

## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective



Fondation Pierre du Bois  
pour l'histoire du temps présent

10 year Anniversary Series of the  
Pierre du Bois Foundation

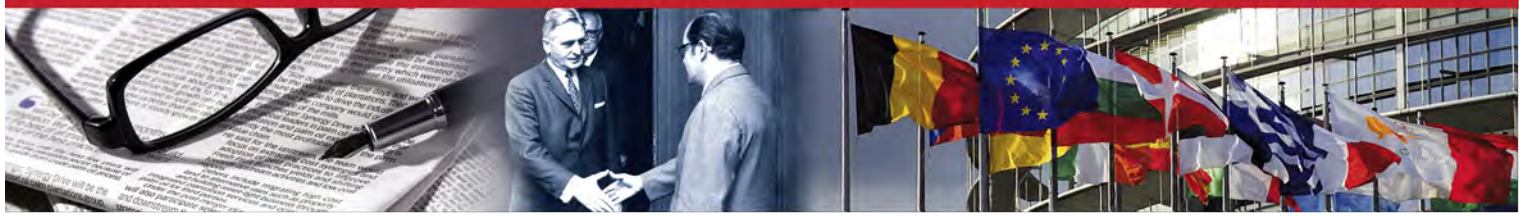
Almost ten years ago, in 2009, the *Fondation Pierre du Bois pour l'histoire du temps présent* held its first annual conference, organized in partnership between the Graduate Institute in Geneva and the Pierre du Bois Foundation, on 'Transatlantic Security Issues from the Cold War to the 21st Century'. This event served as a moment of reflection on more than 60 years of cross-Atlantic relations, their beginnings, their evolution, and their state 10 years into the new millennium. Now, at the end of 2018, the Fondation has celebrated its tenth anniversary and with it we want to use it as an opportunity to re-examine the state of transatlantic relations today.

With the presidency of Donald Trump, a new, less friendly, tone emerged out of the White House and Trump's proclamation to put 'America First' set alarm bells off in many parts of the world, certainly in Europe. But what has really changed since 'The Donald' came to power? Can we notice serious changes in the relationships between the US and their European allies, and Canada? How was American foreign policy affected by the new administration? And what effect does the Trumpian foreign policy have on institutions such as NATO and the UN – both entities founded under US influence?

Over the next couple of months, we will publish a series of papers that will deal with these questions.

Dr. Bernhard Blumenau

Lecturer in International Relations, Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, University of St Andrews



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | December 2018

  
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### German-American relations - a special relationship

Bernhard Blumenau\*

#### *Introduction: Special relations everywhere*

American relations with foreign powers often carry the attribute of being 'special'. As such, this is hardly surprising as countries, with different cultural, political, and historical links with one another, therefore have different relationships. French-US relations are different to Anglo-American relations, while Russian-American relations vary to those links between Germany and the US. Yet, these differences notwithstanding, the partners of the US often pronounce the special character of their relations. With the US being a (perhaps, the) superpower in international relations, this once again is of little surprise. Foreign countries want to emphasise the particular nature of their rapport to the United States to distinguish themselves from other states, underscore common points not shared in other countries' relationships with the US and thereby create a proximity to one of the most powerful countries in world history. Despite their troubled beginnings, the UK-US relationship is often declared special, also because of their common past prior to 1776. Surely, the Franco-US relationship is also special in that both countries made a move towards democracy and republicanism at roughly the same time – 1776 and 1789, respectively – and the Statue of Liberty bears testimony to that.

Then again, the German-American relationship is special, too: Not only is a major proportion of the US population of German origin (roughly 46 million Americans claim to have German ancestry<sup>1</sup>) – just think of some (in)famous Americans such as Baron von Steuben, Carl Schurz, the Heinz family, the Rockefellers, Amelia Earhart, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Neil Armstrong, Henry Kissinger, George Shultz or Donald Trump. But this legacy is also written in cultural, culinary, and geographical terms (for example, dozens of US cities bear German names). Yet, the US-German relationship is also special because of other historical legacies: those of the First and Second World War and the ensuing division of Germany resulting in US occupation, first, and protection later. Moreover, the special US (and Allied) rights in regards to German unification, created a dependency that marked German-American relations for 40-some years. With the end of the Cold War, the rapport between both countries also changed– it matured arguably. In recent years, however, the relationship transformed again as both countries seemed to embark on 'parting ways' as Stephen Szabo has claimed already in 2004.<sup>2</sup> It will be task of this paper to situate current German-American relations against the backdrop of their historical evolution prior to and during the Cold War, in the post-Cold-War and Trump years, concluding with some short speculations as to whether the 'ways' might join again and where this relationship might go in the future.



