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Rivalry in Southern Africa: the Transformation of German Colonial Policy

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Matthew Seligmann's well-researched study of the development of Germany's South African policy in the 1890s is both an in-depth investigation of the motivations behind that policy, and a contribution to the broader debate on German expansionism in the late nineteenth century. Based on the author's doctoral dissertation, the account draws on a large number of German and British archival sources. It distinguishes between official, public and commercial interests in southern Africa, as well as analysing in detail the nature and course of Germany's South African policy in the 1890s. Germany's involvement in South Africa has received considerable attention from historians, but they have tended to ignore the early years of Germany's involvement in South Africa. Seligmann's account addresses this gap by investigating the origins of Germany's policy before 1896, as well as the abandonment of Germany's South African interests by the end of the 1890s.

Any historian of Imperial Germany's political and diplomatic history faces a difficult challenge in trying to identify and understand the motives behind German policies in the Wilhelmine period, and Germany's colonial policy is no exception. As Paul Rohrbach observed in 1912, 'the main reason why our position sometimes makes an uncertain, even unpleasant impression when seen from outside Germany lies in the difficulty of presenting any easily comprehensible, as it were tangible, aim for the policies demanded by German ideas' (p.5). This was the difficulty Seligmann faced in trying to unravel the aims and motivations behind Germany's policy in southern Africa from 1893 until the time of Germany's disengagement in the region in 1898. This policy developed in three distinct stages up to the Boer War. Following a period of initial complete disinterest, a policy inherited from Bismarck, German colonial aspirations led to 'active

interventionism' in the region, which was finally reduced to 'a quest for advantageous disengagement' (p.137), leading the Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Baron von Richthofen, to declare generously in 1898: 'We are letting England have South Africa' (p.1).

Contemporaries considered the question of colonies, and of acquiring a German colonial empire, a necessity, as is emphasized by Bernhard von Bülow who maintained that 'the question is not whether we want to colonize or not, but that we must colonize whether we want to or not' (p.12). In view of Germany's relatively 'belated' arrival on the scene of colonial expansion, such a perceived need for colonies would necessarily lead to conflict with Germany's main rivals. In South Africa, that rival was, of course, Britain.

Given the nature of German decision-making in Imperial Germany, which was erratic and dependent on the whimsical concerns of personalities in positions of power, the question of motives behind German foreign policy has been a vexing one. Historians of Imperial Germany often face a difficult challenge in trying to establish the motives behind German policies, and Seligmann takes issue with several attempts at explaining the reason for Germany's emergence on the colonial stage as a rival to Britain in 1893/4. He dismisses the view that Germany's interest in the Transvaal was designed to effect a change in the international balance of power, an argument advanced, for example, by Erich Brandenburg and William Langer. In other words, Germany's interest in the South Africa was merely a means to demonstrate to Britain that her policy of 'splendid isolation' had to end, and that, rather than facing Germany as an enemy, Britain should seek closer relations with her, preferably by joining the Triple Alliance on Germany's terms (p.60). Although Seligmann proves that this was not the actual motivation behind German policy, he demonstrates that it nonetheless came close to succeeding at times. The British High Commissioner in South Africa noted on the day of the Kruger telegram: 'The difficulty coming at the present moment is very unfortunate as it is generally feared that the United States intends to go to war with us and that they will have the support of Russia and France. That is bad enough, but to have Germany likewise against us, would reduce us to having to fight for our very existence' (p.61). However, as Seligmann points out, such testimony is no proof of German intention, and he considers the evidence available from German sources to be unconvincing. According to Seligmann, the events surrounding the sending of the Kruger Telegram, for example, prove that Germany, or at least the Kaiser, did not consider German South Africa policy as a means towards the achievement of an alliance with Britain. In his first impulsive reaction, Wilhelm II apparently wanted to send troops, rather than a telegram, an action that would not have led to an Anglo-German alliance, but to war. The sending of the telegram likewise was an action 'that could not, in all plausibility, have been aimed at securing the allegiance of Britain' (p.63). Seligmann presents convincing arguments against this theory, although it might have been worth mentioning that a similar twisted 'logic' of wanting to intimidate Britain into an alliance with Germany seems to have been a motive behind the Tirpitz Plan.

