

# **Cultural Relations between Germany and the UK – An Overview<sup>1</sup>**

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When looking at the cultural exchange between Germany and the UK, it quickly becomes clear that there is a state of imbalance. While Germans usually have a positive attitude towards British culture and an exchange with the UK, German culture does not have a particularly high standing in the UK. This imbalance has partly to do with the unique position of the English language. However, it is important to see this in the context that the interest in an exchange with non-English speaking countries is generally rather low.

## **The Image of Germany in the UK**

While historians have differing views on when and where the negative image of Germany had its origin, whether it was the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or World War II, they generally agree that the image deteriorated after the German reunification in 1990.

The relations between Germany and the UK were at this time dominated by a pattern of provocation and reaction. This would usually be started by a British politician or tabloid comparing a German politician with a figure from the Nazi context. This would then be seen as a provocation by the Germans who would protest against the remark publicly. This protest would then be the cue for British tabloids to complain about the German lack of a sense of humour.

The lowest point in this development was reached during the European Football Championships in England in 1996 when British tabloids came up with headlines like “Achtung! Surrender!” and “Lets Blitz Fritz”. At this point, it was virtually impossible to imagine that another football event ten years later would change the situation as favourably as it did.

While it is difficult to say, when exactly the change came about, it seemed as if the British press, in reporting on the World Championships in Germany in 2006, set out to systematically eradicate all previously employed stereotypes of Germany and the Germans. “Freundschaft” and “We love you Germans” were now the headlines.

Recent opinion polls confirm this development. The BBC has been conducting opinion polls regarding countries' influence on global politics since 2005. In 2008, Germany was included for the first time and came up first: The influence of Germany on global politics was seen as more positive than that of any other country.

- UK: 62% positive, 20% negative
- average: 56% positive, 18% negative

This year's result showed Germany's position even slightly improved:

- average: 61% positive (15% negative)

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a shortened and slightly updated version of a report published by the *Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa)* in 2007. For more information please visit <http://www.ifa.de/pub/synergiestudien/grobritannien-syn/>

The GfK Anholt Nation Brands Index, an international opinion poll on country image also shows an improvement of the international image of Germany:

- 2005: Germany in 7<sup>th</sup> position
- third quarter of 2007: 2<sup>nd</sup> behind UK
- since end of 2007: top position in all further polls

What is particularly interesting is that in 2005, when Germany was in 7<sup>th</sup> position, the Germany put themselves in 4<sup>th</sup> position, although all other countries thought they should be first.

As a result, it can only be said that Germany does not have an image problem.

### **Visual arts**

As far as visual arts are concerned, the exchange between Germany and the UK is particularly vivid. German art has received a real boost in the UK in the last five to ten years. There has been a large number of exhibitions of German artists ranging from large shows of a single established artist like Sigmar Polke at Tate Modern to the exhibition The Triumph of Painting at the Saatchi Gallery which was clearly dominated by German artists and to exhibitions of younger artists in smaller galleries.

Photography from Germany is equally successful. In the year 2000 the German photographer and video artist Wolfgang Tillmanns won the Turner Prize, the most prestigious prize for contemporary art in the UK. In 2000, non-British artists were included in the shortlist for the first time since the prize was created in 1984.

British art is also present in Germany in many places. Interestingly, Berlin has recently become an internationally renowned place for the creation of art and is home to a group of about 35 British artists who live and work there. Some of them, for instance, Jonathan Monk, have become an integrated part of the German art scene.

### **Architecture**

British architects have created many well-known buildings in Germany and have helped shape the look of our towns and cities. We even let Sir Norman Foster rebuild the Reichstag.

On the other hand, no German architect has built a well-known building in the UK since the end of World War II. However, it has to be pointed out that due to very strict regulations, British architects have not been able to create a large number of innovative buildings in their home country, either.

### **Literature**

As far as literary translations into the other language are concerned, there is a great imbalance between German and English. Various recent developments on the British book market have made the situation even worse. For instance, giving up fixed retail prices for books has drastically reduced the number of titles available in the UK. Under these circumstances, it is particularly difficult for foreign titles, which have to cover translation costs as well.

The imbalance can also be seen when looking at the top 20 of books sold in Germany and the UK. A survey by a Swedish specialist book magazine carried out between May 2004 and April 2005 showed that among

the top 20 in the UK 61% were British titles and the remaining 39% were taken up by US titles. The German top 20 during the same period, however, included 24% German titles, 29% US titles, 8% British titles and 39% came from other countries.

## **Film**

During the past ten years, films from Germany have once again gained more international reputation. German films like *Good-Bye, Lenin!* by Wolfgang Becker (2003) or *The Life of the Others* by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (2005) have enjoyed a fair amount of success in the UK.

Generally, however, German films face difficulties in the UK. As the market is dominated by US productions, the audience is used to English-language films. Productions from other European countries including Germany only make up less than one percent of the annual turnover (2004: 0.6%).

