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Liberation, Re-Education, Democratisation: The Politics of Gratitude in German-American Relations after 1945

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The US-American presence in postwar Germany and its role in West Germany's re-education and democratisation have fuelled a discourse of gratitude that has lastingly shaped the transatlantic alliance. German politicians and other policy actors continue to rely on proclamations of 'thankfulness' as a means of what Todd Hall has termed 'emotional diplomacy'. In the process, they affirm a collective memory of the postwar years that emphasises friendship and contains social conflicts, political tensions, and ambivalent affects. They draw on iconic tropes and powerful narratives – ranging from the GI handing out chewing gum to CARE packages and the 'gift' of democracy – which have cast German-American relations in terms of generosity, gift-giving, and gratitude. This article traces the roots of this discourse to (the popular memory of) the postwar moment and situates it vis-à-vis the multifaceted affective landscape of early postwar Germany with a specific focus on its gender logics and with an eye to its benefits and the risks it entails.

Introduction

While (in)gratitude has been, in rather explicit and more tacit ways, a staple of transatlantic relations and diplomacy since 1945, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the Second World War in 2020 provided a particularly pronounced moment for high-ranking German politicians to proclaim their (and, by extension, their fellow German citizens') gratitude to the United States.¹ Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier stated in Berlin on 8 May 2020: 'We Germans can definitely now say that the day of liberation is a day of thanksgiving. It has taken three generations for us to admit it wholeheartedly'.² He clearly marks the presence of the United States in Germany as a liberating (rather than occupying) force and indicates German gratitude, but highlights that this collective understanding of the events has only *now* been unambiguously embraced. Then Federal Minister of Defence Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, at the presentation of the Steuben Schurz Media Award on 26 October 2020, echoed this assessment and affirmed its relevance even in light of the strained transatlantic relations during the Trump administration. She provides a more personal touch and a specific generational perspective: 'In my family, the word "America" was always spoken with gratitude and warmth – and this has not changed. This is a formative influence that I share with many Germans of the post-war generation'.³ As the Steuben Schurz Media Award, which was established in 1989, 'is designed to honor the efforts of *people in the media industry including music and theater*, who have contributed significantly to the deepening of German-American relations' (emphases in original),⁴ this statement is not

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their detailed and helpful feedback.

² <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2020/05/200508-75th-anniversary-World-War-II.html> (last visited 29 Sept. 2022).

³ <https://www.bmvg.de/en/news/speech-akk-presentation-steuben-schurz-media-award-3856630> (last visited 29 Sept. 2022).

⁴ <https://steuben-schurz.org/2020/07/25/steuben-schurz-mediapreis/> (last visited 29 Sept. 2022).

surprising. It makes the positive feelings towards America personal and ties them to the intimate sphere of the family, but at the same time highlights their collective dimension. Though in different settings, both statements claim *gratitude* as a key concept in characterising the German-American relationship after 1945 – from the private family conversation to the international political stage. In that sense, they can be read as instances of what Todd Hall has succinctly described as ‘emotional diplomacy’, i.e. a ‘*coordinated state-level behavior that explicitly and officially projects the image of a particular emotional response towards other states*’ (emphasis in original). It is ‘intentional and collaborative’ as well as strategic.⁵ Steinmeier and Kramp-Karrenbauer – alongside other politicians, commentators, and pundits – position Germany as the grateful recipient and beneficiary of (continuing) US-American support. As Hall reminds us, ‘state actors may seek to elicit or steer popular emotions pertaining to their foreign policies’.⁶ In the German context, Steinmeier’s and Kramp-Karrenbauer’s speech acts also work to frame the collective memory of the US presence in postwar Germany in positive terms, to reaffirm the dominant narratives of Germany’s quick re-education and reorientation that transformed former enemies into friends and, ultimately, to cast Germany’s success story of democratisation in terms of gratitude. More recently, Federal President Steinmeier used the diplomacy of gratitude to contextualise the US military presence in Germany and Europe with an eye to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. On 13 July 2022, he addressed American soldiers at Grafenwöhr with these words:

Thank you for your service, thank you for your sacrifice. What you do here, each and every one of you, is of existential importance to the security of my country, my people, our continent and our alliance. [...] Your grandfathers and great-grandfathers have fought to free our continent of the Nazi terror. Your parents and grandparents have secured our path [...] toward democracy after the war. [...] We, as Germans, owe our gratitude to all of them [...]. I want to send my greetings and my gratitude to the hundreds of thousands of veterans and their families in America who have served in my country before.⁷

Such statements also lay out specific ‘feeling rules’⁸ (Arlie Hochschild) that trace their origins to the postwar years and continue to shape transatlantic relations. In the following, I take this currency of gratitude as a starting point to examine which elements of US policies, cultural encounters, and social developments of the immediate postwar years lend themselves to a discourse that conceptualises German-American interactions after 1945 around notions of gift-giving and thankfulness.

The narrative of gratitude was, for example, facilitated by the quick and significant shift in US policies from the agenda of re-education to the strategies of reorientation, recovery, and recuperation that set in under the impression of the impending Cold War. I take my theoretical cue from the ‘turn to affect’⁹ and the scholarship on public feeling to sketch out some aspects of the ‘affective economy’ (Sara Ahmed) of gratitude that enabled the narrative of a transatlantic ‘love story’,¹⁰ or at the very least of an emerging friendship and deepening bond between the United States and Germany after the Second World War. Specifically, I review selected US-American re-education and reorientation policies and practices with an eye to their cultural and affective work and with a particular focus on their gender dimension.

I use the term *affect* following Deborah Gould to designate ‘nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity’.¹¹ Emotional diplomacy channels and

⁵ Todd H. Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁷ https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2022/220713-visit-US-armed-forces-Grafenwoehr.html;jsessionid=E537C947721DCE955A0A2A75D13EEF6F.2_cid504 (last visited 29 Sept. 2022).