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

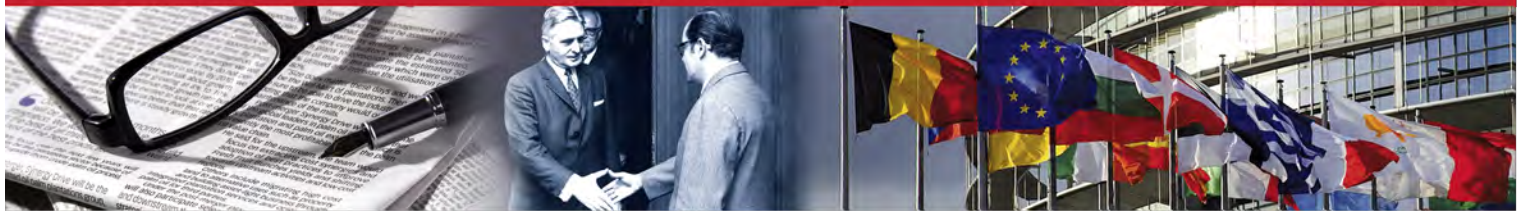
N°9 | December 2018

### Legacies, Trade, Peace, and War: German-American relations before the Cold War

German-American relations date back to the very beginnings of the American settlement with the first German immigrants coming already in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, and then, in greater numbers, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. These settlements left a legacy in American culture and history, one that can still be noticed today. Politically, relations between German princedoms and the US started off very amicably. King Frederick the Great of Prussia for instance, in 1785, concluded a Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the recently independent United States, one of the first such agreements between a European power and the US. Ambassadors were exchanged in the 1830s and despite some minor colonial disputes over territories in the South Sea, US-German relations remained friendly even after the foundation of the German Empire in 1871. At the same time, the US tried to stay out of the European conflicts that proliferated from the early 1900s onwards and that finally escalated into the First World War. It was only after the war drew on much longer than initially anticipated, and German submarines attacked US vessels, that the United States finally joined the war on the side of Germany's enemy, thereby dealing the final blow to the Empire and its allies. The Versailles negotiations for a peace treaty started upon American insistence (especially that of President Woodrow Wilson), but the US soon withdrew from the system that emerged from Versailles. Because of its isolationist policy, Washington left the problems that Versailles created – especially with regards to Germany's status in the system, war reparations, territorial losses and the blame for WWI being placed on the losers – for the Europeans to deal with.<sup>3</sup> The US also remained uninvolved both when Germany tried to join the interwar system in the 1920s and then, once inside, tried to challenge it – progressively aggressively – from 1933 onwards. Even when Europe was embarking on another war in the late 1930s – and well into the Second World War – America remained, officially, neutral. It was only with the German declaration of war on the US, in the aftermath of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941 that the US joined the war efforts against Germany. Once again too, the Americans tipped the balance and allowed the Allied powers to win the war leading to Germany's complete and unconditional surrender in 1945.

### Dependency: (West) Germany and the US during the Cold War

The end of the Second World War in Europe in the summer of 1945, and the subsequent Potsdam Conference that decided on the post-war order meant not only unconditional defeat for a completely shattered Germany, but also the establishment of reparations and foreign occupation. The country – and its former capital Berlin – were divided into four zones, and the territories to the east of the river Oder were handed over to Poland and the Soviet Union. Germany was demoralised, defeated, destroyed, and morally discredited for the horrendous crimes it had visited upon the continent in general, and the Jews, and other groups in particular. Germany was an incapacitated outcast that was completely at the mercy of its Occupying Powers: France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the US. As the Cold War intensified in the late 1940s two states were created on German territory – the western Federal



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | December 2018

Republic of Germany and the eastern German Democratic Republic. In both states, the two superpowers of the Cold War would play a crucial role: the Soviets as the de facto rulers of East Germany, and the US as the most powerful Western Allied country. For major political, military, and economic decisions the two superpowers were indispensable.

