



# A Conversation with Ambassador Emily Haber on Germany's Coronavirus Response Efforts

## TRANSCRIPT

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- Emily Haber, *German Ambassador to the United States*
- Walter Russell Mead, *Ravenel B. Curry III Distinguished Fellow in Strategy and Statesmanship, Hudson Institute*

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*Please note: This transcript is based off a recording and mistranslations may appear in text. A video of the event is available: <https://www.hudson.org/events/1794-video-livestream-a-conversation-with-ambassador-emily-haber-on-germany-s-coronavirus-response-efforts42020>*

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Welcome everybody to a Hudson livestream here and it's wonderful to be here with Emily Haber who is the Ambassador of Germany to the United States. She has a long and distinguished career, served in many parts of the world, knows America very well, and has done I think a remarkable job of representing Germany to the United States and maybe explaining the United States a little bit to Germany at a tough time.

For those of you who are watching our chat, we'll have a period at the end of the conversation when we'll take questions from the audience. The way to communicate with us is to email questions to events, E-V-E-N-T-S, @hudson.org or to tweet at Hudson Institute, and there will be people monitoring those and they will put, they will communicate your questions to me.

All right, well my first question is, this disaster that is unfolding around the world, just is a problem globally, it's a problem regionally and it's a problem for every country. Germany has had some pretty good results in some ways, very low fatality rate, more or less things seem to be doing better than in some other countries. What is Germany doing right and what can the rest of us learn from how Germany has responded to this crisis?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

It's a bit early to speak of success or results because we're still in the early phases and we have over 100,000 people who've been infected. We are number three in Europe after Italy and Spain, so it's not that the crisis has left us untouched. We had a headstart in a way because the virus came later to us than to other countries and we had a headstart because early on, even before the WHO had determined that this was a pandemic, German scientists had developed a test that enabled us to test very early on.

So our strategy was comprehensive testing all over the country, not only in certain effected regions, mitigation measures, quarantine, social contact tracing, and containment measures. That's more or less what other countries have done as well. As the virus came to us fairly late, we have been able to prepare. Take the intensive units, treatment units in German hospitals. We had about 20,000, no 28,000 intensive care units in January with 20,000 with ventilators. Now we have 40,000 with 30,000 ventilators, and they're only 40% occupied, which we do in order to prepare for a peak. So it's not that we did things better or differently, we are affected as any other country is, but we had a healthcare system and epidemic strategy in place that we could refer to quickly.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

When people in Germany look at the economic impact of this on the German economy, what are you hearing? What are people bracing for?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

I hear the same as I hear here. We don't know as yet to what extent we will be affected. My country has, as the European Union has, prepared in terms of tax decisions, like deferral of taxes, deferral of law enforcement. We have measures in place that we have had since the financial crisis in 2008, so if people are not getting their wages anymore, if employment is actually being cut down, the state pays for part of the salaries or reimburses companies. These

are all measures we've had before, so we just had to revitalize them, if you like. But of course the key question in place and it's a discussion we are having in my country, when can we actually return to reopening the society? As of now, as the infection rate shows that we have a doubling of rates every 12 days. It used to be every three days. So we have gone a way but we don't believe we've seen the peak as yet.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

It's the Austrians who are already talking about easing but Germans are not ready for this yet.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

We are ready for the discussion.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Yes.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

As we should be.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Yes.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

But we haven't taken any decision and in all likelihood it will take some more time.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Well turning to the European level, this is also obviously a major European crisis, and while we are talking, I think, that finance ministers will be meeting for some very consequential conversations. What's the view of the German government at this point about what needs to be done, not just in Germany, but for Europe and especially of course for Italy and Spain which are very hard hit?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

Yes, there several layers of answer to that question and I would say some criticism is in place too because in the initial phase of the crisis, European countries, including mine, have reacted first by being inward-looking and focusing on how to deal with the crisis nationally. I guess it's like an airplane, when you are requested to put on your mask first and then take care of your neighbors. So this is what happened in the initial weeks of the crisis. But then European countries rallied around the flag, if you like, and on several levels. On the first, the first level is actually supporting those countries most affected by medical gear, by medical treatment, by ventilators. Germany has done that. We have around 200 people that are being treated in German intensive care units from France, from Spain... No, from France and from Italy in

particular. We're sending medical teams as well. We're sending medical gear. And so does France and so does the Czech Republic and others. That is not a negligible part of solidarity.