⁸ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (updated ed) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

⁹ Patricia Ticineto Clough, ed., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Ralph Willett, *The Americanization of Germany, 1945–1949* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2.

¹¹ Deborah Gould, ‘On Affect and Protest’, in *Political Emotions: New Agendas in Communication*, eds. Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2010), 26.

mobilises affects that may have an impact on individuals and, more importantly, on a collective or body politic. Emotion, according to Brian Massumi, is understood here as ‘the expression of affect in gesture and language, its conventional or coded expression’.¹² I suggest that gratitude has become perhaps *the* preferred emotion in hegemonic discourse to capture German reactions to the US occupation/liberation gradually and retrospectively. Tracing this discourse and its developments in historical detail over the last seven decades lies beyond the scope of this article, and I thus focus on its foundational phase during the re-education and reorientation years under US-American occupation as it is affectively evoked in current emotional diplomacy and memory culture. In the process, however, I also aim to show how this dominant narrative glosses over ambivalent feelings towards the American presence in Germany as well as political differences and tensions and, in fact, risks obscuring a much more conflicted affective landscape that provided the grounds for German-American encounters after the Second World War.

Re-education and Reorientation in Postwar Germany: The Basis for a Diplomacy of Gratitude

The US-American project of re-educating and democratising the German population was fundamentally and from its very beginning concerned with the management of emotions and with providing new models and affective cues. Anna Parkinson explains: ‘Part of the process of re-education was a demand for Germans to feel and act differently – to eschew totalitarian passions and behavior in favor of what was characterized in vague terms as an empathic, levelheaded democracy’.¹³ The dominant historiography usually divides the occupation period into an early phase (re-education) characterised by the (albeit quickly eroding) fraternisation ban that limited personal interaction, a focus on punitive measures, denazification, and the confrontation of the German population with their immediate past, the atrocities of the National Socialist regime, and their complicity in this system of destruction and extermination. It is most readily symbolised by re-education measures such as the so-called atrocity films (that, despite rumours to the contrary, were not systematically forced upon people in exchange for e.g. food stamps)¹⁴ and by the 1944 Morgenthau-Plan that, among other things, envisioned the deindustrialisation of Germany. The later phase (reorientation) constituted a significant shift ‘from directive to persuasion’, as Alonzo Grace, director of the Education and Cultural Affairs Division of OMGUS (Office of Military Government for Germany), pointed out in 1948.¹⁵

Against the backdrop of the early Cold War, official policies were re-designed to embrace a more future-oriented approach in which coercion increasingly gave way to soft power measures, economic support, and cultural offers. They emphasised the model character of the United States as a democracy and took shape in the symbolically significant and substantial efforts of economic rebuilding, especially the Marshall Plan with its European framework and global ramifications, as well as iconic cultural institutions such as the much-cherished *Amerikahäuser* (America Houses).¹⁶ This change in policy can be regarded a prerequisite for gratitude to become a part of a dominant feeling rule that retrospectively structures the affective landscape of postwar Germany.

After years of war and the experience of what came to be known as the hunger winter of 1946/7, the meeting of existential needs and the growing support from across the Atlantic were crucial. These

¹² Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 232.

¹³ Anna Parkinson, ‘A Sentimental Reeducation: Postwar West Germany’s Intimate Geographies’, *Emotion, Space, and Society* 25 (2017): 95–102, 96.

¹⁴ Ulrike Weckel, *Beschämende Bilder: Deutsche Reaktionen auf alliierte Dokumentarfilme über befreite Konzentrationslager* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012).

¹⁵ Beate Rosenzweig, *Erziehung zur Demokratie? Amerikanische Besatzungs- und Schulreformpolitik in Deutschland und Japan* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1998), 214.

¹⁶ Katharina Gerund, ‘Reeducation and Reorientation’, in *Historisches Lexikon Bayerns*, 5 Aug. 2020, available at: http://www.historisches-lexikon-bayerns.de/Lexikon/Reeducation_und_Reorientation (last visited 29 Sept. 2022). For a detailed history of the Amerikahäuser see Reinhild Kreis, *Orte für Amerika: Deutsch-Amerikanische Institute und Amerikahäuser in der Bundesrepublik seit den 1960er Jahren* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012).



Figure 1. Civilians watching an airlift plane land during the Berlin Blockade, 1948.

Source: Wikimedia: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Germans-airlift-1948.jpg>. States Air Force Historical Research Agency; Cees Steijger (1991) *A History of the United States Air Force in Europe*. ISBN: 1853100757.

policies began to alleviate the economic situation significantly and to enrich the cultural and socio-political life and thus certainly facilitated expressions of gratitude in descriptions and depictions of US-German relations. Traute Grier, who was sixteen when the Berlin airlift took place, provides a representative example of this popular narrative. She claims that she and her mother were happy to be living in the American sector, especially after their horrible previous experiences with the Russians. Even though they suffered hunger, the – symbolic *and* existential – Allied support during the Berlin blockade as well as the mother’s job at the American barracks helped them to survive (Figure 1).

She mentions the ‘small acts of kindness’ by US soldiers, for example, when one of them unexpectedly gave her a few oranges – ‘[n]ice, juicy, sweet oranges’, as she recalls. Grier, who ultimately married an American, fondly remembers how ‘genuine friendships’ developed between the Allies and Germans.¹⁷ This feeling of gratitude was particularly pronounced among a young postwar generation, but not all or even most Germans actually shared that sentiment in the historical moment.

