

Nationality and Colonial Strategies: Germany and America – How the American Expansion Resonated in Germany

Sociology, Cultural underpinnings of war

Introduction, Interview, Excerpt, Dissertation, Lesson plan

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Figure 1. Illustration commissioned by JES Copyright @ 2011 Margaret Hurst

Editor's Introduction

We all tend to see what we want to see — in ourselves, in our friends, in our culture, and in other cultures. In his dissertation, Jens-Uwe Guettel takes a penetrating look at how Germany viewed America over the course of the 19th century, the period of America's great expansion westward.

In the following interview and excerpt, you will find highlights of Prof. Guettel's wide-ranging consideration of the many authors, themes and images which were part of this cultural "moment." In the dissertation itself, you will find a deeper look at the novels and writings which reflect the complex attitudes and ideas of the times. Germans certainly noticed what Americans were doing as they expanded the nation westward, but not always the same we saw ourselves.

What makes this dissertation so explosive (to me, anyway) is what comes next – what is off-screen, so to speak. When Prof. Guettel brings up the concept of *lebensraum*, we realize that his thesis is by no means an obscure topic of study: the colonial attitudes of the 19th century can be seen to lead directly to the German nationalism of the modern era and to the rise of the Third Reich. Most certainly, German views of American colonialism formed the roots of the two world wars which dominated the 20th century.

Understanding the deeper cultural roots of war is important to all of us. As I write this, our entire nation is at war – two wars, actually – and each and every citizen is part of that decision. We need to understand why these conflicts have happened in the past, are happening today, and may break out again soon.

19th Century German Views of America

by Jens-Uwe Guettel

Interview With Jens-Uwe Guettel (June 2011)

Was Germany's view of America unique? How did other countries and cultures – France, or Spain, or Norway, or India, for example – view American expansion in the 19th century?

A very good question and one to which I can only give a tentative answer. From my perspective, views of America as an expanding colonial empire were not uniquely German. French politicians and thinkers held similar views and regretted that they did not heed Anglo-American examples of liberal settlement policies before France lost its American possessions. If I had to guess, I would say that it is likely that these sentiments were shared by colonialists from other nations as well.

You mention that the flow of Germans to America caused problems in Germany. What changes or consequences did this bring about?

The flow of German immigrants to America brought about a sense of powerlessness and, at times, panic among liberal German nationalists after 1848: They termed German emigrants to be “the fertilizer of nations” (Völkerdünger), i.e. they saw them as adding to the growth (and greatness) of other nations (mostly the U.S.) while subtracting from Germany’s development and future potential. To a certain degree, these reformers were right: The mass exodus (which lasted until the last decade of the nineteenth century; beginning in the 1890s, Germany’s staggering economic growth turned the German Empire into a destination for immigrants) alleviated social problems and pressures and stabilized Germany’s political structures, thus making another revolution after 1848 unlikely.

What were American views of Germany at that time? There were large contingents of German settlers all over America, so there must have been strong feelings about the homeland.

It is probably fair to say that when it came to questions of growth and expansion, Germany was not a particularly relevant focal point for Americans during the nineteenth century, with one exception: By the late nineteenth century, the German university system was the best in the world, comparable (or even more important) to the status U.S. universities occupy today. At the turn of the century, many (if not most) Americans with PhDs had received their degrees in Germany and thus brought German ideas to America. American academics like Frederick Turner (“frontier thesis”) were thus influenced by German geographers like Friedrich Ratzel, the creator of the infamous term “Lebensraum,” although Turner himself had not received his degree in Germany. (See my above-mentioned article for more information on this particular subject).

Is there a parallel process today between two other cultures? Is China or another nation capturing attention the way America did during the 19th century?

On a purely economic and materialist level, China is obviously highly interesting and relevant, for both Europeans and Americans. However, for nineteenth century Europeans the United States was certainly a land of economic opportunity (maybe even first and foremost), but the country was also always more than that. It inspired liberal reformers in Europe and Germany, and through its sheer existence, according to the eminent nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke, moved the principle of popular sovereignty from being a mere thought experiment into the realm of concrete political possibility.

In my book I argue that during the nineteenth century German colonialists were fascinated by the United States *because*, in their view, the U.S. demonstrated that the establishment of a liberal, progressive (and thus inspirational) political order (apparently) had to go hand in hand with spatial expansion. As far as China is concerned, I very much doubt that many people in the western world find China's political structure inspiring. For obvious reasons, the material/economic aspect appears to be all that counts.

You refer to the forming of a German empire. When did this take place, and what was the process? Why was Germany late to the colonial game? You also mention that Germany had few overseas colonies.

The German Empire was founded in January of 1871 after the united German forces (led by Prussia) had defeated France. Germany was late to the colonial game for this very reason: As a united, modern nation state it only existed as of January 1871. Only afterward was Germany capable of projecting its power across the globe, and it did so beginning in 1884 with the acquisition of a number of colonies. However, German intellectuals and reformers had pondered the acquisition of colonies long before the German Empire came into being.

“Amerika, du hast es besser” – is this still the case today? How does Germany view America today? Do different classes or factions within Germany view America differently?

The answer is yes. Germany, like all western states, is a pluralistic, open, and democratic society in which many different political sentiments exist side by side. The Bush years between 2001 and 2009 have certainly nourished skeptical (and at times hostile) attitudes toward the United States, yet West Germany's long partnership with the United States, and George Bush's clear support for German re-unification in 1989-90, are not forgotten and especially Germany's political class is aware of the necessity of excellent German-American relations.

Why did Germany's view of America change from transnational to nationalist?

