

## History of Post-War Germany 1945-61

This document groups together the responses from members of the Political and Social History to April's subject presented by Matthew.

From Geoff 24<sup>th</sup> April

I found Matthew's intro on the above subject both interesting and thought provoking. It is a big subject which links with a host of other issues as well as encroaching on our own experiences. My initial thoughts cover the following:

a) It is remarkable how Germans after the war avoided confronting their recent past (and they still don't- costumes in every historical pageant/reenactment I have seen there stop long before WW1). How they concentrated on rebuilding their economy and were uninterested in politics, especially at the extremes. The development of the welfare state and the consequent removal of dissent between the parties. This has led to problems in later generations with young people rejecting the 'empty' pursuit of consumerism and a breakdown in the political consensus, allowing a resurgence of the far right.

b) How initial thoughts to keep Germany down were undermined by both the dependence of other European economies, including France, on the German one and the drain of the cost of occupation on the UK's dreadful finances. The importance of cheap labour through immigration from southern Europe and Turkey to the 'economic miracle'. c) The bungling approach of the Soviets, especially Stalin, which lost the possibility of a united, neutral Germany and helped West Germany to establish itself as a Western bulwark. d) The ineffectiveness of French obstruction through all this and the subsequent importance to them of fixing West Germany within the frameworks of NATO and economic co-operation bodies. e) That the West was broadly happy with the German two state position and its criticisms were mainly to shore up their own position. This helped to explain the lukewarm reaction to German reunification.

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Mathews Response to Geoff' Comments:

Continuing Geoff's thoughts:

a) Suppression of the past - yes, Germany was and arguably still is **in denial**. There was **never an ideological commitment to democracy** - it was driven by rapid economic growth and materialism. I might add that this was enabled by US financial support coupled with their own political agenda (e.g. whilst the UK government of 1945-51 of necessity nationalised much domestically, it was under pressure from the US to assist in the privatisation of German industry). The US also gained a valuable export market in the process and West Germany became the bulwark against the Soviet Bloc. In the immediate post war period it is fair to say that German life must have been about survival and little else so one can understand the reluctance to throw ones energy into political activity. As I said in my presentation, in the formation of West Germany, Adenauer conveniently forgot about the Germans left behind in East Germany and no serious efforts were made towards reunification.

b) Economies - Germany had the advantage of no occupation costs (although its industry was being stripped before the Marshall Plan took effect) and was later not caught up in Korea - it in fact gained from the latter in terms of it boosting its exports. Membership of the EEC no doubt was seen as

good for the image of West Germany. Yes, an underclass grew with the import of cheap foreign labour. Throughout this period there was never a shortage of cheap labour and Trade Unions were relatively weak and non-political (in this era in the UK between them the moderate leaders of the T&G, GMB and NUM could dominate Labour Party policy at Conference).

c) Yes the Stalin approach was frequently clumsy - epitomised by the blockade of Berlin. A chance for unification was missed and the Cold War was underway. The East German leader Ulbricht was a committed Stalinist.

d) French obstruction - I am not so well versed on this subject. I know that in the 1945-49 period they actively stripped their zone of German aluminium stocks. Later in the 1954 they vetoed the plan for a European Defence Community. Naturally the French retained a fear of German rearmament and expansionism and so one can understand their wish to lock West Germany into the EEC, NATO etc.

e) Two state solution/reunification - see my comments in a) above.

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From Paula

My thoughts:

Why was Germany treated so leniently regards restitution/compensation to the affected European countries?

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Mathews Response to Paula's comments

Re Paula's comments I would think that the experience gained from the Treaty of Versailles and the severe treatment of Germany and the subsequent reactions must have weighed heavily on the minds of world leaders in 1945.

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From Tessa

I am currently on page 10, so some way to go. Thank you Matthew! You have done a fantastic amount of research.

One concern of mine when thinking broadly about the few years immediately after the end of the war post is the attitude of the western great powers towards the Soviet Union and the rapid deterioration in their relationships.

I think we need to take into account the the great effort the Soviets put into the war generally and against the Japanese. The acquisition of the Atomic bomb altered the balance of power and gave Truman a much more powerful hand. Japan capitulated and came within the American sphere of influence.

