
Post-War Germany under Allied Occupation 1945 - 1949

“This war is not like it was in the past. Whoever occupies a territory also imposes his own system on it insofar as his army has the power to do so.” said Soviet leader Josef Stalin.

“What will we do the day after our victory? Our goal is to give France a position from which it can take care of its interests,” said General Charles de Gaulle in 1945.

According to U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau: *Germany should be changed “into a country primarily agricultural and pastoral in character”.*

What should be done with Germany ?

Most people in Germany’s bombed and destroyed cities weren’t thinking about the distant future – they were too busy simply trying to survive from one day to the next. They were hungry enough to travel miles for a few potatoes and would trade anything for anything. “Quality fountain pens, new, am looking for coal.” Bitter cold and primitive, unheatable homes. Nearly eighty per cent of all housing in Germany had been destroyed. Among the ruins: refugees, soldiers coming home, so-called “Displaced Persons”, former prisoners of war, people looking desperately for their families.

A Swiss citizen wrote to his American friend:

“Germans today believe nothing, hope for nothing and put up with everything. Anyone who wants to teach democracy and human dignity here must give them bread instead of theories. Germany must either disappear completely or rise from the ashes. For the sake of Europe, it simply cannot be allowed to live on in such a miserable condition.”

In February 1945, at the Yalta Conference, the “Big Three”, Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union had already decided to take away parts of the former German Reich in the East even before Germany’s unconditional surrender.

The northeasternmost part of East Prussia went to the Soviets. The rest came under Polish administration. This also happened to Pomerania and Silesia – in exchange for the eastern parts of its own territory, which Poland had been forced to turn over to the U.S.S.R.

This westward shift of the Polish border to the Oder and Neisse Rivers would be fixed in a peace treaty later on. But it wasn’t until 1990 that Poland’s post-war border was officially recognized by the Federal Republic of Germany.

In spite of differing views, none of World War II’s victors really had any idea of what to do with Germany.

Nevertheless they all did manage to agree on four key points, known as the “Four D’s”:

De-Nazification

Demilitarization

Dismantling

Democratization

“It is not our intention to destroy the German people. But they cannot hope for a normal life and a place in the community of nations until Naziism and militarism are wiped out.”

Potsdam, 1945. After conquering their common enemy, it soon became clear that the former war allies were divided over their differing political interests in peace. Nevertheless, an agreement was reached at the Potsdam Conference to keep Germany intact while dividing it into four separate occupation zones and dividing Berlin into four sectors. France, the fourth occupying power, was not represented at Potsdam.

The decision to treat Germany as an economic unit played an important part in maintaining Germany's integrity as a nation.

The most important institution governing Germany after the war was the the Allied Control Council in Berlin. The A.C.C. was in charge of "all matters concerning Germany as a whole".

The most important of the allied activities immediately after the war were the Nuremberg trials. The people mainly responsible for Nazi Germany were tried here. Most were found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity and were executed or sentenced to many years in prison.

Tearing down and taking away German industrial plants began in the summer of 1945, but the allies disagreed over the question of war reparations. The Americans and British hesitated, but the Soviet Union and France, the two countries that had suffered the most in the war, demanded massive compensation.

In an effort to keep the Soviets from removing machinery and equipment from the Ruhr industrial valley, which would have meant the death of Germany's largest industrial center – the Americans managed to establish a policy stating that each occupying power could only act within its *own* zone.

This war reparations policy had serious consequences – because it drew a line through Germany – the beginning of a division, first into separate economic zones, and finally into two separate German states.

"Russia's long-term goal is world domination ... Power is the only thing the Russians understand."

This comment by American President Truman signaled a turning point in American foreign policy. In place of co-operation with a wartime ally came efforts to check Communist influence around the world.

West Germany – initially the American zone – was an important scene for the new U.S. foreign policy.

Germans in the American zone felt the hand of occupation less than they did elsewhere. The Americans aimed at a process of democratization, concentrating mainly on the younger generations and the media.

Teachers with suspicious Nazi pasts were removed from the schools, and the idea of students taking part in school affairs was introduced.

In the media, American press officers carefully made sure news and commentary were clearly separated and saw to it that democracy and democratic institutions were shown in a positive light.

Criticism was welcomed – as long as it wasn't criticism of the occupiers.

The Americans were determined to establish a federal structure for their zone, that is to say: smaller units, federal states. This idea followed the pattern of America with *its* strong federal states.

