

Hitler's Long Shadow: Donald Trump and Angela Merkel

Written by Klaus Larres

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KLAUS LARRES, FEB 8 2017

American and Russian officials needed two hours to release a joint press statement after the first phone conversation between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin on January 28. It took American and German officials more than twice this time to work out a statement after the phone communication between the US President and the German Chancellor on the same day. This was one of several indications that the 45-minute talk between Trump and Merkel was actually much more challenging for Trump than his talk with the Russian autocrat. It may also have been much less pleasant and flattering.

There was perhaps an edge to the conversation that Trump did not appreciate. German policymakers, including the German Chancellor, feel that they are called upon to educate the new nationalist American President who does not seem to have much sympathy or understanding for western democratic values. For the German public and German politicians it is difficult not to look back to January 1933 when Hitler took power in Berlin. He charmed and bullied the electorate with outrageous nationalist and racist promises to make Germany great again and put Germany and the Germans first [1]. Trump did not refer to the at least six million Jews who perished at the hand of the Nazis when he issued a statement to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, 2017. This confirmed a rather uneasy feeling among most Germans regarding the strange convictions and worldviews held by Donald Trump and the people around him. A few days later, of course, this unease and concern was confirmed by Trump's executive order 13769 of January 27 that limits immigration from seven Muslim countries, suspends all refugee admission for four months and bars all refugees from Syria indefinitely. Before a court order temporarily halted the President's executive order two days later, apparently at least 60.000 visas were revoked that had been issued to citizens of these countries.

Obviously Trump is no Hitler and America's democratic institutions are much more formidable than the weakened democratic set-up of the Weimar Republic. Tension and mutual incomprehension between the US President and the German Chancellor are unfortunate, however [2]. They may well have serious consequences for the western world and perhaps even for global stability and peace. For better or worse, the US remains the world's leading economic power. The country also has by far the globe's most formidable military, both in terms of its conventional and nuclear arsenal and Washington's war-fighting expertise and experience. Despite Germany having the world's fourth strongest economy, by comparison the German Chancellor and her country are much less important.

Still, due to recent developments in the context of the Euro crisis and the renewed rise of the ugly face of nationalism and racism in many EU countries, Angela Merkel has been catapulted to being perhaps the last hope for the survival of liberal democracy and democratic stability on the European continent. The Greek state and many Italian banks continue to be highly overleveraged and could collapse any time soon. Both Spain and post-Brexit UK are faced with serious threats to their national unity, if respectively Catalonia and Scotland succeed in their strivings for independence. There are frequent disconcerting flashes of violence and unrest in the Balkans. Increasingly autocratic governments in Hungary, Poland and also in the Czech Republic undermine the values Europe has been based on for the last 70 years. The French presidential election may well result in a surprise victory for Marine Le Pen, a neo-Nazi politician, whose professed goal is to withdraw France from the EU. This would probably mean the end of the West as we know it.

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Bilateral relations between the U.S. President and the German Chancellor thus matter a lot, perhaps much more than at any time since the end of World War II. For Trump is a 'people person,' he recently told the visiting British Prime Minister. Good relations with a particular government appear to depend on whether or not Trump hits it off with the leader of that country. The world in the Trump era is witnessing the return of personal power politics. And in this context Angela Merkel and the Germans face an uphill task.

Trump and Merkel Talk on the Phone

The phone conversation between the two politicians on January 28, 2017, however, was pleasant enough at first. The tension and mutual recriminations built up during the US election campaign appeared to be forgotten. Trump, after all, has a certain boyish-flirtatious charm if he puts his mind to it and Merkel is also quite capable of employing well-honed social skills. The long-serving German Chancellor, in office since 2005, and the new President were able to agree on some matters, such as the importance of further deepening 'the already excellent bilateral relations in the coming years.' Trump was happy to accept an invitation to attend the G-20 summit in Hamburg in July. He expressed the hope that he would 'soon' have the pleasure of welcoming the German leader in Washington. Despite Trump referring to NATO as "obsolete" only a few weeks ago, both politicians emphasized the "fundamental significance" of the NATO alliance for transatlantic relations and the fight against international terrorism. Already in his recent press conference with British Prime Minister May the President had confirmed that he was "100% behind NATO."

Merkel was ready to compromise on some issues as she had indicated in the last few weeks. Much to Trump's delight the two of them agreed on the necessity of making new "investments in the military capabilities" of the alliance. They also emphasized the importance of "a fair contribution of all allies to collective security." Trump's push to get all NATO members to actually dedicate two per cent of their GNP to the alliance found Merkel's approval. This is a self-mandated commitment that has long been accepted in principle by all NATO members. Despite raising its contribution recently, Berlin itself only manages to dedicate just about 1.2 per cent of the country's GNP to defense but the Germans intend to invest more in the future. The two leaders talked about the situation in the Middle East and in North Africa. They also discussed relations with Russia and the Ukraine question. Whether or not the lifting of the sanctions on Russia was talked about remained unclear initially.

