
Book Review

New Research Sheds Light on Prussian-American Relations

by Michael Liebig

Preussen und die USA 1850-1867: Transatlantische Wechselwirkungen (Prussia and the USA 1850-1867: Mutual Influences Across the Atlantic)

by Enno Eimers
Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, 2004

This article first appeared in the German weekly Neue Solidarität, and has been translated from German. Quotes from English-speaking writers have been back-translated from German.

Enno Eimers' weighty tome—almost 700 pages—is an example of thorough academic work. He has gone to the Prussian Secret State Archives and to the U.S. National Archives in Washington, to review original documents covering the period between 1850 and 1867. Not an easy read perhaps, but a veritable gold mine for anyone who would seriously explore Prussian-American relations—so, one plunges enthusiastically into its depths.

Even among historians, acquaintance with the course of German-American relations in the interval between the War of Independence and World War I tends to be slight. Who today recalls that in 1785, Frederick the Great signed a Friendship and Trade Treaty with the U.S.A., and that as early as 1780, during the American War of Independence, Prussia joined the League of Armed Neutrality against Great Britain? Or that Neidhardt Gneisenau, then a young officer, wrote a military treatise on the War of Independence? That Alexander von Humboldt travelled to the U.S.A. in 1804 as the guest of President Thomas Jefferson, the start of von Humboldt's lifelong ties to that country? That John Quincy Adams, one of the greatest Presidents, had been U.S. envoy to Berlin from 1797 to 1801? That Friedrich List became an American citizen, and lived in the United States for eight years, where he wrote his Treatise *Outlines of American Political Economy*? That during the 19th Century, many prominent Americans

studied in Germany, and notably at Göttingen University?

Eimers' work shows just how very close Prussian/German-American relations were, between 1850 and 1867, both in politics and in economics. Prussia, like the other German states, was not so fixated upon the "concert" of European powers, that the United States might seem but of marginal importance. To Prussia's foreign policy, the United States was a major factor, notably on account of the tensions with Great Britain and France. The power of the United States afforded Prussia some leeway in foreign policy, which was put to good advantage in the European power struggles. Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's strategy to unify Germany under Prussian leadership would have been unthinkable without American flanking support.

Von Humboldt and His Networks

Between 1850 and 1867, two figures played a special role in Prussian/German-American relations: Alexander von Humboldt and his protégé Friedrich von Gerolt, the Prussian envoy to Washington. At the Prussian Court and government, Alexander von Humboldt was, in a manner of speaking, chief of the "U.S. lobby," as he took the view that the U.S. Constitution and system of governance were a model to be envied. Humboldt was close to the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV and to his brother and successor Wilhelm, who was to become Kaiser Wilhelm I. Both monarchs were well-inclined toward the United States, to the distaste of Prussian reactionary circles. This pro-American stand became apparent during the Crimean War, the U.S. Civil War, and the unrest in Mexico over Emperor Maximilian. Humboldt was a frequent visitor to the U.S. Legation in Berlin, just as American travellers in Germany were often Humboldt's guests. Insofar as slavery was concerned, Humboldt intervened into U.S. domestic policy, and supported the anti-slavery faction there, notably the explorer John Charles Frémont. The latter was decorated with the Pour le Mérite (Peace) Award in 1861 by the Prussian King.

When von Humboldt died on May 6, 1859, the U.S. envoy to Berlin, Joseph Wright, wrote to his country's Secretary of State Lewis Cass: "Baron von Humboldt's welcome to the



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Friedrich von Gerolt, the Prussian envoy to Washington for a quarter-century, was a staunch supporter of the Union cause during the U.S. Civil War. He was convinced from the outset that the Union would prevail.



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Alexander von Humboldt, the great German scientist and explorer, was also active in the Prussian Court and government as a kind of chief of the "U.S. lobby."

countless U.S. citizens who came into contact with him was boundless; I have always felt that to be a warm recognition for our nation." Humboldt corresponded incessantly with friends in America, notably with the aforesaid von Gerolt, Prussia's envoy to Washington from 1844 to 1848, and again from 1849 to 1871.

