Eradicating Misunderstandings?
The Institute of International Education, Student Exchanges and Transatlantic Relations in the 1920s

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Abstract

The project explores a novel and increasingly prominent field of German-American relations in the 1920s, student exchanges. It traces the ambitions attached to these exchanges by U.S. internationalists (especially the Institute of International Education) and German revisionists (especially the German Academic Exchange Service) and explores how these two groups hoped to achieve their objectives. It shows that it was primarily through two mechanisms, i.e. the careful selection of exchange students as well as a concerted hospitality on campus, that both sides sought to maximize the educational and political gains of these exchanges. In all, it argues that student exchanges were an important but often neglected cultural dimension of interwar transatlantic relations, which set seminal patterns in a new field of international relations as well as facilitated the German-American rapprochement after the First World War.

Research Report

The relationship between the United States and the Weimar Republic has long been understood in predominantly economic terms. Scholars have shown how post-war Germany looked to the prosperous United States to aid its economic recovery, thereby hoping to regain also a measure of its former political influence. The United States, in turn, willingly supported German economic reconstruction to stabilize post-war Europe and create a market for American goods. Its substantial investments in post-war Germany and its mediation in the Franco-German reparations conflict facilitated Germany’s rapid economic recovery as well as the 1925 Locarno Accords. Their shared interest in a prosperous and stable Germany is credited with the speedy rapprochement between Germany and the United States. U.S. support engendered German appreciation and deference, just as it gave U.S. investors and politicians considerable stakes in Germany’s successful recovery. In short, German-American reconciliation in the 1920s is typically attributed to financial entanglements and mutual economic interest.
This focus on the economic dimension has obscured other aspects of German-American relations. In particular, we are left to wonder how the remarkably rapid rapprochement between the two recent enemies played out in the cultural and especially in the academic field, which had hitherto been such an important aspect of transatlantic relations? Coming to the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), I hoped to find answers to the following questions: How did both countries pursue their prevalent interests outside of the commercial and financial, and inside the cultural realm? Who were the key actors, what were their principal motivations, and how did these relate to national interests at large? How did their efforts affect the process of German-American reconciliation after the First World War?

To answer these questions, I decided to focus on German-American student exchanges as a case study. There are a number of good reasons for this decision: First, the 1920s were a true founders’ period of international educational programs. Private institutions, governmental offices, and international organizations alike expended considerable resources on international education, particularly on the student level. As a consequence, studying the development of German-American student exchanges promises some general insight into a formative period of cultural diplomacy after the Great War. Second, while student exchanges are a prominent and well-researched aspect of German-American relations after World War II, their 1920s predecessors have received almost no attention. We thus miss one important piece of information to fully assess their Cold War development. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the records of the Institute of International Education (IIE) have just become available at the RAC. Despite the oftentimes challenging quality of this microfilmed collection and the still rudimentary finding aid, the IIE records are a veritable treasure trove for historians of international relations. They allow us, for the first time, to draw a more detailed picture of German-American student exchanges and their role in transatlantic relations after the First World War.

What follows is a brief account of the development, motivations and impact of German-American student exchanges, which draws on extensive research in German university and state archives, as well as the IIE collection at the RAC.
International Education as a Field of German-American Relations: A Brief Look Back

Before turning to the 1920s, it is well to acknowledge just how profoundly the Great War disrupted the close academic relations that had existed between the United States and the German Empire. Throughout the 1800s, Americans had long flocked to German universities to attain the advanced scientific training not yet available at home, and by the late 19th century, they had patterned their new research universities on the German model. The outbreak of the Great War put an almost immediate end to this close relationship. The German invasion of neutral Belgium alienated America’s educated elites, including many with close ties to Germany. The lack of American sympathy for German positions, in turn, offended and outraged German scholars. Well before the United States ever entered the Great War, longstanding transatlantic ties had been broken and significant psychological hurdles had been erected to interfere with renewing them. Even once the war was over, the two countries long struggled to leave their intellectual “trenches.” On the German side, the experience of defeat, the harsh peace terms and the trials of the post-war period bred contempt for a hostile academic world. On the American side, too, wartime sentiments long outlived the peace treaty and there was a widespread feeling that German scholars would have to show a degree of repentance before they could be readmitted to the academic world. As a consequence, America’s sprawling commitment to international education after the Great War at first passed Germany by. Instead, American foundations like the Rockefeller Foundation or the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace poured their considerable resources into strengthening Franco-American and Anglo-American cultural relations, seeking not to overcome but to write forth wartime alliances.
German Student Exchanges and Post-War Politics

