‘Auslandsdeutschum’ in Brazil (1919–1941): Global Discourses and Local Histories*

Frederik Schulze

The transnational and global perspectives that have emerged during the last two decades have directed our attention towards histories, entanglements and circulations of actors and discourses beyond the nation state. A number of historians of German history have encouraged us to consider global repercussions and alternative historical spaces.¹ While most of the empirical research pursued within these parameters has occurred in German colonial and imperial history, migration history, surprisingly, has received scant attention. Although migration history is *per se* transnational, historians such as Klaus J. Bade, Jan and Leo Lucassen have felt compelled nevertheless to call for historians to discard their narrow, national perspectives, and the concomitant focus on specific moments of emigration or immigration that continue to dominate much of the research on migrations.² From this perspective, immigrants appear to simply move from one nation to another and preserve (or abandon) their ‘ethnicity’.

Moreover, while many recent studies have characterized ‘ethnicity’ as a socially constructed category, they often continue to regard ‘ethnicity’ as essentially a group identity that can be applied equally to all emigrants – indeed to assume that this is so. Frequently this is the case even among scholars who stress the plurality and hybridity of ‘ethnicity’. Terms such as ‘diaspora’ and ‘identity’ have functioned similarly:³ they homogenize groups of people while asserting that the people in those groups consider themselves distinct. Even many studies focused on global and transnational aspects of German migration history continue to seek Germans abroad.⁴

¹ I would like to thank H. Glenn Penny for inviting me to contribute to this special issue and for helpful suggestions regarding this text.
This article underscores that these are not new problems. On the contrary, from the early nineteenth century, and especially in the interwar period, German nationalist actors tried to construct a homogeneous German ethnicity that could overcome the national boundaries and link emigrated persons as so-called ‘Germans abroad’ (Auslandsdeutsche) to the German nation. We should not just recapitulate those narratives and categories. Drawing on the example of German immigrants in southern Brazil, this essay argues that national and ethnic categories do little to help us explain migration phenomena, because these categories lose their definitiveness through the very processes of migration and acculturation, if, indeed, they were ever viable in the first place.

Surely, national discourses and politics have frequently played an important role for migrations, and they should be analysed together with the transnationality and global connections at the heart of those migrations. Stefan Rinke has comprehensively shown how various transnational actors shaped German cultural policy in Latin America during the Weimar Republic and instrumentalized German migrants for their political goals, that is, for strengthening German trade and influence. But the history of emigrants themselves belies the simplicity and uniformity of those discourses and narratives, which frequently led to contradictions and conflicts, as Rinke has also pointed out in a more general way, and as this article tries to comprehend through a regional case study.

Rogers Brubaker has argued that we should ‘not uncritically adopt categories of ethnopolitical practice as our categories of social analysis.’ This warning is especially appropriate for the term ‘Germanness’ (Deutschtum). Political and intellectual elites fashioned it in the early nineteenth century as a marker for an ethnic nation. They regarded the ‘German people’ (deutsches Volk) as a community with common ancestry, language and culture, and its use in Brazil reified the extremely heterogeneous Germans by positing a misleadingly homogeneous unity. Transnational studies, however, should assist us in overcoming not only the spatial but also the ethnic meaning of Deutschtum, by incorporating the interdependence of both global and local perspectives into our analyses. For global processes always include local refractions, just as local histories take shape within broader contextualizations.

---


6 For Latin America, cf. Michael Goebel and Nicola Foote (eds), Immigration and National Identities in Latin America (Gainesville, 2014).


9 Jörg Echternkamp, Der Aufstieg des deutschen Nationalismus (1770–1840) (Frankfurt/Main, 1998).

As Brazilian scholars are quick to remind us, the Brazilian perspective matters as well.\textsuperscript{11} For, in the final analysis, the histories in this study concern Brazilian citizens.\textsuperscript{12} Immigrants, however, were also not simply that—simply Brazilian citizens—any more than ‘ethnic Germans’ in eastern Europe were ever simply Hungarian or Czech or part of another national polity. As numerous studies on the German borderlands in eastern Europe and on ethnic politics in Austria-Hungary have shown, the local populations were not always interested in national projects. Indeed, as Pieter Judson and others have demonstrated, many of these communities developed a vigorous ‘bilingualism, apparent indifference to national identity, and nationally opportunist behaviours’.\textsuperscript{13} Supposed strong categories such as language and ethnicity were not automatically as definitive as the hegemonic discourses would have us believe. The same is true in Brazil.

This essay expands on these points about the interdependence of global and local situations by analysing the various discourses of Deutschtum that gained salience during the Weimar Republic among the German-Brazilian elites in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, the main Brazilian destination of German immigrants. Between 1919 and 1941, when foreign-language publications could be published in Brazil, some Germans and German-Brazilians took part in constructing the idea of a global ‘German ethnic community’ (Volksgemeinschaft), a project developed in Germany at the same time.

