

FORUM: HUMANITARIANISM AND THE MILITARY

“Presence and Preparedness”: The U.S. Military, Humanitarian Assistance, and Entangled Histories in Cold War Germany

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During the night of January 17–18, 1955, the rain-swollen Rhine and Neckar rivers crested. At their confluence, inhabitants of the German city of Mannheim scrambled to protect their homes and property. Residents of the small islands on the outskirts of the city faced imminent disaster.

American forces stationed in the German states of Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Pfalz mobilized to help. The 541st Engineering Company, based in Schwetzingen, arrived with sandbags.¹ The Rhine River Patrol, a U.S. Navy unit charged with maintaining security on the river, sent small patrol boats to ferry supplies and to rescue civilians trapped by rising waters. The City Council singled out a River Patrol Lieutenant named Hansen for his bravery in helping civilians escape Friesenheimer Island.

In the years to come, Americans and Germans pointed to the flood relief efforts of 1955 as evidence of the possibilities for positive, constructive relations between American forces stationed in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the civilian society in which they operated.² Similar humanitarian encounters were an important, and often overlooked, component of the American global presence during the Cold War. Focusing on the U.S. military in Germany, this essay examines what Julia Irwin calls the “entwined histories” of American military and humanitarian power.³ Irwin’s work focuses on catastrophic natural events, while I broaden this approach to include man-made disasters including population displacement and the destruction of infrastructure in the wake of war.

I argue here that these concomitant developments are important for reasons beyond the history of the United States as a global actor. The ability and willingness of the American military to intervene in humanitarian crises allows us to write the military into the histories of countries and regions in which the United States projected power, entangling the histories of American basing and troop deployments with those of the host countries.⁴ As the other essays in this forum clearly demonstrate, American military humanitarianism did not begin or end with the Cold War. However, any account of America’s global projection in the second half of

¹Documents related to the flood can be found in Stadtarchiv Mannheim (StadtA MA), ISG Tiefbauverwaltung, 54/1969 670.

²“Rogers Plan,” *Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 14, 1956; “Notiz für Rundfunkinterview. March 8, 1957,” StadtA MA ISG Allgemeine Verwaltung, 29/1970 148.

³Julia F. Irwin, *Catastrophic Diplomacy: US Foreign Disaster Assistance in the American Century* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2024), 6.

⁴Philipp Gassert et al., eds., *Augsburg und Amerika: Aneignungen und globale Verflechtungen in einer Stadt* (Augsburg, Germany, 2013); Karrin Hanshew, “Cohesive Difference: Germans and Italians in a Postwar Europe,” *Central European History* 52, no. 1 (Mar. 2019): 65–86.

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the twentieth century that does not include a discussion of the military's ability and willingness to play a role in alleviating natural or human-driven catastrophe is incomplete.

American forces stationed abroad engaged with host state populations along a continuum from militarized and fortified zones of exclusion through everyday acts of encounter and intimacy. Humanitarian relief occupies a peculiar point along this spectrum—one at which the vast might of American military power temporarily deployed to save or improve the lives of locals in acute need. During humanitarian relief operations, Americans and Germans came into close proximity. Such encounters contrasted with, and may have helped to mitigate, the boundaries created by the special legal status of foreign forces operating in the Federal Republic.

The story of military humanitarian relief in Germany after 1945 highlights three critical components of the American “Empire by Invitation.”⁵ The first was its enormous scope. The United States developed a global base archipelago after the Second World War that allowed it to project military and humanitarian power in a way that was simply unequaled by any of its contemporaries—and possibly by any state in history.⁶ As the example at the beginning of this essay points out, a U.S. Navy unit operated independently on the upper and middle reaches of the Rhine River, largely to protect the critical supply lines that sustained the massive U.S. Army presence in central and southern Germany.

The second aspect of military humanitarianism that warrants observation is will. American units, sometimes at the lowest levels of command, took initiative in the face of humanitarian crises. While this fit into a larger strategic pattern of the deployment of American personnel as informal “ambassadors,” that does not explain why, in the story above, a young American officer risked his life to save the residents of a small island in the middle of the Rhine.⁷ One could argue that humanitarian assistance served an instrumental purpose in fostering better relations with local communities. However, one of the striking aspects of these humanitarian efforts was that they often emerged from small units, with little or no coordination from higher levels of command. American personnel in Germany regularly acted on their own initiative to provide relief.

