GERMANS IN THE PACIFIC WORLD FROM THE LATE SEVENTEENTH TO TWENTIETH CENTURY

Conference at the University of California, San Diego, March 5–7, 2015. Co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute Washington, the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, UCSD History Department, Deans of Arts and Humanities, and the UCSD Library. Conveners: Hartmut Berghoff (GHI Washington), Frank Biess (UC San Diego), Ulrike Strasser (UC San Diego). Participants: Andreas Daum (State University of New York at Buffalo), Gerhard Fischer (University of New South Wales), Margrit Frölich (UC San Diego), Sebastian Gehrig (Oxford University), Karl Gerth (UC San Diego), Peter Gourevitch (UC San Diego), Deborah Hertz (UC San Diego), Todd Kontje (UC San Diego), Kristina Küntzel-Witt (University of Hamburg), Ricky Law (Carnegie Mellon University), Douglas McGetchin (Florida Atlantic University), Ghassan Moazzin (St. Catharine’s College, University of Cambridge), Glenn Penny (University of Iowa), Sandra Rebok (Huntington Library), Raquel A. Reyes (University of London), Alan Rosenfeld (University of Hawaii-West Oahu), Jürgen Schmidt (Humboldt University, Berlin), Leonard Schmieding (Georgetown University/GHI), Uwe Spiekermann (GHI Washington), Katharina Stornig (Leibniz Institute of European History, Mainz), Emma Thomas (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Reinhard Wendt (FernUniversität Hagen), Robert Westman (UC San Diego), Shellen Wu (University of Tennessee), Shakila Yacob (University of Malaya).

From naturalist Georg Forster and German Jesuit missionaries to political scientist Klaus Mehnert and the Goethe Institut, German individuals and institutions have had a centuries-long presence in the Pacific. Because Germany did not acquire formal colonies until the late nineteenth century, however, research in the flourishing fields of Pacific studies and colonialism often overlooks or understates the role of Germans in the Pacific. By providing a forum for scholars from around the world to present their innovative research, this conference made a substantial contribution to our knowledge of European involvement in the Pacific. Tracing German naturalists, businessmen, missionaries, bankers, engineers, and translators across the globe, conference participants revealed Germans’ significant cultural, intellectual, religious, and economic interactions in the Pacific World in the early modern and modern eras. The conference also featured an exhibit curated by Ulrike Strasser and Sky Johnston on Germans in the Pacific World. It displayed texts and maps from the UC San Diego Library’s Special Collections & Archives that were
produced by many of the same historical actors discussed in the conference talks.

The first panel, chaired by Robert Westman, examined the transfer of knowledge in the early modern period. Raquel A. Reyes spoke about German apothecaries and naturalists in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan. Specifically, she traced the activities of four men — Georg Josef Kamel, Andreas Cleyer, Engelbert Kaempfer, and Georg Eberhard Rumphius — who collected and traded plant specimens during the seventeenth century. The men had diverse professions and personal motivations for their shared botanical activities. When viewed together, they highlight the disparate ways in which knowledge of the natural world was produced and disseminated via vast Pacific trade networks. The panel’s second talk featured Ulrike Strasser discussing the production of geographic knowledge of the Pacific. She followed the history of one map and its evolutions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The map of a set of islands in present-day Micronesia was originally created by German Jesuit missionary Paul Klein following indigenous conventions for spatial representations. Later publications of the map in Europe variously kept the indigenous characteristics or converted the information to fit European cartographical norms. The history of this map reveals that Germans were involved in mapmaking and printing before the famous German explorers of later centuries ever set sail. More broadly, it shows that knowledge production was a collaborative effort with many interlocutors.

