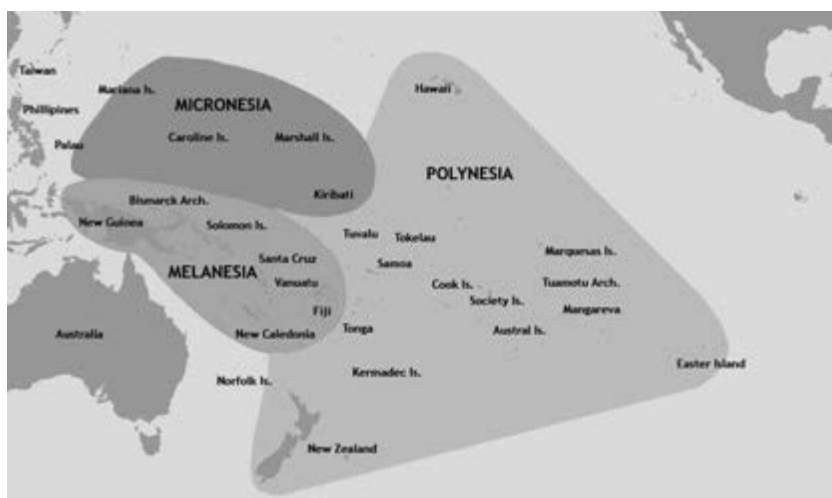


4 **Fiji: The Start of Anglo-German Rivalry in the Pacific**

By the 1870s an explosive situation had emerged in a number of places in the Western Pacific. In some island groups, Fiji, Samoa and the New Hebrides, a combination of incessant factional strife amongst the Islanders and ruthless competition within the foreign community had created a situation hardly conducive to estate agriculture and trade. As was not uncommon, also elsewhere in the Pacific, a weaker party in a domestic war or threatened by outside forces might, of its own free will or urged by foreigners to do so, turn to European nations and the United States, offering sovereignty in return for armed support or protection. On some island groups in the South Pacific, where violence reigned and such requests were frequent, the matter was complicated by a sizeable minority of white settlers who had to protect their lives and property. Such merchants and planters, backed by the might of their weapons and the warships sent by their navies, took the side of those whom they believed could further their business interests most. As titles of land were a much sought-after commodity, this usually meant that they supported the faction that recognised their land titles and would allow them or their company to enlarge their landed property.

Figure 4 The South Pacific. Author: Kahuroa



Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pacific_Culture_Areas.jpg

Instrumental in what happened were the foreign consuls. Often, they were appointed by their governments to protect the interests of their nationals living on the Pacific islands. They were sometimes also sent, as some of the British consuls were, to curb the abuses of the labour trade and the estate economy, despite the fact that their power over the British residents was actually quite limited. Their authority was only backed up by the occasional visits of warships, making them, to a great extent, dependent on the goodwill of the settlers. British consuls who played an active part in the domestic affairs of Fiji hardly had any means to enforce their authority, also amongst British residents, but as the Foreign Office assured one of them in 1869, they could always count on the occasional visit of British warships (Legge 1958: 100). Yet a third reason was to forestall annexation by rival powers; an intention that could result in serious international complications, especially when there was internal strife in the island groups.

After 1871 German Imperial consuls also played their role. They did so as members of what the German author Koschitzky (1887-88 I: 134), betraying the lines drawn in German domestic politics, proudly called 'the new consular system', which 'from the start functioned on a solid Prussian-North German base'.

In the earlier competition in the South Pacific, Great Britain and France had been the main contestants. The United States, where people like Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry, the man who opened up Japan to foreign trade, for reasons of commercial and naval competition with Great Britain pleaded for taking possession of Pacific islands, had occasionally showed its flag in the South Pacific, but had not frequently sailed its waters. After a first visit to Samoa in 1839, it took some thirty years before an American warship visited the islands again (Dulles 1938: 103).

Franco-British rivalry in the Pacific dated from the late 1830s, when France under King Louis-Philippe had embarked on a colonial policy to regain some of the grandeur the country had lost after the Napoleonic Wars and, much as Germany was to do later, to show Great Britain that France was a nation that should be reckoned with as a power that counted on the international scene. The policy of showing what France was worth had in 1842 won Paris, by exploiting domestic strife in the kingdom, a protectorate over Tahiti (Taïti) in the Society Islands (Îles de la Société) where British commercial interests had been dominant (Brookes 1941: 107). The person responsible was the French Rear Admiral Abel Aubert Dupetit-Thouars, who briefly annexed Tahiti in 1843, a decision the French government was forced to reverse after protests from London. The protectorate incidentally

also gave the Tahitian kingdom a new flag in which the French *Tricolore* was shown in the upper right corner. As in other such cases, Tahiti and rumours of other French annexations aroused nationalist public sentiments in France as well as in Great Britain. In December 1844 the British Foreign Office noted that 'the public feeling in England' had been 'deeply wounded by the French proceedings in Tahiti' and 'might be again intensely excited by any further operations of the French in the immediate vicinity of Islands where our missionaries are successfully using their uttermost exertions to bring the inhabitants within the pale of Christianity and Civilisation' (ibid.: 152).

