GERMAN PAST FUTURES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI). Conveners: Arnd Bauerkämper (Free University of Berlin), Frank Biess (University of California, San Diego), Kai Evers (University of California, Irvine), Anne Schenderlein (GHI). Participants: Jennifer Allen (Yale University), Colleen Anderson (Harvard University), Wolfgang Bialas (IES Berlin), Sindy Duong (Free University of Berlin), Philipp Ebert (University of Cambridge), Elisabeth Engel (GHI), Kai Evers (UC, Irvine), Rüdiger Graf (ZZF Potsdam/University of Bochum), Jeff Hayton (Wichita State University), Joachim C. Häberlen (University of Warwick), Alexander Honold (University of Basel), David Jünger (Zentrum Jüdische Studien Berlin-Brandenburg/Free University of Berlin), Anna Pollmann (Berlin), Terence Renaud (Yale University), Elke Seefried (IfZ Munich/University of Augsburg), Adelheid Voskuhl (University of Pennsylvania), Pierre-Frédéric Weber (University of Szczecin), Richard Wetzell (GHI).

This conference brought together historians and literary scholars to explore the relationship between experiences of the past and anticipations of the future in twentieth-century Germany. The first panel discussed broader conceptual and theoretical issues of writing the history of past futures. Literary scholar Alexander Honold gave the first presentation on “Yesterday’s Tomorrow: Modern Literature as Time Machine.” In his wide-ranging talk, Honold drew on Robert Musil, Thomas Mann, and Franz Kafka to demonstrate how futures proliferated in the literary imagination before 1914. Drawing on, but also transcending Reinhart Koselleck’s seminal contributions (especially his twin notions of the “space of experiences” and “horizon of expectations”), Honold depicted futures as highly contingent entities in the work of these novelists. They also tended to either accelerate or slow down temporal perceptions. In his suggestively entitled paper “Ignorance is Bliss: The Pluralization of Modes to Generate the Future as a Challenge to Contemporary History,” historian Rüdiger Graf analyzed how historical syntheses of contemporary history approached the problem of an open and uncertain future. He then suggested to expand Koselleck’s concept of a “horizon of expectation” to allow for four different ways of generating the future: future by expectation, by design, by risk, and by conservation. Arnd Bauerkämper introduced yet another set of conceptual terms in order to analyze the interrelationship of past and future. He developed the idea of “contingency” as a “structured space of agency that human
action can change.” While contingency can point to new possibilities and hope, it can also engender uncertainty and crisis. Contingency is thus also related to “cultures of security,” the second concept that Bauerkämper introduced. He then proceeded to probe the analytical benefit of these terms by pointing to the ways in which negative experiences of contingency as well as the quest for security informed the history of twentieth-century Germany. The panel thus began to revise, refine and/or further develop Kosselleck’s foundational conceptual terms — a task that was taken up in later sections as well.

The second panel dealt with “Futures of the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany.” In his talk, Kai Evers highlighted anticipations of the future between promise and threat. Analyzing works of Alfred Döblin and Franz Kafka, Evers demonstrated that the new genre of the “literature of risk” led to a “futurization” of the future that was shaped by reconstructions of the recent past. A literature of risk seeks to acknowledge simultaneously the awareness of culturally and socio-politically preeminent present future scenarios and the unpredictability of any future present. Adelheid Voskuhl traced the emergence of engineers as a new technological elite. Investigating “poet engineers” such as Max Maria von Weber (1822–1881), she emphasized the proximity of practical philosophy and engineers who used visions of technological progress as weapons against bourgeois culture. Concluding this section, David Jünger analyzed German Jews’ “shattered consistency of time” between 1929 and 1939. Understanding the year of 1931 as a Zeitenwende, German Jews turned to the past and interpreted steps towards emancipation in the nineteenth century as stages of history. As the reality of the Nazis’ advance was unprecedented in the late Weimar Republic, however, the relationship between the past, the present, and the future lost its coherence. Jewish writers such as Stefan Zweig were therefore convinced that their lives had become fragmented as well.

The contributions to the third section of the conference concentrated on “Socialist Futures in East Germany (1949–1990).” In her talk about East and West German political posters from 1949 to 1961, Colleen Anderson demonstrated that the leaderships of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the GDR as well as the politicians of the Christian and Social Democrats in the Federal Republic of Germany, respectively, claimed to build a better future. Referring to the past as a negative foil, the posters reflected teleological views of the future. As highlighted in the discussion, the interrelationship between the East and
West German posters was surprisingly weak. In the following talk, Wolfgang Bialas elaborated on the role of utopias and dystopias in the science fiction literature of the GDR. Gert Prokop’s crime stories, for instance, promised a glorious future in the 1980s, anticipating the advance of communism in the United States. Moreover, science fiction writers sought utopias of socialism in outer space. Influenced by the growing disillusionment and frustration in the GDR, however, “paradise on earth” was increasingly questioned as a bright future. In the last resort, science fiction stories turned dystopian and excluded change. Philipp Ebert investigated expectations of and plans for German reunification in the FRG. Transitional justice generally aimed at criminal persecution as well as the rehabilitation of political prisoners. Yet the fall of the GDR had not been expected as a possible future by West German actors, as the debate on the Zentrale Erfassungsstelle der Justizverwaltungen demonstrated from 1984 to 1989. The discussion concentrated on the role and features of transitional justice in reunited Germany in the early 1990s in comparative perspective. In particular, its punitive character was highlighted.