Due to the outcome of World War I, and the subsequent creation of new German minorities in Europe, the German community abroad (Auslandsdeutschtum) emerged in the minds of many as a kind of transnational society of victims. The local elites in Rio Grande do Sul connected the experiences of German immigrants in Brazil to those of many ethnic Germans in eastern Europe and Germany’s former African colonies in ways that evidence the global dimensions of German nationality. In southern Brazil, however, those same discourses also confronted reconfigurations that had taken place on the ground, and thus they met with a good deal of scepticism. Not even the German-Brazilian elites of southern Brazil, though they were the most receptive immigrants for ethnic discourses, agreed with the idea of a homogeneous Deutschtum in Brazil and they therefore altered, criticized and rejected discourses that tried to construct a German space in Brazil. For in the end, and despite the cultural heritage of many German-Brazilians, the local situation in which they lived was no longer a German one.

I. German Immigration and Migration Politics in Brazil

Only a small percentage of the mass transatlantic migration of Germanophones during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries went to Brazil. In total, between 1824 and


1933, they amounted to around 216,000 arrivals. Nevertheless, German immigrants and their descendants formed, over time, an important part of the population in the southern states of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina.

These immigrants were not a unitary group, and before the foundation of Imperial Germany in 1871, they were not even German citizens. Moreover, from 1871 to 1945, the borders and the belonging of people to the German state varied significantly. Even the term ‘German national’ did not refer to the same group of people across the decades encompassed by this study. The immigrants came from different regions, such as Hunsrück, Pomerania, Westfalen, Württemberg and even Russia. The majority were peasants who settled as farmers in southern Brazil and practised subsistence farming there. Others were craftsmen or, especially after 1900, workers who preferred to migrate to the big cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul. Members of the middle and upper classes, such as merchants, industrialists and intellectuals, also settled in the cities.

In addition, there were other distinguishing characteristics among the so-called ‘German’ immigrants in Brazil. Religion mattered a great deal: these immigrants were equally divided between Protestants and Catholics, with Protestants at a great disadvantage. During period of the Brazilian Empire (1822–1889), when Catholicism was the state religion, Protestants did not have equal legal rights. Politics mattered too: the immigrants represented a wide spectrum of political positions, including liberal, conservative, anarchist, socialist and, later, Nazi. Moreover, their reasons for migrating differed as well: many peasants decided to migrate in order to escape starvation and economic problems, while merchants were looking for new business opportunities, just as merchants had always done. Liberal Forty-Eighters, anarchists and Jews, on the other hand, fled for political reasons. An immigrant’s time of entry into Brazil also had critical implications: different waves, or generations, of immigrants acculturated in different intensities to Brazilian society. Especially after 1918, established immigrants and their descendants had reservations about newly immigrated Germans. In the nineteenth century, many immigrants acquired Brazilian citizenship, and in 1889, with the advent of the Brazilian Republic, all immigrants were naturalized.

From the 1860s, Prussian and later German private societies and state authorities sent pastors, missionaries, teachers and diplomats to southern Brazil to help preserve and create Deutschtum in Brazil (Deutschumsarbeit). They expected schools, churches and local associations to homogenize the heterogeneous emigrant groups in ways that would strengthen German trade and heighten Germany’s political influence in Brazil. Due to the lack of formal German colonies before 1884, many businessmen and officials recognized the potential value of the emigrants for German colonial policy and, later on, as agents for informal empire.

---

14 The data is taken from Hernán Asdrúbal Silva (ed.), Inmigración y estadísticas en el Cono Sur de América: Argentina—Brasil—Chile (Mexico City, 1990), pp. 149–51, but we should bear in mind that he does not consider return trips and transitional stays. On immigration to Brazil more generally, cf. Boris Fausto (ed.), Fazer a América: A imigração em massa para a América Latina (São Paulo, 1999); Lesser, Immigration.

Since many of these organizations believed that such emigrants to the U.S. quickly assimilated, and were thus lost to the German nation, they began agitating to redirect the mass migration towards regions where Germans would stay or become German. Southern Brazil emerged in the 1860s as the outstanding alternative for German colonization: a putatively empty space, with temperate climate, where travellers reported that Germans were ostensibly isolated and able to fulfill their cultural mission by preserving their Deutsche abroad.\textsuperscript{16} This was, however, a colonial utopia; recent studies have shown that the settlers were anything but isolated in Brazil.\textsuperscript{17}

In the imperial period, a network of colonial and ecclesiastical societies, among them the Association for Germanness Abroad (\textit{Verein für das Deutschtum im Auslande}, VDA) which supported German-speaking schools everywhere in the world, worked globally for the preservation of Deutsche and developed critical ties to Germanophone Brazilian urban elites and their societies and press. Schools and churches were the most important institutions within these networks erected to preserve Deutsche, and over time, those included elite Gymnasium and Protestant synods. In contrast to the concerted efforts of these private organizations, the German government’s policy towards Brazil was at best half-hearted.\textsuperscript{18}