The missionaries were mentioned with good reason. The competition in the South Pacific between France and Great Britain was partly religiously inspired; also because from the outset French colonial ambitions and the spread of Roman Catholicism had been intimately linked (ibid.: 78). Missionaries and others dreaded that the islands on which they were active would fall into the hands of a country where another denomination was adhered to. The British position was well-expressed by Herman Merivale, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1854 until 1859: '[T]he South Sea Islands, Christianised and partly colonised by Englishmen, longed for British protection against the advance of a different nationality and religion' (Ward 1976: 187-8). Religious and racial sentiments had the upper hand but British fears may also have been inspired by what happened in Tahiti after the French takeover, when all land belonging to the London Missionary Society was confiscated (Brookes 1941: 157).

In the middle of the nineteenth century, France had made a steady advance in the South Pacific. In 1842 it had established a protectorate over Tahiti, some of the other Society Islands (*Îles de la Société*), the Marquesas Islands (*Îles Marquises*), Wallis Island (*Uvea*) and Tubuai and Raivavae, two of the Austral Islands (*Îles Australes*). The Gambier Islands became a French protectorate in 1844. New Caledonia (*Nouvelle-Calédonie*), in the perception of the Australians uncomfortably close to their coast, followed in 1853, while the Tuamotou (*Tuamotu*) Islands became a protectorate in 1859. In the 1860s France would also add the Loyalty Islands (*Îles Loyauté*), adjacent to New Caledonia, to its overseas territory. In the Loyalty Islands, the scene of Anglo-French, Protestant-Roman Catholic conflicts, the French briefly tried to put an end to Protestant missionary activities, but had to give up after protests from London. In subsequent years, British, or rather Australian, anxiety would focus on a possible French takeover of the New Hebrides, and a Member of the House of Commons would state in 1886 that them becoming French would imply 'abandonment of the valuable

work of civilisation among its independent native population of the British Presbyterian Church'.¹

In 1854 the French penal system was changed, granting New Caledonia a special function and adding to British, or rather Australasian, dread. Guyana was being considered too unhealthy to serve as a penal colony and the South Pacific was thought to be a good alternative (Lorin 1906: 33). In 1864 a convict colony was instituted in New Caledonia, making French rule even more abject to the Australians. Despite New Caledonia being 1,200 kilometres away from Australia, Australians were daunted and upset by the unlikely prospect that some of the convicts – amongst whom soon would be, in fact, many supporters of the Paris Commune – might escape and reach their shores. The British were also unhappy with France establishing a protectorate over the tiny Austral island of Rapa (Rapa Iti, Oparo) in the Bass Islands (Îles de Bass) in 1867. Its harbour was said to be a perfect midway station between Australia and New Zealand and the Panama Canal once the latter would have been dug.

Germany's ambitions

Nobody in Great Britain or its Australian colonies had yet given a thought to a German threat in the Pacific. On the contrary, a German presence was welcomed. As early as 1848 some Australians considered a German colonisation of New Caledonia a good alternative to a French annexation (Ward 1976: 148). Similarly, in 1870, when the possibility of a protectorate over Fiji was discussed, London preferred that Belgium or 'North Germany', that is, the Prussia-dominated *Norddeutscher Bund* of 1866, should be persuaded to take on this obligation (Legge 1958: 26, 72). The United States formed no option. It was too close and too big, and when William H. Seward had been Secretary of State between 1861 and 1869, it had acquired itself a reputation as a nation not averse to expansionism. In 1867 the United States had bought Alaska from Russia and had taken possession of Midway. It had also tried, for the moment still in vain, to bring Hawaii within its orbit, and in 1872, it would gain a foothold in Samoa. Allowing the Germans in would keep the Americans out.

Not much later Germany became Great Britain's main adversary in the contest over colonial possessions in the South Pacific. The regions Germany cast covetous eyes on were almost all on the doorsteps of some of Great

1 Howard Vincent in House of Commons 14-5-1886 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1886/may/14/the-western-pacific-the-new-hebrides).

