

Remembering Dillon Shane Banis

Historian Musician Mensch

1992-2025



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Historian, Musician, Mensch

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The Berlin Program mourns the death of Berlin Program Alumnus Dillon Banis who died on April 15, 2025 in New York City.

Dillon, a Ph.D. Candidate in the History Department at Columbia University, was a Fellow in our program from April 2023 to February 2024, carrying out research for his innovative dissertation project on the sugar beet industry “Sugar, Globalization, and the German Administrative State, 1871-1919.”

His sharp and curious mind made him a pillar of our community. Actively engaging with topics beyond his own field of expertise he exemplified our goal of cross-disciplinary dialogue in each meeting.

We extend our condolences to all whose lives were touched by Dillon and would like to share some thoughts on and memories of this exceptional *Mensch*.

The Berlin Program and Freie Universität Berlin mourn the tragic loss of Dillon Banis. I have vivid memories of his fellowship between April 2023 and February 2024, and of the enormous impression he made on the Berlin Program community, including myself, in the biweekly research colloquium as well as on informal occasions. His enthusiasm and commitment had him join an M.A. seminar I taught in the Sommersemester 2023 on human geo-interventions in the 19th and 20th centuries, where he presented some of his own research and provided stimulating commentary on the contributions of others, as he did in the Berlin Program seminar. His Ph.D. research still strikes me as unusual and innovative, with a new take on the Prussian sugar beet industry during the *Kaiserreich* at the intersections of economic and cultural, agrarian and environmental, regional and global history. This research, sadly, will remain unfinished, and the field of modern German history in the U.S. will now lack a potential future leader. No less important, I will remember Dillon for his many other gifts and talents, including his exuberant social skills and his guitar playing in the Ehrenbergstrasse classroom. Our thoughts are with his family and loved ones.

Paul Nolte, Professor of Modern and Contemporary History, Freie Universität Berlin and Chair of Berlin Program Academic Advisory Committee

Dillon's enthusiasm for Germany went back a long way. According to his sister he began teaching himself German before either of them had had any chance to leave the USA.

As anyone who met him during his many years in and out of Germany could attest, whether in a seminar or in a bar late at night, Dillon was nothing if not an enthusiastic German speaker!

He started out pursuing the history of German and Austrian economics in part because he realized that it was a great hustle. Eccentric enthusiasts for Austrian economics would happily fund conference and research trips that he would otherwise never have been able to undertake.

His natural gregariousness led him to be comfortable in strange intellectual surroundings.

Dillon's research eventually took him into the real depths of German agrarian political economy and the logic of consumer markets for sugar.

In my social circle in Berlin he was affectionately known as "der verrueckte Zuckerrueben-nerd".

Dillon was a true example of how a scholar's curiosity can transform into deep fascination and a transformative view of history.

Adam Tooze, Dissertation Advisor to Dillon at Columbia University

Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of History

Director of the European Institute and Chair of the Committee on Global Thought

"My day job is about German sugar beets." Whether in English or in German, this was often how Dillon introduced himself. It didn't matter if he was at a conference, with a Swiss customs official or alone in a bar, Dillon could engage anyone with a striking intensity, but also with profound humility.

As someone who has read nearly all his dissertation and as a German (music) historian myself, it would be appropriate for me to write about his novel insight into the political economy of Imperial Germany from a Polish perspective. But his professors and classmates can do that.

Dillon was not the typical Berlin Program fellow having graduated from both community and historically black colleges. After his first (of two) Fulbrights, he relished the opportunity to land at Columbia where, unlike himself, he took his work

extremely seriously. For Dillon, academia was a utopia, offering him the opportunity to explore and grow.

Dillon casually approached me at a Berlin Program Summer Workshop in 2023, and said, “could you recommend a good piece by Hindemith,” the esoteric subject of my 2010 dissertation. He must have googled me. Despite his friend requesting me on Facebook, I never thought I would talk to him again until we discovered our mutual love of (American) football. Despite the 9-hour time difference between Berlin and Los Angeles, we watched games together, bonding over “just dumb” play calls. One of these Sundays, I posed a request to my football buddy: I had a pressing job deadline and could he quickly fact check an essay on the history of British capitalism? He spent his entire day rewriting the essay with incisive comments and references.

After I experienced a loss, he offered to distract me in Berlin. This beautiful week was an adventure through mosh pits where we smashed computers with sledgehammers, dialogued with locals in Lichtenberg, and toured Berlin’s smokiest open mics. There he performed his music, switching seamlessly between German and English, from “Der Pfandsammler,” a ballad about a man earned his living collecting empty beer bottles to his prescient “Last Love Song.”

Dillon would go into an AfD bar just to “to experience history before people wrote about it.” During a job interview, he waited for me for two hours in a suit in the rain holding a small bottle of Rotkäppchen Sekt. He collected snow globes for my daughter wherever he went. Dillon loved pigeons, the Dallas Cowboys, colorful pashmina scarves and death metal. He was a meticulous study of hops and could turn my tears into laughter with his Maryland-accented Brett Kavanaugh impressions: “We drank beer. I liked beer. I still like beer.” His guitar accompanied him everywhere, including the last time I saw him a few weeks ago in person in a punk bar on the Upper East Side. As Dillon attempted to buy me his choice beverage, he said, “You know, there was never a power dynamic between us.” As I threw my card down on top of his, he teased “writing an history dissertation is *really* hard. It’s not music.” Then imitating one of our Berlin Program professors, he shouted, “WAS SIND IHRE QUELLEN?!” I shot back, “Whatever, that was the hardest thing I ever had to write!” And it was-until these last 500 words.