And in a second, on a second level, we have stepped up our efforts on the European institutional side by invoking the crisis mechanism and the protection mechanism that allows to support including financially European countries in getting medical care or in taking back European travelers from across the world. Actually there was also one part of the solidarity aspect. What we are seeing today and where we'll see a proposal until 10th of April is the discussion how to support or how to contain the economic impact and financial impact of the crisis in European states.

In my country, what we've done so far is the European Central Bank has announced the purchase of bonds in a dimension of 750 billion Euro. The ECB will make available up to 3 trillion Euros by refinancing operations, and today we discuss the options for support packages. I don't know where we will be. It is my country's position that we say why don't we use the infrastructure in place, which is the European Stability Mechanism, which has about half a trillion Euro at its proposal.

The debate revolves around the experiences of 2008 when harsh reform packages were developed which were controlled the Troika, by the Commission and so forth. This crisis cannot be about that. This crisis cannot tackle conditionalities the way we did in 2008. There will be no Troika, no reform packages, no supervision of the Commission. But what needs to be in place is any package needs to focus on the impact that has been triggered by the coronavirus. It cannot focus on overall problems. We are focusing, we should be focusing on the consequences of the monumental crisis that we are in right now.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

I guess in practice, I mean in theory, that sounds like a very clear distinction, but in practice it gets very fuzzy. Because obviously you have the people who were thrown out of work or the cost of the medical care or the cost of closing the economy down for months or whatever it may be. And that's, one can say, "Okay, this is the coronavirus effect."

Then there's the whole question of economic recovery and what other damage has been done and how does one say, "Well, this is because there was a preexisting problem and this is a consequence of coronavirus," I would think could be a very divisive discussion.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

It would be no less divisive than a discussion on new instruments that come with their historical and ideological baggage as well. You're right that the discussion would be fuzzy. Some distinctions would not be easy to determine, but it will happen much more swiftly than any long ranging discussion on new instruments, which may take actually months. Here we have an instrument in place. Here we are ready to say, "No conditionalities, not the way we used to have conditions." No supervision decisions as in previous crisis, but a focus that needs to be there. Your argument is correct, but it's not an argument that would actually counter the relevance of the focus.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Okay. So we can expect that at least going into this meeting today, the German government still does not think that the so-called corona bonds are the answer.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

I don't make any predictions and certainly not on decisions of finance ministers, but what I'm saying is we need a massive effort. We need an effort that would provide solidarity. We need an effort that would not include conditionalities as in previous packages, but we need to be focused.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

There's been a lot of talk in this country about the roles that Russia and China have played in the crisis. I think in the US there has been a lot of dissatisfaction with a perceived lack of transparency from China, possible influence of China that made the WHO less forthcoming or less useful than one might hope. Then we've heard recently, particularly from Europe, concern about Russian disinformation efforts that have been complicating the question of how to handle the pandemic. What's your perception of the role of these countries in the crisis that we're in?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

We've certainly discovered the potential of soft power in this crisis. Not only of soft power, but also the divisive effect of narratives directed against the transatlantic community. You're right in that. I think we're both in the same situation that we need to develop our muscle of resilience against these narratives. The best way to do it is actually acting jointly and hand in glove. We need to develop resilience. We need to be able to define and identify narratives that are designed to be divisive. We need to be transparent ourselves, and we need to underline that in this crisis, no one can be alone or shouldn't be. And if we are, we are the ideal target.

