

Young Scholars Forum. War and Society – Germany and Europe in Historical Perspective

Conference at the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., March 21-24, 2002

Convener: Dr. Christoph Strupp (GHI). Moderators: Professor Roger Chickering (Georgetown University), Professor Deborah Cohen (American University), Prof. Dr. Ute Frevert (Universität Bielefeld), Prof. Dr. Gerhard Hirschfeld (Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte/ Universität Stuttgart), PD Dr. Christof Mauch (GHI), Professor Gerhard L. Weinberg (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), and Dr. Richard F. Wetzell (GHI).

In March 2002 the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., held its second Young Scholars Forum for American doctoral students and recent Ph.D. recipients in modern German and European history. The Young Scholars Forum has the character of a workshop and concentrates on a different topic each year. In 2002 it featured projects dealing with questions of "War and Society." This year's Young Scholars Forum was made possible through generous grants from the Allianz AG, Munich, and The German Marshall Fund of the United States. The organizers are particularly grateful for their support.

War is a topic that is far from being of merely historical interest. Military violence with all its consequences for nations and societies remains a powerful political factor. The papers presented at the Young Scholars Forum addressed many subjects that recently have also been discussed in the evening news and the morning papers: guerilla warfare, war coverage by the media, defining and dealing with prisoners of war, the influence of the war on intellectual debates in Europe and the USA, problems of transition from war to peace, commemorative cultures, and so on.

The positive response to the announcement of the Young Scholars Forum 2002 showed the broad interest in the American scholarly community for the subject. Most of the proposals – and accordingly most of the papers presented at the conference – focused on the first half of the twentieth century and the period of the world wars. The papers demonstrated a broad range of methodological and topical approaches to military history and the history of warfare.

The opening panel featured two papers dealing with militarism and the young. First **Bryan Ganaway** (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) presented his research on military toys in Germany. In the course of the nineteenth century they evolved from utilitarian objects of a small elite into mass market articles designed to affirm and teach the nation. Technical improvements and pedagogical views that stressed the possibility of transmitting adult values to children both contributed to this change. Through military toys and miniatures, it became possible to participate at least symbolically in the wars of the nineteenth century, and not necessarily on the German side alone. With World War I, military toys became less broadly European and more aggressively and characteristically German in character. Ganaway also addressed the question whether children actually perceived the symbolic meaning of their toys – memoir literature indicates that boys just as much liked to be medieval heroes or cowboys and indians as nationalist citizen soldiers.

In the second paper **Andrew Donson** (Marquette University) discussed the military training of sixteen and seventeen year old males in World War I. Noting that participation was voluntary, he argued that the continuously high rates of participation in these training programs, even among the working class young, are indicators of strong support for the war. Even though the recreational and social dimensions clearly played a role in the popularity of the programs, Donson sees them primarily as an opportunity for young people to express their patriotism and to be part of a nationalist spectacle. He closed with the suggestion that the military youth companies offered an

easy transition into right-wing paramilitary violence after 1918. In the discussion other possible reasons for participation in military training were offered, such as getting away from daily routines or the hope for a better preparation for service at the front. The discussion of both papers revolved around the question of whether children in fact were indoctrinated by nationalist ideology and adult martial values. Historians have difficulties in proving the motives for playing with military toys or joining military training companies and assessing their psychological effects.

In the second panel several aspects of war and language were discussed. In his paper on German colonial wars and the mass media, **Bradley D. Naranch** (Johns Hopkins University) dealt with the “dirty little wars of Imperial German history” and the way the middle-class public in Germany experienced their realities. Because of the geographical distance, these wars were perceived as “virtual conflicts.” On the other hand, war correspondents, with the help of the newly invented telegraph, were for the first time able to have their reports printed just days after the events happened and thereby limited the effectiveness of state censorship. Their eye-witness reports influenced the German colonial debate and could be used by supporters and opponents of the Imperial colonial policy alike. The language of war and military violence they developed stressed the the cultural and racial dimensions of the colonial conflicts and left no room for sympathy with their indigenous victims.

Aaron J. Cohen (California State University) sketched the totalitarian „language of war“ in Germany and Russia during World War I and II. He came to the conclusion that on a purely linguistic level there were remarkable similarities in the form and content of the official propaganda during the second world war, which was shaped by the experience of both countries in the first world war. Simplistic differentiations between friends and enemies, the degradation of the enemies as beasts, social outcasts, or ancient barbarians, and the justification of the war as a defense of the cultural values of ones own society can be found on both sides in both wars. The goal of the war language was, of course, the mobilization of the public in the interest of the war. During World War II, language was subject to far greater institutional control than during preceding periods. While Nazi language distinguished in an emotional way between the „Volk“ and its enemies (Jews, Communists, and others), Russian war language focused on the working class(-party) and the (future) Soviet reality. Participants discussed the importance of new technologies for the transmission of propaganda, its reception by different audiences, and the difficult relationship of reality and language in general.