Britain's own colonies or were islands or island groups that the people living there wanted to annex. Some had a significant number of British settlers and traders. Consequently, London had to take into account the opinions of the Australians and New Zealanders who tended to view the whole of the South Pacific as potential British territory and, since the 1870s, 'had sent a constant stream of annexation requests' to the Colonial Office in London (Hiery 1995: 17). Germany and Great Britain had acted in unison against the Spanish claims over the Sulu Archipelago, but before the end of 1874, when negotiations with Spain were still going on, they fell out over another piece of the Pacific: Fiji. The consequences were great. The conflict over the Fiji islands would shape much of the perception in Germany of Great Britain as a nation that recklessly, *rücksichtslos*, pursued its own colonial interests, irrespective of the consequences for other nations and their citizens. A distrust of the intentions of the British (a feeling that would soon be reciprocal) became one of the major arguments for the German Empire to aspire after colonial territory. It gave Bismarck the arguments he needed to demonstrate that Germany needed more than just a few coaling stations or consular representations in Africa and Asia to protect the commercial interests of its countrymen overseas.

In the popular image of those days Fiji – also known as the Cannibal Islands – was populated by people who, not so long before, had been ferocious cannibals and, indeed, 'the most horrible cannibals that existed on the face of the whole earth'.² Figures from those days had it that there were some 160,000 Fijians, of whom 140,000 were 'in a state of comparative civilisation'; that is, they had converted to Christianity, while the rest (mainly living in the interior) were 'utterly barbarous'.³ Among the white settlers, some 2,000 in total, the British were still the preponderant party, in numbers and in economic clout. Friedrich Hennings had arrived in 1858 and two years later Godeffroy & Sohn had opened a branch in Fiji, but British, or rather Australian, settlers, many drawn to the island to grow cotton, were still dominant. According to a contemporary estimate, they accounted for five-sixths of the foreign community in 1873 (Ward 1976: 254). Furthermore, export was still largely in British hands (*ibid.*: 239) and British consuls did most of the mingling in indigenous political affairs and had a lion's share in creating a rudimentary form of administration in the foreign community.

2 Wilfrid Lawson in House of Commons 4-8-1874 (hansard.milbanksystems.com/commons/1874/aug/04/resolution).

3 Carnarvon in House of Lords 17-7-1874 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1874/jul/17/the-fiji-islands-session-to-the-british).

Among the tasks these British consuls had taken upon themselves was the vital and highly sensitive job of registering the titles of land acquired by settlers. The Germans played a secondary role in Fijian politics.

In Fiji two main rivals contested each other's power. One was Cakobau, the paramount chief of Bau, a small island east of the much larger Island of Viti Levu, who had been converted by Wesleyan Methodists in 1854. The other was Ma'afu, a Tongan, who had succeeded in establishing power in most of the eastern part of Fiji, the Lau Islands. Ma'afu was also a Christian, and it was he who was favoured by the missionaries of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society. Although the missionaries did not go along with this, he 'posed as a Christian crusader engaged simply in opposing the enemies of the Gospel' (Legge 1958: 40-1).

In part, the Americans had been responsible for Cakobau's prominent position in Fiji. In 1855 the captain of the USS *John Adams*, E.B. Boutwell, had imposed a large fine on him as 'King of Fiji' to compensate for attacks on American ships and their crews and other transgressions. This included the plundering on Nukulau Island of the house of the man who had bought the island, John Brown Williams, a former American consul in New Zealand and the American Commercial Agent to Fiji. The incident happened after Williams had fired a canon bomb to celebrate the Fourth of July, accidentally setting his house ablaze. Cakobau had protested that he was not the chief of the perpetrators. His objection was ignored, and, as Forbes (1875: 294) writes, '[t]he Americans recognised him as King of Fiji, saluted him with a royal salute, and mulcted him in the sum of nine thousand pounds'. *The New York Times* reported proudly of Boutwell's punitive expedition and his 'important treaty' with 'the King of Fejee'; that is, Cakobau's signed debt obligation:

During the cruising of the *John Adams* in the Fejee group of islands, five sharp engagements took place between her crew and the cannibals of Polynesia, in which American valour was always victorious. Five of their largest towns were burnt, and all the houses therein reduced to ashes (*New York Times*, 15-2-1856).

His debts induced Cakobau to offer Fiji to Great Britain and left him in fear that he would one day have to pay. It took some ten years before Cakobau was reminded of the fact that he owed the United States money. This was in 1867 when the American warship *Tuscarora* visited Fiji. This time Cakobau tried to get out of his predicament by accepting the following year an offer by the Melbourne-based Polynesia Company to take over the debt in return

for 200,000 acres of land (Legge 1958: 53). The debt, however, also made the United States side with him in his struggle for power with Ma'afu (Forbes 1875: 294). Such acts in 1869 accounted for the unwarranted suspicion in London, nourished by, amongst others, the future Foreign Secretary Granville, that Washington wanted to take possession of Fiji (Dulles 1938: 101).