This began to change only around 1923. On the American side, Germany’s deepening financial crisis and its escalating reparations conflict with France – culminating in the hyperinflation and Ruhr occupation of 1923 – softened opinions on the former enemy and heightened concern for German and, by extension, European stability. As a result, American internationalists moved increasingly to reintegrate and stabilize post-war Germany. While scholars have so far emphasized the economic and financial aspects of this U.S. stabilization policy, it also had a notable cultural component. Beginning in 1923, U.S. foundations and universities renewed their interest in German academia, a development that was manifest in a number of relief drives to aid inflation-battered German students and professors. The Institute of International Education in New York City stood at the forefront of these efforts to reconnect with Germany. Founded in 1919 with the support of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the IIE soon established itself as a clearing house for the management of America’s intellectual and educational relations with the world. In addition to coordinating student exchanges (about 250 fellowships by 1929) and organizing lecture tours, it published reference works on studying abroad and lobbied Congress for student visas and transatlantic shipping lines for student rates. The IIE’s energetic director, CUNY Professor Stephen P. Duggan, was an untriring advocate of international education and systematically expanded its field of operation. Although Duggan, too, first focused on the former Allies after the war, by 1924, he felt that “the antagonism of the war has sufficiently passed away to (...) bring about educational relations in higher education with Germany again.” The same year, he set up the ‘American-German Student Exchange’ between the University of Heidelberg and East Coast colleges.

Duggan’s efforts were driven by the cultural internationalist ideals of his day and age. Guided by the belief that wars arose principally from international “misunderstandings,” he felt that if leaders around the world could just learn to understand and respect each other’s positions and idiosyncrasies, conflicts could be resolved in a peaceful fashion or avoided altogether. From this perspective, the
American-German exchange served to mend relations with a country, whose re-integration in the West was of critical importance to world peace. Duggan later described the American-German Student Exchange as “movement toward developing international friendship and good will by creating a tradition of cooperation and reciprocity between the United States and Germany through the study of the institutions and psychologies of two countries.” Still, it is well to acknowledge that Duggan, like most U.S. internationalists, was imbued with a strong sense of exceptionalism, believing that American economic and cultural models could reform and uplift the world. By being introduced to American values and standards—from hygiene to individualism—foreign countries, too, could be placed on the road to peace and prosperity. Such notions were particularly urgent in the German case. Like many Americans at the time, Duggan believed that Germany’s fateful role in the war had been the product of its ruling elite’s autocratic mindset, excessive militarism and disregard for foreign psychology. Accordingly, exposure to American institutions, ideals and democratic way of life would be an especially wholesome experience for German youth and could forge an internationally minded and democratically inclined elite, unlikely to repeat the mistakes of its fathers. Put bluntly, U.S. cultural internationalists like Duggan saw student exchanges as one solution to the ‘German problem’.

This new way of thinking about students was not singular to the United States. Indeed, the establishment of educational programs clearly unfolded in step with German sentiments and ambitions towards the United States. After the devastating experiences of 1923, German elites, too, were desirous to get back in touch with the former enemies, especially Great Britain and the United States. Two German groups, in particular, proved instrumental in establishing the transatlantic student exchange. The first was a group of liberal German educators at the University of Heidelberg. Men like the economist Alfred Weber feared that Germany’s decade-long isolation was bound to provincialize and radicalize an entire generation of German youth. Since many students could no longer afford to travel abroad on their own, student exchanges seemed the only viable alternative to broaden the horizons of Germany’s future leaders. It was precisely for this reason that they first reached out to the IIE. Equally important to the implementation of the exchange were German officials, however. the Foreign Ministry, in particular, aided student exchanges with the United States (and eventually also with Great Britain and France) as part of its strategy of
reconciliation with the Western Allies. By re-knitting ties on the student level, they hoped to make way for an ‘academic peace’ and to restore the old standing of a still largely isolated German academia. Under Foreign Ministry’s aegis, the exchange program was greatly expanded and transferred from Heidelberg to Berlin in 1925, where it became – renamed the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) – the Wilhelmstrasse’s academic diplomacy arm.

