

Accidents and the State in the 20th Century

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Until some years ago dealing with risk and risk perception was mainly a topic for sociological inquiry in the humanities. However, over the last years, risk, safety, and accidents also became historians' objects of investigation.¹ In 2014, the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) hosted a workshop on „Risks in the 20th Century“.² In 2016, FRIAS was once again venue for an inspiring workshop on „Accidents and the State in the 20th Century“. The workshop took place in the context of a joint research project of FRIAS and the University of Strasbourg Institute for Advanced Study (USIAS). Although this joint research project investigates military accidents, the workshop dealt with all kinds of accidents. From mining to military, from household to traffic accidents, a diverse set of scenarios and the measures taken to prevent them were presented. Attempts to conceptualize accidents and to stress the role of the state ensured that the workshop stayed coherent despite this diversity.

The workshop was opened by JUDITH RAINHORN (Valenciennes). In her talk entitled „Who sets the price for injured bodies? French mining companies facing State intervention against industrial hazards, 1898-1930s“, she presented a previously mostly ignored aspect in mining history and offered a first conceptualization of accidents. After 1898, when a law finally allowed injured workers to choose their doctor freely and guaranteed them compensation, companies, miners, doctors, and legislature found themselves in a power struggle over the privilege to „set the price for injured bodies“. The fact that health is mainly represented in company archives in the form of costs fits into the picture very well. It became clear that accidents

played an important role in the process of reshaping relationships within the industrial world at the turn of the 20th century.

In another endeavor of conceptualizing accidents BIRGIT METZGER (Freiburg) asked the question: „What does 'military accident' mean?“ Accidents lead to the destruction of material and injury or death of people, but are non-intended events which happen in the military context mainly as a consequence of a misinterpretation of danger, disobeying orders, or as workplace accidents. Military use of violence, in contrast, may show similar effects, but is initiated by intention and order. Although the source material in this field is comprehensive (even minor accidents are recorded), numbers are distorted by soldiers who were willingly involved in accidents as a means to escape the battlefield. Remarkably, similar to the mining industry, doctors played an important role in recording and assessing accidents. Given the administrative and economic impacts of their diagnoses, they were under pressure in both contexts in the first half of the 20th century.

How accidents are framed in different contexts was discussed by NILS KESSEL (Paris). In his presentation he compared accidents and disasters in the fields of medicine and road safety and found different conceptualizations of traffic accidents and accidents concerning drugs. Using the case of Thalidomide, he showed that a statistical record was much more important for the public perception of drug accidents than of car accidents where the link between the cause and effect is obvious. The different visibility and temporality of drug accidents influenced social negotiation and political regulation. The role of scandals for state intervention became obvious in both, traffic and drug accidents.

Another comparison shed light on „The nature of Accidents“ viewed from a social and

¹ The H-Risk-and-Safety network is only one vivid example for this development: <https://networks.h-net.org/h-risk-and-safety/> 07.11.2016.

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² The first workshop was followed up by a special issue: Peter Itzen / Simone M. Müller (Eds.), *Risk as an Analytical Category: Selected Studies in the Social History of the Twentieth Century*. Historical Social Research, Vol. 41 (2016) No. 1: Special Issue: Risk & Social History.

cultural history perspective. PETER ITZEN (Freiburg) compared traffic accidents over time, with one example of a carriage accident from the late 19th century and another one from the 1930s when a brake failure caused a lorry accident with several injured persons. In both cases the responsibility of the driver was a point of discussion. The comparison revealed changes in the perception of accidents and a reduced acceptance of risk. In the course of this development, the role of the state changed as people demanded reactions and a new regulative system evolved. Similar to Nils Kessel, Peter Itzen also framed accidents as exceptions and as violations against a perceived normality, which in itself also changed over time.

