

Berlin Program Alumni Panel  
at the 41<sup>st</sup> Annual GSA Conference in Atlanta  
October 6, 2017

# ‘The Christian, Democratic Values of the West?’

Humanitarianism and Memory in Postwar Germany

## Report



**Berlin Program Alumni Panel**  
at the 41st Annual GSA Conference in Atlanta, Oct. 6, 2017

**‘The Christian, Democratic Values of the West?’: Humanitarianism and Memory in Postwar Germany**  
(Alumni Panel of the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies  
co-sponsored by the GSA Memory Studies Network)

**Moderator:** Suzanne Marchand, Louisiana State University

**Commentator:** Michael Meng, Clemson University

**Participants**

René Staedtler, University of Maryland

*War Criminals and Humanitarianism – The Red Cross as an Interlocutor in the Politics of Justice between France and West Germany after World War II*

Jennifer L. Rodgers, University of Pennsylvania

*The Archives of Humanity: The International Tracing Service, the Holocaust, and Postwar Order*

Peter Gengler, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

*Appeals to the ‘World Conscience’: Expelles and the Construction and Leveraging of German Victimhood, 1945-1955*

The panel chaired by Suzanne Marchand (Louisiana State University) examined the politics of humanitarianism and human rights in post-World-War II Europe and Germany by focusing on supranational organizations as well as ethno-national movements, providing insights how appeals to universal human rights were utilized to further divergent political agendas of particularism, privileging one group over the other. Furthermore, the panel demonstrated how dominant memory narratives in Germany in regards to World-War-II and the Nazi past shaped the employment of humanitarianism limiting the universalist paradigm of the latter. While the post-World-War-II era experienced a dramatic increase in appeals to universalism, the panelists demonstrated the ambiguity revealed by national and other particular interests. The Berlin Program Alumni Panel was organized by René Staedtler, University of Maryland, College Park.

René Staedtler’s presentation argued that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) inserted itself into the debate over the meanings of World-War-II in the relations between France and West Germany. As the custodian of the Geneva Conventions, operating under international humanitarian mandate, the ICRC launched a forceful, albeit hidden from public view, campaign against the French war crimes trial program, which mirrored similar arguments and accusations by the West German amnesty campaign. By criticizing the legal foundations of French justice towards war criminals, the ICRC participated in the larger attempt of a transnational network of groups and organizations which sought to revise Allied justice towards Nazi criminals based on the argument that it violated a Western, Christian, humanitarian tradition or code. Staedtler provided evidence for his argument by showing that the ICRC’s utilized its interpretation of the Geneva Convention to demonstrate to the French government that the French war crimes trials program violated international humanitarian law, thus undermining a cornerstone of the French denazification efforts. Furthermore, he demonstrated that



members of the French delegation of the ICRC later on went so far to lend their support to the cause of German veterans organizations who aggressively lobbied for a complete amnesty and reintegration of Nazi criminals into German society.

Peter Gengler (University of North Carolina), argued that German expellee organizations such as the Sudeten German *Landsmannschaft* (SL) adapted their narratives of German victimhood in order to broaden their appeal to Western audiences and thus maximize their leverage. While initially portraying the forced migrations as a violation of Western democratic principles and accusing Western governments of complicity, the SL's strategy evolved quickly into constructing a usable past which embedded Cold War realities and instrumentalized the increasingly dominating anticommunist narrative to "appeal to the world conscience." By erasing the context of the Third Reich and portraying "flight and expulsion" as part of the confrontation between Christian Civilization and the "Asiatic East," the expellee lobby sought to "internationalize" their rhetoric in order to benefit from American geopolitical calculations, cleverly obfuscating German particularism as anticommunism. Gengler showed how the West German government clandestinely financed these expellee lobby efforts to U.S. lawmakers and government officials to further German interests it could not publicly espouse. While expellee organizations have frequently been portrayed as extreme right wing nationalists, Gengler has shown that their memory politics in fact reflected the political culture of the early Federal Republic and its postwar societal consensus, even gaining traction with Western audiences.

