KNOWLEDGE IN FLIGHT: MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOLAR RESCUE IN NORTH AMERICA

Conference organized by the German Historical Institute (GHI) in cooperation with the New School for Social Research and the Leo Baeck Institute, held at the New School for Social Research, New York City, December 4-5, 2017; with support from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) and Dr. Henry Kaufman. Conveners: Simone Lässig (GHI), William Milberg (New School for Social Research), William Weitzer (Leo Baeck Institute, New York). Participants: Jeremy Adelman (Princeton University), Matthias Duller (University of Graz), Jane Edwards (Yale University), Judith Friedlander (Hunter College), David Gill (German Consulate New York), Daniela Gleizer (UNAM, Institute de Investigaciones Historicas), Asli Igsiz (New York University), Elisa Klüger (University of Sao Paulo), Scott Krause (ZZF Potsdam/UNC Chapel Hill), Isabella Löhr (University of Leipzig), Ludger Pries (El Colegio de Mexico/Ruhr University Bochum), Stefan Rinke (Free University Berlin), Marion Röwekamp (Free University Berlin), Anne Schenderlein (GHI), Sarah Willcox (Institute of International Education), David Van Zandt (The New School for Social Research), David Zimmerman (University of Victoria, BC).

The conference “Knowledge in Flight” continued the GHI’s interest in the history of German-speaking refugees from the Nazis in particular and migration more generally. In light of the recent refugee crisis, especially the large numbers of people fleeing the Syrian war, the GHI Washington had initiated a symposium on the challenges of integrating refugee academics from Nazi Europe already in December 2015. The positive response to this symposium, which the GHI co-organized with Germany’s Association of Historians (Historikerverband) and the American Academy in Berlin, inspired the partners to broaden the perspective and investigate the movement of scholars from different perilous and intellectually oppressive political environments and to focus on the impact of institutional forces on scholar rescue in particular.

The conference opened with a keynote lecture by Jeremy Adelman held at the Leo Baeck Institute. In his talk, Adelman reported on his experience of using MOOCs (massive open online courses) in connecting with refugee populations across the world. In a particular course that connected his Princeton undergraduate students with Syrian students still in Syria or in refugee camps, the Syrian
students sensitized their American colleagues for particular historical moments, such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, that had not been included in their course work. Adelman emphasized that this experience did not only enhance the learning experience of the American and Syrian students in the course but also prompted him to make additions to a textbook he was editing. While humanitarian concerns were guiding principles for his efforts, Adelman pointed to the benefits gained by tapping into the special insights and knowledge of refugee populations.

The first panel, entitled “Obstacles and Opportunities: The Context of Refugee Scholarship,” was chaired by Stefan Rinke and opened with Judith Friedlander’s paper about the establishment of the University in Exile at the New School of Social Research in New York City. As a direct response to the Nazis’ Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, which dismissed professors out of racial or political grounds, Alvin Johnson launched a rescue campaign that by the end of the war had offered about 200 refugee scholars employment opportunities at the New School. Johnson’s vision for a University in Exile in New York was to not only rescue individual scholars but also European institutions and their scholarly traditions, which he considered superior to American ones. Citing the examples of Gerhard Colm and Leo Strauss, among others, Friedlander emphasized that the scholars who came to the New School have contributed more widely to the academic and policy communities in the United States than previous scholarship has acknowledged.

In his paper sociologist Ludger Pries also took up the example of scholar rescue at the New School and compared it to the Colegio de Mexico (Colmex) in Mexico City, which likewise became a haven for European intellectuals in the 1930s and 40s. While administrators at the Colegio looked to the New School as an example of how to build a similar university in exile as in New York, the general climates and contexts of forced emigration were quite different in the two cases, as were the institutional settings and goals. In both places, the presence of cosmopolitan leaders, Alvin Johnson at the New School and Daniel Cosio Villegas at Colmex, was crucial for the initiation and success of the projects though. Pries concluded that while the experience of forced migration was a bane for the European Jews, political exiles (New School), and Spanish Republicans fleeing Franco Spain (Colmex), their arrival and integration into the two institutions was a boon to those, strengthening their teaching and research. He
characterized these historical projects as a mix between charity and instrumental utilitarianism.

