

Germans in Bloomsbury

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This paper will be based partly on research done over 20 years ago for my book about German political exiles who came to Britain in the wake of the 1848 revolutions, *Little Germany: Exile and Asylum in Victorian England* (OUP, 1986; 1989), and partly on current research I am doing on 19th-century Bloomsbury.

I will start by giving a brief overview of the German refugees who settled in London in the 1850s, then focus on the reasons why Bloomsbury in particular attracted a significant number of these, and finally give an account of the careers of three of them.

Following the unsuccessful revolutions in many European cities in 1848, large numbers of foreigners – French, German, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, Russian – made their way to safety in London. Some settled here, some moved to other British cities, and others emigrated to America. The Germans formed one of the largest groups, but as a group they were noticeably heterogeneous in their politics and in their professions and trades. Some clustered round the undeniable giant of the exile, that ‘honorary Bloomsbury resident’ Karl Marx, joining the Communist League and later the International Workers’ Association with him; these included many tailors, carpenters, and other skilled tradesmen, who scraped a living in the mean streets of Fitzrovia or Soho, and also intellectuals, many of whom survived financially by tutoring, governessing, and journalism. Marx kept himself aloof from all those who differed from him in politics, or who set themselves up as leaders of rival factions. It is largely thanks to his colourful, energetic, and often splenetic descriptions of their doings in his letters to Engels that we know so much about these Germans; he also vented his spleen in a great comic work, unpublished in his lifetime, called ‘Die Grossen Männer des Exils’ (‘The Great Men of the Exile’, 1852).

The poorer refugees of all nationalities crowded, along with their poor English counterparts, into rooms and cramped lodgings mainly in the Leicester Square area and Fitzrovia (which was colonised in particular by tailors). The more radical of them plotted revolution in Soho and Covent Garden pubs. The less radical, and those with families to keep, set about finding decent accommodation and steady work. Jobs were hard to find, and many faced near-starvation – including Marx himself, who famously spent his time writing *Das Kapital* in the Reading Room of the British Museum and earned only irregular amounts of money from his political journalism for the *New York Daily Tribune*. The Marx family were kept afloat – just – by cheques and money orders sent from Manchester by Engels, who was relatively wealthy, since he managed his father's cotton factory in Lancashire. But some of the educated exiles found tutoring among the wealthy German banking and merchant families who already lived in London – families like the Rothschilds and the Huths. Others were helped by the expanding educational opportunities in London in the 1850s. Vacancies for teachers occurred at several female institutions which were opened at mid-century, among them Queen's College for training girls as governesses, the Ladies' College in Bedford Square offering university-level classes for women (though not yet degrees), and the North London Collegiate School. So also, pre-eminently, did University College London and to a lesser degree King's College London, the former opened in 1828, the latter in 1831. Both taught modern languages (not studied at Oxbridge), and it is hardly surprising to find that some of the early professors of German, French, and Italian were political exiles.

UCL in particular played a vital role in the lives of many of the German exiles. Established in Bloomsbury to offer a university education in the capital, and specifically to educate young men of all religious faiths and none - in direct contrast to the two ancient English universities, which required students to be confessing members of the Church of England - UCL was innovative in giving access to nonconformists, Roman Catholics, Jews, atheists, and others. The openness to differing faiths applied to students and professors alike at the

‘godless College’ on Gower Street.¹ Needless to say, none of the Germans arriving in London, a large proportion of whom were university-educated professional men, was a member of the Church of England; many were not members of any church.

As UCL was also innovative in its curriculum, teaching among other new subjects languages, geography, geology, and later physiology and psychology, it was the ideal institution, along with University College School, run on the same free principles, for foreigners of all religious beliefs to study, teach, and in due course send their sons. (Many of the German exiles’ sons attended UCS in the 1860s and 1870s. Their names often feature in the prizes lists.²) Evening classes were offered at UCL to women and to working men; we know that some of Marx’s working-class friends attended Thomas Henry Huxley’s lectures on physiology in the 1860s. Though Marx did not live in Bloomsbury and had no surviving sons to send to University College School, he was, of course, a constant large presence in Bloomsbury through his daily stints in the Reading Room of the British Museum.

Gottfried Kinkel

The first Bloomsbury-related exile I wish to focus on in detail is Gottfried Kinkel, now forgotten but in 1850 a much better known German refugee than Marx. Kinkel, in the words of the Russian émigré Alexander Herzen (who himself lived in Euston Square in the early 1850s³), was ‘one of the most remarkable German emigrants in London’, and also ‘one of the heads of the forty times forty German schisms’ in the capital.⁴ Handsome and expressive, Kinkel was one of the few exiles whose fame preceded him to England. A

