Robert Pinkerton: Principal Agent of the BFBS in the Kingdoms of Germany

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Robert Pinkerton: Principal Agent of the BFBS in the Kingdoms of Germany

Wayne Detzler

According to Lord Teignmouth, who served as the first president of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), Robert Pinkerton (1780-1859) was the “most diligent of all the Society’s agents.”¹ Pinkerton’s birth in Scotland in 1780 gave no hint of his future significance. His death in 1859 at Reigate in Surrey was almost as obscure as his birth.² Between those two dates Pinkerton compressed a life of valiant service for the cause of Scripture distribution. Nevertheless, his work has been largely ignored by the Germans and unknown to the British despite frequent mention of him in annual BFBS Reports. The significance of Robert Pinkerton was demonstrated recently when his book on Russia was offered at auction in London by the firm of Helen R. Kahn & Associates. Pinkerton wrote of his experience under the title Russia: or, Miscellaneous Observations of the Past and Present State of that Country and its Inhabitants and accompanied his work with valuable original illustrative prints from the region.³ The auction house, early in 2004, offered Pinkerton’s 1833 imprint at a starting price of £850. This paper seeks to build upon such interest in Pinkerton’s work and observations, dividing his Bible Society career into four phases:—The Russian Years; His Hopes for War-Torn Europe; Surviving the Apocrypha Crisis; and Pinkerton’s New Path in Frankfurt.

The Russian Years: From Frontier to the Front Rank of BFBS Agents

When he was twenty-five years old Robert Pinkerton left his native Scotland to settle near the Caucasus Mountains as a member of the Edinburgh Missionary Society. The objects of Scottish missionary interest were the Tatars who lived in and around Karass between the Caspian and Black Seas. The raw climate soon took its toll on the fragile health of the young Scot, however, and in 1809, Pinkerton left Karass for an appointment as private tutor to the family of Prince Meshcherskii in the relative comfort of Moscow.4

It was during Pinkerton’s residence in Moscow that Karl Friedrich August Steinkopf contacted him on behalf of the British and Foreign Bible

Society. From 1795 to 1800, Steinkopf had been secretary of the evangelical Deutsche Christentumsgesellschaft (German Christian Association) based at Basel. In 1801, Steinkopf moved to London to take up the pastoral charge of the German Lutheran church in the Savoy. From this vantage point he became foreign secretary of the BFBS soon after its founding in 1804.\(^5\) Later, in 1812, Steinkopf also founded the venerable Württembergische Bibelanstalt in Stuttgart.\(^6\)

It was Steinkopf who encouraged Pinkerton to work toward the formation of a Bible society in Moscow, but these efforts were frustrated by Napoleon’s invasion. Meanwhile, in Finland, another Scottish missionary, John Paterson, had helped to form a Bible society in 1811, and it gained the tsar’s patronage. In 1812, Paterson went to St. Petersburg, partly to organize the printing of a Finnish Bible, and partly, at the encouragement of Steinkopf, to see what the possibilities were for a Bible society in Petersburg. Paterson and Pinkerton met in Moscow in early September, but had to leave hurriedly as the Napoleonic armies approached. Back in St. Petersburg, as the Napoleonic invasion of Russia raged on, Paterson set about seeking support among the aristocracy, notably gaining the patronage of Prince Alexander Golitsyn, a powerful Russian tsarist official friendly to evangelical causes. A plan for a Bible society was presented to Tsar Alexander I, and tsarist approval was granted in December 1812. Pinkerton hastened to St. Petersburg to join Paterson for the first formal meeting of the St. Petersburg Bible Society (later the Russian Bible Society) held in January 1813. The first auxiliary of the Petersburg committee was established in Moscow in July 1813 through the efforts of Pinkerton.\(^7\)

The success of Pinkerton and Paterson did not escape the attention of BFBS headquarters, and a grant of £500 was dispatched by the Committee in London to its counterpart in St. Petersburg.\(^8\)

5. Adolf Risch, *Festschrift zur Jahrhundertfeier der Priviligierten Württembergischen Bibelanstalt* (Stuttgart: Priviligierten Württembergischen Bibelanstalt, 1912), p. 60. The Deutsche Christentumsgesellschaft sought to combat what it considered to be “rationalism” by the promotion of biblical doctrine and Christian ethics. It implemented this goal through auxiliary associations that sprang up throughout Germany and Switzerland. Johann Urlsperger, its founder, was inspired to found the Christentumsgesellschaft when he observed similar voluntary societies in England.


the BFBS of such an exotic establishment as the Russian Bible Society was quickly realized, and Paterson and Pinkerton were invited back to England. There they addressed a captive audience at the tenth anniversary celebration of the BFBS in 1814. In May of that year, BFBS supporters gathered from throughout England for the large anniversary meeting in London at the Freemasons’ Hall. Financial contributors flocked to hear stirring stories of the Society’s progress, and a flood of donations flowed into the Bible Society’s coffers. Pinkerton’s initial labors in the north of Europe had been crowned with success.