Even without the direct involvement of the German state, the Brazilian government was sceptical about the myriad efforts at Deutschtumsarbeit. Initially, political elites favoured large-scale European immigration as a means of gaining a free labour force that could replace slave labour (abolished in 1888),\textsuperscript{19} an effective way of securing the sparsely populated south of the country against Argentina’s territorial claims, and an opportunity to ‘civilize’ and ‘whiten up’ the Brazilian nation by replacing Afro-Brazilians with Europeans.\textsuperscript{20} Brazilian elites, like many in Germany, regarded German immigrants as cultural pioneers. Although this view existed until the 1930s, a second and more critical opinion about the Germans gained strength after the foundation of the Republic in 1889. Partly as a reaction to the Deutschtumsarbeit, and partly as an expression of the Republicans’ new nationalist project, politicians and journalists launched their own homogenizing discourse, energetically criticizing the Germans in southern Brazil for not assimilating into Brazilian society, and calling for national efforts to accelerate the process. By 1900, those complaints in the press also began including frequent discussion of the so-called ‘German danger (\textit{perigo alemão})’, emanating from accusations that the German Empire had expansionist plans for southern Brazil. This was fuelled to a large degree by U.S. propaganda against German competition in South American markets.\textsuperscript{21}


\textsuperscript{17}Tramontini, \textit{organização}.

\textsuperscript{18}Gerhard Brunn, \textit{Deutschland und Brasilien} (1889–1914) (Cologne/Vienna, 1971).


\textsuperscript{20}Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, \textit{O espetáculo das raças: Cientistas, instituições e questão racial no Brasil, 1870–1930} (São Paulo, 1993); Thomas Skidmore, \textit{Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought} (Durham, 1993).

During World War I, new tensions also arose because many German-Brazilians sym-
pathized with the Central Powers, while the Brazilian majority supported the Allies. 
When German submarines torpedoed several Brazilian ships during the Atlantic block-
ade in 1917, mobs destroyed houses and businesses with German names in Porto Alegre 
and other cities, and between the Brazilian declaration of war on the Central Powers 
22

Beginning in 1930, the nationalistic and authoritarian regime of Getúlio Vargas con-
tinued the efforts to nationalize the immigrants. In order to create a Brazilian national 
community, his regime took measures to mix immigrants regionally, to end cultural 
activities that might undercut Brazilianness, such as Deutschtsarbeitt, and to press for 
‘assimilation’, a concept he took from the Chicago School of Sociology.23

II. Deutschtsarbeitt in Brazil, 1919–1941

As the loss of the war and the Treaty of Versailles put an end to Wilhemine Weltpolitik 
and stripped the German state of territory and colonies, Germans living outside the 
state’s borders in Europe gained increasing attention in political debates. Those living 
outside Europe were important as well. As Stefan Rinke has shown, German trans-
national actors quickly sought to re-establish their connections in Latin America and 
promote a cultural policy there that would helped to salvage Germany’s image abroad 
and promote commercial relations.24 The preservation of Deutschtsarbeitt was an integral 
part of these efforts.

As a result, societies such as the VDA boomed during the interwar period, and 
German-speaking schools abroad were recognized by these organizations as impor-
tant pillars of their Deutschtsarbeitt. Thus the VDA sent legates to Brazil to evaluate 
the Germanophone schools and to support the centralization of the school system in 
order to strengthen German influence in the local schools. For this purpose, the VDA 
distributed educational material and initiated the first German-Brazilian schools con-
ference (Deutschbrasilianischer Schultag) in São Paulo in 1920. There, German-speaking 
teachers, clergymen and diplomats gathered to show their commitment to ‘German 
volkstum’, discuss political goals and elaborate curricula.25 Education was 
tegral to promoting identification with Germany. At the third Schultag in 1925, the 
Landesverband deutsch-brasilianischer Lehrer was founded to organize the teaching staff and 
to instruct it in a political way. It received support from the German embassy, the city of 
Hamburg (whose merchants were traditionally interested in good trade relations 
overseas) and the VDA, and it was integrated into the Verein deutscher Auslandslehrer.26

The Reich Education Fund (Reichsschulfond), which boasted an ever-growing budget to

24 Rinke, Der letzte freie Kontinent, pp. 291–412.
26 The process, however, remained incomplete. In 1931, only 50% of the German-speaking teachers in Brazil were members. Ibid., p. 10.
support German schools abroad, even supported the creation of middle schools to maintain the education of the German-speaking elites and distributed its largesse to German schools across the south. In 1930 alone, it contributed 250,000 Reichsmarks to the support of German schools in Brazil, where there were more than 800, mostly small community schools, in Rio Grande do Sul alone.27

At the same time, Protestant societies such as the Gustav-Adolf-Verein (GAV) and Catholic entities such as the Caritasverband continued their commitment to Deutschtumsarbeit. They supported communities and ecclesiastical organizations in Brazil by providing priests and funds. On the ground, local societies such as the Volksverein für die deutschen Katholiken in Rio Grande do Sul and the German Jesuits were also active, cooperating with German organizations. Contacts between local Protestant groups and their counterparts in Germany, however, were particularly strong.28 Most Protestant communities were affiliated with the Riograndenser Synode (RGS), which joined, as the first synod overseas, the Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchenbund (DEKB) in 1929, allowing the claims by the pastors—mostly German nationals—for support and pensions to be effectively regulated. For its part, the DEKB was granted the authority to discipline pastors who failed in their duty and, if necessary, fine, identify and even recall them.