What united these German groups was a belief that student exchanges had a discrete part to play in the peaceful revision of the Versailles Treaty. By developing closer ties to and a better understanding of a powerful United States, the exchange would ready Germany’s future leaders for the challenges ahead and help recapture Germany’s place among nations. At a time when Germany had to rebuild trust in its intentions and confidence in its industry, intelligent German youth seemed appropriate ambassadors abroad, while young Americans at German universities could be hoped to develop a greater sympathy for Germany and the perceived injustice of the peace treaty. By facilitating and multiplying elite contacts, they hoped to overturn transatlantic misperceptions and to foster a climate in which Germany could peacefully undo the Versailles Treaty. To Adolf Morsbach, director of the DAAD, the German task in the United States was not to conduct propaganda, but, given the opinion-shaping power of American universities, “to enter into relations with America’s intellectual leaders of today, and especially of tomorrow, and to carefully cultivate these relations and to cautiously and unerringly use them for Germany’s cultural and political interests.” In all, German peaceful revisionists and American cultural internationalists were in many respects ideal partners. Their ambition to reintegrate Germany matched Germany’s desire to overcome its isolation in step with a powerful America. After 1924, America’s policy of ‘peaceful change’ and Germany’s policy of ‘peaceful revisionism’ dovetailed not just in the economic, but in the cultural field.

These overlapping interests led to the rapid development of educational exchanges after 1924. In the five years after 1925, the number of German fellowships at the IIE tripled from 14 to 50, while the American fellowships at the DAAD increased even more dramatically, from 9 to 47. Moreover, a number of additional educational schemes like an industrial trainee program, the exchange of professors and teachers, and a Junior Year in Munich (also organized by the DAAD and the IIE) followed
during the 1920s. By the end of the decade, hundreds of American students attended summer and language courses at German universities. Though overall numbers remained modest by any subsequent Cold War standard, they were substantial for the time. For both, the American IIE and the German DAAD was the single largest and most successful exchange program, and served as model for organizing educational relations with other Western countries. Moreover, the exchange program’s ideological and revisionist function, gave it a special place in the self definitions of the two fledgling organizations. As Stephen Duggan wrote in 1929 to Adolf Morsbach, director of the DAAD, “no part of my work has been more successful than the work you and I are doing together.”

So how were the ambitions attached to the American-German Student Exchange translated into practice? By what means were both sides trying to achieve their desired outcome at a time when student exchanges were a resounding novelty?

In practice, the DAAD and the IIE pursued their objectives via a two-fold process of careful selection and concerted hospitality. Fundamental to these was the premise of the students as two-way ambassadors: while abroad, they would represent and interpret their own nation, and once returned, would explain their former host nation to compatriots.

It was precisely for this reason that the selection of suitable candidates was of utmost importance to the overall success of the scheme. Both the IIE and DAAD developed intricate screening processes overseen by committees of liberal professors, foundation officers, and ministerial representatives. Their selection criteria reflected their desire to identify future elites, who would later occupy the sort of political, educational or business positions that would allow them to make best use of their transatlantic education and connections. In both countries, academic excellence was hence a defining principle of selection. Students had to be nominated by at least two faculty members and these professorial recommendations often dwelt in length on the candidate’s academic merits and capacity for scholarly work. A far disproportionate share of American candidates belonged to Phi Beta Kappa and many of them aspired to (and did indeed go into) academic careers. Although the selection procedures thus valued and emphasized good grades and academic talent, general character traits, age and even good looks also played a distinct role. One highly
recommended student, for example, had not only graduated summa cum laude but had also been the captain of basketball, baseball and debating teams. The recommending professor emphasized his attractive looks as well as the fact that he “matches his intellectual brilliance with qualities of character and personality of like high order”; he “has poise and dignity, energy and enthusiasm, undeniable determination and withal, a fine sense of humor that saves him from the deadly dry-rot that infects too many young scholars.” A pleasant personality and good looks was important for both female and male students. One young woman was appointed to Berlin on the recommendation that, apart from her academic standing, her ‘personality is very good; makes friends easily, good-looking and wears good clothes”, and “unusually handsome, well bred and of engaging manners”. Another was recommended as ‘personally very attractive’ while yet another stood out for his ‘attractive Nordic type’. Naturally, the type of praise usually matched the expectations of a certain academic field. One future theologian was thus described as a “good student with a serious purpose, clear head and good heart ... he has the looks and habits of a scholar and the bearing of a Christian gentleman.”

