Weltmacht und Weltordnung Roundtable Review

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Review by Günter Bischof, University of New Orleans

Ranke Redivivus: A German Perspective on U.S. Foreign Policy

Klaus Schwabe, professor emeritus of modern history at the Technical University of Aachen, has been a mainstay in the historical community of German academics writing on U.S. foreign policy for more than a generation. His Habilitationsschrift on Woodrow Wilson’s difficult role in 1918/19 peacemaking vis-à-vis revolutionary Germany, updated and translated into English as The World War, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking (Chapel Hill, 1985) is rightfully considered a classic on Wilsonian diplomacy. He has written numerous essays, some of them groundbreaking, on the U.S. and European integration—the Marshall Plan, the European Coal and Steel Community and the genesis of American midwifery in European federalism, intra-governmentalism and integration strategies. He has been a frequent visitor to SHAFR (Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations) meetings and a regular attendant of the annual German American historians gatherings in Tutzing (Bavaria) and other venues. He is a mentor to and champion of young German historians working on topics of U.S. foreign policy. So when Klaus Schwabe, as the culmination of his life’s work, writes a history of U.S. foreign policy in his


retirement, American historians of U.S. foreign policy rightly ought to take notice of it.

In fact, while foreign historians writing on U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy have been attending SHAFAQ meetings regularly and in growing numbers, and have published their work in *Diplomatic History* (*DH*), their work published in foreign languages has unfortunately not been reviewed in *DH*, with the exception of an impressionistic 1987 *DH*-review essay by Lawrence Kaplan.² By contrast, the Canadian journal *International History Review* has been regularly reviewing foreign language literature on diplomatic history. To its credit, the *Journal of American History* ever since David Thelen's internationalization initiative in the mid-1990s has reviewed a growing number of foreign language works on U.S. history and foreign policy as well. But *DH* has been stuck in its rut of reviewing only works in English, ignoring a growing avalanche of literature on the international history of U.S. foreign policy produced all around the world. Might it be that this state of affairs is still reflecting the old charge against “tongue-tied” American diplomatic historians not reading foreign languages, even though it is increasingly untrue?

It is therefore a welcome change that H-Diplo in its discussion forum is beginning to take note of works such as Schwabe’s, even if they are not written in English. Schwabe’s is a full-fledged 500-page treatment of American foreign policy. It is a good read in German since he does not write in the ponderous and pretentious “academese” so typical of German social scientists. His book therefore should find a wide readership in German speaking lands. He exhaustively has immersed himself and is intimately familiar with all the important English language literature and the various discourses inside and outside the United States on American foreign policy. He shows an impressive command of the secondary literature. He compliments it with a wide array of literature written in German and French. So is his book a major contribution to the literature on U.S. foreign policy in the twentieth century?

To be frank, it is not. Schwabe’s book is written in the classical tradition of German diplomatic history writing. It is rank Rankean positivism at its best and worst. It is a text of straightforward diplomatic and political history “wie es gewesen ist”. His framework is a conservative arch-traditionalist approach of tracing U.S. foreign policy from isolationism to internationalism and interventionism. He includes the traditions of continental expansionism and beyond, revolutionary-anti-colonialism, the temptation to enforce human rights, and the age old missionary impulse of spreading democracy. He is less interested in the economic impulses of spreading capitalism and mass market production. He mentions the “open door” when he has to (1898 and the following years), but does not consider its applicability after 1945. William Appleman Williams and the “Wisconsin School” are not his favorite paradigm, revisionism is not his thing. Like his favorite authors in German political science, who regularly write about foreign policy and who he quotes often (Christian Hacke, Hans-Werner Link, Ernst-Otto Czempiel, Stefan Bierling, as well as

Herfried Münkler in his final Bush-chapter), he is firmly in the realist camp who sees no alternatives to the dropping of the A-bombs in 1945 and the emergence of the Cold War by 1947, and the “Nixinger” realpolitik of linkages and trilateralism. His Rankean-Morgenthauian (Hans) German temperament embraces the historical outcomes as they emerged and does not engage revisionist alternatives and counterfactuals. He merrily ignores all the “turns” (linguistic, gender, cultural etc.) that have so prodigiously enriched the interpretive frameworks of the historical profession in the past 25 years or so—and have increasingly come to influence and change in a positive fashion the work of diplomatic historians too.

