

# **HISTORY AND PRE-HISTORY OF THE ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT FOUNDATION<sup>1)</sup>**

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**Abstract.** In this paper a short review of the history of Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Bonn - Bad Godesberg, Germany, on the occasion of its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary is presented. This outstanding German foundation is actually the third one with the same name. Earlier two other Alexander von Humboldt Foundations consequently existed and they consist its pre-history, which is also shortly reviewed. The establishment of the present Foundation in 1953, its development and growth, its activities, information about the six presidents and five executive directors, as well as the main features, principles and guidelines are considered. During the last 60 years the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation became an important institution for the promotion of international research cooperation, which significantly influences the world science. It supported more than 27700 Humboldt fellows to carry out scientific research in Germany, and they form a large “Humboldt family” – a world-wide network. Large number Bulgarian Humboldt fellows are among the best scientists in Bulgaria.

*Keywords:* Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, research in Germany, international scientific cooperation, Humboldt Fellowships, Hum-

boldt Awards, world-wide network “Humboldt family”, Bulgarian Humboldt fellows

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On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2013 the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation reached the age of 60. This remarkable German foundation rendered great services to the international research cooperation and the development of the world science during these 60 years. However during the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries three Alexander von Humboldt Foundations consequently existed, the present Foundation being the third one.



Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859)

Alexander von Humboldt is a name known by each educated person. This is the name of a giant in the science and humanity, a nature researcher and explorer, universal genius and cosmopolitan, scientist and patron. His Latin America’s journey was celebrated as the second scientific

discovery of South America. Numbers of natural science disciplines such as physical geography, climatology, ecology or oceanography were established by Humboldt. Alexander was born on September, 14<sup>th</sup>, 1769 in Berlin. He studied in the Universities of Frankfurt am Oder, Berlin, Goettingen, Hamburg and in 1792 he graduated at the Bergakademie Freiberg. He was a good friend of Goethe and Schiller. Together with Aime Bonpland he started in June 1799 a research journey: Canary Islands, Venezuela, Orinoco, Guiana, Caribbean Islands, Cuba, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, US and in September 1804 they returned to Europe, after more than 5 years. They climbed the peak Chimborazo up to 5760 m over sea level – a height never reached by any man so far. The next 20 years Alexander von Humboldt worked in Paris on his notes and collections (only the plants' samples were 60 000, 3600 from them unknown!) and published the results in 36 volumes entitled "A journey in the equatorial regions of the New World". Other 5 volumes contain the results of the almost one-year research journey in Russian Asia in 1829. More than 900 objects of nature and geography or institutions have been named after Alexander von Humboldt. The masterpiece of his advanced years, the five-volume "Cosmos, Draft of a Physical Description of the World," has remained unique in its comprehensive approach. Alexander von Humboldt not only invested his heritage and money in his own studies but also selflessly sponsored other young scholars and talents, among them Justus von Liebig and Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy.

On May, 6<sup>th</sup>, 1859 Alexander von Humboldt died in Berlin at the age of 90 and was buried in the park of castle Tegel of his aristocratic family. Three weeks later his friends got together with an "Invitation to an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for Natural Science and Travel". It was a foundation of gratitude which they inaugurated, gratitude for the fruits of Alexander von Humboldt's patronage. The bankers, Mendelssohn & Co.,

in Berlin collected the donations (40 000 Taler, approximately 5 million Euro now); the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences was to be responsible for “determining their use”. The initiative was supported by the Royal Society in London, the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg and the King of Prussia Friedrich Wilhelm IV. On December 19<sup>th</sup> 1860 the Foundation was established with the following objectives: “To grant support to emerging talent, wherever it may be, in any course in which Alexander von Humboldt displayed his scientific activity, namely for scientific works and great travels.” This first Alexander von Humboldt Foundation mainly sponsored research travels of young German scientists in foreign countries. After 63 years activity the Foundation lost all its assets in the wake of economic depression and hyperinflation in 1923.

During the inflation years after the end of the First World War many foreigners came to study quite inexpensive in Germany because of the favorable exchange rates of foreign currency. However after the financial reform and stabilization of the German Mark, many foreign students got into serious difficulties. The Foreign Ministry of the Weimar Republic, headed by Gustav Stresemann, considered necessary sponsorship by some “German Study Foundation for Foreigners” in order to keep these students in Germany. The idea was, through a strict selection procedure to support foreigners who were “talented and pro-German” and would later maintain contact with Germany.

