

# From Division to De-Nazification: The History of East and West Germany

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## Division

How and why were the two Germanies divided after the Second World War? Was it because of Stalin's aggressive policy to put under the Soviet yoke as much of Europe as possible? Was it a defensive act on the part of the occupying powers in western Germany against communist world domination, all of which was embodied in the 'Berlin blockade' of 1948-49?

Not quite. Let us go back to the Potsdam and Yalta conferences, where Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt had agreed to three key items:

1. The four Ds: disarmament, demilitarisation, denazification and democratisation of Germany.
2. Reparations, vital for USSR's recovery.
3. German unity.

And Stalin had even agreed to three occupation zones, with each symbolically represented in Berlin, despite it being deep in the Soviet zone. (How the French ever managed to get a shoe in was beyond many, since they had embraced the Nazis a little too enthusiastically.) This was despite the fact that the USSR had exerted by far the major effort and lost the most in winning the war.

How did these three items fare after the end of the war?

1. *The four Ds.* Only in the eastern, Soviet sector was there any significant progress on these items. The occupying forces in the western areas were too keen to rearm Germany, which already began by the early 1950s. They found 'ex-' Nazis willing participants in the anti-communist struggle, and they fostered pliant governments.

Of course, Stalin too favoured a government sympathetic to the USSR's concerns, but he believed this would happen through popular groundswell.

2. *Reparations.* Soon enough, the occupying forces in the western zones reneged on the earlier agreements. The last thing the Anglo-Americans wanted was for significant resources, technology and money going to the USSR, so they stalled and blocked reparations from the west of Germany.

3. *Unity.* Stalin favoured political unity, the Anglo-Americans did not – this is perfectly clear from the increasingly rancorous discussions over what was to be done with Germany. Whenever Stalin or Molotov or other Soviet representatives pushed for a unified German government, the Anglo-Americans countered by arguing that the economic situation had to be addressed first. In other words, they wanted to axe reparations and keep Germany divided.

Why? The Americans and British could see that communist parties were becoming extremely popular, not only in Germany but across Europe. For his part, Stalin hoped that this 'new democratic' wave would continue in a united Germany and lead to a government favourably disposed to the USSR. In March 1948, Stalin urged the east German communists to draft a constitution for the whole of Germany as a beginning point for discussion with western politicians. He was even prepared for a non-socialist government as long as it was 'democratic and peace-loving'. Yet he was realistic enough to see that the Americans in particular would not agree since it would threaten their desire to control western Europe. On that point he was correct: the Anglo-Americans were certainly not interested in such a united Germany, for then it would risk falling out of their control. So they preferred a divided Germany.

Events unfolded. In June 1948, the UK, France and USA issued a communiqué stating their intention to form a western German state. A few days later a new currency was introduced in the western zones. By the end of June, Stalin ordered restrictions on access to West Berlin. Despite all the western propaganda concerning the 'Berlin blockade', it was not a blockade. Air access was permitted the whole time, for the purpose of supplies. Stalin's reason for the restrictions was simple: he wanted to get the former allies back to the negotiating table. As soon as they agreed, the restrictions were lifted in May 1949.

Despite clear Soviet desires for unity, the four Ds and reparations, the Anglo-Americans were simply buying time. By this time NATO had already been formed. In September 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany was declared and the first formal meetings of government held. The east had no option but to respond with its own state soon afterwards.

### **De-Nazification, East and West**

One of the standard lines you hear out these days is that East Germany never went through a proper process of 'denazification' (*Entnazifizierung*), unlike the good people in the West. Instead, goes the narrative, nearly all the ex-nazis in the east simply joined the new communist government, which explains the 'totalitarian regime', the dreaded Stasi and now the supposed burgeoning of neo-nazi groups in the east. This dodgy narrative indicates that the struggle of the two Germanies is far from over.

To begin with, it ignores a rather inconvenient fact: communism was and is implacably anti-fascist. The Soviet Red Army's victory over Hitler's Germany (for which the western front was a diversionary tactic of limited success) was explicitly celebrated as a victory over fascism. As soon as the war over, virtually all the nazis in the east were arrested, banned from any involvement whatsoever and put in 're-education camps'. And in good old Stalinist fashion, a goodly number of them were granted an early funeral.

Meanwhile in the western occupation zones, the Americans made a show of denazification, with a massive censorship program that spent most of its time censoring criticism of the occupation. At the same time, the Americans shipped out most of the Third Reich's leading nuclear scientists, 'intelligence' officers and whatnot, in order to bolster their anti-communist struggle. Not a few of them were awarded prestigious US medals. The British and French didn't even bother with the show of denazification. They wanted people to run the civil service and since a significant number of the intelligentsia and the civil

service had been nazis not long before, they were simply reappointed. The British and French made a few token arrests of a few elite members of the Nazi party.

But even the Americans gave up on their efforts by the early 1950s, under pressure from Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. In one measure after another, 'former' Nazis were released from prisons and pardoned. These included those responsible for dragging people off to prison, for shootings, executions, causing bodily injury and so on. Above all, ['article 31'](#) removed restrictions on persons 'incriminated' with the Third Reich, since they had suffered so much since the end of the war. In an early example of anti-discrimination laws, they were given favoured treatment for government, educational, medical and many other positions. Why? The new enemy was communism and who better to help in the fight against communism than unreconstructed fascists.

So maybe there was some truth in the East German decision to call the wall they built the *Antifaschistischer Schutzwall*, the Anti-Facist Security Wall.