This is why the Americans divided their zone into four administrative units, from which the federal states of Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Hesse and Bremen were soon born. As early as January of 1946 the Americans were already allowing the first elections of mayors and city councils. The duties of the military government itself were soon turned over to German administrators – all part of a process of introducing democracy from the ground up.

This was not without self-interest, however. America was determined to establish a democratic Germany from the very beginning.

(Original Sound: James F. Byrnes / U.S. Secretary of State)

“The American people want to help the German people to win their way back to an honorable place among the free and peace-loving nations of the world.”

Great Britain’s most important goal was to wipe out Prussian militarism. Yet only a year after the war’s end, it became more important to stabilize Germany as a “strong defence against Communism”.

According to British foreign secretary Ernest Bevin: *“the dangers presented by Russia are certainly at least as great, if not greater, than those presented by a Germany regaining its power.”*

Like the Americans, the British began rebuilding Germany with great energy in their own zone. Food rations were increased and reparations slowed down.

In keeping with democratic traditions, the British tolerated the newly formed German political parties. However, unlike the Americans, the British military government kept control on important matters. Britain allowed the federal states only limited autonomy and governed Germany much as it did its colonies.

French policy toward Germany was understandably determined by its basic desire for national security. The reason, of course, was the sad history France shared with its aggressive neighbor. France aimed at a Germany broken up into economically weak, separate units and opposed all efforts to centralize the German government. In addition, France demanded international control of the Ruhr industrial valley – once the center of the German war machine. Contrary to the Potsdam Agreement, France isolated its zone of occupation from the others and integrated the Saar into its economic and monetary system. Winston Churchill spoke of a “silk curtain” separating the French zone from the rest.

France’s heavy hand as occupier was something people quickly got to know.

But at the same time, France, like the United States, tried to win over young people and introduce lasting democracy in special educational and cultural programs. It was this post-war policy that prepared the way toward French-German understanding and friendly relationship later on.

Unlike France, the Soviet Union kept up the idea of a united Germany, though modeled on its own concept, hoping to exert its influence on the western zones as well.

The Soviets began instituting fundamental political changes in their zone of occupation. Step-by-step, some sixty thousand specially trained party members and a group of German Communists received key positions in the quickly founded federal states of Mecklenburg, Brandenburg, Saxony Anhalt, Thuringia and Saxony. In sharp contrast to the West, de-Nazification and educational reforms under the Soviets were used to introduce radical changes in all areas of life according to Communist ideology. Private property, banks and

industries were seized by the state, which prepared the way for a centrally managed state economy. Land reforms were the first steps toward agricultural collectivization. The uniting of the SPD and the KPD into one party, the SED – “the joint forces of the proletariat” according to the Communists – did not happen spontaneously. It was organized at the top and carried out with an iron hand. As German Communist party leader Walter Ulbricht himself put it: *“It has to look democratic ... but we have to run it.”*

The original plan to rule “Germany as a whole” was strongly affected by the differing interests of the four occupying powers. The gap between the Communist-led eastern zone and the democratic western zones widened.

In view of increasing East/West tensions and growing economic difficulties, the British and the Americans logically drew together.

The Americans included the western zones in their CARE program – direct emergency aid for the starving population – and started a school food program for three-and-a-half million children in the American and British zones.

At the beginning of 1947, the British and American zones were united into the “Bizonie”. Nearly two years later, France joined it.

“Get the Germans working again ...” demanded U.S. journalists and Congress members alike. The Marshall Plan of 1947, extended to all three western zones, was the way this goal was reached. This massive economic recovery program included one-and-a-half billion U.S. dollars for West Germany alone.

The Marshall Plan laid the cornerstone for West German post-war economic success. The Soviet Union rejected Marshall Plan aid for its zone.

In March 1948, the Soviets left the A.C.C., which never met again and was later dissolved: the four-nation government for all of Germany stopped functioning.

Meanwhile, German federal states were already being established by the Soviet Union and the Allies in their respective zones.

But in Germany, as a result of the Cold War, a border had been drawn between hostile powers. “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent,” said Winston Churchill.

The establishment of two German states in 1949 was the result of four years of occupation. West Germany and East Germany were shaped by the politics of their occupiers – by their fundamentally different political systems.

Churchill saw what was happening as early as 1946:

“We have to face the fact that, as we are going on at present, two Germanys are coming into being, one organized more or less on the Russian model, or in the Russian interest, and the other on that of the Western democracies....”

The border between the two Germanys became a no man’s land between enemies for forty years.

It was not until the collapse of Communist Europe and the protest marches in the former GDR that the time had come for creating a united, democratic Germany.