Because of both international and domestic policy reasons the Foreign Ministry did not wish to be seen as founder and sponsor of such a foundation. That is why a private personage was considered appropriate to be founder of the new foundation. This personage was the retired Under-Secretary of State, Veritable Secret Councilor, Dr. Theodor Lewald, member of the International Olympic Committee, who proposed Alexander von Humboldt as patron of this foundation. On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1925 he signed the

charter of establishment of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, with head-quarters in Berlin, and objectives: "Sponsorship of foreign students at German universities and other German educational institutions, particularly through award of fellowships and study allowances." Obviously the new objectives were different from those of the first foundation and closer to those at present.



‘Alexander von Humboldt House’ in Berlin - Charlottenburg  
1926 -1945

Dr. Lewald was appointed Chairman of the five members Board of Governors (the other four were top officers in different governmental services) and thereby he was President of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation until 1937 when the national-socialistic rulers forced him to retire. He was very much assisted by the executive director - from 1928 until 1945 this manager was Kurt Goepel who has rendered great services to the

foundation. Neither in the Board of Governors nor in the Selection Committee German scientists have been involved. The foundation supported mainly students and rarely young researchers. Certainly in the case of PhD students, who were majority among the supported young foreigners, not only education but also scientific research has been promoted. The foundation received in 1926 from the Concern Wertheim a nice house at Kurfuerstendamm in Berlin, the city where the half of all Humboldt fellows in Germany lived. It was called “Alexander von Humboldt House” and soon became a centre of the cultural and social life of the Humboldt fellows.

In the old foundation, just as in the present foundation, there were no quotas for the number of grants given to students from a country. The distribution of the Humboldt fellows according to their nationality was irregular. The largest number of fellows was from Bulgaria. In the first period 1925 – 1930 they were 43 from 312 altogether. In the next period 1931 – 1939 the Bulgarians were again on the first place with 86 Humboldt fellows. There are no data for the time of the war. Thereby the second Alexander von Humboldt Foundation became very important for the Bulgarian science. The young Bulgarians, supported to do research and studies in Germany, became later part of the scientific elite of Bulgaria, including distinguished professors, many of which were elected members of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

During the Second World War the activity of the foundation and the number of the Humboldt fellows progressively decreased until the night of November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1943 when a British-American air-raid completely destroyed the office and documentation of the foundation and practically stopped its activities. The second Alexander von Humboldt Foundation ended together with the Third German Reich in 1945.

Four years after the end of the Second World War the new German state Bundesrepublik Deutschland – Federal Republic of Germany – has

been constituted in the western and southern German provinces. In the first years the Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer functioned also as foreign minister. At his office a Department of Foreign Cultural Relations (including science and high education) was established. This department immediately started the reestablishment of the intermediary organizations of the Weimar Republic for students exchange and scientific relations: in 1950 the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Institute for Foreign Relations as well as in 1951 the Goethe-Institute were restored. A discussion about the reestablishment of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation began, under the general supervision of Minister Adenauer, in the Department of Foreign Cultural Relations. The Secretary of State Hallstein, the Head of Department Salat and his coworker Hilgard, the Head of DAAD Klauser, the President of DFG Reiser, the former Executive Director Goepel of the old (until 1945) Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, have been included in these negotiations. These founding fathers had to solve difficult problems concerning the aims and aspect of the new foundation, reestablishment of the old foundation or setting up a new one, the relations with DAAD, the Board of Governors, the management of the foundation, the selection procedures and committees, the appropriate person to be President and many others. The discussions and negotiations took rather long time, about three years. As a result the draft of a charter of establishment of a new foundation was written and on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1953 it was approved by Foreign Minister Adenauer, who nominated as foundation's first President the famous physicist Professor Werner Heisenberg, at that time director of the Max Planck Institute for Physics in Goettingen.



