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BERLIN UNIVERSITY:
A NEW LOOK AT THE ORIGIN OF
THE HUMBOLDT MYTH**

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WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT AND BERLIN UNIVERSITY: A NEW LOOK AT THE ORIGIN OF THE HUMBOLDT MYTH²

This article traces the origins of the Humboldt myth. It challenges the established view that the myth arose during the celebrations of the centenary of Berlin University in 1910, demonstrating that this view is not confirmed by sources. First, the article examines the speeches delivered by the participants in the 1910 jubilee celebrations and concludes that they could not have provided the basis for the Humboldt myth because they mention Humboldt no more frequently than the names of other prominent scientists, and the brief assessments of his activities are too vague to warrant judgements about his contribution to the development of higher education. Second, the article analyzes the works of German philosophers and educators of the early twentieth century and stresses that the sources of the Humboldt myth go back mainly to works written before 1910, had nothing to do with the centenary of Berlin University and were influenced by Humboldt's note *On the Internal and External Organization of the Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin* published in 1903. The article concludes that the traditional view of the origin of the Humboldt myth needs to be re-examined: the myth was born before 1910 and the centenary of Berlin University was only one channel for asserting and spreading it.

JEL Classification: Z

Keywords: Wilhelm von Humboldt, Berlin University, Humboldt myth, history of universities, higher education, academic community, jubilee, 1910

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Problem Statement

The arguments about the past and future of the university that have flared up in German academic circles over the past twenty years has led to a revision of several entrenched views in the history of universities and higher education. One of these is the “Humboldt model” or “classical model” of a university. According to its advocates, in the early nineteenth century, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767—1835) developed a new model of education that combined study and independent research. He introduced the model at Berlin University, which he founded in 1810, thus making it a model of higher education institutions the whole world tried to emulate.

Thanks to the efforts of such historians as Rüdiger vom Bruch, John Connelly, Dieter Langewiesche, Peter Lundgren, Sylvia Paletschek, Mitchell Ash, Konrad Jarausch, and others, it can now be safely said that this model is no more than a myth, or rather the Humboldt myth (*Mythos Humboldt*), as proposed by Mitchell Ash.³ He and his colleagues have managed to prove that the “Humboldt model” contained almost nothing new and that it was not fully implemented at any university, including Berlin. What is more, Humboldt never claimed authorship of the model—he simply gathered and generalized several ideas expressed earlier by his predecessors. Further, Berlin University was not the brainchild of Humboldt alone: talk about opening a university in the Prussian capital had been going on since the late eighteenth century and many officials and thinkers, including Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762—1814) and Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768—1834), were involved in founding it.⁴ Humboldt managed to join them only in the early 1809 after completing his diplomatic assignment in Rome. For the next sixteen months, he headed up the Section of Culture

³ On the Humboldt myth, see: *Mythos Humboldt. Vergangenheit und Zukunft der deutschen Universitäten*, ed. Mitchell Ash (Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau, 1999); Sylvia Paletschek, “Verbreitete sich ein ‘Humboldtsches Modell’ an den deutschen Universitäten im 19. Jahrhundert?” in *Humboldt International. Der Export des deutschen Universitätsmodells im 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Rainer C. Schwinges (Basel: Schwabe, 2001), 75-104; idem, “Die Erfindung der Humboldtschen Universität. Die Konstruktion der deutschen Universitätsidee in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts,” *Historische Anthropologie* 10 (2002): 183-205; Dieter Langewiesche, “Die ‘Humboldtsche Universität’ als nationaler Mythos. Zum Selbstbild der deutschen Universitäten in ihren Rektoratsreden im Kaiserreich und in der Weimarer Republik,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 290 (2010): 53-91; idem, “Humboldt als Leitbild? Die deutsche Universität in den Berliner Rektoratsreden seit dem 19. Jahrhundert,” *Jahrbuch für Universitätsgeschichte* 14 (2011): 15-37; Martin Eichler, “Die Wahrheit des Mythos Humboldt,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 294/1 (2012): 59-78; Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, “Mythos Humboldt. Eine Notiz zu Funktion und Geltung der großen Erzählung über die Tradition der deutschen Universität,” in *Intuition und Institution. Kursbuch Bredekamp*, ed. Carolin Behrmann, Stefan Trinks, Matthias Bruhn (Berlin: Akademie, 2012), 69-80; idem, “‘Bildung und Wissenschaft’—brauchen wir noch die Universität?” in *Die Idee der Universität—revisited*, ed. Norbert Ricken, Hans Christoph Koller, Edwin Keiner (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2014), 45-62; Mitchell Ash, “Humboldt the Undead. Multiple Uses of ‘Humboldt’ and His ‘Death’ in the ‘Bologna’ Era,” in *The Humboldtian Tradition: Origins and Legacies*, ed. Peter Josephson, Thomas Karlson, Johan Östling (Leiden, Boston: Brill 2014), 81-96.

