

Lerg, Charlotte A.: *Universitätsdiplomatie. Wissenschaft und Prestige in den transatlantischen Beziehungen 1890–1920*. Göttingen: V&R unipress 2019. ISBN: 978-3-525-31076-2; 540 S.

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The role of universities in international relations has found increasing scholarly attention in recent years.<sup>1</sup> However, most historians continue to focus on the post-World War II era, when U.S. universities in particular became key actors in the ‘cultural cold wars’ (Volker Berghahn). In her study Charlotte Lerg explores a much earlier period of cultural diplomacy. In fourteen lucidly written and deeply researched chapters she places ‘university diplomacy’ center stage in German-American relations and traces the quasi-diplomatic role of universities at the ‘long turn of the century’ (Paul Nolte).

Lerg’s analysis is based on the observation that the academic and diplomatic worlds of the late 19th century shared myriad structural and conceptual commonalities: both were inhabited by well-educated groups with a strong elite identity; both were grounded in national ambitions just as they depended on international cooperation; most importantly, both diplomacy and academia were shaped by the logic of prestige, defining themselves through (international) recognition and distinction (p. 23). Around 1900, the rising importance of press and public opinion forced these traditionally arcane institutions to position themselves more actively within an ‘economy of esteem’. (p. 31) In the United States, old and new universities competed for recognition, endowments and enrollments, which they hoped to attain by linking themselves to prestigious German institutions of higher learning (p. 78). To this end, U.S. scholars flaunted their German doctoral degrees, overstated the German influence on their respective universities, and invoked German connections with great pomp and publicity. Their search for German connections made U.S. universities ideal partners for Germany’s nascent state-driven cultural diplomacy (p. 100) The Prussian Ministry of Culture, in particu-

lar, began to adopt an active academic diplomacy, hoping to strengthen Germany’s waning academic prestige in the United States, to mollify American suspicions about German imperialism and ultimately to compete with the efforts of rivals like France. In the following decade, *Wissenschaft* became a defining feature of Germany’s budding cultural *Weltpolitik* in the United States (p. 116)

Given the overlap between academic and diplomatic interests, universities assumed a quasi-diplomatic role in transatlantic relations. The mutual desire for prestige and recognition inspired a large number of university diplomatic initiatives after the turn of the century. German and American universities (supported by German officials) put on large-scale university exhibits at the 1904 St. Louis world’s fair, established professorial exchanges, awarded honorary degrees to diplomats and academics, and opened German outposts on American campuses, and vice versa. Behind these transatlantic initiatives stood a relatively small group of ‘university diplomats’, which included enterprising university presidents like Columbia’s Nicholas Murray Butler or self-appointed cultural brokers like the German-born Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg. These men used university diplomacy to promote their university, their country and, often, themselves (p. 147). As a consequence, universities became stages where German-American ‘friendship’ was performed for the world to see. At Berlin and Columbia University, the exchange professors even served as the official „Theodore Roosevelt“- and „Kaiser-Wilhelm“-Professors. The diplomatic role assumed by universities was owed to their image and self-identification as *nationally representative* institutions. Wilhelm II, for example, was convinced that a Harvard honorary degree was the highest honor, which *Amerika* had to bestow (p. 206). At the same time, university diplomacy was especially at-

<sup>1</sup> Richard Garlitz / Lisa Jarvinen (eds.), *Teaching America to the World & The World to America. Education and Foreign Relations since 1870*, London 2012; Tomás Irish, *The University at War, 1914–25*. Britain, France and the United States, London 2015; Whitney Walton, *Internationalism, National Identities and Study Abroad. France and the United States, 1890–1970*, Stanford 2010.

tuned to transatlantic relations around 1900. American universities provided an elevated and nationally significant stage for quasi-diplomatic interactions (much like courts in Europe) while still avoiding the governmental entanglements that Americans dreaded. By the same token, this 'diplomacy on campus' (Lerg) allowed Germans to get in touch with American democratic leaders while ignoring the cumbersome restrictions of court protocol. The Harvard honorary doctorate awarded to Prince Henry of Prussia, Wilhelm II's brother, in 1902 and the Berlin honorary doctorate awarded to former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt in 1910 illustrate these benefits of university diplomacy (p. 224). In these and other instances, universities facilitated a highly symbolic, quasi-diplomatic communication between the German monarchy and the American republic that might otherwise have been extremely difficult (p. 314).

