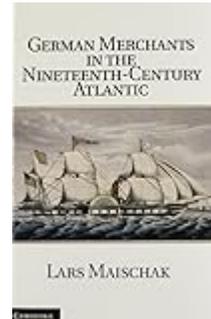




Lars Maischak. *German Merchants in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 315 S. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-01729-0.



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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (July, 2014)

L. Maischak: German Merchants

I have been told by scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century global trade networks that it becomes easy over time to see economic forces as the primary impetus of change in history. Lars Maischak, I suspect, would agree, at least as related to the social, political and professional lives of long-distance merchants and natives of Bremen, Germany between 1815 and 1870.

Maischak's book *German Merchants in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic*, derived from his Frisk Stern Prize-winning dissertation completed at Johns Hopkins University, offers a detailed exposé of this community, who were stationed in Europe and in American cities like New York and Baltimore. His work significantly pushes scholars of the antebellum United States and of circa-1848 Germany to extend their narratives beyond the nation and to embrace those transoceanic linkages that impacted such private and public decisions on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean as family formation, religious ideologies, communication, and military hostility. To this end, he helpfully employs Ferdinand Tönnies' concept of *Gemeinschaft*, or community, wherein the emotional, spiritual, mercantile and political opinions of traders mu-

tually informed each other. This is substantially shown in the rich correspondence founding his research.

Maischak, however, has another bone to pick with historians, whom he claims often and inaccurately associate the globalization of commerce with intentional liberal democratization. Bremen merchants, he contrasts, were "cosmopolitan conservatives" (pp. 82-107) who sought to preserve and expand the hierarchies they inherited from medieval Germanic estates and to protect their families through smartly opposed to speculative business investments. To do this, they used exchange to encourage "moral economies" (p. 50) at home and overseas. This meant envisioning the means of commerce including new transport technologies and trade routes as inspiring a Kantian world peace guided by their paternalist and Christian selves. *German Merchants in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic* reveals that this model resulted in prominence for the Hanseatics during the mid-1800s and allowed Bremen political autonomy. Yet, Maischak shows, the very networks and technologies that allowed for success resulted in these merchants' undoing. By the 1860s, advanced warfare, popular national-

ist movements, and industrial capitalism were realities of life across the Atlantic Ocean. These factors, which relied on the same interconnectivities as long-distance trade, caused the disruption of shipping, the political fragmentation of commercial families and the proletarianization of counting houses. For economic protection, Hanseatic merchants abandoned their hierarchical view of trade and accepted sideline roles under a popular Prussia in 1866. Yet, this was not, Lars Maischak cleverly concludes, a moment of embrace by Bremen of liberal participatory politics. The story of these nineteenth-century merchants, instead, was of creation turning against creator.

German Merchants in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic is organized into three sections, which follow Bremen's long-distance traders from the height of their international dominance through their reluctant consolidation with Northern German Union patriots in the 1860s. The first three chapters function as social history, introducing the men, their wives and children who contributed to this commercial community and explaining the origins of their conservatism. The protection of family and concerns for its conserved standing over time, Maischak explains, caused early Hanseats to privilege women's claims to money tied up in business and to form partnerships shaped limitedly by nuclear and affinal ties. The next few chapters identify this home-centeredness as a distinct form of cosmopolitanism, rather than provinciality. Maischak effectively uses Bremen's successful bid to be terminus of a transoceanic mail service between the United States and Europe in the 1840s to highlight Hanseatic merchant's overseas vision for which he compares to the United States Whigs and influence in non-local politics. The book's final section explores the consequences of this connectedness, including the shift of business away from families and towards abstract investments in banking and stock. Identifying a transatlantic world of mid-nineteenth-century calamities (i.e. the Panic of 1857, Danish naval aggression and the American Civil War), Maischak substantiates his argument that Bremen merchants could no longer survive with their existing model of independent economic idealism.

Maischak thus crafts a narrative about Bremen as an independent republic whose move towards German nationalism was unwanted and unintended. He further shows that commerce transacted between Hanseatic merchants and other Germans was not influenced by ethnicity but was completed in ways mirroring that with other non-Bremen, like North Americans (p. 6). This

noted, I find his inclusion of the identifier "German Merchants" in his title to be confusing. The text suggests that its subjects, at least until the 1860s, would not have recognized the descriptor. The phrase also causes readers to expect ethnicity to play a larger role in the study. A bit of textual reflection on this specific word-choice might have opened *German Merchants in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic* to conversations especially with immigration scholars, who share its interests in questions of movement, networking and group-identities across geographies.

The book also provides wonderful vignettes of Hanseats in this period, such as Wilhelm Kiesselbach and the Gustav Schawbs, who clearly shared many values and ways of doing business. I am interested, however, in those exceptions-to-the-rule that Maischak identifies but only limitedly explores, including the traders who socialized and commercially interacted with the non-Bremen "Hones, Tappans, Wadsworths, Fishers, and Taney's" (p. 270) in the Americas. The existence of these examples causes me to wonder: was it a distinct "Hanseaticness" that bound Bremen's transoceanic merchants together? Or were their values more inclusive? Given that Maischak identifies nineteenth-century Hanseats as employing eighteenth-century business models, it might be helpful to have incorporated more of this earlier historiography. The works of Pierre Gervais, Cathy Matson and Craig Muldrew, in particular, recognize the limited commercial networks that Maischak convincingly shows for his Bremen merchants. They also, however, link their traders through divergent webs of credit, recommendation and trust, beyond ancestry. Pierre Gervais, *Neither Imperial, nor Atlantic: a Merchant Perspective on International Trade in the Eighteenth Century*, in: *History of European Ideas* 34 (2008), pp. 465-473; Cathy Matson, *Merchants and Empire. Trading in Colonial New York, Baltimore 2002*; Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation. The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England*, New York 1998. Could these same models have explained both inter- and extra-Hanseatic mercantile networks? I especially would be interested to hear how Maischak understands his research to extend, improve or challenge these narratives for the mid-1800s.

These few thoughts aside, and certainly stemming from my interest in this project, the amount of research invested in *German Merchants in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic* is truly impressive. Undergraduate students may struggle with some of the economic theories basing its arguments. Seasoned scholars, especially of trade in the Anglophone Atlantic World, however, will enjoy

the access to German-language sources in Maischak's footnotes. Ultimately, Lars Maischak does much to extend a transatlantic paradigm often ended in the 1700s into the nineteenth century. He not only identifies Bremen merchants as major players in this setting, wherein the world market was being made (p. 264). His manuscript emphasizes that the desired goals of this economic change were multifaceted, not always intentional and never guaranteed.

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Citation: Kristin L. Condotta. Review of Maischak, Lars, *German Merchants in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. July, 2014.

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