Von Gerolt was born near Bonn. As a 16-year-old, he had taken part in the German Wars of Liberation, and had then become a civil servant in the Prussian State Mining Administration. After a stint as consular official in Mexico, he became envoy to the United States through von Humboldt's good offices, and notably the latter's ties to the King. Gerolt became a diplomatic institution in Washington, in close contact with many U.S. political figures, including several Presidents and Secretaries of State. The quarter-century during which von Gerolt was envoy saw the Presidencies of Polk, Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, Buchanan, Lincoln, Johnson, and Grant. After stepping down from office in 1855, President Fillmore became the only serving U.S. President in the 19th Century to visit Germany. In Berlin he met with Alexander von Humboldt and King Friedrich Wilhelm IV.

Rapid Expansion of U.S.-Prussian Relations

During Gerolt's watch at the Prussian Legation at Washington, new Prussian Consulates were established, for a total of 14: New York, where von der Heydt, the son of the Prussian

Minister of Trade, was consul; Philadelphia, Baltimore, Charleston, New Orleans, St. Louis, Galveston (Texas), Savannah, Cincinnati, San Francisco, Louisville (Kentucky), Milwaukee, Chicago, Boston, and New Bedford. Only Great Britain had more consulates. That presence reflected two major factors in Prussian/German-American relations: 1) the huge German emigration to the United States; and 2) their extensive trade relations.

While von Gerolt was in Washington, over 1.5 million Germans emigrated to the United States; overall, between the American Revolution and World War I, over 4 million Germans left for America. After the aborted 1848 "Revolution" in Germany, amongst the German immigrants to the United States were many "radical democrats," opposed to any form of monarchical rule; this current became quite prominent in German-American circles and in the U.S. Congress and government, without, however, adversely affecting Prussian-American relations.

By the 1850s and '60s, trade between the United States and the German Customs Union (Zollverein) was brisk, and grew

apace. American exports, first almost entirely agricultural—cotton, tobacco, rice, and grain—included, by the late 1860s, machinery, notably for the agricultural and lumber industries. The Customs Union, for its part, exported mainly metal and textile goods to the United States. In von Gerolt's day, the Customs Union became, after Great Britain, the United States' second most important trading partner. In 1846, the United States, Prussia and Bremen, then the main German harbor for the American trade, founded the Ocean Steam Navigation Company (OSNC), directed against British maritime supremacy in the North Atlantic.

Referring to the growing trade between Prussia and the United States, von Humboldt wrote of "the ever-narrower Atlantic," while von Gerolt emphasised that Prussia must realize that the United States was undergoing "an expansion in power, population and material well-being without historical precedent."

In 1855, Prussian Secretary of Trade von der Heydt wrote: "The importance of the United States for us as a market for our products has grown by leaps and bounds from one year to the next, and to such a degree, that the customs duty of that nation is, for our own industrial interests, of greater importance than that of most other states."

In terms of foreign policy—unlike Great Britain, France or Spain—Prussia had no territorial ambitions in North or South America, and had acknowledged, de facto, the Monroe

Doctrine. In 1871, Bismarck declared: “We acknowledge, insofar as the entire [American] continent is concerned, the predominant influence of the United States—as being grounded in the nature of things, and the most coherent with our interests.” To Alexander von Humboldt, the Monroe Doctrine was justified. Even in respect to the U.S. annexation of thinly populated and economically backward northern Mexico by the United States, he wrote: These territories “will very soon be accessible to civilization, agriculture, and trade.”

‘The Sole Power That England Had To Fear’

Since the Declaration of Independence, Russian-American relations had always been excellent. This, as well as America’s close ties to Prussia, became patent during the Crimean War (1854-56), when Russia was attacked by Great Britain and France. Prussia and the United States remained neutral throughout, but their sympathies for Russia were unmistakable. Tension between Great Britain, on the one side, and the United States and Prussia on the other, almost came to war. In the Caribbean, the British and French were demonstratively deployed against American warships. Prussia and the United States strictly forbade any attempt by the British to recruit mercenaries on their territory. This led to the jailing of the British consul in Cologne, and to the expulsion of three British consuls from the United States.

On May 26, 1856, von Gerolt wrote to Prussian Foreign Minister Manteuffel that the United States “was the sole power that England had to fear,” as it was in a position to repel “British encroachment and pretensions.” After the Crimean War ended, on Sept. 4, 1856, von Gerolt wrote: “The United States have successfully established a position vis-à-vis England, enabling them to rein in what has heretofore been England’s monopoly on the high seas, as well as her encroachment and impertinence vis-à-vis weaker sea powers in those wars where England is involved.”