Finally, the history of humanitarian relief in Germany points to the critical role played by American families in shaping the global Cold War military presence.⁸ The presence of large numbers of dependents, who began arriving in Germany not long after the end of the war, was a remarkable aspect of this overseas base network. Dependents were not just a symbol of American commitment and the “friendly faces of Western democracy.”⁹ They could help to shape and even initiate local efforts that are not necessarily prominent in the archival records of the American military.

The history of military humanitarian relief can pose a methodological challenge for historians. Relief efforts were often un- or minimally coordinated by higher levels of command. This means that they often left little archival record. Most of the sources that we have available to understand military humanitarianism in Germany come from the German side. Histories of

⁵Geir Lundestad, *The United States and Western Europe since 1945: From “Empire by Invitation” to Transatlantic Drift* (New York, 2003).

⁶The literature on this is enormous and growing. See especially Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, “‘The Empire Will Compensate You’: The Structural Dynamics of the US Overseas Basing Network,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 4 (Dec. 2013): 1034–50.

⁷Donna Alvah, “U.S. Military Families Abroad in the Post-Cold War Era and the ‘New Global Posture,’” in *Over There: Living with the U.S. Military Empire from World War Two to the Present*, ed. Maria Höhn and Seungsook Moon (Durham, NC, 2010), 149–75; Thomas Leuerer, *Die Stationierung amerikanischer Streitkräfte in Deutschland: Militärgemeinden der U.S. Armee seit 1945 als ziviles Element der Stationierungspolitik der Vereinigten Staaten* (Würzburg, Germany, 1997), 219.

⁸Emily Swafford, “Democracy’s Proving Ground: U.S. Military Families in West Germany, 1946–1961” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014).

⁹Grace Huxford, “‘There Is No Icebreaker Like a Tiny Child’: Reuniting British Military Families in Cold War Germany,” *Contemporary European History* 32, no. 2 (2023): 206.

the U.S. military presence in Germany, or indeed anywhere in the Cold War world, that do not include substantial engagement with local sources will be partial and miss important sites of interaction.

We can see this clearly in the interactions between the U.S. military and German refugees in the years after the war. The massive scope of destruction in German cities and towns created an acute and intractable housing problem in the wake of the war, made worse by the needs of the occupiers to find housing for their own personnel. While much has been written about the Army and care for “Displaced Persons” in Europe, DPs were just one of an array of uprooted groups on the devastated continent.¹⁰ In addition to German civilians made homeless by bombing or fighting, more than 12 million ethnic German “expellees” came streaming into the ruins of the Reich from their former homes in East-Central Europe.¹¹ In Baden-Württemberg, there were more than 860,000 expellees in the early 1950s, comprising about 13 percent of the population.

As far as American policy in Germany went, the expellees were a German problem to be solved by German authorities. This is reflected in the near absence of these refugees in official histories.¹² The situation on the ground was far more complicated. American personnel, and their families, found themselves living in close proximity to desperately impoverished refugees. Quickly, local efforts began to provide aid to expellees, regardless of policy.

One particularly noteworthy example emerged in the Bavarian city of Würzburg. There, efforts were led by Dorothy Beebe, the wife of the city’s military commander, Brigadier General Lewis Beebe.¹³ The general’s wife, horrified by the conditions of expellees living in camps around the ruined city, unapologetically used the resources of her husband’s command to provide relief. She mobilized the wives of officers serving in the city, as well as the Council of Relief Agencies Licensed for Operations in Germany (CRALOG). She also drew on connections with her hometown of Faribault, Minnesota, which “adopted” Würzburg as a partner city. The records of the military government of Würzburg are replete with correspondence from American personnel who found themselves drawn into a quasi-official humanitarian aid mission led by a civilian.