The close entanglements between the synod and German authorities, for example, became apparent when a permanent representative of the Prussian Church, and later of the DEKB, took up residence in Porto Alegre in 1911. This ecclesiastical diplomat was the main reference person for all German-related cultural and Protestant matters and tried to discipline the local Protestant organizations and to expand German influence over them. The first German provost after the war, Erwin Hübbe (1925–1928), was financed by local German-Brazilian companies and German shipping companies with an interest in Brazilian trade. But he also represented the interests of the VDA, and he cooperated with the Deutsches Ausland-Institut (DAI), which had been founded in 1917. After 1933, his successor, Gottlieb Funcke (1929–1936), sympathized with the Nazis, as did the local organized Nazi clergy (NS-Pfarrerschaft). The presidency of the RGS, however, remained under native control. Hermann Dohms, a Brazilian-born pastor, was president from 1936 to 1956. Regardless, all had stakes in participating in Deutschtumsarbeit. The schools, churches, societies and the press not only promoted the German language but also ethnic solidarity and political identification with Germany.

In addition to these actors, quasi-scientific institutes collected information on Germans and German communities around the world, and provided them with services. The DAI in Stuttgart was the most influential in developing the idea of Auslandsdeutschtum.29 It maintained a library, an archive and a museum, organized


lectures, and kept in touch with other societies in Germany and abroad. Wahrhold Drascher, who had worked as a lawyer in Chile and headed the archive in Stuttgart, initiated its contacts in Latin America. The Institute for the Study of Foreign Countries and of Germans in Border Areas and Overseas (Institut für Auslandkunde, Grenz- und Auslanddeutschtum), founded in Leipzig in 1918, was also an important nodal point in the Latin American Deutschumsarbeit. Its director, Hugo Grothe, an orientalist, was also a VDA-member and an authority on Brazil, and he published influential works on Auslandsdeutsche there.

German-Brazilian elites were connected with all of the associations. Even before 1914, they had founded their own affiliated societies of the VDA and the GAV, and they actively lobbied for the preservation of Deutsche in the almost 150 newspapers and journals that made up the German-speaking press. These newspapers kept readers abreast of the ongoing efforts at Deutschumsarbeit and circulated reports about the Auslandsdeutschtum. At the same time, almanacs addressed the rural population and reminded them, through poems, catechisms and prose, how to lead a German life. Although German-speaking elites were politically and confessionally fragmented, they gained a discursive hegemony through this press and controlled much of the discourse on German immigration in Brazil.

That press was varied as well as extensive. Indeed, during the interwar period, there were a number of important newspapers produced in the state of Rio Grande do Sul: the Neue Deutsche Zeitung (NDZ), originally a liberal paper that later sympathized with the Nazis; the Protestant Deutsche Post (DP), founded by the first president of the RGS, Wilhelm Rotermund, with a circulation of 3,000 in 1916; the Serra-Post, a countryside paper; and the Catholic Deutsches Volksblatt (DVB), published by the Metzler family as a ‘consciously German newspaper’ with a circulation of 7,200 in 1929. The DVB became a staunch critic of National Socialism. Rotermund’s publishing house also produced the famous annual Kalender für die Deutschen in Brasilien, a ‘spearhead and defender of German culture and German character’, which boasted a circulation of 30,000 in 1923 alone. In addition, Hermann Dohms discussed Deutsche in his Deutsche Evangelische Blätter für Brasilien (DEBB).

These periodicals were not limited in their scope to local and regional news, or even to the news in Brazil. They all regularly printed articles from German journals, such as Der Auslanddeutsche (DAI), Süd-Amerika (Institut für Auslandkunde), Deutsche Welt (VDA), Die Getreuen (Catholic), Die Deutsche Schule im Auslande (Verein deutscher Auslandslehrer), as well as German and German-speaking newspapers from all over the world. Clearly, the DAI had the greatest influence on these newspapers: in the 1920s, for example, the DVB published the series Chronicle of the Auslanddeutschtum, written by DAI’s director Fritz Wertheimer.

Other German publicists such as Grothe wrote consistently for Brazilian newspapers. Many went to Brazil, met with German-Brazilians, and had a critical impact. The

---


theologian Paul Rohrbach, for instance, helped fashion colonial discourses while promoting German cultural imperialism and supporting emigration to Brazil. Rohrbach travelled the world, and was a colonial civil servant in German Southwest Africa between 1903 and 1906. Maria Kahle, a Catholic writer, took up a position as an editor in Brazil from 1913 to 1920. After 1933, she promoted Nazi politics and in 1934 she conducted a major propaganda trip for the VDA to Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay in order to boost local Deutschmum.

In 1933, the Nazi ‘enforced coordination’ (Gleichschaltung) extended to all the societies and institutions that worked to support the Auslandsdeutschtum, including the VDA and the DAI. They and their networks were harnessed to support Nazi goals. While these societies adopted Nazi discourses about Deutschum, the Foreign Organization of the NSDAP (NSDAP/AO) extended its activities to southern Brazil more aggressively and tried to co-opt the local societies, but failed to bring all of them into line because several societies refused to comply. Nevertheless, Nazi interpretations of Deutschum easily used the networks and institutions that had supported the Deutschumsarbeit as vectors for infiltrating these communities in Brazil.

