GERMAN MERCHANTS AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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Over the last two decades historical research on migration has increasingly underlined that migration cannot simply be understood in terms of a one way process or as instigated merely by push-and-pull factors. Rather, it was a complex process tending to interconnect neighbouring or even more distant geographical regions.¹ Migrants kept up relations between the regions of departure and arrival by means of communication, travel, and economic exchange over a protracted period. They thereby linked spaces which had previously no, or only loose, connections.

Scholars have, up to now, mainly focused on the lower classes, while the social or commercial elite has received comparatively little attention. In economic history, recent debates on globalisation have directed attention to the actors establishing transnational and global relations. Approaches encouraged by New Institutional Economics and social network theory have given rise to renewed interest in the development of the early British Empire and the Atlantic world. Such studies highlight the role of actors in extending and organising Atlantic business relations. Economic and social historians such as Patrick Karl O’Brien, Perry Gauci or David Hancock regard merchants and early modern businessmen as primus mobile of early modern long-distance trade who integrated the scattered English colonies into a composite Empire.²

Most recently, historians of the Empire have turned to external factors explaining Britain’s rising power and industrialisation. Although studies like those of Inikori or Bowen point to external growth factors, that is, the Atlantic and Asian colonial trade, they focus on dynamic factors lying within the boundaries of the Empire. Remarkably little attention is paid to the impact of trade relations which went beyond the Empire. A notable exception is Jacob Price who argues that many of the dynamics which stimulated economic and industrial growth were located on the European continent, for the volume of imports to Britain far exceeded domestic demand. Apart from studies which highlight the significance of imports of timber and naval supplies from the Baltic for Britain’s navy and industrialisation, detailed research on external growth factors that lay outside the boundaries of the Empire, as well as on the impact of the international trade financed and organised by the influential European immigrant community in the British capital, still needs to be done. The aim of this article is to give an overview of the commercial activities of the German merchant community in eighteenth-century Britain.

Until the late eighteenth century the overwhelming majority of immigrant merchants settled in the capital, the hub and entrepôt of the British overseas and Atlantic trade. While Dutch and Huguenot merchants dominated the commercial immigrant elite in the seventeenth century, German Protestant merchants as well as Jewish merchants became more visible in the eighteenth century. The questions which will be raised here are: Why did German merchants move to Britain? Which markets attracted them within the Empire? How did they contribute to the integration of the British Empire into a global economy?

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