German migration to Brazil in global perspective: trends & new directions*

Migrações alemãs para o Brasil em perspectiva global: tendências e novos caminhos

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Abstract: This essay elaborates the historiographical reasons to take stock of German migration to Brazil in this bicentennial year: It examines how global and transnational history have broken new ground in our understanding of these two nations and their interconnection. It suggests comparisons and contrasts with larger geographic subfields. And it draws out the themes that historians of far different times and spaces may find familiar in the history of Germans in Brazil, from race and empire to class, confession, and commerce. Recent research confirms that Germans abroad were overwhelmingly "unbound" from the dramas of nationalist politics. Yet the story of "unbound" Germans must be understood in light of changing schemes for binding national communities together. The history of Germans in Brazil thus provides an illuminating vista onto the tripartite problematic of nation, market, and state at local, regional, national and global scales – a problematic central to new directions in global and transnational history generally.

Keywords: German history "unbound". Global history. Transnational history. Nation, Market, State.

Resumo: Este ensaio explora as razões historiográficas para fazer-se um balanço da imigração alemã para o Brasil neste ano do bicentenário: o ensaio examina como a história global e transnacional abriu novos caminhos para

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nossa compreensão dessas duas nações e a interconexão entre elas. O ensaio sugere também comparações e contrastes com campos geográficos mais amplos. Além disso, destacam-se temas que historiadores de tempos e espaços muito diversos entre si podem considerar familiares na história dos alemães no Brasil: desde raça e império até classe, confissão religiosa e comércio. Pesquisas recentes confirmam que os alemães no exterior estiveram, em sua maioria, "desvinculados" ("unbound") dos dramas da política nacionalista. Ainda assim, a história dos alemães "desvinculados" deve ser entendida à luz dos esquemas variáveis que vinculam comunidades nacionais. A história dos alemães no Brasil oferece, portanto, uma perspectiva iluminadora da problemática tripartite entre nação, mercado e Estado, em escalas local, regional, nacional e global – uma problemática central para os novos rumos da história global e transnacional, em geral.

Palavras-chave: História alemã "desvinculada". História global. História transnacional. Nação. Mercado. Estado.

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Introduction

The history of Germans in Brazil has now reached its bicentennial. There is good reason to reflect on this two-hundred-year relationship. Across the migrations of the long nineteenth century, some 210,000 Germans emigrated to Brazil. This number was second only to the Germans who left Europe for the United States, and trailed only Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish immigrants to Brazil. Granted, the number of migrants from German Europe trailed these other regions significantly and followed different chronological patterns, but that has not stopped German migration to Brazil from generating a substantial historiography. Whether through sheer numbers or the volume of scholarly and commemorative literature, there are different ways to justify reflecting on two hundred years of Germans in Brazil or in the words of Frederik Schulze (2015a) "brazilianized Germans and German Brazilians".

The aim of this article is to reflect on these different justifications, and to elaborate the historiographical reasons to take stock of German migration to Brazil in this bicentennial year. To examine how global and transnational history have broken new ground in our understanding of these two nations and their interconnection. To suggest comparisons and contrasts with larger geographic subfields, be they European or Latin America history. And to draw out the themes that historians of far different times and spaces may find familiar in the history of Germans in Brazil, from race and empire to class, confession, and commerce.

It is serendipitous time for a broader reflection. Whereas both German and Brazilian historiographies resisted engagement with the early, largely anglophone turn to global history, that resistance has spilled into valuable interventions. Certainly, global and transnational historians are inclined toward a sort of constant reassessment, drawing equally from the field's discomfort with any type of historical normativity and from a self-consciousness to justify an approach so at odds with history's founding national frameworks (Conrad, 2016). In general, however, global history is increasingly, albeit unevenly, accepted – from fad to full-fledged method. For historians of Germany, global and transnational approaches have become so ubiquitous that they are no longer a "turn" but instead seemingly de rigueur. Fault lines instead fall over how best to integrate German history into these larger narratives, not whether such an aim is worthwhile.

Even the fiercest debates over the flashpoints of Nazism and the Holocaust rarely feature rejections of global comparison and exchange in toto. What we have instead is a highly uneven, yet compelling, set of literature on Germany's engagement with the world that focuses above all on the period between 1871 and 1918.

Meanwhile, a florescence of new research has argued that consequential ideas and practices for ordering the world can be traced to Latin America's twentieth century.[1] Historians have also taken more seriously Latin American participation in, and ideas about, major global conjunctures that would seem to have left Latin American societies on the periphery, like the First World War (Katz, 1981; Dantan, 2017a; 2017b; Knight, 2017; Rinke, 2017). As with German historiography, similar concerns circumscribed Latin Americanists' embrace of the new global history. Latin America, as Jeremy Adelman has observed, can fit awkwardly into the "West-rest" axis that often dominates world and global history. Moreover, the vogue for global history that took hold in the 1990s frequently overlooked older research into Latin America's colonial and global connections, whether from world-systems theory, dependency theory, or other methodological perspectives. All these approaches had led scholars of the region to consider global interconnection well before anglophone historians began to consider themselves "global." (Adelman, 2004).

