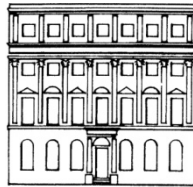


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Tobias Becker:

Competitors and Companions: Britons and Germans in the World.

Conference Report

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Competitors and Companions: Britons and Germans in the World.

Conference organized by the German Historical Institute and the Arbeitskreis Deutsche Englandforschung/German Association for the Study of British History and Politics, and held at the Centre for British Studies, Humboldt University Berlin, 19–20 May 2017. Conveners: Julia Eichenberg (Berlin), Daniel Steinbach (Exeter), and Tobias Becker (GHIL).

For obvious reasons, the history of the Anglo-German relationship has attracted a lot of attention. While traditionally the emphasis has been on official bilateral relations, newer studies, looking beyond high politics, have drawn attention to contacts and interactions on many levels and between many groups such as scientists, artists, journalists, students, and businessmen. Some studies have begun to look beyond Europe to account for contacts in the colonial world or international organizations. The conference ‘Competitors and Companions: Britons and Germans in the World’ set out to survey and expand this research. It focused on the relationship between Britons and Germans by discussing specific examples of competition and co-operation in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, which, in many cases, proved to be two sides of the same coin. ‘Competitors and Companions’ also functioned as this year’s annual conference of the Arbeitskreis Deutsche Englandforschung/German Association for the Study of British History and Politics.

That competition and co-operation were interconnected already became clear in the first panel, fittingly entitled ‘Competitive Collaborations’. Axel C. Hüntelmann’s (Berlin) paper, ‘The Foundation and early Establishment of Public Health Institutions in Germany and Britain around 1900’, assessed the relationship between the French Pasteur Institute, the Prussian Institute for Infectious Diseases, and the Liverpool and London Schools of Tropical Medicine, the leading institutions in the field of hygiene and public health before the First

The full conference programme can be found under ‘Events and Conferences’ on the GHIL’s website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

World War. Although competing with one another for scientific success and prestige, these institutes—and the scientists attached to them—co-operated closely, exchanging knowledge through conferences, publications, visits, and even on shared expeditions to Africa. Similarly, the 1900s saw news agencies competing for the global market but also sharing news with one another as Volker Barth (Cologne) explained in his talk on ‘Competing Partners: The Global Collaboration between Reuters and Wolff, 1859–1934’. Barth described collaboration and competition as feeding into one another and saw commercial considerations, much more than political ones, as a motive behind both. Politics took centre stage in the last paper of the session. Speaking on ‘The War of Words in the River Plate: Propaganda in Argentina during the Second World War’, Chris Bannister (London) compared the propaganda war between Britain and Nazi Germany in Argentina, which was won by the British Ministry of Information, thanks to larger resources but also to Germany’s much less successful efforts to mobilize the expat community.

In her keynote lecture, Gaynor Johnson (Kent) gave a broad overview of ‘Twentieth-Century British Foreign Policy and the German Question’. Focusing mainly on diplomatic relations between Britain and Germany, Johnson stressed that these had traditionally been very good up to the late nineteenth century, especially compared to Anglo-French relations, and that the two world wars have come to dominate views of the Anglo-German relationship. She advocated taking a longer term perspective and including France, without which the Anglo-German relationship cannot be fully understood. She ended her talk by characterizing Britain and Germany as both competitors and companions, who were ultimately united by more than divided them.

‘Post-War Re-Encounters’—after both the First and the Second World War—were the subject of the second panel. It was opened by Ben Holmes (Exeter) with a paper on ‘“To give hope must be our mission above everything else”: British Humanitarian Aid to Post-War Germany, 1919–1925’. Holmes compared two humanitarian organizations, the Quaker-run Friends’ Emergency and War Victims’ Committee and the British Save the Children Fund, which both sent money, food, and clothing to Germany after the war. While the latter withdrew after the end of the post-war crisis, the Quakers stayed on, shifting the emphasis from aid to spreading pacifist sentiments. Both,

however, collaborated with German actors on the ground. Tara Windsor (Birmingham) covered roughly the same period in a paper entitled ‘“If the students are cooperating today, surely there is hope for tomorrow!”: Student Associations and German-British Exchange after the First World War’. Drawing on the National Union of Students of England and Wales and the Deutsche Studentenschaft, Windsor discerned both nationalist antipathies and a renewed longing for exchange and co-operation. In the final paper of the session, ‘“Fagin in Berlin Provokes a Riot”: Anti-Semitism and Anglo-German Relations in Occupied Germany’, Emily Oliver (Warwick) used the screening of David Lean’s 1949 film of *Oliver Twist* and the ensuing protests against the antisemitic portrayal of Fagin to explore the situation and the representation of Jews in post-war West Germany. While Germany was, paradoxically perhaps, thanks to the Allies, the safest place for Jews in post-war Europe, many Germans regarded Jews as black-market profiteers and blamed them for anti-semitism.

With the third panel, ‘Imperial Connections’, the perspective shifted from Europe to the non-European world. In imperial Singapore, for instance, Britons and Germans were in close contact with each other, often socializing in the same clubs, as Marine Fiedler (Berne/Paris) demonstrated in her paper, ‘Being a “Singaporer” from Hamburg: The Relationships of a Hanseatic Family with the Britons of Singapore, 1840–1914’. On the imperial periphery, class affiliation trumped national origin—until the outbreak of First World War brought the conflict of the European centre to the colonial periphery. Daniel Steinbach’s paper, ‘Nation—Race—Empire: Britons and Germans in Colonial Africa’, had a similar story to tell for East Africa. Compared to Singapore, class played a lesser role here and Britons and Germans, united by racism, even intermarried. Yet here, too, the First World War proved fatal—metaphorically as well as literally—when British troops invaded the German territories. Paradoxically, some of the pre-war solidarity survived into the post-war era, which saw Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck invited to a veteran’s dinner in London. The panel was rounded off by Jan Rieger (London), speaking on ‘Anglo-German Smuggling; or: Writing Europe into the History of the British Empire’. Rieger distinguished between two schools of historians of Britain: one that interprets Britain’s history primarily through an imperial lens with Europe merely as a sideshow, while

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the other, largely ignoring the empire, understands Britain as a European power. For his part, Rüger advocated a third interpretation, which would write the empire into Britain's encounter with Europe and Europe into Britain's imperial history.

The final discussion examined the relationship between competition and co-operation in the light of the case studies presented at the conference. It revolved around three overarching themes or perspectives: the economy as driven by competition but also as a driving force for international exchange and co-operation; war as an extreme case of competition but also an extreme case of contact between nations; and finally, culture—identity, language, representations, stereotypes—as a way of producing, expressing, but also of bridging differences. Building on the existing literature on the Anglo-German relationship, the conference showcased current research on this topic and raised new questions for future studies.

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