His Hopes for War-Torn Europe

Soon after the anniversary celebration Pinkerton and Paterson set off for the continent. Their ultimate destination was Russia. Whilst Paterson traveled through Scandinavia, his colleague Robert Pinkerton crossed through Holland, Germany, and Poland. As they traveled they left a string of local Bible societies newly formed in strategic centers, such as Amsterdam, Elberfeld, Hanover, Berlin, and Dresden.

Pinkerton started a Bible society in Amsterdam. It was there that he initially honed his method. First, influential men in the fields of politics, religion, and scholarship were won for the cause. Second, stimulated by a grant of funds from the BFBS offices in London, a local governing committee for the Bible society chapter was formed. Third, a well-defined area of activity was assigned to the committee.

A similar pattern of Bible society organization followed in Hanover. After the withdrawal of Napoleon’s forces, Hanover had been proclaimed a kingdom at the Congress of Vienna, and was ruled in personal union with the crown of England. Adolphus Frederick (1774-1850), Duke of Cambridge and tenth child of King George III, served as viceroy of Hanover, 1816-1837. Of the Hanoverians, John Russell, a traveler, wrote: “The return to their native sovereign was to them the re-creation of their country, which Napoleon had blotted out from among the states of Germany.”

Through the good offices of Abbot Salfeld and Baron von Arnswaldt, a cabinet minister, Pinkerton was able to attract forty influential men to the founding meeting at Hanover on 25 July 1814. The ecumenical character of the meeting was pointed up by Pinkerton who wrote:


In Hanover, as in Petersburg, I saw the Lutheran, Calvinistic, and Catholic Clergy join hands to promote the good cause: and some of these persons assured me, after the Meeting, that though they had been teachers of the same religion in this city for many years, yet they had never had an opportunity of speaking to each other. Oh! What a blessed plan, which is capable of bringing together the long divided parts of the Christian church.  

Alert to the political situation, Pinkerton emphasized that infidelity was at the root of the revolution in France and the consequent war across the continent. The most powerful antidote to anarchy was, in his estimation, the distribution of the Bible. The viceroy of Hanover concurred with the BFBS agent. So impressed was the duke of Cambridge with the potential of the Bible to preserve his position that he assumed the patronage of the Bible society. His minister von Arnswaldt became the committee’s first president. To the Hanover committee Pinkerton also granted financial aid of £500.

Departing from Hanover, Pinkerton directed his attention to the Prussian capital of Berlin. In many ways Berlin was more than the capital of Prussia. It was the center of that loosely knit association of German independent states sharing the German language. As Johannes Ball had welcomed Pinkerton to Elberfeld and Abbot Salfeld had introduced him at Hanover, so also in Berlin did Pinkerton have a patron. One of the leaders of the evangelical community then in Berlin was Baron Hans Ernst von Kottwitz (1757-1843). Not only was the baron an influential representative of the nineteenth-century Erweckung, he was also included in the small circle of royal confidants. To Pinkerton’s delight von Kottwitz assented immediately to employ his prestige toward the founding of a local Bible society.

The invitation to a founding meeting came from the pen of August Neander, who had been appointed professor in the university faculty of theology in Berlin one year earlier (1813). Neander’s contribution to theological scholarship was the rejuvenation of ecclesiastical historiography. In a preface to the first edition of his General History of the Christian Religion and Church, Neander stated that his purpose in writing was devotional. Church history was, for him, “a living witness of the divine power of Christianity and a school of Christian experience.” Professor Neander’s

immense influence in Berlin added to the acceptability of the Bible society.\textsuperscript{14}

In recognition of what they perceived to be God’s intervention in delivering Prussia from Napoleon, a veritable Almanach de Gotha (a Who’s Who) met to form the Bible society.\textsuperscript{15} The tutor to the crown prince, Lieutenant-General von Diericke, assumed the presidency and all the vice presidents were ministers of state. Among the directors were further luminaries of the court. So prominent were the king’s men, that Friedrich Nippold considered the involvement of the royal ministers and advisors to be detrimental to the society because the common people might be mistrustful of such an organization.\textsuperscript{16} King Friedrich Wilhelm III heaped both praise and money on the Bible society.