⁴ Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, “Wilhelm von Humboldts (1767—1835) Universitätskonzept und die Reform in Berlin—eine Tradition jenseits des Mythos,” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 20/1 (2010): 18; idem, “The University of Berlin: A Foundation between Defeat and Crisis, Philosophy and Politics,” *International Journal for the Historiography of Education* 4/1 (2014): 16-19.

and Public Education (*Sektion des Kultus und öffentlichen Unterrichts*) at the Prussian Ministry of the Interior (*Ministerium des Innern*).⁵

Even after historians have debunked the Humboldt myth, we still have scant information on how and when the myth was constructed. The historiography on the subject has repeatedly suggested that its roots go back to the centenary celebrations of Berlin University, which were marked with much pomp and circumstance in the German capital in 1910. In this article, I will try to explain that the main arguments in favor of this claim are not backed up by sources and that, in reality, the process of creating the Humboldt myth was more complicated and contradictory. In the first part of the article, I will consider the jubilee celebrations of 1910 to prove that they had no impact on the emergence of the Humboldt myth. In the second part, I will analyze the works of German philosophers and educators of the early twentieth century, including the *Festschriften* timed for the centenary, to demonstrate that the myth began to take shape several years earlier under the impact of another event. My conclusions seek to clarify the origins of the Humboldt myth and give a better insight into the history of Berlin University and indeed German intellectual culture as a whole.

Humboldt and the Centenary of Berlin University

One of the strongest arguments against the traditional view of the “Humboldt model” is that the idea of a research university as an ideal to be aspired existed in the minds of the German academic community throughout the nineteenth century. But nobody linked the idea with Humboldt until the 1900s. The conclusion suggests itself: the Humboldt myth did not arise out of nothing, but rather as a result of the fusion of an earlier popular legend about the research university and new information about Humboldt, who later became the main hero of the legend.

Practically the same conclusion was drawn by Sylvia Paletschek in 2001, when she proposed her own version of the origin of the myth. In her opinion, the image of Humboldt as the creator of a new university model originated during the centenary celebrations of Berlin University in the writings of philosopher and pedagogue Eduard Spranger (1882—1963) and the speeches made in honour of the jubilee, whose authors took the opportunity to talk up the past of German science.⁶ Paletschek assumed that the university centenary, which had an impressive arsenal of commemora-

⁵ Humboldt worked as the head of the Section from February 20, 1809 until June 23, 1810, before yielding his post to his opponent Kaspar Friedrich von Schuckmann (1755—1834). From 1817, the educational and cultural policy in the Kingdom of Prussia was supervised by a new agency, the Ministry of Religious, Educational and Medical Affairs (*Ministerium der geistlichen, Unterrichts- und Medizinalangelegenheiten*).

⁶ Paletschek, “‘Humboldtsches Modell’,” 100-1; idem, “Erfindung,” 187-9, 191.

tive practices, is often used to construct eye-catching images that strengthen corporate identity. Paletschek calls the 1910 jubilee the first stage in the emergence of the Humboldt myth, although she hardly ever uses this term, preferring her own equivalent—the “invention of Humboldt.”⁷

Paletschek notes that the myth was given a significant helping hand by Humboldt’s famous note *On the Internal and External Organization of the Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin*,⁸ which was discovered in 1896 and published seven years ahead of the centenary.⁹ In this note, Humboldt shares his opinion on how the research process should be organized at universities and academies, and what limits should be placed on state interference in the work of both. We do not know to whom the note was addressed, or indeed when it was written (most probably between 1809 and 1810).¹⁰ The text is just ten pages long and breaks off abruptly with the subtitle “About the Academy.”