Dr. Konrad Adenauer signed the Charter of Establishment of Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and congratulated its first President Prof. Werner Heisenberg, Bonn, December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1953

On December, 10<sup>th</sup>, 1953 the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation was born for the third time. The Federal Chancellor and Foreign Minister Konrad Adenauer and the President-Founder Werner Heisenberg signed the Charter of Establishment, according to which the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation was founded in Bonn - Bad Godesberg by the Federal Republic of Germany as an incorporated foundation in private law with objectives: “The aim of the Foundation is to grant fellowships to academics of foreign nationality, without regard to gender, race, religion, or ideology, to enable them to *continue their academic training* by a study-visit to Germany.” During the first years the accent was put on the high education. Unlike in later years the majority of fellows in the Fifties were doctoral students. The Foundation’s objectives were revised in early 1965: “The aim of the Foundation is to grant research fellowships to young academics of foreign nationality, without regard to gender, race, religion, or ideology, to enable them to *carry out research projects* in the Federal Republic of Germany.” Sponsorship was concentrated on post-docs with intensification of



the care during their research stay in Germany. In 1977 the objectives have been supplemented by the following half-sentence: “and to maintain the resultant academic contacts”. With small changes these objectives are the same up to now.

There were features of the new Alexander von Humboldt Foundation inherited from the old one: young foreigners were supported to carry out academic training by a study-visit to Germany; the grants were given without regard to gender, race, religion, or ideology; there were no quotas according to nationality or to sciences and arts for the number of grants given; the foundation took care for the cultural and social life of the fellows in Germany. However there were also important differences between the old and new foundations: the new foundation was open established by the Foreign Ministry, i.e. by the German state, without screening behind a private personage; the scientific research had priority over education, especially after 1965 carrying out research projects in Germany only is supported; the most important difference was that German scientists were very much involved in the new foundation – not only all Presidents were best scientists with high international prestige and in the present Board of Trustees 8 from 11 members are well-known scientists, but also all selection committees were completed with leading scientists; thus the personal qualification and quality of scientific results became the only criteria for granting fellowships.

Certainly in the first years the most important role had to play the first President of the new Alexander von Humboldt Foundation – new traditions, principles, criteria, worth's scale had to be created and established. Werner Heisenberg, one of the greatest physicists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, made a remarkable, outstandingly successful scientific career – 22 years old he obtained doctor degree from the University of Munich, at the age of 26 he was full professor at the University of Leipzig and only 31 years old he

won the Nobel Prize in 1932. He not only helped to mould the Foundation's principles. His name vouched for integrity, academic quality and unerringness in human and political judgement. His presidency was seen as a signal in often still skeptical foreign countries. He succeeded in introducing the Foundation's selection procedure, in which all disciplines and nations enjoy equal status.

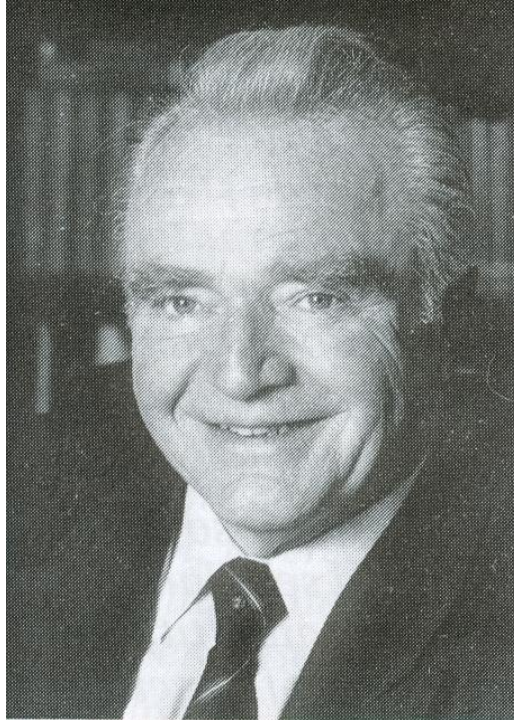


Prof. Werner Heisenberg, Nobel Prize in 1932,  
President of Alexander von Humboldt Foundation  
1953 - 1975

The second important person, who had to manage the practical activities of the new Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, was the executive director. Initially, according to the preliminary agreement, the office of DAAD undertook the Foundation's administration; respectively Dr. Ruth Tamm became simultaneously executive director of both DAAD and the new Foundation. Next year she moved on entirely to the Humboldt Foun-

dation. Two and half years only she has been its executive director – in the middle of 1956 she left because of her marriage. However in this short period Dr. Ruth Tamm rendered great services to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. The first selection procedure in 1954 was perfectly organized and 90 Humboldt fellows have been chosen among 253 candidates from 35 countries; thus the guidelines for the future selection procedures have been settled. Early May 1955 she successfully organized a 4-days meeting of all Humboldt fellows (70 were present) in Bonn with interesting program, including reception by the Federal President Prof. Theodor Heuss. Thus she made a good start of a new tradition – the Annual Meetings - which continues already 60 years; actually Ruth Tamm is the author of the expression “Humboldt family”. She made also another good start - the gaining money from sponsors. In 1954 the Foundation obtained from three sponsors 40 000 DM while the subsidy from the government was 375 000 DM.