III. Discourses on Auslandsdeutschtum in Brazil, 1919–1941

German discourses on German immigration to Brazil changed after 1918 in the same way that the discourses on the Auslandsdeutschtum changed. German colonial discourses of the nineteenth century had constructed the Germans as strong cultural pioneers and colonizers who fulfilled a civilizing mission in the world and formed a global community, the Auslandsdeutschtum. In Brazil as well, these Germans were expected to civilize the country, by bringing their alleged moral, cultural and racial superiority to a backward state, inhabited by allegedly racially degenerated people.

Germany’s loss of World War I, its colonies, its imperial power and its reputation shifted the contexts in which these discourses existed. In response to the losses, German nationalists cast their country and its citizens as victims of the Treaty of Versailles, and they included the Auslandsdeutsche among those victims. Indeed, in some ways these nationalists rediscovered the Auslandsdeutsche as threatened and violated minorities. Volksgemeinschaft became a key word during the Weimar Republic, and according to this globalized rubric, all members of the German Volk formed a distinct whole and shared a common fate.

During the National Socialist period, references to Volksgemeinschaft became even more important, and the NSDAP/AO was charged with strengthening the ‘solidarity between us Germans in the Reich and the Germans abroad’. According to Hans Steinacher, the president of the VDA (1933–1937), the Auslandsdeutsche should fight together against this
threat: ‘The German people from around the world are attacked, as a whole, by their enemies, and they have to defend themselves as a unity’. Indeed, ‘the war on the borders of Volkstum’, he argued, ‘was the direct continuation of the war at arms’. It was a war, he claimed, ‘for soil and language’ and ‘for their own divinely ordained form of life’.38

While the proponents of this fight sketched out clear battle lines between distinct German minorities across eastern Europe and the rabid nationalists who would oppress them, much of the recent work on German minorities in those states has demonstrated that everyday life in eastern Europe was often more complex. Ostensibly unitary groups of Germans were often fractured, the population did not always map onto the essentialized national discourses, but often embraced hybrid forms of life and bi- and multi-linguistic spaces.39 The promulgators of nationalist discourses, however, did not care about that, and the nationalists used the problems of the German minorities harshly to lament the French ‘assimilation’ in Alsace-Lorraine, the ‘foreign domination’ in the Memel Territory, the risks of being ‘displaced’ and ‘polonized’ in Poland, and the ‘elimination from public jobs, the theft of schools, land confiscations, systematic economic discrimination, creation of artificial Czech minorities, tax oppression, vexatious treatment, judicial terror’ in the Sudetenland.40

Similar portraits of abuse, calls for unity in the face of opposition, demands for the revision of the Treaty of Versailles, appeals for the protection of German minorities and the preservation of Auslandsdeutschum also circulated in the German-speaking press in Brazil.41 Rudolf Becker, for example, a leading Protestant publicist in Brazil, wrote: ‘Thus, we hear from all regions Job’s news about oppression, deprivation of rights and disregard of the German element’.42 Victim discourses, much like those invented by the German-speaking elites in Namibia, became wide spread.43

These texts, in fact, affirmed that the strong German colonizer had become a threatened species, a victim in need of protection in Brazil and abroad. Indeed, in this narrative, the Brazilian readership was part of a global community with a shared fate, and they could read articles about similar ‘German struggles’ in Alsace, in the Saarland, in South Tyrol, in Silesia, in Czechoslovakia and other regions in the East.44 They

40Steinacher, Volkstum, p. 6–7.
could also read about the fate of the Germans in Russia and in the former colonies in Africa. Many of these essays shared the same key terms: ‘terror’, ‘humiliation’, ‘brutality’ and ‘slavery’, all of which were employed to encourage Germans to stand together. The discourses on Auslandsdeutschum were thus meant to awake the ‘popular conscience of the Auslanddeutsche’ and to draw together and reveal the interconnections among multiple groups of Germans abroad. Indeed, the ultimate ‘task of every German’ was to co-create the ‘German unity front abroad’. And what a sublime thought: the Deutschtum of the entire world unified as a whole in a common cultural and economic collaboration!

German proponents of such ideas even travelled through Brazil, giving lectures in an effort to raise the awareness for the topic: Jens Jessen, for example, offered reports in 1922 about the situation in North Schleswig, and Maria Kahle organized so-called Ostmarken-Abende in 1928.

Many German-Brazilian elites were receptive. They assisted in broadcasting these new discourses of joint, even world-wide victimization because their own experiences seemed to be quite similar. As early as in the second half of the nineteenth century, in fact, these elites had begun to develop a local victim discourse in reaction to Brazilian nationalization policies, which aimed at forced assimilation during World War I. The German-Brazilian elites stylized themselves and other immigrants as victims who were ‘exploited and betrayed’, who were not acknowledged as Brazilian citizens with equal rights. At best, they were tolerated, but more often they were confronted with distrust and denial, and insulted as ‘strangers’ and ‘foreigners’. Indeed, the German-speaking press even identified a latent ‘hatred of Germans’ and the nativist behaviour of the Brazilian politicians.

