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German Studies Association Conference 2003 Sessions 3 and 22: Revisiting Alltagsgeschichte: Praxis in Everyday Life and the Discipline of History. German Studies Association.

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These back-to-back panels were organized with the intention of taking stock of current work in the field of Alltagsgeschichte (history of everyday life), assessing how the field has developed in the past few decades, and establishing lines of inquiry for future work in the field. The first panel had as its sub-theme “Politics,” and the second “Agency.” Politics was taken to include both the political implication for the historian of adopting an everyday life approach, and the political importance of everyday actions among historical actors themselves. Agency has long been a central concept for everyday life historians, and thus warranted a panel in its name. One of Alltagsgeschichte’s early contributions was to insist that ordinary people act and are not merely acted upon by larger structures, forces, and powerful figures. Not surprisingly, all six of the papers touched on politics and agency, and together comprised a broad sampling of Alltagsgeschichte “at work,” ca. 2003. Moderator Geoff Eley opened the first panel with remarks on the trajectory Alltagsgeschichte has taken since it developed in West Germany and the intellectual influences it has drawn on since, among them feminist scholarship. Paul Steege then presented an insightful paper highlighting the importance of place (or location) on the making of the Cold War. Breaking from existing Cold War historiography, Steege did not see Berlin as a simple microcosm of a grand Cold War, a place where one could come and see the postwar struggle mapped out on an actual physical landscape. (John F. Kennedy had invited listeners to “come to Berlin” to see what the Cold war was really about.) Steege rather elucidated Berlin’s Cold War significance by juxtaposing the messy situation on the ground with the global frameworks of meaning applied to Berlin. His phrase “messy location” pleased the commentator

and audience members; it seemed to sum up the realm that Alltags-historians work in, and Steege argued for its centrality for deconstructing the “big category” of Cold War. Steege used Victor Turner’s notion of liminality, of being “betwixt and between,” to chart Berliners’ courses through the sectors of their city. In everyday trade and travel, Berliners contested sector boundaries; boundaries were policed, but things were a little “messy” around the edges. Here the everyday life perspective challenges the neat (and total) division that Berlin has come to symbolize in Cold War discourse. Steege wove together material and symbolic aspects of Berlin history of the late 1940’s to reveal an “unevenness” in tempo between the global and local. In breaking down the Manichean category of Cold War, Steege invited us to reconsider, in a fundamental way, where politics happen. In so doing, he placed himself firmly in the Alltagsgeschichte tradition of insisting that politics do not happen above and affect below. Next Nathan Stoltzfus presented an illuminating paper on the ways that the Alltagsgeschichte approach has significantly revised scholarly understanding of resistance in the Third Reich. He reviewed the historiography on German resistance, which has evolved from an elite concept—Widerstand—focusing on those overt actions intended to bring down a regime, to a more nuanced understanding of resistance that includes non-compliance and dissent. There was little place for women in earlier accounts of Widerstand. Stoltzfus introduced the Rosenstrasse protests as a “new past.” These 1943 actions by non-Jewish Berlin women married to Jewish men, long dormant in historical understandings of resistance, have attracted wide attention of late. Its inclusion in a new anthology on German resistance and an upcoming commercial film on the topic

suggest that Rosenstrasse is becoming part of the established history of resistance during the Nazi period. A broad range of historians see the Rosenstrasse expression of opinion from ordinary persons as having caused the regime to adjust temporarily its racial policies. Stoltzfus notes, however, that this assessment of Rosenstrasse is not universally accepted. Some historians, sticking to the top-down perspective on state power, argue that the protesters had no influence on Gestapo decision-making. To resolve this difference of opinion, Stoltzfus raises the question of sources. The Rosenstrasse nay-sayers use documents generated by the regime itself to argue the protests had no bearing on policy. He asks whether these are the best sources to consult, since Rosenstrasse reveals a clash between two Nazi principles, racial purification and keeping the social peace. Nazi documents cannot be the sole source for understanding the workings of the Nazi regime. In his account of the Rosenstrasse protests and historians interpretations of them, Stoltzfus makes a convincing argument for the relevance of everyday life perspective for understanding the complicated relations of state and society in the Nazi dictatorship.