On Sept. 19, 1854, Prussian Minister of Trade von der Heydt wrote to Manteuffel: “Finally, one should not neglect to point to Prussia’s political stand, the which will probably destine her, in the fairly near term, to strengthen her ties with North America, and any hesitancy in this respect, owing to fear of trouble with England, in an issue that should rather be determined by Prussia’s interests alone, would be foolish.”

Prussia worked very closely with the United States in connection to Japan and China. When, in 1860, an official delegation from Japan visited Washington for the first time, von Gerolt took contact with them immediately. That was the year in which Prussian ships first sailed to Japan, using maps supplied by the United States government. The leader of the Prussian delegation, von Eulenburg, signed the first Prusso-Japanese Trade Agreement in 1860, and was actively supported by the United States legation in Japan. As a result, the U.S. consul general to Japan, Townsend Harris, was granted a high Prussian Order.

Wilhelm I, who became regent in 1858, and in 1861, King

of Prussia, was as positively inclined toward the United States as his predecessor Friedrich Wilhelm IV. In 1871, he arbitrated between the United States and Great Britain, in a conflict over the Canadian-U.S. border, deciding in favor of the United States. Prussian-American ties were firm enough to withstand the death of Alexander von Humboldt (May 6, 1859).

The U.S. Civil War

Following a severe economic crisis in 1857, pressure mounted in the United States for protectionism, and a current led by the Republican Party, whose candidate was Abraham Lincoln, was elected President in 1860. In 1858, the renowned “American System” economist Henry C. Carey published his three-volume *The Principles of Social Science*, a powerful appeal for protectionism and “internal economic development.” Carey’s work was translated and published in Germany in 1863.

The protectionist movement in the United States, as well as Carey’s works when they reached Prussia and Germany, strengthened the hand of the faction in Germany associated with Friedrich List’s economic policy ideas. In the German economic debate, the idea of regulated trade to promote domestic economic growth gained further ground. Bismarck, moreover, had scrutinized how the United States, during the Civil War, had conducted and financed the war economy. It is critical to point out here that, far from being adversely affected by the protectionist measures on the U.S. side, the volume of U.S.-German trade increased constantly.

Even more so than during the Crimean War, the close ties between Prussia and the United States came to the fore during the U.S. Civil War. Joseph Wright, U.S. envoy to Berlin, wrote in 1861 to Lincoln’s Foreign Secretary, William H. Seward: “the government and the people [of Prussia] are, in spirit and sentiment, on our side.”

The moment the Confederacy announced Secession, Prussia made it plain that it backed the Union, and dealt with the Civil War as an “internal affair” of the Union. Prussia never recognized the Confederacy as a subject of international law, nor did Prussia ever contemplate the British/French policy of “negotiated peace” between the Union and the South. In 1863, von Gerolt wrote to Bismarck that the Union, even while the Civil War continued, would be in a position, should need arise, to conduct war against England and France. Alongside Russia, Prussia was America’s most reliable ally in Europe. All the more so, that Bismarck became Prussia’s Minister President in 1862. Bismarck’s correspondence with von Gerolt in Washington was as sustained as that with any of Prussia’s envoys to the European powers.

In the early phase of the Civil War, Prussia and the Customs Union delivered weapons to the Union. Still more significant, during the Civil War, most U.S. government bonds were negotiated on the German Exchanges, while the sole attempt to place a Confederate bond at the Frankfurt bourse failed. In the early phase of the war, the Prussian government,

and specifically von Gerolt, allowed German officers to enroll in the Union Army, including Capt. Paul von Radowitz, the son of a former Prussian Foreign Minister, Karl von Hardenberg; Prince Felix von Salm; and Oskar von Babender, among the better-known. A chapter in Eimers' work deals with German soldiers in the Union Army, as distinct from German-American soldiers in the Union Army.