Alexandra Monchick, Berlin Program Fellow 2007-2008

Dillon's untimely death is a tragic loss for transatlantic historiography, both academically and personally. I met Dillon in Berlin in 2023. Our shared interest in agricultural history, in the connections between agricultural production methods and

broader social developments, brought us together. Dillon accepted an invitation to lecture at the University of Bremen, where he creatively combined the statistical social history of 19th century agriculture with the history of migration and food, demonstrating convincingly that agricultural history, properly done, is more productive than its reputation in Germany and remains essential to understanding also modern industrial societies. I mourn Dillon's loss on a human level. I fondly remember our exchange about patchwork families and his music performances in a playground in Neukölln, or a party in Schöneberg to which he took me. Dillon literally built academic bridges between US and German historiography, already as a doctoral student. I am heartbroken that this bridge-building ended so abruptly.

Veronika Settele, Professur für Neueste Geschichte, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

I was deeply saddened to hear of Dillon's passing. Although I knew him only briefly, he was always a generous and thoughtful interlocutor—someone who gave his full attention to the work and words of others. Conversations with Dillon always felt expansive and encouraging. Beyond his intellectual generosity, I will also remember the easy joy he brought to gatherings. His presence was a reminder of the warmth and community that sustain our work and lives. My thoughts are with all those who loved him.

Clemens Finkelstein, Associated Fellow | Panel on Planetary Thinking | JLU Giessen, Berlin Program Fellow 2023/24

The last time I saw Dillon was at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association in January. I didn't know that he would be there, too, and both of us were pleasantly surprised about the happy coincident. Over the next few days, we spent many hours together, drinking too many coffees and beers and chatting about history, politics, and our personal lives. Dillon helped to make my conference experience an enjoyable one, and he supported me by coming to my panel. We promised to stay in touch before each of us walked into the hustle and bustle of a snowy Midtown Manhattan afternoon. I didn't know that this was, in fact, a last goodbye.

Dillon and I spent far too little time together. But whenever I was lucky enough to have a long conversation with him, I enjoyed every minute of it. Dillon was incredibly smart, his broad knowledge of history and theory truly astonishing. He stood at the cusp of a promising academic career that would have left a lasting mark on our

discipline. Nothing of this had come easy to him. Dillon told me about the many struggles he was going through during his entire life. His successful pursuit of a PhD at Columbia University was a remarkable accomplishment in itself, one he had to fight for more than many others.

Most importantly, Dillon was a good and generous human being. I was looking forward to getting to know him better in the coming years, as a colleague and as a friend. I mourn the fact that this won't be possible anymore.

Rest in peace, Dillon.

Ludwig Decke, Berlin Program Fellow 2023/24

When I met Dillon in early 2023 in our research colloquium, two thoughts crossed my mind in which both *Zuckerrüben* and historiography were curiously absent: Leonard Cohen and the cover of Bob Dylan's album *Freewheeling*. But more on that later.

Dillon Banis came to us from Columbia University's History Department to do research for this Ph.D. project on the sugar beet industry "Sugar, Globalization, and the German Administrative State, 1871-1919 " where he was advised by Adam Tooze, Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of History.

Before Dillon joined our program, he had held a Fulbright fellowship which allowed him to do research in Berlin and get connected to relevant academics and institutions. Before officially starting in April 2023, he showed up at a meeting in January 2023, because he was interested in the topic discussed that week, and perhaps, to scout out what he was getting himself into. He soon established himself as a mind to be reckoned with. Well-read, erudite, always ready and prepared to engage in subjects outside his own field of expertise, he offered productive feedback often pointing to further avenues of inquiry. His open and warm personality made criticism easy to accept. Not one to play softball though either, he did not shy away from articulating when he was not convinced.

But this is not all he brought to our colloquium. His guitar was his constant companion. After his "day job" Dillon wrote, composed, and engineered his own music which he performed in Berlin. He played one of his songs "Der Pfandsammler" for us in the colloquium, a portrayal of the struggles faced by a person living on society's margins.

Dillon lived in Lichtenberg, a district in the east of Berlin marked by its socialist architecture, a place where rent is still affordable but where the social mix is quite different from e.g. Kreuzkölln, Friedrichshain or Dahlem. Having no *Berührungssängste*, Dillon engaged with people from all walks of life and hung out with them.

During our conversation at the end of his fellowship in February 2024, I learnt that he had released an album on Youtube. "Look at Me" was recorded in Berlin between February and April, 2023 and features 12 songs each wrapped in its own musical style. Full of emotions and abstractions, the pieces address existential questions, which I took as vignettes of his inner self, like much of Cohen's work.

I was struck by the piece on secret archives in which the narrator connects his historical research to attempts to structure or perhaps even close some *files* in his personal life.

It takes guts to put yourself out there, I thought. Where better to share such intense reflections than in a joint in lower Manhattan, perhaps some place close to Jones Street - as on Dylan's 1963 album cover.

Karin Goihl, Berlin Program Academic Coordinator

THIS IS OUR SONG FOR YOU, DILLON.

[The Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies](#) at [Freie Universität Berlin](#) promotes scholars in the humanities and the social sciences working on dissertation or postdoctoral research projects on Germany and/or Europe. The program offers a stimulating academic environment that combines excellent research opportunities with intellectual and cultural interaction. Our research colloquium serves as a central meeting point for all fellows to share, discuss and support each other's work. In close cooperation with our North American partner and co-sponsor, the [German Studies Association](#), our Summer Workshop, the GSA Distinguished Lecture and other events offer opportunities to engage with timely topics and strengthen ties between scholars working in these fields.

CREDITS

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