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Friedrich Fabri and Imperialism in the Bismarck Period. Revolution, Depression, Expansion

[“Friedrich Fabri und der Imperialismus in der Bismarckzeit. Revolution, Depression, Expansion”]

(Beiträge zur Kolonial- und Überseegeschichte, Band 13)

Freiburg: Atlantis-Verlag, 1975; 579 pp.

Historians are not as prone to write biographies today as they were a hundred years ago. Heinrich von Treitschke's opinion that “men make history” is viewed with scepticism. Individuals may influence history and help to shape historical developments, but there are also groups of people who have collectively acted in history; there are more comprehensive forces of development – intellectual, ideological, social, economic movements for

instance – which often attract historians' attention more strongly and challenge them to further scholarly work. If biographies are still being written, then mainly for three reasons: a person is interesting by virtue of his or her human existence, the extraordinary circumstances surrounding his or her life; or he or she has performed something extraordinary for society and its development (for better or worse); or he or she symptomatically reflects the spirits and tendencies of the age.

For Dr. Bade's biographical study of the protestant theologian and colonial politician, Friedrich Fabri (1824–1891), the third of the reasons given was particularly decisive. From 1857 until 1884 Fabri was the Inspector in Charge of the Rhenish Mission in Barmen, in 1880 founder and then chairman of the West German Association for Colonisation and Export, 1882–1887 board member (1883 also vice-president) of the newly founded German Colonial Association, 1887 board member of the German Colonial company, 1891 co-founder of the General German Association. Contemporaries called him the "Father of the German Colonial Movement". He was an active organizer, colonial agitator and expansionist publicist, but at the same time, and perhaps even more, he was an exponent of conservative-nationalist colonial movements encompassing wide groups of the population and of the virulent efforts to attain a German position of world power during the Bismarck period. He did not, however, remain unchallenged as a spokesman of these expansionist groups, but had some critics alongside the combatants; he was not just a chauvinist fanatic, but also dealt critically with both more moderate and more radical positions. A reconstruction of his ideas, his activity in associations and his journalistic, political and economic activities has been made by the very sensitive and conscientious author of this biography, which superbly reflects the "Spirit of the Age" and the concepts of imperialist thinking in the Germany of the time.

In six chapters Dr. Bade analyses (1) the Mission leader's path to becoming a colonial politician, (2) Fabri's "social-political" theory of 1879 for overcoming crises, (3) the organisation of the colonial interests in associations, (4) Fabri's personal designs for overseas colonial projects, (5) the consolidation of the colonial movement through the foundation of the German Colonial Society and (6) Fabri's quarrel and co-operation with Bismarck. As Fabri's personal papers have been lost, Dr. Bade had to evaluate publications by the colonial agitator, papers from the archives of the Rhenish Mission, the files of the Colonial Office, association files and publications, and items in the papers of Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (who for a time was Fabri's collaborator in the colonial movement), and much other widely scattered material.

Dr. Bade deals in a convincing manner with the way in which Fabri, conscious of the fact that his country was in a social crisis, and afraid of the fact that the excess population, the proletariat question and the socialist movement would lead to a social revolution, adopted social-reforming and social-defensive positions. As leader of the Mission he sought salvation in internal colonization, workers' houses, housing development and consumer co-operatives and in an integration of the lower middle class by the creation of property. As a colonial agitator he sought salvation in overseas expansion, informally by the export of goods, capital and people, and formally by the purchase of colonies for cultivation, for trade and for the deportation of the socially dangerous human potential. The social question was, so to speak, to be exported.

This crisis therapy of Fabri's fits in completely with the social imperialism model of interpretation as propagated recently in Germany, particular by Prof. Hans-Ulrich Wehler: Expansion to safeguard the existing social structure, or: Imperialism as a social-political safety valve. What Dr. Bade says about emigration, however, expands Wehler's interpretation and completes it. Fabri wanted a diversion of German immigration away from the United States, where the German element disappeared through assimilation, primarily to South America where possibly unified settlement areas could be established and where efforts towards Germanization seemed to promise success, then to German colonies in which the emigrants would be saved for the German nation and at the same time establish Germany's position as a world power. Thus for him emigration and the colonial movement were directly connected, they were two components of one projection. From Dr. Bade's research one can see that not all politicians who pursued social-defensive aims in the Germany of the period approved of social-imperialist tendencies. Otto Zacharias, one of Fabri's opponents, demanded, for instance, birth control. Another, F. C. Philippson, warned of international conflicts and defended the principle of free trade against colonial fanaticism. Friedrich Kapp condemned Fabri's conception as dangerous zealotry. One should also note that the impulse for the actual acquisition of overseas territories in 1884 did not come from the primarily social-imperialist oriented groups, but from the trade and capital interests of the Hanseatic cities which completely surprised many colonial enthusiasts, including Fabri, by their move.

It becomes clear from the activities of Fabri, his friends and also his opponents how private pressure groups worked in Bismarck's Germany. Even as leader of the Mission the colonial political organizer and agitator was taking up key positions in large associations and was so occupied with this that he neglected the Mission work and had to be dismissed in the end.

Then he pulled all the stops of mass influence out in order to push through his aims. He was not always successful from a colonial-political point of view though. His colonial projects in South America and Africa met with hardly any response; his efforts to obtain a seat in the Reichstag failed. Even in his association work there were setbacks. But Fabri's prestige as "Father of the Colonial Movement" was considerable: it was so large that he was able to criticise Bismarck's initial lack of colonial interest and his later charter policy and yet still be called upon by Bismarck as an adviser. At an early stage he demanded a Colonial Office in Berlin and greater state presence in the colonies. Bismarck did not follow his advice here, but his successor, Caprivi, carried Fabri's conception through.

If the colonial movement obtained its confirmation with the establishment of a German colonial empire, the discussion about a planned control of German emigration was less fruitful. When the German colonies proved unsuitable for the solution of the emigration question, Fabri and those of similar conviction concentrated on South America again more strongly. The emigration discussion, however, continued to fall on deaf ears in Bismarck's case. Later, when a Reich law on emigration was finally passed in 1897, emigration from Germany had dropped so much that the effect of the regulations remained slight.

Dr. Bade's comprehensive study is based on his doctoral thesis. This may be characteristic for his at times excessive love for detail. But taken as a whole, this work is much more than a doctoral thesis, it is a historiographical masterpiece by one of the younger generation of German scholars and has brought the interpretation of the German past a considerable step forward for a period which is of particular interest today.

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