

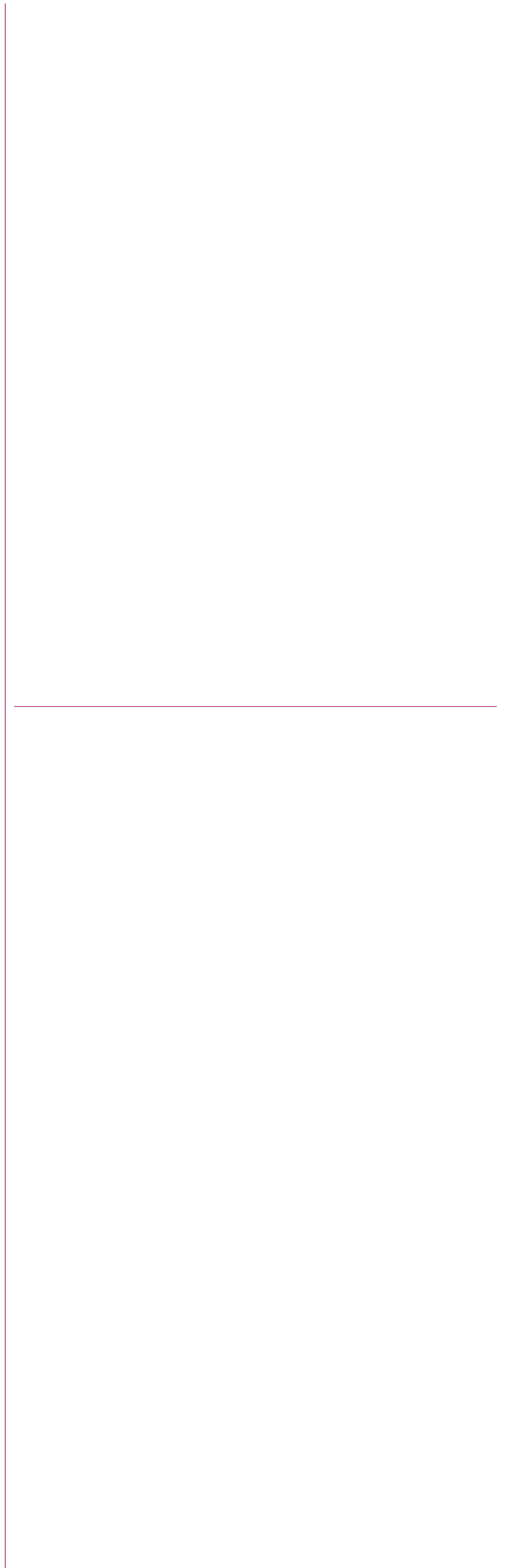
‘Germany and Israel’: The Second Peter Straus Memorial Lecture

The Last Days of Mankind

The dramatic potential of *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, the documentary drama of the First World War published by Karl Kraus in 1922, was demonstrated by two young actors at the London preview, staged at the Austrian Ambassador's Residence on 26 January 2016 to launch the complete translation published by Yale University Press. 'At last, at last!' declares a diplomat in August 1914 at the Vienna Foreign Ministry in an exultant speech about the ultimatum to Serbia, recited by Christopher Staines. But the hope that 'the World War can be confined to Serbia' proves illusory, and later we hear the same voice lamenting: 'Another fine mess we've got ourselves into!'

Zimmermann, an eminent authority on the topic, began his talk with a somewhat unexpected question: Why, he asked, did it take over 15 years for Germany and Israel to establish official diplomatic relations? His answer was no less surprising. Established after the Second World War, the two states came to represent almost antithetical past entities – the German Reich on the one hand and the Jewish people on the other hand; the heirs of the perpetrators vis-à-vis the heirs of the victims. Interestingly enough, Zimmermann noted, Israel seemed keen to establish full diplomatic relations long before 1965 and it was mainly Germany – despite the reparation agreement between the two countries that was signed in the early 1950s—that was reluctant to make this relationship official. The main reason for this was the so-called Hallstein doctrine that prescribed that the Federal Republic of Germany would not establish or maintain diplomatic relations with any state that recognized the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) as an independent state. Although Israel had no links with East Germany, another conflict now seemed to determine the nature of the relationship between the Jewish and the West German states. So long as Arab countries did not officially recognize East Germany, it was more important for West Germany to maintain good relations with Arab states who had their own policy of banning any country that recognized Israel's right to exist. This changed in 1965 after the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser invited Walter Ulbricht, President of East Germany, for a week-long visit to Cairo.

The relations between Germany and Israel are often depicted as 'special'. In a speech to the Israeli Parliament, for example, Angela Merkel declared that Israel's security is part of the German *raison d'état*. She used the concept of 'historical responsibility', which has always played a large role in Israeli politics towards Germany. But according to Zimmermann, what characterizes the relations between Germany and Israel is a manifold asymmetry. Perhaps the most surprising of which is the different 'lessons' each society took home from its history: on the one hand a society that learned to hate soldiers and wars, and on the other hand a society that worships its soldiers and sees military might as a necessary prerequisite for its existence as an independent state. Reflecting on recent developments in which the Israeli community in Germany is rapidly growing, Zimmermann concluded that today Israelis have come to like the Germans more and more whereas the Germans show less and less understanding and sympathy for Israel. The possible consequence of this development for the two countries was one of the topics that were considered in the lively discussion that followed Zimmermann's thought-provoking lecture.



Book Talk

Before the Holocaust: New Histories of the Concentration Camps

The history of the Nazi concentration camps has long been dominated by the legacies of the Holocaust, the wartime genocide of the Jews of Europe. New research carried out in the framework of an AHRC-research project at Birkbeck, University of London has re-evaluated this history and studied in particular the camps of the 1930s. On the occasion of the publications of these new histories, the Centre for German-Jewish Studies and the Wiener Library for the Study of the Holocaust and Genocide co-hosted a book talk event on 25 April 2016. Nikolaus Wachsmann, director of the AHRC research project