In general, both sides sought to select and place students so as to maximize the personal, professional and national benefits of the exchange. An effort was made, for example, to place the academically strongest and most mature candidates at universities like Harvard or Berlin, where they stood to profit academically and where German and American scholarship also required a particularly excellent representation. Accordingly, one American professor recommended a female student for a leading German university because “few of our students can give foreigners a better idea of the high standard of American education.” By the same token, a very young and academically less-refined German student was recommended for “one of the smaller women’s colleges”, where it would be easier to make friends. Moreover, German authorities picked students who possessed hobbies and character traits that would make them popular in the United States, such as an interest in sports or debating. At one point, too, the DAAD asked that fewer married American students be sent to Germany, because they did not as readily integrate into student life, thus defeating the political purpose of the exchange.

Both sides, too, sought to make sure that these students were able to fully assume their ‘ambassadorial function’. The IIE, for example, seems to have favored a certain
‘American type’, characterized by high morals, middle class prosperity, and youthful enthusiasm. One female student was recommended as ‘an excellent representative of young American womanhood’ and the IIE generally avoided sending recent (and especially German) immigrants overseas. In Germany, much emphasis was placed on national ‘reliability.’ Only students of a certain age and with a solid sense of national identity were considered suited to represent Germany effectively and to withstand the not-to-be-underestimated dangers of ‘Americanization’. 19 Outgoing students also received a measure of ‘national’ instruction. A ‘departure camp’ close to Berlin briefed them on current political, social and economics topics and provided them with up-to-date literature on major revisionists topics, including rearmament, the war guilt question and reparations. In all, these meetings prepared German students to present a national image well suited to the overall revisionist objective: a country united in a heroic fight against the injustices of Versailles. Both the IIE and the DAAD thus put in place careful selection and instruction mechanisms to attain the exchange program’s anticipated educational and political gains.

At the same time, universities and educational organizations also developed structures to ensure that the actual experience of international students abroad would be conducive to the purpose of the exchange. Fundamental to these efforts was the insight that study abroad was in itself no guarantee for greater sympathy or understanding, but depended on the international student coming into close contact with the host society. To foster such meaningful encounters came fairly easy to the United States, where college structures, on-campus housing and a plethora of social clubs and activities brought domestic and international students together. In the 1920s, organizations like the YMCA’s Committee for Friendly Relations Among Students and a growing number of International Houses aided this purpose. Moreover, with time there evolved a network of former and prospective exchange students on campus, who were eager to mentor the German guests. By the late 1920s, the IIE also had established a three-day ‘arrival camp’ in the Hudson Valley, which familiarized exchange students with American idiosyncrasies (Image I).
By comparison, German universities faced greater problems. The more advanced age of German students, the lack of on-campus housing and the restrictive membership of fraternities (a substantial part of student sociability) made it more difficult to bring international visitors in touch with German student life. In large cities like Berlin, international students often felt isolated from their German peers. At the same time, German organizers were particularly concerned about the lack of organized hospitality, which they blamed for the pronounced anti-German sentiment during the war. Accordingly, the 1920s saw heavy investments in hospitality infrastructure, including international clubs, houses and academic offices at German universities, which were to smooth bureaucratic hurdles and facilitate those “personal connections, which can be of great import in human, cultural and political terms, especially to Germany in its current situation.”

In this way, both countries put in
place elaborate structures to maximize the perceived gains and minimize the perceived risks of these exchanges to the nation. Careful selection and concerted hospitality became key mechanisms to achieve the desired results.

Reconciliation and its Limits

So what was the effect of all these efforts?