The problem of postwar homelessness proved durable. Most cities in western Germany still had populations living in badly damaged housing or “bunker settlers” who lived in disused German military facilities until the mid-1950s. The American presence initially made this problem worse, since American forces physically occupied large swaths of surviving housing stock and formerly German military bases that might have been used for civilian housing. The expansion of American basing after 1950 provided a partial solution to this intractable problem. As the Cold War deepened, the U.S. Army began a massive base construction program in Germany, which then allowed the Army to release civilian housing requisitioned in the immediate aftermath of the war.¹⁴ When combined with the growing material prosperity of the Federal Republic, the last vestiges of wartime deprivation began to vanish. From

¹⁰Adam R. Seipp and Andrea A. Sinn, “Landscapes of the Uprooted: Displacement in Postwar Europe,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 1–7.

¹¹Andreas Kossert, *Kalte Heimat: Die Geschichte der deutschen Vertriebenen nach 1945* (Munich, Germany, 2008); Sylvia Schraut, *Flüchtlingsaufnahme in Württemberg-Baden 1945–1949. Amerikanische Besatzungsziele und demokratischer Wiederaufbau im Konflikt* (Munich, Germany, 1995).

¹²Sylvia Schraut, “‘Make the Germans Do It’: The Refugee Problem in the American Zone of Post-War Germany,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 16, nos. 1–2 (2000): 115–24; Harold Zink’s massive official history of the occupation mentions them once. Harold Zink, *The United States in Germany, 1945–1955* (Princeton, NJ, 1957).

¹³This story is told in greater detail in Adam R. Seipp, “The Driftwood of War: The US Army, Expellees, and West German Society, 1945–52,” *War and Society* 32, no. 3 (2013): 211–32.

¹⁴Adam R. Seipp, “‘This Land Remains German’: Requisitioning, Society, and the US Army, 1945–1956,” *Central European History* 52, no. 3 (Sept. 2019): 476–95; Robert P. Grathwol and Donita M. Moorhus, *Building for Peace: U.S. Army Engineers in Europe, 1945–1991* (Washington, DC, 2005).

1953–1955, newspapers across the American area published stories about American soldiers helping *Bunkersiedler* move out of their substandard housing and into new homes and lives.¹⁵ Images of American military trucks loaded with the possessions of grateful Germans surely contributed to the changing image of the United States a decade after the end of the war.

Not all humanitarian crises in Germany stemmed from the war. The Federal Republic of Germany is geologically stable, and the climate is generally reasonable. However, the river systems that flow through the country are prone to seasonal flooding. There is some evidence that the construction or postwar reconstruction of dikes and weirs in the Rhine Valley may have actually made flood risks worse.¹⁶ American forces, whose bases concentrated in areas near the Rhine and its tributaries, relied on the river systems for supplies and transportation. The Federal Republic's militarized river systems emerged as another "contact zone" where the environment, the needs of the civilian population, and the might of the foreign military presence interacted.¹⁷

The United States may have had the largest military contingent of any North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) sending state in the Federal Republic, but it was not alone. Natural disaster relief could involve forces from multiple NATO member states. A particularly good example of this occurred in 1962, when the city-state of Hamburg faced catastrophic flooding. Future Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, then an ambitious but relatively obscure State Senator, cajoled German and international forces to provide disaster assistance.¹⁸ This flew in the face of legal restrictions around the use of military forces in peacetime, which the World War II veteran Schmidt blithely disregarded. It earned him the sobriquet "Lord of the Flood" and gave him a platform on which to launch his national political career.

Disaster relief even connected to the political tumult of the "long 1968" in Germany. The presence of foreign forces played a central role in the wave of student protests that convulsed the FRG during those years.¹⁹ The question of whether the Americans were in the country as protectors or occupiers took on a central place in debates going on within German society.

Germans who defended the American presence in the country frequently pointed to the ability and willingness of the U.S. Army to intervene in natural disasters as evidence of the goodwill of the FRG's NATO allies. As in the example of Mannheim, discussed earlier, flood relief offered a positive vision of the American presence that could counter more negative public sentiment. Two apparently unrelated events in Heidelberg, home of U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR), in 1970 highlight the connection between the American presence and social change in Germany. In February, the Rhine and its tributaries again burst their banks during heavy rain. American military engineers based in Mannheim fanned out across the river system to help. More than eighty American soldiers helped place sandbags in a desperate attempt to save the Old City of Heidelberg from the rising Neckar River.²⁰

¹⁵"Urlas-Siedler sollen ohne Aussicht auf Ersatzgelände räumen," *Nürnberger Zeitung*, Apr. 9, 1953; "Ein neues Leben beginnt," *Rhine-Neckar-Zeitung*, Oct. 30, 1954.

