

TOWARD A BIOGRAPHICAL TURN? BIOGRAPHY IN MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY—MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY IN BIOGRAPHY

Conference at the GHI, March 25–27, 2004. Conveners: Volker R. Berghahn (Columbia University) and Simone Lässig (GHI). Made possible by a grant from the Thyssen Foundation, Cologne.

Participants: Roger Chickering (Georgetown University), Charles Closmann (GHI), Hilary Earl (Wilfried Laurier University, Waterloo, ON), Astrid M. Eckert (GHI), Jan Eckel (University of Freiburg), Willem Frijhoff (Free University, Amsterdam), Sander L. Gilman (University of Illinois, Chicago), Barbara Hahn (Princeton University), Ian Kershaw (University of Sheffield), Peter Longerich (Royal Holloway, University of London), Susan Pedersen (Columbia University), Karl Heinrich Pohl (University of Kiel), Cornelia Rauh-Kühne (University of Tübingen), Ulrich Raulff (Humboldt University Berlin), Hedwig Röckelein (University of Göttingen), John C. G. Röhl (University of Sussex), Paul Lawrence Rose (Pennsylvania State University), Mark Roseman (Indiana University), Angelika Schaser (University of Hamburg), Dirk Schumann (GHI), Christof Strupp (GHI), Christine von Oertzen (GHI), Christian von Tippelskirch (Brooklyn, NY), Dorothee Wierling (University of Hamburg), Michael Wildt (Institute for Social Research, Hamburg), Michael Wreszin (Queens College, New York), Ophra Yerushalmi (New York City), Stefan Zahlmann (University of Konstanz).

Historians who wrote biographies were long considered old-fashioned and methodologically conservative, especially in Germany. During the past decade, however, historiography has shifted from concentrating on structures and numbers to a cultural history that is sensitive to the individual, the unique, and the non-typical, and thus must bring “people” back into history. In this context, the criticism of biography, which was especially widespread in Germany during the battles between social history and traditional political history, has softened. One major motive for organizing this conference was the hope that, despite its methodological pitfalls, biography might enrich modern historical study. Consequently, the conference aimed to answer the following questions: Can biography offer historical research a distinctive contribution that is truly up to date in subject, method, and theory? What would a biography informed by the approaches and categories of modern historiography look like? What should a biography that aims to do more than present the story of a

“great man” (or a “great woman”) be? And what differences do we see between biographical writing in the American and the European realms?

To find some new answers to these questions, the conference brought together participants who covered a wide geographic, temporal, and methodological spectrum—scholars from Great Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States; scholars writing on time periods ranging from the Middle Ages through the early modern era up to the recent past; scholars pursuing topics from social and economic history to intellectual and political history, from gender history to psychohistory. Some of the participants did not originally set out to write biographies, but gradually discovered biography to be the right genre for investigating certain questions. Other participants had originally set their sights on writing a biography, but then realized that the genre involved so many difficulties that they decided instead to take their chosen personalities as points of departure for considering larger questions. Some panelists had already published biographical works or made major contributions to critical biographical scholarship; others presented works in progress.

The conference opened with a remarkable lecture by Ian Kershaw entitled “Biography and the Historian: Opportunities and Constraints.” Kershaw, the author of the most widely read and highly regarded biography of Adolf Hitler, examined the differences between the German and Anglo-Saxon cultures of historical research and writing. While English and American historians never seemed to have serious problems with biographies, academic historians in Germany identified biographies for a long time with positivism and hence with an antiquated approach to history. This was especially true of the path-breaking and later dominant social historians of the 1970s and early 1980s, whose methods appealed to Kershaw himself. While the situation has definitely changed during the last decade, and even the practitioners of *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (the history of society) are moving individuals and charismatic rule to the center of their work, Kershaw remained skeptical concerning the analytical potential of biographies. In Kershaw’s opinion, which received strong support from several speakers at the conference, the biographical perspective should be used as a window to examine more complex problems in a very specific and unique way, rather than in the classical sense of writing about the lives of prominent individuals.

By contrast, John Röhl championed a much more “classical” biographical approach. Röhl, who spent a significant part of his academic life reconstructing the life of Wilhelm II for his multi-volume critical biography of the German emperor, adamantly defended his approach. While alluding to the controversies of the 1970s and early 1980s and giving special attention to the Bielefeld School of social history, which generally

had a critical view of the analytical potential of biographies, Röhl paid relatively little attention to the current "boom" of biographical research, even among prominent German social historians.

