

Transnationalism and German History

by Jennifer Jenkins

In exploring the possibilities that transnationalism can offer to German history, the term itself provides a good starting point. While one speaks in US history of a „transnational turn“ – the term was first used in US immigration policy during World War One in an effort to „internationalize“ such policies – in German studies and German history transnationalism hasn't yet acquired a clear set of meanings.¹ Is it primarily descriptive in nature, a synonym for what would otherwise be called „international“ or „global“? Or is it analytical? Does it continue the strenuous critique of the „master narratives“ of nationalization and modernization that have been so authoritative in the writing of modern German history? As such does it carry the possibility of moving beyond critique and setting out a new framework for analysis?

As all of the contributors to the H-German forum have noted, transnationalism questions the dominant position of the nation state as both a unit of territorial and administrative organization and as a category of analysis. As they all state, and the root of the word itself attests, transnationalism means to transcend the boundaries of the nation state. As the nation state still functions as a central framework in the German field, this shift has potentially far reaching implications. So this short piece starts with the question: what does it mean to transcend?

The simplest way to transcend is to expand, chronologically and geographically beyond national boundaries. As the contributors note, transnationalism broadens the context for inquiry and brings previously invisible subjects into view. In so doing it multiplies actors, processes and perspectives, setting out networks and influences that both crisscrossed Germany's borders and influenced developments within them. This perspective is necessary for understanding German cultural developments that were embedded in events and processes

larger and older than the nation state as Nina Berman notes, setting out western Christianity and the impact of the Crusades as two such examples. According to Ron Granieri, this expanded context has been operative for some years in diplomatic history, which has moved beyond stereotypical accounts of „high“ politics to provide a rich and complex sense of international networks. Young-sun Hong starts from this expanded international context. Does expansion, however, exhaust the meanings of transnationalism?

An expanded and more complex sense of context adds undeniable richness to studies, but transnationalism means more than expansion. Its effect is not only additive; it is not just a „corrective“ to the narrowed perspective of nationally-focused studies. Rather, transnationalism places emphasis not just on the diffusion of ideas but, importantly, on dialogue between multiple actors, many of which were not European. It emphasizes the active process of transmission and translation that necessarily occurs as ideas, narratives and models travel and are implemented across national boundaries. The emphasis on dialogue increases not just the number of actors but multiplies the possibilities of perspective and reposes the question of agency. Here transnationalism's critical edge is sharper, its potential impact greater. It highlights the active pressure provided by multiple contexts, many of which stayed invisible when seen through studies fixed on national borders. Young-sun Hong moves beyond Cold War networks limited to Germany and the two „superpowers“ to analyze the dialogue on socialism and hygiene that occurred between East Germany and the Third World, in the process differently positioning the topic of East German identity and questioning the category of the nation state. With this shift in perspective, as Nina Berman states, transnationalism offers the possibility of addressing cultural production, in the past and today, that is intercultural in scope. Here a fascinating set of topics come into view. The making of German culture incorporated materials, ideas, and experiences from around the globe, and the seductive appeal exerted by „German modernity“ on other countries – Persia

¹Clavin, Patricia, „Defining Transnationalism“ *Contemporary European History* 14,4 (2005), 421-439.

and India being two examples; there are more – poses new and intriguing questions. Berman mentions GWF Hegel's interest in Indian writers, which he drew on via British translations, and Bertolt Brecht's influence on the development of theater in Turkey.² The possibilities could be multiplied, and the connections between Germany and the Ottoman Empire/Turkey represent a field that is ripe for exploration.

Moreover, as the contributors note, transcending the nation state doesn't mean doing away with it entirely. Rather, transnational developments provided a context in which national interests were actively identified and developed. With this perspective the national context does not disappear from view as much as it is differently positioned. The topic of German Orientalism offers a case in point. Orientalism, with its transnational academic culture of specialists and texts moving between institutions and over borders, had a deep and pervasive influence on the development of national cultures, especially in Germany.³ A rich German tradition of thought and action focused on the Orient articulated national interests of various kinds, many of which were imperial in scope. As Nina Berman and others have shown, German involvement with the Orient – particularly with the Ottoman Empire –

²See Buck-Morss, Susan, „Hegel in Haiti.“ *Critical Inquiry* 26,4 (2000), 821-865; Kontje, Todd, *German Orientalisms*, Ann Arbor 2004. On the influence of German architecture in Turkey see: Bozdogan, Sibel, *Modernism and Nation Building. Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic*, Seattle 2001; and Nicolai, Bernd, *Moderne und Exil: Deutschsprachige Architekten in der Tuerkei 1925-1955*, Berlin 1998.

³See, among others, Pollock, Sheldon, „Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj,“, in: Breckenridge, Carol A.; van der Veer, Peter (Eds.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament. Perspectives on South Asia*, Philadelphia 1993, 76-133; Berman, Nina, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne. Zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900*, Stuttgart 1997; Pasto, James, „Islam's 'Strange Secret Sharer'. Orientalism, Judaism and the Jewish Question“, *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 40,3 (1998), 437-74; Marchand, Suzanne, „Orientalism as Kulturpolitik. German Archaeology and Cultural Imperialism in Asia Minor,“ in: Stocking Jr., George W. (Ed.), *Volksgeist as Method and Ethic. Essays on Boasian Ethnography and the German Anthropological Tradition*, Madison 1996, 320-21; see also the articles by Tuska Benes, Nina Berman, Susan Boettcher, Gottfried Hagen and Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous published in a special issue on „German Orientalism,“ *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24,2 (2004), with an introduction by this author.

