FRANK LORENZ MÜLLER, Britain and the German Question: Perceptions of Nationalism and Political Reform, 1830–63 (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2002), xii + 268 pp. ISBN 0 333 96615 5. £45.00

Frank Lorenz Müller’s book Britain and the German Question looks at British perceptions of pre-Kaiserreich Germany from 1830 to 1863. Although of secondary importance to British foreign policy during the second third of the nineteenth century, the German Confederation and its individual member states were closely monitored by British observers. Two aspects of political life attracted particular interest: nationalism and political reform. Both played a prominent role in German politics for most of the German Confederation’s existence and were constitutive elements of the German Question. The question of how German unity was to be achieved in the context of the Austro–Prussian struggle for supremacy was shaped by the ‘tension between the challenge posed by an opposition demanding liberal, constitutional and national progress and the various governmental responses’ (p. 1). As Müller shows, British attitudes towards this problem were neither clear-cut nor static.

Aiming to emphasize ‘the multidimensional character of British perceptions’ (p. 3), Müller concentrates on ‘Britain’s foreign political establishment’ (p. 2), and especially on British diplomats to the German states. While this might at first glance look like a restriction of the source base, it in fact reflects the limited number of traceable British observers of Germany. Germany rarely impinged upon the sphere of British public opinion. Only on a few occasions was Germany the topic of parliamentary debates, and in the British newspapers which Müller draws upon in his study Germany hardly plays a prominent role. However, the foreign political establishment, that is, mainly Foreign Office officials, produced vast quantities of documents in which German affairs are dealt with not only regularly and extensively, but often also with profound knowledge. This was not least because of the long periods of time for which individual British envoys were accredited to German courts. In an appendix Müller provides a very useful list of long-serving British diplomats to the states of the German Confederation. Four British diplomats served in Germany for more than thirty years, seven for more than twenty years. It is unfortunate that we learn little about the implications which length of service had on perceptions of Germany beyond the
fact that many diplomats certainly possessed expertise. A second reason for the extent of knowledge about Germany is the federal structure of Germany which meant that the Foreign Office sent diplomats not only to Berlin and Vienna, but also to Hanover, Hamburg, Munich, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, and Dresden. Thus the official and private correspondence of the British envoys covers the complex and often heterogeneous aspects of the political life of the individual states as well as of the German Confederation as a whole. The number of British diplomats posted to Germany at the same time—Müller counts a total of twenty-six ambassadors, envoys, secretaries of legation, and attachés for the year 1851 alone (cf. p. 5)—ensured varied assessments of German affairs.

The first of the four chronologically ordered chapters deals with the Vormärz period from the aftermath of the July revolution of 1830 to 1847. It was the European dimension of the revolutionary events of 1830 that restored the British interest in Germany. In accordance with the views of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, who came to office for the first time in November 1830 and shaped British foreign policy for the following decades, British observers were deeply suspicious of the national and liberal movement. The oppositional challenge was regarded, without much differentiation, as radical, anti-monarchical, and therefore potentially destabilizing. On the whole judgements of the measures taken by the German governments were equally negative. The constitutional states, seen as Britain’s ‘natural allies’ (p. 26), were condemned for their weak and passive policies. However, British reactions to the measures taken by the German Confederation, culminating in the repressive Six Articles of 1832, differed. While senior British diplomats to Germany such as Frederick Lamb in Vienna and Thomas Cartwright in Frankfurt defended the Austro-Prussian attempt to suppress civil rights in the face of revolutionary danger, Lord Palmerston rejected the measures. In his despatch of 7 September 1832, Palmerston left the German governments in no doubt of his belief in timely concessions (*divide et impera*). For him, Metternich’s reactionary course was counter-productive for Germany’s internal peace and potentially dangerous for Europe. Palmerston argued in terms of the European law of 1815, but his whole viewpoint was determined by the European dimension of Britain’s policy towards Germany. Primarily, the German Confederation had a functional role as a stabilizing power in the middle of
Europe between France und Russia. Throughout his book Müller takes account of the European dimension of British policy by skilfully integrating British perceptions of Germany into a wider European context. This makes the anti-revolutionary mind-set of the British observers plausible.