This boom became one of the threads running through the conference, intimately connected with the question of what it means to write an innovative and up-to-date biography. The first panel, entitled "Challenges of Social and Cultural History," was devoted to the problem of to what extent biographical research uses the insights and methods of recent historical research. From this point of view, medieval expert Hedwig Röckelein's paper asked "What Can Cultural Studies Offer Narratives of Historical Biographies?" Röckelein gave a survey of the development of biographies since ancient times and identified the specific stumbling blocks of the genre. She especially focused on the illusion of continuity and coherence, a challenge that is in her opinion best managed by using the reflective approach of cultural studies and cultural history. In other words, biographers must display their techniques of montage, and they must reveal and make explicit their ways of collecting, combining, reading, and writing, of constructing and narrating a biography.

This was also one of the major points made by Willem Frijhoff in his inspiring paper "Religion as the Interface Between Culture and Society: How to Write the Biography of an Ardent Believer." In his study of Evert Willemsz, a Dutch orphan who experienced a religious awakening and eventually became the second Reform minister of Manhattan, Frijhoff examined problems of belief and religion, but also raised more general issues. These included identity and identity transfer, the inner consistency of lives, problems posed by the lack of sources, strategies for constructing the life of a "no-name" individual, and the question of how to deal with myths and traditions constructed by posterity.

Christoph Strupp's paper "Biography as Historiography: Johan Huizinga (1872–1945)" examined recent biographical works that deal with scholars in the history of science. His main focus was directed toward biographies of historians, a booming field in contemporary Germany, and toward "biographies in context," considered an instructive and modern way to write social history and the history of an individual. Since Huizinga's historical writings lacked programmatic pretensions, Strupp preferred to overcome traditionally structured chronological narratives. Instead, he considered Huizinga's research and professional activities alongside his engagement in Dutch and international cultural life, but also his bourgeois background and the small size of the profession in the Netherlands. Strupp's presentation clearly underlined the advantages of a biographical approach in this special case.

Cornelia Rauh-Kühne's paper "Biographies of Entrepreneurs: Biographical Approaches to Economic History?" presented a review of three

recent studies that seemed to indicate a biographical turn in economic history. After introducing the biography of Otto Friedrich, by Volker R. Berghahn and Paul J. Friedrich, and the biography of Hugo Stinnes, by Gerald D. Feldman, Rauh-Kühne discussed the biography of Fritz Kiehn, which she co-authored with Hartmut Berghoff. According to Rauh-Kühne, while other authors only treat entrepreneurs as leaders and decision-makers and not as members of a social elite in German society, her own biography strives to contribute to the general history of the German *Wirtschaftsbürgertum*. Rauh-Kühne pleaded for an interdisciplinary economic history that would include the social background, the everyday practice, and the career and social motivations of a business, as well as its political instrumentalization.

The comment on the first panel was delivered by Stefan Zahlmann, who is currently working on a project that deals with "failure" as reflected in autobiographical writings. Zahlmann stressed the relationship between the historian and the subject that all four papers touched upon in some way. In this context, he explained how academic interest in biographies has changed over the last hundred years. Texts focusing on the lives of "heroes" (usually prominent, successful men) and mostly featuring anecdotal descriptions of the linear development of a character have given way to works constructing and reconstructing the lives of often unknown individuals and to "biographies in context." Zahlmann pointed out that this shift is based on new theoretical approaches, new perspectives on sources, and an interest in the history of different social groups and persons. For Zahlmann, there could be no question that biography has become a stimulating impulse for a redefinition of modern historiography.

The second panel, "Life and Letters or Something Else?" considered precisely this shift in scholarship. It asked whether and to what extent "traditional biographies," that is to say, the written lives of prominent persons, including political figures, leading intellectuals, or scientists, are affected and should be affected by new approaches in historiography. Angelika Schaser's paper "Women's Biographies, Men's History?" presented the arguments and reflections that led to her decision to write a "double biography" of Helene Lange and Gertrud Bäumer, two leading figures of the German Women's Movement who also shared a substantial part of their private lives. In this context, Schaser explained why biography has always been a predominantly "male genre." As long as historians focused mainly on "heroes" and "big names," women did not come into the focus of biographies. Only within the last decades have gender perspectives become more attractive and influential, leading historians to write biographies of "heroines" as well as gendered biographies of men and families.

This was also the main argument in Barbara Hahn's paper "Letters—Biographies: A Dangerous Shortcut? Or How to Write on Women Intellectuals." Hahn concentrated on two examples, Rosa Luxemburg and Ricarda Huch, and the main narratives that were constructed in past decades to explain their lives. The paper discussed these efforts as critical to their adoption in art, especially in films or movies, a medium that would stand in the center of interest at the conclusion of the conference.

