

THE POLITICS OF SOVEREIGNTY AND GLOBALISM IN MODERN GERMANY

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI), March 22-23, 2019, organized in collaboration with the Leibniz Center for Contemporary History, Potsdam, and the University of British Columbia. Conveners: Rüdiger Graf (Leibniz Center for Contemporary History, Potsdam), Anne Schenderlein (GHI), Quinn Slobodian (Wellesley College), Heidi Tworek (University of British Columbia). Participants: Mario Daniels (Georgetown University), Martin Deuerlein (University of Tübingen), Sebastian Gehrig (University of Roehampton), Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University), Benjamin Hein (Stanford University), David Lazar (GHI), Clara Maier (Hamburg Institute for Social Research), Wencke Meteling (Johns Hopkins University SAIS/University of Marburg), Steven Press (Stanford University), Anna Ross (University of Warwick), Adam Seipp (Texas A&M University), James Stafford (University of Bielefeld), Lauren Stokes (Northwestern University), Heidi Tworek (University of British Columbia).

The conference centered on sovereignty as a basic concept of German history and on its relation to globalism. Whereas sovereignty is a term from the sources as well as an analytical concept, “globalism” has recently become a political slur among the far right. There was consensus among participants to treat sovereignty not as a property, but as an aspirational political and/or legal claim made under specific historical circumstances. In their opening remarks, conveners Rüdiger Graf, Quinn Slobodian and Heidi Tworek laid out the aim of the conference, which was trifold: to advance a conceptual history of German sovereignty, to explore the interrelation between sovereignty and globalism, and to show why German history (still) matters. The approach was well chosen, not least because it did not allow for any easy answers while it shed new light on Germany’s and Germans’ place in history. In contrast to two common narratives on sovereignty in the twentieth century, namely its decline and the supposed transfer of sovereignty from the nation-state to inter- or supranational organizations, the conference painted a far more complex picture by examining the history of competing and often seemingly contradictory German claims for sovereignty in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both the papers and the discussion successfully countered simplistic juxtapositions and false analogies such as “national sovereignty” versus “globalism,” or “internationalism and free trade” versus “nationalism and protectionism.”

The first panel, "The Defense of Ownership and Control in a Global Age," opened with a paper by Heidi Tworek on German communicational sovereignty in the Age of Empire. She showed how the German Reich tried to gain control of world communication by setting up its own news agency, *Wolff's Telegraphen-Büro*, first on an imperial, then on a global scale, until Wolff was restricted to German territories after World War I. Contemporaries were aware that Germany's status as a world power depended on its ability to produce, disseminate, and control news on land, at sea and in the air. Thus communicational sovereignty became multidimensional, it combined technology and business, and it aimed at national security *avant la lettre*. James Stafford focused on the German Empire, "tariff autonomy" and the "system of commercial treaties" at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Challenging two competing interpretations of German tariff policies, one economic, one political, he argued that economics had its own politics, and that legal issues played a major role in the European trade convention network. He convincingly argued that "protectionist internationalism" was by no means contradictory. Contemporaries regarded the national economy as a closed, coherent entity which could then interrelate with the world economy from a position of strength. Protectionist internationalism was a strong rationale in the quest for national sovereignty and for entry into a heavily regulated international trade order that was set up to protect the nation-state and national interests. Anna Ross took a closer look at another form of economic nationalism. Taking the case of the German legation in Spanish-occupied Tangier from 1941 to 1944, she analyzed the relationship between property and sovereignty. In order to substantiate their legal claim on property outside the German Reich, the German legation drew on their own genealogies of property ownership. As Ross pointed out, this was a common feature in property seizures during regime transitions.

The second panel dealt with "Gold, Diamonds, and Monetary Sovereignty." In his paper on the German colonial empire, Steven Press described how the diamond finds in the Namib Desert in 1908 boosted colonial sovereignty's price tag. Whereas the forbidden Diamond Zone proved a death camp for indigenous people working there, the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft* as a private company made huge profits from its de facto "mining sovereignty," drawing anger from Social Democrats in the German parliament. In equations of sovereignty, commodities could have cash equivalency, but they also take on a deeper significance, as Quinn Slobodian showed in his paper on "Exit

Fantasies: Global Goldbugs and the Rise of the German Far Right.” Political commentators in Germany and elsewhere often refer to a split in the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) between an extreme right wing and a more liberal wing. Slobodian instead hinted at the agenda behind the party’s foundation in 2013, i.e. its demand to re-establish gold as an alternative currency to the hated Euro. After the world financial crash of 2008 AfD members such as economist Peter Boehringer monetized on a growing mistrust among parts of the German population in the democratic state’s ability to manage monetary and currency issues. They advocated for gold as an exit from the Central European Bank’s “monetary socialism” (*Geldsozialismus*). In a similar fashion, right-wing thinkers for decades have railed against the egalitarian movements’ “inflationary” social demands since the 1960s. The AfD’s thinking on currency as well as immigration issues is embedded in a bleak zero-sum vision of the world, as encapsulated in the anti-immigrant slogan “the boat is full,” and curiously enough, from a politically very different angle, a similar zero-sum vision shapes the environmental discourse on “limited natural resources.”