Painting in such broad strokes no doubt raises questions about Brazilian peculiarities within Latin American historiography, not unlike similar questions that have dogged historians of Germany. Yet as Frederick Schulze and Georg Fischer (2019) have recently argued, global history has much in common with the historiography of Brazil. That commonality includes the history of commerce and commodities, environmental history, or the history of hybrid identities, race, and racial discourse. Much the same can be said of German historiography, and even the largest sweeping surveys in the field have come to address questions that will look familiar to historians of a global or transnational inclination (Adam, 2021; Penny, 2022; Blackbourn, 2023).[2]

[1] See, for example, Brown (2015). Examples of the latter include Offner (2019), Fajardo (2022), Pryluka (2024), and Teixeira (2024).

[2] Smith (2020) is not explicitly global, but problematizes the relationship between "Germans" and "Germany".

There is no little coincidence to some of the similarities between these two fields – both relative latecomers to anglophone global history and both also conscious of protecting national specificity and the type of expert knowledge it endows. Moreover, long legacies of thought in both national traditions capture a tortured relationship with the liberal "West" often identified with its anglophone champions, Great Britain and the United States. To be sure, these legacies differ on key points and problems – for example, the centrality of Nazism and the Holocaust in the German historiography compared with slavery, race, and late-twentieth century dictatorship in the Brazilian. Yet both German and Brazilian history can be defined in part by not mapping easily onto the dichotomies that birthed global history and about which global history is in constant, critical self-reflection. In this sense, yoking the three fields together promises not only revelations about German in Brazil and German and Brazilian historiographies, but also the type of reflexivity essential to global history.

Thus, it is this global framework that holds the most promise for historians of German-Brazilian relations and especially German migration to Brazil. The sections that follow sketch out the promise and the corpus of recent work it builds on. They do so by focusing on three thematic problems: the nation, the market, and the state. Because my own work has been above all as a historian of Germany and Germans – albeit one who identifies as a global historian and who has written on Germans in Latin America – there will be an asymmetry to the reflections that follow. Yet my hope is that this is a relational asymmetry, the type made possible – and demanded – by a global approach (Conrad, 2016). In the same vein, it is my hope that detailing this new research does not amount to overlooking the long tradition of scholarship and local studies into the history of German communities in Brazil.

Across these sections unfolds the argument that new research in global and transnational history has provided new coordinates for understanding the bicentennial of German migration to Brazil, and that these coordinates offer a broader contribution to global history in general. This story provides a unique vista onto the tripartite problematic of nation, market, and state at local, regional, national and global scales. How did individuals and groups construct their identities and affiliations in a world of nationalizing and racializing states? How did increasing economic

interconnection change that construction and demand it anew? And how did states themselves respond: how did constituents make the case for more robust national ties amid transnational exchange? These are among the questions that guide new research on the German migration to Brazil. They afford an opportunity to reflect on a substantial existing literature and to imagine new ways this literature might address topics foundational for global and transnational history in general.

The balance of research confirms that Germans abroad were overwhelmingly "unbound" from the dramas of nationalist politics. Historians should, therefore, attend as much to local commemorative studies and to non-national affinities as they should to nationally-bounded histories. Even when Germans living out in the world did take an interest in national or imperial ambitions – for some did – they did so through their own lenses and interests. Yet the story of "unbound" Germans abroad must be understood in light of changing schemes for binding national communities together. Ample recent research has detailed Germany's imperial ambitions which, far from a German pathology, resembled similar such schemes that echoed around the world and across the twentieth century.

1. The Nation and Beyond: Ties and Affinities

In the anglophone academy, graduate students working on German history will almost invariably encounter James Sheehan's seminal 1981 essay "What is Germany History?" (Sheehan, 1981). Well before what one would call the "global turn" – and certainly before historians of Germany began to embrace it – Sheehan reflected on the challenges and likely pitfalls of identifying a historiography too closely with either national identity or a nation-state. Whither Austria, or Switzerland? What united Prussia and the Black Forest except historical contingency? Sheehan crystallized questions that were far older, dating to Germany's embattled founding between 1866 and 1871. Doubtless, as Helmut Walser Smith has recently shown, the idea of the German nation is old and durable – but how this idea translated into different mental maps of Europe and the world was a fluid, unfinished project (Smith, 2020).