The third paper, delivered by Karl Heinrich Pohl, drew on the life of Gustav Stresemann to suggest some novel approaches to biographies of well-known public figures. Since the notion of a life with a coherent thread and a deeper meaning from birth to death must be regarded as a "biographical illusion" (Bourdieu), Pohl preferred a structural rather than chronological approach. He also tried to deconstruct and (re)write his subject's life from uncommon points of view, such as illness, personal economic interest, social climbing, gender, or generation. Hereby Pohl demonstrated to what extent Stresemann (successfully) influenced future interpretations of his life.

Cultural patterns in a broader sense were also examined by Paul Rose. In his paper "Patterns of Thought and Behavior in the Biographies of German Cultural Figures during the Third Reich," Rose gave special attention to some prominent cultural figures of the Third Reich, including Furtwängler, Heisenberg, Riefenstahl, Jünger, Heidegger, Schmitt, and Strauss. Rose argued that beneath individual variations, a common pattern of mentality and behavior revealed the "deep culture" of Germany. Although he conceded that this approach is no longer fashionable and has some pitfalls, Rose was certain that such an approach could avoid terminological and ideological debates, and could help explain the "German Catastrophe."

In his commentary, Volker Berghahn, himself the author of a biography that uses a single life as an analytical window, raised some other questions of broader interest. He was skeptical not only of Rose's methodology, but also of attempts to negate a "red thread" and to emphasize instead the fragmentations, ruptures, and incoherences in the life of the subject, as Pohl had advocated. According to Berghahn, if one breaks with the continuities and coherence that are encouraged by the narrative itself, the resulting biography would probably be unreadable. Another point of interest was the question of to what extent the historian has to be, and is permitted to be, "investigative" in the private fields of intimacy or sexuality. Here Berghahn stimulated debate over which boundaries biographers must respect and which they should try to break down.

The third panel was devoted to a kind of biography that seems to have been "invented" in Germany: the special case of perpetrators and victims. Hilary Earl's paper "'Route to Crime': Writing Individual and

Collective Biographies of Perpetrators Using War Crimes Trial Documentation" suggested that war crimes trial testimonies are rich sources of perpetrator "voices" that can be used to better understand how and why the Holocaust happened. In Earl's opinion, they can help to reconstruct individual routes to crime and murder, and therefore help to understand "how ordinary people commit extraordinary acts of human evil." Moreover, Earl argued that trial documents also offer ample material to profile the social characteristics of an identifiable group or cohort of perpetrators by elucidating the common attributes of the specific group. Earl herself did this in the case of the *Einsatzgruppen* trial at Nuremberg in 1947 and 1948.

The approach of collective biography played a central role in Michael Wildt's paper titled "Generation and Institution—Towards a Concept of Collective Biography." Wildt commented on the remarkable increase in research on Nazi perpetrators in recent years and stressed the new quality of these works, most of which have a strong biographical bias. They depart from both the structuralist approach, which focused on the bureaucratic and political structures of the Nazi regime, and the intentionalist biographical perspective, which focused on Hitler as the dominant figure. More recent scholarship centers on lesser-known individuals or groups and their opportunities for decision-making, options for action, and agency. In this context, Wildt also referred to the concept of generation, which he used as a framework for interpreting groups of protagonists such as the high-ranking personnel of the Sicherheitspolizei (Sipo) and the Sicherheitsdienst (SD). Although he stressed the potential of the concept, he also discussed its limits, which become obvious when one seeks to comprehend the vector that takes individuals from experience to action. Apart from generational experiences, Wildt also stressed anti-Semitism, as well as the category "institution" as the basis upon which the self-radicalizing policy of this nucleus of Nazi perpetrators capable of committing genocide could emerge and grow.

While the first two speakers focused only on perpetrators, the perspective changed with the next two papers. Jan Eckel concentrated on Hans Rothfels, a historian who has been seen as a victim as well as an (intellectual) perpetrator. Eckel's paper, "The History of National Socialism as the History 'of the Contemporaries': Biographical Approaches to the History of Historiography," asked in what ways the historiographical interpretation of National Socialism in Germany after 1945 was prefigured by the biographical experiences of the historians concerned. Methodologically, Eckel saw the historiographical text as a space of intellectual self-reflection on political and personal experiences, a position illustrated by Eckel's examination of Hans Rothfels's book *German Opposition to Hitler*, published in 1948.

The paper "Writing the Biography of a Holocaust Survivor," delivered by Mark Roseman, presented the fascinating story of Marianne Ellenbogen née Strauss. This example offered Roseman a unique opportunity to discuss some fundamental methodological problems that one encounters in writing biographies, such as the function of memory, the use of (auto)biographical sources, the limits of oral history, and the biographer's identification with his or her subject. The paper demonstrated that an academic biography can offer both a sophisticated, methodologically exemplary analysis and a well-written, readable narrative. Altogether, Roseman provided the audience with very personal but far-reaching reflections of the research process and the relationship a biographer can develop to his or her "hero."