¹⁶Theresa Petrow and Bruno Merz, "Trends in Flood Magnitude, Frequency and Seasonality in Germany in the Period 1951–2002," *Journal of Hydrology* 371, no. 1 (2009): 129–41.

¹⁷Chris Pearson, "Researching Militarized Landscapes: A Literature Review on War and the Militarization of the Environment," *Landscape Research* 37, no. 1 (2012): 115–33.

¹⁸Kristina Spohr, *The Global Chancellor: Helmut Schmidt and the Reshaping of the International Order* (Oxford, UK, 2016), 41.

¹⁹Wilfried Mausbach, "America's Vietnam in Germany, Germany in America's Vietnam: On the Relocation of Spaces and Appropriation of History," in *Changing the World, Changing Oneself: Political Protest and Collective Identities in West Germany and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s*, ed. Belinda Davis et al. (New York, 2010), 41–64; Tim Schroth, "Vom kleinen Imperialismus, seinem grossen Bruder und Punkten, wo es einfach aufhört: Antiamerikanismus und Antizionismus im Heidelberger SDS" (Wissenschaftliches Arbeit, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, 2014).

²⁰Hank Franz, "GIs Combat Rising Waters in Germany," *Stars and Stripes* (European Edition), Feb. 26, 1970.

A few months later, the young president (*Rektor*) of the University of Heidelberg attracted national and international media attention when he publicly criticized the American war in Indochina.²¹ The resulting scandal polarized the university and the politics of the German state of Baden-Württemberg. Prominent intellectuals and politicians condemned or defended the Rektor's comments.²²

Those who spoke out in support of the Americans highlighted the importance of disaster relief. A group of conservative academics from the university issued a public statement at the height of the affair, which praised the Americans for their help with the February flooding and similar disasters since 1945. The scholars made an explicit connection between disaster relief and the consolidation of German democracy: "West Germany can only live in the type of society that it has chosen because of American presence and preparedness (*Einsatzbereitschaft*)."²³

During the years after German reunification in 1990, the American military presence declined markedly. German communities said goodbye to garrisons that had been part of the landscape for decades. In the nostalgic reminiscences of the early post-Cold War era, the story of aid in times of disaster featured regularly. The Mayor of Heilbronn, in his farewell address to American troops leaving the city in 1992, thanked them for "the humanitarian help of the first years and assistance with establishing a democratic economy and society..."²⁴ Today, the American military presence in Germany has shrunk from its Cold War levels of more than 200,000 troops to around 30,000. Many of the connections between Americans and Germans formed over generations of contact have faded from memory. Some, however, remain. The partner city program between Würzburg and Faribault continues.²⁵ Both cities still commemorate the initiative taken by Dorothy Beebe and her partners in the desperate postwar years.²⁶

More than just local stories, the history of American humanitarian relief efforts in Cold War Germany points to the wider ramifications of the overseas basing network established after the Second World War. When we examine the creation and maintenance of these outposts of American military power, we have the opportunity to tell the story of America's twentieth century in a global, integrated, and transnational way. To fully understand the importance of American global power projection, we must consider the military not just as an instrument of American foreign policy; we also need to understand it as an actor embedded within and entangled with the histories of the states and societies in which it operated.

²¹"Für Taktlosigkeit entschuldigen," *Rhein-Necker-Zeitung*, June 15, 1970.

²²Universitätsarchiv Universität Heidelberg, Rep 82/5; see also Katja Nagel, *Die Provinz in Bewegung: Studentenunruhen in Heidelberg 1967–1973* (Heidelberg, Germany, 2009), 387–422.

²³"Akademikerinnen bedauern Brückierung," *Heidelberger Tageblatt*, June 24, 1970.

²⁴"Heilbronn Closure Marked," *Herald-Post*, Nov. 6, 1992.

²⁵<https://www.faribaultmn.org/2022/06/14/nort-note-2/> (accessed Sept. 2023).

²⁶Susanne Vankeirsblick, "Hilfspakete aus Minnesota," *Main-Post*, Nov. 30, 2016.