Seligmann also dismisses a second attempt at explaining German policy, advanced, for example, by Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher. According to this interpretation, Germany never had genuine interests in the Transvaal, and merely wanted to exploit the situation to gain concessions from Britain in other parts of the world (p.63). Instead , Seligmann favours a third interpretation to explain Germany's interest in the region. He argues that the Reich had serious economic and colonial ambitions in South Africa (p.65). Imperial Germany possessed extensive economic interests in the region, which had become a major outlet for German industry, and German businesses had established themselves in the Republic, with branches of Krupps, Siemens and Halske, and the Deutsche and Dresdner banks, to name but a few. An appendix of trade statistics confirms the claim that Germany did indeed have considerable commercial interests in the region, which increased almost six-fold between 1892 and 1896, while exports to the Transvaal and the Cape Colony increased ten-fold and two-fold respectively (p.146). 'In short, German commercial activity in the Transvaal was both substantial and lucrative, either of which attributes could have served to attract the attention of the Reich authorities' (p.66). In addition to such economic interests, Seligmann emphasizes the colonial interests which gave credence to German policy in South Africa. The Transvaal's strategic position in the middle of southern Africa gave it the potential of becoming an important link in the establishment of a transcontinental German South Africa. Moreover, the Boers were regarded as 'Teutonic'. Under Dutch rule, the region was seen as a place for possible emigration for Germans. The problem, as Seligmann emphasizes,

with identifying such areas of German concern and interest, is that it is 'by no means the same as demonstrating that these particular interests motivated the conduct of policy.' The difficulty for the historian, once again, is to penetrate the complicated decision-making system that existed in Imperial Germany. As Seligmann explains, 'it was, after all, in the nature of the German political system that the Reich administration, while sensitive to the various outside pressures that could be applied by public opinion, business considerations and campaign groups, was nonetheless not under any constitutional obligation to act upon such stimuli, a circumstance which ensured that it very often chose not to do so' (p.67).

Whatever Germany's motives were at different times towards the region, they cannot be understood without an appreciation of Kaiser Wilhelm II's role, as Seligmann demonstrates in his analysis of the creation and despatch of the infamous Kruger Telegram. Far from having been out of the ordinary, it was only the culmination of support from Germany for the Transvaal, although perhaps it its bluntest form. Seligmann places it in its proper context, having been in keeping with German policy to date, which had aimed 'to establish as a fact the idea that the Transvaal was, in its own right, a sovereign state' (p.78). Altruism, naturally, was not the motivating factor behind this policy. Rather, Seligmann concludes 'that if the Reich government strove to establish the freedom of the Transvaal from British influence then it did so, not for the benefit of the Boers, but for reasons that fulfilled requirements of its own devising' (p.78).

The telegram is usually regarded as one of the Kaiser's great blunders, and seen as the point when the Anglo-German antagonism became firmly established. Popular reactions in Britain to the telegram led to an upsurge of anti-German feelings and, with hindsight at least, the rift between the two states seemed to be becoming increasingly unbridgeable. As Seligmann shows, the Kaiser's role in this particular blunder was less decisive than is usually assumed. The person responsible for proposing the congratulatory telegram to President Kruger in January 1898 was not the Kaiser, but Adolf Marschall von Bieberstein of the Foreign Office, the man behind much of Germany's South African policy. Marschall also drafted the text and ensured that its contents presented a direct challenge to Britain (p.90). Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that contemporary evidence of the Kaiser's pivotal role in the despatch of the telegram stems from Marschall as well as Bernhard von Bülow's memoirs, a source that Seligmann quite rightly describes as 'intentionally malicious or self-serving' (p.92). The Kaiser certainly denied afterwards that he had been in favour of the telegram, not only in his (unreliable) memoirs, but also according to contemporary sources, as Seligmann is able to demonstrate. Contemporary observers blamed Marschall and the Auswärtiges Amt and, given that Marschall championed Germany's southern African policy during his time in office, he has to be regarded as one of the key decision-makers responsible for directing and shaping Germany's policy. Marschall provided 'a bridge between Caprivi's continental outlook and Bülow's world policy', and his time in office was 'an important transitional stage' in Germany's quest for *Weltmacht* (pp.141/2). By the time Bülow, Tirpitz and Miquel ascended to positions of influence, Germany disengaged from South Africa and turned to the even more ill fated *Weltpolitik*. Whatever Wilhelm's role in the Kruger Telegram episode, Germany's Weltpolitik was a reflection of the Kaiser's ambitions, and the provocative foreign policy of Marschall and his successors relied on his approval.

In analysing the different influences behind Germany's South African policy, and in examining the developing conflict in the region as well as Germany's subsequent withdrawal, this book makes an important contribution to our understanding of German foreign and colonial policy at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition, this scholarly investigation is essential reading for anyone studying the conflict between imperial powers in South Africa, and the genesis and development of the antagonism between Germany and Great Britain in particular.

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