Stalin was a tyrant but it concerns me that the West even now fails even now to acknowledge the

tremendous sacrifice of Soviet citizens. Without that sacrifice the war almost certainly would have ended very differently. There are disputes about the actual numbers but at least 24 million people died and the economy was devastated. I can see why the Soviets showed no compunction initially in stripping out East German factories etc.

When I visited St Petersburg (Leningrad) as a tourist recently, the guide started off our tour by describing the effect of the siege of the city by the Germans. There was so little food, it is said people resorted to cannibalism. My Dad said to me what a great relief he felt when Hitler redirected his army towards Russia.

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### Mathews Response to Tessa's Comments

Tessa makes a very valid point regarding the immense sacrifice of the Soviet Union. As a result one can understand their determination that German expansionism was never to be repeated. However, perhaps we should not forget that there had been a pact between Hitler and Stalin in the early stages of WW2.

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From Tessa

Iain went on a bicycle trip to Germany with some mates in August 1961. I interviewed him today and here is his account of his experiences plus some photos :

### **Iain Roxburgh's account of a cycling trip to Germany, Austria and Switzerland August 1961**

In August 1961, I went for a cycling tour with two friends staying in youth hostels on the way. We spend more than half the time in West Germany and travelled up the Rhine Valley and came back to Cologne across Bavaria.

One of the things that I noticed immediately was the many cobbled streets and tramlines everywhere in the towns and villages. This is made cycling very difficult indeed and dangerous at times.

On the second night, we stayed at a youth hostel at the point where the River Main enters the Rhine. All the other people staying were Germans and I remember sitting on the riverbank and having a conversation with someone older than myself. He was probably in his mid 20s. Somehow we got round to talking about Germany and the war and I recall him saying, "I don't think it was as bad as it was made out". I challenged him about the concentration camps but he was in denial and said that he could not believe it.



Then we made our way to Heidelberg and south into the Black Forest. We noticed that most of the cars were Volkswagen Beetles. The villages that we saw were both ancient and poor. Oxen were being used to pull carts along.



We did not have a lot of money with us but found that it went much further than we expected. The exchange rate was 12 deutschmarks to the pound. This meant that we could afford to stop at various gasthaus and enjoy a standard sausage, kartoffle and sauerkraut dinner. Real coffee was very expensive indeed and instead everyone drank acorn coffee which was pretty foul.

The youth hostels that we stayed in were generally of a good standard and superior to most in England. We slept in dormitories for the night.



We cycled through the Black Forest, into Switzerland and then along the boundary between Austria and Germany on rough mountain tracks. I do not recall any policing of the borders and we were free to travel as we wanted. Eventually, we joined the Alpen Strasse which was similarly made of cobbles and sets. It was constructed in this way to carry tanks and we had to cycle around very hairy bends.

On the evening on the 12<sup>th</sup> August, we clocked into a very good Youth Hostel at Garmish Partenkirchen. When we woke up in the morning, we immediately became aware that something significant had happened as all the other lads in dormitory were talking intensely to one another. One of them had a transistor radio. One of my companions was doing A level German and it became clear that East Germany the starting to construct a wall in Berlin and one of the lads who were listening was very worried because his home was Berlin and he was concerned about his family's well-being and him getting back.

We went outside and saw American soldiers and armed cars in the streets. We saw the newspaper headlines, which said that there were "Panzers in the Eastern Section". Everyone thought that a third world war had started.

We thought that we had better hedge our bets and get into Austria as we knew that it was a neutral country so we cycled up the pass to Seefeld and headed for Innsbruck where stayed the night. We met up with my mum and dad as arranged in a village near Kitzbuhel and after spending a few more days in Austria, cycled back through Munich, Augsburg, Frankfurt and down the Eastern Side of the Rhine to Cologne, where are we boarded a train and travelled back to England.

## Comment from Alan

A key theme is the speed of the German economic recovery after the war and I doubt if I'm the only person who is amazed by just how rapid this was .

Germany had suffered total defeat, unconditional surrender and occupation by foreign armies. The Germans themselves called it their Stunde Nul- Zero Hour.