The Central Prussian Bible Society was not the first such organization in Berlin. As early as 1805, Johann Jänicek had added to his missionary training institute the function of distributing Bibles. This modest effort had been assisted also by British funds, and the Prussian king lent his support. Jänicek readily threw his weight behind the new society in 1814, and his small stock of Scriptures was absorbed into the larger operation.\textsuperscript{17}

Noble patronage might have caused concern to some of the lower classes, but it also gave impetus to the expansion of the cause of Bible distributing: Auxiliary Bible societies sprang up throughout all of the provinces of the Kingdom. Bibles soon flowed from Prussian presses. According to Adolf Bruckner, even in the impoverished parts of East Prussia where 32,000 families had no Bibles, Scriptures were sent to the huts of the poor in 1814.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} Thirteenth Report of the BFBS (London, 1817), appendix, p. 167. Early in the nineteenth century Neander, originally a Jew by the name of Mendel, came under the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher. At his conversion to Christianity in 1806, Mendel assumed the name Neander (Greek for “a new man”). See August Neander, Allgemeine Geschichte der christlichen Religion und Kirche (Berlin: H. G. Bohn, 1850-1852), vol. 2, p. vi.

\textsuperscript{15} Heinrich Hermelink, Das Christentum in der Menschheitsgeschichte, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler and R. Wunderlich, 1955), p. 308. Adolf Bruckner, Max Geiger, Johann Heinrich Kurtz, Friedrich Nippold, and Friedrich Zange all attributed the Erweckung to a national sense of thanksgiving for deliverance from French domination.


\textsuperscript{17} Letter from Johann Jänicek, 23 November 1814, BFBS Foreign Correspondence Books, no. 2, p. 118 (BSA/D1/6/2).

Pinkerton's record of success in establishing Bible societies at Elberfeld, Hanover, Berlin, and Dresden clearly contributed to the genesis of the German Bible society movement. The evangelical theologian, August Tholuck, called Robert Pinkerton "a humble, pious man who glows with the fire of life." A latter-day commentator on his work in Dresden pronounced Pinkerton "a born organizer with glowing gifts." 19

Leaving Dresden in 1814, Pinkerton returned to Russia, where three frigid winters passed before he again toured Germany. In 1818 he crossed the continent on his way to the BFBS anniversary in London. Along the way, Pinkerton visited hospitals and prisons, giving Scriptures to prisoners and patients, but lamented his own failure to do enough of this in these places of need. He had urged the societies he had formed to undertake such charitable actions, and he continued to engage in his own direct distribution of Bibles, including copies delivered directly to prisons, where in many parts of Prussia he developed the practice of reading the Scriptures aloud before the prisoners. 20

On his journey southward through Germany, Pinkerton also visited universities. The University of Göttingen was called "the fairest pearl in her [Hanover's] crown" by the duke of Cambridge. Here Pinkerton found the professors of the university "with one accord" joining the "sacred band" of Bible distributors. University Vice Rector Pott served as secretary of the Bible society. 21

Professors at Heidelberg joined their colleagues from Göttingen in supporting the Bible societies' distribution effort. At Tübingen, university professors formed an auxiliary of the Stuttgart Bible Society. 22 In Halle, Chancellor August Niemeyer signed his name to a letter requesting the "London Bible Society" to grant two English printing presses to the old Canstein Bible Publishing House. The Canstein Bible House had been founded in 1710 by Baron von Canstein, but the Halle chancellor considered the English printing machines to be "much better and more durable than the German [ones]." Chancellor Niemeyer furthermore requested sample Bibles from the BFBS, since "the mere sight of such a Bible library could not fail of making a deep impression on a great number of our students at the University." 23

Robert Pinkerton had indeed become a major initiator of local Bible societies throughout the Germanies. He originated Bible distribution in

22. Fifteenth Report, appendix, p. 73.
23. Sixteenth Report of the BFBS (London, 1820), appendix, p. 120.
prisons and hospitals in post-Napoleonic Germany. As universities became drawn into the Erweckung, Pinkerton also found leadership for the Bible society movement from within the elite German universities of the day. All of this occurred during the first fifteen years of the Bible Society's existence. For the BFBS Committee in London, the success in its continental operations owed in good measure to the zeal and wisdom of Robert Pinkerton, whose reputation grew accordingly.