Thus, Paletschek singles out two types of sources of the Humboldt myth that are connected with the centenary of Berlin University, viz. Festschriften and jubilee speeches. As regards the former, she bolsters her arguments with quotations from Spranger. For some reason, however, she does not a single extract from the speeches as evidence of the latter, which prompts legitimate doubts about the validity of her position. In 2010, the missing examples were cited in an article by Dieter Langewiesche, but as I will show later on, even they do not establish an unassailable connection between the 1910 jubilee and the birth of the Humboldt myth.¹¹ At present, the majority of scholars support Paletschek’s theory, including those who do not quite share her critical view of Humboldt.¹² To verify the validity of her theory, I will consider the sources identified by Paletschek to find in them the origins of the Humboldt myth. I will start with the speeches before passing on to Festschriften, but first I will permit myself some introductory remarks on the centenary celebrations of Berlin University, which have never before been the subject of special research.

⁷ Sylvia Paletschek, “The Invention of Humboldt and the Impact of National Socialism. The German University Idea in the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” in *Science in the Third Reich*, ed. Margit Szöllösi-Janze (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 37-58.

⁸ Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Über die innere und äußere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin,” in *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften: Politische Denkschriften*, ed. Bruno Gebhardt, vol. 1 (Berlin: Behr’s, 1903), 250-60.

⁹ Paletschek, “Erfindung,” 186-7.

¹⁰ Adolf von Harnack (1951—1930) believed that the letter was written after the summer of 1810, though it might have appeared earlier. On May 9, 1809, Humboldt sent a message to his friend, the Minister of the Interior of Prussia Friedrich Ferdinand Alexander zu Dohna-Schlobitten (1771—1831). In the message, Humboldt mentioned a plan to unify an academy and a university. Apparently, he was referring to his note. See: *Gesammelte Schriften*, 250-1; Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Aus der Denkschrift an den Minister des Innern Alexander Graf zu Dohna-Schlobitten vom 9.5.1810,” in *Idee und Wirklichkeit einer Universität. Dokumente zur Geschichte der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1960), 215.

¹¹ Langewiesche, “Nationaler Mythos,” 81-4.

¹² Tenorth, “Universitätskonzept,” 17, 25; idem, “Mythos Universität. Die erstaunliche Aktualität einer Idee und die resistente Realität von Universitäten,” in *Ideen und Realitäten von Universitäten*, ed. Marc F. Buck and Marcel Kabaum (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2013), 22.

The preparations for the jubilee took a total of nine years. The ceremonies were arranged in the capital of the German Empire on October 10—12 and involved thousands of people, including students, professors, members of the university administration, government officials, citizens, tourists, and representatives of foreign delegations from universities in Europe, Asia and the United States.¹³ The presence of Emperor Wilhelm II as the special guest lent imperial scope to the event.

The keynote of the rhetoric was the scientific achievements of the German nation. The newspapers wrote enthusiastically about the superiority of German national science over the values of the western “cosmopolitan revolution” embodied by France and the United Kingdom.¹⁴ Those were the grim omens of the coming World War I. In due course, they developed into open calls to violence and self-sacrifice for the sake of the state, which in the war years were heard not only from political rostrums, but also from university podiums.¹⁵

In honoring Berlin University, the speakers lavished praise on the Emperor and his predecessors.¹⁶ They referred to the “Prussian spirit” just as frequently, recalling that it had inspired people to new achievements following the military setbacks of 1806—1807.¹⁷ One gets a feeling that such contrasting references to the past threatened to cause discord between government and the people, though the speakers went out of the way to prevent that from happening. In his celebratory speech, Professor Max Lenz (1850—1932) in fact tried to unite the government and the people under the flag of common interests, declaring that the passionate desire of the German people to be united under the House of Hohenzollern had been realized in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ The participants in the jubilee celebrations, including the Emperor, never tired of repeating that the history of Berlin University is inseparable from that of the Fatherland, and science and that higher education must benefit the state.¹⁹

¹³ “Liste der Delegierten zur Jahrhundertfeier der Universität Berlin,” in *Hundertjahrfeier der Universität Berlin*, vol. 1 (Berlin: s. n., 1910), 3-6.

