Panel 42: Transnational Networks: German Migrants in the British Empire 1660-1914

The panel was dedicated to Great Britain as a country that offered attractive prospects to many European immigrants politically, culturally, and economically and yet, that has always been in the shadow of America. The island country opened up an Empire reaching out to the remote areas of the globe, free from small-state customs barriers and legal restrictions, with extraordinary opportunities for trade and research. The panel focused on the Germans representing the largest group of immigrants over more than two centuries arguing that German scholars and scientists, explorers and merchants were able to pursue their overseas international interests within the worldwide infrastructure of the British Empire. At the same time, Great Britain needed those experts from other places for expanding and consolidating its scattered possessions.

In the first paper Mark Häberlein (Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg) concentrated on German-speaking emigrants and commercial networks in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic World. The approximately 111,000 German-speaking migrants who settled in British North America between 1683 and 1775 constituted the largest continental European „ethnic“ group in the British Empire before the American Revolution. Building on a number of recent works that clarified the role of German traders and entrepreneurs within the transatlantic commercial networks that evolved in the context of German-speaking migration, the presentation identified four groups of actors within these business networks. First, German and Swiss entrepreneurs actively recruited migrants for a number of land development and settlement projects. Second, German businessmen hired skilled central European workers for various industrial ventures, especially iron- and glassworks. Third, a large number of German-American businessmen returned to Europe either sporadically or regularly in order to collect inheritances, deliver letters and obtain goods sought by German-speaking settlers in the colonies (guns, metal goods, textiles, wine, clocks, books, musical instruments). Finally, Lutheran pastors used their contacts to the Francke foundations in Halle to import large quantities of religious books and pharmaceuticals, and the Moravian church organized its own passenger transports to the New World. Häberlein concluded that despite the mercantilist restrictions of the Navigation Acts, trans-national relations and activities played an important role in the early modern British Empire.

In the second presentation Margrit Schulte Beerbühl (Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf) talked about international trade networks of German merchants in eighteenth-century London. In a case study on Nicholas Magens, a German merchant in London, she explored his far reaching family based commercial network which went beyond national and imperial boundaries to such distant and diverse places as Vera Cruz and Canton. By using the kinship based business branches at the leading entrepots of the other European colonial powers he like many other German and continental merchants in London circumvented mercantilist trade restrictions and disruptions caused by the many wars of the century and thereby contributed to the emergence of a global network under British dominance. Considering that in the age of mercantilism Britain’s pursuit of national prosperity and hegemony was intimately bound up with a protectionist policy for which the British immigration policy became a powerful instrument to foster the globalisation of commercial networks beyond the boundaries of the Empire, Schulte Beerbühl concluded that the British strife for hegemony, however, acquired an underlying European character by these means.

In the third paper Frank Hatje (Universität Hamburg) focused on transnational relations among German Pietists and British Evangelicalists in the 18th and 19th centuries. The paper extended the scope of research on pietists and evangelicals. While the protestant awakening of the early 19th century is normally stated to be a parallel movement in most nations of protestant Europe, the paper included the late 17th century German pietism and its linkages with English evangelicalism. Hatje argued that the parallels were by no means incidental, but the result of interrelations based on per-
sonal encounters and networks of correspondence which transmitted protestant doctrinal knowledge and the knowledge about the organizational structure of the movement from Germany to England (and vice versa). In detail he explored the topic by means of five case studies: the ‘Salzburg transaction’, the Halle-London linkage, the Moravian influence on Methodism, the fusion of the German and the English religious networks (particularly the ‘Deutsche Christentumsgesellschaft’ and the variety of associations from the SPCK to the missionary and Bible societies), and the mutual communications about the progress in the central projects of the ‘inner mission’ (prison reform, charity etc.). Finally, Hatje showed how in all of these cases migration of German pietists towards the British colonies via England was involved and how it resulted both in settlements and in missionary activities of Germans in the British Empire.

Subsequently Ulrike Kirchberger (Universität Bayreuth) gave a speech on the overseas interests of German migrants in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. She described German migrants in mid-nineteenth-century Britain as a heterogeneous group that was attracted by the non-European world for several reasons. The paper pointed out how German migrants in Great Britain planned and implemented their projects and interests in the overseas world. During the 1840s and 1850s tens of thousands of German ‘transmigrants’ migrated in the USA and in other non-European regions via the great harbours London and Liverpool. German merchants participated in the British overseas trade; German missionaries came to Africa and India with the help of British missions and German orientalists, expeditions and natural scientists worked for the British Empire. Thus, Kirchberger reflected on the fact that the British as well as the German colonialism was influenced by German actors realizing their interests in overseas regions, using British networks and infrastructure.

Horst Rössler (Bremen/ Bremerhaven) talked about migrant workers and pioneer migrants who went from Hannover via England to New Zealand between 1850 and 1870. In the 18th and 19th centuries Germans were the most important Continental immigrant group in England and especially in London. However, going to England was no one-way move. Taking Hanoverian workers (sugarbakers) in the London sugar refining industry as an example he showed that many migrants returned back home after a number of years and that some, after having learned the trade in England, set out from London for other European centers of the sugar industry where their skills were in demand. In addition, for a considerable number of migrants work in the London sugar industry was only a step on their way to overseas, particularly the United States but also the British colonies such as New Zealand where the immigrants took to farming.

John Davis (Kingston University London) continued with a presentation on German academics and imperial culture. By way of example he talked about Friedrich Max Müller, who was the most prominent German philologer in Britain, indeed one of the most prominent Victorian academics overall, typifying for many the German professor. Philology was a subject attracting a great deal of interest in late 18th-century Germany, largely as a result of the Romantic re-discovery of the past, but also because it seemed to offer new insights into theology and the Bible. Great interest was aroused when British imperial expansion enabled access to non-European documents, many of which were connected with civilisations pre-dating Christianity. Many German researchers decided to travel to Britain, or to parts of the British Empire, in order to see these new primary sources for themselves. As in many other areas, German philologers led the way in terms of research by the start of the 19th century. British academic reformers and intellectual circles were consequently aware of this, considered a perusal of German research necessary for any kind of real academic advancement, and also encouraged German academics in a variety of areas - including philology - to transfer to Britain. One significant result of the absorption of German philosophical traditions into the intellectual life of the British Empire was its influence upon the reception of Indian - particularly Sanscrit - culture. Davis described how a historiographical debate has emerged from this, relating to whether or not the impact of this influence has been positive or negative, and intersecting with discussions regarding colonialism as well as internal Indian debates regarding nationality. Overall he argued that the coterminal discovery of the past and of evolutionary thinking in Germany and Britain, and the consequent dependence of Britain upon German intellectuals for the evaluation of ancient colonial civilisations, had a lasting impact upon the development of the British Empire.

Finally Stefan Manz (University of Greenwich London) talked about promoting the German Navy
in the British Empire, 1898-1914, giving the example of the British branches of the ‘Association of German Navy Clubs in Foreign Parts’. From the 1890s, enthusiasm for the German battle fleet was just as strong in German diaspora communities as it was within the Reich. The Berlin-based ‘Hauptverband’ acted as an umbrella organisation for a transnational network of 150 local navy clubs and 10,000 members worldwide. Within Britain, clubs existed in London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Birmingham and Newcastle. Their aim was the collection of monies for the building of the German battle fleet and the fostering of ethnicity and nationalism abroad. These activities were supported by the protestant expatriate churches. Manz argued that the battle fleet has to be seen as a powerful symbol of national unity and as an important element of migrants’ ethnic identity construction on the eve of World War I.