“German Visions of Sovereignty through Decentralization” was the topic of the third panel. In his talk on globalism and sovereignty in German social sciences, Martin Deuerlein traced the discourse on interdependence from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1970s. During the nineteenth century, the discourse was predominantly progressive and optimistic, but it only referred to “civilized nations,” not colonies. As Deuerlein insisted, internationalists were not cosmopolitans. World War I abruptly ended any optimism about an interconnected world. Social scientists now diagnosed a disquieting “gap” between reality and concepts of the world. When in the 1970s the discourse on interdependence was revived, it was closely connected to a perceived “crisis of sovereignty” and “crisis of the nation-state.” Clara Maier analyzed German intellectuals’ narratives of sovereignty during the crucial decade after 1945, when Germany not only lost its sovereignty but also parts of its territory, and states were radically broken up. The occidental thinkers (*abendländische Denker*) among German intellectuals, many of whom had emigrated to the U.S. and the U.K. during the Nazi era, dissociated Prussia from Germany and accused it of colonialism against the South German states. Economist Wilhelm Röpke, whose rationale was part of a broader array of Christian Democratic thinking, denounced Prussianism as a feature of socialism. He recommended to decentralize and federalize Germany and to

liberate the economy. Under the umbrella of the emerging Cold War, it was self-congratulatory for Catholics and Protestants alike to put the blame for the “German catastrophe” on Prussia. Maier concluded that this deep ideological embedding of the Federal Republic in the post-1945 international order lost its plausibility when in 1989-91, Prussia and the German nation-state came back into focus and a new global order arose.

Rüdiger Graf opened the fourth panel on “Sovereignty in the Constraints of International Institutions” with a paper on sovereignty and the war crimes trials in Leipzig after World War I. Facing an almost universal wave of national indignation, the Allies dropped their demand that German authorities extradite the emperor and several hundreds of generals, other military personnel and high-ranking politicians. Instead they transferred the trials to the highest German court. In Germany, this was widely seen as reaffirming Germany’s status as a sovereign state, which had been severely damaged by the Paris treaties, especially article 231 (“German war guilt article”). In the end the Leipzig court convicted only a tiny fraction of those charged with war crimes, which is why some researchers consider those trials an unsuccessful precursor to the Nuremberg trials, while others argue that the German judges (at least partly) applied international criminal law. According to Graf, the trials were neither a failure nor a success. Rather the “transitional injustice” of Leipzig contributed some stability to the beleaguered Weimar Republic. How crucial it was for both German states to be legally admitted to the international community after World War II became evident in Sebastian Gehrig’s talk about “German Legal Exceptionalism: Sovereignty, National Division, and the Accession of the Two Germanies to the United Nations.” During the early 1960s, the GDR campaigned to gain admission to the UN as a backdoor to be recognized as a sovereign state. Like the Federal Republic, the GDR referred to constitutional lawyer Georg Jellinek to argue its case. In his opus magnum, “General Theory of the State” (*Allgemeine Staatsrechtslehre*, 1900), Jellinek stated that according to international law, a state needed three elements to be recognized as a sovereign state: a state territory, a state population, and state power. After giving up its claim to be the sole representative of Germany, the GDR turned to socialist constitutional law. It picked up the rhetoric of decolonization and claimed the “self-determination” of the East German population and “socialist citizenship,” a stance other socialist nations approved of. Finally, and in difference to other divided nations, both German states were admitted to the UN, though

technically they represented one state only — a single exception in the history of the UN.

