IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP: GERMAN AMERICAN BUSINESS BIOGRAPHIES, 1720 TO THE PRESENT

In 2010, the German Historical Institute Washington DC launched an ambitious new project, Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present. The core of the project is a compilation of approximately 250 short biographies of German American businesspeople. The biographies will be supplemented by scholarly essays to set the biographies in context. The Immigrant Entrepreneurship website (http://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org) will make available a rich selection of supplemental source materials in a variety of media, including documents, photographs, and audio recordings.

Generously supported by the German Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology, Immigrant Entrepreneurship makes a significant contribution to a wide array of academic disciplines and offers unique tools for teaching and research. The project aims to:

- deepen our understanding of immigrant entrepreneurship by focusing on one group over an extended period,
- contribute to the ongoing effort to globalize American history and situate the American past in a transnational framework,
- provide an innovative resource for students and scholars in a variety of fields and lay the groundwork for further research, and
- make invaluable materials on immigration and entrepreneurship readily available to the interested public.

An Historical Perspective on Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is a sine qua non of economic development. Long neglected, the study of entrepreneurship has received growing attention since the 1980s. Entrepreneurship’s historical variations have, however, remained largely unexplored. Immigrant Entrepreneurship aids in tracing changes in entrepreneurship over the past three centuries.

The questions why individuals become entrepreneurs and what strategies they pursue have been raised repeatedly in studies of entrepreneurship and are central to this project. Individual experience will be considered in conjunction with the opportunity structures—social, economic, and cultural—that shape entrepreneurial undertakings. The Immigrant Entrepreneurship project will give particular attention
to the transformation of opportunity structures over time and the changing nature of the constraints on entrepreneurial endeavors.

Immigrant Entrepreneurship aims to reconstruct the responses of individuals to the challenges and opportunities linked to immigration. It will analyze the role of immigrant entrepreneurs in the formation—and continual re-formation—of the American business elite from the early eighteenth century to the present day. The United States has long defined itself as a “nation of nations” and as “the land of opportunity.” Immigrant Entrepreneurship aims to shed light on the intersection of these two facets of American identity.

German Americans

The German American case richly exemplifies the history of immigrant entrepreneurship in America. German immigrants began arriving in Britain’s North American colonies in the early eighteenth century. Germans were the largest group of immigrants arriving in the U.S. for much of the nineteenth century, and a variety of factors—such as political persecution at home in the 1930s or the allure of Silicon Valley in the 1980s and 1990s—continued to spur migration from Germany over the course of the twentieth century. In 2000, more than 15 percent of the U.S. population claimed German ancestry. Germans are not, however, a widely visible ethnic group in twenty-first century America. And although some of the country’s best-known corporations bear the names of their German immigrant founders, the large scholarly literature on German migration to the United States gives short shrift to entrepreneurs.

German immigrants and their descendants have played an important but often unrecognized role in building the American economy and business community. Over the past three centuries, German American enterprises have been active in the most crucial sectors of the American economy, and changes in German American entrepreneurship...
reflect important turns in American history. Heinz, Strauss, Anheuser-Busch, Miller, Pabst, Pfizer, Steinway, Boeing, and Merck are but a few examples of prominent entrepreneurs who founded well-known companies. More recently, German immigrants have taken leading roles in emerging sectors of the economy, including microelectronics and biotechnology.

Key Questions

Immigrant Entrepreneurship looks at how German American entrepreneurs were influenced by and participated in the cultural, social, and economic processes associated with the rise and transformation of industrial capitalism. A series of key questions guides and structures the research. For example:

