

Humanizing History

Molly Bankert Interviews New Professor Robert Terrell

This fall, Syracuse University will welcome a new professor to the History Department. Robert Terrell describes himself as a "historian of Germany, Europe, beer, and food". He is interested in the influence that capitalism, geopolitics, and the flow of goods and ideas have on culture and society. He earned his Master's in European History from Villanova University in 2011 and completed his Ph.D. at the University of California, San Diego. Prof. Terrell taught courses in World and European History at UC San Diego and at Temple University. He combines his love of cooking with his love of history, which incited his research on food and culture within Europe. In his dissertation, entitled "The People's Drink: Beer, Bavaria, and the Remaking of Germany, 1933-1988," he argues that the Bavarian culture of beer drinking was integral to the fate of Germany.

We asked Professor Terrell a few questions as a way to introduce him to the SU community.

Why do you study history, and what made you want to study it?

I study history because I'm very interested in human beings and understanding humanity. I study Germany in particular because in the twentieth century it was home to some of the highest highs and lowest lows of modern history. It started and lost two world wars, it perpetrated genocide, it was ground zero of the Cold War, and it is today at the heart of the experiment of the European Union. Even just in the sphere of politics, twentieth century Germany was home to seven different regimes: a monarchical empire, the most progressive liberal democracy of its day, a fascist dictatorship, a military occupation, rival social democratic and communist regimes, and a reunified democracy since 1990. If you focus on culture, you can see everything from avant garde

modernism to jazz to racial propaganda, to the marches and opera of Richard Wagner, and all the way through pop culture and punk rock. Germans are famous for constantly reworking their identities as they confront and come to terms with some of the dramas of their own national pasts. I could go on and on. For me, modern Germany is really an ideal place to look at some core questions about the human condition.

What are your current research projects?

I am a historian of modern Germany and most of my research interests use what seem to be pretty small or even ordinary things to open up analytic windows onto much larger questions.

My first book project is a history of beer production and consumption in twentieth century Germany. Far from an idle component of everyday life, I contend that throughout the twentieth century beer was part of many political, economic, and cultural efforts to define Germany and Germanness, both by Germans themselves and by non-Germans projecting stereotypes onto Germany. Part of my initial interest was in trying to figure out the relationships between a simple behavior like beer drinking and something as global as the stereotype of the beer drinking German. They are not exactly the same. Any American who has travelled abroad has likely experienced being reduced to some stereotype of America, and yet many of those are not completely unfounded. So my research has really focused on how ideas about material culture work at different geographical scales, for the Germans in a rural town, for state policies on alcohol, for the business interests of brewers, or for the tourists attending Oktoberfest.

More broadly, my research agenda is concerned with understanding Germany in global contexts. My second major project, for example, looks at

German connections to the Muslim world from the 1900s to the 1930s. That project will look at everything from "oriental" rug markets, to geopolitics, to Muslim immigration in Germany.

Why Syracuse?

That's a tough question. Syracuse is really an ideal university for me. It's an excellent research institution that is deeply invested in quality education. My interactions with students have suggested that they are serious about their education, curious, and thoughtful. Members of the history department have been very welcoming, supportive, and collegial. I'm not sure what more I could ask for. Maybe some serious athletics. Wait, Syracuse has that too!

Do you have a way of teaching that you feel will be unique here at SU?

In general, my style is very collaborative. Even though I will be a professor, I see my role as guiding, rather than professing. I work to help students feel empowered over their learning, opening space for respectful conversation in seminars, and in larger lectures as much as possible. I believe that every student has experience, expertise, understanding, or thoughts that everyone would benefit from hearing and thinking through. We're all at the university to think beyond ourselves and the world that we know. I try as often as possible to facilitate that.

In terms of teaching history as a subject, I design my classes around one or two main goals. First, I work to develop critical but empathetic understanding of people in the past. For modern German history this is particularly important. On one hand, if we judge without empathy we risk reducing the complexity of people's lives. On the other hand, if we empathize uncritically we risk being apologists for immorality. History is messy and complicated because people are messy and complicated. I try to help students understand and empathize with that, but also to think critically about it. Second, I try to help students see their own world historically. In classes on consumerism, for example, instead of seeing a car simply as a car, I hope students can begin to think about the technological development, the labor and related labor politics that went into making it, the ge-

opolitics of the oil on which it depends, the social history of mass motorization, and the cultural complexities that determine consumer trends in everything from zero emissions, to sound systems, to paint jobs. We could go on. Everything about our world has a history and I am very interested in having students learn to see the world that way.

What courses will you be teaching here next semester? What are they about, and what will make students want to take them?

In the fall I will be teaching HST 365 - Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. The class will follow the rise and fall of Nazism, from its origins after the First World War, through the end of interwar liberal democracy, and into questions of participation and resistance, violence, racism, war, and ultimately mass murder and genocide. We will try throughout the semester to think about why and how people acted the way they did and what it was like to live, kill, and die in a racial state. What many people don't know is that the Nazi regime was quite popular in Germany and it is not easy to explain that while appreciating its complexity and disastrous consequences. I hope that students are drawn to the course by its engaging material and by the opportunity it offers for deep consideration of historical complexity. While we will not make explicit historical comparisons, I also think that understanding the crisis of modern liberalism and the rise and fall of Nazi dictatorship has a number of valuable lessons for the contemporary turn towards xenophobia and populism in the West.

In the spring, I'm planning to teach HST 316 Europe since 1945, which will actually be a great follow up to the fall course. That will look at the legacies of the war, as well as the cold war division of Europe, the end of European empires, and the history of European integration. I'm also planning to offer a research seminar in the spring on commodities, consumption, and consumerism in modern Europe. I'm excited to develop a number of similar courses that analyze modern Germany and Europe using everything from food and alcohol to music, cars, and clothing.

Welcome to Syracuse, Professor Terrell!