23RD TRANSATLANTIC DOCTORAL SEMINAR IN GERMAN HISTORY: GERMAN HISTORY IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Seminar at the Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden, Hamburg, June 7-10, 2017. Co-organized by the German Historical Institute Washington and the BMW Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown University in cooperation with the Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden, Hamburg. Conveners: Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University) and Richard F. Wetzell (GHI), in cooperation with Miriam Rürup (Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden). Faculty Mentors: Peter Becker (University of Vienna), Annika Mombauer (Open University, United Kingdom), H. Glenn Penny (University of Iowa), Annette Timm (University of Calgary). Participants: Lisa Eiling (University of Gießen), Reiner Fenske (Technical University of Dresden), Sheer Ganor (University of California, Berkeley), Peter Gengler (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Björn Grötzner (University of Potsdam), Sebastian Huebel (University of British Columbia), Susanne Korbé (University of Graz), Stefanie Krull (Emory University), James McSpadden (Harvard University), Nisrine Rahal (University of Toronto), Sarah Schwab (University of Konstanz), Kerstin Schwenke (University of Munich & Zentrum für Holocaust Studien des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte), Olga Sparschuh (Free University of Berlin), Simon Unger (University of Oxford), Teresa Walch (University of California, San Diego), Brian van Wyck (Michigan State University).

The twenty-third Transatlantic Doctoral Seminar in German History, co-organized by the German Historical Institute Washington and the BMW Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown University, was dedicated to nineteenth- and twentieth-century German history and generously hosted by the Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden in Hamburg. As always, the seminar brought together eight doctoral students from North America and eight from Europe, all of whom are working on dissertations in modern German history. The seminar was organized in eight panels, featuring two papers each, which opened with two comments by fellow students, followed by discussion of the pre-circulated papers. Meeting in the Institute’s lovely building with the memorable address “Am Schlump,” the seminar was characterized by a congenial combination of scholarly rigor and friendly collegiality.

The first panel examined two different aspects of the history of education in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany. Nisrine
Rahal’s paper “‘A Real Nursery’: The Pedagogical and Revolutionary Construction of the Kindergarten” argued that Friedrich Fröbel’s kindergarten focused on a reconstruction of the mother-child relationship that, Fröbel hoped, would have repercussions beyond the kindergarten. The space of the kindergarten and the bodies within it, Rahal argued, were abstract universal figures mobilized for social, cultural, and political reform that mirrored the revolutionary upheaval of 1848-49. The kindergarten was therefore a site of conflict among the various activists. Moving from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century, Brian van Wyck’s paper, “Gastarbeiter im Schuldienst: Turkish Teachers in West Germany, 1961-1989,” examined the policies and practices related to Turkish teachers in West German schools, who were tasked with educating pupils in Turkish language, history, and culture. Focusing on the 1970s, Wyck’s paper argued that shifting assumptions about the Turkish students’ futures and the nature of their situation as Turkish citizens in West Germany led German education officials, school administrators, and Turkish parents to revise their expectations of what kind of knowledge teachers were supposed to impart to the students.

The second panel further pursued the topic of migration. Susanne Korbel’s paper “Die Ähnlichkeit der Differenz: (Wahrnehmungen von) Migration in der Populärkultur zwischen Budapest, Wien und New York um 1900” examined the influence of migration on popular culture in Budapest, Vienna and New York between 1890 and 1930. Conceptualizing performance venues as “Jewish and non-Jewish Spaces,” Korbel investigated the effect of Jewish mass migration on the content and form of popular culture, especially theater, in these three cities. Sheer Ganor’s paper “Comic Relief: Humor and Displacement in the German-Jewish Diasporic Experience” analyzed examples of humor and comedy produced by German-speaking Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Humor, Ganor argued, afforded a common ground for mitigating the challenges of displacement as well as a flexible medium for overcoming but also for accentuating otherness in new surroundings.

The third panel brought together two papers on the intellectual history of the interwar era. Simon Unger’s paper “‘Being Small in the Face of the Great’: The Protestant Journal Eckart and its Readers, 1924-1960” analyzed the ambivalent attitudes toward and interpretations of National Socialism among religious intellectuals in the circle around the Protestant journal Eckart. The key question for Unger
was to understand how critics of the regime could identify with certain aspects of National Socialist ideology while rejecting the Nazi movement at large. Lisa Eiling’s paper “Im ‘Dienst an den deutschen Belangen in der Welt’: Arbeit und Gemeinschaft im Werk des Kieler Nationalökonom Bernhard Harms (1876-1939)” analyzed Harms’s writings on labor as well as related correspondence in order to argue that the notion of labor as service for the national community emerges as a coherent central theme in Harms’s life and work.

The fourth panel explored the interwar era in transnational perspective. In his paper, “National Parliamentarians on the International Stage: Private Diplomacy and Political Cooperation in Interwar Europe,” James McSpadden demonstrated the existence of informal international political networks among socialist, bourgeois, and German nationalist politicians during the 1920s and 1930s. These networks, he contended, could be used by various political actors to shape policymaking and political outcomes during the interwar period. Reiner Fenske’s paper “Zwischen imperialer und transnationaler Geschichte: Die Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft und der Deutsche Ostbund im Kontext des Deutschlands der Zwischenkriegszeit” argued that both the Kolonialgesellschaft and the Ostbund pursued the goal of a settler colonialism that was intended to be racially and ethnically restricted to Germans and whites.