This question offers me the opportunity to “advertise” my book, which traces German-American expansionist connections from 1776 all the way to 1945. It is currently under review and is tentatively entitled *Globalizing America: German Expansionism and the United States, 1776-*

1945. People interested in the actual ‘application’ of American methods within the context of the German colonial empire can also check out my article in *Modern Intellectual History* (Jens-Uwe Guettel, “From the Frontier to German South-West Africa: German Colonialism, Indians, and America Westward Expansion,” *Modern Intellectual History*, 7, Nov. 2010, pp 523–552).

What is next in this field of study? Where would you like to see future scholars look?

Some of the previous questions, in my view, are indicative of where more research can and should be done: Clearly, from a nineteenth-century German perspective, the United States was not only exemplary politically, but also when it came to territorial expansion. What about other nations? France? Great Britain? Or Japan? Further research could potentially uncover a global network of colonialist/expansionist sentiments fueled by shared perceptions about the United States and its continental growth.

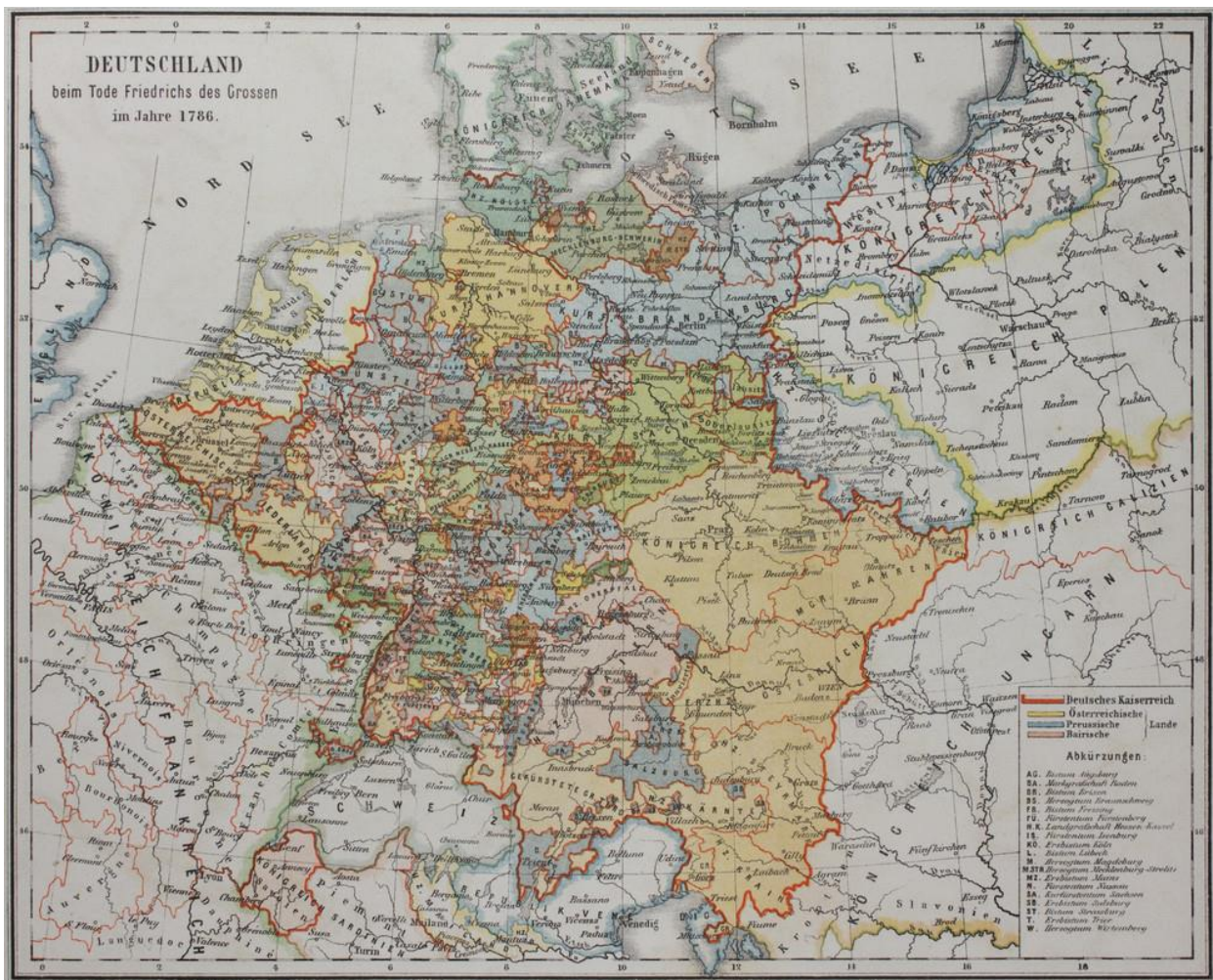


Figure 2. Map of Germany in the 18th Century after the Death of Frederick the Great.

3. How did Germans view America's expansion? How did Americans view it? Who was correct?

4. According to the author, why were the works of James Fenimore Cooper so popular in Europe?

5. How many colonies did Germany have, compared to England and France? How did Germany conceive of itself in relation to other nations?

6. What is “lebensraum”? How could such an innocent-sounding idea be so dangerous? Does it exist today, in any nation?

7. The author writes about encounter with racial “Others.” Do those exist today? Are there novels you have read or movies you have seen which deal with encounters between “Others”?



Figure 4. An 1860 painting “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” by the German American painter Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze. The painting is a study for a mural celebrating the idea of manifest destiny. Photo by Ad Meskens.

8. Today, is America perceived differently by outside nations than Americans perceive ourselves? Is Germany?