The reign of King Cakobau

In June 1871, with the support of a group of settlers, Cakobau was proclaimed king of the whole island group; according to Forbes (1875: 275), the result of a 'daring and successful *coup d'état* ... effected by a few white men ... almost unknown in the general community'. He was crowned in Levuka, the settlers' town and port on Ovalau Island. Ma'afu was assigned the subordinate position of Viceroy of Eastern Fiji. In ruling over Fiji, Cakobau was assisted by a Western-style government, controlled by and largely made up of foreigners; copying the political system of Hawaii, which been established earlier in Honolulu. Most of the members of Cakobau's cabinet were British, but among them were also Gustavus Hennings and his brother Friedrich, who became Minister of Finance. The government also had the blessing of the American consul.

In 1872 Cakobau tried to regulate and humanise the recruitment and employment of labourers and announced an enquiry into titles to land. He was too ineffective to accomplish much. Unpopular as the first was among foreigners, not to speak of the complications the second might give rise to, from the outset the Cakobau government had to deal with an impressive group of opponents: the government of New South Wales, the then British consul, E.B. March (who only recognised Cakobau as chief of Bau), and a pressure group of British planters styling themselves the Ku Klux Klan. The latter, soon to be renamed the British Subjects' Mutual Protection Society and Volunteer Corps, seemed to aim at an armed confrontation with Cakobau's government, but had to refrain from action when a British warship, the HMS *Cossack* arrived (Forbes 1875: 324; Gravelle 1983: 123-7). In 1873 Gustavus Hennings, the acting German consul, also turned against the administration. By that time, the Fiji government had lost most of its authority and had almost bankrupted the islands. It also did not help that all settlers were now considered Fijian citizens. Those resisting claimed that they were defending the liberties of the white community, comparing their actions with the rebellions in Great Britain against Charles I and II (Forbes 1875: 333-4). A British naval presence in Levuka and elsewhere in

Fiji was needed to keep some of them and Ma'afu in check and to prevent them from rebelling (Ward 1976: 249, 252; Forbes 1875: 325, 330).

The straw that broke the camel's back was probably the intention of the Cakobau government to organise elections in which the Fijians were also to participate in 1873: 'Every white man felt himself personally aggrieved, and determined to resist to the utmost', Forbes (1875: 336) wrote.

By that time, the domestic political situation in Fiji had already become so chaotic that the Colonial Office in London concluded that a considerable armed presence would be needed to restore order (Brookes 1941: 371). Even without civil war the planters lived in a hostile environment. In spite of the tropical heat the richer planters roofed their wooden houses with galvanised iron. They did so to prevent angry Fijians and also workers (Forbes notes that the Solomon Islanders are 'a treacherous lot of men, both feared and disliked by their employers') from setting fire to their houses. Their white employees and the much more numerous small planters were not protected in this way and had to make do with walls made of reeds and thatched roofs (Forbes 1875: 70).

The settlers' community also became divided. Forbes (1875: 33), longing for the old spirit of 'camaraderie', observed that he 'remained long enough in Fiji to see this kindly feeling among the settlers sadly change; to see it give place to mutual contempt and distrust, which threatened even to end in anarchy and bloodshed'. By 1873 civil war and collapse of law and order loomed. Or, in the words of Carnarvon, there was 'disorder and confusion all around, and a war of the most bloody character seemed imminent'.⁴ By the end of January of that year, John Bates Thurston, a cotton planter and former British consul as well as Chief Secretary of the Cakobau government, turned to the Foreign Secretary, Granville, enquiring whether London was prepared to accept a decision of the Fiji government to cede the kingdom to Great Britain. In the past London had always refused such requests. Apart from it being unwilling to add new territory to its empire, foreign relations had been an additional argument. Annexation of Fiji, it was argued in 1870, or, as was feared in 1873, might irritate the French or might induce Washington to take possession of Hawaii (Ward 1976: 241; Brookes 1941: 352).

This time the answer was affirmative, but London took the step to annex Fiji reluctantly. The annexation of Fiji, as the then Colonial Secretary, Carnarvon, characterised it nine years later in the House of Lords, had been

4 Carnarvon in House of Commons 17-7-1874 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1874/jul/17/the-fiji-islands-cession-to-the-british).

pressed on London by the Australian colonies.⁵ What London did was to appoint a Commission of Enquiry. Its members, Commodore James Graham Goodenough, the freshly appointed commander of the Australian Naval Station, and E.L. Layard, who was to take up his position as the new British consul in Fiji, were sent to the island group to investigate on the spot what action had to be taken.

