A Little Germany in Victorian London

The revolutions, wars, and religious schisms of the nineteenth century created global diasporas of migrants, refugees, exiles, and people generally on the move. Some forged new identities, livelihoods, and destinies in their chosen haven, while others plotted, conspired, or dreamed wistfully away, attempting to influence from abroad events back in their native land. The Irish in America, Scots in southern Africa and Canada, Italians in South America, and Russians in France and Switzerland all established little colonies far away from home where they reproduced much of the culture and community they had left behind. After the revolutions of 1848, London, in particular, became a place of sanctuary for many of the expelled leaders of the so-called springtime of the peoples. Poles, Italians, the French, Hungarians, and Germans ended up in the British capital, where, with one or two famous exceptions—such as Giuseppe Mazzini and Louis Blanc—they were largely left alone to be absorbed into the teeming metropolis. From the older studies of William Roberts on Mazzini (*Prophet in Exile: Giuseppe Mazzini, 1837-68* [1989]), Peter Brock on the Polish exiles (“Joseph Cowen and the Polish Exiles,” published in the *Slavonic and East European Review* in 1953), Thomas Kádár on Francis Pulszky and Lajos Kossuth (*Diplomat in Exile: Francis Pulszky’s Political Activities in England, 1849-1860* [1979]), and Leo Loubère on Louis Blanc (*Louis Blanc: His Life and His Contribution to the Rise of Jacobin Socialism* [1961]), as well as more recent work by Fabrice Bensimon on Britain and the French Republic (*Les Britanniques face à la révolution française de 1848* [2000]), and by Saho Matsumoto-Best on British perceptions of the Italy of Pius IX (*Britain and the Papacy in the Age of Revolution, 1846-1851* [2003]), we know quite a lot about this generation of men of exile. And, fine accounts exist by Bernard Porter (*The Refugee Question in Mid-Victorian Politics* [1979]) and Margot Finn (*After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874* [1993]) about how Britain reacted in different ways to the presence of so many potentially troublesome visitors to its shores.

One refugee community—the Germans—is perhaps better documented, although not necessarily more understood, than others. As demonstrated by Christine Lattek’s detailed and definitive book—a revised version of her 1990 University of Cambridge PhD thesis—émigrés from Germany made up some 40 percent of the entire foreign community in mid-nineteenth-century London. They included sugar bakers, tailors, domestic servants, scholars (for example, the renowned philologist Max Müller), doctors, musicians (e.g., Charles Hallé), and, of course, two princes—Albert, the consort of Queen Victoria, and Metternich, the Austrian chancellor on the run. Radicals and socialists were prominent within this population. But the notoriety and posthumous influence of one of them—Karl Marx—has tended to dominate the historiography of German exiles. Marx (and Friedrich Engels) were at loggerheads with their compatriots for most of the decade or so after 1848, even getting into fistfights with some of them. Marx and Engels’s correspondence, in which they chronicle their despair and disgust at the pretensions and mistakes of other exiles, has long been
available to historians of the era. It has proved difficult to dislodge the conventional view that Marx and Engels were, to all intents and purposes, the most interesting and active of the political refugees.

The great achievement of Lattek’s book is to put Marx and Engels back in their proper place. Although they were always close to the center of German exile politics, Marx and Engels were not continuously involved in any of the key political organizations established by other refugees, and, over time, they became less connected with the exile community in America, or even with events back in Prussia and the other German states. Lattek traces the history of a series of exile groups—the League of the Just, the German Workers’ Educational Society, the Communist League, the European Central Democratic Committee, and the International Association—and the various German-language newspapers published in London that sustained their activities. She also makes very effective use of the archives of the Prussian secret police, who, at times, seem to have known more about the exiles than the exiles did themselves.

Two men emerge as the key agents of German socialist politics in exile: Karl Schapper and August Willich. Schapper was a former forestry student, who helped set up some of the first exile organizations and who befriended the English Chartists. He played an important part in the shaping of what became the Communist Manifesto (1848). Willich, once a military cadet, was not at all of an intellectual disposition. He was a popular orator and a gregarious presence in the London clubs and pubs frequented by his countrymen. Both men had more of a rapport with the German artisanal community in London than Marx and Engels, partly from actually having manned the barricades in the heady days of 1848. Willich, for one, never seemed to have given up planning for a military revolt in Prussia. Both were also instinctive collaborators. Lattek takes the reader through the very dense thickets of changing organizational strategies and personnel among the German exiles. Schapper and Willich opened up their organizations to other nationalities in exile, and they proved more eclectic in blurring the distinctions between democrats and socialists than Marx and Engels allowed. Indeed, a lot of the distrust that grew up between the different German camps was less over what was to be done in Germany, but with which of the various French factions they should unite. Alongside Schapper and Willich, there were other colorful personalities, whose reputation ensured a good political following: for example, Gottfried Kinkel, who escaped from a Prussian prison to be feted on arrival in England, and whose fifteen minutes of fame inspired the raising of a “German National Loan” (most of the subscribers came from the United States) to finance agitation back in Prussia.

Lattek describes well the ebb and flow of German exile politics in these years—the momentum built up around the axis of London, Paris, and Brussels in the 1840s; the links established with the internationalist wing of the Chartists, such as the Fraternal Democrats and later middle-class English radical supporters; and the events of 1848-49 themselves, when some socialist exiles, such as Joseph Moll, returned to fight in Germany only to lose their lives in battle. In 1850-51, exile politics seem to have been at their most exuberant and successful, with a coming together of many around a common platform of idealistic socialism. Even then, disputes were never far from the surface. The author of Effi Briest (1895), Theodor Fontane recalled visiting the Communist League’s headquarters (a hotel in Covent Garden) in 1852, and hearing one of Willich’s supporters declare to another, “‘when I gain power, the first one I am having shot is you!’” (p. 124). The good old days did not last. The show trial of captured “men of ’48” in Cologne and the coup d’état of Louis Napoleon in France in 1852, fundamentally weakened the movement. Many exiles continued on their journey across the Atlantic to America, while others gave up politics and returned to plying their trades and professions. A new lease of life was given during the Crimean War and its aftermath, when Napoleon III’s state cracked down on such French refugees as Victor Hugo and later on when France moved to eliminate Austrian strength in northern Italy. However, dissension and disagreement remained the norm for the German exile community. By the end of the 1850s, a new wave of exile newspapers had emerged, but the same divisions between democrats and socialists—captured for posterity in Marx’s cantankerous pamphlet, Herr Vogt (1860)—remained. And beyond the socialists, the sentiments of the exile community in London were shifting with the times. Lattek brings out well how many German refugees turned their attention from the late 1850s onward to the aspiration for German unification. The Schiller festival of 1859—celebrated in London—was an important moment in this transition. And it is interesting to note how many of the exiles whose activities are so meticulously brought to light in this book ended their days as pan-German nationalists who found themselves at one with Bismarck. One man remained aloof, working tirelessly in the British Museum on his magnum opus, and the rest, as they say, is
history. But as this book argues very convincingly, the politics of German socialism in exile were always much more than an episode in the life of Marx.

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