Even the Prussian-led Customs Union (Zollverein) was valued for its anti-revolutionary impact. Müller points out that Britain’s view of the Zollverein was far less negative than the older literature would have us believe. Britain clearly condemned any protectionist moves on the part of the Zollverein, but also had hopes that a Prussian-led Zollverein which promised fairly liberal tariffs would have a positive effect. Furthermore, unlike the Diet of the German Confederation, Britain approved of the Zollverein as an efficient way of organizing Germany. However, the frequently observed national and unifying effect was only rarely connected with the popular national movement which was boosted by the Rhine crisis of 1840–1 and the accession of Frederick William IV as Prussian king. Müller demonstrates that the popular national movement was widely ignored both by British diplomats and the British press, which left them unprepared for future developments.

Müller’s picture certainly mirrors the general interest of diplomats in high politics. There is at least one aspect of the popular movement, however, which attracted a great deal of British interest, but which Müller almost entirely ignores. During the Vormärz period religion and religious life in Germany—for example, the ultramontane movement in Bavaria, the dispute about mixed marriages in the 1830s, and the religious sects of the 1840s—played an outstanding role and had varied political repercussions on a national scale. Müller’s decision to leave aside these aspects of the Vormärz period is particularly regrettable as the interest of British observers in religious matters was clearly linked to the situation at home. Sensitized by the Catholic emancipation of 1829 and the Irish question, British observers were always aware that religion could not be separated from politics: their experiences and their self-perceptions were mirrored in their view of Germany. In general, Müller rarely makes connections with internal British events and developments which could help to explain the assessments of the individual British observers, such as, for example, the parliamentary reform of 1832. This said, Müller leaves no doubt about the convictions held by British diplo-
mats which shaped their appraisal of German politics. One which is very clearly and convincingly referred to throughout the book is the Whiggish principle of moderate reform. The measures introduced by Frederick William IV after his accession to the throne in 1840 acknowledging that there was need for political reform in Germany, the convocation of the Prussian United Diet in 1847, and the Zollverein all prompted positive responses.

A belief in the efficacy of ‘timely concessions’ (p. 58) in preventing popular uprisings also dictated the first British reactions to the revolution of 1848, which Müller deals with at the beginning of chapter two, ‘British perceptions of revolutionary Germany’. Britain’s positive and optimistic assessment of the steps taken by several of the Märzministerien in the German states, however, was short-lived and gave way to apprehension about democratic radicalization. From as early as March 1848, the governments of the German states were criticized for being short-sighted in their concessions and in danger of losing their authority. The widening of the electorate, which was regarded as totally inadequate, drew particular criticism. It was only consistent that British observers welcomed the reactionary measures which Prussia took in November 1848. These guaranteed the restoration of order and thus, in British eyes, confirmed Prussia’s leading role in Germany. The Prussian constitution of December 1848 however was considered too liberal and unsuited to serving the ultimate end of wise policy, that is, ‘containment of the opposition and consolidation of the established political system’ (p. 76). All in all British attitudes to events between March 1848 and June 1849 were similar to what they had been in the early 1830s. This also applied to the condemnation of the party of movement, which drew the special attention of British observers at the centre of the national revolution, Frankfurt.

As far as British observers were concerned, the new National Assembly in the Frankfurt Paulskirche which replaced the unpopular and, not only in British eyes, ineffective and almost obsolete Diet of the German Confederation was soon discredited by its members. Although on the whole they were not as radical as had been feared, they lacked political experience and were also considered dangerously theoretical. One of the main reasons for the condemnation of the Frankfurt Nationalversammlung, however, was the blocking resolution with regard to the ratification of the Treaty of Malmö in Sep-
tember 1848. The Frankfurt assembly, which revoked its decision two weeks later, proved to be not only incompetent but also irresponsible and a danger to European peace. Against this background, it is not surprising that British diplomats followed the proceedings in Frankfurt with the utmost scepticism and distrust. With regard to issues both of reform and of Germany’s role in European security, they welcomed the failure of the revolutionary project in Frankfurt.