Yet, as Lerg shows, the quasi-diplomatic nature of university diplomacy also created problems. In particular, it was often difficult for contemporaries to disentangle its public and private dimensions (p. 293). The controversial opinions of individual exchange professors were easily mistaken for official pronouncements and caused apprehension in Washington and Berlin. Moreover, while universities and governments sought to harness the positive press coverage associated with university diplomacy, the press followed its own rules and often focused on rumors and social scandals. More importantly still, this transatlantic university diplomacy was predicated on different and ultimately incompatible objectives. Whereas German scholars and state offices wanted to use it to maintain Germany's (allegedly) unique academic position and supremacy, U.S. universities supported initiatives like the professorial exchange to achieve international visibility and recognition of their (soon-to-be) academic parity (p. 187).

In light of these underlying fault lines, German-American academic relations disintegrated rapidly during the First World War. The efforts of German scholars to use their academic prestige to win U.S. sympathies after 1914 failed spectacularly. The infamous manifestoes of German professors met only with 'incomprehension and consternation' in

the United States (p. 377). As Lerg argues, the tenuous economy of esteem, which was ultimately built on the ideal of scholarly disinterestedness and universalism, could not withstand any all too overt political agitation (p. 373). From 1914 onward, U.S. universities began to rid themselves of increasingly undesirable German connections. Had they previously hailed the strong research traditions of German *Wissenschaft*, they now denounced them as morally deficient and un-American. At the same time, they began to recast their own universities as democratic service institutions whose devotion to character-building followed a distinctly American – entirely non-German – tradition (p. 441, 451). The making of the American university, Lerg convincingly argues, took place first through close association with, then by sharp distancing from the German university (p. 454). Hence American universities began their ascent to the position of academic leadership that German universities had once occupied (p. 458f.).

Lerg offers an innovative, learned and elegantly written reinterpretation of the entanglements of academia and diplomacy around 1900. Not all of her subject matter is new, to be sure. As Lerg acknowledges, some aspects of Germany's early cultural diplomacy (esp. the professorial exchange) are comparatively well researched.<sup>2</sup> And yet, Lerg's analysis stands out for her equally impressive grasp of both countries' intellectual, cultural and social history. Moreover, by placing universities – not ministries – center stage Lerg has found an ingenious device to navigate the inherent imbalance between an officially organized German cultural diplomacy and a privately organized American cultural diplomacy.

<sup>2</sup> Bernhard vom Brocke, *Der Deutsch-Amerikanische Professoren Austausch. Preußische Wissenschaftspolitik, internationale Wissenschaftsbeziehungen und die Anfänge einer deutschen auswärtigen Kulturpolitik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch* 31 (1981) 2, pp. 128–182; Franziska von Ungern-Sternberg, *Deutschland und Amerika. Das Germanische Museum in Cambridge, Mass. Kulturpolitik zwischen den Kontinenten*, Köln 1994; Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase, *Die politische Funktionalisierung der Kultur. Der deutsch-amerikanische Professoren Austausch 1904–1914*, in: Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase / Jürgen Heideking (eds.), *Zwei Wege in die Moderne. Aspekte der deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen 1900–1918*, Trier, 1997, pp. 45–88.

Using 'prestige' as a central category of analysis allows Lerg to explore the intersections of the diplomatic and academic worlds, and the intangible yet powerful bonds that sustained them. Admittedly, this focus on prestige is not equally convincing in all parts of the book. Especially with regard to the First World War prestige alone holds only limited explanatory power, leading Lerg herself to draw on a larger number of factors to explain the rift in the academic world. For the most part, however, her focus on prestige enables Lerg to paint a more nuanced picture of the relationship between academia and international politics, getting at the different layers of ambition (personal, institutional, national) that animated university diplomacy. Historiographically, her findings regarding American universities are especially significant. As she shows, American universities were by no means just hapless victims of official German machinations. Based on previously neglected archival material, Lerg convincingly positions (private) U.S. universities as key national actors on the international stage long before the advent of the Fulbright Commission or the ascent of the 'Cold War University'. In fact, while scholars have traced the origins of American cultural diplomacy to U.S. philanthropic foundations in the interwar period, U.S. universities seem to have played an at least equally crucial role from the late 19th century onward. The structural similarities between the diplomatic and the academic worlds, not least their shared concern for prestige, rendered American universities effective foreign policy actors already at a time when U.S. state and foundation efforts were practically non-existent. In short, before there ever was American *cultural diplomacy* there was American *university diplomacy*. Above all, Lerg's study calls for a serious engagement with cultural diplomacy at the 'long turn of the century'. It is to be hoped that her book finds a wide readership and, preferably, an English translation.

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