You are a historian as I am. The difference between the Great Depression in 1929 and the Great Recession in 2008 was that in 2008, all countries and the transatlantic community mustered its capacity to fight the challenge jointly. That's why the impact of that crisis, which was much more reduced than the impact of the Great Depression in 1929 when everyone fought at the challenge on its own. I think that's a lesson to take in. It wasn't easy to take in right after the outbreak of the crisis because healthcare business also in Europe is national. But now in this phase of the crisis, I think we should reassess and do everything we can in order to act jointly and the recognition that we are all affected alike.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

I've been looking a bit at what we can expect as the focus of the pandemic moves away from Europe and North America into Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia. I have to say the more one looks at this, the more concern one has about the humanitarian consequences, social economic consequences. Certainly right near Europe, you have the refugee camps in Syria and Turkey, Libya, you have these sort of large movements of people, wartime situations where it's very difficult to think about how does one control a pandemic there? How has Europe's thinking been and Germany's thinking been moving in this, and is there any transatlantic cooperation in this area?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

There's certainly a transatlantic cooperation both in the G7 and in the G20 formats. The president of the Federal Republic of Germany has recently along with other international actors and NGOs published an appeal. He said this is no time for geopolitical turf wars. This crisis knows no borders and it will affect everyone and it's time to use international formats, not only to combat the challenge but to join forces to create synergies in research, in developing vaccines, in making sure that treatment will be available and in making sure that treatment and vaccines will be common goods. That is one way ahead to deal with the challenge that is still to come and that is what they mentioned and how horribly actually will this virus affect the poorer countries and regions of the world and those less capable to defend themselves.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

There's been some talk here about the consequences for migrants. The combination of the economic shocks and the pandemic and perhaps violence in some countries, at least in the Americas we have the drug cartels and obviously in the Middle East you have jihadis and other violent groups, extremists. Do we secure borders? What do we do about refugees in this context? How is Europe approaching this problem?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

What I observed both in Europe and actually here as well that migration numbers go down. They go down because, I expect to some extent, there is an awareness that migration can act and migration means staying in reception facilities, staying in camps, moving in large groups can be labs of contagions so that is not surprising.

What I worry about is two-fold. One aspect concerns what you said, where this virus or the effects of the virus, the devastating economic and ramifications of the virus, will that feed extremism to a degree that is unprecedented? We've seen precedents of that. That is very well possible, and it's another argument for responsibility of the Western and developed world to take care of those that are less capable to do so. The second aspect is to what degree does the virus or the effect of the virus alter our perceptions of those who come to our countries for very different reasons? Some because they wish for a better future, some because they have very good reasons to leave their countries, and some because they are entitled to protection in our countries. If that is impacted by the crisis, and I don't know if it is as yet, it certainly will change our countries too.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

You are very knowledgeable about Russia and at first we were hearing some denial from Russia that the pandemic would be a large problem, but recently we're seeing all the signs of a serious local epidemic and lots of consequences. In your view, what are the impacts of the pandemic on Russia and particularly connected with the collapse in world oil prices and the price war that Russia started right before the pandemic?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

I really cannot say that because I should be watching that from very close in order to be able to seriously assess such a development. Look, in a way, the situation we live through right now is really unprecedented. It is, if you like, in this sense revolutionary. In those situations-

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

It's revolutionary.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Yes.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

And, in those situations, previous patterns of understanding, or assessment, or interpretation do not hold anymore. I would be in difficulties in predicting precisely to what extent Europe would be changing in the crisis. And we're still in the early phases of it. I'm not able to predict to what extent politics and polarization in this country are changing. And I'm certainly not able to say what this would mean for the Russian system, for the Russian economy, and for the Russian elites.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Good. Good. Good answer. The other crisis in Europe that has been getting a little less attention but as, in its own way, quite grave, is the Hungarian government's response to the pandemic of a state of emergency that many critics say gives the government essentially dictatorial powers. What is the German government's view of this situation? And how do you see things developing?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

We've said it very clearly, we understand that countries need to react to a challenge that they have not seen before. We have reacted by doing things we haven't foreseen as well. But we've also said it cannot be an opener for measures that are there to stay, that are not meant to be transitory, that are not limited in scope and time. If they are, it says something about what Europeans are. And I believe that the relevance of our soft power, and yours, was always because, to some extent we were a model. You, America are a model, were a model that has foreshadowed the patterns of what the European Union was to become over time.