The second panel, chaired by Karl Gerth, carried the theme of knowledge transfer into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ricky Law examined Japanese translations of a broad range of German texts — on topics such as the justice system and criminal code, interest rates, city planning, urban zoning, and public housing — to illuminate a rich interwar cultural and intellectual rapprochement between Japan and Germany that preceded their military alliance during World War II. Japanese translators had been especially impressed with Germany’s postwar recovery in the 1920s and 1930s and were eventually drawn by the allure of Hitler and Nazism, translating Mein Kampf in 1932 and increasingly narrowing their translations to works on mobilization and technology after the outbreak of World War II. In the second talk of the panel, Shellen Wu examined the role of German engineers in building formal and informal empire in China from 1880-1914. Although ostensibly sent as “translation interns” without Reichstag
approval, Wu argued that German engineers crucially contributed to Germany’s imperial presence in China by building infrastructure and helping to secure access to resources.

The third panel, chaired by Margrit Frölich, examined the German naturalists and scientific explorers who traveled to the Pacific in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Andreas Daum opened the panel with a talk that drew from his study of roughly thirty German naturalists in the Pacific around the year 1800. He concluded from his survey that as Germans sailed under the flags of other nations during this time, their perceived weaknesses turned out to be strengths. Although Germans lacked colonies and large state-sponsored societies, they met the needs of expeditions with their local science training, practical knowledge, language competence, and history of extensive travel throughout Europe and its growing market of public knowledge. Kristina Küntzel-Witt focused her talk on two eighteenth century explorers, Georg Wilhelm Steller and Carl H. Merck, who travelled on Russian expeditions. These two men did maintain a German identity, but saw themselves first as scientists. Their example shows that nationalism was not so pronounced on such Russian expeditions that it precluded assistance from German naturalists. Sandra Rebok rounded out the panel with a talk on Alexander von Humboldt, the most famous German explorer of the era, and his interactions in the Pacific. Although he only spent 47 days physically present along the Pacific Rim, Humboldt maintained a lifelong interest in the Pacific from a distance. Furthermore, Humboldt’s approach to studying the world, later termed “Humboldtian science,” served to put the Pacific in a global scientific context.

The fourth panel, chaired by Hartmut Berghoff, examined German business networks in the Pacific. In Ghassan Moazzin’s talk on the Deutsch-Asiatische Bank in China, he shifted our focus of German presence in the Pacific from one of conflict to cooperation, arguing that German bankers were not mere tools of imperialism but rather that they cultivated personal trust with their Chinese counterparts. Both German bankers and their Chinese customers often had to make significant concessions in order to conclude deals and establish financial relations. Shakila Yacob’s talk examined the German company Behn Meyer in Colonial-Malaya and post-colonial Malaysia to survey the success of German entrepreneurs, who saw great potential in the area. Despite Britain’s temporary bans on German trading in the area following both World Wars, German entrepreneurs’
resourcefulness and willingness to work with small traders and provide long-term credit quickly made them the preferred trading partner in the region. Uwe Spiekermann explored the economic ventures of the Claus Spreckels family in the Pacific from 1870-1920. Through its role in the sugar trade of Hawaii, the Spreckels family played a pioneering role in the economic development of the Pacific region and its integration into global networks. From their position as private businessmen, the Spreckels also helped establish major industries on the West Coast of the United States including the military industrial complex in San Diego and San Francisco.

The fifth panel, chaired by Deborah Hertz, focused on German diasporas in the Pacific Americas. In his talk on German schools in Chile from 1880-1960, Glenn Penny sought to decenter the role of the state. In fact, it was German merchants and industrialists who financed these German schools in Chile long before the Foreign Office began funding them at the turn of the century. While the schools sought to reinforce German identities of these diasporic communities and were one of many nodal points in a larger, ever-changing network of such German communities, “Germans” at this time constituted a diverse group, and these schools reflected their often vibrant and hybrid identities. Leonard Schmieding explored German gastronomic businesses — such as cafes, restaurants, and beer halls — in San Francisco between the Gold Rush and the great earthquake of 1906. Such places sought to present an authentic German experience, serving traditional German food and employing German emigrants, and thus functioned as informal contact zones for Germans and non-Germans in San Francisco. Gradually, however, these businesses became increasingly Americanized.