There were four alternatives. One was to recognise the government formed by King Cakobau (himself a former cannibal, it was maliciously remarked in the House of Commons) in June 1871.⁶ In view of its poor performance and the widespread opposition against it, the likelihood that the Commission of Enquiry would come out in support for him was slight. A second possibility was to give the British consul the powers of a magistrate over British subjects. This could hardly be effective and would, Carnarvon explained in the House of Lords in July 1874, be a temporary solution, 'a stop-gap at best'.⁷ Yet another alternative was a British protectorate, leaving Fiji's own government more or less intact. The final option was annexation, the ceding of the kingdom by the king and the major chiefs, and the establishment of what Carnarvon called 'a Crown Colony of a rather severe type'.⁸

Goodenough and Layard's brief was clear. London was 'far from desiring any increase in British territory' (Brookes 1941: 384). Annexation was out of the question 'unless it proved to be the only means of escape from evils for which this country might be justly held to be bound to provide an adequate remedy' (ibid.: 384). Yet this was the course of action to be taken. In the opinion of Goodenough and Layard the Cakobau government lacked authority and support and was not the institution to maintain law and order. There were, they wrote in their report, 'no prospects for these islands should Her Majesty's Government decline the offer of cession, but ruin to the English planters and confusion to the native government' (Gravelle 1983: 137).

When London made its final decision, dependent on the advice of the Governor of New South Wales, the outcome could no longer be doubted. In the House of Lords, Carnarvon spoke of 'protecting a place into which English capital has overflowed' and 'English lawlessness is going on'.⁹ He

5 Carnarvon in House of Lords 20-4-1883 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1883/apr/20/question-observations).

6 Alexander Baillie-Cochrane in House of Commons 4-8-1874 (hansard.milbanksystems.com/commons/1874/aug/04/resolution).

7 Carnarvon in House of Lords 17-7-1874 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1874/jul/17/the-fiji-islands-cession-to-the-british).

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

now depicted the acquisition of Fiji as an excellent catch. Its islands were lovely with a nice climate ('No frost ever comes there'), located 'in the track of all ships passing between the new World of America and the still newer World of Australia'. They had 'unquestionably fine harbours'. One could also not complain about the economic prospects: 'The internal resources of the Islands are considerable, for the soil is very productive. The cotton plant, the sugar cane, the palm, the banana, all grow there'. Morally, the annexation was also a blessing:

Those Islands, though they do not cover the whole area of the kidnapping trade, rise, as it were, in the centre of it, and are a convenient post from which it may be watched and brought within those wholesome and legitimate limits within which it becomes a blessing instead of a curse.¹⁰

As the British Admiralty had done in 1859, proponents of annexation again pointed out that between Australia and Vancouver Great Britain 'had not an islet or rock on the 7,000 miles that separated those territories'. What was needed was an 'advanced position in the Pacific', an island 'on which to build a coaling station'. Great Britain's 'interests in the Pacific imperatively demanded such a port as the Fiji Islands' would give it, 'not only because of its strategic importance, but in connection with the trade which was likely to be developed'.¹¹

What aggravated the situation was that in the previous years the foreign community in Fiji had not fared that well, politically or economically. Politically, in the previous years Fiji had been the scene of rampant internal war and disorder, also affecting the life and property of the foreign settlers, especially those in remote areas, where the violence was greatest. Economically, the cotton market, which had been the motor of Fiji's prosperity, had collapsed in the early 1870s. 'Cotton-planting had not paid as men had expected it would pay. Since 1868 there had been a great fall of prices, and in 1873-4 the planting community in Fiji was to all intents bankrupt' (Forbes 1875: 335). Planters now tried their luck at growing sugar cane. One of the firms that felt the consequences of the economic downturn was that of the Hennings brothers, who owned shops and a number of large plantations on the islands. The Hennings had taken possession of land that had served as collateral security from cotton farmers who had become bankrupt, but

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ William M'Arthur in House of Commons 4-8-1874 (hansard.milbanksystems.com/commons/1874/aug/04/resolution).

this had not saved them. In 1874 their debts, partly arising from the loans they had previously advanced, ran to £80,000. Faced with the prospect of financial ruin, the Hennings had to borrow a considerable sum of money from another company, Rathbone, Fééz, and Co., with Karl L. Sahl, the German consul in Sydney, as director and co-owner, pledging their landed property as security.

The aftermath of annexation

On 10 October 1874, in a deed of cession, Cakobau transferred Fiji to Great Britain. He did so, the text said, to secure 'the promotion of civilisation and Christianity and of increasing trade and industry'.¹² The deed being signed, Hercules George Robert Robinson, Governor of New South Wales and temporary Governor of Fiji, said in a speech that he was sure that British rule would 'tend to develop the great natural capabilities of these beautiful islands, and at the same time, conduce largely to the contentment and happiness of all classes of the population' (*Daily Southern Cross* 9-11-1874). Thereafter, the flag of Fiji was lowered and that of Great Britain raised. A band played the British national anthem, HMS *Pearl* fired its salutes and there were three cheers for the Queen. Cakobau, no longer king, was rewarded with a lavish trip to Sydney, where he got measles. Cakobau survived, but many Fijians who contracted the disease after he had returned home in January did not.