Within the highly asymmetrical power relations of the occupation, ‘emotive dissonances’ (Arlie Hochschild) certainly occurred for many Germans, with ambivalent feelings towards the United States and the occupation, and it seems safe to assume that less appropriate emotional responses were suppressed, at least in public. The policies and practices of re-education and reorientation required Germans (and Americans) to perform what Arlie Hochschild describes as ‘emotion work’ on different levels – with gratitude becoming the dominant German response to the US occupation

¹⁷ Traute Grier, ‘Berlin Airlift Turns 60: A Firsthand Account of Post-War Berlin’, *Spiegel International*, 26 June 2008, available at <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/berlin-airlift-turns-60-a-firsthand-account-of-post-war-berlin-a-562269.html> (last visited 7 Sept. 2023).

over time. This gradual embrace of gratitude as a preferred emotion concerning the US occupation and the American postwar policies corresponds to some degree with a phenomenon that Erika Doss has observed in US memory culture, where the memorialisation of the Second World War has evolved around gratitude and where '[s]aying "thank you" to the "greatest generation" has obviously become a popular commemorative project'.¹⁸

In the German context, positive images of both the US-occupation zone and the members of the US military were crucial to further a public feeling of gratitude directed towards the United States. According to a 1947 OMGUS survey, 84 per cent of Germans claimed that from their contemporary perspective they would have chosen to live in the American zone in 1945.¹⁹ While, especially in the first years of the occupation, there were attacks on US installations²⁰ and soldiers were not necessarily welcomed by the German population with open arms, members of the US military gained a comparatively good reputation and the image of the generous, friendly, and cool soldiers persists in the transatlantic collective imaginary until today. Doris Ziegenrucker, for example, recalls that the first Americans she met made an 'indelible impression' through their 'generosity, coolness and kindness'.²¹ Especially the trope of the kind African American GI handing out candy or chewing gum to German children has become firmly enshrined in the memory of the postwar years.²² Friendly encounters between soldiers and the German population, especially women and children, helped pre-figure the narrative of a quickly established transatlantic friendship. The seeming absence of explicit forms of anti-black racism among the German population gave way to a narrative of freedom from racist constraints and liberation from segregation that African American soldiers found in former National Socialist Germany of all places. Actors on both sides of the Atlantic could strategically use this discourse: it became both a catalyst for the Civil Rights movement in the United States and an indicator of Germany's break with its National Socialist past and racist ideology.²³

Structural efforts by the United States to rebuild and to support the German population reinforced such a positive image and it could, over time, be easily associated with positive emotions towards the United States. This becomes particularly evident in recollections of the Berlin airlift, as related by Traute Grier above, or by the unbroken iconicity of the CARE package, to be discussed below, or Germans' reactions to the plethora of economic, cultural, and political programmes provided by the Americans. The reputation of US soldiers was also confounded against the hegemonic depictions of their Russian counterparts. National Socialist propaganda had effectively generated fears of both US-American (especially African American) soldiers as well as soldiers of the Red Army that were cast as rapists and representatives of a potentially barbaric masculinity. The stereotype of the black soldier as possible rapist relied on a presumed uncontrolled sexuality and proclivity to violence. It had previously been popularised in the German context with the propaganda surrounding the so-called Black Horror on the Rhine that stoked fears of (sexual) crimes by black soldiers who served in the French Army during the occupation of the Rhineland after the First World War.²⁴ And it was,

¹⁸ Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 189–90.

¹⁹ Werner Sollors, *The Temptation of Despair: Tales of the 1940s* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2014), 4. See also Anna J. Merritt and Richard L. Merritt, eds., *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany: The OMGUS Surveys, 1945–1949* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970).

²⁰ Historian Perry Biddiscombe has compiled a list of 'Attacks on American Troops in Postwar Germany' (2003), which covers the time from 1945–1948 and is available at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/Other/14-F-0091_attacks_on_American_troops_postwar_Germany.pdf (last visited 29 Sept. 2022).

²¹ Doris Ziegenrucker, 'Das Abenteuer Frieden', in *Nachkriegs-Kinder: Kindheit in Deutschland 1945–1950*, ed. Jürgen Kleindienst (Berlin: Zeitgut, 2009), 76–88, 81 (my translation).

²² Katharina Gerund, *Transatlantic Cultural Exchange: African American Women's Art and Activism in West Germany* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 57–8.

²³ *Ibid.*, 59–62; see also Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

²⁴ Maria Höhn, *GIs and Fräuleins: The German-American Encounter in 1950s West Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 89; see also Iris Wigger, *The 'Black Horror on the Rhine': Intersections of Race, Nation, Gender and Class in 1920s Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

according to Peter Martin, quickly exchanged for a new one: that of the somewhat lanky, gum-chewing black soldier who is friendly, helpful, and distributes chocolate and corned beef.²⁵ The stereotyped image of Russian soldiers has persisted into Cold War discourses. As Júlia Garraio has argued, '[t]he propaganda of Adenauer's conservative era made blatant use of the traumatic experience of the rape of German women by members of the Red Army to justify some of its political positions'.²⁶ These contrary attributions laid the groundwork for a rather positive public image of the US military as liberators, and they shaped feeling rules that helped to make gratitude a key emotion to characterise the transatlantic relationship in the long run.