_Surviving the Apocrypha Crisis_

Peace persisted in the relationships between German Bible societies and the paternal BFBS for almost a decade after Pinkerton's triumphal tours of 1814 and 1818. That the German committees also felt an attachment to England could be accounted for by the £58,131 that poured into German Bible societies from the BFBS London offices.24 Many of these grants of funds were recommended to the Committee in London by Robert Pinkerton, with the result that the continental committees came to see him as a direct channel of support from BFBS headquarters in Earl Street. Alongside the British generosity, the German societies increased their own scripture distribution, establishing in the process sound financial stability. From the vantage point of the twentieth century, BFBS historian William Canton considered the first decade of Bible society work in Germany to be an era of significant success and harmony. As he noted:

> From 1821 to 1825 these [German] Societies presented their fairest picture of prosperity. Their connection with the great mother organization was undisturbed in its affection and admiration by any breath of controversy.25

This "picture of prosperity" and harmony was about to be broken, although one must scrutinize the records very carefully to decipher the roots of the controversy that ultimately choked off relations between Germany and England. The seed of the strife was a dispute over whether to include the apocryphal (deutero-canonical) books of the Bible in editions printed by and for the Bible societies. Over this matter, disagreement between the BFBS and the German Bible societies escalated in four fairly clearly defined stages.

_Phase One_. Initial signs of tension appeared already in 1812. With financial assistance from the BFBS, the Moravians near Königsberg were printing five thousand Lithuanian Bibles. Bibles in the Lithuanian language

24. Cumulative figure abstracted from the tenth to the twentieth annual reports of the BFBS (London, 1814–1824).
were "extremely scarce and extravagantly dear," and the BFBS grant enabled the Moravians to rectify this.\textsuperscript{26} When Steinkopf toured the Continent in 1812 as an official representative of the BFBS he was charged by the Committee in London with the assignment of insuring the exclusion of the apocryphal books from the Lithuanian Bibles.\textsuperscript{27} As a Lutheran churchman, Steinkopf found it difficult to understand the British evangelicals' concern that the apocryphal books should be deleted. Nevertheless, he informed his continental friends of the London Committee’s concern. A storm of protest was unleashed by societies in Germany, Sweden, and Russia. Lutherans had never, according to the European committees, seen a Bible without the deuto-canonical texts. The British pressure, according to this view, would only reduce the market for Bible Society Scriptures.

Phase Two. The London Committee agreed, albeit reluctantly, to allow societies abroad to print Bibles at their own discretion.\textsuperscript{28} Applying the standard BFBS principle, however, these Bibles must contain "no note or comment," a phrase that for most British evangelicals would have been interpreted to mean the exclusion of apocryphal texts. For such churchmen the Apocrypha was a mere human invention in contrast to the divinely inspired canonical Scriptures.

There the matter rested for nine years before a second threat to the unity of the international Bible society movement arose. In 1822, the Committee in London resolved that all future grants that local or national societies received from the BFBS would be solely for printing the canonical books "as they were generally received in England." The Committee's resolution made it clear that evangelicals in Britain, the main contributors to Bible Society funds, had applied pressure toward that end. On the other hand, continental committees were free to print the Apocrypha, or deuto-canonical texts, with their own funds. A system of double bookkeeping was thus introduced by which the expenditures of British and continental funds were kept separate.\textsuperscript{29}

Such a system of accounting for funds received from various sources made sense to the accountant, but not to some of the strong-willed evangelical lay people and theologians. The evangelicals desired from their

\begin{itemize}
\item 27. BFBS Minutes of the Committee, 6 July 1812, vol. 5, p. 291 (BSA/B1/5).
\item 28. BFBS Minutes of the Committee, 7 June 1813, vol. 6, p. 106 (BSA/B1/6).
\item 29. BFBS Minutes of the Committee, 29 August 1822, vol. 13, p. 59 (BSA/B1/13).
\end{itemize}

Although most British church people, including some evangelicals, found no fault with the inclusion of the Apocrypha, a vocal majority of the BFBS supporters insisted on its exclusion. Since the lifeblood of any voluntary society is the generosity of its members and friends, the BFBS Committee was particularly sensitive to its supporters' demands.
continental counterparts an unconditional surrender on the Apocrypha issue. The pace of deliberations and debate quickened after 1822, and the heat generated by the discussions gained in intensity.