‘Quickly and treacherously abandoned by the Brazilian state, aggrieved by the Brazilian civil service in various ways’, the powerful German pioneer, readers were told, turned into a victim, suffering from hate and hostility. The fact that the Germans were

---

not appreciated as cultural pioneers, even though the German-Brazilian elites believed that they had helped build Brazil’s wealth and progress, and some Brazilian elites had also made these claims earlier, provoked vast frustration among these elites.56

IV. Local Adapations, Reconfigurations and Discursive Failure

There was therefore considerable disparity between the essentializing discourses that circulated both internationally and within Rio Grande do Sul and the realities of the immigrant’s experience on the ground. German-Brazilian elites actually reacted to the idea of the Auslandsdeutsch in different ways. If much of the press evoked a unitary Deutschtum with essential German values, not even the elites automatically envisioned themselves as either pure German or as a threatened minority that must fight for Germany’s honour. On the contrary, already during the nineteenth century, these elites had invented a new, hyphenated identity: ‘German-Brazilianness (Deutschbrasilianertum)’. By embracing this term, they offered a measured response to critics who pointed to their insufficient assimilation. They declared their civic commitment to the Brazilian state, while demanding their right to maintain their cultural identity, their Deutschtum.57 Politically, they assumed an independent position between Germany and Brazil.

Moreover, the middle-class ‘German-Brazilians (Deutschbrasilianer)’ did not form a homogeneous group either. Rather, they remained fractured and divided over many political and religious issues, including the character of Deutschtum. As a result, the discourses of Deutschtum promulgated by pundits lost their decidedness in open discussion, and Deutschtum itself became the subject of a negotiation process, which, in turn, generated competing and overlapping discourses on the topic. Through that process, German-Brazilian elites were able to influence discourses and Deutschtumsarbeit in significant ways.

IV. 1: Refusing Victimhood

Although the middle-class Deutschbrasilianer criticized abuses and discrimination in their newspapers, they did not fight on the abstract Auslandsdeutsche front. Instead, they tried to change their actual situation by participating actively in Brazilian society and politics. From a civil point of view, they began to feel Brazilian and adopted positions of local political leadership. Increasingly, from the 1880s onwards, the German-language press demanded political engagement from immigrants. This, as several prominent figures of the German-Brazilian elites believed, was the only way to improve their situation. The colonists, they advised, should resolve problems on their own initiative: enhance the infrastructure, create militias against marauding revolutionaries during the Federalist Revolution (1893–1895), and resist the land reform implemented by the government for the expropriation of landowners without tenure—a problem for many immigrants who did not have proper documentation.58


Subsequently, some immigrants founded a society to collect funds to buy colonists out of military service, while groups of Protestants addressed several petitions to the government calling for their legal equality. Although it is true that the official equality of Protestant citizens was only achieved with the proclamation of the Republic in 1889, which separated church and state, it is also true that by that time, their own actions had managed to gain them extensive social recognition.

Moreover, immigrant elites began engaging in national politics to effect changes on the ground. As early as the 1860s, German-language newspapers called on naturalized German-speakers to participate in elections and to seek public office in order to win respect for the German population. Because the political heterogeneity of the immigrants was so great, however, those actions never led to the formation of a German immigrant party, even if some people tried to create one.

Instead, beginning in the 1880s, various German-Brazilian politicians were elected as members of existing political parties to the state parliament of Rio Grande do Sul. Initially, many of these players were Forty-Eighters who often worked as newspaper editors. After the Brazilian government in 1880 ceded to naturalized Brazilians the right to be elected without reservations, Carl von Koseritz, for example, the most important German-Brazilian local politician of this period, asked every immigrant to become naturalized and to ‘love’ Brazil ‘like his true fatherland.’ Still after World War I, these political players fought back and supported what they thought to be the interests of the German-speaking population, for instance when deputy Arno Philipp defended the German-Brazilians against criticism that they lacked patriotism. The point, then, is that the Deutschbrasilianer did not embrace their victimhood as Germans, as the broader discourses implied, but participated—as Brazilians—in the political decision-making process.

IV.2: Distancing Germany: Autonomy

German-Brazilian elites also developed an increasing self-assurance towards Germany. Despite the celebration of German national holidays, their efforts to retain their distinctions, and their dedication to preserving Deutschtum in Brazil, a political distance emerged and increased between Germany and the middle-class group of the Deutschbrasilianer during the Weimar Republic. Indeed, the Deutschbrasilianer consistently refused to accept tutelage and intrusion from Germany. Some even criticized German economic interests in Brazil, accusing them of exploiting immigrants’ feelings: ‘They...

60 Wilhelm Rotermund et al., Augusto e Dignissimos Senhores Representantes da Nação! (São Leopoldo, 1885), in Arquivo Histórico da Igreja Evangélica de Confissão Luterana no Brasil, São Leopoldo, SR 4/1/1007.
want to use these [feelings] to be able to do good business in Brazil... But we want no part of it.

