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Imperialism Upon a Hill

The literature on U.S.-German rivalry in Latin America in the era of imperialism has increased exponentially in recent decades. The classic monumental work of Alfred, Vagts Deutschland und die Vereinigten Staaten in der Weltpolitik (1935), combined with Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase's magisterial Lateinamerika als Konfliktherd der deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen (1986) count more than 3000 pages.[1] In addition, a number of scholars like Holger Herwig, Friedrich Katz, Manfred Jonas, Reiner Pommerin, Hans-Jürgen Schröder, Reinhard Doerries, and Thomas Schoonover—to name but a few—have written and edited important volumes on the topic.[2]

Yet, in The Danger of Dreams, Nancy Mitchell sets out to challenge earlier interpretations. In particular, she challenges the point of view expressed by Vagts, Fiebig-von Hase, Katz, Herwig, and many others that German policy followed expansionist aims in Latin America. She claims that the German threat was but a bogey of U.S. media, military and political leaders to legitimize U.S. interventionism and „protective imperialism" (a term coined by Samuel Flagg Bemis) in the southern part of the Americas. What is more, according to Mitchell, U.S. historians—reinforced by revisionist trends in German scholarship from Fritz Fischer to Hans-Ulrich Wehler—have used the misrepresentation of Wilhelmine foreign policy up to the present to lend credence to their claim of the exceptional character of U.S. expansionism in Latin America, an expansionism decisively different from the more brutal European forms because of its basically defensive and protective designs—an imperialism upon a hill so to say.

From Mitchell's point of view, Germany was not really a threat to Latin America because the empire simply did not have the means to carry out an expansionist project in this part of the world. She admits that the German government and, especially, the erratic kaiser bore „a great deal of responsibility" (p. 220) for the misperception of Germany's foreign policy aims, but emphasizes that the kaiser's fits and Pan-German propaganda should not be mistaken of expressions of policy. Rather the new „Germany south of Capricorn" was a dream that became dangerous because of how the North Americans made use of it. According to her point of view, the negative image of Germany became a potent force in U.S. public discourse, so much so that by the First World War Wilson could use it in order to legitimize U.S. intervention in Haiti, and in the Dominican Republic. Mitchell concludes: „German dreams, expressed by the kaiser and the pan-Germans and given substance by the fleet, allowed Americans to act like an ordinary power and to feel exceptional" (p. 228).

Mitchell starts by describing the emergence of what may correctly be called a state of commercial warfare that developed between the United States and Germany up to the turn of the nineteenth century. This was a conflict in which the dynamically growing United States constantly kept the upper hand. Ger-

[1] Vagts, Alfred, Deutschland und die Vereinigten Staaten in der Weltpolitik, 2 vols., London 1935; Fiebig-von Hase, Ragnhild, Lateinamerika als Konfliktherd der deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen 1890 bis 1903. Vom Beginn der Panamerikapolitik bis zur Venezuelakrise von 1902/03, 2 vols., Göttingen 1986.

[2] Katz, Friedrich, The Secret War in Mexico. Europe, the United States and the Mexican Revolution, Chicago 1981; Herwig, Holger H., Germany's Vision of Empire in Venezuela, 1870-1914, Princeton 1986; Jonas, Manfred, The United States and Germany. A Diplomatic History, Ithaca 1984; Pommerin, Reiner, Der Kaiser und Amerika. Die USA in der Politik der Reichsleitung, 1890-1917, Köln 1986; Doerries, Reinhard, Imperial Challenge. Ambassador Count Bernstorff and German-American Relations, 1908-1917, Chapel Hill 1989; Schröder, Hans-Jürgen (ed.), Confrontation and Cooperation. Germany and the United States in the Era of World War I, 1900-1924, Providence 1993; Schoonover, Thomas, Germany in Central America. Competitive Imperialism 1821-1929, Tuscaloosa 1998. There is a plethora of articles on the topic. See the overview by Bernecker, Walther L.; Fischer, Thomas, Deutschland und Lateinamerika im Zeitalter des Imperialismus, 1871-1914, in: Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv 21 (1995), pp. 273-301.

mans were consternated about this development. From their perspective, the War of 1898 and the growth of the U.S. navy showed that the United States would not be satisfied with economic expansion. Numerous diplomatic squabbles added to that perception in the following years. On the other hand, the German empire itself did its best to appear as the new bully on the international scene. Mitchell shows how both the German and U.S. navies reacted with drawing up war plans. But she maintains that while the German plans were essentially meaningless, U.S. designs reflected the widespread perception of a German threat to the hemisphere.