Though the popular retrospective narrative of an emerging transatlantic bond in the postwar years suggests overall positive emotions tied to the United States and its representatives, the affective landscape of postwar Germany was, in fact, conflicted, contested, and complex. It included relief at the end of fighting *and* anxiety about the future, hope *and* what Werner Sollors pointedly termed the 'temptation of despair',²⁷ gratitude *and* resentment towards the occupying forces. In any case, as Sara Ahmed puts it,

emotions *do* things, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments. [...] [T]hey work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.²⁸

Gratitude (and, of course, ingratitude) was part of the emotional repertoire that created different communities in the postwar moment and were negotiated in highly gendered terms on both sides of the Atlantic. Alongside the feminisation of Germany, thankfulness became coded as feminine as German women (and their children) were cast as the primary recipients of US charity and support. As Petra Goedde has argued, Germany in the immediate aftermaths of the Second World War came to be coded as a feminised space due to its demographics and the significant role of women in the postwar years:

[B]y 1944 almost all young and middle-aged men had been conscripted into the army. Women therefore figured prominently in early postwar German society, both as agents of reconstruction [...] and as informal interlocutors with the occupation troops. [...] American soldiers [...] developed a feminized image of German society that contrasted sharply with the aggressive masculine wartime image of the Third Reich. [...] The soldiers' feminization of Germany – born of personal interactions – affected the way they defined their own mission in Germany. Unable to conceive of women as the enemy, they saw themselves increasingly as providers and protectors of the starving, impoverished enemy population.²⁹

Relationships between German women and American soldiers came to symbolise the beginning of the transatlantic partnership on a personal level and in gendered terms, yet, at the same time, they were also a highly emotional, contested issue in postwar debates. They were a source of concern for both parties involved. US soldiers received 'dire warnings [...] about contracting venereal diseases from

²⁵ Peter Martin, '...als wäre nichts geschehen', in *Zwischen Charleston und Stechschritt: Schwarze im Nationalsozialismus*, eds. Christine Alonzo and Peter Martin (Köln: Dölling und Galitz, 2004), 700–33, 701.

²⁶ Júlia Garraio, 'Hordes of Rapists: The Instrumentalization of Sexual Violence in German Cold War Anti-Communist Discourses', *RCCS Annual Review* 5 (2013): par. 5, available at <https://journals.openedition.org/rccsar/476?lang=pt#ftn7> (last accessed 29 Sept. 2022).

²⁷ Sollors, *The Temptation of Despair*.

²⁸ Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text* 79, no. 22.2 (2004): 117–39, 119.

²⁹ Petra Goedde, 'From Villains to Victims: Fraternization and the Feminization of Germany, 1945–1947', *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 1 (1999): 1–20, 2. See also Petra Goedde, *GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender, and Foreign Relations, 1945–1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

German women'.³⁰ In the German context, numerous pejorative terms for women who engaged with soldiers entered into popular parlance, and the *Fräulein* became 'a stereotype of young postwar women who indulged in hedonistic pleasures and amusements associated with infidelity, shame, and loss of honor'.³¹ Contrary to 'white narratives labelling German women as prostitutes seeking black market goods', Nadja Klopprogge explains that from an African American perspective exactly these goods, i.e. nylons, may have made them appear as 'respectable women and possible soldiers' wives'.³² Beyond the stigmatisation, many of the women who entered relationships with American soldiers can also be seen as rebellious in their performance of femininity, as cultural mediators, and as pragmatically securing their own (and their family's) survival. Goedde further explains:

Left without a male breadwinner and with scarce indigenous economic resources, they looked toward American GIs to fill the vacuum, offering companionship and often sex in return for American army rations. In many cases the borderline between romantic involvement and prostitution became blurred. Some women resorted to prostitution to save themselves and their families from starvation. For others it became an additional source of income.³³

Yet, the numerous casual relationships and especially the marriages, or at least marriage applications by US soldiers, retrospectively could be incorporated into a romanticised narrative of a transatlantic love story. They also epitomise the hierarchy between the occupiers and the occupied imagined along hetero-patriarchal logics. The fact that it was women who turned to American GIs for provisions, companionship, and the hope of a better life, either in Germany or in the United States, indicates how the positive feelings towards the United States, including gratitude, evolved along gendered lines. The postwar 'crisis of German masculinity'³⁴ was exacerbated by women taking the lead in rebuilding German society as well as by US soldiers vying for German women and stepping in as providers. With the overall absence of German men in the early phase of the occupation, women (as well as children and the old) were the primary recipients of support. Affective cues and retrospective feeling rules concerning US benevolence and German gratitude were mapped onto the feminised landscape of postwar Germany and its inhabitants.³⁵

The preconditions for the diplomatic and popular discourse of gratitude as a key emotion in transatlantic relations emerge from these postwar constellations. They can be seen (a) on the policy level in the shift from the rather punitive re-education programme to measures labelled reorientation, focused on aid and rebuilding as well as emphasising a rather voluntary engagement with the United States as model democracy in order to help Germans learn how to feel and enact 'democracy'; (b) on the cultural level through the comparatively positive image of the United States, including the members of their military and their culture, that extended beyond the American occupation zones; and (c) on the level of personal encounters that were immediately viewed or could at least be re-coded in a positive light, including many children's experiences of US-American generosity in the form of chocolate and other gifts as well as the often contentious relationships between American soldiers and German women.

This discourse of gratitude, however, also risks or even requires (in order to function and gain plausibility) veiling some of the more controversial and arguably problematic aspects on all three

³⁰ Uta Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 35. See also Annette Brauerhoch, 'Fräuleins' und GIs: *Geschichte und Filmgeschichte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Stroemfeld/Nexus, 2006), Höhn, *GIs and Fräuleins*.

³¹ Gerund, *Transatlantic*, 64.

³² Nadja Klopprogge, 'The Sexualized Landscape of Post-War Germany and the Politics of Cross-Racial Intimacy in the US Zone', in *Transforming Occupation in the Western Zones of Germany: Politics, Everyday Life and Social Interactions, 1945–55*, eds. Camilo Erlichman and Christopher Knowles (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 171–89, 176.

³³ Goedde, 'From Villains to Victims', 8.

³⁴ Brauerhoch, 'Fräuleins', 12.