Schwabe’s substantial book, then, reads like a traditional American diplomatic history textbook, yet with a lot of genuflection to political science categorizations. As the title suggests the overall theme is America’s emergence as a world power and as the post-World War I and even more so post-World War II creator and mediator of the global balance of power. The frame of “American empire” is raised but does not serve as a consistent political/economic framework of interpreting “America and the world” as it does in the recent monographs of Harvard historians Niall Ferguson and Charles S. Maier as well as Bernard Porter and V.G. Kiernan, or more as an economic/cultural paradigm as in Columbia historian Victoria de Grazia’s impressive work. Schwabe’s three parts “Between Imperialism and the League of Nations (1919-1920), “The Path to World Power” (1921-1945), and “Cold War Superpower and Beyond” (1945-2000) is even broken down in the traditional fourteen chapters of American textbooks that define a typical semester. This may fill a market niche in German publishing but it does not challenge traditional interpretations of U.S. foreign policy.

Schwabe’s strengths are clearly in the two postwar eras he has studied himself for a lifetime, in tandem with a cohort of American diplomatic historians that followed the same career trajectory going from the post-World War I period to the early Cold War years (most prominent among them Charles Maier, Marc Trachtenberg, Michael Hogan, and Melvyn Leffler). Predictably he is excellent on Wilson and his dream for collective security arrangements and his failure in implementing them. But was Wilson’s and (Franklin Roosevelt’s) utopia of exporting democracy a success? Was the U.S. with its long tradition of “nation building” never an imperial power (p. 41)? Schwabe is outstanding in putting the “German question” at the forefront of American security challenges in Europe during

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the Cold War. His discussions of the two Berlin crises (1948/49 and 1958-62) and German unification (1989/90) are models of circumspection and admirable economy. But is he not operating with a “Eurocentric” frame in interpreting Washington’s foreign policy? Of course, Schwabe started out as a historian of Germany and taught German history all of his life and it shows in this book. Even though he covers U.S. relations with East Asia (with an entire chapter on the Vietnam War), the Near East, Latin America and Africa, his familiarity with these subject matters decreases in the order mentioned here. This is not surprising as historians like to write about what they know best. But should not the failed U.S. interventionism from Vietnam to Iran to Iraq be the focus of a history of American foreign policy after World War II?

What is surprising is that Schwabe ignores the entire body of a rich literature produced by his younger German colleagues on “Americanization” — along with American and German Studies specialists in his generation. The strong presence of American mass culture and consumerism in West Germany, Europe, and increasingly throughout the world—growing in intensity after the two World Wars—he has willfully chosen to ignore. Arguably, the generation(s) of German historians coming after him have done some of their best work in this area of studying transnational cultural and political diffusion an thereby have influenced debates in the U.S. The difference in perspective may have resulted from the fact that many of them have been trained in the interdisciplinary fields of both contemporary history and American Studies, with its increasingly rich traditions in


7 There is a growing literature on the emergence of American Studies in Germany; for starters see Philipp Gassert, “Between Political Reconnaissance Work and Democratizing Science: American Studies in Germany, 1917-1953,” Astrid Eckert (interviewer), “American History in Germany: The View of the Practitioners,” German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C. Bulletin 32 (Spring 2003): 33-84. The larger context of the postwar European American Studies tradition and its contributions to American History was thoughtfully
Germany, and not as traditional German historians. As such they are much more “culturalist” in their approach than the traditional school of Rankean positivists prevailing among historians of Germany and historically oriented political scientists on America who have tended to dominate the field of U.S. foreign policy studies in the Federal Republic.