The third panel consisted of two papers less closely related. First, **Daniel Krebs** (Emory University) presented his research on German prisoners of war in the American war of independence. About 6000 German mercenaries were captured during that conflict. Based on letters and diaries, Krebs described the process of capture and the transition from being soldiers to being prisoners of war through certain rituals of surrender. These rituals stood in for international laws on warfare and prisoners of war, which were at that time sketchy at best. While Congress set some general rules in May 1776, the administration of the prisoners had to be left to local authorities. Generally they were treated well, kept in regions with a high percentage of German settlers, and could even work for money. On account of a serious labor shortage, the prisoners of war were quickly regarded as potential immigrants. In the discussion Krebs stressed the differences between the treatment of captured German and British soldiers, and the absence of ideological factors, which played an important role in the treatment of prisoners of war in the twentieth century.

Jonathan Gumz (University of Chicago) in his paper on the problems of guerilla and interethnic war in the Austrian-Hungarian *Militärgeneralgouvernement* of Serbia in 1917 took the participants back to the early twentieth century. The Habsburg’s occupation of Serbia can be seen as the persistence of an older absolutist form of rule that did little to win over the population of that territory even though the *Militärgeneralgouvernement*, concerned with its image, avoided large-

scale violence in its counter-guerilla actions. The situation was complicated by the mix of ethnic groups and religions in the region, with the Austrian government supporting Muslims and Albanians in the south in their struggle against Bulgarians and Serbs. Gumz focused on aspects of World War I that, in the face of the industrialized mass warfare of the western front, have been largely overlooked. He pointed out the borderland character of the occupied territories and made clear that, contrary to the western and eastern front, this occupation was never meant to lead to annexation.

The fourth panel focused on two papers dealing with World War I and its aftermath from local and comparative perspectives. **Pierre Purseigle** (Université de Toulouse II) in his research on the cities of Béziers (France) and Northampton (England) shed light on the importance of local elites for the social mobilization for war. They acted as local transmitters of the national propaganda efforts by adjusting the messages to local cultural codes. Mourning and remembrance served as prime examples of how local identities and national events interacted. Purseigle also discussed interests and limits of the comparative approach he has chosen.

Adam R. Seipp (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) compared the demobilization process in Munich and Manchester in 1918-19. Power structures were put to the test during the tumultuous first months of the *Räterepublik* in Munich and the strike-ridden winter of 1919 in England. Both cities will serve as case-studies in a project that focuses on the new role of state and citizenship, the changed understanding of politics, and the way authorities coped with the general demand for “order” in the post World War I period. Both papers successfully attempted to “make the picture more complex” by challenging established narratives on the national level, but were confronted with problems of contextualizing their findings and justifying the selection of their examples.

The fifth panel concentrated – after one of the participants dropped out – solely on a paper presented by **David J. Bielanski** (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) on Weimar paramilitary violence and the cult of the dead that rose in Germany after World War I. Bielanski explored the masculine features of the “new man” that were based on the experiences of the front soldiers and revolved around concepts of duty and service to the nation. They were prominently visible in paramilitary organizations like the socialist *Reichsbanner* and the nationalist *Stahlhelm*. Violence was a key-element in the identity of their members; fights in the streets replaced the fight in the trenches. Those killed in these battles were easily incorporated within the cult of the dead.

The papers of the sixth panel dealt with the relationship between intellectuals, science and war. **James A. Good** (Rice University) showed how the reception of German idealism – most notably the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel - in America was influenced by war. The American Civil War and the German wars of unification stimulated the interest in German culture and the liberal values of its system of education: “Lehrfreiheit” and “Lernfreiheit.” John Dewey embraced Hegelianism as a student in the 1880s and later, as a professor at the Universities of Michigan and Chicago. After the turn of the century Hegelianism gradually lost its influence, and during World War I Hegel’s political philosophy was held responsible for the German militarism. Dewey criticized German idealism – Kant and Hegel – in his book “German Philosophy and Politics” (1915). Good argued, that while Dewey was certainly unable to convincingly prove a correlation between abstract philosophical ideas and the policies of the German government, his changed perception of German culture has to be seen mainly as a disillusionment with the German intellectual tradition in the light of German propaganda rhetorics.