It is difficult to reconstruct with hindsight, but it appears that before the British annexation it was access to economic opportunities and not nationality that provided the fault lines in the foreign community. Legge (1958), in his study of these critical years in Fiji, hardly mentions any Germans at all. Forbes (1875: 118) praises the Hennings brothers and the contacts they had with the business community of Australia and New Zealand for contributing to the Anglo-Saxon predisposition of the Fijian settlers' society. Hedemann and a number of other German merchants were against the new government, urging Ma'afu to rebel. Hedemann even boasted about several thousand armed man being on stand-by in Samoa, but this did not set these Germans apart. British nationals also opposed the Cakobau government, and had testified of their readiness to take up arms (Gravelle 1983: 134; Legge 1958: 87, 96).

12 Deed of Cession of Fiji to Great Britain (www.vanuatu.usp.ac.fj/library/Paclzaw/Fiji/DEED%20OF%20Cession%20%20Fiji.htm, accessed 10-7-2011).

It was the annexation and its consequences for land ownership for foreigners and the recruitment of labour that would make the difference, not only in Fiji itself, but even more so for the relationship between Great Britain and Germany. The German resentments brought about by the annexation would deeply influence future developments in the South Pacific. The way the new British administration proceeded convinced the Germans, or at least allowed them to use this as a political argument, that a British takeover of islands where Germans had settled in significant numbers could only be to the detriment of German economic interests. The so-called Fiji Crisis was also a reason stated to plead for a German naval presence in the Pacific; and because this in itself would not suffice, given the strength of the British navy, actual colonisation. Or, as a contemporary German historian and apologist of Bismarck's colonial policy, Koschitzky (1887-88 I: 139-40), put it, because of Fiji, Germany became aware that the German trading and estate companies needed better protection 'than that by a friendly, but an otherwise unscrupulous England behaving selfishly towards foreign interest'. In the background of such observations feelings of aggrievement could be discerned: 'Germany did not want to have colonies or monopolies, just good and equal rights for its shipping and its trade', Koschitzky (1887-88 II: 13) writes elsewhere. A much more important person, Admiral Tirpitz, already observed in 1879 that the way Great Britain treated Germany resembled 'Society's response to a social climber' (Berghahn 1993: 49). What he wanted from London, he wrote thirty years later, was 'fair play' (ibid.: 49).

For Great Britain there were lessons as well, not least an even greater reluctance to take on new colonies unless political reasons absolutely necessitated it. After Fiji had become a Crown Colony, London asked the Australian colonies to contribute to the costs of its administration. The response was negative, at best evasive. To Australian politicians Fiji was an imperial question, and thus the responsibility of the home government, not that of the Australian colonies. The Australian reaction resulted in cost-sharing featuring prominently in future discussions with Australia and New Zealand about British expansion in the Western Pacific. Another lesson was that buying land from Islanders by foreigners was a tricky matter. Was there to be any British annexation in the future, land should remain under the control of the British administration. Fiji probably also added to the awareness in London that trouble between British nationals and settlers of other nationalities could have international implications, and that one of the ways to prevent such tricky situations from arising was to extend control over British settlers on the islands, another reason why the office of the High Commissioner was created (Ward 1976: 264, 266).

Initially, German settlers in Fiji, in the words of Koschitzky (1887-88 I: 138-9), 'trusting in the justice and protection they expected from the British flag', had greeted the annexation 'with delight'. This assessment was not entirely true, but those who had held such expectations were also in for a big disappointment. Within days the new British administration announced that commercial debt claims dating from before June 1871 – when, as the Colonial Office in London maintained, 'there was no attempt at settled government' in Fiji¹³ – could not be taken to the courts it was setting up. In a time of economic downturn this was a highly touchy matter, made all the more sensitive because in the past, in the absence of banks, providing loans had been a private affair. Wealthier merchants and planters, acting on trust, had been the only source of credit (Legge 1958: 77; Forbes 1875: 100). Reclamations dating from before 1871, for instance for compensation for property damaged during the violence of the previous years, would also not be taken into consideration.