The more sophisticated of this work has seen this “strange thing” of cultural exchange\(^8\) as a two-way street where both societies (the U.S. and Germany) have been picking and choosing what they found most attractive about each other’s societies and cultures.\(^9\) Cultural adaptations are being transformed in the process of transfusion. Scholars no longer speak of American “cultural imperialism” where one culture was imposed on another but rather of a “shopping mall” or “toolbox” approach where you select what suits you best (“the phenomenon of selective appropriation”).\(^10\) The American projection of power in Europe after the two world wars came hand in hand with the transmissions of American mass culture.\(^11\) West Germany becoming an eager and willing ally of the United States only ten years after its utter defeat and humiliation in 1945 was only possible because of the West Germans’ wholesale embrace of American pop culture and consumer products. Jazz, Hollywood, coca-cola and jeans—as well as American GIs projecting American manhood and power—were as important in rebuilding friendly American-West German relations as placing American military bases, divisions and nuclear weapons in the territory of the Federal Republic.

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\(^8\) Reinhold Wagnleitner, “‘No Commodity is Quite So Strange As This Thing Called Cultural Exchange’: The Foreign Politics of American Pop Culture Hegemony,” Amerikastudien/American Studies vol. 43, no 3 (2001): 443-70 (with a bibliography of this Austrian author’s seminal work in the Americanization of Europe, 468-70).


Young German gender historians have demonstrated how crucially important the “foreign relations” between American occupation soldiers and German women were after 1945 in rebuilding trust and confidence towards the international acceptability of the Federal Republic. During reconstruction after the Civil War gender played a central role in the reconciliation of the two sections of the U.S. that had fought a civil war against each other. Gender played a similar role in the occupation of Germany. As Petra Goedde notes “Many GIs filled a void in German society left by the war-related shortage of German men. They became male providers and protectors to young German women and on occasion functioned as male role models for young German boys.” The Germany Americans encountered after the war was “weak, submissive and disproportionately female.” German women used their bodies as “bargaining chips.” Since most GIs supported their German lovers with food and material goods, “the borderline between love affairs and prostitution became blurred.” By June 1950 almost 15,000 newly-wed German wives of GIs had entered the U.S. (by comparison only 758 Japanese war brides had entered the U.S. during the same time period). Casting Germany in such feminine terms also allowed Germans and Americans to avoid confronting the Nazi past. Goedde’s crucial insight—and one that Schwabe has chosen to gloss over—is that “politics–domestic and international–cannot be separated from the cultural context in which it unfolds.”

Klaus Schwabe has written a straightforward textbook and has been oblivious to the rich subtexts of interpreting the field as they have emerged lately. He has missed an opportunity to write a history of American foreign relations that reaches beyond the pale of traditional political and diplomatic history. American diplomatic history has followed the historical profession’s leads and took the various methodological “turns” in the past quarter century. Unearthing these various subtexts has greatly enriched the field. Schwabe’s German readers will never know unless they follow these discourses in journals of record such as *Diplomatic History* and the *The Journal of Cold War Studies* and read the work of a younger generation of German American Studies scholars. Ultimately, this may be the result of a younger generation of historians pursuing new avenues of scholarly insights and reconceptualizations. It may also indicate that German scholars have long ago ceased to be trendsetters in the historical sciences. The days are long gone when Berlin set the agenda. Now it is being done in Paris, New York, in Oxbridge, the American Ivy League colleges and in California.

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12 See the groundbreaking study by Petra Goedde, *GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender, and Foreign Relations, 1945-1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. xiii-xxiii, 91 (bodies as bargaining chips), 100f (number of marriages). Maria Höhn traces the same fascinating gendered terrain but with more attention to race, see *GIs and Fräuleins: The German-American Encounter in 1950s West Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).