The fourth panel examined West German visions and, in particular, emotions related to the future. In his paper, Pierre-Frédéric Weber examined a postwar West German emotional culture of fear with a special focus on the country’s foreign policy. He argued that Germany suffered from a complex array of fears emanating from military defeat and occupation, which produced fear of other’s fear of Germany as well as fear of oneself. Weber explained that FRG politicians adopted an attitude of self-limitation, which manifested itself in three ways: concessive, assertive, and retarding. Using different concrete foreign policy examples, such as the Alleinvertretungsanspruch as an assertive form of self-limitation, he argued that these self-limiting attitudes served as a sort of “post-traumatic stress valve” that compensated for some of the fears and allowed hopes for a better future. Frank Biess focused on the role of fear in postwar West Germany, too. In particular, he highlighted how anxiety was present in the 1960s — a time generally seen to be one of optimism and progress after the FRG’s political stabilization and at the height of the economic miracle. Analyzing what he called “democratic” and “modern fears,” he related anxious anticipations of West Germany’s possible economic and political futures to shifting memories of a catastrophic past. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, these memories were especially the collapse of Weimar and the rise of Nazism. Biess argued that these fears and the debates about them and new processes such as on automatization...
were essential to West Germany’s democratization. In the last paper of the panel, Jennifer Allen argued that, after a profound period of anti-utopianism in the West, a new revisionist utopianism emerged in West Germany in the 1980s. Allen framed developments such as the Geschichtswerkstätten, grassroots Green Party efforts at environmentalism, and the Stolpersteine project as micro-utopias which were characterized by imminent practice. In this way, she demonstrated the close interconnections between past, present, and future.

The panelists of the fifth section on “Social Conflicts and Cultural Milieus” discussed diverging attempts of the 1970s and 1980s to anticipate future developments in governance, public policy, and new conceptualizations of the self. Sindy Duong took debates on an emerging “academic proletariat” in these two decades as a case study to analyze changing attitudes toward the reach and limits of scientific prognoses for planning public policies. She argued that rather than predicting future trends on the academic job market accurately, these prognoses primarily served the purpose of influencing and legitimizing contemporary political decisions. In his presentation on “The Future of the Self: Dystopias and Utopias about the Self in the West-German Alternative Left”, Joachim C. Häberlen examined autobiographical writings of the alternative left in the 1970s. As he demonstrated, these reflections and proposals for different, more fluid understandings of masculinity and femininity contributed to changing modes of subjectivity in the West German Left. Jeff Hayton took a closer look at the West German punk scene of the 1980s. He argued that the movement’s fearful anticipation of a possibly already occurring transformation of the Federal Republic of Germany into an undemocratic state shaped by efforts to control and surveil its populace was informed equally by their views of the end of the Weimar Republic and their reception of dystopian novels like Orwell’s 1984. The equation of West Germany with the failing Weimar Republic served as a justification to engage in violent, oppositional activities vis-à-vis the West German state. The discussion about these presentations dealt with the question of how the prognostications of academic unemployment compared to other models of forecasting general unemployment and which theories and concepts of the self shaped debates of the alternative left. Moreover, it was discussed how particular to the punk movement the fear of an emergent surveillance state might have been in West Germany in the 1980s.

The contributors to the sixth section concentrated on “Utopias and the Past in Twentieth-Century Germany.” In her presentation on
“Remainders of Apocalyptic Experience: Günther Anders and the Fragments of the Twentieth Century,” Anna Pollmann outlined how the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and its implications for future warfare led philosopher Günther Anders to a reconceptualization of apocalyptic thinking. Anders’ concept of a “profane apocalypse” marks the culmination of his intense reflection on the concept of history and its boundaries, which Anders began in the 1930s and continued until the early 1990s. Two contemporaries of the philosopher, Fritz Sternberg and Ossip Flechtheim — who both spent the 1940s in American exile as well — stood at the center of Terence Renaud’s presentation on “Crisis Theory and Futurology in the 1940s.” Analyzing the early phase of “futurology” (a term introduced by Flechtheim), Renaud proposed that the apparent contradiction in these scholars’ work between the urgency of decision demanded by their anticipations of political and economic crises and their interest in future scenarios that the crisis itself generated disappears when one interprets prognosis not primarily as a prediction of future trends and events but as a guide for political action. In her talk on “Shaping the Future. A Short History of Future Studies since 1945,” Elke Seefried extended the history of future studies all the way to the present. Paying particular attention to the first three decades after the Second World War, Seefried differentiated between three approaches within future studies. A normative one was influential especially in France (de Jouvenel). A critical and emancipatory approach prevailed primarily in Scandinavia and West Germany (Jungk and Galtung). In the 1960s, a third empirical and positivistic approach began to dominate especially in the U.S. and West Germany (Kahn and Steinbuch). While Seefried observed a general decline of the premise that the future could be planned and controlled since the 1970s, she detected a partial return to the technologist idea of ‘steering’ in future studies for the 1990s and 2000s in the wake of digitalization and the new media. Among many other topics, the discussion addressed in particular the questions how the experience of the recent past, especially the shared experience of living in exile, shaped the new critical approaches to future studies from Anders to Jungk.

The concluding discussion highlighted some of the key insights of the conference, while also pointing out areas for future research. Several participants underlined the importance of relating memories of the past to anticipations of the future as one of the original contributions of the conference. The possibilities and limitations of employing
Reinhart Koselleck’s terms “space of experiences” and “horizon of expectations” also constituted another emphasis of the debate. The conversation of historians and literary critics proved fruitful yet also revealed disciplinary differences: while historians tend to orient their analysis toward already existing master narratives, literary critics appear to have abandoned such narratives altogether. Several participants suggested to shift the focus of investigations from the content of imagined futures to an analysis of different modes of generating the future, also with attention to the shifting medialization of the future. Other participants missed a more extensive discussion of the concept of “generation” or pointed out the absence of less privileged voices — especially women, minorities, and immigrants — in analyses of the future. Overall, participants praised the open, collegial, and productive discussions on a subject that appears to enjoy increasing attention among scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

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