If we give a discount on values, or on democratic rights, or on the freedom of the press, it's a discount on what we are. And I'm sure that other actors, those you've mentioned before, will be watching that very closely and will draw the conclusion that they're being given license and that the measure by which they are being judged is being diluted.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

And yet, it's very difficult to figure out, at least as I look at it, what can actually be done. That, when a member of the European Union behaves in ways that other members find violates core standards, it's actually quite difficult. It requires a kind of unanimity for some sorts of steps. Concretely what might happen now?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

We said clearly, Europeans did, at the European Commission, that European countries stated clearly what I just said now. And that is the power of the European Union weighs on its normative clout, not only but to some extent, and that's soft power. So, we'll be watching very closely.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

But also, Walter, politics and policies have their time too. And right now, we're focused on handling the crisis.

Let's take step by step. Doing all at the same time may be an impediment in reaching what we need to do at first, and that is getting to grips with this crisis, handling it, managing it, and containing it, and then easing it. We're not forgetting that other issues are important too.

But one step at a time.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Pandemic first is your thinking here.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

Yes.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

I'm seeing a lot of questions from the audience who are asking about China specifically. Will Germany... how is China's lack of transparency, how is that affecting German perceptions of China and German thinking about the way forward with China?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

The lack of transparency was certainly a point that is seen very critically in Germany, especially in the early phases of the crisis. It is compounded by the fact that China portrays itself now as a rescuing factor or a rescuing actor with regard to European nations and easily forgets to what extent we've supported China in the early phases of its crisis when we provided medical gear, and when we provided doctors, and when we sent in planes. China wasn't alone in the crisis. And that's a factor that we would like to be out there as well. We cannot accept, if China instrumentalizes the crisis now in order to sew divisions, in order to place false narratives, and in order to put out their divisive narratives targeting discussions we are having in our countries, actually, a strategy that reminds me very much of the Russian playbook.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Mm-hmm. I think there's some concern here that the statistics that we're getting out of China even today are less reliable than one would like. And this isn't simply a question of truthfulness. It's actually what we all want to know is what happens after the lockdown? What is the course of the epidemic? So, there's a sense in which China's denial of clear information is actually hamstringing the global effort to deal with this virus.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

I agree with that. I think that's true. I think the collection of data, of information, of trends is hugely important for our collective capacity to fight the crisis. When I talked about the headstart that I feel Germany had in January, it was our capacity to read what had happened elsewhere and to take responsive action. But that, of course, requires as much transparency and as much truthfulness as we possibly can get in order to devise counter strategies.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Yeah. And it would appear that there may be two layers of bad information at work. One, that regional authorities in China have a history of only telling the central authority what they think the central authorities want to hear. And then, the central authority trying to make sure that the face it presents to the world reflects their own wish rather than reality.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

Yeah. Well, I think we do not have sufficient data at all. None of us does for the moment. We're still in the process of collecting data and trying to understand what this virus is, and what it does, and what it will respond to. But what we cannot accept is intentional data manipulation. There's a lot of lack of knowledge and lack of transparency for want of capacity. That's one thing. But lack of transparency that is intentional and will harm other countries, that's something that cannot be accepted and should be called out.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Does this also affect the way that countries should be looking at China in trade negotiations. Creating some skepticism about things that China says it's doing or that information may not be accurate, does this carry over into other fields?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

Why should the virus be a game changer for assessments, perceptions, and views we've had before? We were in agreement with people here who said, we cannot accept that China doesn't grant market access, that it enforces joint venture obligations, that it steals intellectual property, and so forth. These problems have existed before. They're not new. So, I would not call it a game changer in that sense. I think what we take from the crisis is perhaps a greater reticence in believing one-on-one what the information that China... Believing 100 percent the information that China presents. We've seen that there were gaps, there were delays and perhaps some dressing up.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

We had dinner together in the early stages of this when the pandemic was not... Had not really yet reached the West. And I remember being impressed with how you had... You were already reading up on the 1918 influenza outbreak and you certainly bring a historical cast to your work and observations. I mean obviously in some ways this is unprecedented, but in other ways the world has seen epidemics before. What can the past tell us as we all try to figure out how do we respond to this thing? What do we do?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

