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Reviewed by **Wolfgang Krieger**, Universität Marburg

Why Did They Stay? The First Four Decades of U.S. Troops in Germany

What would have happened if those 250,000 American soldiers in Germany had not stayed for 40 years? They might well have been withdrawn in 1956 after divided Germany had been firmly anchored in two alliances, NATO and the Warsaw Pact. West Germany was politically stable and had established diplomatic relations with Moscow (in 1955). Its armed forces were being built up rapidly and would soon provide a boost to NATO's overall strength. And U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, first deployed in 1954, would increasingly balance off those huge Soviet tank forces, as JCS chairman Admiral Radford argued in mid-1956. Or think of 1973 when the Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction [MBFR] talks on troop reductions (east and west of the iron curtain) started. Along the model of the SALT negotiations, an interim agreement might conceivably have been reached.

We know all the reasons why none of this happened, or we think we do. Hubert Zimmermann lays them out beautifully in his excellent, highly illuminating essay. He walks us through a number of "crises" when the United States might have withdrawn at least part of those six U.S. divisions or when big reductions were loudly demanded by the U.S. Congress. While presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy were still expecting to see the boys coming home "within a few years" their successors had little hope for this to happen during their own administrations. Indeed, Johnson and Nixon refused any withdrawals because they insisted on their presidential prerogative of defining overall U.S. defense policy. Their successors no longer saw U.S. troop levels as a burning issue. Strategic deterrence of Soviet adventurism in the third world seemed more important and a vastly larger U.S. economy could bear the ensuing financial burden more easily.

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As Zimmermann writes: “Over time, the troop commitment became ... a ‘sticky institution’”. (p.11) What a nice term for our world of national and international institutions which are all too often as sticky as they are superfluous! Just think of the OECD with its 2,500 employees. A leftover from the days of the Marshall Plan it was transformed from a transatlantic into a global body in 1961, just when troop withdrawals negotiated by Eisenhower and Khrushchev might have started, had the Paris summit of May 1960 not been such a sad failure.

Zimmermann, who has done important work in international financial and economic diplomacy, and thus in political science, might have stuck to this concept and made institutional behavior the main axis of his inquiry. Instead, he takes the historian’s path of a chronological study, in which he particularly highlights domestic political and economic factors in American decision-making.

Valid, new, and refreshing as his argument no doubt is, I wish to add three factors which in my view deserve to be explored in this context.

Firstly, there is the self-interest, call it enlightened if you wish, of the United States Army. None of the other services had as much of a stake in keeping to those force levels in Germany as did the Army. This was particularly relevant during the 1950s and 1960s when the American strategic bomber force, the aircraft carriers and nuclear-armed submarines seemed in the eyes of many military experts to be a much more efficient deterrent against Soviet aggression, much better insurance against World War III and, should global war with the communist world occur, a much more promising way to win it. After all, who in his right mind would plan to drive an American tank force from Germany all the way to Moscow and beyond? In this discourse the Army’s main argument was that the West European populations would not feel protected by those awful, far-away weapons system in the same way as they did by several hundred thousand American “hostages” whose presence, in the event of a Soviet attack, would rule out any possibility of Washington standing on the side lines as it had done in the two world wars until 1917 and 1941 respectively. Without being confident of such an instant American involvement the West Europeans might not have the stomach to defend themselves even for a few days. This argument may well have been the Army’s best line of defense against all those air wings and fleets, real and imagined, which threatened the Army’s share of the Pentagon budget. Zimmermann, unfortunately, does not mention those bureaucratic aspects.

My second point concerns nuclear weapons which the author mentions but, in my view, does not give enough weight. As U.S. forces based in Germany (and nearby) acquired more and more “battlefield” nuclear weapons they became entangled in some unwanted political consequences. If U.S. forces needed to be equipped with “the most modern weaponry”, as was argued at the time, why would those same weapons not be needed by their NATO allies with whom they formed the “layer cake” defense line across Germany, from Denmark to the Alps? Alone among the cold war U.S. presidents, Eisenhower was willing to let the European allies control, perhaps even buy those weapons or build them

on their own. He was willing, at least in principle, to go far beyond the “nuclear sharing” scheme resulting from the NATO Council decision of December 1957.¹ His successors were not and had to live with the consequences. Those growing numbers of battlefield nuclear weapons needed a large U.S. military contingent to manage, guard, and use them – use them late and in a limited way if possible (flexible response). While a weak NATO defense force would need to employ them early, destroying much of central Europe in the process and leaving no room for any further crisis diplomacy, a strong force with sufficient conventional power could afford to wait and see if nuclear use was really needed to avoid utter defeat. Thus the combination of U.S. nuclear strategy and U.S. non-proliferation policy left Washington with no alternative but to maintain those high conventional force levels.

Thirdly, there was the effect of détente on troop levels. The Europeans may well have “invented MBFR to stop unilateral reductions”, as Henry Kissinger told French defense minister Michel Debré in July 1973. (p. 22) But I disagree with the argument that Brezhnev blocked the reductions of Soviet and American forces because “he preferred an American troop presence ... to a German-dominated central front.” (p. 23) More likely he knew that Soviet power west of its national borders rested on the presence of the Red Army in east Germany. Any reduction of those forces would be a signal to the Germans, Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians that Soviet domination was finite and might induce them to revolt just as they had done in 1953, 1956, and 1968. In other words, Brezhnev (and his successors) must have found U.S. troop levels a most convenient excuse for keeping Soviet force levels unchanged.

Quite rightly Zimmermann points to the Yom Kippur war of 1973 as providing “another justification for keeping forces in Europe (though not necessarily at the same level)”. (p.24) This is exactly why some 56,000 U.S. troops are still in Germany today, almost 60 years after Harry Truman first sent them.

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¹ Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement 1945-1963* (Princeton University Press 1999), pp. 146-200.

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— *Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux*