

**Klaus Weber.** *Deutsche Kaufleute im Atlantikhandel 1680-1830: Unternehmen und Familien in Hamburg, Cádiz und Bordeaux.* München: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2004. Tables, charts, maps. 403 pp. EUR 59.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-406-51860-7.



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## Comparative Commercial Families: Early Modern Germans on the Make in Atlantic Trade

Klaus Weber highlights three merchants at the beginning of his comprehensive and comparative study. Johann Christoph Harmenson from Hamburg settled in Bordeaux and gained success with a lively trade in colonial reexports and wine. His story partially represents the standard image of the early modern German merchant with an emphasis on the preeminence of the commercial relations between the Hanseatic north and the French Atlantic seaboard. Augustin and Christian Franz Rautenstrauch from Bohemian Blotendorf settled in Cadiz, Spain; they marketed Bohemian glassware and expanded their trade to a broad array of German and English goods. Eventually, they established branches in Lima and Mexico in New Spain. The family's ongoing commercial success in independent Mexico as well as throughout the Iberian Peninsula expands our understanding of the breadth and scope of early modern German merchants. These examples of the 460 merchant families analyzed in this work demonstrate well We-

ber's efforts to uncover the range of German merchants active in Atlantic trade between 1680 and 1830. If he challenges the traditional view that German commerce was monopolized in "Hanseatic colonies" abroad, his comparative analysis of mercantile activities in Cadiz and Bordeaux also reinforces the importance of Hanseatic merchants and the centrality of Hamburg in Atlantic commerce. Despite their importance, north Germans from Hamburg, Bremen, and Lübeck were not alone; German merchant communities drew from many inland regions, in particular Bohemia, Westphalia, and Bavaria.

For historians of the Atlantic world, Weber's study makes an important contribution by exploring German merchants—their origins, trade, and family networks—active in the foreign merchant communities in the Atlantic ports of Cadiz and Bordeaux. He corrects the traditional approach that tends to favor the British, Dutch, French, and Spanish in the Atlantic world based on their suc-

cess in establishing colonies and commercial monopolies. As no German colonies existed, German merchants have long been marginalized in traditional scholarship. Likewise, traditional national interpretations of economic development focused on the development of the “nation” alone. Weber, who mined archives in France, Spain, and Germany, emphasizes that this “national approach” to early modern trade and merchant communities is problematic. This is especially the case with German merchants, since Germany did not exist as a state or national identity. In the last three decades, historians have begun to feature the importance of cosmopolitan commercial networks in the Atlantic world. Weber’s study contributes to this work as it uncovers German family networks that retained strong connections to their regions of origin. Confession more than national origin, however, played the key role in social integration in commercial communities. In his analysis of German merchant communities, he demonstrates how these family networks extended both internally to inland points of production as well as externally to the French and Spanish colonies where merchants developed new trade strategies for economic and political success. This work reinforces the view that the “nation state” is not the best unit for analyzing and measuring economic growth.

The study is well organized and commences with a clear introduction and assessment of recent historiography on the early modern Atlantic world and German commerce. The second chapter provides an interesting overview of trade between German territories and the Atlantic economy between 1650 and 1850. Based on an assessment of secondary sources, Weber emphasizes the importance and breadth of colonial goods—sugar, coco, indigo, tobacco, cotton, coffee, and tea—in German central Europe as consumer items that influenced all social groups. Furthermore, he points out that trade did not go in one direction by highlighting demand in colonial markets for European goods, especially ironwork, tools, and textiles produced in German central Europe. He then provides a very

concise summary of the development and regional sources of exports from German central Europe, in particular iron and metal goods, textiles, glassware, and clocks. He concludes this chapter with a discussion of inland (river and canals) trade as well as transformation in foreign export trade after 1815.