Consequently, for West Germany, it was during the Cold War when a new phase in the transatlantic relationship evolved: the phase of German dependency. The US was only one of the three Western Occupying Powers with rights to Germany but certainly the most important. While Britain and France were struggling with their disintegrating empires and their global decline, the US was on the rise not just politically but also economically. The fact that the US single-handedly funded the reconstruction of Europe by means of the Marshall Plan demonstrated that very clearly. Consequently, it was the US support for West Germany's Economic Minister Ludwig Erhard's plan for a new currency – the deutschmark – and the concept of the social market economy that allowed these plans to go ahead. This would soon provide the basis for Germany's economic boom, the *Wirtschaftswunder*, in the 1950s and 1960s. More importantly though, militarily, the US provided for West Germany's security. When the Soviets blocked access to Berlin in 1948, the US organised the airlift which kept the Western part of the city alive. Faced with the overwhelming Soviet military might to the east of West Germany's borders, it was the presence of US military in the Federal Republic that – together with nuclear defence guarantees – provided for the security of the recently founded state. Moreover, being the defeated power of WWII, West Germany initially had only limited means of diplomatic interactions in the post-war world. It was this amalgamation of factors – economic, military, political dependency linked with the legacy of the Third Reich – that resulted in a very unequal relationship between both countries. The US would normally lead, and the Federal Republic would usually follow suit; sometimes grumpily, but follow it would eventually.

The Offset Agreements were one such case: The US – having a heavy military presence on German soil – demanded that the economically prospering West Germany offset some of the costs of maintaining the American troops through the purchase of US equipment. Reluctantly, Bonn continued these payments until the 1970s, even though most of this equipment was not really needed anymore.

It was only from the late 1960s onwards that West Germany showed some more independence, albeit in a strictly limited fashion. The case of the Vietnam War is one such example. The US demanded that their allies support the effort in Vietnam, ideally with fighting troops. For historical, legal and other reasons the German government fervently opposed this demand but provided a hospital ship and billions of dollars of 'development aid' to South Vietnam so as to compensate for this refusal and to appease the US. West German chequebook diplomacy was born, and it became an oft-used German tool to counter US demands for more engagement over the next 30 years. So, while US demands were rebuffed to some extent, considerable concessions were still made on the part of Germany. Likewise, Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* was another West German attempt to get some more autonomy in foreign policy. By actively engaging with the East, so the idea ran, West Germany could play a more proactive role in East-West, German-German, and international relations thereby gaining some independence from the US. At the same time though, to discern US worries about Germany leaving the Western bloc – the spectre of the neutralisation



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | December 2018

of Germany was looming large – West Germany continued to closely update and engage with the Americans on all matters pertaining to Ostpolitik. It never questioned the basic principles of the US-German alliance. Moreover, Ostpolitik could only blossom because it mirrored US policies towards the Soviet Union: *détente*. This general axiom of the German-American relationship remained intact for the remainder of the Cold War: Germany would navigate somewhat more independently; but on basic principles it would still fall in line with the US. This was both a dictate of the powerful role the US played in international relations and within the Western alliance, as security provider, but also because of the special say the US had in all matters pertaining to German unification. This became obvious a decade later. It was because of close German-American cooperation in the tumultuous period of November 1989 to October 1990 that an agreement on German unification, and the end of the country's division, could be reached so quickly. The close collaboration and consultation between Germany's Helmut Kohl and the late US President George Bush Sr was the key to overcoming not just Soviet but also British and French reservations to unification. With that goal achieved on 3 October 1990, the US now expected Germany to assume more responsibility globally and to assume 'partnership in leadership'. At the end of the Cold War, the US was willing to upgrade the unequal relationship of German dependency to one on a more equal footing; to a more 'normal' relationship.

### 'Normalisation': German-American relations in the post-Cold War world

The problem was, however, that post-Cold War Germany was not really willing to step out of its Cold War comfort zone. Being preoccupied with domestic unification, and with a population eager to cash in on the 'peace dividend', Germany in the early 1990s tried to continue its Cold War policy of leaving difficult crises to the US to resolve and – at most – contribute financially to their resolution. This policy was reflected, for instance, in Germany's approach on the Gulf War in the early 1990s, where money rather than troops were sent. It was only with the escalating Balkan Wars of the late 1990s and under growing American pressure that Germany was willing to exert some of this partnership-leadership by contribution of not just money but jets and soldiers to the campaign against Serbian aggressions in Kosovo. This was the real beginning of the normalisation of the relationship between both countries. It continued when the US decided to strike against Afghanistan for their harbouring of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, who were responsible for the terror attacks of 9/11. Again, Germany joined America and other Western allies and contributed to the military efforts – but also, much like in Kosovo, assumed responsibility for a zone in Afghanistan once the ruling Taliban was pushed out.