The „need to regulate traffic [and the] influence of car accidents in the rise of regulatory law“ was discussed by PATRICIA FARALDO CABANA (Freiburg/Brisbane) from a legal history point of view. Although a concept of „accidents“ was missing in law due to their definition as random and unpredictable, a growing number of car accidents in the first quarter of the 20th century caused a need for regulation. In Great Britain, the widespread car ownership and the use of criminal law to control motor vehicles led to a collapse of criminal courts. As a consequence, most traffic offences were no longer considered subject to punishment (criminal law), but to regulation (administrative law).

Traffic regulation and social implications were also central in the keynote lecture of BILL LUCKIN's (Bolton/Manchester) entitled „Before the State: Highways, Communities and the Law in Nineteenth Century Britain“. With examples of traffic accidents due to drunk driving with carriages, he pled for a more detailed examination of the role and situation of accident victims in history. He stressed how differently the moment of the accident itself was received by survivor, perpetrators and witnesses. Depending on their social status, their account could significantly influence the sentence. The social situation also played a role in the treatment of the victims at the accident scene: The treatment of accident victims depended heavily on whether there was a doctor nearby who was not busy treating one of his wealthier patients.

The creation of emergency rescue services was then subject of two other contributions. FRÉDÉRIC VAGNERON (Zurich) presented the early beginnings of municipal emergency ambulances and rescue services from the 1880s up to 1914. Following his line of argumentation, it was not a new conceptualization of emergency, not a new medicalization, or a new type of accident that these initiatives responded to, but a social demand stimulated by several different kinds of „accidents of modern life“. In Paris initiatives had started to run ambulances against contagious diseases like cholera and smallpox in the 1880s. In the case of Paris, Frédéric Vagneron identified three phases of early emergency provision: the time of initiatives (1880-1890), the time of coexistence (1888-1894) with its three different ambulance systems, and the time after the reorganization of the municipal ambulance system in 1907.

A later phase of the development of emergency systems was addressed by CHARLES-ANTOINE WANECQ (Paris). Between 1956 and 1979 road accidents were understood as a „neglected epidemic“. As a reaction to the number of accidents and fatalities which increased with mass motorization, the French state responded early with a series of surveys to identify needs. They were however conducted without an elaborate plan on how to use the results and little financial means to implement any action. It was not until the 1970s that measures were taken in France. Eventually, first aid stations, emergency call posts, ambulances, and the emergency number „15“ were introduced.

A different medical response to accidents was presented by ANDREA DEL CAMPO PEIRANO (Manchester) through the case of the „Instituto Traumatológico“ in Chile. This institution for injured workers, whom a law of 1924 guaranteed the right to receive treatment, was opened in 1937 by the Chilean state. The „Instituto Traumatológico“ did not only offer medical care but also cultural and educational programs for its patients to support their healing process and stimulate their personal development. The institute's magazine „The injured worker“ to which patients also contributed – very often with articles full of gratefulness – was widely distributed out-

side and a means for the institute to build its reputation. It also spread the picture of the „good injured worker“ which matched the discourse of productivity, nationalism, and the Chilean „social question“ of the time.

Another topic that was mentioned repeatedly throughout the workshop was education as a means to prevent accidents. Under the catch phrase „Most accidents happen at home“ JONATHAN VOGES (Hannover) presented a campaign to promote accident-proof households in West Germany (1950s-1970s). The state refused to intervene in the private life of people, but was nevertheless concerned about household accidents which, from a national economic perspective, entailed higher social costs. The campaign under the patronage of Luise Erhard, wife of the German Bundeskanzler at that time, called attention to household accidents and warned about the misuse of household equipment in its magazine „Das Sichere Haus“ (the safe home). Jonathan Voges argued that the state found it to be easier to regulate the products than to regulate the housewives. The 1970s shifted the campaign's focus to leisure time accidents at home and to men who were involved in accidents at home. Moreover, TV and radio programs educated the German population and raised further awareness.

