Dr. Susanne Wiedemann

Book Manuscript Abstract

**Transpacific Circuits: German Jewish Refugees’ Global Encounters, 1938-1949**

Dr. Wiedemann’s book manuscript, tentatively entitled “Transpacific Circuits: German Jewish Refugees’ Global Encounters, 1938-1949,” traces the migration of German Jewish refugees across three continents and examines their encounters with urban modernities in Berlin and Shanghai and the effects of globally circulating U.S. culture in the 1940s. Long before they emigrated to the U.S. after the end of World War II and became U.S. citizens, she argues, they forged new identities in Shanghai that were shaped by the past in Europe and the present in China, by encounters with U.S. culture from afar and up close in postwar Shanghai, by the regulatory power of different citizenship regulations, racial classifications, and immigration laws, and by intersecting and colliding ideologies of race, ethnicity, class, and nation. Oscillating between the persistent use of German frames of reference and a gradually evolving hybrid culture steeped in Shanghai’s cosmopolitan fabric, the refugees started participating in the discourse of U.S. national identity and citizenship, which permeated sites of cultural contact. In movie theaters, on theater stages, on radio shows, in the bilingual emigrant press, in lecture halls, and, after the war, through personal contacts with GIs and the consumption of imported U.S. commodity culture, the refugees learned about America and created their own meanings of what it meant to them as displaced persons, as Jews, and as former German nationals. Far from passively absorbing American culture, they modified American cultural imports and molded them, often in creative ways, into a distinct German-American refugee culture in Shanghai shaped by the war, the Holocaust, and the post-war global refugee crisis. By asking who can become an American and what it means to be one, they were probing notions of America’s self-definition as a pluralistic nation of immigrants, especially in light of changing meanings of race and ethnicity in the postwar period.

Interdisciplinary in approach, this project draws on American Studies, German Studies, East Asian Studies, and postcolonial and cultural studies. It uses a wide range of primary sources in tracing refugees’ lives across three continents: German and U.S. archival documents, including personal correspondences and institutional and government records (especially immigration and naturalization records), oral histories, visual and material culture, autobiographies, fiction, the urban built environment in Berlin, Shanghai, and San Francisco, and periodicals published in Berlin, New York, and Shanghai. As a cultural history, this study offers a trajectory through which to better understand the intertwined roles of culture, space, mobility, the role of the state, and ideologies of nation, race, and ethnicity across national boundaries in 20th century identity formation. It complicates the binary, one-directional Europe-U.S. immigration paradigm by rerouting it from the transatlantic passage to the transpacific rim, which is, in U.S. immigration historiography, exclusively associated with Asian immigration.