Introduction

Thomas W. Maulucci, Jr.

The U.S. military forces stationed in the Federal Republic of Germany have helped to shape German–American relations in ways that far transcend their well-known military role in the Atlantic alliance. The transformation of the American, British, and French occupation zones into the Federal Republic of Germany represents one of the few successful examples in the twentieth century of democratic nation building abroad. In 2003, General Charles F. Wald, Deputy Commander of the U.S. European Command, called American military spending in the Federal Republic over several decades “an unintended Marshall Plan.” And approximately twenty-two million U.S. servicemen, military employees, and dependents have lived in Germany since 1945. As a result, most Americans have friends or relatives or at least know someone who has served there, and the GIs, their bases, and related institutions like Armed


3 See the Appendix.

4 As the attentive reader will note, the term “GIs” is used frequently in this book to refer to all of the American armed forces stationed in Germany. Technically, this usage is incorrect. Strictly speaking, “GI” applies only to army personnel and even more narrowly to enlisted soldiers. The expression came initially from the galvanized iron trash bins used
 Forces Radio helped introduce several generations of West Germans to American society and culture. Therefore, the American military presence in Germany is also one of the largest cultural-exchange programs in world history.

Although the impact of Cold War-era defense policies on American life has been intensively studied, scholars are only beginning to examine the “shadow” that American overseas military spending and basing during this period cast on its allies. This is also true of the relationship between GIs and Germans. The existing literature has focused heavily on the American military presence abroad (in terms of race, sexuality, gender, and class) on both American servicemen and their families and the host countries.

by the army shortly after 1900 and by World War II was widely used to refer to both “general issue” army gear (GI boots, GI soap, etc.) and to troops. With apologies to the other service branches, and especially the Marines, who take offense at the designation, we feel that our use of GIs can be excused for several reasons besides the alliteration produced by pairing it with the word “Germany.” In recent decades, the term increasingly has come to describe all enlisted personnel. In addition, by far most of the servicemen and women stationed in Germany after 1945 were army personnel, with the air force in distant second place. On the use of “GI,” see Hugh Rawson, “Why Do We Say ‘G.I.?’, American Heritage Magazine 57, no. 2 (April–May 2006), 16.


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years of military occupation under the Office of Military Government of the United States (OMGUS) from 1945 to 1949, sometimes extending into the era of the Allied High Commission (1949–55). Moreover, it has concentrated on aspects of official U.S. military occupation policy in Germany rather than on the role of the American forces.7 Recently, important work has started to appear on the social and cultural history of the American military presence in Germany, including the role of black GIs in the civil rights movement, military families, and the failure of the nonfraternization policy in the late 1940s.8 However, the best general


history of the U.S. Armed Forces in Germany during the post-1945 period, by the political scientist Daniel J. Nelson, is now twenty-five years old.\(^9\)

This collection of essays presents an overview of the new scholarship on the American military presence in the Federal Republic of Germany. It seeks to refocus our attention away from the immediate post–World War II years and onto the subsequent periods in which GIs were stationed in that country. This means that the essays in the volume deal with an American military that is no longer an occupier per se but instead one element in a complex relationship between two sovereign states. Moreover, many of the contributions demonstrate how cultural and social approaches to international history can shed light on the U.S. Armed Forces’ role in German–American relations.

I

Any discussion of the GIs in Germany must begin with a basic question: How can we best understand the U.S. overseas military presence in the twentieth century? More specifically, were the U.S. troops in the Federal Republic part of a post-1945 overseas “empire”?\(^10\) In his summary comments at the conference that gave rise to this volume, Günther Bischof spoke of the “New Rome in old Germania.”\(^11\) Certainly, the image of American “legions” stationed in central Europe to keep the “barbarian hordes” – not primitive Germanic tribes but the troops of the Soviet Union and its allies – from overrunning Western Europe is evocative. Others have found the comparison with the Roman Empire compelling as well. John J. McCloy, the first American High Commissioner in Germany from 1949 to 1952, said in reference to Lucius D. Clay that “being


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[American] Military Governor [in Germany] was a pretty heady job. It was the nearest thing to a Roman proconsulship the modern world afforded.”

Another obvious comparison is with the British Empire. In the eyes of some observers, the mid-twentieth century marked the onset of a new Pax Americana akin to the Pax Britannica of the nineteenth century. In the late 1940s, British policy makers commented that the United States had now come into a position of world dominance never enjoyed by their own country. Some American officials, like the State Department’s Norman Davies, believed “we shall in effect be the heirs of empire and it is up to us to preserve its vital parts.” “To historians,” wrote Paul M. Kennedy, American overseas basing in the mid-1980s “look[s] extraordinarily similar to the chain of fleet bases and garrisons possessed by that former world power, Great Britain, at the height of its strategic over-stretch.” America’s international position never rested, however, solely or even primarily on military power. It is no coincidence that it was in the 1950s, when the global influence of the United States had reached a new height, that Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher proposed their concept of “informal empire” to explain Britain’s political and economic relations with the non-Western world in the mid-nineteenth century.