- Migration: What circumstances prompted the decision to migrate? In what ways did the migration experience support or hinder entrepreneurial success?
- Social origins: What were the social origins of the immigrant entrepreneurs? Were they self-made? Where did they first achieve business success, in Germany or the United States?
- Entrepreneurial sources: How did German American entrepreneurs discover business opportunities? What kind of obstacles did they encounter? How did they overcome them?
- Comparative advantage: Did German immigrant entrepreneurs draw on comparative advantages rooted in Germany? Did, for example, German craft traditions or technical education give them a leg up in competing in the American market?
• Business strategies: What was the nature of the business opportunity? Did German American entrepreneurs choose to serve an ethnically defined consumer base, target a specific market segment, or advertise an ethnic brand?
• Transnationalism: What kind of transfer of skills, capital, or knowledge took place between Germany and the United States? Was there a subgroup of “transnational entrepreneurs” with continuous and close connections to Germany?
• Religion: What was the significance of religion for German American entrepreneurs?
• Politics: How did German American entrepreneurs position themselves in political terms? What roles did they play in political parties, parliaments, councils, and lobby organizations?
• Ethnic networks: Did expressions of ethnic solidarity in the form of loans, solidarity, advice, information, or networks contribute to success in the U.S.? How active were the businesspeople in German clubs, associations, and cultural institutions?
• Family life: What role did spouses and/or children play in shaping the public representation of the family? Were they involved in business endeavors?
• Integration/Americanization: Did German American entrepreneurs actively maintain—or sever—ties to Germany? Did German American businesspeople develop multiple identities? Did they strive for and/or achieve social and cultural inclusion?
• Change over time: How did general changes in the U.S. economy, political situation, and society affect German American businesspeople?

Project Structure

Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present consists of five chronologically defined volumes:

1. From the Colonial Economy to Early Industrialization, 1720–1840
2. The Emergence of an Industrial Nation, 1840–1893
3. From the End of the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era, 1893–1918
4. The Age of the World Wars, 1918–1945
5. From the Postwar Boom to Global Capitalism, 1945 to the Present

All material will be published electronically on a comprehensive online platform. It will include statistics and raw data on businesses and immigration; maps; visual and media materials such as archival photos, video clips and audio recordings; interviews with contemporary...
entrepreneurs; and business documents. This electronic resource will be an invaluable tool for teaching and research.

**Project Team**

*Immigrant Entrepreneurship* builds on the knowledge and expertise of a large team of contributors. Both junior and senior scholars have been commissioned to write biographies and contextual essays. Each volume is edited by a specialist in the field. The volume editors are:

- **Volume 1:** Marianne S. Wokeck (Indiana University, Purdue University Indianapolis)
- **Volume 2:** William J. Hausman (College of William & Mary)
- **Volume 3:** Giles R. Hoyt (Indiana University, Purdue University Indianapolis)
- **Volume 4:** Jeffrey Fear (University of Redlands)
- **Volume 5:** R. Daniel Wadhani (University of the Pacific).

Hartmut Berghoff and Uwe Spiekermann are the project’s general editors and direct the *Immigrant Entrepreneurship* team at the German Historical Institute.

**Conferences and Panels**

*Immigrant Entrepreneurship: The German American Experience in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*
Panel at the Deutscher Historikertag, Berlin
October 2010

German Immigrants in the American Business World: 300 Years of Transatlantic Knowledge Transfer
Panel at the annual meeting of the Business History Conference, St. Louis
April 2011

German Immigrant Entrepreneurs in American Material Life, Politics, and Culture:

1. The Rise of a Modern American Consumer Culture
2. Businessmen and Progressive Politics
3. Hollywood Dream Worlds

Panel series at the annual meeting of the German Studies Association, Louisville
September 2011
Unternehmer und Migration
Symposium of the Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte, Frankfurt am Main
October 2011

In Search of a New Balance: Meat in Twentieth-Century American History
Panel at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Chicago
January 2012

Social Goals – Entrepreneurial Means: Corporate Governance and Business Principles in Social Ventures
Panel at the annual meeting of the Business History Conference, Philadelphia
March 2012

The Struggle with Beer: Morals, Markets and Marketing, 1880–1940
Panel at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Milwaukee
April 2012

Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Influences of German Immigrants on Business and American Consumer Culture, 1920s to 1950s
Panel at European Business History Association, Paris
August 2012

Immigration & Entrepreneurship: An Interdisciplinary Conference
Conference sponsored by the German Historical Institute and the University of Maryland, College Park
September 2012

From Peddlers to Millionaires: Jewish Immigrant Entrepreneurs from Central Europe and the Transformation of American Fashion and Retail
Panel at the annual meeting of the German Studies Association, Milwaukee
October 2012

Frontiers of Profit: Immigrant Entrepreneurs and the Economic Development of Northern California
Panel at the annual meeting of the Western History Association, Denver
October 2012