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The German Customs Union, or Zollverein, is an icon of German national history. Yet despite this, relatively limited research has been dedicated to the subject in recent times. Supported by many during its existence for its contribution to German unity, after 1871 the Zollverein was presented by Heinrich von Treitschke and other kleindeutsch historians as both explanation and justification of Prussian-led unification. Resistance to this interpretation goes just as far back, however. Particularly after 1945, historians revisited the subject as part of their questioning of what was presented as the inevitability of Prussian dominance. The commercial diplomacy of the smaller states, hitherto relatively ignored, now enjoyed more careful attention. Even Helmut Böhme's research on Prussia's rise to pre-eminence was an explanation of the collapse of the opposition.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis was now on federal politics rather than centralisation. Indeed, the Zollverein, by giving monarchs money via extra-parliamentary routes, even began to be seen as a political hindrance to unity.

A similar diminution in the Zollverein's significance in historical literature can be discerned in economics. Its contribution to German industrial take-off was at first accepted as a given and a further factor underpinning Prussia's claim to lead. The most stalwart voice for this argument, simultaneously showing how it had been accepted abroad, was W. O. Henderson's 1939 volume on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Yet post-war economic history called into question such assumptions. Statist approaches to the promotion of industry became passé, counterproductive or suspect. Regionalism was the name of the game. Even continued interest in tariffs, trade-flows, integration and customs unions – discussions which continue to draw on the Zollverein – steer clear of commercial diplomacy, the mechanics of the organisation, and politics. Despite a flicker of

interest in 1984, on the 150th anniversary of the Zollverein's foundation, research on the subject has become a backwater.

Set against this backdrop, and the surprising dearth of substantial scholarly works on the subject, the current volume is a significant and welcome clarion call for a revival of interest. It is also noteworthy for taking us, at first sight, full circle: namely, back to the subject of the Zollverein's relationship to German unification. This time, however, we are not provided with the questionable deterministic leaps of logic found in kleindeutsch histories. Rather, the authors have made use of important debates relating to nation-building and nationalism, and sought to revisit the subject in the light of these. Recent scholarship relating to elites, discourse-analysis, cultural nation-building, interest groups, international perception and national self-perception is strategically and effectively brought in.

The first part of the volume deals with the foundation of the Zollverein. Thomas Stamm-Kühlmann revisits Prussia's intentions in the early years, and counters notions of national ambition in Berlin by demonstrating the variety of motives and the trajectory of Prussian policy making. Angelika Schuster-Fox widens the lens to include the Bavarian position between 1848 and 1866. Oliver Werner, meanwhile, looks at a hitherto vague presence in Zollverein histories: the Middle German Customs Union. What is presented in received histories as merely a spring-board to the Zollverein is here shown to be an important stage in the shaping of inter-state diplomacy. Together, these contributions reveal the complexity of motives for membership of the Zollverein and its importance in defining and altering inter-state relations.

The second section focuses on the significance of the Zollverein to national discourse. Andreas Etges studies the function of the Zollverein as a catalyst of national economic concepts. Heinrich Best applies his established expertise respecting interest politics to

<sup>1</sup> Helmut Böhme, *Deutschlands Weg zur Großmacht. Studien zum Verhältnis von Wirtschaft und Staat während der Reichsgründungszeit 1848–1881*, Berlin und Köln 1966.

<sup>2</sup> William Otto Henderson, *The Zollverein*, Cambridge 1939.

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show the importance of the protectionist/Free Trade debate in terms of political integration and engagement. Rudolf Boch focuses more narrowly on the evolving and emerging voices of the Rhineland's economic interest groups, and in doing so casts light on the importance of economics in the growing demand for political participation.

The third section of the volume relates to parliamentary and bureaucratic elites. Hans-Werner Hahn provides a fascinating and lucid overview of the Zollverein's impact on political institutions, the constitutional challenges and precedents created by the Zollverein and the intersection of these with political changes enacted in 1866 and 1871. An important point made by Hahn, demonstrating the complexity of the subject, is that while calls for wider or popular participation in the Zollverein strengthened, German state parliaments often also willingly relinquished their rights to interfere in commercial questions. Henning Kästner takes this subject forward with a focused and highly original study of discussions of the Zollverein in the parliament of Saxony-Weimar-Eisenach. Kästner also underlines, however, the importance of these parliaments in legitimising the Zollverein and its measures at the local and popular level. Marko Kreutzmann's masterly contribution draws on a research project on Zollverein bureaucrats which had preceded and contributed to the conference upon which this volume is based. Casting some light on the practical mechanism of the Zollverein, Kreutzmann's statistical analysis demonstrates the high level of continuity of personnel that underpinned the organisation and the transition to a unitary state in 1871. The biographical analysis, meanwhile, shows that officials did on occasion identify themselves with a nationalist perspective. Nevertheless, there was a heavily conservative and particularist momentum. Zollverein officials generally, and despite one or two prominent and influential exceptions, followed, rather than led the movement to unification.

A final, thought-provoking section considers alternatives and counter-developments to the Zollverein. Markus Mößlang, drawing on his comprehensive research of British diplomatic correspondence, shows that, whether or

not the Zollverein was significant to nationalists in Germany, it failed to encourage British officials to think of the German states in national terms. There were sporadic moments of concentration on German commercial affairs when British trade interests seemed threatened. However, the default position remained one of Free Trade disinterestedness. Thomas J. Hagen casts a fresh look at Austrian-led efforts to achieve economic integration after 1848, a welcome re-evaluation of a subject underplayed in orthodox German histories. He argues convincingly for the existence of an economic area which operated parallel to, if not around, the Zollverein. Jürgen Müller similarly revisits the Germanic Confederation, and reminds us that, despite received one-dimensional impressions of the organisation, the Bund in fact undertook a wealth of activities relating to economic integration. Because historians have focused their attention on the Zollverein, however, there remains a substantial amount of research to be done on the Bund's economic commissions and committees.

In this volume, then, the Zollverein's significance to German national history begins to re-emerge. The editors wisely impress in the introduction that this volume can only be a start and spur to wider research. After all, it sometimes seems that the problem with German history is that there is so much of it. Never is this truer than when looking at the complex worlds of the Germanic Confederation and the Zollverein. The selection of approaches and subjects chosen here adequately demonstrates the point that far more remains to be said on this particular topic. The national agenda, and the various reactions to it since, have prevented historians from doing the Zollverein justice.

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