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HONORS COLLOQUIUM: BERLIN IN THE 1940s

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ABSTRACT

"Berlin in the 1940s" is an honors course that can foster high levels of communication, creativity, personal responsibility, intellectual community building, and synthetic analysis. The seminar itself provides an interdisciplinary and international approach to understanding "local" Berlin (Germany) during its wartime, 1939-1945, and postwar, 1945-1949, crisis periods. Students have the opportunity to stretch themselves between and among an assortment of disciplines, including diplomatic, economic, social, intellectual, architectural, and film studies, among others. Despite the limitations of time (one 75-minute meeting per week) and resources (primarily my own), the students still had available to them virtually all of the primary and secondary materials the course requires. Methodologically, the class promotes creative exploration, use of available sources, and independent study, while providing minimal instructional intervention, lecture, and common reading.

INTRODUCTION

The course begins with a basic historic treatment of "1940s Berlin" before students, in subsequent weeks, engage one another (and the professor) in discipline-specific and cross-disciplinary document evaluations, discussions, oral presentations, and paper writing. During the same initial meeting when the historic background is laid out and discussed, the class participants introduce themselves and their reasons for subscribing to the course. At this same point in time when student-colleagues learn the basics of mid-century Berlin and become acquainted with one another, the professor defers to them the degree to which their final grade will rest on three components: discussion, oral presentation, and paper presentation. The student provides a confidential, written response to the professor that values each area with a minimum grade weight of 15% and a maximum of 70%. The total weighting must add up to 100%.

The purpose in starting the course off with a combination of basic history, personal introductions, and individualized evaluation emphases is to set the tone for collegiality, serious scholarship, and intellectual enjoyment. Consider the following suppositions and working assumptions. First, if the environment for advanced learning is built on trust, then it is critical for professors and students to work, together, to sharpen everyone's critical thinking skills, to explore unconventional questions, and to realize that the "classroom" extends beyond the traditional setting. Second, if the classroom of learning is more than a physical place--a lecture hall, a professor's office, or a boundaried campus--then even the globe is too confining. Third, if the assessment of learning should be more than a letter grade earned by a student and assigned by a professor, then give the students some control over their fate from the outset. The more invested they feel in the process of evaluation, the more likely they are to perform at a higher level in the course. And, fourth, if the meeting of minds must necessarily function as an open forum for the free exchange of ideas, then doesn't it follow that the professor should be "the first

among equals"; that all values are acceptable but one, intolerance; and that the student who most fully engages in the course also emerges most fulfilled.

OPENING DAY SYLLABUS

The outline and general parameters of the course are in place with the "first day" syllabus. The fact that the students will determine their future book and/or film choices, the date on which they make their oral presentations, and the weighting of grades across areas of evaluation significantly attaches each class member to the overall success of the course. At least that is the theory going into the class.

This course, Honors Colloquium: Berlin in the 1940s, provided an interdisciplinary and international approach to understanding local Berlin during its wartime, 1939-1945, and postwar, 1945-1949, crisis periods. The class provided plenty of room for creative methods, use of available sources, and independent study. Beginning with a basic historic treatment and then branching out into diplomatic, economic, social, intellectual, architectural, and film studies treatments, among others, students engage one another (and the professor) in discipline-specific and cross-disciplinary document evaluations, discussions, oral presentations, and paper-writing.

Grades were determined by the quality of discussion, one oral book report, and one analytical research paper. The latter was an analytical essay based on two or more books, two or more films, and a series of documents. Students addressed the contribution that each book, film, or document provides for advanced understanding of Berlin in the 1940s. In other words, students described what is each author's purpose in writing the book, each filmmaker's objective in producing his or her work, or the document's historic meaning. Then, through comparative discussion and the use of argument, evidence, and analysis, the students evaluated the books/films/documents for method, effectiveness, significance, and insight.

For the oral report, students chose an additional book or film title for an 8-12-minute in-class, oral presentation. They discussed the author/filmmaker's argument (i.e., what he or she wants us to believe), purposes (e.g., a political/personal agenda or a pursuit of truth), sources/evidence (e.g., testimony, interviews, letters), method (e.g., organization, form of presentation, pace), and the degree of "success" in delivering the product.