It is with reference to this essay that Glenn Penny opens a recent

volume on Germans around the world – but especially in the Americas. Penny has done as much as any historian to insist that German historiography globalize Sheehan's call – that we look beyond the nation and the nation-state and embrace the polycentricity of Germans and German history (Penny; Rinke, 2015; Penny, 2017; 2022). One of the signal changes in the history of Germans abroad has been an urge to explore identity, ties, and affinities beyond the nation. Global and transnational approaches, after all, make it possible to tell the history of Germany and Germans without defaulting to the rise and fall of state-building projects. The instinct to upend normative national frameworks is of course of one of the hallmarks of global history. As Penny has argued, during the years of migration and globalization that defined the nineteenth century, many Germans abroad were "unbound" from the nation-state. That is, migrants, merchants, and settlers from German Europe did not straightforwardly adopt the identities and interests pursued by the German nation-state. For all that they were German, they also – and often more frequently – adopted identities based on region, confession, class, or occupation.

Even the use of this phrase, "Germans abroad," captures a historiographical shift. Drawn from the German "*Auslandsdeutsche*," "Germans abroad" was once a highly charged nationalist category, a reference to a reservoir of potential Germans living throughout the world and one piece in a conceptual puzzle that tied blood, nation, and imperial ambition into a destructive bouquet. We now know, however, that significant flows of German people, goods and capital around the world did not automatically render "*Auslandsdeutsche*" agents of the empire (Manz, 2014; Conrad, 2016; Penny, 2017; 2022). Studies of transnational Germans reveal the multivalent character of German history – from the role of regional and confessional variation to the importance of other categories of identity and affiliation like gender, class, and even professional occupation. Renewed scholarly attention has built on a long tradition of locally produced studies to yield an enormous outgrowth of research into Germans abroad, living well beyond the borders of the *Reich*, from Romania to the American Midwest.[3] Groups of Germans outside the *Reich*'s boundaries

[3] This body of work is substantial. Some examples include Frotscher (2015), Schulze (2015b), Bindernagel (2018), Bryce (2018), and Cercel (2023), as well as many cases discussed in Penny (2022). Historians have also shown how imagined ideas of Brazil could construct idealized Germans abroad, just as those living abroad might deviate from this archetype (see Witzel de Souza, 2021).

were indeed "polycentric" in character, rather than tethered to a central point envisaged by state projects (Penny, 2012, p. 267; Penny; Rinke, 2015). Whether they were "German" at all is a matter of perspective. One need only refer to immigration records to recognize that such categories owed as much to bureaucratic haste as they did to a person's deeply felt identity. Moreover, of course, there was no Germany as such across the first sixty years of the nineteenth century. When the North German Confederation established diplomatic outposts in Latin America, it did so by repurposing existing consulates of the Hanseatic cities, Hamburg, Bremen, and Lübeck.

For both Germany and Brazil, after all, regional variation numbers among the key ties that has interacted with, and continues to influence, national identification. Both countries' contemporary federal structure highlights and reinforces this tendency. Historians of Germany have long examined the interplay between local, regional identities and nationalism – studies that date back even to the febrile political contests over *kleindeutsch* and *großdeutsch* visions for a German nation-state. Regional variation is a key topic in German historiography, stretching from what Mack Walker called the "third Germany" to the country's federal structure today (Walker, 1971). Studies that recount the interplay between local and national identities have been essential to understanding how Germans viewed their nation (Applegate, 1990; Jenkins, 2003). Global and transnational studies, too, have underscored the regional variation and polycentrism integral to German history (Applegate, 1990; Blackbourn, 2015; 2023; Penny; Rinke, 2015; Penny, 2022). Consider, for example, the regional rivalries that marked German shipping companies in Argentina. The local German-Spanish commercial newspaper in Buenos Aires, the *Buenos Aires Handels-Zeitung*, followed with keen interest the shipping rivalry between the Hamburg-based Hamburg-America Line and its Bremen-based competitor, North German Lloyd. For the paper's editor Enrique Kohn, this rivalry was centripetal: it advanced a German presence in the Southern Cone even as it relied on identifications beyond the nation (Guenther, 2025 forthcoming).

For Hamburg especially, the interplay between regional and national affiliation had a long history. Hamburg – a free republic city-state ruled by a tightly-knot cohort of merchant oligarchs – had signed trade

treaties with independent Latin American republics before Prussia had even begun to establish a Customs Union among German states. By 1845, a full seventy percent of German firms with business in South America had Hanseatic roots, and Holger Herwig has argued that before 1880 "it would be more accurate… to speak of Hamburg's trade with Venezuela," than of Germany's. The same can surely be said of Latin America in general. Hamburg had negotiated trade agreements with recently independent South American republics, often to counter treaties signed by both Britain and the United States (Herwig, 1986, p. 17-24). These economic interests in Latin America developed without supervision from national government; most Hanseatic trading outposts predated the process of national unification that ended in 1871 (Forbes, 1978). Among the best-documented of these trading outposts belonged to the Hamburg-based Schramm family, which owned a sugar plantation and its enslaved workers in Bahia, northeastern Brazil (Schramm, 1963; Naranch, 2011).