**Phase Three.** The conflict erupted again in 1824. The principal Catholic agent of the BFBS in Germany, Professor Leander Van Ess, requested aid from the Committee in London for the printing of eight thousand copies of his Bible translation. Since Van Ess held the chair in Catholic theology at the University of Marburg, his prestige insured relative freedom for the distribution of Scriptures among his fellow Catholics. His translation of the New Testament enjoyed local diocesan support, and thus during his tenure with the BFBS Van Ess was able to disseminate a half million copies of his New Testament. In 1822, Van Ess had resigned his position at Marburg to devote his time more fully to the Bible cause. His action presupposed continued generosity from London, and the timing coincided with the completion of the entire Old Testament translation. The Catholic agent argued that only Bibles containing the Apocrypha could be sold to Catholics, and the Committee in London voted him £500. He would have the canonical books printed with these funds, and supply the apocryphal books from other funds.30

It was at this point that open conflict erupted. The fuse that ignited the explosion was the Scottish revivalist, Robert Haldane. Although Haldane's fame was greatest in Scotland and in French-speaking Europe, where he had preached with success, he had many influential followers among the evangelicals in England. Haldane had expressed his disdain for the Apocrypha to the Committee of the BFBS as early as 1822. The decision to grant Van Ess £500 prompted new attacks from the Scottish preacher.31

Under mounting pressure from the north, the London BFBS Committee withdrew its grant to Van Ess on 6 September 1824.32 On the basis of this case and in response to continued opposition from Haldane, the BFBS formulated a new principle in December 1824. Henceforth no grants would be made for editions of the Bible in which the canonical and apocryphal books were to be mixed. BFBS funds were to be applied only to the printing of canonical books.33

Needless to say, the Scots contested this settlement as well. It was still possible, they argued, for foreign societies to send out Bibles with the Apocrypha. Although the BFBS funds were applied only to the canonical books, money received from continental sources could be spent on what

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Haldane called "the mongrel book."34 In Haldane's estimation, the admixture of canonical and apocryphal books was detestable. Only a complete separation from any society that circulated the Apocrypha would silence the Scottish criticism, and in London the Committee was unwilling to acquiesce.

Haldane's fervor placed his Scottish friend, Robert Pinkerton, in a desperate dilemma. After all, Pinkerton was the most prominent BFBS agent in German-speaking Europe. Should Pinkerton concur with Haldane's conviction, he would be at odds with the policy articulated by the BFBS. On the other hand, conformity with the committee's resolution would require an open severance of his ties with Haldane and his Scottish evangelical supporters.

**Phase Four.** The final phase of the dispute formalized the positions of all parties involved: the BFBS Committee, Haldane and his Scottish supporters, and the German Bible societies. In November 1825, a fourfold policy was enunciated by the London BFBS Committee: First, the Scriptures were recognized as excluding the apocryphal texts. Second, no funds granted by the BFBS could be used to distribute the Apocrypha. Third, all Bibles and Testaments printed and funded by the BFBS were to be bound and thus safe from later insertion of the Apocrypha. Fourth, societies that sold Bibles with the Apocrypha were to return the proceeds from copies received through the BFBS to that organization. This was designed to eliminate the possibility of paying for printings of the Apocrypha with profits from BFBS Bibles.35

Pinkerton visited local societies in seven German kingdoms and arrived at a prematurely positive conclusion that "their connection with the great mother organization was undisturbed."36 He cited the continued distribution of Scriptures among the poor. Of course, the poor did not share the concern of many ecclesiastical authorities for a "complete" Bible containing the Apocrypha.

Within a year, however, Pinkerton's optimism had been shattered by reality. The tide of cordial cooperation had frozen into a sea of resistance. Four influential members of the Central Prussian Bible Society in Berlin released a pamphlet in which they argued that the Lutheran Church considered a Bible to be incomplete if it did not contain the Apocrypha.

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35. BFBS, *Monthly Extracts from the Correspondence of the BFBS* (London, December 1825), p. 66. All four regulations were printed in the *Twenty-third Report of the BFBS* (London, 1827), and every year thereafter, at the end of the "Laws of the Society."

Therefore, the Central Prussian Bible Society found it impossible to comply with the BFBS's stipulations. 37

An unfortunate by-product of the conflict followed in December 1826. Under pressure from his friends in Germany to reverse the BFBS decision and yet at the same time forced to uphold the policy of the Society for which he served as foreign secretary, Dr. Steinkopf resigned from the BFBS. Although the Bible Society explained Steinkopf's withdrawal by reference to his declining health—he had been seriously ill in 1826—it was also attributable to his genuine disagreement with the categorical exclusion of the Apocrypha. The relatively robust state of his health can be deduced from the fact that he attended the Jubilee of the Bible Society twenty-eight years later, when he was eighty-one years old. 38