She then goes on to give an interpretation of the Venezuelan crisis of 1902/03, the height of the „German danger," and concludes that there was a substance to the German threat. Yet it rather consisted of Germany's growing fleet and industrial power, and not of any real designs in Venezuela where, according to Mitchell, the empire followed the British lead and was anxious to avoid disturbing the North Americans. President Theodore Roosevelt, by showing no concern about the idea of a blockade in 1901, enticed the Europeans powers to act against the Venezuelan government. In the course of the blockade, however, Roosevelt changed his mind, recognizing the threat arising from the action for U.S. expansionism in the region.[3] In the end, Germany was seen as the main troubleshooter.

In the case of German interests in Brazil, the topic of her third chapter, Mitchell argues that the empire neither followed a course of formal nor informal imperialism. From her point of view, Berlin supported the activities of private interests like commercial houses, shipping agencies or settlement colonies halfheartedly at best. She discusses the failure of the German railway and settlement project in Santa Catarina as well as the diplomatic problems caused by the gunboat Panther in 1905. These failures are revealing, Mitchell claims, because in no other Latin American country did the existing preconditions favor German expansionism as much as in Brazil.

The last case study of the book focuses on U.S.-German conflicts in Mexico, which reached their dramatic climax in the Zimmermann telegram affair of 1917. Mitchell, however, restricts her analysis to the period up to the outbreak of the First World War and concludes that Berlin tried hard to placate the United States. In contrast to earlier interpretations (e.g., Katz), she maintains that there was no purposeful imperialist policy of the empire in Mexico prior to the war. She demonstrates how German interests in Mexico were dwarfish compared to the North American presence there. Thus, Mitchell states, the events leading to the Zimmermann telegram have to be seen as a „discontinuity" (p. 7) of German activities in that country that can only be understood in the light of the new situation of warfare.

Mitchell indeed challenges the dominant interpretations of German-American rivalry in Latin America. German historians like Pommerin and U.S. scholars like Melvin Small have presented similar lines of argumentation before.[4] Even Fiebig-von Hase, who maintains that there were imperialist dispositions in the empire with regard to Latin America, has pointed out that mutual misperceptions and exaggerations of the „American/German danger" were an important ingredient in the emergence of the rivalry. Mitchell takes the argument a step further, claiming that the misperceptions and their use lay at the very heart of the rivalry.

This central thesis depends heavily on Mitchell's reading of German policy towards Latin America. Thus it is crucial for her to

[3] Roosevelt later claimed (for obvious political reasons) that he had forced the German government to accept arbitration by threatening a naval war. Mitchell like many other scholars before her does not believe this version. While documentary proof for an alleged ultimatum is indeed lacking German records show that the president had relied on threats to bring the empire into line more than once in December 1902 and January 1903. Thus on February 3, the interim ambassador in Washington Hermann Speck von Sternburg reported to Berlin: „Dewey's fleet had received secret order to keep ready." See Rinke, Stefan, Zwischen Weltpolitik und Monroe Doktrin. Botschafter Speck von Sternburg und die deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen, 1898-1908, Stuttgart 1992, p. 88 (see also pp. 71-72).

[4] Pommerin, Reiner, Der Kaiser und Amerika. Die USA in der Politik der Reichsleitung, 1890-1917, Köln 1986; Small, Melvin, The American Image of Germany 1906-1914, (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1965); The United States and the German 'Threat' to the Hemisphere, 1905-1914, in: The Americas 28 (1972), pp. 252-270.

present a Germany that was not really interested in carrying out an imperialist policy in the region. Mitchell seems to suggest that German imperialism in Latin America can be measured by the willingness to risk offending the United States for the sake of increasing influence. In emphasizing the lack of such a willingness Mitchell is correct. By 1904/5, as German 'encirclement' was taking shape, Berlin rather looked for an alliance with Washington. And yet this search for harmony did not keep the German empire from following a policy that, given the standards of the time (both on the German and the U.S. sides), had to be interpreted as imperialist or rather as the preparation for a full-fledged imperialist assault that might lead to the forced partition of the „last free continent"[5]. This paradox was crucial to the Weltpolitik of chancellor Bernhard von Bülow. The aim was to strengthen Germany's formal and informal influence and international prestige as a Weltmacht in all parts of the globe at the expense of the other great powers yet without losing the 'free hand' in the diplomatic game. Thus in Latin America as elsewhere, the German empire wanted to have its cake and eat it, too. This increasingly led to Germany's isolation and to its forced retreat like e.g. at the Algeciras Conference of 1906 which concluded the First Moroccan Crisis.