The fifth and last panel, titled “Mobility and Migration as Challenges to Sovereignty,” dealt with a particularly hot topic given the so-called “European refugee crisis” and the heated migration debate in the U.S. Benjamin Hein presented on “The Migration Story and the Global Turn in German Citizenship” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The citizenship law the German Parliament passed in 1913 was based on the ethno-nationalistic principle of *ius sanguinis*. This is why some researchers attribute it to the political far-right, though Liberals and Social Democrats also voted for it, Hein argued, and ethnicity is built into any liberal constitution. He characterized Liberals and Social Democrats as “ethno-cosmopolitans” who understood migration as the essence of being German. Parts of the German discourse can be traced back to the U.S. debate on whiteness after the Civil War, when whiteness became defined more narrowly with a focus on mobility. In their fight for citizenship reform in Germany, ethno-cosmopolitans faced opposition from nationalists like Prussian historian Heinrich von Treitschke, who praised rootedness and “soil” and railed against cosmopolitanism. The huge success of the Social Democrats in the national elections of 1912 brought a political sea change, as Hein pointed out, and it boosted the “migration story.” The German citizenship law of 1913 did away with the requirement of residence in a German state; instead it struck a balance between the principles of national “soil” and national identity based on “Germanic mobility,” granting citizenship to six million “Auslandsdeutsche” (Germans who lived outside the German Reich). In his talk about “Sovereignty, the U.S. Army, and Everyday Life in the Federal Republic,” Adam Seipp explored what he called “modulated sovereignty.” Given that 22 million U.S. Americans lived and worked in Germany, Seipp rightly assumed that the massive U.S. military presence must have affected the way Germans experienced, redefined and renegotiated notions of their (limited) sovereignty. Taking German-American labor relations as a case in point, he described how Germans who worked for the U.S. Armed Forces lost parts of their sovereignty during the week and regained it on the weekend and how German workers and unions negotiated their rights with U.S. authorities through different historical phases, at one point campaigning: “Germany is not Disneyland!” Curiously enough, in 1990 a Bavarian court ruled that it was illegal for the U.S. Armed Forces to leave Germany and to lay off German employees.

Lauren Stokes explored German asylum politics in the jet age, or “Sovereignty at the Schönefeld Airport.” For asylum seekers from socialist countries, it was an open secret that Berlin constituted a formidable gap: fly to Schönefeld Airport, take the subway U6 from Friedrichstraße to West-Berlin, then board a plane to any destination. At its peak during the 1980s, 400,000 asylum seekers per year took this route. It was obsolete for West German authorities to treat the inner-German border as an international border in order to enforce passport controls, just as it was inconceivable to erect any physical barrier because of what they called the “wall of shame.” So police took to racial screening on the U6, forcing those they apprehended to apply for asylum in the Federal Republic. When asylum numbers grew accordingly, a desperate Ministry of the Interior negotiated with East German authorities to implement visa requirements for all Sri Lankans entering the GDR, because they were the biggest group of asylum seekers. The “Berlin gap” was closed, Stokes concluded, but a dubious racial paper wall was erected.

The teaching and study of German history is no longer a given at history departments outside of Germany. Like other European national histories, it has been sidelined due to the global turn in the discipline of history. The conference made clear why history as a discipline cannot and should not go global without keeping an eye on the national track, and it delivered compelling arguments why German history still matters long after the Holocaust and why we as historians should pay more attention to the concept and idea of German sovereignty. Conference participants convincingly treated sovereignty as a contested, flexible, multilayered, and relational concept, whereas globalism fell somewhat short.

The conference participants articulated many reasons why it is worthwhile to pursue the topic of German sovereignty and globalism: First, the topic is refreshing since it combines transnational and global angles with core questions on German territory, population, and state power — the three elements deemed necessary for sovereignty (plus international recognition as a fourth element). Second, the lens of sovereignty sheds new light on how Germans perceived of themselves, and of how Germany related to the world. It opens up a multifarious, dynamic, globally entangled German history. Third, German globalism is a huge desideratum in historical research. Which world projects came out of the German space? What was German global thinking like? Which ideas of the world

did Germans form? Furthermore, “sovereignty is a legal claim with magic power. We can’t write a history *of* sovereignty” (James Stafford), but we can write histories of how sovereignty was understood, redefined, negotiated, acknowledged, questioned, or denied. A history of German sovereignty claims and globalism can also “push back against simplistic assumptions” (Heidi Tworek) such as ‘sovereignty’ versus ‘globalization,’ ‘nationalism’ versus ‘globalism,’ or ‘good, liberal cosmopolitans and free-traders’ versus ‘bad, racially minded nationalists and protectionists.’ Moreover, “sovereignty has a different chronology than territoriality” (Benjamin Hein), which runs counter to simplistic narratives such as “neo-liberalism since the 1980s hollowed out national sovereignty.” In addition, questions of sovereignty transcend societal sub-spheres that too often in our discipline are treated separately in economic history, political history, military history, etc. The topic of sovereignty and globalism is very well suited to bring historians and histories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany back together. And finally, the topic closely relates to our moment in time.

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