The fifth panel examined the role of sociability in two very different historical situations. Sarah Schwab’s paper „Deutsch unsere Geselligkeit in deutschen Vereinen’: Vereine, Klubs und Feste. Engagement, Geselligkeit und Ethnizität unter deutschen Südafrikanern, ca. 1918-1960” examined the role of sociability in the ethnically organized associations set up by Germans in South Africa. Practices of sociability, she argued, promoted social contact and cohesion among the group’s members, while at the same time marking certain social activities as specifically “German.” The associations thus created a social space located between private and public in which ethnicity was articulated in the form of sociability. Teresa Walch’s paper “Gaststätten in Nazi Berlin: Pubs and Cafes as Sites of Transgressions” explored public houses and cafes in Nazi Berlin that eluded attempts by the Gestapo and police to completely control what was done and said in such public places, thus becoming “sites of transgression.” Despite closures, surveillance, and denunciations, she argued, pubs remained places where Communists and Socialists criticized the regime and where homosexuals continued to meet.
The sixth panel focused on the National Socialist era. Sebastian Huebel’s paper “Jewish Masculinities and the Importance of Work in the Third Reich” examined how the Nazis sought to emasculate Jewish men and how, in turn, Jewish masculine self-understandings changed. When their adherence to hegemonic practices of masculinity were challenged, Huebel argued, many Jewish men turned to despondent behaviors, but others developed coping mechanisms that allowed them to defy emasculation and adapt to their marginalized status as men. Kerstin Schwenke’s project “Besuche in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern” investigated visits to Nazi concentration camps, which took place in a variety of vastly different contexts. Presenting a case study of the visits by representatives of foreign regimes that were ideologically aligned with Nazi Germany, Schwenke argued that official camp visits were always staged in order to focus the visitors’ attention on carefully selected aspects of the camps.

The seventh panel returned to the topic of migration, now focusing on the post-1945 era. Peter Gengler’s paper “‘Germany’s No. 1 Problem’: ‘Flight and Expulsion’ Narratives and the Struggle for Recognition in Postwar Germany, 1945–1955” examined the widespread hostility that expellees faced upon their arrival in Germany as well as their responses. In the years before the foundation of the Federal Republic, Gengler argued, expellees articulated their experiences in “sympathy narratives” in order to argue for social recognition and material aid. In doing so, they cultivated an identity of a unique “community of fate,” which provided a platform for the politicization of “flight and expulsion” during the 1950s. Stefanie Krull’s paper “‘Belated Germans’: Aussiedler Migration from Poland to the Federal Republic, 1975–1985” investigated West Germany’s May 1976 integration program for ethnic remigrants and the subsequent 1977 public relations campaign. Rather than simply implementing policies for integration, Krull argued, these initiatives crafted an image of ethnic German remigrants as the “worthiest” immigrants to West Germany. By casting the ethnic remigrants as victims and contributors, the government aimed to expedite their acceptance.

The eighth panel combined the topics of migration and international relations in the second half of the twentieth century. Olga Sparschuh’s paper “Turiner und Münchner Migrationsregime im Konflikt zwischen Stadt, Land und EWG: Liberalisierung der Migration seit 1961” offered a comparative analysis of the consequences of
the European Economic Community’s first regulation implementing freedom of movement for workers throughout the EEC. Whereas in Italy the new EEC regulation resulted in the abolition of Fascist-era legislation restricting internal migration, West Germany’s labor shortage led the German government to liberalize migration beyond what was required by the EEC regulation. The EEC rules, Sparschuh argued, created a situation in which migration from the south of Italy to Turin and Munich can be compared as two cases of European internal migration. Björn Grötzner’s paper “‘Footprints on the Sands of Time’: Regierungswechsel und außenpolitische Kontinuität im Dreieck Bonn-Paris-Washington, 1969–1981” presented a case study of the international conflicts deriving from the 1975 German-Brazilian nuclear deal — an agreement to export German nuclear technology to Brazil, to which the incoming Carter administration resolutely objected — in order to probe the relative importance of the actions of individual political actors versus structural transformations in international relations in explaining the trajectory of relations between Germany, France, and the United States in the 1970s.

In the concluding discussion participants reflected on whether one could discern common patterns in the themes and approaches of the papers presented at the seminar. It was noted that migration history and diaspora studies were especially prevalent among the papers; many also addressed the issue of German identity and national belonging; and quite a few projects approached their subjects from a transnational angle. Most of the research projects were not responding to major historiographical debates, which seems indicative of the current moment in the historiography of modern German history. The final discussion also provided an occasion to discuss the mechanics of writing and of giving oral presentations. One of the mentors, Annette Timm, even prepared a guide with writing advice based on her reading of the papers. The completion and publication of the excellent dissertation projects presented at the seminar is eagerly awaited.

Richard F. Wetzell (GHI)