One such case concerned the plundering in 1868 of German property by Fijians, in revenge for a military operation by the crew of the British corvette HMS *Challenger*, whose help had been called in by the British consul on the islands. Berlin would demand compensation but London refused, pointing out that what had happened was the Germans' own fault. They had tried to acquire land on the cheap in a region that was in the midst of civil war. When, in 1866-67, King Cakobau had subjugated the region, German and British settlers, in spite of warnings by the British consul not to do so, had 'followed up the retreating and beaten enemies of King Cakobau, and with muskets, powder, and lead purchased the land from which they were driven'. When fortunes of war turned against the king and the people he had chased from their land returned, the situation for the settlers, who 'in many cases with their wives had unwisely ventured among a heathen and cannibal people', had become extremely precarious.¹⁴ As they themselves wrote at the time, the mind of the Islanders was such that they feared for their lives, and were 'subject to all manners of threatening, thefts, violence, and annoyance'.¹⁵

Land claims were an even more vexatious matter. Land, the initial feeling had been, could only increase in value after Great Britain had restored law and order. In the House of Lords Carnarvon even speculated that prices

13 Herbert to Lister 28-5-1876 (PRO FO 534 22).

14 Gordon to Carnarvon 19-11-1875 (PRO FO 534 22).

15 Petitioning to Acting Consul Thurston 27-7-1868 (PRO FO 534 22).

might quadruple or even quintuple.¹⁶ The planters had also expected that an annexation would solve land disputes with the local population in their favour (Forbes 1875: 200). Such expectations did not become a reality. Land claims could not be brought before court. Instead, an investigation was started into the land titles acquired by foreigners before 1871. For the moment, all land owned or leased by foreigners was considered to have reverted to the Crown. It was only to be returned to them after a Land Commission had decided on the validity of the titles. Titles were to be refused for uncultivated land, for land that in the past had been bought for too low a price, or for which no positive proof of ownership could be produced.

Judging from the remarks of the Earl of Kimberley, politicians in London, aware of the weak basis of many of the land titles in Fiji, had expected fierce protests by settlers who were denied their claims, or who insisted that the new Fijian administration disregarded their interests and sided with the Fijians.¹⁷ What London politicians were preparing for were remonstrations in Australia, maybe even by the premiers of the Australian colonies. They were not aware that they were on the threshold of an intense diplomatic row. Trouble did not come from Australia, but rather from Berlin where the German government seized upon the opportunity to put pressure on London. Germans asserted that the British land policy in Fiji especially hurt their compatriots who had bought large tracts of land and, 'with much money, effort and time', had turned part of these into cotton and other estates or had got hold of them when debtors failed to pay off their loans (Koschitzky 1887-88 I: 138). Especially the demand for positive proof of purchase and ownership, they argued, was almost impossible to submit for land bought years before 'in the customary form of the country', in a manner that, until the annexation, had been considered lawful.¹⁸

To make matters worse, the evaluation of the land titles by the Land Commission proceeded slowly, if only because there were not enough surveyors to assist in the task of evaluation and measuring the plots, which even after a title had been acknowledged delayed the issuing of land grants.¹⁹ Among the companies that suffered were Godeffroy & Sohn and F & W Hennings. Another victim was Rathbone, Fééz, and Co. Germans were also to complain

16 Carnarvon in House of Lords 17-7-1874 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1874/jul/17/the-fiji-islands-cession-to-the-british).

17 Kimberley in House of Lords 17-7-1874 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1874/jul/17/the-fiji-islands-cession-to-the-british).

18 Aide-mémoire communicated by Münster 27-6-1882, Münster to Granville 1-7-1882 (PRO FO 534 22).

19 Gordon to Herbert 3-6-1879 (PRO FO 534 22).

that when, in 1880, at the request of its chiefs Rotuma was annexed and became part of Fiji, German ships were no longer allowed to sail directly to the island, causing the ruin of all German firms on the island. This was presented as being all the more vexatious because all foreign economic activity in Rotuma was said to have been in German hands (Koschitzky 1887-88 II: 30).

On 13 October 1874 the new authorities had announced that no new transactions of land would be recognised before an investigation of ownership of land acquired before the annexation had been completed. In the meantime nothing was done, awaiting the arrival of the new Governor, Arthur Hamilton Gordon, and his instructions from London. Gordon did not arrive in Fiji before the end of June 1875, and once he got there he did not make haste. The delay did not exactly help to appease the planters who, Legge (1958: 163) writes, 'largely because of the sudden change in fortunes, were a particularly vehement pressure group'. To make matters worse for the foreign community, in matters regarding land, labour recruitment and labour conditions, Gordon tended to side with the Fijians, giving their welfare much more consideration than the interests of the planters. As much land as possible should remain in Fijian hands, and where foreigners had acquired large tracts of land, he only intended to allow them part of it (Legge 1958: 167, 181). Nevertheless, Fiji needed labourers. To solve this problem, Gordon turned to an equally discomfiting new source of recruitment: India, later giving rise to severe ethnic tension (Thomas 2010: 267).