Steven P. Remy (Ohio State University) discussed his research on the University of Heidelberg in the Third Reich and disproved the „Heidelberg myth“ of the universities as victims of the regime. Focusing on the activities of departments and prominent professors during World War II, he showed that the regime could count on the support of its universities and research institutions

through war-related publications, courses, and lectures as well as technological innovations, weapons research, „Raumforschung,“ and medical services. Resistance among professors or students was rare in Heidelberg. Of crucial importance was, beside ideological commonalities, the large-scale financial support of scientific research by various government and military institutions. The discussion of both papers raised very broad questions of the relationship between intellectuals and society. It became clear that intellectuals or university professors do not work in a vacuum. They respond easily to massive social disturbances like wars, and outside factors deeply influence the production of knowledge.

The seventh panel brought together papers by Wendy Maxon (University of California, San Diego) and Monica A. Black (University of Virginia, Charlottesville). **Wendy Maxon** explored the topics of mechanization and bestialization in German culture after World War I and demonstrated the value of art works for historical research. She focused on the works of artists such as Oskar Schlemmer, Rudolf Schlichter, Heinrich Davringhausen, and George Grosz. They were occupied with the effects that the industrialized slaughter had on the soldier's body, especially on the western front. They represented different views on general debates over the human body that played an important role in the German culture of the 1920s. Their disturbing images of robots and human *Fleisch* were contrasted by a new awareness of sports, conditioned bodies, nutrition, and health in general.

Monica A. Black presented her research project on perception of death among German soldiers during World War II. Based on the reading of letters from the front which are dominated by elements of the Christian narrative of suffering, death, judgement, and resurrection and victimization, she argued that religious convictions largely survived under the NS-regime. The totalitarian ideology had not superseded Christianity, but on the eastern front the two coincided when the enemy was described as godless, anti-Christian, and bestial. German soldiers viewed themselves as defenders of the Christian culture. The discussion concentrated on soldier's letters as a source that is difficult to use because of the masses of material and the random preservation in the archives, but is nevertheless one of the most fruitful resources for the history of wartime mentalities.

The last panel dealt with German history after 1945. **Andrew Oppenheimer** (University of Chicago) discussed West German pacifism. The fate of the German Peace Society, founded in 1892 and relicensed in November 1945, illustrates the obstacles to a simple continuity in pacifist thought and activism. In the Cold War, the society's educational work could not be based on the Weimar-era ideals of anti-militarism. In the anti-communist climate of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the GPS had difficulties dealing with the communist wing of their organization. It adapted to general liberal-democratic values of the West, but continued to oppose rearmament and the integration of the Federal Republic into NATO.

Finally, **Kristin Rebien** (Stanford University) presented her research on the *Gruppe 47*, the influential network of writers around the author Hans-Werner Richter. All the members of the group had been fighting in World War II and dealt with the war and its consequences in their writings. The myth of the "Stunde Null" that influenced the social and political development of the Federal Republic, was also decisive for the *Gruppe 47*. Their self-image and their success was based on the notion of a "new beginning" and their self-proclaimed status of a cultural elite, and even though publishers refrained from publishing new authors for a number of reasons in the immediate post-war years, the *Gruppe 47*, through its affiliation with critics and publishers, managed to achieve a unique position in the literary market. The discussion of both papers circled around various questions of political and cultural continuity and discontinuity after 1945.

The final discussion of the Young Scholars Forum raised a number of important general questions with regard to the history of war. The broad spectrum of topics and methodological approaches

presented at the conference was clearly seen as an asset. The participants interpreted war as a “social situation” rather than as a historical event, and this paved the way for valuable discussions of the problems of pre- and post-war societies and called the notion of wars as historical watersheds into question. Almost all the papers also were marked by an interest in the representation and perception of history rather than history itself. Some of the papers on German history of the first half of the twentieth century were influenced by a revived notion of a German *Sonderweg*, which proved once again the necessity and the value of comparative research and interdisciplinary approaches. The Young Scholars Forum certainly helped laying the ground for this. The quality of the papers and the readiness of all participants and the invited senior scholars from Germany and the United States to engage in discussions in a dedicated and friendly manner was very impressive. It made the weekend at the GHI Washington a sure success.

The publication of the papers of the Young Scholars Forum 2002 as a book is not intended at this time.

Christoph Strupp

Contact:

German Historical Institute

1607 New Hampshire Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20009, USA

Tel.: (202) 387 3355, Fax: (202) 483 3430

E-mail: strupp@ghi-dc.org

Internet: www.ghi-dc.org

© Arbeitsgemeinschaft außeruniversitärer historischer Forschungseinrichtungen
in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland e.V., 2002
Nachdruck nur mit ausdrücklicher Genehmigung der AHF.
Heruntergeladen von www.ahf-muenchen.de.