It is notoriously difficult to assess the impact of academic exchanges, especially with regard to so complex a process as postwar reconciliation. Without access to a large and reliable sample of student impressions, a conclusive analysis is impossible. The IIE and the DAAD themselves realized that student exchanges were essentially long-term investments. They recognized that even if they ultimately succeeded in fostering pro-German or pro-American sentiments, it would be at least a decade until the former exchange students had reached professional positions to influence transatlantic relations. The disruptions of the Nazi period and the Second World War make it near impossible to see whether such expectations were actually met.

Still, some observations about these exchange’s immediate and personal impact can be made.

By and large, the exchanges seem to have been very successful. German students were wildly enthusiastic about their time in the United States and felt called to correct prevalent misconceptions and stereotypes upon their return home, including, for instance, assumptions about the United States as a “cultureless” nation. In some cases, their enthusiasm for the American way of life, for its freedom and prosperity, was so great that it worried their educated bourgeois parents and professors, who were usually more reserved, about American “materialism” and mass culture. In the United States, too, the carefully selected and well-educated German student often left a positive impression, entirely at odds with the propaganda depictions of the Great War. In this way, the student exchange helped liquidate some of the war’s enemy images. The experience of American students, too, seems to have been
overwhelmingly positive. While German efforts never succeeded in creating a tight-knit American college atmosphere, a considerable number of American students expressed great enthusiasm for the independence of the German system. They found Germany clean and orderly, and savored Berlin’s riveting art and music scene as much as its quaint university towns. Many left with a much deeper appreciation of the war’s impact on Germany, at times taking away just the sort of lessons Germans hoped they would: “There is an excellent friendly feeling everywhere for all Americans,” one American student wrote to his parents from Berlin in August 1927, “[o]ur alliance with France in the war was only temporary and accidental, whereas with Germany we have a much closer actual connection and kinship.”

But it also well to acknowledge that exchange did not always have the desired result. In Marburg, for example, a number of Americans were not making quite the hoped-for impression. One of them, a report noted, “has felt obliged to criticize everything peculiarly German which he encountered and thereby has on many occasions aroused the hearty indignation of the German students living with him in [the dormitory].” This, however, was nothing compared to his friend, who “has been intoxicated daily, sitting in the early hours of the morning in a coffee house before beer and “Schnaps” and in the evenings emptying numerous bottles of wine – altogether a deplorable figure, ruined by alcohol. We shall not speak further of the various scandals which were enough to bring into bad repute […] the America students studying here.” In this way, exchanges could exacerbate rather than ameliorate misunderstandings between the two nations. As a result, negative reports of this kind were taken very seriously by the IIE and the DAAD. In a program built on the assumption that one elite individual conveyed the entire ‘character’ of his nation, such incidents were seen as gravely harmful and led to serious interventions and reprimands.

In all, however, such transgressions seem to have been the exception rather than the rule. The selection and instruction mechanisms usually worked well, as did the concerted efforts at hospitality. Students wrote with enthusiasm of organized skiing trips to the Alps or the time they had spent in an American home on Thanksgiving. As late as the mid-1930s, one German student was found to be “making the most of every opportunity that is offered him to acquaint himself with American college affairs and the program of American education and is giving evidence of catching something of our spirit”. At least the 400 or so exchange students themselves came
away with a better understanding of the other country, found many of their stereotypes corrected and often retained nostalgic memories of their year abroad that would outlive the confrontations of the Second World War. A 1929 survey taken by the IIE – although clearly not as positive as it had hoped – was interpreted in a broadly positive light. Duggan reported that former exchange students, “are reaping the gains of a year or more spent in an American college or university [they...] have found that people of different countries have much to give each other [and their] insight into new thought and ideals gives them knowledge, tolerance and confidence – the essence of which is the spirit of international understanding”. At least on this personal level, these exchanges clearly furthered the process of cultural demobilization and reconciliation.