Apparently, the allies had originally intended to be harsh on Germany. They believed in German collective guilt. The Americans after VE Day said that "Germany will not be occupied for the purpose of liberation but as a defeated enemy nation." At one stage a more extreme view envisaged divesting Germany of its industry and turning it into an agrarian, peasant economy that would be powerless to wage war on its neighbours again. But when American soldiers and officials reached Germany they saw just how bad conditions were (as outlined on page 1 of Matthew's presentation). There was a major re-think – based on a fear that to reduce Germany to peasant level would create the breeding ground for another war. The British cabinet quickly reached the same conclusion - a punitive peace would be disastrous and could leave Europe devastated and unable to recover. Montgomery, at the end of the war, had said that he had little sympathy that the Germans were hungry as "they had brought it on themselves." However, he, along with his American counterpart, changed his mind when he saw the results of starvation and sickness amongst the population. *(Some of the points above have been taken from "1946 - The Making of the Modern World" by Victor Sebestyen.)*

It was this change of attitude by the allies that helped sow the seed for German economic revival.

Concerns at first were humanitarian, but British Occupation officials and planners worried also that hunger would damage German revival and lengthen the Occupation (which in itself was a costly enterprise). Rations at home were reduced to increase supplies to Germany. The USA had everything to gain from the economic recovery of W Europe, including GFR, and both the USA and Britain wanted to see GFR involved in the developing European economic and industrial institutions. Consequently, within four years of the war ending, GFR was a member of OEEC and in 1957 became a founder member of the EEC. By any standards, a remarkable turnaround.

Containment of the German threat mutated into the development of a major industrial power within the space 14 years, perhaps demonstrating that it was sometimes better to be on the losing side.

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## Response from Mathew to Alan's Comments

Yes the Russian (especially), American and French occupation zones were known to be tougher regimes than the British. The Morgenthau plan was to turn Germany back into a pastoral economy and was quickly abandoned.

I agree with your analysis and the turning point certainly came with the USA led European Recovery Programme which as I said was both a financial and political package.

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## Further comment from Tessa:

I forgot to recommend a book that I have finished reading written by Maxim Leo, entitled Red Love - The Story of an East German Family. It is based on research by the author who grew up in East

Berlin, into the lives of his parents and grandparents including the part they each played in WW2 and their differing roles and degrees of commitment to the regime in the GDR.

He tries to capture why so many dreamed the GDR would be a new world and why, in the end, it fell apart.

The Observer said it is “Simultaneously gripping and meditative “

The New York Times commented “ a searching and sensitive chronicle of three generations making the journey from euphoric hope to disillusionment to despair”.

I agree with their assessments.

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From Stephen:

Geoff and others raised the issue of the German unwillingness to confront the past. While it is true that apart from the (relatively) small numbers of Nazis indicted at Nuremberg, most party members were assimilated into the post-war economy and society there are a number of points I think need making.

1. Firstly, German experience was not a lot different to that of France (in how it dealt with active participants in the Vichy regime) and some other continental countries that had been occupied during the war. More recent examples include Spain and South Africa, the latter where a more inclusive approach has been taken to the adherents of a previous regime. Although in the Spanish example it is interesting that it has taken a generation to pass before the past under Franco is being fully addressed.

Secondly, it is not fair to say that the Germans have not confronted their past. 60s historians began the process of challenging the wrongs of German politics and policy e.g. Fischer challenging the issue of German responsibility for WW1 and biographies of Hitler e.g. Joachim Fest. It is interesting and in some ways refreshing that the Germans of today treat WW2 in a more mature way than us Brits!

Thirdly, Geoff made the point about the rise of the Far Right in Germany in recent years but it is in my view significant that the focus of the AfD for example has been in former East German states, where despite great efforts, the economy still lags behind the wealthier West, and perhaps it also illustrates that the legacy of Soviet-style communism society has more in common with right wing nationalist politics than western liberal (social) democracy.

Finally, it is significant that Germany made significant commitments early to the Iron & Steel Community, then the Common Market and subsequently the EU. Of course there were economic advantages to this for the Germans, but equally it is important not to downplay the political importance of tying formerly warring European states in a form of economic, then social and (however falteringly) political integration, the very opposite of the belief that German security was dependent upon being stronger and more aggressive than her neighbours, which had been the experience in the first half of the 20th century.

2. Paula asked why there was no restitution or reparation demanded after the war, and others have commented upon this. My observations are that the Allies had learned the lessons of WW1 and the Treaty of Versailles and the failure of that 'Carthaginian Peace'. The Allies, as others have pointed out, also found that German economy and society was literally on its

knees in 1945 so for example reparations on the scale of 1919 were simply not feasible. A key factor though was the changed geo-political landscape in Europe. I think that the Allies were keen to develop Germany as a bulwark against the greater threat (as it seemed to them at the time) of Soviet control of Europe.