Peter Longerich, who is currently writing a biography of Heinrich Himmler and who served as commentator on the third panel, expressed skepticism regarding two points. The first concerned the question as to whether it is appropriate to connect biographies of perpetrators directly with biographies of victims. The second had to do with collective biographies and especially with the concept of generation.

The fourth panel, "Generation, Ethnicity and Class, Gender and Family: New Biographical Approaches and Methodological Problems," opened with a paper by Susan Pedersen, which posed the question, "Why do British Historians Write So Many Biographies—And Should Anything Be Done About It?" Pedersen, who just completed a biography of Eleanore Rathbone, the early twentieth-century British feminist, social reformer, and politician, pointed out that biography is a ubiquitous and established genre in Britain. Even in the academic field, it is an accepted mode of writing, and a great many established historians are known primarily for their excellent political biographies. However, as Pedersen pointed out, the conservative and boundary-conscious character of the majority of the biographers poses dilemmas for those seeking to incorporate less conventional figures into the biographical canon. This is particularly true for biographers of women.

By contrast, Michael Wreszin's paper "The Root is Man: Methodological Problems of Intellectual Biography" barely touched upon "unconventional" approaches to biographical research and writing. The author of a biography of Dwight MacDonald, Wreszin served as an advocate of a "classical" biography of political figures, and discussed problems of identification with the "hero" and the treatment of private and intimate matters.

The final two presenters departed from treatments of individual lives in order to focus instead on biographical approaches to "groups." Dorothee Wierling's paper "Cohort or Generation? The 1949ers in the GDR," based on her book about those born in 1949 in the GDR, presented the main

features of growing up in the GDR in the 1950s and examined the self-interpretations of protagonists belonging to this cohort. Wierling outlined those characteristics shared by most in the cohort, and discussed the categories that explain the most important differences among cohort members. In this context, the paper brought up a number of conceptual and methodological problems that had already played a role in other panels: the problems of generationality, of including oral history material in biographical writing, and of constructing a "collective" biography.

The last paper, "Between the Individual and Society?" was presented by Simone Lässig. She reminded the audience that categories of family and kinship matter not only for research in the field of early modern history, but are also relevant for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Contrary to established positions of social and economic history, she argued that family biographies can offer new and genuinely different insights. Using the example of the German-Jewish banking family Arnhold, she demonstrated that "kinship" sometimes was as important as other categories such as class, ethnicity, or gender. In Lässig's view, "kinship" remained a serious economic factor, especially in a business that "lived" on social and symbolic capital. Thus kinship can help reveal the economic influence of female family members.

The gender issue was also one of the points addressed in the comment delivered by Roger Chickering, author of the major biography of Karl Lamprecht. He reflected on the fact that the entire biographical project has historically been coded male because "heroes" became heroes in roles that have historically been occupied by males. Chickering also commented on the problem of continuities and discontinuities in a given life, and presented stimulating questions concerning "collective biographies." This seemed to him to be a contradiction in terms which, in spite of the genre's potential, risked eliminating the richness, the multitude, and the complexity of individual lives. He also identified this problem for family biographies, which could make the individual biography nearly invisible, as in Wierling's approach. In this context, Chickering drew attention to another danger: the temptation to take sources produced by a political system, a family, a business, or an individual for granted and to tell exactly the story these "source producers" wanted to have told.

The last session of the conference differed markedly in format from the preceding panels. In a session called "Historical Research: Interdisciplinary and Popular Communication," two non-historians presented their work, which was in some sense biographical in nature. The pianist Ophra Yerushalmi screened her documentary film on Frédéric Chopin, and Christian von Tippelskirch presented his movie "Out of the Ashes," which tells the story of a Jewish doctor who survived the Holocaust working in Auschwitz. Sander L. Gilman, who wrote a biography of his

friend Jurek Becker, and Ulrich Raulff, the author of an instructive biography of Aby Warburg, delivered two instructive commentaries. They dealt not only with the films, but also broadened the perspectives of the audience. Both commentators discussed "manipulation," as well as ways to reconstruct individual lives that differ significantly from an academic approach, but the results of which have a much bigger audience than do the works of professional historians.

In sum, the papers, the commentaries, and the discussion proved that the field of biographical research is still trying to find, adopt, and, what is more difficult, practice new and modern methods and approaches that will lead to biographies that are truly innovative and that have an impact on historiography. There are still more questions than answers. But on one point, all participants were agreed: Biography is "back" in serious historiography, even in Germany.

Simone Lässig