

**Berlin Program Alumni Roundtable  
at the 30th Annual GSA Conference  
Sept. 28 - Oct. 1, 2006 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

**Representing Dictatorship: The Third Reich and the GDR**

**Moderator: Randall Halle (University of Pittsburgh)**

**Participants:**

**Heather Gumbert (Virginia Tech), Berlin Program Fellow 2002-2003**

**Erik Huneke (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Berlin Program Fellow 2002-2003**

**Molly Wilkinson Johnson (University of Alabama, Huntsville), Berlin Program Fellow  
1999-2000**

**Heather E. Mathews (University of Texas, Austin), Berlin Program Fellow 2001-2002**

**Jon Berndt Olsen (College of William and Mary), Berlin Program Fellow 1999-2000**

**Eli Rubin (Western Michigan University), Berlin Program Fellow 2001-2002**

In his prefatory remarks, moderator Randall Halle noted that he was struck by the fact that the Berlin Program alumni who responded to the invitation to participate in this Roundtable all studied the German Democratic Republic (GDR) rather than the Third Reich. The comments proffered by the Roundtable participants tended to focus on elements of continuity and discontinuity between the Third Reich and the GDR and the reasons for which observers across the political spectrum in present-day Germany, as Jon Berndt Olsen observed, have a vested interest in examining how a “second German dictatorship” came into existence.

Exemplary of the nuanced attention paid to questions of the GDR’s historical relationship to Nazi Germany were Molly Wilkinson Johnson’s observations about the role played by athletic endeavor under National Socialist (NSDAP) and Socialist Unity Party (SED) rule. In both cases, sports were clearly linked to the regimes’ larger goals of augmenting production levels and contributing to the populace’s readiness to engage in paramilitary activity. Yet despite these surface continuities, the connection of sports to matters of economic import or national defense was certainly not unique to dictatorial regimes like Nazi Germany and the GDR. While many GDR citizens sought to obtain sports badges because of the benefits that accrued to recipients of this honorific, Johnson’s interviewees tended to emphasize the culture of sociability in athletic competitions and made only passing mention of the political banners that served as the backdrop for this sociability. Johnson urged her listeners not to discount the sameness of everyday life and the continuity of *Verein* culture as experienced by Germans under both Nazi and Communist rule.

Heather Mathews invited her fellow panelists and audience members to think about the question of *representing* dictatorship from the standpoint of an art historian, and to take the study of visual culture as a basis for reframing comparisons between the NSDAP and the SED. Heather Gumbert exhorted her listeners to pay attention to the importance and persistence of narratives about dictatorship — even or perhaps especially when they are not corroborated by the ostensible facts about a given event. As an example, Gumbert invoked narratives of the *Ochsenkopf* campaign to turn around antennas to prevent reception of West German television signals; these sometimes factually inaccurate stories exerted considerable influence over the ways in which East German rule was experienced and remembered.

Erik Huneke's commentary was based upon the premise that the study of the comparability of and continuities between Nazi Germany and the GDR need not entail the politically loaded connotations of the totalitarianism paradigm that have often guided such comparisons. One way of reframing such comparisons is to uncover some of the assumptions influenced by totalitarianism theory that implicitly inform even those accounts of GDR history that focus more on aspects of everyday life in East Germany than on the repressive mechanisms of dictatorial rule. A useful vector of comparison might be the notion of participation, as proposed by Mary Fulbrook, and the degree to which it was allowed, encouraged, or circumscribed by the Nazis and by the SED. The racial state established by the Nazis was one predicated upon very stringent delineations of inclusion and exclusion, whereas for the SED, the point was not so much to determine who did not belong to the East German community, but to make sure that everyone knew what the conditions of belonging were.

The points raised and questions asked during the subsequent discussion both resonated with and built upon the panelists' remarks. One audience member wanted to know more about the continuities and discontinuities in visual culture—whether of an overtly political nature or not—in both contexts. A question about *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for the East) prompted Eli Rubin to note the prominent role played by consumer goods as a vehicle for memory, as exemplified by the Museum of Everyday Life in the GDR that is located in Eisenhüttenstadt. Erik Huneke noted the irony of using consumer goods as a vehicle for nostalgia, given how many East Germans had felt deprived due to the deficiencies of GDR consumer culture, and urged for *Ostalgie* to be considered as a phenomenon that should itself be historicized, since it has taken changing forms during the 17 years that have elapsed since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Randall Halle picked up on the theme of reconceptualizing the relationship between state and society in the GDR and Nazi Germany. Erik Huneke noted the shift on the part of at least some scholars sympathetic to a version of the totalitarianism paradigm from a focus on GDR-Nazi Germany comparisons to the comparative study of the USSR and Nazi Germany. Eli Rubin advised some additional qualifiers to be added to the notion of participation as a lens through which to discern differences and similarities between the GDR and the Third Reich, namely notions of complicity and guilt, and in particular the extent of involvement in acts of violence on the part of the state and the general populace.

As the conversation drew to a close, one Berlin Program alumna who was in the audience expressed her discomfort with using the term “dictatorship” at all. In her view, use of the term presupposed the comparability of the type and extent of the repressive measures employed under the Nazi regime and SED rule, thereby eliding significant differences between them.

While some panelists were very sympathetic to this concern, others were a bit more hesitant to abandon the term entirely—whether for lack of a more suitable alternative, out of the desire to remain attuned to the tenor of debates about the GDR in present-day Germany, or given the analytical exigencies of identifying the aspects of GDR and Nazi rule that in both cases precluded the possibility of truly democratic participation.

A lively exchange of e-mail correspondence occurred in the days following the Roundtable. Randall Halle offered his advice and support should the panelists wish to organize symposia or conference panels that might result in further collaborative projects, such as an edited volume that would feature the panelists' and other emerging scholars' work on GDR history. Heather Gumbert expressed interest in organizing one such symposium at Virginia Tech in early 2008.

*Report by Erik Huneke  
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