SUMMARY

To say that "Berlin in the 1940s" exceeded expectations would be a mild understatement. While I did not have fixed measures of success in mind before embarking on the honors course, I did have modest hopes. I adopted an approach to building a class that had neither occurred to me, in synthetic form, prior to fall 1999-spring 2000 (when I designed the seminar) nor that I had thought deeply about before instituting. Sometimes, the best classes are those that develop instinctively and as works-in-progress. The fact that so many highly motivated and mature students landed in one classroom at one moment in time, I believe, explains our success more than any one factor. Still, there were additional elements at work—some planned, some unplanned, and some institutional--that provide further plausible explanations for the high performance we enjoyed.

In terms of the institutional context, the 12-year-old Honors Program at Delaware Valley College of Science and Agriculture is still--in my estimation--in a nascent stage of development. As it turned out, because I came along at a time when few other professors offered honors

courses, when almost no one else competed for the minimal resources allocated to the Honors Program, and when quality students craved an intellectually challenging seminar that also emphasized shared success, individual responsibility, and student ownership, the course was well positioned to excel.

Having discussed in brief some of the institutional, planned, and unplanned elements that conspired successfully on behalf of the course, there finally remains the topic itself, "Berlin in the 1940s." The fact that Berlin was at the center of two global crises in the span of a decade--during the Second World War, 1939-1945, and the early Cold War, 1945-1949--makes it a study area rich with possibilities. Given the many volumes written by, and about, the actors and events of mid-century Berlin, the wealth of newly released archives related to wartime and postwar Berlin, and the multiplicity of disciplines and approaches that can be used to explore an even greater number of questions surrounding the topic, you have a ready-made honors course.

COURSE RESOURCES

Primary Sources (partial list):

Andreas-Friedrich, *Berlin Underground, 1938-1945*
Andreas-Friedrich, *Battleground Berlin: Diaries, 1945-1948*
Heidelmeyer and Hindrichs (eds.), *Documents on Berlin*, Vol. I, 1943-1957
Planning for Germany (microfilm in Krauskopf Library)
Shirer, *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent*, 1934-1941
Shirer, *This is Berlin: Radio Broadcasts From Nazi Germany*
State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee: State Department Documents on Postwar
Vassiltchikov, *The Berlin Diaries, 1940-1945*
Vogel, *Bad Times, Good Friends: A Personal Memoir*

Secondary Literature (partial list):

Battle of the Cold War
Beck, *Under the Bombs: The German Home Front, 1942-1945*
Bering, *Outpost Berlin: The History of the American Forces in Berlin, 1945-1994*
Erickson, *The Road to Berlin: Stalin's War With Germany*
Farr, *Berlin! Berlin! Its Culture, Its Times*
Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity After Hitler*
Gay, *My German Question: Growing Up in Nazi Berlin*
Giangreco and Griffin, *Airbridge to Berlin: The Berlin Crisis of 1948*
Grathwol and Moorhus, *American Forces in Berlin: Cold War Outpost, 1945-1994*
Haydock, *City Under Siege: The Berlin Blockade and Airlift, 1948-1949*
Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin*
Launius, *The Berlin Airlift: Constructive Air Power*
Miller, *To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift, 1948-1949*
Murphy, Kondrashev, *Bailey, Battleground Berlin: CIA vs. KGB in the Cold War*
Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*
Parrish, *Berlin in the Balance: The Blockade, The Airlift, The First Major*
Pennacchio, *The United States and Berlin, 1945-1949* (unpublished dissertation)
Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany,* 1945-1949

Pommerin (ed.), *Culture in the Federal Republic of Germany*
Schivelbusch (trans.), *In a Cold Crater: Cultural and Intellectual Life in Berlin, 1945 -1948*
Taylor, *Berlin and Its Culture Willett, The Americanization of Germany, 1945-1949*

Films (partial list):
Bolthead Productions, *Berlin: Journey of a City*
Carter, *Swing Kids*
Cromwell Productions, *The Russian Front: The Battles for Berlin*
Duke, *The Berlin Airlift*
Fassbinder, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*
Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Charles Pennacchio, who teaches history, political science, and honors at Delaware Valley College of Science and Agriculture (PA), has received several teaching awards and is co-author of *American History in a Box* (2002) and *The Philippine-United States War, 1899-1902* (2003).