³⁵ This correlates with the fact that emotion work, in general, tends to be coded as a feminine activity. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 165.

levels. First, the dominant historiography of the smooth transition from re-education to reorientation tends to obscure the many continuities between the two phases and between the postwar era and the time before 1945, as well as the continuing project of democratic (re-)education. The focus on reorientation diverts attention from the stark hierarchies between an occupying force and a German population in the aftermath of an unconditional surrender. Second, the promotion of a positive image of the United States and its representatives not only leaves out racism towards soldiers of colour and the long and complex history of anti-American sentiments in Germany.³⁶ It also does not fully account for the moments of forceful interaction, cruelty, or coercion, and the fact that this impression was created (and maintained) in a context of extreme power imbalances, under the auspices of the emerging Cold War and in contradistinction to the image of the Russian soldiers. Third, the foregrounding of consensual sexual relations between US-American soldiers and German women ignores the fact that against the backdrop of economic hardship and existential needs, as well as the extreme power imbalance, consent is a difficult concept to apply. As Susan Carruthers has argued, '[w]ith their monopoly of armed force and abundant supplies of stuff, occupation soldiers enjoyed easy access to women's bodies'.³⁷ In combination with the strong association of (mass) rape with the Red Army, the emphasis on friendly and romantic relations with members of the US military potentially hides the fact that rape occurred in the US occupation zone as well and, as Miriam Gebhardt has shown, US soldiers even relied on rape as a war tactic, though these cases were neither neatly documented nor prominent in the collective memory of the postwar years.³⁸ There were many other and arguably more significant reasons these crimes were hardly publicly recognised, but they most certainly also did not fit the emerging affective economies of friendship and partnership between (West) Germans and Americans.

Gifts from the United States

Practices of gift giving have been central to the emergence of a discourse of gratitude and provided the basis for iconic tropes and well-known narratives that have become part of the collective memory in Germany. They range from humanitarian aid to everyday small gifts that US-American soldiers could provide, and from the cultural offers of the re-education program to the rather abstract but long-lasting gift of democracy. The gift, as scholars from Marcel Mauss to Jacques Derrida and Pierre Bourdieu have argued, albeit in different ways, constitutes social relations and economies based on reciprocity, moral obligation, and solidarity. Rereading *The Gift* and tracing its genealogy, Grégoire Mallard explains that Mauss's work had been the outcome 'of a decade-long interest in the history of international contractual obligations among sovereign groups (tribes, empires, nations, etc.), expressed when the latter exchange *prestations* (a term difficult to translate into English, which refers to the services given), "apparently freely given, yet coercive and interested".³⁹ The gift as such is always embedded in economic and affective logics. Following Jacques Derrida, a true gift then is an impossibility, for as soon as it is recognised as a gift by a donor and/or recipient it becomes enmeshed in interests, expectations, and economies. He elaborates that '[t]he simple consciousness of the gift right away sends itself back the gratifying image of goodness or generosity, of the giving-being who, knowing itself to be such, recognizes itself in a circular, specular fashion, in a sort of auto-recognition, self-

³⁶ See, for example, Andrei S. Markovits, 'On Anti-Americanism in West Germany', *New German Critique* 34 (1985): 3–27, or Philipp Gassert, 'The Anti-American as Americanizer: Revisiting the Anti-American Century in Germany', *German Politics and Society* 27, no. 1 (2009): 24–38.

³⁷ Susan L. Carruthers, *The Good Occupation: American Soldiers and the Hazards of Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 13.

³⁸ Miriam Gebhardt, *Crimes Unspoken: The Rape of German Women at the End of the Second World War* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

³⁹ Grégoire Mallard, *Gift Exchange: The Transnational History of a Political Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1. See also Jacques Derrida, *The Gift: I. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002); Ilana F. Silber, 'Bourdieu's Gift to Gift Theory: An Unacknowledged Trajectory', *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 2 (2009): 173–90.

approval, and narcissistic gratitude'.⁴⁰ Along these lines, the many American gifts that Germans received in the aftermath of the Second World War may also be conceived of as incentives or rewards. Yet, in the hegemonic discourse of gratitude as it is often used in personal recollections as well as mobilised in emotional diplomacy, the substantial support from the United States is at least implicitly framed as instances of gift-giving – for which gratitude is the appropriate emotional response in the long run and which is constitutive for transatlantic relations.

For instance, the trope of the friendly GI handing chocolate bars and chewing gum to children from his jeep or tank symbolises American generosity – it holds the (sweet) promises of US-American culture (and democracy) and provides a gift and positive experience, which became enshrined in the memories of the postwar generation through constant reiteration and partly, perhaps, because the treats handed out by the soldiers made for a most striking contrast to the realities of the immediate aftermath of war, when hunger, loss, and lack of existential resources were ubiquitous, and the United States still fashioned and understood itself (and was perceived by substantial parts of the German population) as occupier rather than liberator. This account by contemporary witness Joachim Zinram, featured on the website of the US Army, is representative of the shift in German-American relations and emphasises the significance of the small but relevant gifts ('treasures') the US soldiers provided, especially to children:

'It seemed to us that the Americans did not see us as their enemies anymore. The U.S. government helped us rebuild our country', Zinram explained. 'The best memory I have of the Americans back then was when they drove their tanks and Jeeps through the streets of our town. I always heard them long before they got there, and then I stood patiently on the side of the road, waving to them. Many Soldiers stopped their vehicles and gave candy, chocolate and bubble gum to us children. We were in awe – these were like treasures to us.'