Steinkopf's resignation left the representation of the BFBS in Germany squarely on the shoulders of Robert Pinkerton. In an effort to explain the BFBS pamphlet concerning the matter, the Committee in London dispatched Pinkerton and R. Waldo Sibthorp on a tour of the German Bible societies. Sibthorp was a fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, and later took charge of the Percy Proprietary Chapel in St. Pancras. Sibthorp and Pinkerton made a large circle around Germany visiting local Bible society committees. Here and there they found support for the BFBS position, but most committees were closed to the BFBS approach. In summing up the results of their tour, Sibthorp praised Pinkerton for his zeal and ability. "It would be doing an injustice to him," Sibthorp wrote, "were I not to state my full belief that no other individual connected with our Society could have effected so much in removing prejudice, softening angry feelings, and opening the continent, in some degree, to the reception of the Holy Scriptures, as they are now circulated by us." 39

In spite of his admiration for Pinkerton, Sibthorp concluded that the door was closed and in most cases barred against the operations of the BFBS. The positive effects of the tour were two: misapprehensions were cleared away and distribution by sympathetic individuals emerged as a new means of operation. To support such a diversified network of Scripture salesmen a central depot at Frankfurt was needed. 40

Both German and English sources agree with Sibthorp in fixing 1827/1828 as the commencement of a new era of individual initiative. German societies were forced to apply themselves with more zeal and sacrifice to

the task. As Charles Shore has noted, fifteen years later Pinkerton would list three salutary effects of the crisis concerning the Apocrypha: first, many had become convinced that the Apocrypha should be deleted from the Bible; second, continental Bible societies had grown to meet the challenge; and third, the circulation of the Scriptures was aided materially by being committed into the hands of individuals.

Pinkerton’s New Path in Frankfurt

It was R. Waldo Sibthorp who first proposed the establishment of a central BFBS agency for all of German-speaking Europe. He saw this as an imperative forced upon the Committee in London by the dissolution of relations with the German Bible societies during the Apocrypha crisis.

The re-assignment of Pinkerton to such an agency became a matter of urgency. Reasons for this were cited in the 1831 Report of the Bible Society. First, the sudden severance of ties with the BFBS’s principal Catholic agent, Leander Van Ess, demanded the attention of an on-site Bible Society agent. Second, an agent stationed in Frankfurt and equipped with a depot stocked with Scriptures could expedite the supplying of these volumes to individual correspondents or colporteurs. Third, an accredited agent could enter into effective negotiations with printers and thereby reduce the cost of printing Bibles. Fourth, by traveling throughout the German kingdoms the agent could discover new distributors, establish subsidiary depots and supply Catholics who had formerly received Testaments from Van Ess. Perhaps also the BFBS hoped by stationing its own representative in central Europe to win the war against those who would include the Apocrypha in the dissemination of Scripture on the continent.

Whatever the primary motivation, the BFBS Subcommittee for General Purposes recommended the assignment of Pinkerton to Frankfurt on 21 May 1830. Three days later these minutes were confirmed by the BFBS Committee. The Subcommittee for General Purposes was charged with implementation of the plan. The publication of this decision established

43. Van Ess’s forced withdrawal was connected to alleged indiscretions with his housekeeper.
46. Twenty-seventh Report, appendix, p. 94.
Pinkerton, at least in the eyes of BFBS supporters, as the sole agent of the Bible Society in German-speaking Europe. By the end of May 1830, Pinkerton had settled in to the task in Frankfurt. A residence permit was forthcoming from the governing mayors, and a room was rented to house the depot.

A confirmation of the decision to dismiss Van Ess was explained by Pinkerton in these words: "the cloud upon his [Van Ess's] faculties seems denser than ever." Van Ess's nephew did not contest this assessment, since his uncle was unable to work further. Hidden in his agreement was the understanding that the BFBS would provide a pension for Van Ess.47

In the work of establishing a Frankfurt agency, Pinkerton received invaluable assistance from J. D. Claus, who had represented the interests of the BFBS in the Rhine-Main area (the region of Frankfurt and Darmstadt) since the rift over the Apocrypha. In April 1828, he became a salaried representative of the Bible Society and took journeys to Bavaria as well as to France.48 Claus also provided schools with Bibles. As Catholic pilgrims passed through Frankfurt on their way to Walldürn he supplied them with a copy of the Catholic version of the New Testament.49 Best of all, Claus was in wholehearted agreement with London over the Apocrypha issue.50