¹ Establishmen

only two were considered seriously: David Masson, aged thirty, a graduate of Aberdeen University who had written essays on Milton and the Pre-Raphaelites and had references from, among others, Thomas Carlyle, and Kinkel, who though having no proven expertise in the subject, could speak and write English well and had experience as a lecturer in Bonn. Kinkel had impressive references too, from German colleagues and from the classicist and UCL Council member George Grote (himself the grandson of a German banker who had settled in Britain). Kinkel so impressed the appointing committee with his eloquence at interview and with his general knowledge of philology that a majority of its members recommended him for the post, despite his obvious disadvantage as a foreigner. Though UCL was famous – or infamous – for its openness in matters of political and religious belief, the Council, which met to consider the committee's recommendation, felt it did not

field of battle, then a Prussian prison, 'perhaps the oddest thing of all is that all this plus London did not change him in the least, and he remained a German professor', with 'something judicial and episcopal, solemn, stiff, and modestly self-satisfied' about him.¹⁰ Marx was characteristically rude, reporting in a letter to a German emigrant in America on the lecture, which he had not attended but of which a friend had given him an account:

The amiable Gottfried has so far succeeded in ingratiating himself that he has been accorded the use of one of London University's lecture rooms to repeat before a London audience his old series of lectures on Christian art in the Middle Ages. He is giving them *free* and gratis in the hope that he will be able to worm his way into the post of Professor of Aesthetics at London University.¹¹

I wonder what Marx would have said if he had known that Kinkel had very nearly become Professor – not of Aesthetics, as there was no such post – but of English at UCL some months before.

In 1866 Kinkel was offered a chair in Art History at Zurich, which he accepted. He was given a splendid farewell dinner by many of the London Germans, including the engineer William Siemens, several businessmen, and scholars like Theodor Goldstücker, Professor of Sanskrit at UCL and yet another German émigré.

Johannes Ronge

One of Kinkel's many friends in London was Johannes Ronge, also an exile but in this case more a religious than a political one. He had founded a modern liberal Roman Catholic sect, the 'Freie Gemeinde' (Free Community) in Hamburg in 1846 and had come to England in 1849 to escape repression and the closing down of the school he had opened in connection with the sect.

¹⁰ Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, III, 1158.

¹¹ Marx to Adolf Cluss, 17 April 1853, *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, 48 vols. (London, 1975-2001), XXXIX, 313.

Marx's wife Jenny described his 'German Catholic organ tones' at a London banquet attended by miscellaneous German exiles in 1852.¹² Marx mocked the title Ronge was widely given of 'the modern Luther', adding that he was John the Baptist to Kinkel's Jesus Christ; and Johanna Kinkel noted ruefully that Ronge was doing quite well in finding converts and supporters.¹³

In fact there was not a huge amount of sympathy in London for Ronge's brand of Catholicism and it was in another field that he and his wife Bertha were to make their mark. They introduced the kindergarten system to Britain, opening the first of its kind in their Hampstead house in September 1851, and soon moving to Bloomsbury's Tavistock Place to continue the venture. Their joint work, *A Practical Guide to the English Kinder Garten*, was published in 1855. Though the Ronges themselves returned to Germany in 1861, they left behind enough trained and dedicated kindergarten teachers to continue and spread the system. The Education Act of 1870 and the associated establishment of School Boards incorporated the kindergarten system into mainstream education, and by 1893 the Ronges' *Practical Guide* had gone through eighteen editions. The kindergarten system thrived in London, still run from Tavistock Place. The Froebel Society, named after the founder Friedrich Froebel, under whom Ronge had studied, was established in 1874; training schools were opened by Emily Shirreff, President of the Society and a member of the Women's Education Union, and her sister Maria Grey, who added a kindergarten department in 1883 to her Training College for Women Teachers. The movement thus grew as part of the expansion of opportunities in education and training for women in the last decades of the nineteenth century, many in organisations established in Bloomsbury.

Adolf Heimann

One of the members of the appointment committee at UCL which nearly gave Kinkel the chair of English in 1852 was Adolf Heimann, Professor of German

¹² See Ingrid Donner and Birgit Matthies, 'Jenny Marx über das Robert-Blum-Meeting am 9. November 1852 in London', *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels Forschung*, IV (1978).

in the College since 1848 and a teacher at University College School before that.¹⁴ In 1853 he and his English wife Amelia moved with their children to a large house on the south side of Gordon Square built by the speculative builder Thomas Cubitt in the 1820s. The house, one of three in the only block still standing on that side of the square, was expensive to run, and Heimann and his wife took in student boarders. Heimann also taught female pupils at the Ladies' College - coinciding there in the academic session 1854-

professional rank.¹⁷ [It was only in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, when the 99-year leases began to fall in, that the houses in the area became largely given over to boarding houses, small hotels, and divided flats.¹⁸] Thwarted by his landlord, Heimann rented a house in Queen Square – still in Bloomsbury but not Bedford-owned – and advertised his college, defiantly called the Gordon College, for the teaching of German to women from October 1868.¹⁹

The Bloomsbury Germans I have been talking about – and there are more whom I have not had time to include – were part of a remarkable German colony in London, many of whom gravitated naturally, by virtue of their profession as teachers and professors, their non-alignment in religion, and