The next executive director was personally nominated by the President Heisenberg – the 29 years old Dr. Heinrich Pfeiffer became Secretary General of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation from 1956 to 1994. He dedicated his life to the Foundation. He contributed decisively to the establishment not only of the effective mechanism of the Foundation, but also of the Humboldt family in the whole world. He knew personally almost each Humboldt-fellow. Soon it became clear that this choice of Werner Heisenberg was one of the best his decisions in favor of the Foundation. During almost 20 years the tandem Heisenberg – Pfeiffer succeeded to form the excellent appearance of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and to turn it into a flourishing institution. After President Heisenberg has withdrawn in 1975, Heinrich Pfeiffer continued together with the next presidents tirelessly to work for the development of the Foundation – always larger quantity, always higher quality.



Dr. Heinrich Pfeiffer, Secretary General of  
Alexander von Humboldt Foundation  
1956 – 1994

Professor Heisenberg held the President's office almost 22 years and rendered invaluable services to the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation. After him five other Presidents headed the Foundation up to now. As the second President, from 1975 to 1979, Feodor Lynen, one of the great architects of the classical biochemistry (Nobel Prize in 1964), consistently supported the principle of quality and abstinence from politics of the day. So it was possible to resume academic exchange with China and intensify that with Japan. He bequeathed to the Foundation the program named now after him, enabling young German scholars to spend research periods abroad at the institutes of Humboldtians. As the third President of the Foundation from 1979 to 1989 Wolfgang Paul, a pioneer in the field of particle physics, consistently supported the principle of "quality before

quantity" and the intensification of worldwide contacts with the Humboldt family. He won the Nobel Prize in 1989, the last year of his presidency, and donated a considerable part of the money to a foundation named after him and administrated by the Humboldt-Foundation. Reimar Lüst, an astrophysicist, assumed office as the fourth President of the Humboldt Foundation in a time of political upheaval. The European revolutions in 1989 and German reunification in 1990 confronted him and the Foundation with new challenges. Experience he gained as Chairman of the Science Council and President of the Max Planck Society helped him to meet them. Wolfgang Frühwald was the first humanities scholar, a well-known scientist in contemporary German literary history, holding the presidency of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation from 1999 to the end of 2007. Prior to that he was President of the German Research Foundation DFG and of the European Heads of Research Councils and he has been granted numerous scientific awards. In January 2008 Helmut Schwarz, one of the leading researchers in the field of molecular chemistry, became the sixth Alexander von Humboldt Foundation's President - an internationally well known scientist with many awards, honorary doctorates, honorary fellowships, and foreign professorships from all over the world. Not only Presidents contributed for the excellent development of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Many German scientists took part in different boards, commissions, departments, etc.

Certainly not less important is the work of the people who practically realize Foundation's programs - the officials and employees in the Foundation's secretariat. We, the Humboldtians all over the world, very well know how friendly and competent these people are, how quick and effective they solve any problem. I shall mention only those who govern and represent this excellent staff – the Secretaries General of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. After the retirement of Dr. Pfeiffer, his activity

has been very successfully continued from 1995 to the end of 2003 by Dr. Manfred Osten. He is a very good friend of the Bulgarian Humboldtians – during these nine years he visited Bulgaria six times taking part with lectures, moderator of round-table discussions, publications, etc in various activities of our Humboldt Union. During the last 10 years the already rather large Foundation's administration has competently and convincingly been managed by Dr. Georg Schuette from 2004 to 2010 and by Dr. Enno Aufderheide since 2010 up to now.

