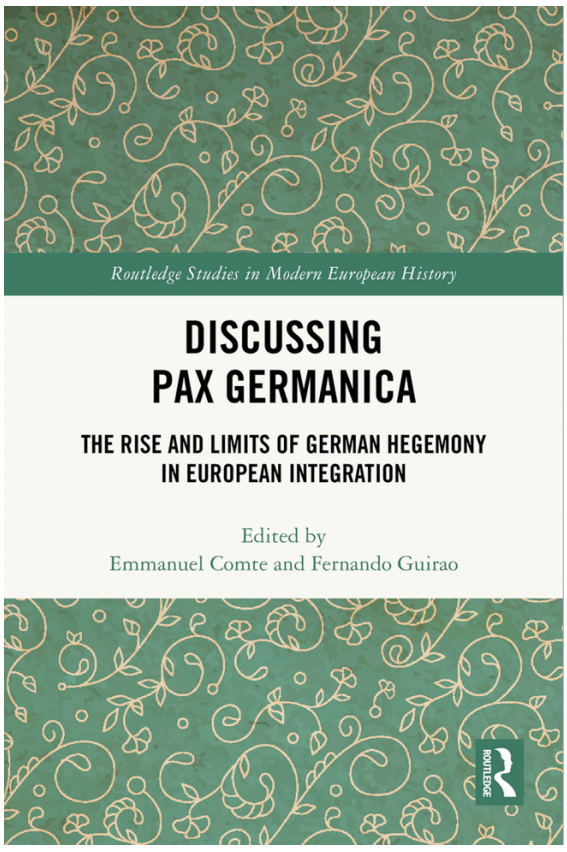
States and Migration: The Human Movement Podcast
Episode #20 ‘Pax Germanica and Human Movement in Europe’
Enhanced transcript
By Emmanuel Comte

Abstract: This episode of *States and Migration* delves into *Discussing Pax Germanica*, a new volume that reinterprets European integration through the lens of German influence. Dr. Emmanuel Comte presents the central argument discussed in the book: Germany’s historical legacies and political clout have profoundly shaped the structures of the European Union, particularly its approach to mobility and sovereignty. A highlight is Caroline de Gruyter’s chapter, which draws striking parallels between the Habsburg Empire and today’s EU, underscoring the dangers of geopolitical overreach in both political systems. The episode concludes with a call to rethink European security in light of Europe’s unique historical identity.

Introduction

Thank you very much, Hugo, and many thanks to the Centre for Geopolitics in Cambridge for hosting this event. We are truly honoured to present this book to you and your audience today.



Overview of the book

This volume is fairly recent and centres on the role of Germany in European integration. To explore this question, we brought together a number of scholars and one prominent policymaker. The book captures a diversity of views on Germany's influence in European affairs.

The contributions are organised into four parts, each representing a distinct perspective.

The first group of chapters highlights the long durée of German influence over European affairs. These contributions draw parallels between German history and the modern European Union, emphasising the deep continuities across centuries. They demonstrate how German and European histories have been intertwined for over a millennium.

The second group focuses more specifically on the history of European integration, underlining Germany's prominent role in shaping this process. My own chapter argues that one cannot fully understand European integration without placing Germany at the centre. Germany's particular historical predicament gave rise to the European Union as we know it. Its resources and political traditions helped shape the Union's key features—namely, the common market, the European legal focus, and a multi-layered system of sovereignty.

At the centre of the volume, we are privileged to include a testimony from Mr. Herman Van Rompuy, who honours us with his presence today. He shares his experience during the Eurozone crisis and other key moments of his tenure as the first permanent President of the European Council.

The third group of contributions explores the limitations of German influence—particularly in military affairs, at the end of the Cold War, and in more recent monetary matters. Fernando Guirao will elaborate further on his own contribution in this section.

The final part of the book addresses the most recent developments, including energy policy, the aftermath of the Euro crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. These chapters generally suggest that Germany's role in European integration is now in decline.

Announcements

I encourage everyone in the audience to read the book to gain a deeper understanding of the various dimensions of German influence in Europe. We also have some good news: the book is available from Routledge in hard copy and eBook formats—and now, as an audiobook.

You can find the audiobook on my website, emmanuel-comte.eu. It is narrated in a warm and articulate British voice, and I highly recommend the experience.