As Müller shows in his third chapter, ‘British perceptions of the Austro-Prussian struggle for supremacy’, British hopes for a reformed and more closely united Germany lay with Prussia. Müller devotes special attention to the Prussian klein-deutsch plan of the Erfurt Union. For a number of reasons which reflected British perceptions of Germany since the 1830s, Palmerston approved of Prussia’s plan. Both the European dimension of a Prussian-led Germany—the securing of a Danish–Prussian peace and the creation of a counterweight to the autocratic Austro-Russian alliance—and the internal effect of calming revolutionary aspirations corresponded to the British interest in a peaceful Europe open to British trade and commerce. When developments from summer 1849 showed that Prussia’s plan did not necessarily converge with the overall goals of British foreign policy, Britain’s support for Prussia faded. Up to November 1850, when the Treaty of Olmütz settled the growing Austro-Prussian tensions, Britain again took the role of a predominantly passive observer. The failure of the project of the Prussian Union and Austria’s strengthening was followed impartially as long as European equilibrium was not endangered, as was the case with Schwarzenberg’s plan for a Reich of 70 million people. The outcome of the Dresden conference of early 1851, which simultaneously checked Austria’s quest for supremacy and restored the old German Confederation and the Federal Diet in Frankfurt was welcomed by Britain. National and political reform were of secondary importance at that time and, as described in chapter four, ‘British perceptions of the “reaction” and the struggle for federal reform’, in the years that followed.

During the Crimean War, when Britain sought allies against Russia, there was certainly a German dimension to British foreign policy, but questions of nationalism and political reform in Germany hardly headed the agenda. Not only were British observers convinced of the success of the reactionary party, but suggestions for
federal reform, such as, for example, those put forward by the Saxon Foreign Minister, Friedrich Ferdinand von Beust, were dismissed under the influence of British Russophobia. The standstill in British interest in Germany’s internal reforms, reflected in Müller’s brief account of that period, was overcome at the start of the Prussian New Era in 1858. Britain once again identified Prussia—in contrast to the incompetent German states of the third Germany and Austria—with necessary moderate political reforms. Furthermore, nationalism orientated towards Prussia was seen as an effective means of countering French aggression. Against this background the Deutsche Nationalverein, to which Müller pays a good deal of attention in the last part of his study, was perceived as something quite positive, although there was some easiness about the scale of the proposed centralizing reforms. Of course, the hopes of British observers were once again frustrated when the pendulum of Prussian policy swung back to reactionary measures in 1861. The Fürstentag of 1863, when discussion of the German Question reached another impasse, marked the end of fruitless efforts to reform the German Confederation internally.

For the British foreign political establishment, which had observed the challenges to the German states for more than thirty years, the failure of the German Confederation was only consistent. To British observers the raison d’être of the German Confederation, namely to secure internal and external peace, as expressed in Article 2 of the Act of the German Confederation, was called into question not least because Germany had proved unable to follow the British example of moderate and non-democratic reform. German nationalism, on the other hand, was approved of only as long as it did not aim for a centralized union, posed no threat to Germany’s neighbours, and generally accorded with Britain’s security and commercial interests.

Müller’s conclusions concerning the kind of united Germany that Britain would have welcomed in general follow the same lines as those in older studies such as those by Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, Günther Heydemann, Wolf D. Gruner, and Günther Gillessen. Müller’s thorough knowledge of the existing research and his wide use of source material, such as, for instance, private papers by British diplomats, which in many cases has been neglected by historians, enables him to draw an accurate and comprehensive picture of Anglo-German relations and British perceptions of Germany at a
crucial period of German history. The fact that he does not only focus on Austria and Prussia, but also includes the middling German states known as the ‘Third Germany’ is commendable. At the same time, Müller’s book leaves no doubt that pre-Kaiserreich Germany was seen as an entity that consisted of more than a loose confederation of states.

It is unfortunate that Müller does not scrutinize the patterns of British perceptions of Germany beyond the more general aspects of British–German relations. As ‘British interest in German politics between 1830 and 1863 remained somewhat theoretical and characterized by a lack of urgency’ (p. 7), we miss a closer look at why individual British observers reached specific conclusions at a given time. Given the complexity of the conditions under which the letters and despatches Müller uses were created, the individual background of the observers and connections with internal British developments would have been particularly interesting. A stronger emphasis on the circumstances of British perceptions would also have made the selection of examples appear less random than it sometimes seems, especially in chapters two and four.

Nevertheless, Müller’s book is well put together and lucidly written. Although traditional both in method and scope, it surpasses existing studies of Anglo–German relations in the period of the German Confederation. With the reservation that in most instances Müller touches upon crucial questions of perception only indirectly or inexplicitly, anybody interested in the history of national images and in a more theoretical approach to the perception of nations and countries will gain from Müller’s book as well.

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