¹⁴ Heinz Deiters, “Zur Jahrhundertfeier der Universität Berlin,” *Akademische Blätter*, October 16, 1910, 209.

¹⁵ Trude Maurer, “Engagement, Distanz und Selbshauptung. Die Feier der patriotischen Jubiläen 1913 an den deutschen Universitäten,” *Jahrbuch für Universitätsgeschichte* 14 (2011): 149-164.

¹⁶ *Jahrhundertfeier der königlichen Wilhelm-Friedrichs-Universität zu Berlin 10.—12. Oktober 1910*, ed. Erich Schmidt (Berlin: Schade, 1911), 40-42; Max Lenz, *Rede zur Jahrhundertfeier der königlichen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin* (Halle a. d. S.: Waisenhauses, 1910), 5-6.

¹⁷ Paul Schwartz, “Die Gründung der Universität Berlin und der Anfang der Reform der höheren Schulen im Jahre 1810,” *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für deutsche Erziehungs- und Schulgeschichte* 20/3 (1910): 151. The reference was to the defeat of Prussian forces by Napoleon in the battles of Jena—Auerstedt and Friedland during the War of the Fourth Coalition of 1806—1807. Prussia lost its army and much of its territory, including the lands received after the partition of Rzeczpospolita and, as a result, threatened with losing its independence, was forced to sign a humiliating peace agreement with Napoleon.

¹⁸ Lenz, *Rede*, 6.

¹⁹ *Jahrhundertfeier*, 36; Deiters, “Zur Jahrhundertfeier,” 209.

The pompous rhetoric periodically referred to scientists and the founders of the university. Humboldt was mentioned by Wilhelm II, Minister of Education and Culture August von Trott zu Solz (1855—1938), Lord Mayor Martin Kirschner (1842—1912), Max Lenz, and many other speakers, but these sporadic references had nothing new about them, so the origins of the Humboldt myth are not there, no matter how strongly one may wish that they. Of all the speeches, I managed to find only two where something was written about Humboldt in addition to his name being mentioned. The first belongs to the Rector of Berlin University Erich Schmidt (1853—1913), while the second came from his successor, Max Rubner (1854—1932).

Langewiesche turns to Rubner's speech, indicating that it was timed for the 1910 jubilee. By quoting from the speech, he implicitly backs up Paletschek's theory about the origin of the Humboldt myth by filling in previously missing references to sources. At least two points are open to doubt. First, Rubner's speech could only be linked to the centenary of Berlin University by a big stretch: Rubner did not speak on October 10—12, but three days later at his investiture ceremony, when the jubilee celebrations were over and many guests, including the Emperor, had left. Second, there is only one sentence in Rubner's speech that points to Humboldt's links with the research university: "Wilhelm von Humboldt assigned the university the twin task of teaching and researching."²⁰ It does not follow from this sentence that Humboldt was the pioneer of the new university model. Rubner enlarged upon the idea that Berlin University had to develop free creative research, but he never again mentioned Humboldt.

Unlike Rubner, Schmidt delivered his speech on October 11, at the height of the jubilee celebrations and in the presence of the Emperor, top imperial officials, deans, professors and foreign delegates. His speech began with a reference to the monuments to Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt erected in 1882 and 1883 on the right- and left-hand sides of the entrance to the main university building on Unter-den-Linden Boulevard. Schmidt referred to Wilhelm von Humboldt as a symbol of the humanities, and called his younger brother Alexander a symbol of the natural sciences.²¹ Could this allegory be the start of the Humboldt myth? Probably not.

Schmidt was not the first to resort to the allegory. Another Berlin University Rector, Emil Heinrich du Bois-Reymond (1818—1896),²² had done the very same thing twenty-seven years earlier. The monuments to the two Humboldts became the topics of a speech he gave on August 3, 1883

²⁰ Max Rubner, *Unsere Ziele für die Zukunft* (Berlin: Schade, 1910), 4.

