



Forum: New Research In Transatlantic History

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INTRODUCTION: NEW TRENDS IN TRANSATLANTIC HISTORY

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Not long ago, in October 2020, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* observed that German-American relations had reached a new low point.¹ A changing global order and the rise of nationalism, the British *Guardian* explained on a different occasion, had led to a decline of political networks as important pillars for an earlier era's transatlantic relationships by 2018.² Since the 2016 presidential election in the United States, a number of developments have eroded opportunities for exchange. President Donald J. Trump decided that troops stationed in Germany would be either relocated to Poland or withdrawn from Europe altogether, and allies such as Germany have been openly criticized by the U.S. for not doing their share in supporting NATO. This year, the Covid-19 pandemic prompted the United States to impose travel bans on arrivals from the European Schengen zone, a decision followed by the E.U.'s own restrictions on arrivals from the U.S. While the second Iraq War serves as an important reminder that German-American relations have a much longer history of post-Cold War strain, more recent political developments certainly accentuate the challenges to transatlantic relations. In view of such antagonism, however, it is important to remember that transatlantic trade, where it remains unaffected by the pandemic, remains vital to both the U.S. and Europe and that transatlantic cultural affiliations in recent decades have intensified rather than weakened. Arguably, some of these developments have not been interrupted by the current health crisis, as participants of transatlantic video conferences will groggily concede.

Current events and developments prompt us to revisit the history of transatlantic relations. At the German Historical Institute Washington, we have received inquiries from German audiences wondering about American populism and its effects on trade relations, tourism, and professional exchanges. At the same time, colleagues in the U.S. have looked towards Germany as an example of a functioning social state or to study *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as an effective way of dealing with a country's racist past.³ The current crises — among them a crisis of democracy, a crisis of transatlantic relations, and a global health crisis — prompt historians to uncover long-term developments that

- 1 Kurt Kister, "Verlorene Liebe," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Oct. 11, 2020, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/usa-trump-deutschland-verhaeltnis-kommentar-1.5060318?reduced=true>
- 2 Madeleine Schwartz, "The End of Atlanticism. Has Trump killed the Ideology that Won the Cold War," *The Guardian*, Sept. 4, 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/sep/04/atlanticism-trump-ideology-cold-war-foreign-policy>.
- 3 See, for instance, Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans. Race and the Memory of Evil* (New York, 2019).

have resulted in our current predicaments and to assess historical comparisons and claims about the uniqueness of our situation. The current crises also invite us to focus on actors who sustained transnational relations at times when global crises challenged them.

This issue of the *Bulletin* introduces new work on transatlantic history that seeks to rise to the challenge. It raises questions about how to investigate transatlantic co-operation beyond traditional diplomatic channels in a globalized world in which nationalism is on the rise. By asking how transatlantic connections and exchange were maintained in times of crisis, we propose to highlight specific sets of actors who profoundly shaped transatlantic relations: researchers and experts who built and maintained scientific networks and practiced global science in shifting political realities, merchants who sought to translate such shifts into financial profits, and migrant families who created transnational lifestyles. This issue of the *Bulletin* presents innovative approaches to transatlantic history by featuring four emerging scholars. All four have recently published (or are about to publish) their studies in the GHI's "Transatlantic Historical Studies" (THS) book series, published with the Franz Steiner Verlag. For close to thirty years, this series has been a venue for studies on transatlantic networks and exchanges and for works by European authors in the field of American history. The series highlights European perspectives on and approaches to North American history and has made significant contributions to transatlantic historiography.

The term "transatlantic history" is, of course, reminiscent of a world order shaped by the United States and its North Atlantic allies. If conflated with "transatlantic relations" and diplomatic history, it sounds like a relic from the Cold War. Few will doubt, however, that the United States has remained a global military and economic superpower, a dominant hub for innovation in science and technology, a key destination for global migrants (including migrants from Europe), and a major producer of a globalized popular culture. German media and German students continue to look to the U.S. as a place for comparison and for engaging their ambitions. The recent global attention paid to the 2020 presidential election reflects the United States' continued relevance for Europeans and for people around the world. There is no question that the United States' international reputation as a leading voice in global affairs has been severely damaged under the Trump Administration. But calls for the U.S. to return to the global stage and take more responsibility for the future of the planet never ceased; on the contrary, they have become louder and

more urgent, and most observers expect the incoming Biden administration to reinvent multilateralism.

Rather than dismiss transatlantic history, therefore, we propose to engage its most promising trends and to build on them by extrapolating from strong research traditions and by developing new narratives. We can see a productive engagement with ideas that have evolved in global and transnational histories, such as using new approaches and broadening the field of actors. By tracing the transatlantic history of people, ideas, and objects in a globalized world, transatlantic history has, in recent years, been inspired by and contributed to migration history, the history of knowledge, the history of science and technology, and the material turn, to name but a few trends.