Jennifer Rodgers (University of Pennsylvania) presented her paper on the International Tracing Service (ITS) as a key agent in redefining the practice of humanitarianism after World War II. Rodgers argued that the extension of the ITS mandate to include the spreading of "Christian, democratic and humanitarian" traditions to combat the spreading of communism in Western Europe amounted to the emergence of a political humanitarianism, limiting the agency's universalism to the detriment of individual Holocaust victims, especially in the Eastern Bloc, and scholars hoping to shed light on Europe's recent history. Furthermore, Rodgers showed how the involvement of the Federal Republic in the administration of ITS had been engineered by the United States as a path towards a moral rehabilitation, enabling it to showcase its commitment to democracy and binding it to the West. When the administration of ITS was transferred to the Red Cross in 1955, it then in turn proceeded to implement its own political agenda, including efforts to protect Swiss banks from claims on dormant accounts. Rodgers demonstrated how ITS and its custodians hindered scholarship on the Holocaust and tightly controlled the recognition, compensation and ultimately memorialization of National Socialism's victims.

In his commentary, Michael Meng (Clemson University), highlighted the common themes of the three papers as they revealed the tensions and contradictions of pursuing universalism through supranational organizations or, in the case of Gengler's paper, through the rhetorical appeal to a transnational, humanitarian sensitivity to suffering and persecution. He argued that the papers raise a question that has been debated extensively in German intellectual history: the advancement of universalism through supranational concepts, laws, and institutions. Hegel and Arendt, according to Meng, were highly critical of these notions. For them, the ideal of creating an egalitarian and universalist community was a political-ethical project that had to be completed in a specific organization or community of people who genuinely embrace that ideal. Hegel and Arendt both expressed a certain worry about the strength of supranational regimes. The panel's contributions seemed to confirm these worries.

**Suzanne Marchand** is Boyd Professor of History at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, where she specializes in European intellectual history. She is author of *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (2009) and *Down From Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (1996). In addition to numerous scholarly articles, Suzanne Marchand has coauthored the innovative world history textbook *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World From the Beginnings of Humankind to the Present* (W.W. Norton, 2002) and a new European history textbook, *Many Europes: Chance and Choice in Western Civilization* (McGraw Hill, 2013).

**Michael Meng** is Associate Professor of History at Clemson University. His first book, *Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland*, appeared with Harvard University Press in 2011. The book won the Hans Rosenberg Prize of the Central European History Society. A volume coedited with Erica Lehrer, *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland*, appeared in 2015 with Indiana University Press. He has published articles in *Central European History*, *Contemporary European History*, *German History*, *New German Critique*, and *The Journal of Modern History*. Michael was a Berlin Program Fellow 2006/07.

**René Staedtler** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at the University of Maryland, College Park. His dissertation project focuses on the relationship between Franco-German reconciliation and justice for the victims of Nazi crimes in France. By examining emerging Franco-German networks which lobbied for a shift from retributive justice to amnesty, he argues that justice against perpetrators was forsaken in the interest of Franco-German reconciliation and European integration. René was a Berlin Program Fellow in 2015/16.

**Jennifer Rodgers** is a 2013-2014 alumna of the Berlin Program. She received her Ph.D. in History from the University of Pennsylvania in 2014. Following her tenure in Berlin, Rodgers was a postdoctoral fellow at the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, the American Council on Germany, and the University of South Florida. She is currently an adjunct professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, where she will be teaching courses on gender in World War II Europe and the history of Berlin. Rodgers is finishing a manuscript based on her dissertation titled *The Archives of Humanity: The International Tracing Service, the Holocaust, and Postwar Order* and also has begun work on a second monograph that explores the history of childbirth in Germany from 1871-1990.

**Peter Gengler** is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he also received his M.A. in 2013 with a master's thesis on the Ravensbrück concentration camp memorial between 1945 and 1990. His research broadly focuses on postwar German cultural memories of war and dictatorship. Peter is currently completing his dissertation, *'Flight and Expulsion': Expellee Victimhood Narratives and Memory Politics in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1944-1990*, which was supported by the Berlin Program and the DAAD during the academic years 2015-2016 and is advised by Professor Konrad H. Jarausch. Peter was a Berlin Program Fellow in 2015/16.

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