Additionally, I offer an online course on Pax Germanica for those interested. The enrolment deadline is the 18th of August, and further details are also available on my website.

Once again, thank you to the organisers for inviting us, and to all of you in the audience for being with us today.

Response to Caroline de Gruyter

I would like to comment on two points raised by Caroline. I believe Caroline's chapter is one of the strongest in the book. If there is one chapter to remember, it should be hers, as it brings together many of the themes explored throughout the volume.

The Habsburg Empire was historically central to the German world, even though it became disconnected from the idea of Germany. There are many parallels with the European Union, illustrating the significant influence of Germany in European integration.

Another crucial point made by Caroline is that World War I destroyed the Habsburg Empire. Caroline also noted that the current situation is extremely dangerous. After reading her contribution before this seminar, I, too, found it impossible not to draw a parallel.

She demonstrates in her chapter that the Habsburgs were generally averse to war, with the notable exception of World War I—a conflict that ultimately hastened the empire's demise. That is why the current situation is so dangerous. The European Union must not misrepresent itself but rather understand its nature.

Specifically, if the EU pursues an overly aggressive stance towards Russia, it risks repeating history. Just as the Habsburg Empire could not tolerate offensive behaviour directed at Russia—even though Russia was not a decisive factor in its eventual collapse—the EU must carefully evaluate its actions.

Response to Brendan Simms

The question asked is whether Germany's relationship with Europe has been defined more by demography or by geopolitics. The longstanding question—what is Germany?—served as the starting point in Caroline's earlier discussion. It is interesting to consider that German history is deeply intertwined with the idea that Germans see themselves not as an isolated unit, but as an integral part of the broader continent. Whether oriented toward Central and Eastern Europe, the South, or elsewhere, German emigration in Europe has been a constant theme in German history—a point that perhaps should have been further emphasized in the book.

Subsequently, geopolitics manifested in the form of aggressive states on Germany's periphery, driving the centralization of power within the country. Both factors are important. Ultimately, Germany is better served when its relationship with Europe is defined by demography rather than by geopolitics.

The EU in the context of the war in Ukraine and the Trump presidency

This book is important not only because Germany is a key player in Europe and the European Union, but also because it demonstrates that many of the EU's structures are deeply influenced by German history. I encourage the public to read the book and form their own opinions about the true nature of the European Union. While many aspects of the EU can be debated, ultimately history asserts itself, and the Union cannot transform arbitrarily at any given moment.

By understanding the historical context of both the European Union and the continent, we recognize that the scope for maneuver is limited. Numerous parallels in European history reveal that when an aggressive neighbor challenges Europe's borders, a centralizing response often follows. This narrative encapsulates the continent's history, as exemplified by a recent vote in the Dutch Parliament mentioned earlier by Caroline. The Dutch were the first to depart from the Empire during a period marked by centralization efforts in response to external aggression, which underscores the real risk of disintegration.

I recommend reading the book to form your own conclusions on these debates. The enduring argument presented is that the European Union has always navigated a narrow path—and that any further attempts at centralization may trigger centrifugal forces.

It is increasingly clear to German leaders that the costs of relying on U.S. security guarantees are rising significantly. This is not only due to Washington's demands for greater European defense spending, but also because, across a range of areas, the U.S. is becoming a more expensive and complex partner for European security.

Germany has long been committed to the American security umbrella, primarily because it never seriously considered the French nuclear deterrent as a viable alternative. The U.S. guarantee was always perceived as far more credible than anything France could offer.

As for the idea that the European Union needs NATO, that remains an open question. Historically, European integration has always taken place within the framework of NATO. However, I see no compelling reason why NATO must be deemed indispensable.

We may, therefore, be moving toward a more European-centered defense system. Such a development is entirely feasible, and Germany could play a key role in shaping it.

This need extends beyond the Trump presidency. Let us be honest: tensions and uncertainties in the transatlantic relationship began to intensify even before that. There is now a clear need for a new European security concept—one that is tailored to Europe itself.

This is why the book we are discussing is so important. In order to design an effective European security framework, we must begin by understanding what Europe actually is. We cannot simply impose a U.S. model or even a national model onto the EU. A genuinely European security concept must be developed, grounded in Europe's unique characteristics and needs.

In this sense, the book contributes meaningfully to the broader reflection on how to build a security system that is truly tailored to Europe.