For British films it is easier to find an audience in Germany than the other way round. The German market is also dominated by US productions but British films come 3<sup>rd</sup> regarding the annual turnover after the USA and Germany. One big advantage for British films in Germany is that German audiences are used to dubbing which solves the language problem.

## **Theatre**

The exchange in theatre and dance is particularly fruitful. The strength of the German theatre in comparison to the British theatre lies in the innovative work regarding the direction and staging of plays. The subsidised German theatre system provides an excellent basis for the development of new styles and of the definition of what theatre is and what it should be. In doing this, the German theatre presents a source of inspiration for British directors. However, as they are not subsidised to the same extent as German theatres, British theatres often lack the funds necessary for an exchange.

As far as plays are concerned, there is once again an imbalance in favour of the UK. In the past ten to twelve years, British contemporary playwrights have been very successful in Germany. Plays by dramatists like Mark Ravenhill, David Harrower, Sarah Kane and many others have become firmly established in the programmes of German theatres, which cannot be said of any German dramatist in the UK.

## **Music**

The exchange of music across country borders is much easier than the exchange of theatre or literature, in particular in classical music, since language barriers are no issue here. The reason for this is that German is one of the established languages in classical music, e.g. in opera or in the genre of the *lied*. Therefore, German-British exchange in classical music happens effortlessly and everywhere. When Simon Rattle, chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, conducts Mahler's fourth symphony at the Edinburgh International Festival, it is difficult to say who exports culture and who receives it. The same applies to Kurt Masur, who toured Germany as chief conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra in 2004.

The situation is different when it comes to contemporary non-classical music. Here, English is the internationally dominant language and songs performed in German do not stand a chance in the UK.

Purely instrumental music faces fewer difficulties. For instance, *Techno*, a musical style that originates in Germany, has been very successful in the UK.

### **Language**

When comparing the Germans and the British regarding their knowledge of the respective other language, the above mentioned imbalance is particularly evident. English is a world language and is internationally the most spoken foreign language. So it is no wonder that learning English is more important for Germans than learning German is for the British.

However, Germans should not sell their own language under its value. According to a survey carried out in the EU in February 2006, German is not only number one in terms of the number of people speaking it as a mother tongue but it also comes second together with French regarding the number of people speaking it as foreign language. The former president of the Goethe-Institut, Jutta Limbach, coined a phrase in this context “Englisch ist ein Muss, Deutsch ist ein Plus.”

Therefore, the low interest of the British in the German language should be seen in the context that foreign languages generally have a rather low standing in the UK and must not only be seen as a result of a lack of appeal of the German language. The current language policy of the British government has not exactly helped to improve the situation. From the age of 15 it is now optional for British pupils to take foreign languages any further which means that pupils more or less need to find the motivation to learn foreign languages in themselves.

### **Universities**

Generally, British universities are very popular with German students and academics. This has to do with the good reputation of British universities but also with the English language which is an important motivation factor. For students of English, studying in the UK represents an important contribution to their relevant qualifications. For students of other subjects, improving their language skills is a welcome additional qualification.

Among younger German academics, the UK is very popular because the academic structures are less hierarchical and more open, which makes it easier to find a job. German academics are also attracted by the combination of teaching and research, which is customary in the UK. On the other hand, the administrative workload of lecturers in the UK is much higher than in Germany. Although a large number of German academics decides to stay in the UK for a longer period in time, many of them would like to return to Germany eventually, if they saw a chance.

For British students, Germany does not seem to be very attractive judging by the numbers of British students at German universities. As the number of British students studying in non-English-speaking countries is generally low, it seems that language barriers and restrictions by the university system – not all degrees allow for a year abroad – play an important role here.

It is more difficult to judge the situation for British academics. While the British Academy indicates that Germany is among the most popular countries with British academics, the German counterpart Alexander

von Humboldt Stiftung registers a comparatively small number of applications from the UK.

Recent developments in Germany have the potential to attract more students from the UK. The introduction of international degrees taught in English and the introduction of the BA/MA system have already resulted in a rise in the number of foreign students studying in Germany.

### **Youth exchange**

Youth exchange between Germany and the UK is generally rather slow and is characterised by one-sided enthusiasm on the German side. Compared to the youth exchange between Germany and other countries there is much less activity and until a few years ago there were no structures of support.

The imbalance of the interest of German and British teenagers has of course once again partly to do with the difference in importance of the two languages.

In 2004, the Queen's visit to Germany was taken as an opportunity by the two governments to launch a new initiative which has resulted in the setting-up of UK-German Connection, a central agency for information and support regarding German-British youth exchange that has established all kinds of structures and programmes devised to promote youth exchange and has generally brought a breath of fresh air into the exchange.

So, where do we stand in 2009 as far as German-British cultural exchange is concerned? Coming back to my initial remarks on the image of Germany in the UK I would say that the underlying imbalance in the German-British cultural exchange seems no longer to exist as far as the view of the respective other country is concerned. This might in time result in new impulses for the cultural exchange in all areas.