²¹ *Jahrhundertfeier*, 31-32.

²² The list of speeches of Berlin University rectors, see in *Reden von Rektoren der Berliner Universität 1810–1932: eine Auswahlbibliographie*, ed. Christa Schwarz (Berlin: Humboldt-Univ., 1977).

timed to coincide with the anniversary of the birth of King Friedrich Wilhelm III. The history of the creation of these monuments took up the first few minutes of the speech, while the rest was a panegyric not to Wilhelm, but to Alexander, whose achievements, according to Du Bois-Reymond, had long been underestimated. Du Bois-Reymond still described the elder Humboldt as a talented diplomat and scholar, listing the areas of knowledge in which he excelled: aesthetics, philology and antique culture. Wilhelm was also accorded praise for helping to found Berlin University during Prussia's "resurgence" (*Neugeburt*), though the Prussian monarch was named as the immediate founder of the institution.²³

By the end of the nineteenth century, the services of Wilhelm and Alexander to science were hardly ever put into question. The former was known as a diplomat and philologist, while the latter was a famed explorer and a natural scientist. The fact that the brothers were identified with the humanities and natural sciences would probably have pleased many educated Germans, especially members of the academia. From that point of view, Schmidt's allegory can hardly be interpreted as an attempt to exaggerate Humboldt's services to Berlin University. Most probably, it was a traditional figure of speech without any extra meaning that reflected the momentous occasion.

Continuing the search for the Humboldt myth, I would like to single out an important fragment of Schmidt's speech in which Wilhelm von Humboldt is described as a man "who helped to preserve the essence of diverse human educational ideals in the years when the old [system of] higher education had been shattered, and who enriched and added a spiritual dimension to aesthetic education and linguistics."²⁴ Little was known in the nineteenth century about Humboldt's contribution to education, so Schmidt's speech undoubtedly reveals a new side to Humboldt that was not frequently mentioned in the academic community. What event could have caused these changes?

Most probably, the reason was the publication of new manuscripts written by Humboldt and discovered in the 1890s during the preparations of twenty-five-volume collection of his works timed to coincide with the bicentenary of the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1900. Publication of the volumes continued during the first half of the twentieth century. The first volume appeared in 1903 and was edited by Albert Leitzmann (1867—1950), a literary historian from the University of Jena, as did the tenth volume, edited by historian Bruno Gebhardt (1858—1905). The first volume, along with the earlier known works, included Humboldt's texts on the theory of education and compara-

²³ Emil du Bois-Reymond, "Die Humboldt-Denkmäler vor der Berliner Universität," in *Reden*, ed. Emil du Bois-Reymond, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Veit & Comp., 1912), 249, 255.

²⁴ *Jahrhundertfeier*, 32.

tive anthropology written in 1791—1795.²⁵ The tenth volume included business papers of the period when Humboldt headed the Section of Culture and Public Education at the Prussian Ministry of the Interior. Among these papers was the note *On the Internal and External Organization of the Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin*.

The new collection stimulated an interest among scholars in Humboldt's work. Thanks to the new manuscripts, the famous diplomat and philologist came to be perceived as the founder of the research university. Most probably Schmidt's words about Humboldt's contribution to the development of aesthetic education and the preservation of human educational ideals echoed that new perception. However, these words can hardly be seen as the origins of the Humboldt myth, or even as a tiny contribution to spreading it.

It would seem that the archival findings of the 1890s played into the hands of the organizers of the centenary celebrations. At least, the findings could motivate them to put one of the founders of their *alma mater* on a pedestal and praise him for the achievements that had been overlooked by predecessors. Moreover, it is no secret that at the start of the twentieth century, German universities were gradually yielding ground to technical institutes supported by the Prussian Minister of Education and Culture Friedrich Althoff (1839—1908). To restore their former authority, the university professors desperately needed effective mechanisms of self-legitimization. Humboldt's image fit the role of such a mechanism perfectly. Even so, in 1910, Humboldt did not become the main hero of jubilee speeches, although he was mentioned in a new capacity in one of them.