After 1945 and during the Cold War, transatlantic history focused mainly on international relations, nation states, and diplomats. Against the backdrop of the bloc confrontation and the Westernization of Germany and other U.S. allies, historians identified and analyzed ties between German-speaking central Europe and the emerging U.S. since the eighteenth century. Wars provided narrative turning points and allowed for perspectives that explored the role of Hessian mercenaries in the American War of Independence, European Forty-Eighters enlisting in the Union Army during the Civil War, anti-German sentiment in the U.S. during the First World War, the entrance of America onto the world stage with peace negotiations after that war, the United States' central role in European reconstruction after the Second World War, and the history of the Cold War between 1949 and 1989/91. Transatlantic history circumscribed the Atlantic by emphasizing the history, role, and relations of NATO member states. Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean usually remained out of sight, and Eastern European countries mostly hidden behind the Iron Curtain. Political historiographies that focused on the history of nation-building in the Northern Atlantic took either the French central state or the British parliamentary monarchy as ideal types to distinguish from it a German *Sonderweg* and American Exceptionalism.⁴ This historiography was often embedded in a linear teleological modernization theory, which sought to identify patterns of industrial, social, and political development in order to assess a country's progress in establishing a stable liberal democracy and capitalist society. The problem, of course, was not so much the assumption that progress might occur, but to assume that such achievements could be directed from outside and that they were

⁴ On the German *Sonderweg*, see Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte. Volume 3: Von der "Deutschen Doppelrevolution" bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges. 1849–1914* (München, 1995). On American Exceptionalism, see such older works as Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation. The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1963) and, more critically, David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence, 1993). The concept of nation-building has recently been mobilized to explore U.S. history as well. Historians of early America, perhaps not surprisingly, have taken the lead. See, for example, Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750–1804* (New York and London, 2016). Taylor has reminded us that the American Revolution initiated rather than completed American nation-building. Implications of the unsettled nature of the American nation state have been explored by Axel Jansen, *Alexander Dallas Bache: Building the American Nation through Science and Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Frankfurt and New York, 2011). On recent efforts to write a comparative history of U.S. economic development "not built on analytical benchmarks derived from the American experience," see Stefan Link and Noam Maggor, "The United States as a Developing Nation: Revisiting the Peculiarities of American History," *Past & Present* 246 (February 2020): 269–306.

irreversible.⁵ For believers in one-directionality, an important goal seemed to have been achieved when the Berlin Wall came down on November 9, 1989, which famously prompted political scientist Francis Fukuyama to proclaim the end of history.⁶

Since then, many developments, beginning with the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the contested NATO intervention in the Balkans, have put that theory under scrutiny. After the terrorist attacks of September 2001, American decisions to go to war not only in Afghanistan but also in Iraq challenged important political pillars of transatlantic cooperation. The 2008 financial crisis led some critics to question the capitalist system and American globalization. Historians, too, have responded to such key developments by identifying new research questions. A new history of capitalism, for instance, historicizes capitalism to show that it is a man-made and thus non-essentialist form of world order. It seeks to uncover alternative economic systems discussed since the nineteenth century.⁷

Among the first historians to broaden the scope of transatlantic history was Bernard Bailyn, who set up the Harvard Atlantic Seminar as a platform to discuss it. Bailyn complemented political history with the history of ideas by investigating how enlightenment ideas traveled to the United States.⁸ Other works inspired by *Ideengeschichte* investigated the reception of Marxism in late nineteenth-century America or European debates about slavery.⁹ Daniel T. Rodgers revisited social progressives during the early twentieth century to trace the many ways in which social reform ideas moved across the Atlantic.¹⁰ Meanwhile, other historians suggested that Europe be provincialized.¹¹ The “cultural turn” introduced new approaches to the fields of modern and contemporary history by focusing on political cultures. Feminism and post-colonialism have made their imprints on historical research by asking about the changing roles of the categories “sex,” “gender,” and “race” in different historical periods.¹² Works such as Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* have created awareness for a Black diaspora and reclaimed historical agency for the most disenfranchised populations in the Atlantic, enslaved people.¹³ Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton* has

5 There are countless critiques of a linear modernization theory, see, for instance, Michelle Murphy, *The Economization of Life* (Durham, 2017), 36-38; Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology. American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, 2000), and Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future. Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, 2007). Thomas Haskell, in turn, has provided a refreshing critique of critics of modernization theory, including Gilman. “Taking into account the breathtaking naiveté with which the intervention in Iraq was carried out,” he wrote in 2005, “and observing hints here and there of an unaccustomed thuggishness on the rise in American political life, I take seriously the possibility that, by comparison with the planners who succeed them, the cold war modernizers with their welfare state values may ultimately come to be regarded as paragons of deep thinking, foresight, and probity.” Thomas Haskell, “Modernization on Trial,” *Modern Intellectual History* 2, no. 02 (August 2005): 235-263, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244305000417>.