Yet a day later Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert, said that EU-sanctions on Russia had indeed been discussed. Soon he also made clear that Merkel had talked to Trump about his executive order of January 27 restricting travel from seven Muslim-majority countries. "The chancellor regrets the US government's entry ban against refugees and the citizens of certain countries," her spokesman announced.

It appears that Merkel lectured Trump in no uncertain terms about her firm conviction "that the necessary decisive battle against terrorism does not justify a general suspicion against people of a certain origin or a certain religion." Merkel explained to the freshman President that "the Geneva refugee convention requires the international community to take in war refugees on humanitarian grounds. All signatory states have this obligation." This seemed to be quite new to Trump who had only vaguely heard about the Geneva Convention. The new President, who has a rather delicate ego, was not impressed by Merkel's admonition, however. In fact, Trump has come to view Merkel with suspicion, if not disdain.

During the past year on occasion Trump praised Merkel as being "a really great world leader." But he also referred to her refugee policy as "a total disaster," stating that she was "ruining Germany" and had made a "catastrophic mistake" with her policy. "What Merkel did to Germany is a shame, it's a sad, sad shame," Trump pronounced in March 2016. Merkel's statement in the wake of his surprising election victory did not go down well with Trump either. Extraordinarily, she not only congratulated him on his election victory but also indicated that Germany's relations with her European partners were "deeper" than those with the United States. Not least, she also issued a set of conditions for cooperating with Trump's government, conditions that ran counter to many of the pronouncements he had made during the election campaign.

"Germany and America are bound by common values – democracy, freedom as well as respect for the rule of law and the dignity of each and every person, regardless of their origin, skin color, religion, gender, sexual orientation or

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political views," her statement read. "It is based on these values," the Chancellor continued, "that I wish to offer close cooperation, both with me personally and between our countries' governments." Thus, it seemed, no cooperation was possible if these values were not respected by the new President. Still, she continued more diplomatically, "partnership with the United States is and will remain a keystone of German foreign policy so that we can tackle the great challenges of our time."

Other German politicians were less polite. Defense minister von der Leyen referred to Trump's victory as a "heavy shock" and the German Justice Minister thought that "the world won't end, it just keeps getting crazier." Sigmar Gabriel, the outspoken former Economics minister, who in late January 2017 was appointed Germany's new foreign minister, said at the time that Trump was "the trailblazer of a new authoritarian and chauvinist international movement ... They want a rollback to the bad old times." Gregor Gysi, the formidable former leader of the Left party, put it particularly succinctly when he told German radio that Trump was "a simple soul, not particularly well-educated, he's coarse." Gysi feared that "this will give right-wing populism a new boost in Europe."

Trump and Germany's Foreign Policy Establishment

One thing is certain: Donald Trump's electoral victory has shaken the German foreign policy establishment. At first it was hoped in Berlin that the President-elect would stop his rather simplistic pronouncements and move away from his divisive election campaign toward the political center. Trump, it was expected, would use the transition period to transform himself into a much more mature and respectful statesman (and perhaps even delete his twitter account). Yet, this has not happened. By now German politicians have given up hope that Trump will ever develop into a responsible politician. It seems that the world will have to come to terms with a rather impulsive, irrational, quite vain and frequently ill-informed and ill-advised President.

German foreign policy experts are also deeply upset about Trump's inner circle. While there is great confidence that a good working relationship can be established with, for instance, the new secretaries of defense and state, the new National Security Advisor, General Michael Flynn, is a very different matter. He is regarded as "durchgeknallt" (off the wall) and considered to be rather a loose cannon. Berlin is also deeply worried about some of Trump's advisers who have a strong ideological bent. Most concern exists about the right-wing and anti-Semitic Stephen Bannon, whom Trump inexplicably even made a full member of his National Security Council's Principals Committee. The only 31-year old Stephen Miller is another senior advisor who is obsessed with the dangers accruing from Islamic jihad. He and Bannon wrote most of Trump's inauguration speech and the controversial executive order on immigration. Kellyanne Conway, who coined the phrase "alternative facts," is also seen as a little unhinged. And Jared Kushner, the President's unpredictable 35-year old son in law, who during the transition period was meant to liaise with both Israel and Germany, remains a dark horse. None of them, moreover, is graced with any foreign policy experience. And so far it is quite impossible to judge how strong their influence on Donald Trump actually is.