In her paper on *Alltagsgeschichte* and class, Maureen Healy shifted the focus to the evolution of everyday life history since 1980's. She reviewed what was at stake in the original debate between structural historians and *Alltags*-challengers. Second, she argued that the rise of *Alltagsgeschichte* has coincided with a decline in the study of class. Along with historians of other various persuasions during the 1990's, everyday life historians have widely resorted to the vague term "identity" to write about class. This has hindered our understanding of how economic difference operates in everyday life. The debate among social historians in West Germany in the 1970's and 1980's centered on whether structure and process or everyday practice was the appropriate foundation for the study of the past. The resilience of *Alltagsgeschichte* (as structural history faded) can be explained in a number of ways. *Alltagsgeschichte* was well-positioned to draw on the broad return to story-telling ("narrative") in European history. To interpret written and oral sources, everyday life historians have fruitfully borrowed "ways of reading" from literary studies. Healy argued that this borrowing has opened the interpretive field greatly, but *Alltagsgeschichte* has so far avoided "postmodern absolutism" in which the all powerful Language once again strips actors of agency. In the 1990's historians looking to connect the self to the collective, the local to the national turned with a passion to the term identity. Everyday life historians have used identity as a filament to bridge

the small and the large. In the case of class, this has not worked very well. Teasing a recognizable "class identity" out of the everyday stories from which *Alltagsgeschichte* derives has proven difficult. The historical actors themselves do not necessarily express their perceived economic standing (and that of others) as a collective experience or sharedness.

Commentator Dorothee Wierling defended *Alltagsgeschichte* against the charge that it naively overestimates agency. Agency does not imply that actors make their own conditions (*contra* Marx); rather agency is the process by which actors make (given) conditions their own. Wierling addressed questions to the specific panelists and then made the following observations: Discussion of storytelling, agency and practice are important, but they don't fully describe what *Alltagsgeschichte* has done and can do. There is a danger in our stories turning into legends and our categories into myths. This can be true for "resistance," "identity" and "agency" itself. Wierling closed by noting that one of *Alltagsgeschichte*'s great strengths is its capacity for ambiguity in interpreting the past. Here ambiguity should not be seen as a deficiency, but an accurate reflection of richness of historical experience.

Moderator Peter Fritzsche opened the second *Alltagsgeschichte* panel on agency. Drew Bergerson presented an engaging paper on *Eigensinn* and ethics in everyday life during the Third Reich. He applied a philosophical standard—Kant's categorical imperative—to the everyday actions and gestures of Hildesheimers. He argued that Kant's conditions for enlightenment were present in two ways: Hildesheimers debated their public behavior and did so in the public sphere. Using several examples from everyday life, Bergerson showed the ways that "reasoned public debate" could have the unreasonable consequence of furthering the Nazi party's aim of transforming self and society to fit its principles. Whether or not to use the salutation "heil Hitler" became a pivotal moment for *Eigensinn* among a group of Jewish boys and girls hiking in the woods in 1935. Decision to use the greeting "good morning" when coming across others in the woods was "pure *Eigensinn*: a symbolic rebellion against the system designed as ordinary." Bergerson argued that daily decision-making of this sort "made Hitler into the mediator of informal social relations behind the veil of the everyday." This was true in other everyday encounters as well: a master mechanic letting a potential apprentice know his politics by revealing an SA uniform beneath his apron; a German officer depicted by a portrait painter with his Nazi insignia hidden. Bergerson noted that when re-telling these stories, his inter-