Isn't a lesson of the 1918 pandemic that because of the war, countries were actually hiding information, not giving it out and that this led to the surge of up to 50 million people I believe that have lost their lives in the epidemic. So not being transparent, not sharing information, trying to attack the challenge, everyone on its own, not joining forces, all of that are the lessons from the 1918 epidemic, which brings me back to the previous point. What we should be doing now and in the early stages is share information, share research, share whatever we can in development of vaccines, make vaccines accessible and get to an understanding that this is something for the global common good.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

I have another audience question. What can Germany do or other countries to try to get China to be more transparent?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

Talking with China. Talking is a fine thing as Americans know. Actually the lack of contact or lack of talking does not give you more information and that does not give you more influence or clout. It gives you less space in order to make your point heard. Call out what we cannot accept and try to navigate some differences and making sure that you have an infrastructure of contact and negotiations in place that will allow you to come to a side.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Another one of our viewers is asking, will this pandemic affect EU budget negotiations?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

Sure.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

And so if we might have a larger budget than, than would have otherwise been seen.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

There. Again, I would be ill-advised in predicting to what extent it will grow. But I think it's obvious that we cannot leave budget negotiations in a spirit that was pre-pandemic. We're in a different world right now. Our nations are affected more than they have been probably since the second World War. So it will require a huge effort and it will impact the budget negotiations.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

All right. And I think I have a final question from the audience here asking whether Germany might modify its trade relations with main suppliers as it observes the effect of the pandemic on global supply chains. Do you think this is going to change our models of economic integration at all?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

It may, but it's too early to say. You see it in some places. You see it already now. I'm not talking for my country right now, but you see it, conclusions being taken in the context of medical supplies and medical equipment, but it's too early to say that this will be the conclusion... Will be conclusions in Germany. Don't underestimate to what extent my country is a globalized country. Over 40 percent of our GDP comes from global trade. So you're asking a question that for Germans is really big.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Yes. And I think probably because there's been so much China in these audience questions, the person was asking whether this would affect decisions about China specifically?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

China has a huge market for Germany. The decisions therefore will be less easily taken than other countries which are less globalized or hyper-connected than we are. Don't underestimate the huge importance of that market, the huge influence of that market for us.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

And now I'd like to ask a more personal question. As an ambassador, your job is basically to meet people, and to be out and about and being able to see what's happening and engage. How has this changed your work?

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

It has changed my work enormously. I can't meet people anymore. I talk with people on the phone, but talking to people on the phone is something completely different. You see if you sit with someone and you see his reactions and you know if a remark or question is welcome or not, you will immediately react to it and in order to keep the conversation going the way you want. You can't do that on the phone. You don't have the receptiveness on the phone. So any phone call that I would have had is mostly dealing with very specific facts and very specific solutions. If it is part of my job to understand what is happening here, I have much less space than I used to have before. That's not good.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

And is your staff meeting by teleconference or phone? How do you, because you run an organization, you have an embassy to direct as well as your own work.

**Ambassador Emily Haber:**

I created three clusters, which are completely separate universes. They will not meet. There's one presence cluster in the embassy and while we do meet there, we meet in a very spaced out manner. There is a second cluster working at home and ready to take over the minute that someone in the first cluster becomes ill. Because you see what I do here, what we do in a large scale in Germany, and that is tracing contacts, being sure that everyone that has been in contact with me goes into quarantine the minute that I, or someone from this cluster falls ill or a

relative or a child or a partner of one of the first cluster falls ill. The second cluster takes over then and those who are not ill will work from home. And there's a third cluster which would take over the minute that in the first two clusters a case of illness occurs. So I do hope that we have created both the conditions to faction at least in a limited way and transparency in case of transmittance of illnesses.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Well, thank you. It sounds like you're responding as well as any of us. As you can see at Hudson, we're doing live streams instead of meetings. And thank you so much for sharing the time with us, and I hope that even in a shutdown Washington, you're able to keep your fingers on the American pulse and let folks in Germany know what's going on and it's good to see you again.