Johann Ludwig Tellkampf, Excerpts from the Chapter "On the Steamship Connections between German and North American Ports" (1853)

Abstract

Johann Ludwig Tellkampf (1808–1876) was a university-based political economist and liberal from Breslau (Wrocław) who had been elected to the Frankfurt National Assembly during the Revolution of 1848–49 and who reemerged as a political and economic commentator and member of the Prussian Parliament after 1849. More than a decade earlier, in 1838, Tellkampf had left a post in Hanover following the suppression of its constitution and travelled to New York City, where he taught as professor of political science at Union College and Columbia University. As this passage makes clear, during his time in New York, Tellkampf supported the lobbying efforts in 1845 of the special envoy from Bremen in the United States, Carl Theodor Gevekoht, who worked to secure for Bremerhaven one of the two proposed steamship postal routes between the United States and Europe. Their plans came to fruition in 1847 when the first U.S. mail ship docked in Bremerhaven. The excerpt offers insights into the nature of transatlantic connections between Germany and the United States in this period and sheds light on ideas of progress and globalization and the role of technology, communication, and intercultural exchange in those processes. Rivalry with Britain and the desire to increase the German Confederation's international weight also figured in the campaign to establish the steamship line, as well as in Tellkampf's follow-up efforts to promote the building of a German fleet, including in the larger publication from which this excerpted chapter is taken.

Source

V. On the Steamship Connections between German and North American Ports (with reference to the expansion of the fleets of Prussia and the German coastal states.)

Some 40 years have passed since the brilliant Fulton launched his first steamboat on the Hudson, with little success and insulting jests from dubious or envious spectators—and already we are observing competition among steamships on the ocean's waves. What a victory for this genius! May it always overcome narrowmindedness, resentment, and envy with the same success as Fulton's invention, which takes us from one part of the world to another at whirlwind speed and seems to make old fairy tales come true.

If the history of civilization teaches us that intellectual progress is always fastest and healthiest where commerce with other peoples was easiest, as in ancient Greece, steam power now expands the advantages of such commerce throughout the world and facilitates modern civilization in a manner unknown to previous centuries. One may assert that steam power, when applied to shipping, already worked wonders in its infancy, much like Hercules did. It brings far-flung continents into close proximity, so close that the New World with its great, youthful development comes near enough to make mutual influence unavoidable, and the culture of the civilized Old and New Worlds thereby enters into a new stage of development.

Steamship connections have made it easier for us to expand our knowledge through personal observation and acquaintances in foreign lands, and many thousands of travelers have availed themselves of this opportunity, so that an education free of prejudices is becoming ever more

widespread. It will doubtless prove to be healthy and practically prudent, for the acute grasp and evaluation of the contrasts evident in the lives of diverse peoples ease our exploration of the truth; the human mind gains in clarity and the variety of impressions to the same degree as it becomes better acquainted with the spirit, the arts and sciences and the institutions of foreign nations.

As we know, the development of industry is intimately connected with the progress of civilization, and the direction it takes in order to become beneficial and profitable must go hand in hand with the taste and cultivation of the most civilized nations. And thus we find the intellectually and materially useful in close alliance, and both are equally facilitated by the steamship connection between Germany and the American continent. The establishment of this steamship connection by the United States has liberated the country from England's monopolizing influence and represents a renewed practical declaration of independence.

I will begin with some information on the already established steamship connection and on that basis include some suggestions about the use of steamships in order to demonstrate that even in peacetime, the reestablishment and maintenance of a fleet by Prussia and the Customs Union (expanded to include the North German coastal states) can be a blessing and not a burden for our shared fatherland.

An act of Congress of March 3, 1845, authorized the Postmaster General of the United States to make contracts regarding the sending of letter post between any port in the United States and one or several foreign ports, wherever he regards this as conducive to the public interest. The Postmaster General declared that in order to implement this law, he wished to make a contract with whoever offered the most acceptable conditions and proposed that the connection should be created with only one European port. The contract was signed with Mr. Mills in New York. There was long much dispute over the choice of a European port, since every state wanted one of its own ports to be chosen. England and Belgium were most active in this regard, as rivals to German interests. There are some statesmen in Germany who believe that, as a consequence of the customs union with Belgium, that country represents our trade interests abroad; this affair offered clear evidence of how unfounded such an opinion is.

In light of these difficulties, Mr. Gevekoht, who had been sent from Bremen to Washington at that time, Prussian Minister President v. Gerolt and the author of this text succeeded in persuading the influential statesmen of the union that it would be most expedient to prescribe the following route for steamships: they should depart from New York, stop at Cowes on the Isle of Wight on England's pleasant coast, and then land in Bremen. This route was then also accepted by the Postmaster General and the administration.[1]

The matter was brought before the postal committee of the House of Representatives. The report was positive, and the funds were immediately approved; the Senate also gave its unanimous approval. In the Senate it was suggested that a steamship connection to Liverpool should also be created, but this was later rejected.