Yet this normalisation of Germany's behaviour towards the US, making it more like many of America's other allies, also meant that discords could be seen more openly. The prime example for that occurred during the Iraq War of 2003/4. The US was forging an 'alliance of the willing' to strike at Saddam Hussein, who allegedly built weapons of mass destruction. However, Germany's Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, facing re-election and knowing of the weariness that his German compatriots had towards yet another war (the third in a period of only 5 years), especially when on such shaky grounds, resisted US pressure and opposed the war. He did so in concert with France and Russia but against the US, the UK and many eastern European countries. This open rift between the former junior



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | December 2018

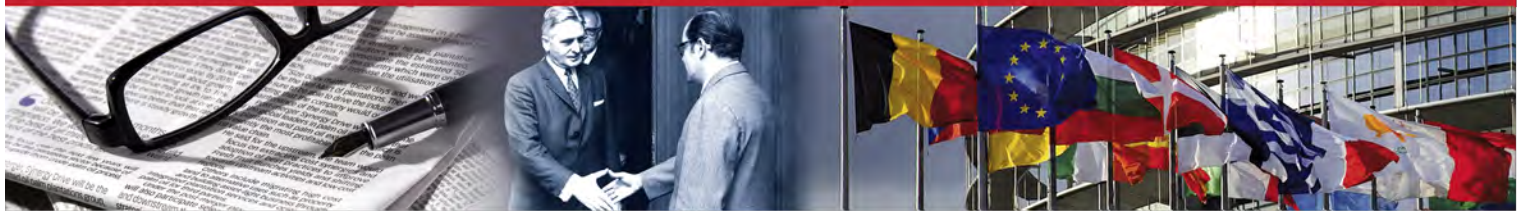
partner, Germany, and the former protecting power, US, was unique in post-WWII history. Granted, disagreement existed before, and the Vietnam War, the October War<sup>4</sup> and others were examples of this. But never before had Germany so openly and vocally resisted the US as could be witnessed in the course of the 2003/4 war. It was at that time when Szabo predicted the 'parting ways'. But rather than that, in hindsight, what it really meant was the evolution of the relationship between both from a Cold-War dependency into a mature alliance. This also meant that both countries could have diverging opinions, and could voice them loudly sometimes, yet the basics of the partnership remained intact. Germany and the US never questioned their general alliance as such, nor did they question NATO, maintaining otherwise intimate political and economic links. Certainly, emotions occasionally ran high, especially between political leaders in both countries, but that had much to do with both sides having to get used to this new mature relationship. The US, also, had to learn that having a partner in leadership meant that the partner could sometimes disagree. Relations quickly improved, however – proving that no deep ruptures existed – when Schröder lost the elections and was succeeded by Angela Merkel, and Barack Obama replaced Bush Jr. After a somewhat rocky start both leaders soon developed a very efficient, close, and amicable relationship that resulted in Merkel receiving the US Medal of Freedom in 2011.

It was the Iraq crisis of the early 2000s that marked the endpoint in the process of the normalisation of the relationship but also showed that the basic interests remained aligned and strong enough to never properly put into question the strategic and close partnership. In terms of encouraging open and free markets and intimate trade contacts, political cooperation and coordination, and maintaining the military alliance, both were on the same side - as they had been since 1949. Germany and the US remained reliable partners, smaller issues such as the espionage issues notwithstanding.<sup>5</sup> Basic values and convictions were shared and even the occasional crises would not change that, no matter what the political couleur of the leaders in both states.

### Irritations: German-American relations in the Trump years

This reliable and – in its essence – unquestioned partnership changed when Donald Trump became US president in 2016. Already in his election campaign he singled out Merkel in his criticisms. This animosity continued after his election. Trump was quick to challenge several of the pillars upon which the German-American relationship (and transatlantic relationship at large) was built: the notion of free trade, globalisation, and the integrity of the Western (security) alliance. Trump's policy of 'America First' was in blatant opposition to these principles and Germany was to feel all too clearly the icy wind blowing over the Atlantic Ocean. As one of the biggest exporting nations, with a massive trade surplus, Germany feared the impact of Trump's trade policy that included new duties and levies on foreign goods destined for the US. This led to a trade war in all but name not only with China but also, and explicitly, Germany and the EU. For a big exporting nation such as Germany, trade wars are never good news.