6 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).

7 Hannah Ahlheim, “Ex Machina. Die Gestaltung der Utopie in der Arbeitswelt des britischen Frühsozialisten Robert Owen,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 311 (2020): 37-69, here 44.

8 Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967).

9 Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, 2010).

a Progressive Age (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

11 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, 2000).

Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053-1075.

10 Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in*

12 Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of

13 Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

shed light on the connection between slave labor in the Americas and industrialization in Europe.¹⁴ Other economic historians subscribing to a “material turn” have traced the journeys of commodities across the Atlantic and established a strong link between the slave trade, the transportation of consumer goods, and the circulation of knowledge across the Atlantic.¹⁵ Following a similar trajectory, historian of science Lorraine Daston has sought to change the focus of her field by noting that “some version of the history of knowledge, of which the history of science is a part, is probably indispensable.”¹⁶ Emphasizing the role of knowledge has allowed historians in many subfields to focus on its circulation, often in the context of migration studies and in relation to the circulation of objects.¹⁷ While migration history and exile studies have been an integral part of transatlantic historical scrutiny since the end of the Second World War, they often focused on the migration of single men and their subsequent achievements as military strategists or entrepreneurs. More recently, migration historians have shifted the focus to entire families, childhood histories, and the impact of migration on gender norms. The emerging scholars who have contributed essays to this “Forum” on “New Trends in Transatlantic History” practice this new kind of transatlantic history as they incorporate the new perspectives sketched here.

In his article on the nineteenth-century removal of Native peoples in the American West, Julius Wilm does not engage in transatlantic history in the strict sense but he applies digital methodologies that have become an important element for it. Specifically, Wilm uses digital tools to process large sets of data on the Homestead Act of 1862 to address an important lacuna in U.S. history. While everyone agrees that Indian dispossession in the late nineteenth century resulted from land allocated to white settlers (among them transatlantic migrants) by the U.S. government, we know little about the timing of these processes and whether they were in fact one and the same thing. Wilm addresses this key issue of nineteenth-century American history in three steps. First, he provides an overview of free land settlement laws in Florida and Oregon to show how, before the Civil War, white settlers were actively encouraged by the U.S. government to settle in disputed areas and to help expel Native nations. He then asks whether this same model also characterized the 1862 Homestead Act, wartime legislation that made land in the West available to U.S. settlers on a much larger scale than previous settlement laws. Wilm answers this question in the negative, arguing that the Act’s political rationale differed from prewar federal

14 Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton. A Global History* (New York, 2014).

15 Ines Prodöhl, “A ‘miracle bean’: How Soy Conquered the West, 1909-1950,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, Washington DC 46 (Spring 2010): 111-129; Londa Schiebinger, *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford, 2017).

16 See Lorraine Daston, “The History of Science and the History of Knowledge,” *Know 1* (2017): 131-154, here 142-143.

17 Johan Östling, David Larsson Heidenblad and Anna Nilsson Hammar, “Developing the History of Knowledge,” in: idem, eds., *Forms of Knowledge. Developing the History of Knowledge* (Falun, 2020), 9-26, here 15, Anna-Carolin Augustin, “Nazi-Looted Precious Metal Objects, Art History and Jewish History in Postwar Germany,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, Washington DC 66 (Spring 2020): 31-51.

land grants to settlers. Before the Civil War, the federal government openly endorsed settlers confronting and ousting Native Americans from their lands. The Homestead Act, however, was intended as a developmental policy tying settlers to the federal government without making them that government's spearhead. Having established this difference in legislative intent, Wilm goes on to ask about unintended consequences, by examining whether the new postwar policy, despite a shift in political rationale, nevertheless continued to result in Indian displacement. Using data analysis and digital mapping tools to analyze data on homesteading provided by the U.S. General Land Office, he is able to show that in several western states, land grants and the removal of Native Americans did indeed go hand in hand. Even if political rhetoric and government aims had shifted during and after the Civil War, the acquisition of lands by settlers and the displacement of Native peoples remained intertwined.

While Wilm places settlers in the middle of Indian removal, Patrick Gaul examines the role of German-speaking merchants in the middle of the American Civil War. Gaul focuses on the cities of Hamburg and Bremen to challenge the perception that, during the American Civil War, the German states sided with the Union because they rejected slavery. By tracing how businesses in such politically liberal cities preserved and expanded long-established connections with slave-holding cotton planters in the Confederate States, Gaul shows how trade interests trumped moral considerations. The German textile industry was dependent on cotton grown in the American South, which created strong incentives for merchants to break or by-pass Union blockades of Confederate ports and to move goods through the Gulf of Mexico. While cotton flowed in one direction, weapons flowed in the other. Transatlantic traders were able to deliver Prussian and Austrian arms to the American South, which helped prolong the Confederate fight for slavery and secession. Gaul concludes that the liberal political veneer of European merchants glossed over the illiberal effects of their lucrative transatlantic trade relationships.