The point is that the 1910 celebrations were called upon to sanctify not only Berlin University, but also the German Empire and its ruler. The mention of kings, herzogs, princes and their great contribution to German science were a feature of the majority of university jubilees in the Modern Times, as monarchs and royal princes were often honorary guests at such events. It is not surprising that the scientists and officials who made speeches in 1910 gave credit for the founding of Berlin University to the ruling house of Hohenzollern. In this way, they shored up the illusion of harmony between university and the state and earned the benevolence of the latter. Nobody neglected the names of the Humboldt brothers, Schleiermacher, Fichte and others, but they were overshadowed by the eulogies to the Emperor and his predecessors.²⁶ On the strength of the above, one has to admit that the jubilee speakers could not have contributed to the birth of the Humboldt myth: their rhetoric

²⁵ *Wilhelm von Humboldts gesammelte Schriften: Werke*, ed. Albert Leitzmann, vol. 1 (Berlin: Behr's, 1903), 86-96, 255-281, 282-287, 377-410.

²⁶ *Jahrhundertfeier*, 5-6, 36-42.

contained no information about Humboldt's innovative model and/or its introduction to Berlin University.

The Birth of the Humboldt Myth

Having established that the Humboldt myth was not present in the jubilee speeches, we can now pass on to the next type of sources identified by Paletschek, specifically Spranger's Festschriften. It is impossible to deny that they contain references to the Humboldt myth. In 1910, Spranger did indeed publish a couple of books to mark the centenary of Berlin University in which, as Paletschek rightly notes, he referred to Humboldt as the founder of a new university model and to the opening of Berlin University as a turning point in the history of German higher education. Nevertheless, the question arises as to whether Spranger was the first to mention Humboldt and Berlin University in the new capacity. From my observations, it was not Spranger, but rather his teacher, Friedrich Paulsen (1846—1908), who must be given the palm in this story.

Paulsen was known as a talented pedagogue, a neo-Kantian philosopher and a historian of education. The concept of "Neo-Humanism"²⁷ that he introduced in the 1880s earned widespread popularity and is still used in education theory and philosophy. Paulsen studied in Erlangen before moving to Berlin, where he defended his first dissertation on Aristotle's ethics in 1871 under the tutelage of Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg (1802—1872), and four years later, he defended his second dissertation on Immanuel Kant's theory of cognition. In 1878, he was named Extraordinary Professor of Philosophy and Pedagogy at Berlin University, and in 1896, he became Professor of Moral Philosophy, succeeding Eduard Gottlob Zeller (1814—1908).

By comparing the works of Paulsen written several years apart, I discovered intriguing changes in his assessments both of Humboldt and of Berlin University. In his *opus magnum* on the history of German education published in 1885, Paulsen presents Humboldt as a scholar of Antiquity, referring to him as "the new Greek" (*Neuhellen*).²⁸ Seventeen years later, however, in his 1902 book *The*

²⁷ On Neo-Humanism, see: Erich Feldmann, *Der preußische Neuhumanismus: Studien zur Geschichte der Erziehung und Erziehungswissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert*, vol. 1 (Bonn: Cohen, 1930); *Dokumente des Neuhumanismus*, ed. Rudolf Joerden, vol. 1 (Weinheim: Beltz, 1931); Chen Zhaoyang, *Neuhumanismus und neuhumanistische Bildungskonzeption von Lessing bis Goethe: ein Problemaufriss* (PhD diss., University of München, 1991); Jürgen Osterhammel, "Zwischen Spätaufklärung und Neuhumanismus: die Schulreform des Großherzogs Karl Theodor von Dalberg und die Erneuerung des Hanauer Gymnasiums 1812/13," *Hanauer Geschichtsblätter* 31 (1993): 247-259.

²⁸ Friedrich Paulsen, *Geschichte des gelehrten Unterrichts: auf den deutschen Schulen und Universitäten vom Ausgang des Mittelalters bis zur Gegenwart mit besonderer Rücksicht auf den klassischen Unterricht* (Leipzig: Veit & Comp, 1885), 523.