Yet arguably, the exchange also had a broader influence. At a time when personal and sympathetic contact with the former enemy was still rare and often logistically and psychologically difficult, these student exchange offered an institutionalized meeting space for future opinion leaders. Their presence on campus often had a disproportionately wide impact, precisely because they were often the first German or American visitor in over a decade. Encountering a likeable and considerate German or American student often went a long way to correct or at least second-guess prevalent enemy images. Many an American professor, for instance, now allowed himself to remember his happy student days in Germany and encouraged younger colleagues to visit. In this way, the transatlantic travel of a relatively small number of exchange students could have a fairly substantial effect. While much more research is needed on the role of student exchanges at that time, my archival research at the RAC clearly shows that there was a substantial and underexplored cultural dimension to German-American relations in the 1920s. It also adds to recent scholarship, which emphasizes the time ‘before the Cultural Cold Wars’ (Rietzler) as a formative period in cultural exchange and cultural diplomacy on both sides of the Atlantic. The opening of the records of the IIE will allow scholars to explore these issues in much more detail.

2 See the Institute of International Educations, Annual Bulletins.

3 The Institute of International Education” The Educational Record. 5/3 (Jul 1924), 190.

4 As Duggan summed up: “The Institute believes that it is essential for Americans to know of the difficulties and problems of other countries as for the people of other countries to know something about us, in order that international good-will may be realized.” Stephen P. Duggan “The Institute of International Education.” School and Society 12 (1920), 642.

5 IIE, Fellowships for Study in Germany under the American German Student Exchange, 1930-31, RAC, IIE Records, Alumni and Historical Files, RG 1, Reel 7 HF, Roll No 7, Side 1 #1 American – German Student Exchange


7 Der Akademische Austauschdienst 1924/26 (Booklet), RAC, IIE Records, Alumni and Historical Files, RG 1, Reel 7 HF, Roll No 7, Side 1 #5 Akademischer Austauschdienst, Printed Forms 1924-31.

8 Politisches Archiv des Auswaertigen Amts [PA AA]


10 Statistics


12 Stephen Duggan to Adolf Morsbach, Dec 31, 1929; RAC, IIE Records, Alumni and Historical Files, RG 1, Reel 3 HF, Side 1 #8

13 German Candidates for U.S. Fellowships, 1934-35, RAC, IIE Records, Alumni and Historical Files, RG 1, Reel 6 HF, Side No. 2 #15

14 Recommendation, Paul Luton Wiley, Reel 6 Side No. 2 #15 German Candidates for U.S. Fellowships, 1934-35, RAC, IIE Records, Alumni and Historical Files, RG 1

15 Recommendation, Lysbeth W. Mency (?), Reel 6 Side No. 2 #15 German Candidates for U.S. Fellowships, 1934-35, RAC, IIE Records, Alumni and Historical Files, RG 1

16 Recommendation, Carl Martin Selle, Reel 6 Side No. 2 #15 German Candidates for U.S. Fellowships, 1934-35, RAC, IIE Records, Alumni and Historical Files, RG 1


18 Adolf Morsbach to Stephen Duggan, Nov 7, 1929, RAC, IIE Records, Alumni and Historical Files, RG 1, Reel 3 HF, Side 1 #8

19 German Consulate General, New York to AA, Jul 2 1925, PA AA, R 63122.


22 Free Translation Letter of April 3, 1929 from Professor Hermelinck of the University of Marburg to the Akademischer Austauschdienst, RAC, IIE Records, Alumni and Historical Files, RG 1, Reel 3 HF, Side 1 #8

23 Free Translation Letter of April 3, 1929 from Professor Hermelinck of the University of Marburg to the Akademischer Austauschdienst, RAC, IIE Records, Alumni and Historical Files, RG 1, Reel 3 HF, Side 1 #8

24 Wittenberg College to Miss Douglass, RAC, IIE Records, Grantee Files, March 20 1936, Reel 6 Side 2

25 Correspondence of author with Wolfgang Baare-Schmidt, son of Hans-Georg Baare-Schmidt (German exchange student at Colgate, 1938)

26 RAC, IIE Records, Alumni and Historical Files, RG 1, Reel 3, Side 1 # 9 Survey of American & Foreign Ex Fellows, 1929.
27 Prof. Dr. Julius Richter. Bericht über meine Vortragsreise an den Universitäten, Colleges und Theologischen Seminaren der Vereinigten Staaten vom 25. Oktober 1924 bis 5 April 1925, PA AA, R 64708