But Germany is also a strong supporter of international organisations and multilateralism, and here, too, Trump's policy goes in a completely different direction. Trump showed open hostility towards the EU and complete disregard to the United Nations. In his dealings with NATO, Trump also pointed out how Germany (and others) freerode on US



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | December 2018

contributions to the alliance and would significantly underspend on their military. If Germany and others would not readjust their budgets, he threatened, the alliance might not exist for much longer. Several key concepts of transatlantic relations were thus threatened at once: NATO, free trade, and the general commitment – with occasional hesitation – of the US towards European integration. All of these issues were contented before but never as loudly and never at the same time – nor in such an aggressive manner. Trump, so it seems, was willing to tear down America's post-war achievements: European integration, NATO, and the general post-war order, all of which Germany had benefited from. Within less than two years the US-German relationship deteriorated to a point where the chancellor openly stated that Germany could no longer rely upon the US.<sup>6</sup> In its promotion – or safeguarding – of free trade and multilateralism, Germany was now forced into closer relations to the only major global power that stood up to the US on that front: China. Meanwhile Trump, openly declared that he preferred the company of questionable leaders such as Vladimir Putin or Kim Jong Un over his democratic European allies. Personal and political relations between the leadership in Germany and the US have reached a point that has never been as low as today. Two years after Trump's election it seems that on many fronts, Germany and the US are opponents rather than partners.

### Conclusions – the way forward

What, then, are the prospects for the US-German relationship? For the foreseeable future, as long as Trump stays in power, not much suggests that relations will get any better. Worse, Trump and people close to him (Steve Bannon – ideologically in line with Trump albeit officially disavowed now by the latter – or Washington's ambassador to Berlin, Richard Grenell) want to actively support right-wing parties that challenge conventional political structures in Europe. And thereby, they would also challenge many of the ruling parties on the continent, and Germany.<sup>7</sup> This intervention into European domestic affairs has hardly ever occurred so openly and shows the extent to which relations are deteriorating.<sup>8</sup> From today's perspective it appears likely that tensions will persist. Trump will continue to challenge Germany, e.g. on its trade surplus and alleged free-riding on NATO, and the challenge that 'America First' poses to multilateralism and international cooperation will likely remain a serious bone of contention in the German-US relationship.

In actual facts, Trump's accusations do have some legitimate basis: the EU also sees Germany's trade surplus very critically and as the Bundeswehr has lots of its equipment not fit for duty, some more investment here would indeed make sense. Many of these issues had been raised by US presidents before Trump. But it is the aggressive tone in which these accusations are made today that is concerning. Trump questions the fundamentals of the German-American relationship; something unheard of until today. Some of the severe criticism might have to do with Trump's personal dislike for Angela Merkel – Trump with his questionable attitudes towards women in general might be irritated by a strong-willed, politically experienced and powerful woman. Yet even with a new German chancellor in the not too distant future, the problems will likely continue. Trump's policy is based on spontaneity rather than predictability, and the ensuing irrationality – and irritations – will likely continue to upset the transatlantic



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | December 2018

relationship. As for Germany, it will look more actively for partners elsewhere. When it comes to maintaining free trade, China, Japan, and Canada might be possible allies. Germany will also push for the survival of European integration and the European Union as a counterweight to Trumpmerica. Yet, with Merkel weakened and growing domestic instabilities, these goals will be harder to achieve.

To be clear, Germany will not completely turn its back on the US and will seek to maintain amicable relations with America; the sheer political and economic power of the country will dictate that. After all, economic, social, and political ties below the top level are extremely intimate and it takes more than a few years of Trump to break them; but they will be strained. Future high-level relations could resemble more and more the interactions Germany maintains with Russia – another country that cannot be ignored but with a highly controversial leader. Germany's UN Security Council membership in 2019-20 will also likely trigger further controversies between both governments on issues such as multilateralism, climate change, liberal economic policies, and the role of international organisations in general. Yet, though of vital importance to the country, Germany cannot uphold these principles on its own and, in light of open American pressure and increasing challenges to the European project, it remains to be seen how many other countries are willing to collaborate to defend them.