Education – in this case traffic education from the 1920s to the 1950s – was also NADINE ROSSOL's (Colchester) topic. In the time of the Weimar Republic accidents were understood as a consequence of people's misbehavior which led to a number of educational initiatives. Policemen were seen as traffic experts and therefore involved in these educational measures. In the Nazi Period racist undertones merged with stricter laws, the Second World War led to a decrease in traffic and its related problems; traffic safety education faded from the spotlight. After 1945, traffic education was rapidly taken up again to remind people of their duties. Stricter traffic regulations and the encouragement of citizens to denunciate wrong behavior were rejected as over-policing and „Gestapo methods“. Nevertheless, ever growing numbers of accidents made flaws in traffic education obvious.

After each session a commentator comple-

mented the presentations. STEFAN KAUFMANN (Freiburg) commented from a sociological point of view, stressing the new type of power struggle that evolved from the regulation and management of accidents. HELKE RAUSCH (Freiburg) identified central questions that were brought up numerous times during the workshop. Those reached from „What is the nature of an accident?“ to „Who, actually, is the state?“ and „Is the story of state and accidents a story of individual risk taking?“. ANNE RASMUSSEN (Strasbourg) commented on the last two sessions and emphasized the role of municipal actors. She argued that accident management has to be seen as a long-term process. The final concluding remarks were given by KURT MÖSER (Karlsruhe) who summarized the key talking points of the conference. It became clear that historical research on risk and accidents is still at its very beginning and a field of research worth exploring.

In good workshop manner most of the papers given were work reports and not completed studies. As a consequence, the presentations were more descriptive than analytic and the findings of the workshop are only preliminary. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that the topic is of societal relevance, even though it is not yet clear what and how we can learn from it. After two days of fruitful academic exchange and generous hospitality of FRIAS the workshop ended for all participants with many new ideas and thought-provoking stimuli about „Accidents and the State in the 20th Century“.

Conference Overview:

Welcome

Session 1: Risk, citizenship, responsibility and social justice

Judith Rainhorn (Valenciennes): Who sets the price for injured bodies? French mining companies facing State intervention against industrial hazards, 1898-1930s

Nadine Rossol (Essex): Preventing Danger through Education: The State, Traffic Accidents and Citizenship in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (mid-1920s to mid-1950s)

Patricia Faraldo Cabana (Freiburg): Death on

the roads and the need to regulate traffic. The influence of car accidents in the rise of regulatory law

Comment: Stefan Kaufmann (Freiburg)

Keynote lecture

Bill Luckin (Bolton): Before the State: Highways, Communities and the Law in Nineteenth Century Britain

Session 2: Naming and qualifying accidents

Peter Itzen (Freiburg): The Nature of Accidents and Social History

Nils Kessel (Paris): Normal exceptions – A comparison of accidents and disasters in the fields of medicines and road safety

Birgit Metzger (Freiburg): What does „military accident“ mean?

Comment: Helke Rausch (Freiburg)

Session 3: Responding to accidents I: emergency systems and medical innovation

Frédéric Vagneron (Zurich): The „moment of the accident“ and the multiple causation behind the rise of municipal ambulances and emergency rescue services in the European Urban Environment (1880-1914)

Charles-Antoine Wanecq (Paris): Road accidents as an epidemic: the creation of the Emergency Medical Services (SAMU) in France (1956-1979)

Comment: Anne Rasmussen (Strasbourg)

Session 4: Responding to accidents II: Concepts of rehabilitation and citizenship

Jonathan Voges (Hannover): „Most accidents happen at home“: The Aktion Das Sichere Haus and the „securization“ of West German households from the 1950s to the 1970s

Andreadel Campo Peirano (Manchester): „My gratitude to the great and honourable Trauma... I take it in my soul“. Integral rehabilitation for injured workers in the state traumatological hospital. Chile 1938-1942

Comment: Anne Rasmussen (Strasbourg)

Conclusion and Discussion

Kurt Möser (Karlsruhe)

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