The German foreign policy establishment is scared of the possible disastrous consequences of the Trump presidency regarding intra-western relations and global stability and peace. In particular Trump's trade policy, his reset of relations with Russia, his attitude toward the EU and his potentially difficult relations with China deeply worry Berlin (as well as many other EU states)[3]. EU Council president Donald Tusk, a former Polish Prime Minister, even said recently that for him a newly aggressive China, Putin's Russia, ISIS and Donald Trump were the greatest external threats to the survival of the EU.

Trade policy: in Berlin there is a great deal of concern regarding the new President's protectionist trade policy which envisages the imposition of import tariffs as high as 35 per cent on, for instance, car manufacturers who don't produce their cars in the US but in cheap-labor countries. While all of Germany's luxury car manufacturers such as BMW and Mercedes Benz as well as Volkswagen have factories on American soil, they also produce a great number of their vehicles in Mexico for export to the U.S. BMW and Daimler are in the process of building new factories in Mexico and Audi completed a brand new one last year. Although China has become a much more important market for German car companies, the US market remains vital. It is Germany's second largest car market. In 2016 approximately 1.3 million German cars were sold in the U.S. The threatened imposition of high tariffs on German cars imported from Mexico would probably make them rather uncompetitive in the U.S.

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European integration: Trump's public support of Brexit which he referred to as "fantastic," his repeated public praise about Britain re-gaining its independence and its borders as well as his expectation that other countries will follow the British example has also profoundly upset German policy makers[4]. Transatlantic relations were often influenced by economic rivalry and political difficulties. Yet, from Truman and Eisenhower to Obama, all U.S. administrations have strongly supported the European integration process. The only exception was the lukewarm attitude for economic reasons of the Nixon administration. But even Nixon fully realized how important for stability and peace (and economic well-being) on the continent the European project was.

Russia: The new President's praise for Russian autocrat Putin has also led to much anger in Europe. Moscow not only meddled in the American election process but it is feared that Putin's propaganda machine is also already actively interfering in the election campaigns in France and Germany. Putin's aim clearly is to bring havoc and instability to Europe. Trump's strange fascination for the strongman in the Kremlin is greatly resented in Berlin. No one really understands it. In March 2014 Moscow, after all, violently annexed Crimea, an integral part of sovereign Ukraine, and Russian soldiers clandestinely invaded eastern Ukraine, thus attempting to destabilize the entire country.

Putin's threatening behavior toward the Baltic States and occasionally Finland and Sweden is also disconcerting. In the final days of the Obama administration it led to the stationing of NATO troops in Poland, close to the Russian border. Whether President Trump supports this policy is an open question. The barbaric bombing campaigns of the Russian air force on Aleppo and elsewhere in war-torn Syria on the side of Iran and President Assad has turned the German public and the German establishment abruptly against Putin, despite long-standing economic and cultural links between the two countries. Shortly before his inauguration Trump, however, indicated that he is considering scrapping the sanctions imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea. He apparently intends to do this even before Russia has fully implemented the Minsk II agreement that is meant to bring peace and stability back to Ukraine. The Merkel government is strongly opposed to lifting sanctions without obtaining anything fundamental in return. At times, however, the Trump administration has also indicated that it wants to keep the sanctions until Putin has shown some restraint in Ukraine. America's allies will watch nervously when the expected summit between Trump and Putin takes place sometime in the near future[5].

China: Trump's robust attitude toward China has also scared most German politicians. German policymakers, not least new Foreign Minister Gabriel agree, that China's 'investment binge' in the West, the lack of reciprocity in western companies' market access to China, intellectual property rights problems, 'market economic status' disputes, and many other challenges need to be addressed. Trump's inflammatory talk about the imposition of a 45 per cent tariff on Chinese exports and his unfounded allegation of Chinese currency manipulation worry the much cooler heads in Berlin[6].

Likewise, attacking China's "core interests" by questioning the western world's "one-China policy," in place since the 1970s, and perhaps supporting the independence of Taiwan makes little sense to the stability-conscious German politicians. Trump and his Secretary of State Tillerson have also threatened to perhaps impose a naval blockade to prevent Chinese access to the rocks and islands in the South China sea. This is potentially highly dangerous and defeats common sense. The new President has also repeatedly complained about China not doing more to restrain North Korea's nuclear ambitions and Pyongyang's intention to develop an intercontinental strategic missile that could reach the American west coast.

There are many issues that need to be discussed and resolved in American and German relations with China, but this needs to be done in much more subtle ways. Mutual talks and consultations rather than unnecessarily robust rhetoric appears to be necessary. After only a matter of weeks, there is very little confidence left in Berlin that the Trump administration is competent enough to deal with the globe's most pressing problems in a reasonable and sensible way. Before her press conference with Ukrainian President Poroshenko on January 30 the German Chancellor once again referred to Trump's executive order on mostly Muslim immigration to the US as unacceptable.