However, the German retreats did not mean that the empire had given up its imperialist designs. By looking at the whole picture of Wilhelmine interests in Latin America Fiebig-von Hase has shown that from the 1890s to 1914 German capital investments as well as trade in the region grew immensely. In addition, Jürgen Schaefer has written a detailed account of German 'military aid' to several Latin American countries which helped to strengthen the empire's position.[6] Moreover, in this period the German government developed its Deutschtumspolitik, i.e. a policy aimed at strengthening the German element in the Latin American countries by e.g. supporting German-language schools, founding cultural institutes, secretly sponsoring press propaganda or creating a German news agency for the region and so on. Mitchell is certainly right in claiming that this policy was not very effective prior to 1914. Yet, many of the Germans living in Brazil, Chile, or Argentina in this period developed a much stronger sense of their ethnic identity thanks to their pride in Weltpolitik and their feeling of being taken seriously. Combined with the economic and political factors mentioned above, the very emergence and long-term goals of the new concept of Deutschtumspolitik demonstrated an expansionist disposition for Latin America, which, after the setback of 1903, gained momentum in the early 1910s but was then again interrupted because of the World War.[7]

The volatility of Germany's Latin American policy makes it harder to detect the expansionist designs, for examples in the case of the Samoan tangle. But Berlin clearly tried to profit as much as possible from the unfolding of events and to gain as much influence as possible in the region. In doing that, it was supported by a variety of transnational actors like businessmen, settlers, journalists, or military officers whose activities began to influence official policy. What kept the empire from daring to do more was the counterweight of the United States. Thus by their imperialist aims in the region—cloaked under the Monroe Doctrine—the United States in a way indeed 'protected' Latin America from German and other European expansionism. Yet, this 'protection' was certainly uncalled for by Latin Americans who in this period developed their own ideas about international relations as expressed in the Drago and Calvo Doctrines.[8]

Hence, the first part of Mitchell's central thesis—that there was no substance to the German threat—seems highly dubious. The second part of the thesis, however—that the

[5] The term was coined in 1919 see: Rinke, Stefan, Der letzte freie Kontinent. Deutsche Lateinamerikapolitik im Zeichen transnationaler Beziehungen, 1918-1933, HISTORAMERICANA 1 (1996), p. 21.

[6] Schaefer, Jürgen, Deutsche Militärhilfe an Südamerika. Militär- und Rüstungsinteressen in Argentinien, Bolivien und Chile vor 1914, Düsseldorf 1974.

[7] For the cultural dimension see: Kloosterhuis, Jürgen, Friedliche Imperialisten. Deutsche Auslandsvereine und auswärtige Kulturpolitik, 1906-1918, Frankfurt am Main 1994.

[8] A thorough and modern study of Latin American foreign policies and of Latin American perceptions of European and U.S. imperialism remains a lacuna in scholarship.

perception of the threat and the resulting image of a marauding Germany was used extensively in U.S. political and military discourse and in constructing the self-image of an exceptional imperialism—is very well-founded. The best parts of the book analyze the U.S. perspective of events. In concentrating on the power of perceptions Mitchell has followed a path that has recently opened new ways of looking at transatlantic relations.[9] This allows her to show that the more U.S. power expanded the more North Americans sensed dangers and exposure (p. 225). She has included a number of telling U.S. cartoons which strengthen this part of her thesis - although they could have been more closely analysized in their own right. These cartoons might become useful for an in-depth study of the imagery of German-American relations that remains to be written and could be based on a comparison with German cartoons of the period.

The Danger of Dreams is a thought-provoking book that will undoubtadly not go unchallenged. It will certainly continue to be discussed among specialists of relations between Germany and the United States in the era of imperialism. What this study teaches is that there are no accurate perceptions of reality - yet neither are there clearcut misperceptions. The mutual images existing in the United States and Germany contained a level of both and by delimiting the possible heavily influenced politics.

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[9] For recent research see: König, Hans-Joachim; Rinke, Stefan (eds.), Transatlantische Perzeptionen. Lateinamerika - USA - Europa in Geschichte und Gegenwart, HISTORAMERICANA 6 (1998); Barclay, David E.; Glaser-Schmidt, Elisabeth (eds.), Transatlantic Images and Perceptions. Germany and America since 1776, Cambridge 1997; Fiebig-von Hase, Ragnhild; Lehmkuhl, Ursula (eds.), Enemy Images in American History, Providence 1997.