How to Become Isolated in Isolation? Networks in the German Political and Trade Union Exile after 1933

Swen Steinberg

Abstract

This contribution takes a longitudinal sectional view of group formation processes in the exile network of German Social Democrats and Trade Unionists. In particular, it focuses on a network established by refugees from Saxony, first in Czechoslovakia, then in Great Britain. In addition to issues regarding self-organization, mobilization of resources, and political positioning, it examines conflict management in the context of the dispute over leadership erupting in London in 1939. This conflict reveals that the network was both strengthened and weakened by the homogeneity of its membership as it isolated it from other groups. Moreover, the conflict was not caused by the exile situation but rather dated back to Germany before 1933. Finally, the network is assessed with regard to its effectiveness and continuity or discontinuity after 1945.

Since the early 2000s the term “network” has been enjoying increasing popularity among German historiographers: conferences, manuals, and “networks,” formed by groups of scholars, deal with methodological approaches and the heuristic value of this approach to history.¹ Network as a metaphor “has been used since antiquity to describe the complexity of relations between social and material entities.”² Influenced by the works of social scientists and historians from the United States since the 1970s, Social Network Analysis (SNA), as an analytical method, has “developed into a complete academic concept for the analysis of social structures through a focus on relations between individuals.”³ Recent research in German historiography employs network theory to focus on social processes on the micro level. The range of topics includes

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² Ibid.: p. 369.
³ Ibid.: pp. 369, 372.
migration and marriage, regional credit markets, interlocking directorates in large scale enterprises, academic knowledge transfers in the 18th century, and local resistance networks against National Socialism. The advantage of this approach is that connections invisible from the outside can be disclosed and visualized. Furthermore, the evidence of the valence of certain network actors can be described – for example, the role of “brokers” between different sub-networks and their strategic role. These network approaches can be useful in examining the subject of ‘networks in exile.’

However, the lack of sources can be a problem in the use of sna. For example, files are usually not preserved or remain fragmentary, and even a well-preserved correspondence reflects only aspects of personal relationships. When violent biographical breaks result in gaps in these documents, a ‘detailed reconstruction of relationships’ must remain incomplete. Because of the issue with sources, when describing ‘networks in exile’ it is more useful to examine the form of the groups described as networks, the motives of the persons active in these groups and their relationship to their ‘social environment.’

This article focuses on the strategic use of networks by German trade unionists in exile, the historical embeddedness of the actors and their ability to mobilize resources. This perspective is not completely new in exile studies. The research on the literary and art exile after 1933 in particular uses categories like ‘patronage’ to describe relationships between persons and groups.

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7 Ibid.: pp. 377–378.