Historians of Brazil, too, have attended to the interplay between regional and borderlands identities, global economic interconnection, and state formation. This attention has ranged across scales and includes studies of Brazilian integration in the 19th-century global economy, both as a Portuguese colony and as a continental empire in its own right.[4] Microhistories have also proven a fruitful way for historians of Brazil to write the country's nineteenth century into a larger arc of imperial revolution and transformation (Mügge, 2022a; 2022b). This is an approach from which historians of Germany might borrow. During the crises in sovereignty occasioned by the Napoleonic Wars and Atlantic revolutions, ideas about Brazil's place in the world – ideas that cropped up across broad sections of society, free and enslaved – entailed not only thinking about Brazil within a world of competing imperial powers, but also about the multiscalar problem posed by an internal, continental empire. Not just ideas: the concrete military problem of internal conquest sat at such a nexus, with 19th-century imperial military might a marker of international prestige, borderlands conquest a way to shore up and centralize power, and the German mercenaries who engaged in this conquest a reminder of the interplay between transnational entanglement and national self-definition (Mügge, 2022a).

[4] Wide-ranging samples might include Prado Júnior (1945) and Topik and Wells (1998).

This triangular relationship might prompt reflection on new directions for the history of "Germans abroad," which have until now overwhelmingly emphasized their subjects' detachment from the dramas and imaginaries of centralized nation-state building and destroying. This emphasis has been an essential tool for overcoming methodological nationalism and breathing nuance into a stale image of Germans as Berlin's agents in waiting. Yet a central tension dogs such new studies. On the one hand, it is historians of "German abroad" who have done the most to elaborate the many non-national affinities that defined ostensibly German people living around the world. Not only was "Germanness" fluid and prone to be played up or down tactically, but also affinities and identifications from gender and class to profession and confession often took equal, if not higher, importance to national identity. On the other hand, the fundamental thrust of this literature has been to seek out "Germans" around the world and try to make sense of them. There is thus the danger that preconceptions about national characteristics become smuggled into even avowedly transnational work. As the contributions to this special issue show, getting out from under the specter of the nation-state means not only proposing alternative identities and affiliations, but also showing the fault lines among Germans abroad themselves. Class and profession seem two highly promising avenues, ones historians have begun to tread – not least relating to the history of German commerce and trade.

2. Commerce, Trade, and Travel

When it comes to the normative power of the nation, few changes have generated as much urgency, consternation, and opportunity as the economic interconnection that exploded across the middle of the nineteenth century. This interconnection neither led teleologically to the birth of newly robust nation-states (in, say, Germany, the United States, and Japan), nor was it essentially transnational and cosmopolitan. Empire, nation, and interconnection coexisted in an uneasy but mutually reinforcing triangle, in which travel, migration, and commercial connection prompted new questions about the meaning of an integrated world – not despite but precisely because this integration was so uneven.

There is a long tradition among Latin American historians and social

scientists to analyze the political causes and consequences of such uneven interconnection. Whereas in some analytic traditions the relationship between, say, political and economic liberalism seemed relatively clear, Latin American history turns this clarity on its head and has therefore been highly generative. The same is true for famous concepts – from "informal empire" to "dependency" – that attempt to describe political outcomes and possibilities of economic integration that map imperfectly onto the traditional categories of national, imperial, and international analysis. For Germany, too, given similar lessons from normative historical models and the very real fact of important but politically uncertain commercial connections. The case of Germans in Brazil, therefore, offers traction on the different ways of articulating political and economic power and interest in a global age. There was no *a priori* reason why German merchants and firms operating out in the world had to align with imperial designs crafted in Berlin.[5] The "lumpiness" of imperial sovereignty, the nature of "soft power," and the basic polycentrism that characterized Germans abroad precluded any such certain alignment (Benton, 2010; Penny; Rinke, 2015).[6] But the very fact of competing commercial interest, fluid national and other affinities, and state-led schemes for binding it all together produced a spectrum with a variety of articulations. For Germans in Brazil, an instructive example comes from the contest over German naval armament and Anglo-German naval rivalry at the end of the nineteenth century.

[5] The relationship between overseas business and empire has received more attention in the historiography of the British Empire than the German – especially through debates over Britain's "informal empire". Historians of the British empire do not universally accept the informal empire concept. Central to scholarly disagreement has been the mechanism by which informal influence became formal control and the extent to which British firms aligned with Whitehall's interests. Such pathways from imperial "bridgeheads" to formal empire do not concern this paper, however. For both sides of the British informal empire debate agree that the networks of trade, capital, and information established in the mid-Victorian period were essential to Britain's geostrategic position and to the network effects made possible by the expansion of vast, violent colonial empires. Never perfectly aligned with governmental interests, these networks nonetheless buttressed Britain's position at the turn of the twentieth century not only because they were British-led, but also because others needed them as well. There is a vast corpus of "informal empire" literature. Entry points include Gallagher and Robinson (1953), though they note that they did not invent the term, Platt (1968, p. 297), Porter (1986), Hopkins (1994), Darwin (1997, p. 617; 2009, p. 10-11, 112-143), Ferguson and Schularick (2006), and Winder (2010).

