Since 1945, three leading traditions have fought for primacy in the theory and practice of US foreign policy: the liberal internationalist, the realist, and the neoconservative. Liberals and realists, so the usual story goes, disagree on the fundamental questions of the relationship of law, morality and power in international politics. Where the liberals are said to be principled multilateralists and earnest supporters of human rights, the realists are said to stick to the austere and amoral calculation of whether actions abroad are in “the national interest.” But the real history is much more complicated. In the postwar era, 1945-1989, US realists and liberal internationalists had much more in common than is usually portrayed. Liberal internationalists were neither consistently liberal nor truly internationalist. They were one face of American primacy in the international system. Realism, sometimes associated with the global balancing of the US, Soviet and Chinese interests by Henry Kissinger, is often thought to have originated in the late 19th century German tradition of Realpolitik, and its master practitioner Bismarck. In this course we explore the myths that have grown up around liberal internationalism, realism, and the relationship between US history and German history that nurtured both sets of ideas.

The true story of foreign policy realism is one of a century of transatlantic exchange of ideas, from the US to Germany and back again. The notion that Germany’s modern history followed a deviant path, resulting as it did in the Third Reich, and the US was an exceptional advocate of democracy and fair play in international relations cannot sustain scrutiny. German emigres like Kissinger and Hans Morgenthau played an outsized role in reshaping US foreign policy in a “realist” manner after 1945, but these German emigres did not bring something foreign to America. They returned something to America that had been forged in transatlantic exchanges of the previous century. Beginning in the late 19th century, Germans and Americans alike agreed on many fundamentals about the pursuit of national interests in the international system. This course examines how realist “truths” that accurately described late 19th century imperial competition, became so prestigious and convincing for modern thinkers and politicians in the West in the 20th century. It argues that this prestige and deference is largely undeserved. Realism lives on as tired cliches and shopworn truths, like light emitted from a distant, dead star. Realism was not always realistic. This course explores how and why a transatlantic realist tradition was built, how it evolved in the face of criticism and changing political circumstances, the difference between its orthodox and dissenting faces, and its legacy today.

Required Texts:
Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (selection, in PDF)

**Week 1: Introducing Realism and Realpolitik: History of a German-American Idea, from Bismarck to Kissinger**

Introduces the contested meanings of the terms “realist” and “Realpolitik,” and the historical research that has traced their evolution. Notes that the American realist tradition is usually understood as a mere offshoot of Bismarck’s nineteenth-century philosophy of balancing state powers through alliances. The lecture explains that realism differs from Realpolitik, however, because while Realpolitik emphasizes a balance of power, Atlantic realism initially aimed at primacy in interstate competition and a Social Darwinian view of a struggle for territory, markets, and “world power.” It expresses skepticism about this tradition, and contrasts this “orthodox realism” with a dissenting transatlantic tradition, the “realism of prudence” and restraint.

*Readings due*: None.
*Optional reading*: David Milne, *Worldmaking*, Ch. 7: “Metternich Redux: Henry Kissinger” (pp. 326-386)

**Week 2: Woodrow Wilson and Carl Schmitt: The So-Called Idealist and the Realist**

For his statement of US war aims in WWI, and his plans for a League of Nations, President Wilson is today usually characterized as a “liberal idealist” or “internationalist” about world politics. In this lecture, we explore the limits of Wilson’s liberalism and the myths that Wilson, and the League, were pie-in-the-sky “ideals” untethered from the reality of power politics. In fact, Wilson combined Realpolitik with Protestant faith in progress and American exceptionalism. Students are introduced to the mercurial political thinker Carl Schmitt, the acerbic German critic of the post-WWI settlement, the League, and Wilson. His famous statements, such as “sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” and “he who invokes humanity wants to cheat,” are situated in the political context of 1920s and 1930s Germany. Joining the Nazi Party, Schmitt became the Party’s chief legal theorist and preached a “Germanic Monroe Doctrine,” i.e., German hegemony in Europe. Emphasizes the intertwining of German and American history in the interwar years.