In the third paper of the panel Daniela Gleizer focused exclusively on Mexico’s role in the rescue of anti-fascist refugees during the Second World War. Jewish refugees had almost no chance of getting into Mexico because Mexican officials viewed them as “unassimilable” and hence prohibited Jewish immigration from 1934. In contrast to other countries that preferred taking in exiles based on their professional capacity and out of economic considerations, Mexico was primarily offering asylum to political refugees, especially active communists, most of them Spanish Republican exiles, in order to reaffirm the country’s anti-imperialist and anti-fascist principles to the outside. Such foreign political concerns were given more importance than attracting scientists and academics who could have contributed to the country’s desired modernization. Objections to attracting talent from abroad came from local groups of intellectuals, who feared competition. Thus, Gleizer emphasized the importance of taking into consideration local infrastructures rather than solely focusing on a national perspective of analysis.

In the second panel, titled “Imperial Colleagues and Unwanted Competitors,” and chaired by Anne Schenderlein, Isabella Löhr placed the persecution and flight of refugee scholars during the 1930s and 40s into larger debates of twentieth-century historiography, which showed that the refugees’ experience was not as unique as exile scholarship has generally described it. Löhr argued that historically, scholar rescue coincided with the professionalization of the modern university, the development of an academic labor market since the late nineteenth century, and with increasing global educational mobility. Taking a closer look at academic aid organizations such as the American Emergency Committee Aid of Displaced Persons and other non-state actors such as the Carnegie Foundation, she demonstrated that in their decision-making on how to distribute aid, humanitarian concerns were second to labor and professional issues, such as academic excellence. Löhr not only emphasized the importance of approaching this particular history of scholar flight and rescue in the framework of global migration and internationalist practices but argued that it serves as a good case to study border-crossing infrastructures.

In the second paper, Elisa Klüger focused on opportunities and obstacles faced by Brazilian exiles in Chile between 1964 and 1973.
Klüger demonstrated why Santiago de Chile became a center for exiled Brazilian intellectuals. The rise of the Chilean left and general upheavals in the Chilean intellectual space as well as the existence of international institutions, universities and research centers and the financial support of North American foundations provided a wide range of job opportunities in the political and academic field to the exiles. Nevertheless, there were significant differences between two waves of exiles on a structural level. Klüger observed that exiles belonging to the first wave leaving Brazil between 1964 and 1968 often came from elite families, benefited from greater social and economic resources and were older than exiles belonging to the second wave in 1968. Financial capital, social networks, political relations or professional reputation made it easier to find jobs for first wave immigrants. Second wave exiles, usually less privileged and younger, often had to deal with an interruption of their academic education but received support by the first generation exiles.

Marion Röwekamp delineated the specific situation of Spanish Republican scholars in Mexico and outlined the case in comparison to the case of German Jewish refugees in Mexico and the U.S. After the rise of Franco, around 50,000 Spanish Republican refugees came to Mexico. For several reasons such as sharing the same language and the educational system as Mexicans, the Spanish refugees experienced a relatively easy exile situation. Republican funds made them independent from financial aid by the Mexican government, and they easily received Mexican citizenship. By contrast, German refugees in the United States had a more difficult time. Their legal status as immigrants was often unclear, they faced anti-Semitism, and their professional degrees were frequently not officially recognized. In comparison to the Spaniards in Mexico, German refugees also faced a language barrier, which posed serious challenges for those intellectuals whose professions were tied to verbal communication of their ideas.