Since 1953 the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation developed and realized many different programs. Humboldt Research Fellowship for scholars not resident in Germany is the oldest and largest program – up to 600 new grants per year. In 1962 it was differentiated into Fellowship A for post-docs and Fellowship B for lecturers; in 2007 new career stage model was introduced. In 1972 the Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt announced in Harvard University, USA, Research Awards for American scientists as gratitude for the Marshall-Plan announced 25 years ago also in Harvard; the Humboldt Foundation was entrusted with the administration of this special program. Later these Humboldt Research Awards for distinguished foreign scientists formed one of the most important Foundation's programs. In 1979 the Feodor Lynen Research Fellowships were established for young German researchers to carry out research with former Humboldt fellows in their home-countries. Many other programs were introduced as well. Because of the excellent prestige of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation many other foundations, German or foreign institutions, and persons willingly constituted joint fellowships or awards. Typical examples are Max Planck Research Award, the Bundeskanzler Scholarships, the Roman Herzog Program together with Hertie-Foundation.



Humboldt Fellows recipients of the “Bundeskanzler Scholarship” in 2001, together with Federal Chancellor Schröder, Foundation’s President Frühwald and Secretary General Osten

The very successful development during the last 60 years transmuted the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation into most important institution for the promotion of international research cooperation, which is universally recognized and significantly influences the world science. It enables highly qualified foreign researchers to spend extended periods of research in Germany and promotes the ensuing academic contacts. Its leading principles are: The Humboldt Foundation promotes excellence; the selection is realized by scientists only through a peer review system; it is independent of ideological, commercial, political and denominational influences; there are no quotas according to nationality or to sciences and arts; it sponsors individuals, not projects; it supports scholarly initiative and independence; it is flexible and attentive to the individual’s needs as a researcher and person; it maintains a lifelong partnership with the Humboldtian through a comprehensive follow-up program and responds to new challenges and

innovative ideas through a continuous dialogue with a world-wide Humboldt network.



The main office building of Alexander von Humboldt Foundation,  
Bonn – Bad Godesberg, Jean Paul Str. 12

The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation granted in 2012 altogether 721 Fellowships and Awards; taking into account those who continued from the previous year and those from the follow-up program, in average more than 2000 foreign scientists per year carried out research in Germany, supported by the Foundation, which spent 112.5 Million Euro for that in 2012. In 60 years the Humboldt Foundation sponsored over 27700 scientists from 137 countries of all 5 continents. Most of them are among the best scientists in their countries. Not only three Foundation's presidents were Nobel Prize winners. 50 Humboldtians have received a Nobel Prize so far. The last one was given to the Humboldtian Professor James Rothman in 2013.

The Humboldt-fellows form the very large "Humboldt Family" and they remain in close contact with the Foundation. The Foundation carries



out a comprehensive follow-up program, which helps to cultivate a valuable potential for partnership with German scientists. There are 118 Humboldt associations in 71 countries. We are proud that the Humboldt Union in Bulgaria is one of the active members of this Humboldt network. Through lasting relationship with Germany, former Humboldt guest-researchers act as multipliers in their countries.



Humboldtians together with Dr. Sven Baszio, participants in Humboldt Kolleg “Research in Bulgaria and Romania after the Admission in EU”  
Sofia, 2007

This is the case of Bulgaria as well. Due to the communist government in Bulgaria and the iron curtain in Europe, the first Bulgarian Humboldt-fellows appeared in Germany not until 1965, i.e. 12 years after the establishment of the present Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. After that, however, the number of Bulgarian Humboldtians started a rapid increase and at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reached another summit – according to the number of Humboldtians per capita of the population Bulgaria was in the first place world-wide. Thus we are a big Bulgarian “Humboldt family” which maintains close relations with the Alexander von Humboldt

Foundation. The Bulgarian Humboldtians are included in all follow-up programs – resumptions, follow-up invitations, equipment donations, donations of academic literature. Many scientific instruments and powerful computers have been given by the Foundation to Bulgarian Humboldtians. Humboldt conferences in Bulgaria are also sponsored by the Foundation.

On behalf of the Board of the Humboldt Union in Bulgaria, on behalf of all Bulgarian Humboldtians, I would like to express our gratitude to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and to the people who work in it for their great contributions to the development of the Bulgarian science. We congratulate you on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and wish you much success in your future very important and noble activity in favor of the international science.

#### NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the Humboldt Kolleg “National Policies in Support of Research Excellence” (Dedicated to the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation), Sofia, December 5<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

2. The author, Prof. D. Platikanov, was a President of Humboldt-Union in Bulgarien (2002 – 2006).

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