German Universities and University Study, he declares Humboldt to be the founder of Berlin University, which was erected as a counterweight to the higher schools of the “military dictator” Napoleon. In Paulsen’s opinion, the figure of Humboldt, which blended a talented scholar and a great statesman, symbolized Prussia’s abandonment of militarism and discipline in favor of creative research and its main principle—freedom.²⁹

One can safely say that the note *On the Internal and External Organization of the Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin*, which he mentions in his book, helped Paulsen to look at Humboldt from a different angle. How could Paulsen have learned about the note if it was only published a year later? The reason is that, before Paulsen’s book was published, fragments from the note were quoted by Bruno Gebhardt and Adolf von Harnak, the author of the jubilee history of the Prussian Academy of Sciences.³⁰ Paulsen, who was thoroughly familiar with the works of his colleagues, had a chance to learn about the main content of the letter before its official publication.

Fascinated by Humboldt’s note, Paulsen became increasingly convinced as the years passed that the research university sprang up thanks to Humboldt in 1810. In 1906, his new book *The German Universities: Their Character and Historical Development* presented Humboldt as the reformer of the entire Prussian education system, including higher education: “Humboldt remained in this position only a short time [...] but it was sufficient for him to place the whole educational of the State on a new basis and to inspire it with new ideas. During this era the development of the universities, as well as of the secondary and primary schools, took the direction which, with a few variations and modifications, has been maintained throughout the whole century.” Further on, he wrote that one of the new ideas in higher education was the idea of freedom embodied in Berlin University.³¹

Paletschek maintains that Paulsen considered the turning point in the history of German higher education not the opening of Berlin University,³² but the transformations that took place at the universities of Halle and Göttingen in the second half of the eighteenth century.³³ That claim is only partly true, and only for *The German Universities and University Study*. In that book, Paulsen did indeed write about Halle and Göttingen as progressive education institutions where, with the advent of the Modern Times, medieval scholasticism had retreated under the onslaught of the natural sci-

²⁹ Friedrich Paulsen, *Die deutschen Universitäten und das Universitätsstudium* (Berlin: Asher & Co., 1902), 63-64.

³⁰ Bruno Gebhardt, *Wilhelm von Humboldt als Staatsmann*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1896), 118-124; Adolf von Harnak, *Geschichte der Königlich preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaft zu Berlin*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Reichsdruckerei, 1900), 594-597.

³¹ Friedrich Paulsen, *German Education: Past and Present*, trans. T. Lorenz (London: Fisher Unwin, 1908), 183.

³² Paletschek, “Erfindung,” 186.

³³ On these transformations, see James D. Cobb, *The Forgotten Reforms: Non-Prussian Universities 1797—1817* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1980).

ences, and where the principles of free education and research were asserted.³⁴ Although in 1902, Paulsen described the opening of Berlin University as one of the most notable achievements of post-Napoleon Prussia, he did not refer to it as a turning point in the history of higher education. However, in 1906 he carried that idea to its final conclusion: “The University of Berlin was [...] the earliest representative of a new type, the leading idea of its foundation being that the university should be, above all, the workshop of free scientific research. The universities of the eighteenth century had already shown a tendency in that direction, Halle and Göttingen leading the way. But, in their whole constitution, they continued to be, in the first place, mere high schools, teaching being the principal task of the professors, whereas scientific research was expected of them only as a secondary pursuit.”³⁵

We may thus conclude that the Humboldt myth owes its origin not to Spranger, but rather to his teacher, Paulsen, because it was he who enunciated the two main ideas that formed the nucleus of the myth several years before the jubilee celebrations of 1910: (1) that Humboldt was the author of the innovative model of a research university; and (2) that Berlin University was the place where that model was introduced, and this consequently marked a new stage in the history of higher education. Paulsen conceived of both ideas not fortuitously, but under the influence of Humboldt’s note, which revealed to him a new facet of the work of the famous diplomat and philologist.

