THE CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS OF GERMAN COMPANIES IN THE UNITED STATES, 1945–1980

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Early in West Germany’s efforts to rebuild its economy in the wake of World War II, major West German firms sought to re-enter the international marketplace. In the United States, West German firms faced a great challenge in resuming trade relations put on hold during the war. German assets, including trademarks and licenses, had been expropriated. Nevertheless, German companies put considerable effort into re-establishing contacts in the United States and getting back into the American market.

My dissertation explores public relations and advertising by German companies in the United States from 1945 to the 1980s. Public relations and advertising are forms of communication a company uses to address its environment. Corporate communications were especially important for German companies eager to repair their reputations after World War II and to free themselves of the taint of the Nazi past. German firms also had to contend with the fact that the American market differed enormously from their home market in West Germany. Advertising and public relations played a more prominent role in the United States, where commercial competition was more intense than in Europe and mass consumption more extensive.

My study will examine the communications strategies West German companies pursued in the American market. Could they win public trust? What kind of corporate image did they want to evoke? I argue that the nationality was an ambiguous factor for German companies. On the one hand, they were confronted with lingering hostility on account of the recent past. But, on the other hand, the label “Made in Germany” could be used a selling point that called to mind traditional associations of quality and reliability.

My dissertation will look at three case studies: Bayer, Volkswagen, and Siemens. Although the firms belong to different branches, the case studies all focus on the same question: How did the firms promote themselves in the United States? To better understand their actions in the American market, the study will compare the corporate communications employed in the U.S. with the methods and strategies
pursued by the parent company back home. That comparison will shed light on the companies’ learning processes in the United States. A common practice was to hire American agencies for public relations and advertising campaigns. I will thus also examine the cooperation between the corporate managers and the American account executives and consultants who helped steer West German firms’ efforts to present themselves in the U.S. market. A look at the individual level is promising as a company is shaped by the people who make decisions; in this case, the managers and experts sent abroad. I will consider their experiences and the question whether knowledge gained in the U.S. influenced the companies’ international strategies more generally or their practices at home in West Germany.

By examining German companies’ efforts to compete in the American market, my dissertation will throw light on transatlantic business relations more broadly and ask about two-way flows across the Atlantic. Focusing on the internationalization experience of German companies and their representatives in the United States will further our understanding of the reciprocal perceptions of American and European business cultures at the middle of the twentieth century.