[6] On the problem of "*Auslandsdeutsche*" in general, see especially H. G. Penny (2017); see also Conrad (2010) and Manz (2014).

In the 1890s, Latin American coasts emerged as key figurative battlegrounds for the conflict over German naval armament (Böhm, 1972). The backdrop to these contests is well-trodden historiographical ground. Naval armament would become, of course, the centerpiece of German *Weltpolitik* ("world policy"). One key outcome of the recent global turn in German historiography has been to de-pathologize Germany's pre-1914 imperial expansion and *Weltpolitik* (Grimmer-Solem, 2019).[7] In the formation of national identity, the grip of navalist politics, the practice of colonial rule, and the world-status aspirations of *Weltpolitik*, Imperial Germany was a thoroughgoing participant in the liberal imperialism of the fin-de-siècle.[8] Self-consciously modern, inspired by a racial "civilizing mission," and bullish about the political opportunities of the new global economy – these were the hallmarks of liberal empire, and in these respects Germany was more similar to its fellows than different (Grimmer-Solem, 2019).[9] Following this turn, it is possible to investigate the different constituencies that drove *Weltpolitik*, the ways competing definitions of national prestige could associate under its aegis, and the many Germans abroad who were perfectly content to ignore it altogether.

Such was the case in the early 1890s in Brazil, where Germans had held business and settlement interests for decades (Forbes, 1978, p. 387-390). Hamburgers had been involved in this exchange with Brazil, and especially the southernmost state Rio Grande do Sul, for half a century. In 1893, monarchist elements in Rio Grande do Sul revolted against Brazil's four-year-old republican government. Britain, no doubt influenced by the Brazilian navy's quick action against the monarchists, sent two ships of war to Rio de Janeiro. Presumably recalling failures in Chile two years earlier, the German cruisers *SMS Arcona* and *SMS Alexandrine* joined their British counterparts on September 19 (Böhm, 1972, p. 51-55).

[7] *Weltpolitik's* allegedly pathological features may be familiar to some readers and are central to explanations of the First World War that locate the war's origins in German foreign policy; but its liberal features have been under-emphasized; this liberalism, too, led to a great deal of violence and instability. Cf. Clark (2021, p. 151), who describes *Weltpolitik* as little more than "the old policy of the 'free hand' with more menacing mood music", and James (2021, Chapter 6). No doubt, as these authors suggest, *Weltpolitik* also drew on continuities in German foreign policy.

[8] See, on national identity, Conrad (2010); on navalism, Kelly (2011); on colonialism, Kundrus (2003) and the literature surveyed in Eley and Naranch (2014, p. 1-18) and in Press (2021); and, on liberal imperialism, Fitzpatrick (2008), Guettel (2012), and Grimmer-Solem (2019).

[9] For a provocative discussion of the similarities between Germany and the United States, not just Germany and the European empires, see Lahti (2021 ed.), especially Conrad (2021). Nor should Japan be left out of the conversation. Kim (2014).

There, however, German and British approaches diverged. The British Foreign Office drew up plans for the major European powers and the U.S.A. to intervene in Brazil. Hamburg's merchants, however much they desired a show of German naval force, contended that actual European military intervention could only hinder trade. Indeed, Britain's gradual interventions in the Brazilian conflict damaged its standing with both sides. Meanwhile, German ships continued only to protect German shipping, much to the satisfaction of Hamburg's Brazilian firms, who began regularly to praise the Imperial Navy for its much-needed support. From October 1893 to February 1894, that support protected all 95 German ships that called at Rio de Janeiro. It was put into stark relief by the British, as a cohort of merchants and shipping lines in both Rio and London began actively to protest the Foreign Office's more engaged Brazilian policy. The German navy became an example of preferable European intervention. Ships owned by Edward Johnston & Co., an English firm in Rio with strong ties to Hamburg, even attempted to sail under a German flag to secure safe passage (Böhm, 1972, p. 51-55).

This brief vignette has several revealing components, from the cooperation that allowed an English firm to fly for protection under the German flag to the Hamburg-based firms' identification with German naval efforts. Yet that identification followed only insofar as German gunboat diplomacy prioritized longstanding patterns of Hanseatic commercial activity, rather than some other imperial ambitions.