The sixth panel, chaired by Todd Kontje, extended the discussion of diasporas by examining Germans in the South Pacific. Reinhard Wendt’s talk illuminated the transcultural diaspora of a group of ethnic Germans who traveled from Pyritz, Pomerania to Vava’u (a group of tropical islands in Tonga), where they established roots and developed a Tongan-German identity. After World War II, many of them moved to Fiji and New Zealand and later to Australia and the United States. Thereafter, they constituted a “diaspora within a diaspora” where their Tongan or German identities were alternately emphasized, underscoring the “plasticity” of ethnic identity. Gerhard Fischer discussed German immigration to Australia during the colonial period and Germans’ attempts to integrate into Australian society.
In the mid-1800s, Germans constituted the largest non-British immigrant group to Australia, where they fought for equal rights in parliament and campaigned alongside their neighbors for Australian independence. During World War I, however, many Germans were interned without trial or deported back to Germany, and the government largely succeeded in destroying any independence that the German cultural community had previously secured in Australia.

The seventh panel, chaired by Frank Biess, investigated aspects of German colonialism in the South Pacific at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Emma Thomas provided the perspective of women in German New Guinea by examining the records of female indentured laborers. Their story tells a dark chapter in the history of the colony. The women were often the victims of gendered violence and sexually assaulted by both German colonialists and other New Guinean laborers. That this form of violence was institutionalized on the island became clear when reforms were attempted and advocates for the status quo explicitly acknowledged that a function of the female indentured laborers was to provide sexual services. In his talk, Jürgen Schmidt shifted the focus to the German presence in and eventual colonization of Samoa. Germans’ self-identity as good workers was put to the test on this island, conceived as the paradise of the South Seas. While Samoans were stereotyped as being lazy despite a high level productivity on the island, German inactivity was often overlooked. Katharina Stornig returned to the topic of women in German New Guinea. She examined Catholic nuns in the colony who worked as teachers, translators, and domestic servants. Their depictions of life and death on the colony mediated European perceptions of New Guinea.

The eighth and final panel, chaired by Peter Gourevitch, explored various German involvements in world politics in the twentieth century. Douglas McGetchin spoke about a trans-Pacific plot to overthrow British rule in India. Germans living in the Pacific contributed to the effort by participating in arms smuggling operations. Although this effort yielded little success, the episode shows the involvement of an often overlooked German diaspora in global affairs. Alan Rosenfeld delivered a talk about German political scientist Klaus Mehnert’s years as a professor at the University of Hawaii from 1937 to 1941 and the journal he published thereafter through the conclusion of WWII. Mehnert cast a vision of a harmonious Pacific set free by Axis powers from the subjugation of Anglo-American imperialism. His perception...
of the indigenous inhabitants of the Pacific, however, reinforced the notion that they were in need of assistance from outside to reach their fullest potential, which only hastened the decline of their traditional lifestyles. Sebastian Gehrig concluded the panel with a talk about the Cold War era involvement of the “two Germanies” in the Pacific. He showed that cultural diplomacy was an effective way to establish ties beneath the radar of global politics.

Several major themes emerged from the three days of talks in a concluding roundtable discussion with all of the conference participants. First, participants noted that the politically peripheral position of Germans in the Pacific was often a strength. Since Germany was late to establish formal colonies in the Pacific, most of the Germans who spent time there necessarily cooperated with foreign powers and institutions. This situation created the possibility for Germans to align themselves with whatever enterprises in the Pacific were best suited to help them achieve their own aims — whether that be saving souls, making scientific discoveries, building wealth, or fostering cultural ties. Second, participants questioned how best to conceptualize the two key terms of the conference: “Germans” and “the Pacific.” While no definitive answers were given, the conference’s talks nuanced and deepened our conceptions of what these terms might signify. Third, all agreed that the history of the Pacific is incomplete without attention paid to the roles Germans played in the Pacific, and, conversely, that German history is incomplete without attention paid to the Germans who went to the Pacific. The conference marked a major step toward enriching both of these histories.

Sky Michael Johnston (UC San Diego) and Teresa Walch (UC San Diego)