Such resistance became especially clear when the NSDAP/AO began its activities in Rio Grande do Sul. Despite the fact that many Deutschbrasilianer who had not loved the Weimar Republic were initially impressed by the successes of the new regime, the efforts of its representatives to instruct Deutschbrasilianer about their Germanness and their proper course of action quickly led to protest. As Ambassador Arthur Schmidt-Elskop noted during a journey through southern Brazil in 1935, for instance, ‘the largest part of the Deutschbrasilianer refuses to follow the German [reichsdeutsch] leadership, embodied by the local groups [Ortsgruppen] of the NSDAP’. Across the diversity of Deutschbrasilianer was the shared refusal to allow people from Germany to tell them what to do.

As a result, the Gleichschaltung fared poorly in Brazil, where many of the Deutschbrasilianer’s long-established societies resisted forced co-optation. They regarded the NSDAP/AO with great scepticism, because ‘its members possess very little experience in the country and have not accomplished anything significant for Deutschtum’.

Moreover, the AO behaved badly and was aggressive, and that raised considerable criticism in the German-language press and facilitated a political split in the immigrant societies between those who did and did not support National Socialism. Newspapers such as the DVB and the Serra-Post, for example, opposed Nazi ideology directly and published articles about the ‘German-Brazilian’ struggle against all efforts of the NSDAP to co-opt and alienate [us] from the country.

IV.3: Distancing Germany: No Minority

The notion of a pervasive minority problem and a general demand for the rights of Germans living abroad were crucial elements in the pervasive discourses of Deutschtum in the 1920s and 1930s. These issues were discussed in Brazil as well. Hermann Dohms, for instance, engaged with them directly in his journal DEBB. Although international law had defined the concept of minorities after the war, Dohms stated that the concept did not apply to the immigrant societies of the Americas. Here, the dogma of assimilation was prevalent. Therefore, Dohms believed that the preservation of Deutschtum was even more difficult in the Americas than in Europe because it was not guaranteed by...
This situation was further aggravated by the fact that the Brazilian actors did not distinguish between ‘Volkstum and citizenship’, so that, contrary to Europe, the preservation of Deutschtum was not legally granted in Brazil. That led Dohms to conclude that the Brazilian Deutschtumsarbeit had to be different from the Arbeit in Europe. It should not emphasize political identification with the German Empire.

Other German-Brazilians went even further, questioning the applicability of the concept of Volksgemeinschaft for the immigrants and their descendants. Franz Metzler, for example, a member of the most important Catholic family of publishers in Rio Grande do Sul, became an ardent critic of National Socialism after 1933. He rejected the attempts of the NSDAP/AO to co-opt the German-speaking societies in Brazil and condemned the Nazis’ claim to leadership as ‘atrocioussness’. ‘We do not have anything to do with the culture of “racism”, with supranational theories of Volksgemeinschaft, or with foreign ethnic and power politics!’ he wrote in disgust.

Metzler also criticized the Nazi interpretation of Volksgemeinschaft. He analysed the concept’s emergence in the wake of the war and argued that the minority debate and the loss of the war were the catalysts for a reinvigorated interest in Auslandsdeutschtum. ‘Then’, he wrote, “Deutschtum in Brazil” was—“discovered” by those in Europe. But the situation in Brazil, he maintained, was not comparable with that of German minorities in Europe: ‘We’, he wrote, ‘are not a national minority, according to international law’. He was not even certain how the term Auslandsdeutsche might apply to them: “Auslanddeutsche”? he asked, ‘do we Deutschbrasilianer, Brazilians of German descent, live here as Germans abroad!.. We are here at home and (from our perspective) not abroad!’

That, in fact, was the problem for Brazilians of German descent. Metzler saw good reason to fear ‘that the ethnic missionary work [Volkstumsmissionierung] we face.. includes demands that could bring us into conflict with loyal citizenship’. The Deutschbrasilianer, he stressed, were ‘loyal to the Volksgemeinschaft—but Metzler meant the Brazilian Volksgemeinschaft. And in the immigration country Brazil, he explained, there were no minorities, thus the German discussion of their fate completely misconstrued their situation. Indeed, Metzler favoured the quick integration of the Deutschbrasilianer into Brazilian society, and he supported the so-called nationalization campaign of the Vargas regime.

The preservation of Deutschtum, he argued along with many others, could only occur voluntarily, and never as a result of external pressure. Given his

---

75 Hermann Dohms, ‘Sind völkische Minderheiten in Südamerika möglich?’, DEBB, 8, 1/2 (1926), p. 7.
79 Franz Metzler, ‘Deutschbrasilianer oder Brasilianer deutscher Abstammung’, p. 11.
80 Ibid.
81 ‘Brasilianische Probleme’, p. 36.
argumentation, it is not surprising that his paper *DVB* was prohibited in Germany in 1935.86