Similar was the case of the Hamburg-America Line, soon to become the largest shipping firm in the world and perhaps the private company most associated with the increasing presence of Germanness around the world. Yet here too that Germanness was circumscribed in ways Berlin could not necessarily dictate. From the 1890s onwards, the Hamburg-America Line's official yearly reports asserted the line's importance to German interests abroad – yet typically in ways defined by the HAPAG's own concerns. The report for 1897 praised imperial intervention in China and looked forward to business there, but gave few specifics. On January 3, 1898, however, the line established a monthly freight service to East Asia.[10] Several years later, it was not China but the Ottoman Empire, where regular service was established with 'the interests of the firm,

[10] Hamburg-Amerika Linie, *Jahresbericht 1897* (Hamburg: H.O. Persiehl, 1898), p. 4.

but no less the national interest' in mind.[11] By 1904, the destination in question was southern Brazil: 'We hope', by increasing service to southern Brazil, 'to be particularly conducive to the development of German settlement in Brazil.'[12] One of *Weltpolitik*'s key innovations was to focus attention on economic spheres of influence beyond formal colonies. The three statements thus covered three of the principal desiderata for proponents of *Weltpolitik*: China, the Ottoman Empire and Latin America (see, in particular, Grimmer-Solem, 2019, p. 22).

Commercial ties both reflected and intensified the myriad political and personal affiliations held by Germans around the world, especially in areas of high migration like southern Brazil. And new scholarship on Imperial Germany has tended to see this story as one bounded firmly by the chronology of the First World War. Thus, one of the challenges in recent global and transnational histories of Germany has been to break through this chronological barrier. In this case the history of German migration to and interest in Brazil is highly generative. Migration actually increased during the Weimar years, and ample continuity bridged political ruptures (Rinke, 1996). Beyond the hardline nationalist goals of groups like the Nazi Party network in Brazil, there is here a way to follow forms of economic nationalism after the end of Germany's power-political designs (Dietrich, 2007).

After all, this through line of engagement with German firms and German commercial actors in Brazil did not end in 1914, nor even in 1945. And, as previously, this engagement opened fault-lines that raised questions about national identity, global interconnection, and economic prestige. Among the most striking examples is Brazil's relationship with West German car manufacturers, especially Volkswagen, during Brazil's period of import-substitution industrialization (ISI), especially under President Juscelino Kubitschek. Volkswagen's plant outside São Paulo was among the first of its kind in Brazil and represented West German foreign direct investment designed – from VW's perspective – to circumnavigate the tariff walls erected to protect Brazil's infant industry. From the perspective of Kubitschek's government, the VW plant was a welcome way to attract a firm with sufficient capital to undertake large-scale automobile

[11] Hamburg-Amerika Linie, *Jahresbericht 1901* (Hamburg: H.O. Persiehl, 1902), p. 5.
[12] Hamburg-Amerika Linie, *Jahresbericht 1904* (Hamburg: H.O. Persiehl, 1905), p. 5.

manufacturing and to do it on Brazilian soil with Brazilian workers. Given the associations between driving and middle-class lifestyle, not to mention the upward mobility entailed by a job on the VW line, the São Paulo plant of *Volkswagen do Brazil* became a site for the creation of Brazilian national identity even as it was tied to a West German firm (Wolfe, 2010).

Eventually VW made autos using up to 95% Brazilian manufactured content (Wolfe, 2010, p. 121). Ford, GM, and Mercedes followed similar steps. At the time, the entry of these multinationals received broad support among Brazilians. Per one historian, "The wages and benefits so outpaced anything else available to poor and working-class Brazilians that a position in the auto factories became nearly synonymous with social mobility" (Wolfe, 2010, p. 132). Auto factories delivered the highest working-class wages and benefits in the country, and factories defined themselves and their workers as modern. Not just modern: but Brazilian modern.

Among the chief challenges for global histories of Germany has been extending a global frame of reference forward in time to the postwar period. A potential through-line for German historians may exist in the lingering symbolic capital attached to German technological and commercial capacities. After all, West Germany would quickly leverage this capital to grease the wheels of its integration into post-war Atlantic order. Might this trend of economic prestige – economic nationalism even – provide ground for studying the continued relationship between West Germany and the wider world? How did the imperative to ascribe national character to commercial activity and goods – so common during the Age of Empire – change after 1945?

3. The Persistent Problem of State Power

Both Germany and Brazil, albeit in different ways, fit into the pattern of centralizing imperial formations that wove themselves into the economic interconnection and migrations of the nineteenth century. In both cases – again, albeit in different ways – a challenge of doing this type of global or transnational history is locating the place of the nation-state, or the imperial nation-state. How did the history of state aspirations

interact with an "unbound" history of Germans abroad, especially in places like the Brazilian borderlands?