view partners were simultaneously eager and reluctant to share stories of their own Eigensinn. The stories in which ordinary Germans have agency “undermined their claim that they had lost autonomy under the Nazi dictatorship.” Bergerson’s study of Eigensinn reminds us that inaction—as well as action—should be considered part of agency. <p> Belinda Davis similarly focused on agency in her lively paper on New Left activists of the 1960s and 70s. She asked: Who were the 68ers? To answer this question she looked at the everyday ways the activists lived their politics. Davis found that the stereotype of the 68er as a pampered university student born after World War II and enjoying the “Gnade des spaeten Geburts” does not match the backgrounds of the those she has studied. Of 25 leading activists, not a single one was born after 1945. Some had spent their childhood in Nazi youth organizations. The political proclivities of their parents spanned the spectrum from right to left. The 68ers had quite varied class backgrounds; not all were university students; some were self-supporting and had their own families at the time of their most concentrated protest. Davis cracked open the myth of a stable 68er “type” by documenting the heterogeneity of participants’ backgrounds. Nevertheless, some important common characteristics bound them together. These included attraction to an emotionally grounded politics, to the idea of self-liberation, the romance of being Lebenskuenstler, and meaning derived from being a part of something. A communicative thread also runs through their explanations for activism—a desire to speak and “be heard.” A look at the everyday lives of 68ers reveals that activism was, at root, hard work. 68ers fit their activism into busy lives that included employment and family obligations including childcare. Activism entailed not a life of leisure but a life of juggling Fach groups, writing prolifically for newspapers and newsletters, and arranging food provisions for the Kommune. Davis closed with examination of the extended family-like living arrangements that were created through the WG. She concluded that by trying to live a different politics—by incorporating anti-authoritarian and anti-dogmatic forms into their <cite>Alltag</cite>—the 68ers had a democratizing effect on West German political culture. <p> Pamela Swett presented a tightly argued paper on the centrality of everyday crises for understanding the political radicalism of the Weimar Republic. She used a structural change—expansion of Berlin’s public transport network—to show how politics became radicalized at the neighborhood level. The local rail tram and subway stations built between 1900 and 1930 became distinct landmarks in Berlin neighborhoods. Contrary to what one

might expect, the expansion of the transport network did not weaken local identities but strengthened them. The small stations that went up provided new anchors for neighborhood association. Unlike Europe’s grand central stations studied by Wolfgang Schivelbusch, the small stations of interest to Swett created a kind of indoor/outdoor effect, whereby one never really left the surrounding landscape. In some Berlin neighborhoods, the space underneath the new elevated tracks turned into local centers of commerce and contact. These transit stations also came to serve a political function during the late Weimar period. To demarcate the space of one’s own neighborhood from that of rivals, locals staged overt political actions in and around these hubs. While workers tried to exert more control over their neighborhoods, other factors (tied to economic crisis) were simultaneously threatening neighborhood cohesion. For Swett, this tension between dwindling neighborhood cohesion and workers wanting to exert control over neighborhood space is a paradox that helps explain the volatility of the era. To defend local transportation nodes meant (especially for men) defending the autonomy of the community against outsiders and those with opposing political views. Swett’s paper exemplified one of the things that <cite>Alltagsgeschichte has</cite> done well: it insisted that politics has a spatial element. Politics is not performed in the abstract, but is physically located somewhere, and this somewhere (here, Berlin’s small neighborhood stations) is constitutive of politics itself. <p> Mark Landsman observed in his comment that all three of the papers drew attention to local and intimate settings—to ways of being neighborly [Bergerson], the shared space of the WG [Davis], and the maintenance and defense of neighborhood boundaries [Swett]. In all three cases, these local interactions had significant consequences for larger questions of politics and culture. Landsman addressed questions to each panelist, and raised the methodological question of how Alltagsgeschichte balances the particular and the general. He suggestively proposed a “dialectical flow of influence and meaning” connecting the two. <p> Although he was not present in person, the spirit of Alf Luedtke was palpable during the sessions. All of the papers drew directly or indirectly on his work, and panelists acknowledged enormous intellectual debt to him. These two panels generated quite productive discussion in the sessions themselves and among participants afterwards. Taking stock of the field, it seems that Alltagsgeschichte is alive and well at 25! <p> For a complete listing of all sessions at the 2003 German Studies Association Conference, please visit <http://www.g-s-a.org>. <p>

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