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Confrontation and cooperation. Germany and the United States in the era of World War I 1900-1924

Germany and the United States of America

The Krefeld symposia - volume 2

Oxford, Berg Publishers

1993

460 pp.

ISBN 0-85496-789-3

Confrontation and cooperation brings together the proceedings of the 1990 Krefeld Historical Symposia. American and German historians meet regularly in the city of Krefeld to discuss the historical dimensions of German-American relations. In 1990 these scholars discussed both the causes of German-American confrontation which culminated in American intervention against Germany in 1917, as well as the origins of close German-American cooperation in the 1920s.

In the first chapter Edward P. Crapol explains why, despite a strong element of Anglophobia in the United States in the late nineteenth century, there was a *rapprochement* between the two powers. To him the answer is simply that Britain followed a policy of acquiescence and appeasement of America. Britain realised that its empire was overextended and that it did not have the power to oppose America. As far as the United States was concerned, Germany was with time perceived as a far more dangerous rival.

Economic competition between the two powers fuelled a mutual antagonism with German protection tariffs of its agriculture and industry becoming a serious bone of contention. As America was in a stronger position this competition created a powerful feeling of anti-Americanism amongst the majority of Germans. For Germans the USA appeared as an advantaged state greedily and unfairly blocking Germany's legitimate expansion.

American-German rivalry was not based solely on economic competition, but also on the German decision to resort to military power and to build a powerful battleship fleet as an instrument of *Weltpolitik* to compel Britain and the USA to acquiesce in German global ambitions. Anti-Americanism was also used by the Germans as propaganda to justify the building of a large fleet. It would be the navy's task to defend Germany's worldwide interests against powerful British and American interference. This unleashed not only an Anglo-German naval race, but also involved the Americans who felt threatened by the German naval buildup. The central characteristic of British and American foreign policy was to deter German global ambitions. This escalated Germanophobia in Britain and the United States.

As Europe drifted towards war, however, Germany for tactical reasons went out of its way to win the friendship of America in order to isolate Britain. The German emperor for example even donated a massive statue of Frederick the Great to the United States. The embarrassed Americans did not know what to do with it and was tempted to reply by donating a statue of President Monroe to Berlin! It must be borne in mind that in the nineteenth century German universities were admired by the Americans, but by 1917 German culture and militarism had become synonymous for Americans. The perception developed that German culture was evil and dangerous, especially after the invasion of neutral Belgium. German propaganda in the United States between 1914 and 1917 was also extremely inept and did more damage than good.

Eventually the United States entered the war when the Allies were exhausted and unrestricted submarine warfare brought a German victory within reach of possibility. Ultimately the perception was that direct involvement in the war would secure American development. American involvement in the war led to an outburst of anti-Germanism. Dachshunds were killed by rock-throwing patriots, orchestras refused to play Beethoven and opera companies stopped performing works in German. There were campaigns to remove German books from libraries, book burnings were common, while

German as a second language was removed from school curricula. The treatment of German-Americans was so harsh that even today, in contrast to Polish-American or Irish-American communities, there is no German-American factor in American politics.

As is the case with most collected conference essays *Confrontation and cooperation* does not always make scintillating reading. It will, however, be of immense value for those with an interest in American-German relations.

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