Here, again, the history of Germans in Brazil sheds light on the persistent problem of state power. Brazil's place in the nineteenth-century German imaginary is well-known (Conrad, 2010). Dreams of a German colony in Rio Grande do Sul captivated nationalists of all stripes across the century. Hamburg's Colonial Society, for example, received support from the 1848 Frankfurt Parliament to request land concessions from the Brazilian government. This request followed an increase in both commerce and migration between Brazil and the German states (Washausen, 1968, p. 12-22). Historians have shown that even before Germany's formal pursuit of colonies, such imperial aspirations embedded themselves in models of nation-hood, just as they found themselves buoyed by increasing migration (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Little surprise, then, that the new historiography of Imperial Germany showcases the thorny problem of state power – but also how to negotiate it.

After all, perhaps the most sustained recent trend among historians of Germany has been a thoroughgoing turn to global and transnational histories of Germans and Germany in the long nineteenth century. Especially for literature on the German Empire (1871-1918), and even more so especially for histories of the Wilhelmine period (1888-1918), historians have increasingly taken up problems familiar to global, transnational, and imperial histories. Indeed, not only did this time period see a continuation of trends toward German integration into the world – especially intellectual exchange and commerce – but also the years between 1871 and 1918 saw a transformation in Germany's imperial ambitions, in the form both of traditional, formal colonial land grabs and more capacious aspirations. We know that some Germans abroad developed strongly held beliefs about national identity and politics associated with imperial encounters and aspirations (Manz, 2012; Guenther, 2025 forthcoming). At the same time, many had far more pressing concerns and more comfortable affiliations than to the identities imagined in Berlin.

In these decades, Germany and Germans found themselves thrust into the churn of unprecedented global economic integration and the spread of empires from Europe, the United States, and Japan. An earlier historiography of Imperial Germany had paid limited attention to its

global imperial ambitions and overseas colonial conquest.[13] More recently, historians have shown that global concerns, rather than domestic political problems, motivated Germany's imperial expansion before the First World War. Colonial dreams and international trends influenced policymakers in Berlin and the liberal, nationalist German middle classes.[14] These global interactions, in turn, shaped the construction of German national identity (Conrad, 2010). Globalization, transnational exchange and inter-imperial politics drove policymaking in Berlin, especially the *Weltpolitik* of Bernhard von Bülow, Kaiser Wilhelm II and Alfred Tirpitz (Kelly, 2011, p. 129-165; Bönker, 2013; Grimmer-Solem, 2019). Seen this way, *Weltpolitik* resembles the liberal imperialisms of Britain and France, as well as the imperial aspirations in the United States and Japan. For Steven Press, too, training a global lens on German colonial rule in Southwest Africa reveals dynamics that accorded with – and, in fact, borrowed from – other states (Press, 2021). So de-pathologized, *Weltpolitik* becomes yet another expression of imperial mimesis and rivalry – not simply a Germany deviation (Adelman, 2015).

We know, in other words, that the experiences of Germans out in the world – economists, colonial "adventurers" and missionaries, traders, and all manner of people who had affinities other than "German" – contributed to a matrix of imperial ambition that had broad public appeal, not despite but precisely because it was a variable matrix into which one could project one's own imagined futures. We know, for example, of the galvanizing effect had by German naval cruisers on enclaves around the world (Manz, 2012). So too with merchant steamers in the North Atlantic (Russel 2011; 2016; 2020).[15] In the Southern Cone of Latin America, as well, steamships appeared as gargantuan floating embassies of Germanness – but of a specific type of Germanness constructed as much on the

[13] "Imperial" in "Imperial Germany" refers to the emperor of the Germans, anointed after the Franco-Prussian War, when the Hohenzollern kings of Prussia were elevated to German *Kaisers*, presiding over a *Reich* of quasi-independent regional kingdoms, duchies, and city-states. The German original, "*Kaiserreich*", is in this sense clearer than the English translation.

[14] For a summary of recent work on German colonialism, see Eley and Naranch (2014) and, among many others, Zantop (1997), Kundrus (2003), Steinmetz (2007), Press (2021), and Blackler (2022). On liberalism, imperialism and the German middle classes see Fitzpatrick (2008) and Guettel (2012). On inter- and transnational forces behind policy, see, for example, Kelly (2011) and Torp (2014).

[15] On battleship "naval theater", see Rüger (2007).

Rio de la Plata as the Spree or (as was more likely) the Elbe (Guenther, 2025 forthcoming).