His recollection also showcases how a discourse of gratitude in transatlantic relations is upheld and reinforced not only within German discourses but also in the United States, for example within the context of the US military, and how it can be used strategically for different purposes, in this case to bolster the image of the army. In the US context, it also relates to what Carruthers has discussed as 'the "good occupation" of popular memory [that] offers [...] an affirmative vision of postwar altruism', despite its imperialist agenda.⁴¹ Zinram further points out how essential American efforts to fight hunger and poverty in postwar Germany were for his generation:

'It was a very sad time. We had nothing to eat. [...] Every day, I took an empty lunchbox with me to school. During lunch, it was filled with either grits, rice pudding or just chocolate milk, which the school received from the Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe, or CARE, packages from the Americans[.] [...] It meant the world to us – it helped us survive.' The small town he grew up in was close to Bad Kreuznach, where the U.S. Army 8th Infantry Division was stationed. The American Soldiers provided lunch for the schools in the area and made sure that the German children would not starve.⁴²

The connections between existential needs, intimate relations, and emotional bonds also figured prominently in the public discussions on relationships between US soldiers and German women as outlined above, especially regarding their potentially transactional nature and the (perceived) advantages for the women (and their families) in the form of protection, material goods, or mobility.

⁴⁰ Derrida, *The Gift*, 23.

⁴¹ Carruthers, *The Good Occupation*, 308.

⁴² Nadine Bower, "'American candy meant the world to us': Post-war Germany through the Eyes of a German', *U.S. Army* (5 June 2020). https://www.army.mil/article/236213/american_candy_meant_the_world_to_us_post_war_germany_through_the_eyes_of_a_german (last visited 29 Sept. 2022).

The seemingly small, but also luxurious, gifts like the chocolate bar, the cigarette, the pack of coffee, or the nylon stockings gained symbolic significance in the construction of gratitude as a central emotion towards the United States. They could be perceived as signs of good relations between Germans and Americans and of US-American goodwill but were often viewed as an emblem of shame as women who interacted with US soldiers were frequently regarded with scorn and suspicion. While many recipients of US aid – be it through personal interaction or official programmes – may have been grateful for the support, it seems safe to assume that especially US consumer goods could also become objects of envy, of contempt, and of ingratitude. This would hold true particularly from the perspective of returning German men, those Germans who did not receive as much support or who had lost property, opportunities, and relations with the end of the Second World War as well as those Germans who simply did not want to accept charity. The existential aid offered on a structural level and the small gifts in everyday encounters were, of course, not necessarily disinterested acts of kindness – even though they may have at times been quite genuine or were at least perceived and proclaimed as such. They were, though sometimes inadvertently, part and parcel of a political re-education process and the strategic positioning of postwar Germany in a Cold War world order. Gifts, big and small, were received not only within the gendered logics of the postwar encounter between Germans and Americans, but also quite differently along generational lines. Especially for many postwar children, the interactions with US soldiers and American consumer goods and culture were formative, and it is primarily this generation that has safeguarded the recollections and memories of these years and the German-American encounter. As James Tent has argued, '[g]ratitude is a fleeting emotion although the generation that experienced acts of moral and material support after the war retain memories of gratitude for what occurred'.⁴³ Both the material gifts that were often essential to survival in the aftermath of 1945, but sometimes also provided additional treats, as well as the symbolic cultural gifts from America that were received or acquired by many Germans during the US occupation and beyond, can be viewed as part of the overall re-education and reorientation efforts. They were a means to foster amicable relations on the micro-level of personal day-to-day-encounters as well as on a macro-level of structural relief efforts that could be seen as part of an emerging emotional diplomacy that established gratitude as a central emotion in transatlantic relations.

Not only the Red Cross and CARE (Cooperative for American Remittance to Europe) were engaged to '[provide] aid to millions of destitute people, survivors of the Holocaust, hapless refugees and expelled, orphans and widows and a host of other victims of total war. At least fifteen American welfare agencies worked in Germany after the war'.⁴⁴ The iconic CARE package was a highly politicised philanthropic effort of US-American NGOs to alleviate the dire living situation of large parts of the European population and has become itself of a postwar success story. As Philipp Baur has pointed out, the question of food distribution was a highly emotional issue in postwar Germany, but 'the significance of CARE went beyond filling hungry stomachs. Psychologically, the CARE package worked both as trigger and reward for West Germany's democratization and orientation towards the West'.⁴⁵ While the gift of the CARE package affirmed the position of power of the donor, who, for instance, could choose the recipient or designate a specific group or type of recipient, the public relations strategy of CARE included the facilitation of (mutual) personal contact, the promotion of a narrative of friendship, and the elicitation of professions of thankfulness. The packages always contained the following note: 'This CARE package is a gift by an American friend. Your friend would like to hear if you have received the package, and if it is to your liking'.⁴⁶ This note added to the affective power of the package and furthered the idea of an exchange – the recipient is not only supposed to passively receive

⁴³ James Tent, 'Simple Gifts: The American Friends Service Committee and the Establishment of Neighborhood Centers in Post-1945 Germany', *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 2, no. 1, Die Kirchen Europas in der Nachkriegszeit (1989): 64–82, 81.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁵ Philipp Baur, 'From Victim to Partner: CARE and the Portrayal of Postwar Germany', in *Die amerikanische Reeducation-Politik nach 1945: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf 'America's Germany'*, eds. Katharina Gerund and Heike Paul (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 115–40, 116.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

the gift, but also to respond and to potentially engage with the 'friend' who provided the package. The materiality and content of the packages played as much a role as the context for its reception.