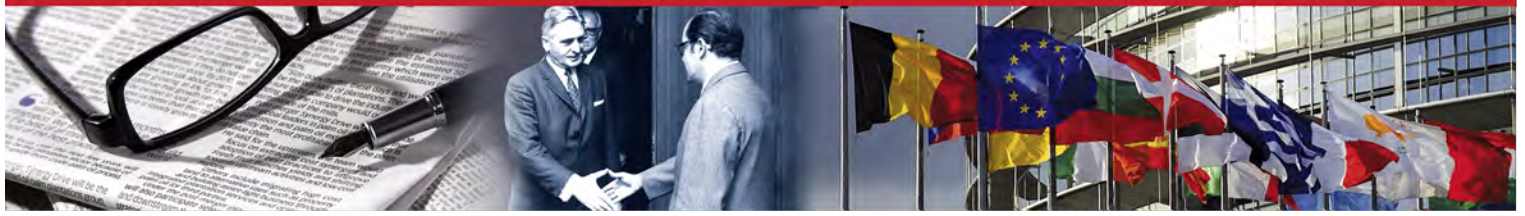
Consequently, on the political level, a clear lack of contact, cooperation, and conversation will be noticeable in the future as well as a roughening of the tone. Socially and culturally, however, links will hopefully be less affected. The US does have strong cultural ties with Germany – and vice versa. Not least because of the hundreds of thousands of US soldiers that had been stationed in Germany during the Cold War, high school exchange programmes and others, personal links exist, and will continue to exist. Culturally, Germany is part of the American DNA and there is a significant percentage of the US population that disagrees with Trump and his policies. Therefore, there is some ground for optimism that the special and amicable relationship will survive, and that these commonalities will provide a good point of departure for a reset of relations; in due course. For now, tensions will continue, especially as Angela Merkel is turning into a lame duck as she steps down from her party presidency and, probably sooner rather than later, the chancellorship.

Over the course of the past 250 years, relations between Germany and the US have rarely been easy; and more often than not, been special in every sense of the term. There have been highs (e.g. in the late 1700s, during most of the Cold War, and afterwards) and very deep lows (just think of the World Wars). The current period is on the lower end of the spectrum but far from the deepest extreme of US-American relations – and there is no indication that it will go down that low. The Cold War is over, and its fix points – military, political, and economical – are shifting. Change is a major force in history; relationships evolve, and so will the German-American one. But because of their common past, German-US relations will always be special.

Dr. Bernhard Blumenau

\* Lecturer in International Relations, Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, University of St Andrews





## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | December 2018

<sup>1</sup> 'The Silent Minority', *The Economist*, 5 February 2015, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2015/02/05/the-silent-minority>.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen F. Szabo, *Parting Ways: The Crisis in German-American Relations* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The US remained somewhat involved in issues related to the reparations and endorsed the Dawes and Young plans that attempted to address some of the problems deriving from the Versailles settlement.

<sup>4</sup> See Bernhard Blumenau, 'West Germany and the United States during the Middle East Crisis of 1973: "Nothing but a Semi-Colony"?', in *The Routledge Handbook of Transatlantic Security*, ed. Jussi M. Hanhimaki, Georges-Henri Soutou, and Basil Germond (London: Routledge, 2010), 123–52.

<sup>5</sup> When US intelligence agencies tapped into the phones of senior German politicians including the chancellor, see Reuters, 'NSA Tapped German Chancellery for Decades, WikiLeaks Claims', *The Guardian*, 8 July 2015, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jul/08/nsa-tapped-german-chancellery-decades-wikileaks-claims-merkel>.

<sup>6</sup> Florian Gathmann et al., 'Merkels Sommer-PK Im Minutenprotokoll: "Können Uns Nicht Länger Auf Die USA Als Ordnungsmacht Verlassen"', *Spiegel Online*, 20 July 2018, sec. Politik, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/angela-merkel-die-sommer-pressekonzferenz-im-live-blog-a-1219348.html>.

<sup>7</sup> 'US-Botschafter in Deutschland: Grenell Will Konservative in Europa Stärken', *Spiegel Online*, 4 June 2018, sec. Politik, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/richard-grenell-will-konservative-in-europa-staerken-breitbart-interview-a-1210970.html>; 'Steve Bannon Will Sich Jetzt Auf Europa Konzentrieren', *DIE WELT*, 23 September 2018, <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article181633580/Steve-Bannon-will-sich-jetzt-auf-Europa-konzentrieren.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Although the US do have a long history of clandestinely (!) interfering in European domestic affairs, mostly to prevent Communist parties from gaining influence, for instance in Italy.