In 1862—and this is no mere anecdote—Lincoln and Secretary of State Seward visited von Gerolt at his private home, a most unusual gesture to a foreign diplomat. The U.S. envoy to Berlin, Norman Judd, wrote in 1862 concerning von Gerolt: "His enthusiasm for our cause, the thorough knowledge of our public affairs, and of the origin of the rebellion, together with his firm conviction of the ultimate triumph of the government, has had the most favorable and beneficial influence on government circles here. His position has enabled him to talk freely to the King, Queen, and Crown Prince, as well as the circles mostly military that surround them. His influence however has not been confined to that circle, but has reached other influential personages."

From the very outset, von Gerolt was convinced that the Union would prevail. In Spring 1862, he wrote to the Prussian Foreign Ministry: "Through the tremendous material means that the willpower and persistency of the North have, in the present war, so very swiftly developed, the people are made aware of their own power and of the source of succor, and should the United States emerge triumphant from this struggle, an issue that one can no longer doubt, the Union shall step forth with fresh energy, as a power of the very first order." In March 1863, von Gerolt wrote to Bismarck that the U.S. Congress had "granted the President such power, for which there is no precedent neither in the history of the United States nor of that of most European States."

Bismarck's Perspective

As early as 1857, Bismarck had written that Prussia had already "forgiven" the United States her "revolutionary origins . . . in the Treaty of The Hague of 1785." He soberly examined the growing economic, military, and political power of the United States, and was determined to use that power factor in world politics, for Prussia's diplomacy in Europe. The manner in which Bismarck obstinately maneuvered to achieve the unity of Germany under Prussian leadership, would have been unfeasible without the role played by the United States in international relations. That applies to the German-Danish War of 1864, the Prussian-Austrian War of 1866, and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71.

During the German-Danish War, Bismarck could skillfully counter the pro-Danish tendencies of England and France, because the latter two nations were in extremely conflictual relations with the United States throughout the U.S. Civil War. In the Prussian-Austrian War of 1866, France was prevented from moving against Prussia, essentially because her forces were pinned down by Napoleon's Mexican adventures,

while war with the United States loomed on the horizon. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, the United States posture was one of benevolent neutrality.

One year before the Franco-Prussian War, the U.S. envoy to Berlin, George Bancroft, wrote to the U.S. Department of State that France's unfriendly attitude toward any greater unity of the German people directly affected United States interests. "Trade between the United States and Germany is far more important for us, than that with any other power on the [European] continent," he wrote. Two short years before Bancroft's analysis, the United States and France had been on the verge of war over Mexico.

Here are the words of the U.S. envoy to Vienna, John L. Motley, to Secretary of State Seward in 1864: "Bismarck is a man of superior intellect, considerable acquirements, perfect courage and unyielding firmness. . . . The secret of Bismarck's success—for he is successful and is likely to remain so—is that he thoroughly believes in his creed. In the age of political skepticism it is something to believe in at all. And certainly the great characteristic of Europe today is political skepticism." And the U.S. envoy to Berlin, Joseph Wright, wrote to Seward in 1866: "Count Bismarck . . . is a statesman of large and enlightened views, exhibiting at all times the greatest frankness and friendship in all matters connected with our country."

Bismarck maintained particularly close ties to U.S. Envoy Bancroft, who stayed at Berlin from 1867 to 1874. Concerning the North German League, which Bismarck established after the victory over Austria in 1867, Bancroft wrote: "This wonderful result has special interest for America, because it has sprung from the application of principles which guided the framers of the Constitution of our United States. The constitution of North Germany corresponds in so many things with ours that must have been formed after the closest study of our system." Bancroft himself was the author of a five-volume history of the U.S. Constitution and a ten-volume history of the United States.

Bancroft had been a student at Göttingen University, studying ancient history under Professor Heeren, the founder of ancient historiography in Germany. Bancroft himself authored a book on the political system of ancient Greece. In the 1840s, he became Secretary of the Navy, and played a major role in the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846-48. He was then appointed U.S. envoy to London. Although Bancroft was a member of the Democratic Party, it was he who pronounced the funeral oration for President Lincoln in the U.S. Capitol. Prusso-American relations reached a high point with Bancroft and Bismarck, a reflection of the fact that here were two powers that aspired to great things, that respected each other's station in the world, two powers that, in terms of domestic progress, were similar in many respects, notably in terms of their economic and technological achievements. This is precisely our concern today, to which Eimers' work is a most worthwhile contribution.