It is impossible to tell the story of global integration without the history of nineteenth and twentieth-century imperial expansion and rule. Indeed, to extend the metaphor, the very proliferation of unboundedness, interconnection, and polycentrism that attended late-nineteenth century globalization prompted new and varied attempts at binding. Inter-state competition obtained in the flow of people, ideas and political movements, information, and of course the economy, contributing to what we might call the discovery of "the global" (Conrad and Sachsenmaier, 2007; Winder, 2010; Bönker, 2012; Manz, 2014; Tworek, 2019; Grimmer-Solem, 2021; Slobodian, 2015).[16]

The history of Germans in Latin America, and in Brazil especially, might help us get to grips with this problem. Latin America was at once a key theater in the creation of *Weltpolitik* and a key site for research on transnational Germans beyond the nation-state. While historians have studied German imperial ambitions in Latin America, these studies have tended to operate either under the "informal empire" framework; or to emphasize high politics and inter-imperial diplomatic relations; or to highlight German deviation from other patterns of imperial aspirations (Fiebig von-Hase, 1986; Herwig, 1986; Mitchell, 1999).[17] Studies of "Germans abroad," meanwhile, have tended to emphasize the political distance between German communities in the Americas and Berlin's fantasies – and with good reason.

Yet, while it may be true that many Germans living in Brazil and across the Americas had little, if any, interest in goings-on "at home" – people for whom "German" was an idealized category, even a tactical one, that had limited bearing on one's daily life and self-identification – it was not only the German state that imagined projects of binding "Germans abroad" to the imperial metropole. Occasionally, it was those Germans most cut off from the state who imagined the most violent forms of binding and clung to the most recalcitrant forms of national chauvinism. For the merchant-turned shipping magnate Emil Helfferich, for example, it was time spent in the Dutch East Indies during the First World War that

[16] The phenomenon is developed further in Slobodian (2018).

[17] Though concerning the interwar period, see also Rinke (1996).

became the most reliable rhetorical tool to justify his swift and fierce support for the National Socialists (Guenther, 2023). The contention here is certainly not that most Germans abroad thought this way, nor that we must re-center the nation-state or return to tightly nationally-bounded research, but instead to attend to the ways the transnational and the national were often co-constitutive (Adelman, 2017; 2021).

4. Conclusion: Global Regimes and New Directions

This opening essay has wagered that the bicentennial of German migration to Brazil offers a moment to reflect on new trends in the historiography of this relationship. It has argued that pathbreaking working at the intersection of global, German, and Brazilian historiography offers broader lens for global- and transnationally-inclined historians. It has done so in rather schematic fashion, focusing on three interrelated thematic problems: national affiliation and identity, commercial ties, and state ambitions. In each case, the heuristic of an unbound-binding dynamic – to borrow from Glenn Penny – reveals a dialectic at the center of global history: the power of global integration and disintegration to produce unity in difference. This dialectic makes possible a broad sweep of studies into the history of German migration to Brazil and German-Brazilian relations that attends to entanglements, exchanges, and relationality, rather than simply comparison and the collision of two nationalities.

In the case of the nation and national affinities, historians have shown over the past decade how different forms of identification coexisted with and at times superseded national character. Brazilian historiography, in particular, offers a long history of work into both hybridity and the backlashes it frequently prompts: naturally, the history of race is here central. And in both historiographies, the power of regional and local affinities to both circumscribe and supercharge national feeling is well-established. In either sense, Germans in Brazil really were "unbound" from the nation-state.

Commercial ties – chief among other entanglements – did of course bind both the German slavers of Bahia and borderlands settlers of Rio Grande do Sul into an increasingly integrated world. These commercial ties often prompted political ones, and the nineteenth century saw a

proliferation of still-powerful liberal assumptions about the connection between the two. But the nature of these ties, and whether they existed at all, was an open question with many possible answers – answers that often cut across lines of class, occupation, and other forms of identification. The wealthy Schramm family on its plantation in Bahia and a more middle- or professional-class settler were far from the same.

Germany and Brazil, and especially Germans in Brazil, defied neat conclusions about how trade and finance interacted with both imperial ambitions and national sovereignty. The case of German shipping and naval activity off the coast of Rio de Janeiro is illustrative, but so might be later cases such as that of Volkswagen do Brazil. Globalization has a remarkable ability to demand that observers ascribe national character to ostensibly trans- or multinational enterprise. This is an enduring problem that historians might more extensively explore, just as the issue of informal empire and dependency has generated abundant research by Latin Americanists into the gray areas of political influence and rule.

For, indeed, both migration and commerce prompted newfound imperial ambitions – binding attempts, whether of a German empire with "world status" or a Brazil continental one. These attempts were neither monolithic nor the natural consequence of interconnection: they were instead the products of choices and political imaginaries. States projected them onto Germans abroad, but so too did some Germans dream up their own ways of getting the state involved. At the same time, however, the commercial and agricultural activities of German settlers in Brazil went far beyond these flashpoints of imperial interest. Berlin's most ardent imperialists may have imagined such Germans abroad as agents of empire, but the overwhelming majority were not in any conscious way. There is too much research to ignore either side of this binding-unbinding paradox. What remains instead is for further studies, like the contributions that follow, to detail specific cases and expose general trends to help historians make sense of the interplay between national and transnational forces that defined the nineteenth century and remains foundational for contemporary political life.

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