Pinkerton relied heavily on personal friendship with supporters of the Bible Society. This became the best means of circumventing the alienated German Bible societies. For instance, in 1831 a general officer of the Prussian Army approached one Samuel Elsner, secretary of the disaffected Central Prussian Bible Society. The general sought Scriptures for the soldiers under his command.51 The Central Prussian society was unable to meet the enormous demand of the soldiers. Thus, Samuel Elsner laid down his role as secretary and launched the Military Bible Society in 1833. Because he was willing to circulate New Testaments provided by the BFBS, the Apocrypha issue was circumvented. Cost of printing the Testaments was divided between the BFBS, the crown prince (later Friedrich Wilhelm IV), and the soldiers themselves. Between 1831 and 1854, Pinkerton's agency provided no less than £4,467 to this project.52 After more than ten years of uninterrupted activity on behalf of the young men of the military, Elsner summed up the significance of his

47. Twenty-seventh Report, appendix, p. 94.
51. This was probably General von Thule, who also served as president of the Prussian Society. See William O. Shanahan, German Protestants Face the Social Question (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1954), p. 80.
progress: “We look upon the distribution of the sacred volume among the military as a glorious epoch in the history of the Bible Society.”

In a sense, Elsner’s distributions to the military constituted mass circulation of Scripture. From the first, however, the Frankfurt center cultivated individual correspondents in almost every corner of the German kingdoms. During the first year more than one hundred individuals approached the Frankfurt agency for aid. Most of these ordered a small store of Testaments and Bibles from Pinkerton and replenished their stock as copies were sold or given away. This method had three major advantages. First, societies opposed to the distribution of Scriptures without the Apocrypha could not hinder the circulation of these Scriptures by individuals. Second, the correspondents were in closer contact with needy individuals than were the titled and wealthier members of Bible society committees. Third, by selling Scriptures directly, even if at reduced rates, capital for further printing could be raised.

A perusal of the annual Report of the BFBS for the years of Pinkerton’s service at Frankfurt reveals a list of correspondents that included people of notable influence. Several professors maintained a supply of Scriptures for their students. Among these were August Tholuck of Halle, professors Kraft and von Raumer of Erlangen, Professor Werner at Ehingen, and an anonymous professor at Augsburg. Clergy also kept Bibles and Testaments for their parishioners, and several deans, both Protestant and Catholic, supplied their colleagues. Pinkerton often visited these correspondents, and they in turn frequently called at Frankfurt. In fact, in one sample year alone, 1831–1832, more than twelve hundred visitors came to the central depot in Frankfurt.

Members of the nobility, such as the widowed Countess Friedrike von Reden, also turned to Pinkerton. She took up from her husband the patronage of the Buchwald Bible Society in Silesia. Under her supervision the so-called Hirschberg Bible was printed and sent out to every elementary school in Prussia. At one point, Countess von Reden personally underwrote more than 120 Bible depositories in her domain. When Pinkerton settled at Frankfurt, the countess marked his arrival with these words: “May the Lord grant that assistance may be abundantly offered from London, and that we may have the unspeakable delight to see, through the generosity of England, a light never to be extinguished made to shine among the multitudes of our poor fellow-creatures who are groping in the deepest darkness.”

Another source of allies were those affiliated with the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews (LSPCAJ), later known as the Church’s Mission to the Jews. Pinkerton recruited J. G. Bergfeldt to serve in Königsberg on the eastern edge of Prussia. In requesting a further grant of Bibles in 1830 he assured the BFBS that the poverty of the Prussian peasants made them receptive to Bibles, even if the Apocrypha was not included. Johann Christian Moritz, another agent of the Jewish mission, worked in the Frankfurt area. Moritz was able to effect large distributions. He undertook a tour to Württemberg in 1833 during which he distributed Hebrew and German Scriptures among both Gentiles and Jews. A third agent of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews was J. Stockfeld, who confined his efforts to the Rhine Valley. Not only did he personally put Scriptures into the hands of Jews and Gentiles, he also enlisted “several pious persons in the work of disseminating the Scriptures among Gentiles and Jews.” At one time more than thirty individuals were assisting Stockfeld in this project. The fourth member of the LSPCAJ with whom Pinkerton corresponded was the Reverend F. W. Becker of Warsaw. Like Stockfeld, Becker employed colporteurs to distribute Scriptures. By this means he could report circulating 865 copies in a three-month period. One blacksmith bought New Testaments for all his workmen. He hoped thereby to prevent them from spending their wages in the public houses on Sundays. Theoretically, they would become interested in Christianity and cease to frequent the public houses. Sobriety on Sunday would also aid productivity on Monday.