In the first paper of the third panel, “From Refugee Scholars to Returnees: the Ford Foundation behind the Iron Curtain, 1948-1970,” Matthias Duller outlined the efforts and activities of the Ford Foundation to establish scientific exchange with communist states in Eastern Europe. Despite internal debates, the Ford Foundation developed a conception of itself not only as a powerful private organization but also as global actor with a major role in foreign cultural policy. In the context of the Cold War, the Foundation established the “Free Russia Fund/ East European Fund” to support Russian refugee scholars
and intellectuals. In 1953 the Ford Foundation discontinued the fund and changed its strategy from supporting refugees from communist countries to impact scholars and intellectuals that still lived in these countries. Duller emphasized the similarities and differences between the various programs that existed with different communist states and discussed their intentions and impact.

In the second paper of the last panel, Scott H. Krause illustrated the roots of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in socialist exile circles and the development of their political agenda. Tracing stations of Paul Hertz and Hans Hirschfeld in Paris 1983-1940, New York 1941-1949 and postwar Berlin, Krause pointed out how these experiences transformed into knowledge, shaped their political behavior and led to a reorientation from anti-fascism to anti-totalitarianism. Hertz and other members of the anti-fascist “Neu Beginnen” group (NB) that managed to escape to New York founded the “American Friends of German Freedom” (AFGF). Members of the AFGF benefited from contact to other emigré scholars in the United States and adapted to the new environment but still kept their identity as German-speaking socialists. After the war some émigrés returned to their former home country to help build a liberal democracy in West Germany. Their knowledge of prewar Germany and exile became a precious commodity in the transatlantic political negotiations at the time.

In the last paper of the conference, entitled “Competitive Cooperation: The Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, the American Emergency Committee and the Placement of Refugee Scholars in North America,” David Zimmermann focused on the often ignored relationship of the two largest national assistance organizations for displaced academics and scholars. Zimmermann traced the development of this important and successful, but also extremely problematic cooperation between the American and the British organizations. Jealousy and competition characterized their cooperation, but since they managed to overcome these problems they were able to establish an “underground railroad” to support numerous refugee scholars and assist them in finding jobs in academic institutions or securing financial aid.

The closing roundtable titled “Protecting Endangered Scholars and Scientists: Historical Perspectives, Contemporary Challenges” was moderated by Simone Lässig, who opened by asking how far historical approaches and strategies might hold for dealing with the current
refugee crisis. Sarah Willcox, Director of the Scholar Rescue Fund of the Institute of International Education, opined that contemporary challenges remain the same as past ones in that each scholar struggles after their arrival and that the acceptance by and joining of an academic community is very difficult. The Scholar Rescue Fund attempts to lessen these complications by providing structures and networks that aid scholars in succeeding long-term and with their families. Asli Igsiz, Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, directed the audience’s attention toward Turkey, where over the past year and a half nearly 6000 academics have been purged and many private universities were closed. This makes Turkish scholars the largest group of scholars seeking rescue at the moment. Igsiz pointed out that in contrast to the past, European countries were taking more responsibility in the current refugee crisis. David Gill, German consul general in New York, reported on the activities of the German government in supporting scholars in flight, such as the Philipp Schwartz Initiative of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which is funded primarily by the Federal Foreign Office. This initiative has so far brought about 130 scholars to Germany. Gill named Germany’s historical responsibility as one reason for helping persecuted scholars. In addition, these initiatives are guided by the hope that offering people coming from restrictive regimes the opportunity to work in a free scientific system may in turn make them ambassadors of democracy when they return to their home countries. Julika Griem, vice president of the German Research Foundation (DFG) and professor of English Literature in Frankfurt, was more skeptical about the continuities of past and present refugee crises and the degree to which insights from the past apply to today’s problems. The remaining discussion centered on institutional restrictions, language issues, Islamophobia (and whether it had somewhat replaced anti-Semitism), and the Americanization of the international academic scene. Not only is academia a highly competitive system but the mastery of English is a major requirement to participate in it. Griem suggested that one might rethink these developments, to ask how research and teaching can benefit from different perspectives, and to strengthen the reputation of people who speak several languages besides and other than English. The entire roundtable discussion is available for streaming on the GHI website.

Anne Schenderlein (GHI) and Judith Beneker (GHI)