has a dense and important material history central to the development of a specific „German“ religious and cultural identity. Within this rubric, a founding moment of German national culture can be seen in an avowedly transnational exchange: the translation of the Avesta by Abraham Anquetil-Duperron in 1770, the subsequent European „discovery“ of Sanskrit, and the connections that developed between the discipline of Indo-European philology and the nineteenth-century nationalist search for Germany's „ancient“ cultural origins. The European interest in the ancient cultures of India and Central Asia, spurred by the work of Anquetil-Duperron and Sir William Jones, and brought to Germany by the philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder and the Indologist Friedrich Schlegel, fueled a search for Germany's deep, national and „Aryan“ past.⁴

Transnationalism thus has clear benefits for studies of German culture, as Konrad Jarausch stated. But couldn't its impact be deeper, its effect greater? Couldn't it also significantly shift the perspectives and categories through which Germany's national political history has been written? Ron Granieri mentions the ongoing impact of transnationalism in diplomatic history, a field of political history to be sure, but he doesn't give specific examples of how the term could change how Germany's political past has been conceptualized. Again, the effect could be significantly greater than a broadening of topics. Transnationalism offers a way of reposing central political questions and shifting our perspective on state-society dynamics. Sebastian Conrad and Juergen Osterhammel in the introduction to their edited volume *Das Kaiserreich transnational* refer to the way in which transnationalism displaces one of the more prominent conceptual frameworks for German political history: the question of the primacy of foreign versus domestic policy.⁵ One could think that this was an outmoded debate,

⁴Schwab, Raymond, *The Oriental Renaissance. Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, 1950; repr. New York 1984; Benes, Tuskac, „German Linguistic Nationhood, 1806-1866. Philology, Cultural Translation and Historical Identity in Pre-unification Germany,“ PhD diss., University of Washington, 2001.

⁵Conrad, Sebastian; Osterhammel, Juergen, „Einleitung,“ to Conrad and Osterham-

but its influence was recently felt. In an assessment of post-Sonderweg scholarship, the historian Volker Berghahn claimed that new histories of culture and society have paid little in terms of generating new understandings of the Kaiserreich's major questions. The „more immediate task,“ he wrote, is to explain „how the country got into a 'great war' in 1914.“⁶ Berghahn's assessment reinscribes the „primacy“ argument, privileges the status of foreign policy and foregrounds the type of questions about the Imperial state that were at the core of the „primacy“ debate. One could also say that fifteen years of research on Germany's *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* has generated a complex picture of imperial civil society and its cultural modernity but has not brought us closer to a different understanding of the Reich's central political institutions. This is particularly true with regard to studies on „high“ politics, which focus on the role of the state.⁷

Transnationalism could also reopen this set of questions, by analyzing developments that cut across the foreign policy / domestic policy divide. As Ron Granieri put it, transnationalism allows us to „see the interwoven reality of politics within states and politics across borders.“ Wilhelminian social reform and the networks that coalesced around „social imperialism“ provide cases for such explorations, as do the paths and activities of imperial intellectuals and publicists such as Paul Rohrbach and Hans Humann. As Geoff Eley has stated, the „real ground of social imperialism,“ was „the complex interarticulation between developments at home and developments abroad.“ Here topics exploring what Eley called the „wider cultural consequences of colonialism“ offer possibilities for exploration.⁸ Kevin Repp has

mel (Eds.), *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871-1914*, Göttingen 2004, 12.

⁶Berghahn, Volker, „The German Empire 1871-1914. Reflections on the Direction of Recent Research“, in: *Central European History* 35,1 (2002), 75-81, here 76.

⁷For a summary of this debate see: Eley, Geoff; Retallack, James, „Introduction“ to Eley and Retallack (Eds.), *Wilhelminism and its Legacies. German Modernities, Imperialism and the Meanings of Reform 1890-1930*, New York 2003, 1-15.

⁸Eley, Geoff, „Comment“ to the GSA Panel, „Cultural Reform, Imperialism and the State in Wilhelmine Germany“ (2004) and his „Social Imperialism in Germany. Reformist

shown, to give one example, how projects of social reform in imperial Berlin generated „regimes of discourse and praxis saturated in colonialist images.“ This was as true of the activities of modernizing reformers as it was for those of the Prussian state. The colonialist gaze had a „protean range,“ Repp stated, remarkable in the „diversity of subject positions it seemed able to empower.“ These ranged from the descriptions of Berlin as a „colonial city“ in the work of the art critic Karl Scheffler, to the attempts to assimilate Berlin within a totalizing architectural vision as evidenced by the plans for „Greater Berlin“ in 1910. They also included the activity of the Prussian state in its programs to germanize West Prussia and Posen through new patterns of „settlement.“⁹ David Blackbourn's recent masterful synthesis sets out how a transnational perspective could shift our understanding of the development of Germany's economy, state and society after 1871. He does this by emphasizing the global framework in which the tremendous expansion of Germany's economy took place, claiming that the forging of its internal political institutions was actively shaped by this context of expansion.¹⁰

„Germany is not an island,“ as Conrad and Osterhammel remind us in their introduction.¹¹ Transnationalism, as a set of topics and a new shift of perspective, allows us to fully explore what this means. It both brings new topics to light, and sets out new conceptual frameworks focused on dialogue, transfer and exchange across national borders. It is my hope that its many-sided impact will be significant.

Synthesis or Reactionary Slight of Hand?“, in: *From Unification to Nazism*, Boston 1986, 154-167.

⁹Repp, Kevin, „The Capital as Colony. Settlements, 'Inner Colonization', and Visions of Greater Berlin in Late Imperial Germany,“ paper at GSA panel „Cultural Reform, Imperialism and the State in Wilhelmine Germany“ (2004).

¹⁰Blackbourn, David, „Das Kaiserreich transnational. Eine Skizze,“ in Conrad and Osterhammel, *Das Kaiserreich transnational*, 302-324.

¹¹Conrad and Osterhammel, „Einleitung,“ 7.