To rescue their investments, and unable to convince the new colonial administration of Fiji of their rights, Germans, via their consul, sought mediation by their government against what they considered to be a blatant violation of justice; hoping that Berlin could persuade London to give them what they thought was theirs, or at least have Great Britain compensate their losses. One of them was Karl Sahl, whose firm had been forced into liquidation, but in the end would survive. Something, Karl Sahl pointed out as late as May 1882 in a letter to Bismarck, had to be done to 'prevent the complete annihilation of German interests' in Fiji.²⁰ His firm, Sahl explained to Bismarck in May 1882, had been granted title for about 10,000 acres, but a land title had been refused for the circa 14,000 acres it acquired from its debtors, while with respect to the roughly 70,000 acres it had leased for ninety-nine years no decision had yet been taken. Sahl's company, it was explained to London, had not been able to cultivate their plantations as no official title deed had been granted for many of their plots and, in

20 Sahl to Bismarck 18-5-1882 (PRO FO 534 22).

consequence, had not been able to pay off the loan they had had to arrange to survive.²¹

In London Münster, the German ambassador from 1873 to 1885, indeed throughout these years, drew the attention of the British government to the problem, pleading that the 'well-founded claims of German subjects may reckon not only upon a higher degree of legal security, but also upon a more favourable consideration' than the new rules set in Fiji provided.²² At another instance, asking for the 'kind intervention' of Foreign Secretary Granville, he pointed out that 'it cannot be desired by the English Government that the hopes excited among the Germans at the annexation of the country by England (in regard to the increased security for property which it was expected to bring) should through the action of the Colonial authorities, be destroyed'.²³ The land issue had caused the German settlers 'great commercial troubles and serious losses'.²⁴

London, in turn, tried in vain to convince Berlin that the Germans in Fiji were in no way treated differently from other Europeans who had settled there, including the British. Indeed, the latter suffered as much and protested as vehemently as their German colleagues did. Where the German government stressed the legality of some of these individual claims, London posed the opposite. It pointed out that the plots concerned had been acquired in a doubtful manner, that there was something wrong with the papers of ownership, or that the circumstances under which property had been damaged were exceptional. Gordon did not agree with the critics. During one and a half years – between January 1876 and June 1878 – over 800 claims, 'many of which were very difficult, complicated, and open to dispute' had been investigated, and this could by no means be called 'an inconsiderable piece of work', he wrote to London.²⁵ German settlers were of a different opinion. Besides disputing the outcome of the investigations they were enraged by the fact that almost 18 months had elapsed between the formal annexation in October 1874 and the start of the investigation of land titles. Land, the planters complained, lay waste for years.

Whatever argument London put forward to the German government it only bore out the opinion that the British policy was unfair and implied a discrimination against German nationals. In Germany the impression

21 Aide-mémoire communicated by Münster 27-6-1882 (PRO FO 534 22).

22 Münster to Derby 7-5-1875 (PRO FO 534 22).

23 Münster to Granville 1-7-1882 (PRO FO 534 22).

24 Ibid.

25 Gordon to Herbert 3-6-1879 (PRO FO 534 22).

stuck, and was there to remain. In a recent German publication the birth of the German colonial empire is directly linked to the Fiji question and the fact that Great Britain 'without compensation compulsorily acquired more than half of the land and territory of all the estate companies with the exception of the British ones' (Nuhn 2002: 32).

As it did at other moments, British politics worked slowly. The conclusion Germans drew from this was that London 'apparently paid little attention' to the requests of Germany to have the matter solved (Koschitzky 1887-88 I: 138). They also stressed that the work of the Land Commission had 'an extremely long drawn-out course' and was 'highly protracted', resulting in an equally protracted diplomatic correspondence (ibid.: 127, 132). The fact that London seemed to put off offering a solution that satisfied the Germans was to disturb Anglo-German diplomatic relations for a decade. Anxiety on the side of the Germans even grew at the end of 1883 when fuel was given to their suspicion that Fiji was not just an incident but a portent of a consistent British policy. The occasion was the Australasian Intercolonial Convention in Sydney, where from 28 November until 8 December representatives from the British colonies in the Pacific, including Fiji, met. Urging for a British occupation of East New Guinea, the conference spoke out against acquiring landed property before a British takeover. In one of the resolutions the participants stressed that

in the opinion of this convention all purchases or pretended purchases of land made before the establishment of British jurisdiction or dominion in New Guinea or other islands in the Pacific not having recognised government, should not be acknowledged excepting in respect to small areas of land actually occupied for missionary or trading purposes, and further that after the establishment of such jurisdiction or dominion no acquisition of land should be permitted except through the Crown; and that only for like purposes (*The Argus* 10-12-1883).

This was much to the dismay of German South Sea companies and German planters, who recalled what had happened in Fiji ten years earlier.

The conflict would drag on for ten years. In 1884 Berlin and London agreed that the disputed land claims would be investigated by a joint commission. In 1885, when Germany and Great Britain also hammered out their other differences of opinion with respect to the Western Pacific, the Fiji case was finally solved.