The above does not cancel out the fact established by Paletschek that Spranger had a hand in fostering the Humboldt myth, though it would be rash to consider him to be the creator of that myth. Most probably Spranger could be described as a supporter and popularizer of Paulsen’s ideas. Indeed, Spranger may have developed an interest in Humboldt under the influence of his teacher. In 1909, Spranger defended his doctoral dissertation on Humboldt’s contribution to the development of Neo-Humanism.³⁶ That same year he became a *privatim docens* at Berlin University, and a year later, he published two Festschriften in honor of the centenary of his *alma mater*. The first of these contained the works of Fichte, Schleiermacher and his colleagues, reflecting on what an ideal university should be.³⁷ The second was a book about Humboldt as a reformer of German education.

The book clearly reveals the key ideas of the Humboldt myth as formulated by Paulsen. The emergence of Berlin University was conceptualized by Spranger as a farewell to the medieval scholastic university, which sank into oblivion along with the *ancien régime* under the pressure of En-

³⁴ Paulsen, *Die deutschen Universitäten*, 55-60.

³⁵ Paulsen, *German Education*, 185.

³⁶ Eduard Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und Humanitätsidee* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1909).

³⁷ *Fichte, Schleiermacher und Steffens über das Wesen der Universität*, ed. Eduard Spranger (Leipzig: Dürr, 1910).

lightenment criticism. The new university may have been reminiscent in form of the hangovers of the past it was called upon to replace, but its spirit embodied advanced educational principles: the attitude to the research process as a never-ending search for the truth, freedom of scientific knowledge, the unity of all sciences, and the interconnection between universities and academies within a single system—all that Humboldt wrote about in his note. Spranger described the founding of Berlin University as Humboldt’s “greatest act,” portraying his hero as a wise and industrious statesman who believed in the spiritual revival of his nation, which was living through a brief period of decline.³⁸

Conclusion

The material analyzed in this article suggests that, contrary to the widely held view, the centenary of Berlin University did not generate the Humboldt myth. The speakers at the celebrations went out of their way to legitimize the reign of the Emperor and highlight the good relations between the monarchy and science. Even if they happened to mention Wilhelm von Humboldt among other well-known names, they did not mention him as the pioneer of a research university. Only the rector, Erich Schmidt, spared a few words to praise the activities of Humboldt in the field of education, but he did not touch upon the new university model or Humboldt’s contribution to its development.

The Humboldt myth can be encountered in the Festschrifts of Eduard Spranger published for the centenary, but Spranger was not its author. Several years before him, the same ideas were expressed by his teacher, Friedrich Paulsen, who had studied Humboldt’s note *On the Internal and External Organization of the Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin*, which was discovered in 1896 and published in 1903. Paulsen’s books had nothing to do with the centenary of Berlin University. He did not live to see the jubilee, as he died in 1908. Spranger merely confirmed the ideas of his teacher in two Festschrifts published on the occasion of the centenary of his *alma mater*.

Did it occur to Paulsen and Spranger that by linking Humboldt’s name to the appearance of the research university they constructed one of the most tenacious myths in the history of science and education? Could this myth have seen the light of day if Humboldt’s note had not fallen into the hands of two German scholars who were held in high esteem until the end of the twentieth century? It was probably because of their authority that the views of Paulsen and Spranger avoided a critical

³⁸ Eduard Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Reform des Bildungswesens* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1965), 199-202, 207-208.

examination for a long time and indeed continued to win new adherents, including such famous names as Karl Jaspers, Helmut Schelsky and Jürgen Habermas.³⁹

Through the efforts of German scholars, modern science has over the past twenty years made a thorough study of all the twists and turns of the Humboldt myth in the twentieth century. Hopefully, this article will throw more light on the initial stage of that path. Far be it from me to think that studies of the “Humboldt model” will soon peter out. Considering the continuing arguments about the future of the university unfolding with varying degrees of intensity in the United States and the European Union, the chances are that we will have occasion to remember Humboldt and his contribution to higher education again and again.

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³⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Die Idee der Universität* (Berlin: Springer, 1923); Helmut Schelsky, *Einsamkeit und Freiheit: Idee und Gestalt der deutschen Universität und ihrer Reformen* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1963); Jürgen Habermas, “The Idea of the University: Learning Processes,” *New German Critique* 41 (1987): 3-22.

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