A day later, during a visit to Stockholm, Merkel sharply rejected Trump economic advisor Peter Navarro's accusation in the *Financial Times* that Germany was unfairly benefitting from a "grossly undervalued" euro. He claimed that

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Germany kept the euro artificially weak in order to obtain an export advantage and thus exploit both its EU partners and the U.S. He also said that this German policy had been the main hurdle between the TTIP negotiations between the EU and the US which were now effectively dead. Already during the election campaign Trump had accused China of manipulating its currency to obtain trade advantages. The administration is now making similar accusations against Germany (and also Japan) though the phrase 'currency manipulation' has not been employed yet, possibly because this would have certain legal implications. But the President recently called Europe a "vehicle for Germany" and does not seem to mind antagonizing EU leaders and the German Chancellor in particular.

These are worrying developments. Already the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Asian TPP (the Trans-Pacific Partnership), Washington's desire to re-open NAFTA negotiations with Mexico and Canada and various remarks by the new President have made clear that Trump has turned against multilateral free trade arrangements in favor of bilateral deals where US power and influence can dominate more easily. Speaking in Stockholm Merkel defended Germany by saying that the European Central Bank was totally independent and did not take instructions from national governments. Indeed the German government has been very critical of the European Central Bank's bond buying program that has weakened the common currency. However, the large German trade surplus with the US and much of the Euro zone has been controversial. Berlin, some analysts have concluded, ought to rebalance its economy by stimulating domestic consumption and embarking on a domestic investment program. There is indeed some wisdom in these calls.

Still Navarro's attempt to drive a wedge among the EU countries is a disconcerting development. This only used to be Russia and China's policy; the Trump administration seems to have jumped on board for purely nationalist economic reasons. Trump intends to dismantle multilateral economic globalization in favor of bilateralism. Navarro, who also is in favor of a 20 per cent import tax plan that he believes would pay for the Wall with Mexico, explained in his *FT* article that the new US administration thought it best to unwind and repatriate the international supply chains that all global multinational companies require. "We need to manufacture those components in a robust domestic supply chain that will spur job and wage growth" in the U.S., he outlined. For Germany, one of the world's most globally integrated economies, and its strong export industry such a nationalist American approach would be disastrous. Thus further German-American conflicts may be just round the corner.

Perhaps this was one reason why new German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, the former Economics minister, headed to Washington after only a few days in the job to get to know his new US counterpart Rex Tillerson. While it was too early for substantive talks (it was Tillerson's very first day as Secretary of State), displaying a certain eagerness to work and cooperate with the new administration could do no harm Gabriel may have reasoned.

Where Do We Go from Here?

German-American relations remain crucial for the stability, security and well-being of Europe. They also remain vital for America. Both within the EU and NATO, Germany is one of America's most important, economically strongest and most stable allies. It is crucial therefore that the US President, after all still the leader of the 'free world,' and the German Chancellor get their act together. Trump needs to overcome his suspicion and mistrust of Angela Merkel. The German Chancellor needs to overcome Hitler's long shadow. She already realizes of course that despite all his many political and personal flaws and right-wing beliefs, engagement with Donald Trump and his administration is essential. The U.S. and united Germany are the leaders of the West. Essentially there is no one else who has the capability to take over in an ever more complex and dangerous world. Both leaders should live up to that awesome responsibility and try to get on with each other – for the sake of all of us.

It may be wishful thinking but perhaps Donald Trump and his advisers will step back a little from a policy that is intensely preoccupied with national sovereignty issues and protectionist economic policy concerns. Perhaps they will begin to realize that multilateral international cooperation, including European integration, are actually advantageous to the U.S. and greatly beneficial for American well-being and security. Angela Merkel's forthcoming visit to Washington would be a good opportunity to start talking about these issues in an open-minded way. In fact, like it or not, in a tumultuous and volatile world, the U.S. and Germany need each other and ought to once again closely cooperate with each other.

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Notes

[1] See Volker Ulrich, *Hitler: Ascent, 1889-1939* (New York: Knopf, 2016)

[2] For an article on the "mutual incomprehension" between the US and Germany over the Iraq war of 2002, see Klaus Larres, "Mutual Incomprehension? U.S.-German Value Gaps over Iraq and beyond", *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No.2 (spring, 2003), 23-42.

[3] See also Klaus Larres, "Donald Trump's Foreign Policy: what do we know, what can we expect?" *In Depth Newsletter*, University of Nicosia, Cyprus, Vol.13/6 (December 2016)

[4] For an excellent recent overview of the European integration process, see Winfried Loth, *Building Europe: A History of European Unification* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter/Oldenbourg, 2015).

[5] For a biography that helps to understand Putin's personality and worldview, see the outstanding book by Steven Lee Meyers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Vintage, 2016).

[6] See also Klaus Larres, "China and Germany: The Honeymoon is Over", *The Diplomat* (16 November, 2016)

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