In a CARE brochure published to mark its seventieth anniversary, one contemporary witness, Marianne Beckmann from Munich, recalls the arrival of the package, the 'Ami-Packerl' as she calls it:

Father didn't want charity. 'If there is anything that I've held on to, it is my pride', he said. 'Pride or no pride – children, now go to the parish office and get us one of these *Ami-Packerl*', my mother responded when she didn't know what else to do. Each time, these packages were a small miracle for us. They included corned beef, things, which my mother miraculously turned into semolina slices, pancakes, or pasta. Father could not eat any of that, he did not even touch the food. For us, it was pure joy. A widow with nine children lived in our neighborhood. I don't know how they would have survived if they hadn't received CARE packages.⁴⁷

This passage represents the standard CARE narrative, but it also includes the father, his pride, and his refusal to accept the gift from the United States. It indicates the conflicted and contested emotions towards the occupying forces and reveals – somewhat inadvertently – the (failed) emotion work of the recipients and their different perceptions of the gift: as a miracle (the children), a necessity (the mother/the widow), and an affront (the father). While the joyful recollection of the child constitutes the dominant voice of this account (and marks the preferred emotional response), the diverging reactions of other family members cannot completely be contained. They correspond with the crisis of masculinity as it manifested itself in the postwar years and the gendered discourses of gratitude. The mothers pragmatically welcome the charitable gift for the survival and well-being of their respective families, while the father's emotional response stands in his way of accepting the CARE package or enjoying any of its contents. While the father's reaction precludes a sense of gratitude, the emotion can be more readily assigned to the mother (standing in for a feminised postwar Germany) and the female child (representing the postwar generation that has shaped contemporary discourses on the continuing German gratitude for American support after the Second World War). These retrospective emotional assignments correspond to CARE's representations of the German population in its own publications of the postwar years which targeted an American audience. As Baur has shown, not only did CARE rely on an image of the German population that was young and female to project 'an image [...] of great demand for relief' to its potential donors, but it also shifts from an early feminised and infantilised depiction of Germany to re-masculinised images after the end of the occupation.⁴⁸ The focus on existential needs and the suffering of a German population that serves as a background to the affective power and lasting iconicity of the CARE package, on a larger scale, also figures in many stories of the Berlin airlift or the relief efforts of the Marshall Plan. It positions the German population as victims who were liberated by the Allied forces from National Socialism, who were deserving of US charity, and who gratefully received the many American gifts of the postwar era.

While the German victims quickly became partners, as the CARE brochures in line with popular narratives and memories suggests,⁴⁹ this overarching narrative risks, first, obscuring that also many ordinary Germans had been perpetrators, accomplices, and willing followers of the National Socialist regime. Second, with its emphasis on the United States and its representatives as givers and the German population as recipients, it masks not only that US soldiers were an occupying force and as such confiscated and re-appropriated buildings and other properties or even engaged

⁴⁷ The German-language CARE brochure issued on the occasion of the organisation's anniversary and featuring several carefully curated accounts by contemporary witnesses can be accessed online: https://www.care.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Presse/Publikationen/care-zeitzeugenbroschuere-web.pdf (last visited 18 May 2021). The featured quote is my translation. The dominant self-fashioning of CARE with regard to its role in postwar Germany is also evinced in their recent image film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElQyXTrHf5E> (last visited 18 May 2021).

⁴⁸ Baur, 'From Victim to Partner', 132.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

in outright looting,⁵⁰ but it could also be seen as prefiguring the transatlantic relationship that is more of a one-directional affair rather than a mutual exchange. Third, in doing so, it also allows little room for active appropriations as well as ambivalent emotional reactions on the part of the German population that did not revolve around gratitude. Understanding gifts to constitute social relations and to always being embedded in material and affective economies might counter this somewhat simplified dynamic. It further draws attention to the expectations and expressions of gratitude that occur in political rhetoric and are used as a means of emotional diplomacy. Furthermore, and more importantly, the notion of gift-giving as part of an exchange highlights that this discourse of gratitude might also imply a more encompassing agenda for Germany, namely a responsibility to safeguard the achievements of the postwar years, its democratisation and continuing solidarity with the United States.

Conclusion: The Transatlantic Relationship beyond Gratitude?

The dominant narrative of the liberation and successful re-education and democratisation backs up (West) Germany's swift conversion from enemy to trusted partner of the United States. It serves as the backbone for the development of a discourse of gratitude as part of transatlantic emotional diplomacy. Upon closer inspection, German-American relations of the postwar years complicate the notion of gift-giving and the centrality of gratitude that are retrospectively evoked by elite political actors as well as seemingly ordinary citizens, who have lived through that time and whose voices are selected for publication in various venues – from the CARE brochure to the US military's web presence.

Not all re-education and reorientation efforts could be easily turned into success stories. Initiatives such as the attempt to reform German schools failed to garner substantial support among German politicians and other political actors, and the proposed remodelling of the German educational system after the American model never materialised (though changes with regard to the curriculum and the organisational structure within schools were successfully implemented).⁵¹ And signature elements of the American postwar policies, such as the America Houses with their libraries and public events, (educational) films, and youth and exchange programmes, which were well-received and found approval among large parts of the population, were promoted as offers within the context of Cold War cultural diplomacy – implying that they could either voluntarily be taken up or even ignored and rejected outright. This further suggests choice, activity, and to some degree responsibility on the part of the potential recipients.

While gratitude continues to be a powerful means in transatlantic emotional diplomacy, one question that emerges from these observations is how German-American relations could be viewed beyond this conceptualisation that harks back to the (memory of) the postwar years (and beyond the hierarchy that is implied in the United States being the provider and Germany being the thankful recipient of gifts, charity, and support). In 2003, a *New York Times* article reported on the fact that many younger Germans, especially from families resident in the former East Germany, questioned the expectation of gratitude – especially with an eye to the time that has passed since the end of the Second World War (one student called for a 'statute of limitations on gratitude') and considering the destruction that Allied forces, and especially the United States, inflicted on Germany.⁵² It is significant that these students have a connection to historic East Germany. Their reactions shed light on the fact that the discourse I have described and analysed in this article is one that would require further regional

⁵⁰ See, for example, Seth A. Givens, 'Liberating the Germans: The US Army and Looting in Germany during the Second World War', *War in History* 21, no. 1 (2014): 33–54.