The following three chapters explore the German communities in Cadiz and Bordeaux as well as the central role of Hamburg in European commerce. The first two chapters share common structures that introduce the reader to each city, its foreign merchants, and economic relations between German merchants and the state. These chapters also provide a wide range of case studies of family and commercial networks. In fact, Weber argues that family structures and relations were central in connecting German manufacturing to plantation economies and Atlantic trade. Comparing Cadiz and Bordeaux makes clear that German proto-industrial exports were in demand in Spain and Spanish colonies, whereas German goods, primarily textiles, were important exports from Bordeaux to African and Caribbean markets. Low wages in German central Europe combined with demographic growth made German goods highly competitive in the Atlantic market. Likewise, low labor costs in Hamburg generated an economy focused on processing such colonial imports as sugar, coffee, and tobacco. Hamburg’s economic ties with French domestic exports (wine and luxury goods) and colonial goods were central to its role as a commercial transit hub.

The chapters on individual cities are followed by a comparative analysis that explores family and business networks in inland proto-industry, plantation economies, and Atlantic trade. Weber emphasizes the importance of family support, security, and structures in early modern commerce. He follows different generations as they succeed (more often in France than in Spain) to integrate into social and economic life, and expand family businesses and branches. He also highlights how

the exports of German textiles and banking intersected successfully with the eighteenth-century slave trade, and argues that German merchants in Bordeaux benefited from the slave trade and plantation economies as much as did the French. Finally, he points out that war on the high seas, economic blockades, and above all the Napoleonic Continental System ruptured the old regime Atlantic economy and initiated the decline of foreign merchant colonies. Though some family networks endured, generally family structures lost their importance as mercantile families ceased to monopolize all commercial activities from shipping to banking to manufacturing. Despite such breaks, he notes important continuities in inland industries as modern manufacturing, especially chemicals, had roots in early textile industries.

Weber provides his readers with several case studies of successful German merchant families. Along with contextualizing them with other foreign merchants and methodologically assessing their economic performance in charts and graphs, he explores the geography of the merchant communities as well as marriage strategies, conversions, and intergenerational family structures. This is commendable work. Yet there is little on merchant sociability, especially during the enlightened and sociable eighteenth century. We know, in Hamburg, for example, that associational life and clubs were central to commercial and family networks. To what degree did the mercantile associational life and sociability influence the family networks and economic success of merchant communities on the Atlantic coast or in the colonies? In fact, the reader wants to know more about those merchants who expanded to Mexico, Peru, and the Caribbean. Although the focus of the book is clearly German merchant communities in Spain and France, the role of England, Canada, and the United States and their varied German mercantile communities would have been a useful comparison. Comparing German communities' commercial success and social integration in Baltimore or Philadelphia (based on secondary sources) to

those in Bordeaux or the French Caribbean could have been useful to this otherwise exemplary comparative study. In fact, Weber's comparative approach encourages more research on these early modern commercial networks in the Atlantic world and beyond.

The temporal emphasis in the book is clearly prerevolutionary and it is very solid. Yet the reader might like to hear more about how these family networks attempted to survive international war and economic blockade. The French and Napoleonic wars end this world too abruptly. The period of the French and Napoleonic wars and the decades following read often like an epilogue than part of the analysis. Yet Weber points out that some of the families managed to restore the portions of their earlier commercial status or shift into banking during the postwar period after 1815. This reader would like to know more about how these families navigated those postwar years and the new economic models advanced by the English. Weber's overview of the postwar decades suggests that the merchant family networks became less important as the economy industrialized, which contests other work on kinship structures in the modern era. Thus, his work raises some important questions for future researchers on the transitions within the German, European, and Atlantic economies between 1815 and 1830.

The methodological study of 460 German merchant families in Cadiz and Bordeaux remains the strength of this study demonstrated by the many tables, genealogical charts, and maps located at the end of the book. It provides insights into German merchant networks beyond the Hanseatic communities. Weber surveys secondary sources in German, Spanish, French, and English, and examines commercial and state papers, family correspondence, wills, and consulate and notarized documents to formulate his comparative analysis. Extensive research in Spanish, French, and German archives and engagement with mainstream historiography on Atlantic trade and proto-indus-

trialization make this an important contribution to scholars working on Atlantic merchant communities. It also enriches our understanding of the early modern import and export trade in German central Europe. Weber's work will hopefully encourage more comparative studies on commercial networks, families, and trade within and beyond Europe during these important transitional decades.

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