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U.S. Intervention in the Caribbean

By [Christian Cwik](#)

Since the beginning of the 20th century, political conflicts determined relations between the German Empire and the USA. The Caribbean became one of the scenes of these conflicts during and following World War I. General reasons were the imperial debt policy, increasing German investments, submarine warfare and US economic interests.

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The Rise of Imperialism

During World War I, the Caribbean (including the Circum Caribbean coasts) was transformed into a contested area. The US government utilized the imperial interests of European powers to justify its own political interests in the region. Since 1823, the so-called Monroe Doctrine served as the basis for US interventions. Any efforts by European nations to colonise territories or interfere with states in the Americas were thus considered an act of aggression. The first victory was the military defeat of [Spain](#): In the Spanish-American War of 1898, US troops intervened in the Spanish Caribbean colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico as well as in some Pacific islands where President [William McKinley \(1843-1901\)](#) established US military governments. In 1902, Cuba became "independent", but, according to the Platt Amendment of 1901, under US protection. From 1880 onwards, the United States strengthened its economic interests in the Caribbean. US corporations, such as the Standard Fruit Company and the United Fruit Company, could acquire land anywhere in the Caribbean

territories and thereby established many new plantation systems.

The Clash of Imperialism in the Caribbean

Neither US nor European interventions were something new in the Caribbean, but by the turn of the century new conflicts between the different [imperial powers](#) and their allies provoked the outbreak of a major war. Apart from traditional colonial powers like [Great Britain](#) and [France](#), the [German Empire](#), which had long been a second-tier colonial power, attempted to become an imperial player on a global level. One of Berlin's major concerns was to support the construction of the [interoceanic canal on the Isthmus of Panama](#) to connect the German protectorates in the [Pacific](#) with the German Empire. After Africa and Asia, the Caribbean became more and more important. From 1870 onwards, German investments can be observed in most Caribbean countries and colonies. German agents even encouraged the government in Berlin to occupy a West Indian island, preferably Danish St. Thomas (Virgin Islands), to build a naval and cable station as part of a worldwide trading network. A secure naval station in the West Indies would have been a strong basis near any future Central American canal and would have allowed expanding trade with and investments in Central and South America.

Roosevelt's Corollary Policy

President [Theodore Roosevelt \(1858-1919\)](#), who governed from 1901 to 1909, feared German involvement in America's "backyard". In October 1902, Roosevelt entered the Colombian civil war to prevent the Germans from further investments and to protect future US interests. He sent two gunboats to help the Panamanian conservative elites in their independence project and occupied the Panama Canal Zone in 1903.

Another political conflict broke out in 1902 between the German Empire and the US because of the so-called Venezuela Crisis that began after Venezuelan President [Cipriano Castro \(1858-1924\)](#), who governed from 1899 to 1908, refused to pay debts to the German Empire, Great Britain and Italy. The consequence was a naval blockade against the main Venezuelan ports. Roosevelt forced the German troops to withdraw and the blockading nations agreed to a compromise on 13 February 1903. Nevertheless, the Germans maintained their blockade until the last day of the negotiations.

The blockade was the reason for Roosevelt's Corollary proclaimed on 4 December 1904. It asserted the [United States'](#) right to intervene in conflicts between Europe and the Americas, despite legitimate European claims. Until entering World War I on 6 April 1917, the US intervened in the Dominican Republic (1905, 1907, 1916-1924), in [Nicaragua](#) (1907, 1909, 1912-1925), in Honduras (1909, 1911-1925), in Mexico (1914, 1915, 1916, 1917) and in Cuba (1906-1909, 1912, 1917-1919). The latter US intervention in Cuba started in August 1917 because of the US fear that the German Empire would support the insurgents from the Cuban liberal party who refused the declaration of war on Berlin in April 1917.

The US entered Haiti as early as 1915 when the country collapsed due to an unredeemable external debt. Most of the debts were controlled by German and French banks. Between 1901 and 1914, the German Empire had sent warships to Haiti to force diplomatic claims several times. With the outbreak of World War I, President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#), who governed from 1913 to 1921, became more and more concerned with the German policy in Haiti, as German traders and companies not only controlled about 80 percent of the country's external trade but also owned and operated utilities and corrupted local governments. Hence the US government started to control Haiti's customs duties and the National Bank. Eventually this US policy led to an invasion of Haiti to prevent Germany from taking over the country in 1915. After the withdrawal of troops in 1934, US financial sovereignty remained until 1947.

A similar series of events took place in the Dominican Republic where the US appointed a general customs administrator in 1905. This guaranteed the US control of revenue distribution and, at the same time, the Dominican Republic the amortization of debts.

Roosevelt persuaded the US Congress that this "big stick policy" would protect the Caribbean from any European military intervention. In 1907, the Dominican Republic and the US signed a treaty reserving the US the right to intervene in order to protect the customs receivership. Like Cuba, the Dominican Republic was thus converted into a "legal" protectorate. When it became clear that the US wanted far more influence, the Dominican Congress rejected Wilson's aims in 1915, upon which US Marines landed in Santo Domingo in 1916, where they established a US military government.

The First World War

Already in April 1914, US Marines had occupied the Mexican port of Veracruz, practising landing operations that they later adopted during World War I. The so-called secret [Zimmermann Telegram](#) of January 1917 was a very important motive behind Washington's decision to enter the war. The attack of German submarines on Allied merchant vessels and submarines in the Atlantic gave the Americans another reason to enter the war. Due to the fact that German submarines operated as far as in the Caribbean, the US feared a long-planned German invasion of the Danish Virgin Islands. To prevent this, they concluded a treaty with [Denmark](#) and purchased the islands for \$25,000,000. In the same vein, Washington also tried to buy other Caribbean territories, such as Jamaica and Trinidad, from Great Britain and France.

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