Elisabeth Piller's article takes us into the twentieth century by tracing shifts in American cultural diplomacy vis-à-vis Germany from the *Kaiserreich* to the Second World War. She does so by establishing as her prism the long tenure of a key transatlantic actor, Nicholas Murray Butler, who was president of Columbia University in New York City from 1901 to 1945. At a time when the U.S. pursued no official

cultural diplomacy, Butler unofficially claimed the role of cultural diplomat for himself. Piller traces the many ways in which Butler came to stand for larger shifts in German-American relations. Before the First World War, Butler translated his belief in the significance of America's global role into supporting academic exchanges with Germany. At Columbia, he set up international houses and initiated exchange programs with Berlin. During the war, however, Butler was deeply disappointed by his German peers' blind defense of their country and their refusal to acknowledge its atrocities in Belgium. As a prominent peace activist before the war, he rejected what he took to be the results of German militarism, and in the immediate postwar years he paused cultural engagements with Germany. Partly in response to the role of France in postwar Europe, which he considered a break in peaceful developments, after 1924 Butler renewed his German connections and became instrumental in efforts to reintegrate German academics into the global research community. Piller points out that Butler felt such integration was necessary if another disastrous war was to be avoided. After 1933 and the Nazi rise to power, Butler remained reluctant to cut ties with Germany, and did so only in 1937, when the regime's racism, anti-Semitism, and rearmament could no longer be balanced by hopes of peaceful integration. Piller's essay provides an important perspective on twentieth-century transatlantic diplomatic history by expanding its range of key actors.

The Forum's final article, by Sophia Dafinger, traces the history of experts in the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS), experts recruited in 1944/45 by the American military in the social sciences to help evaluate the "success" of its bombing campaigns. While Dafinger's work may be considered U.S. history rather than transatlantic history, her perspective and approach are transatlantic in the sense that they are informed by German historical writing on the role of experts in government. While Nicholas Murray Butler had represented American academia at a time when the federal government was only beginning to grow into new diplomatic roles and responsibilities, the relationship between the state and academia was fully transformed during the Second World War. The war gave rise to science-based technological efforts on an unprecedented scale (such as building a nuclear bomb), which drew academics from around the world into the American military's orbit. Dafinger's story is that of another Big Science effort, the social scientific endeavor of assessing the impact of bombs on societies. Social scientists after the war ventured into bombed-out German and Japanese cities to conduct

interviews with local leaders and citizens in order to assess how U.S. bombings had affected the enemy's "home front." After 1947, such work was pursued by think tanks established by the newly founded U.S. Air Force. Dafinger shows how assessments made during and after the Second World War would inform American military strategies in Korea and Vietnam during the fifties, sixties, and seventies. She highlights how the cooperation between academics, the military, and politicians impacted all three spheres. The military's demand for experts who used quantitative methods, for example, fed back into the social sciences, where such methods came to dominate and push competing methods aside. Dafinger convincingly argues against narrowing the historical perspective by tying the twentieth century to the Cold War; instead, she insists that the Second World War marks a watershed in twentieth-century transatlantic and global history because it reshaped the most profound expectations about the legitimacy of war and about how it may be pursued.

Taken together, the four essays in this *Bulletin's* "Forum" provide a comprehensive view of recent trends in transatlantic history. These trends are closely connected to developments in other historical subfields. Julius Wilm, for example, in approaching a key issue in U.S. history, uses data-driven approaches, comparing patterns that emerge from one set of data with data accrued from other sources, thereby making visible patterns of settlement and their consequences. His methodological approach is complemented by an expanded narrative agenda that is also articulated in the articles by Gaul, Piller, and Dafinger. Patrick Gaul's work expands on lines of inquiry pioneered by Sven Beckert, Don H. Doyle, and others, who have sought to provide the steadfastly national narrative provided for the American Civil War with a global framework.¹⁸ By expanding the frame of analysis, Gaul is able to illuminate an important European context for the war on American soil, and to demonstrate that economic motives remained unchecked by moral scruples. Similarly, by focusing on Nicholas Murray Butler as a key actor in transatlantic cultural relations, Elisabeth Piller rejuvenates and expands the history of transatlantic cultural diplomacy. Finally, Sophia Dafinger draws on recent work on the historical significance of knowledge and expertise to illuminate the significance of the Second World War in shaping the relationship between politics and academia in times of crisis. Through their new approaches and by expanding the range of historical actors, therefore, the four contributors to this "Forum" represent the vitality of transatlantic history today.

18 Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2014); Don H. Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (New York, 2014).

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