The American overseas presence has, however, rested on the consent of the “occupied” to a far larger extent than Roman or British rule did. Christopher T. Sandars has proposed the useful concept of the “leasehold empire” to describe the system of American overseas bases that began to develop during the early 1940s. Every time the United States wished to establish bases overseas, it engaged in often-protracted negotiations with the host countries. In Western Europe, for example, the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) of 1951, with subsequent revisions, continues to govern the stationing of American and other NATO troops on the soil of Germany.

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14 Sandars, America’s Overseas Garrisons.
their alliance partners. SOFA recognizes the jurisdiction of the laws of both the sending and the receiving states over the stationed troops. The former takes precedence in “on-duty” offenses and in offenses committed by members of one foreign force against members of another, while the latter takes precedence in all other cases.\textsuperscript{15} Writing about the postwar American relationship with Western Europe, Geir Lundestad coined the term “empire by invitation” in a seminal article he published in 1986.\textsuperscript{16} Going a step further, Robert Kagan contends that the Western European states used American protection to positively reorder their dealings with one another, initiating an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity. By the start of the twenty-first century, however, they had come to see the use of military power in international relations as “outmoded and dangerous.” Paradoxically, “Europe’s new Kantian order could flourish only under the umbrella of American power exercised according to the rules of the old Hobbesian order,” writes Kagan. “American power made it possible for Europeans to believe that power was no longer important.”\textsuperscript{17}

The American “empire” never aimed at formal territorial expansion. Although American policy makers believed that after World War II they would need to maintain roughly the same number of overseas bases that existed in 1944–5 in order to provide for national security, there were no plans to establish a long-term military presence in Europe. As early as November 1945, General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s chief of staff reported that due to rapid demobilization and redeployment “the forces within [the European] theater are unable to perform any serious offensive operations. Their capacity to carry on limited defensive operations is slightly better.”\textsuperscript{18} Only the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 led to substantial new deployments of American troops to Europe. In a recent study, political scientist John J. Mearsheimer argues that the United States had no real choice in the matter during the Cold War, given the fact that it was


\textsuperscript{17} Robert Kagan, Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order (New York, 2003), 73.

the only country that could contain the USSR militarily in Europe. American troops were not there primarily to preserve the European peace but to prevent Soviet expansion.\textsuperscript{19} Even so, as Hubert Zimmermann points out in his contribution to this volume, policy makers in Washington in the 1960s and 1970s did not see the stationing of GIs in Europe as permanent. Many factors spoke against it, including the American tradition of avoiding “entangling alliances,” new technologies (e.g., nuclear weapons), domestic opposition in the United States to paying for stationing, and, eventually, Soviet–American détente.

The idea of an American empire is, moreover, difficult to reconcile with the diverse functions that the GIs in Germany performed. As Hans-Joachim Harder writes in this volume, they served as a symbol of West German–American friendship, as a pawn in superpower negotiations on disarmament, and as the guarantors of both West German security and eventual German unification. Although the American “legions” in Germany were a symbol of the superpower status of the United States after 1945, they were never merely the instruments of an imperial power.

In their introduction to a recent collection of essays comparing U.S. military bases in South Korea, Japan, and (West) Germany, the countries where more than 90 percent of American servicemen were stationed overseas during the Cold War, Maria Höhn and Seungsook Moon point out that in many ways the German outposts of the American empire were exceptional. Globally, it mattered whether the United States was dealing with a democratic host government, what types of troops were stationed, where the military bases were located in the host country, and which cultural and racial assumptions informed the bilateral relationship. In South Korea, for example, the United States collaborated with dictatorships until the late 1980s and maintained peacetime command of most South Korean forces until 1994 and wartime command until 2012. Höhn and Moon describe this situation as neocolonial. Moreover, in South Korea and in Japan U.S. servicemen were concentrated in outlying areas (in Japan mainly on Okinawa), which limited interaction with the bulk of the population and hid the social and other costs of basing. Historically, Okinawa also has faced the special problem of hosting thousands of young, unmarried Marines who stay there only briefly before being

sent on combat missions elsewhere and who have extremely limited con-
tact with and understanding of the locals. It is therefore no surprise that
in recent decades South Koreans and Okinawans have directed much
antagonism toward American bases and their residents. Although most
GIs in Germany were also stationed in rural areas, the relationship with
what Höhn and Moon call America’s “favored ally” has been character-
ized by greater mutual respect and regular interaction, including on the
intergovernmental level. As a result the (West) German government and
population have demonstrated a high degree of acceptance of U.S. bases
since 1945. Even the massive peace movement of the 1980s focused its
attention on American nuclear weapons, not on the American military
presence per se. This important caveat raised by Höhn and Moon is
reflected in a number of new books on popular protest against U.S. mili-
tary installations around the world, which in recent decades have focused
on areas outside of Europe.