**Week 3: Continentalism, Neutrality and the Rise of Fascism: Charles Beard, Lindbergh, and Franklin Roosevelt**
In 1940, the America First Committee, with celebrity aviator Charles Lindbergh as its leader, urged the US to stay neutral in the war that was raging between the Third Reich and Western Europe. The America Firsters are remembered as fascist sympathizers or foolish “isolationists.” In fact, they were “continentalists,” who had no inhibitions about intervening militarily in the Western hemisphere. The AFC was infiltrated by German spies and corrupted by Nazi influence from abroad. But the AFC also included socialists, pacifists, and respected figures like Charles Beard, one of the leading historians and public intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s. This lecture explores the critical years between 1939 and Pearl Harbor, when America was divided on whether to intervene in WWII. The lecture explores the connections between fascism, neutrality and isolationism/continentalism and the relevance of Beard and America First during the Trump Presidency and beyond.

Readings due: Milne, Worldmaking, Chap. 3: “Americans First: Charles Beard,” (pp. 123-167)


In 1939, as Hitler invaded Poland, the British historian E.H. Carr published what has become a classic of international relations, The Twenty Year’s Crisis. In it, he argued that the West had succumbed to deadly illusions: that the League of Nations and international law had ended the threat of war and that liberal commerce was more powerful than national interests. But Carr’s alternative was to appease Hitler in the name of “realism.” Carr had a sophisticated critique of liberal moralism but his “realism” created no standpoint from which to critique the Third Reich’s national self-assertion. This lecture criticizes the myth that all interwar theorists were “idealists” and also offers a critical reading of Carr and his famous book.

Readings due: E.H. Carr, The Twenty Years’ Crisis [1939], 41-94

Week 5: The German Emigrés and Geopolitics in the Early Cold War: Realism and the Drive for an American Geopolitics

In a Life Magazine article, Edmund Walsh, the Georgetown professor described his tense meetings with the leading geopolitical strategist of the Third Reich, Karl Haushofer, shortly before Haushofer committed suicide in the spring of 1945. Since 1942, the US press had created a near-panic about an alleged German super-weapon—geopolitics—undergirding Hitler’s conquests. By 1945, American foreign policy elites had arrived at a consensus that the US should play the leading role in the post-war global order, and that American interests were now global, not hemispheric. This lecture explores the academic and public debates about the goals and strategy of US foreign policy after the defeat of the Third Reich and the fraying of the US-USSR wartime alliance. This lecture explore the ironic reversal in the fate of geopolitics: the US wartime panic over geopolitics, was followed abruptly by a fevered pursuit of an American geopolitics adequate to the Cold War.
Week 6: Realist Critics of the Cold War including Vietnam: Reinhold Niebuhr, George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau

As “Mr. X,” George Kennan, a Russia expert, wrote an influential article in Foreign Affairs in 1947 outlining the policy that would become President Truman’s doctrine of “containing” communism worldwide. But during the Korean War, and the Eisenhower years, thinkers like Kennan, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and German émigré political scientist Hans Morgenthau became alienated by the hubris and messianism in the US Cold War posture. By 1965, Morgenthau, then an advisor to the State Department, was the first US government official to publicly declare the US war in Vietnam a mistake, an unwinnable folly. President Obama considered himself a realist in this Niebuhrian sense. This concluding week of the semester explores this “dissenting” face of realism in the 1950s and 60s, and assesses its legacy for US foreign policy orientation today.


Note: Realism in World Politics: The Transatlantic Tradition, Pt. II will be held in the summer 2021 session. The topics covered are listed below. Students may take Pt. II without having taken Pt. I., and those who take Pt. I will not find Pt. II repetitive.

Week 1: American Geopolitics: From the Monroe Doctrine to the War of 1898
Week 2: German Geopolitics: The Idea of “Living Space” from 1890-1945
Week 3: Geopolitics and Realism in US Foreign Policy, from Kissinger to Trump
Week 4: Geopolitics and Realism in German Foreign Policy, from Adenauer to Merkl