⁵¹ See, for example, Heike Paul, 'Abe Meets Alois: Post-1945 Bavarian (Re-)Education', in *German-American Encounters in Bavarian and Beyond, 1945–2015*, eds. Birgit M. Bauridl, Ingrid Gessner, and Udo J. Hebel (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), 67–86, and Dorotyya Ruisz, *Umerziehung durch Englischunterricht? US-amerikanische Reeducation-Politik, neophilologische Orientierungsdebatte und bildungspolitische Umsetzung im nachkriegszeitlichen Bayern (1945–1955)* (Münster: Waxmann, 2014).

⁵² Nina Bernstein, 'The World: Young Germans Ask: Thanks for What?', *The New York Times*, 9 Mar. 2003, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/09/weekinreview/the-world-young-germans-ask-thanks-for-what.html> (last accessed 29 Sept. 2022).

differentiation. With its focus on the policies in the US occupation zone, it gravitates towards those areas of immediate American influence and is in many ways embedded in specifically *West* German narratives of the postwar decades.

Scholars and commentators have also drawn attention to the need for a new narrative beyond the nostalgia for the German-American friendship framed by the Cold War and its reliance on gratitude. Historian Jacob Eder, for instance, states with reference to the celebration of the Berlin airlift:

The display of gratitude for the – admittedly remarkable – achievement of the Airlift is a not so subtle reminder of the times when Germany was still a priority for United States foreign policy. Herein lies the most significant problem of German Cold War nostalgia: it indicates a failure to acknowledge that not only U.S. political priorities, but also U.S. society as a whole have changed dramatically over the past decades.⁵³

His assessment is from 2018 and was made in the context of the *Deutschlandjahr USA*. With the recent invocations of the Second World War and the reinvigoration of Cold War logics in diplomacy, journalism and (public) scholarship on Russia's war on Ukraine, it seems that these discourses may continue to shape transatlantic relations and emotional diplomacy. However, accounts that hint at a different conceptualisation can easily be found, even and maybe especially on the level of personal recollections and within the existing scholarship on the postwar years. German Americanist Winfried Fluck, for example, has offered the following anecdote that at first glance seems to fit well with the numerous accounts of postwar children's fascination with US culture that potentially cast it as a gift, if not a treasure or miracle:

My first encounter with American popular culture took place in bombed-out Berlin in 1949. I was five years old at the time. Among our neighbors was a woman who managed to support herself by entertaining American GIs on the weekends. On Saturday mornings, she would call my friend and me up to her apartment and ask us to do her grocery shopping for the weekend. Then, upon our return, she would reward us with chewing gum and Superman comics [...]. I particularly remember the strong presence of an intense blue in Superman's dress as well as in the sky through which he moved, a blue that gained an almost magical quality in our dreary, colorless surroundings.⁵⁴

In contrast to other such recollections, Fluck uses this personal experience as a springboard to examine self-Americanisation and active appropriation of US culture in the postwar context; he speaks of a reward that he and his friend receive rather than a gift. What is more, it is mediated through the German woman, who has access to American culture via her good relations to US soldiers. Fluck does not frame the items of American popular and consumer culture as a gift but as something he earns, but the positive image of the United States is left intact as the comics and gum are still markers of hope, magic, and promises of a better future associated with the United States.

On a systemic rather than an individual level, but with a similar emphasis on Germans' active role in not only appropriating US culture but also implementing democracy, David Miles has argued:

While the 'gift' of democracy may have initially stemmed from the destruction of Nazi power by the Allies at the end of World War II, its longevity depended on the success of the Federal

⁵³ Jacob Eder, 'Getting Over the Cold War: Why German-American Relations Need a New Narrative', *AICGS*, 21 Dec. 2018, available at <https://www.aicgs.org/2018/12/getting-over-the-cold-war-why-german-american-relations-need-a-new-narrative/> (last accessed 29 Sept. 2022).

⁵⁴ Winfried Fluck, 'California Blue: Americanization as Self-Americanization', in *Americanization and Anti-Americanism: The German Encounter with American Culture after 1945*, ed. Alexander Stephan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 221–37, 221.

Republic's constitutional institutions in inculcating a respect for democracy and constitutionalism among the German people.⁵⁵

The success story of US-American re-education efforts has its pitfalls and failure – it easily conceals, for example, the half-hearted denazification of several institutions or the continuation of antisemitism and racism in Germany. Yet, it reminds us that democratisation is not handed out as a gift but is an ongoing process that requires constant civic engagement. The emphasis on *gratitude* as central to the postwar moment and to transatlantic relations in the long run may serve diplomatic purposes and further establish feeling rules towards the historical moment as well as the transatlantic partnership. It, however, just as easily may distract from the more complex affective landscape that shaped German-American exchanges after the end of the Second World War and may redirect the moral obligation from taking responsibility for the crimes and atrocities committed under fascist rule and accounting for their lingering consequences to showing gratitude towards the liberators.

Acknowledgements. My work on this article has been part of a research project at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany) on 'Reeducation Revisited: Transnationale und kulturvergleichende Perspektiven auf die Nachkriegszeit in den USA, Japan und Deutschland', which is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – Project Number: 407542657.

⁵⁵ David Miles, *Democracy, the Courts, and the Liberal State: A Comparative Analysis of American and German Constitutionalism* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 127.

Cite this article: Gerund K (2024). Liberation, Re-Education, Democratisation: The Politics of Gratitude in German-American Relations after 1945. *Contemporary European History* 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777324000055>