When England's efforts to establish Liverpool as the final destination of this steamship connection failed, the English took the measure of sending a weekly steamship from Liverpool to create competition in Atlantic shipping, which was intended to nip the American-German connection in the bud. As we know, this proved unsuccessful.

The reasons why the steamship connection between New York and Bremen via Cowes was the most expedient were as follows: it was known that the revenues from the letter post on the English steamships paid for the financial support that England granted the ships, and people wondered whether a large portion of the costs of the intended steamship connection could be covered in a similar manner.

This would presumably be the case, since the new steamships are capable of handling the correspondence among all European states. Cowes, where the steamships stop, is closer to London than to Liverpool; one can travel from the first- to the last-mentioned in three hours by railway. This also applies to the entire south of England. Cowes is also very well located with respect to southwest continental Europe, and steamships travel daily between that town and the nearest ports on the Continent. From Cowes, the post arrives in Le Havre in fewer than 9 hours, and in Belgium and Holland in even less time. The American steamships that travel from there to Bremen also carry correspondence from New York destined for northeastern Europe. From Bremen, these letters are distributed in all directions by steamship and railway. The German North Sea ports are at the heart of commercial Europe and thus offer great advantages as landing stages for the transatlantic steamboats. On the return journey from Bremen, the transatlantic steamships can carry all the letters from the central and northern European states along with the letters from England, France, Belgium etc., that go via Trieste and Cowes.

It was extremely important for business and private correspondence that the postage for all letters sent on the American steamships be significantly reduced, and a marked increase in the number of letters was expected in the wake of this reduction. The postage for all letters and packages weighing no more than 8 grams (½ *Lot*) was set at 25 cents for England and the Continent, or approximately 10 silver groschen. Previously, it cost 42 2/3 cents to send a letter by English steamship, and if one did not know any merchants in New York or Boston, each letter cost one dollar through one of the agencies set up for this purpose. Sending an ordinary newspaper cost 61 cents. These high postal costs can be explained by the fact that as long as it enjoyed a steamship monopoly, England demanded a very high fee for letters sent to the Continent, as England does in all matters where it exercises any kind of monopoly. It was a matter of breaking this monopoly. This succeeded and the world of correspondents gained much in the process. All of the well-known reasons for moderate postage costs were arguments in favor of the direct steamship connection. As to Germany, in particular, we should keep in mind that, as a result of German education, nearly all of the many Germans in the United States can read and write. These people, with the exception of the wealthy, were previously excluded from using the English steamships because of the high cost of postage. Now, the steamship connection between New York and Bremen allows them to send letters cheaply and directly, and they dispatch all of their correspondence via the new steamships.

This new connection is, however, important not only for its immediate connection with travel and correspondence but also for information via the press. The postage cost that the English steamships have demanded thus far for an ordinary newspaper was, as noted above, 61 cents, or nearly one taler. Heavier monthly publications paid proportionally more. In practice, such postage prices were tantamount to a ban on the reciprocal sale of periodicals published on the two continents. They were excluded from being sold in Europe, and, similarly, American readers were deprived of periodicals published on the European continent. The English press monopolized news from both continents, sharing it in such a light and in such a way as was in its own interest, and compelled both continents to see each other through *English* eyes.

This was clearly not the best way to become acquainted with each other and their specific mutual interests in an unprejudiced manner. While thus far periodicals have been sent more cheaply but also more slowly by German sailing ship, they generally arrived at a time when they had long since lost the charm of novelty.

The American as well as the European press therefore had a greater interest in the success of the American steamships than has been recognized and utilized thus far. Its effect will gradually lead to a fairer appreciation of the good qualities of the nations on both continents and facilitate a more precise knowledge of their intellectual and commercial relations, creating a more rapid exchange of improvements and discoveries in the sciences and industry.

[…]

NOTES

[1] I cannot do otherwise but to particularly emphasize the untiring efforts of Gevekoht and von Gerolt and note that the difficulties overcome by these two gentlemen were such that one cannot praise their patriotic zeal too highly.

Source: *Beiträge zur Nationalökonomie und Handelspolitik*, by J. L. Tellkampf, Professor at the University of Breslau, part 2. Leipzig: Verlagsbuchhandlung von I. I. Weber, 1853, pp. 139–46. Available online at: http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10388645-1

Translation: Pamela Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Johann Ludwig Tellkampf, Excerpts from the Chapter “On the Steamship Connections between German and North American Ports” (1853), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-5006> [October 12, 2024].