II

Although it was fundamentally shaped by the course of the Cold War,
U.S. military basing policy in Europe after 1945 did not follow an overall
strategy. Instead, it developed in response to developments in bilateral
relations with each host country. As Simon Duke and Wolfgang Krieger
write, “the overall picture only makes sense when it is dissected into the
individual country histories and then reassembled. The history of basing
in, for instance, the Federal Republic of Germany is quite different from
that of the United Kingdom, or that of Turkey from that of Italy.” In
the Federal Republic, we can discern four main phases in the history of
the U.S. military presence since 1944.

Between 1944 and 1949, the GIs were in Germany as military occu-
piers, although by the end of this period West Germans clearly had come
to perceive them as friends and protectors as well. The next phase started

20 Höhn and Moon, “The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, Race and Class in the U.S. Military
Empire,” in Over There, ed. Höhn and Moon, 1–36, here on pp. 11–19.
21 Andrew Yeo, Activist, Alliances, and Anti-US Base Protests (Cambridge, 2011); Cather-
ine Lutz, ed., The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle against US Military Posts
(Washington Square, NY, 2009); Alexander Cooley, Base Politics: Democratic Change
and the US Military Overseas (Ithaca, NY, 2008); Kent E. Calder, Embattled Garrisons:
22 Simon Duke and Wolfgang Krieger, “Introduction,” in U.S. Military Forces in Europe,
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not with the establishment of the Federal Republic in 1949 but rather the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, and it lasted until the mid-1960s. During this period, West Germany became a member of NATO (1955); American servicemen and their dependents in Germany enjoyed a high standard of living; and official and unofficial relations between the GIs and their West German neighbors were excellent. However, the late 1960s initiated a new phase. Due to the Federal Republic’s growing political and economic importance as well as to social transformations in Germany and the United States, the next twenty years of the American military presence would be marked by frequent tensions. Daniel Nelson even asked whether the U.S. forces in Germany had become “Defenders or Intruders” in the eyes of the locals by the early 1980s. The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of a fourth phase. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the future of the American military presence in Germany was called into question. Although American bases in Germany played an important role as staging areas for forces used in the Gulf War of 1990–1, there was no question during the 1990s that the United States would reduce the number of military installations it maintained in Germany and the number of troops stationed there. From more than 225,000 in 1990, American troop strength in Germany was cut to fewer than fifty thousand troops toward the end of the decade. The number then rose again to approximately seventy-five thousand troops by September 2003 due to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. But by 2011 the total had fallen again to around fifty-five thousand, and as this introduction is being written it is once again below fifty thousand.

III

On September 12, 1944, units of the U.S. First Army entered the German village of Roetgen. By the end of the next month, the nearby city of Aachen and its outlying districts were also under American occupation. However, this was not the first time that American troops were stationed

on German soil. In late 1918, the U.S. Army occupied the area around Koblenz as part of the Allied occupation of the Rhineland. The presence of Allied troops was intended to remind the Germans that they had lost the war and to ensure their good behavior during the Paris peace negotiations. Late in the summer of 1919, the United States reduced the number of troops it had in Germany from 110,000 to 15,000. This smaller force was supposed to exercise a moderating influence on the Allies, above all France, in their policies toward Germany. In early 1923, making good on Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes’s threat that a French advance into the Ruhr would lead to the end of the American occupation, the United States withdrew its remaining troops.  

Although the American military found itself involved in many more aspects of German public life after 1945, there are striking parallels between the experiences of the Doughboys who served in Germany from 1918 to 1923 and the GIs who followed them a generation later. In both cases, American troops benefited from comparison in German eyes with their occupation partners. The Doughboys profited from the fact that their country had not signed the Versailles Treaty. After 1945, Germans both in and outside of the U.S. zone clearly had a better opinion of the Americans than of the British, French, and Soviets. The British and the French zones lagged behind the American zone in terms of the economic situation, food supply, and the freedoms granted to inhabitants. Especially in the French zone, the occupiers’ policies often seemed improvised and even arbitrary to residents. More generally, Germans thought that Britain no longer played as important a role in world affairs as it had before the war and that France was actively trying to impede the restoration of German unity. Conditions in the Soviet zone seemed by far the