**IV.4: Failing Volksgemeinschaft**

The notion of a global Volksgemeinschaft could never hold up to the reality of German diversity abroad, as the case of the so-called ‘Russian-Germans (*Russlanddeutsche*)’ in Brazil suggests. Beginning in the 1860s and ending in the 1930s, various waves of German migrants from Russia arrived in Brazil. During the nineteenth century, economic problems and famines caused an exodus of descendants of the German communities that had immigrated to Russia in the eighteenth century, and after 1917 and the traumatic birth of the Soviet Union even more fled the state. When some of those migrants arrived in Brazil in the 1930s, some German-Brazilian publicists were eager to receive the Russlanddeutsche and cheered the Volksgemeinschaft.87 The Russlanddeutsche, they wrote, were Auslandsdeutsche who, after a long stay in Russia, had now migrated to join their tribal brothers in Brazil. The Protestant pastor Friedrich Wilhelm Brepohl, for example, who worked with some of the recently arrived Russians in the Brazilian state of Paraná, called them a ‘small, perfectly German people’.88

But others pointed to the disparity between the alleged unity of Auslandsdeutschum and everyday reality of these people’s lives. In the 1870s, for example, when one of the ‘Russian-German’ groups left Brazil disappointed and returned home to Russia, the local politician Koseritz termed them ‘narrow’, unable to integrate, and unwilling to ‘give up their traditions, a process which every immigrant in a foreign country has to undergo’.89 Over the following decades, other observers scoffed at the Russlanddeutsche, calling them ‘a difficult, inferior and not exactly reliable element’, while German consul Felix von Stein observed in Porto Alegre in 1915 that Russia had changed them: the ‘German-Russians’ were ‘entirely brutalized under Slavic dominion and, from an intellectual point of view, depressed to an extraordinarily low position’.90 Similar evaluations persisted well into the 1930s, showing that the Russian-Germans were no more able to integrate into the world of German-Brazilians than into that of Brazilians in general.91

**V. Conclusion**

The questions ‘Who is a German?’ and ‘Where are German histories?’ were central questions in the interwar period. In order to understand these questions about nationality and ethnicity, we have to overcome a national perspective and open up global and local ones. The global focus reveals a globally acting network of associations and actors who discussed these questions and constructed a global Auslandsdeutschum.

---

that was imagined as a victim community. These ethnic discourses were meant to be homogenizing and came together with practices such as Germanophone schools, churches and press abroad. Southern Brazil, especially Rio Grande do Sul, played a crucial role in these debates, because it was considered as a particular ‘German’ region abroad. Texts on *Auslandsdeutschtum* therefore also circulated in the Germanophone press in Brazil, and the local German-Brazilian elites were part of the network. The German discourses became, in many cases, part of an emerging consciousness of globality.

The local perspective reveals, however, that these politics and discourses interfered with the Brazilian context because they were not well placed. While the image of the maligned German appeared to be confirmed by the Brazilian situation, where German-speaking people faced nationalization campaigns, and in some cases persecution during the war, even advocates remarked that the general idea of Germans around the world constituting a threatened minority could not gain purchase in an immigration country where minorities did not exist.

Not even the immigrant elites considered themselves Germans; rather they self-identified as ‘German-Brazilians’. While they discussed *Deutschtum* and established new discourses and social spaces, ethnicity was not their only concern. Brazilian citizenship mattered as well. Thus they tried to participate actively in Brazilian society. The elites also formed new political spaces, with or against Brazilian politicians and other immigrant elites. Other social spaces are thinkable: for the merchants, club houses and economic relations with German-speakers or non-German-speakers were significant; for the colonists, the family (often mixed with other nationalities) or village communities with other immigrants were central, so that local and regional identifications arose. Religious or linguistic spaces played another key role—in Brazil, several German dialects as well as a Portuguese-influenced German were spoken.

What existed, then, was a plurality of discourses, spaces and social realities of the so-called ‘German’ immigrants in Brazil, often overlapping, competing and conflicting. They were not simply German, but formed heterogeneous immigrant histories, which rendered impossible any simple classification that the discourses of *Auslandsdeutschtum* tried to establish. Therefore, those discourses often had much less power over reality than we might suppose, and in many ways our focus upon them has helped to obscure the ways in which they were channelled and shaped by local conditions and existed alongside other discourses of Germanness, which were more fluid, flexible and more able to accommodate hybridity and difference.

**Abstract**

German emigrants became the focus of attention for German proponents of colonialism in the nineteenth century. German emigrants in southern Brazil especially were supposed to stimulate German trade as well as secure German prestige and influence. After World War I, German colonial discourses about Brazil continued under different circumstances and in a slightly new constellation of actors. Private societies, ecclesiastical institutions and scientific actors continued to preserve *Deutschtum* in Brazil, but instead of constructing the Germans in Brazil as civilizing pioneers, as they did before 1918, they co-opted them into a wider conception of the German *Volksgemeinschaft* that was constructed as a community of victims. The loss of the war led to this discourse, which covered not only Brazil, but also other regions in the world with German-speaking communities, and above all eastern Europe. The image of the misjudged German
fitted well to the Brazilian context, where German-speaking persons were nationalized and in some cases persecuted during the war. However, the immigrants not only adopted these ideas but also criticized and changed them by elaborating new German-Brazilian identities.

**Keywords:** nationalism, immigration, Latin America, Brazil, ethnicity, colonial discourse, Auslandsdeutschum

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster
Frederik.Schulze@uni-muenster.de