3. One key issue for the history of this period was the sheer scale and human suffering involved in the migration (voluntary or more often forced) of German peoples from the lands they had inhabited for centuries as a result of the war and re-drawn national boundaries after the conflict finished. The millions who fled before the Red Army advance in 1944-5 were followed by forced expulsions of huge numbers of ethnic German people from the Baltic states, Poland, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere and this placed huge pressure on not only German society and economy, but also on the Allies occupying the country in the post-war period. It is a mark of the success of the German economic and social model in the immediate post-war years, that these people and their descendants have been integrated successfully into what was a smaller geographic area for the (West) German state. There is an argument that Angela Merkel's open door policy to migrants a few years ago reflects a continuation of this approach and a willingness, not seen every where in Europe, to welcome and take responsibility for those seeking asylum and refuge.

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Comments from Phil:

Just wanted to add some ( late, apologies ) comments reference our topic for discussion tomorrow.

First of all many thanks to Matthew for his excellent comprehensive and thoughtful analysis, followed on by further excellent material from everyone else.

My somewhat eclectic thoughts are drawn from two books I have been reading recently:

The secret Lives of the Nazis ( The Hidden History of the Third Reich ) by Paul Roland

The Shortest History of Germany by James Hawes ( Not that short actually! )

Followed by some of my own experiences of working in Germany in the summer of 1969 ( I may have mentioned some of these at a previous History Group meeting? ) and working with German Engineers / managers during my career.

The Shortest History of Germany endorses the comments others have made regarding The Treaty of Versailles and the subsequent punitive reparations placed on defeated Germany and their people. The subsequent hyperinflation and all its consequences of valueless money left a penniless and starving population vulnerable to anyone offering away out. Enter The Nazis!

I have had conversations with German Managers during my career whose families were ruined at this time. I would judge that most of them were driven, to work and be successful, in work and their rewards. More so than ourselves?

The Secret Life of the Nazis presents a depressing and frightening picture of Hitler, Goering, Himmler, Goebbels, Bormann, and others living a life of luxury at their people's expense while they starved, leading them eventually to defeat and poverty. Hitler and his inner circle were clearly

addicted to a frightening cocktail of hard drugs. Interestingly Hitler and other members of his inner circle had Jewish blood running through their veins!

At that time Nazi Germany was a Gangster State run by criminals, psychopaths, sadists and self-serving second rate bureaucrats! ( to quote from the book }

In the summer of 1969 ( following completion of the second year of my degree ) I worked in the Swabian Alps in Southern Germany ( between The Black Forest and Stuttgart to the West and Bavaria and Munich to the East ) for Pumpenfabrik Urach, a typical German ' Mittelstand' company. They made specialist pumping equipment for the Chemical Sector and exported their products Worldwide. The company was run by the Commercial Director and Technical Director.

The Commercial Director spoke fluent English, French and three or four other languages. He spent his life flying the world seeking and supporting the work they did. I can remember him telling me that he rarely came across any British counterparts on his travels! Where are they? What are they doing he would ask me! I wonder has much changed over the last 50 years?

I had less contact with the Technical Director, who was not as fluent in English. What I do remember clearly to this day is July 21st that year. The day of the Apollo moon landing. The Technical Director had been at University with Wernher von Braun, who had worked on the development of V1 and V2 Rockets and was then leading much of the NASA's work on the moon landing. On that day he had the factory offices and working areas kitted out with TV's and work stopped to allow all employees to watch Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin land the Apollo capsule on the Moon. I couldn't imagine that happening in the UK then, or even today!

While I was working there that summer I was welcomed and treated well by most if not all employees. Outside working hours and at weekends I was well looked after by a number of employees my age. They were all keen to practice their English. Happy days! Would German students undertaking similar vacation assignments in the UK have had similar experiences? Then or even now?

Finally coming to my more later experiences of working with companies manufacturing and supporting their equipment in service here is my summary.

Germans? Professional, Business Like, disciplined, good design solutions, not the best in terms of innovation / flair.

Italians? Good Innovation / Flair. With regard to Business like / Disciplined Approach? Highly Variable!

Americans? Very much summarised by that old saying USA and UK? Two Countries separated by a common language!

Thinking about it, all of the above are characterised by the cars they have produced over the years!