Despite occasional government prohibitions Pinkerton also employed and deployed colporteurs, door-to-door Bible salesmen. While Baron von Bunsen was praising the use of colporteurs at the BFBS anniversary in London in 1839, the president of the Prussian Bible Society, General von Thile, spoke out against the practice. Prussian authorities feared that the home distribution of Scriptures would encourage the publication and sale of liberal political pamphlets in the same manner. Therefore all colportage was banned in Prussia until after the 1848 revolution.

Although the Prussians persisted in their rejection of the use of colporteurs, the Saxon Bible Society sent a man into the field in 1845. The

Saxon government approved the assignment of a person by the name of Schuppan to travel among the rural communities in 1845. Within two years Schuppan was joined by two colleagues. Pinkerton attributed the prosperity of the Saxon Bible Society to their willingness to employ this controversial means of Bible distribution.63

An external witness to the debate over colportage was the German reformer Theodor Fliedner who lived in Kaiserswerth, not far from Elberfeld. Fliedner wrote, “If the Central Bible Society in Berlin would make a serious attempt to use agents [colporteurs], it would soon realize the need for further such men, their blessed effectiveness and their absolute indispensability.”64

Despite the relative success of Bible societies during the nineteenth century, they did suffer rejection from the Catholic hierarchy. The contentious issue for the Catholic church was distribution of vernacular Scriptures, whose approval for general use would not come until the twentieth century. In 1814, during his triumphal march across Europe, Pinkerton proposed the establishment of a Polish Bible Society at Warsaw. Immediately this was opposed by the archbishop of Gniezno, the primate of all Poland. The archbishop wrote to the Vatican for guidance. Two years passed before Pope Pius VII responded in 1816 with a papal rescript. Vernacular Scriptures would undermine the very foundations of religion, he asserted, with a reference to the fact that vernacular Scriptures had earlier been placed on the Index of prohibited writings as early as 15 June 1757.65

In an effort to smooth the way for a Bible society in the Austro-Hungarian realm, Pinkerton met on 20 August 1816 with Prince Metternich in Vienna. He petitioned the prince for permission to establish a Bible society in Vienna. The prince delayed his answer for two full months while he conferred with the emperor. On 23 December 1816, an imperial edict prohibited the formation of a Bible society and the distribution of BFBS Bibles in the Austrian Empire.66

Almost a quarter of a century passed before Pope Gregory XVI issued an encyclical condemning the Bible societies. He vilified them as “daring Heralds of Infidelity and Heresy.” In a thinly veiled reference to the “central Society of these Heretics and Infidels,” he accused the BFBS of using

65. A handwritten copy of Pinkerton’s English translation of the papal rescript appears in BFBS Foreign Correspondence Books, no. 5, pp. 319, 321, and 323 (BSA/D1/6/5).
“falsified Bibles,” “pestilent journals,” bribes, and inflammatory addresses to snatch the faithful from the bosom of the church of Rome. 

In 1844, Pope Gregory XVI issued a bull in which he condemned the Bible societies. He spoke of the BFBS and its widespread influence. He condemned the circulation of Scriptures in the vernacular tongue with “no interpreter or guide.” Then the Pope concluded: “we condemn anew, in virtue of our Apostolical authority, all the Bible Societies before alluded to and already disallowed by our predecessors.”

Pinkerton’s Agency in Retrospect

The value of Pinkerton’s work can be summarized in three ways. First, he channeled money and Scriptures to German-speaking Europe. During the period between its tenth anniversary in 1814 and the democratic revolution of 1848, the British and Foreign Bible Society sent £176,762 to the German kingdoms, and more than four million Scripture portions were distributed.

Second, Pinkerton helped to link together the far-flung centers of the evangelical awakening, the Erweckung, in German-speaking Europe. Adolf Bruckner attributed the unification of the awakening to BFBS agents. In 1842, Pinkerton’s report claimed partial credit for advancing the awakening.

Third, Pinkerton founded Bible societies that were capable of survival on their own, despite the disruption of the Apocrypha crisis. In his valuable essay on Pinkerton, Robert Steiner has asked: “Why, then, was Pinkerton largely forgotten in Germany?” Steiner answers, enigmatically, because he was not a German, but rather a Scot. Pinkerton remains, nonetheless, among the most prominent nineteenth-century agents employed by the British and Foreign Bible Society.

67. Letter from Robert Pinkerton, BFBS Foreign Correspondence Inwards, 1840, no. 4, p. 61 (BSA/D1/2/71).