

The Effects of the Second World War

By the end of the Second World War, it was evident that something had gone horribly wrong with Western civilization. For the second time in just over three decades, Europe had plunged into a terribly destructive war in which tens of millions of soldiers and civilians had died. The people of Europe learned more about the terrible atrocities committed by the Nazis in eastern Europe, especially the murder of six million Jews. These catastrophes, moreover, had followed the Great Depression of the 1930s and the failure of the League of Nations.

This reading examines how Europeans and the world dealt with the postwar world by focusing on three topics: the creation of the United Nations and international economic organizations, the Nuremberg trials, and the fallout from the Holocaust. In each of these instances, society and governments attempted to remedy what went wrong – by establishing stronger political and economic cooperation, by prosecuting the guilty and bringing the truth to light, and by destroying nationalistic and jingoistic myths.

The Creation of the United Nations and New Economic Organizations

Despite the failure of the League of Nations to stop the outbreak of a second world war, many leaders still believed in the possibilities of international cooperation. It was generally believed that the League had been too weak to stop the aggressive maneuvering of Germany, Japan, and Italy; a stronger organization was therefore needed. Moreover, leaders hoped to avoid a recurrence of the Great Depression; one of the lessons, they believed, was that the Depression could have been avoided had countries not raised tariff barriers and shut off international trade. This led to a series of economic agreements and organizations to structure the postwar international economy.

The first attempt at defining what the postwar world would look like was the Atlantic Charter. In the Charter, which was signed by 26 countries, including the United States and Great Britain, the signatories pledged to fight for better economic and social conditions for the people of the world and the end of subjugation and aggression. The Atlantic Charter called for freer trade and freedom of the seas. Its precepts were not binding, though they were forerunners of later wartime agreements. More importantly, the Atlantic Charter was an agreement between a group of countries with diverse interests; it was proof that countries could work together.

Further attempts to define world organizations attracted more countries. Most importantly, the Soviet Union joined discussions about postwar organizations. At a crucial set of discussions at the Dumbarton Oaks mansion in Washington, DC, from August 21 to October 7, 1944, many countries, including the Soviet Union, China, the United States, and Great Britain, agreed on the guidelines for a postwar United Nations. This included the formation of the United Nations Security Council, on which those four countries would be permanent members. They would also have a veto over any Security Council resolutions. France would later win a permanent Security Council seat and a veto.

Just prior to the Dumbarton Oaks conference, from July 1 to 22 the Allied countries met at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire to discuss the makeup of the postwar economy. The conference eventually agreed to create the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), which is now known as the World Bank. The main idea behind the conference was to ensure continued prosperity through collaboration, American-led relief (in the case of the IBRD), and free trade.

When the Allies finally defeated the Axis powers, the United Nations became a reality. On June 25, 1945, fifty countries adopted the draft charter of the United Nations unanimously. They signed it the next day. The UN held its first General Assembly and its first Security Council meeting in January 1946 in London; on February 1, 1946, Trygve Lie, a Norwegian, was named the first UN Secretary-General.

The Nuremberg Trials

Following the war the victors sought to assign individual responsibility for the crimes of the Nazis; they did this through military tribunals. The most notable of these tribunals were the Nuremberg trials, held at the Palace of Justice in Nuremberg from October 20, 1945 to October 1, 1945.

There were many challenges in determining how to prosecute and punish aggressors in the war. First, it was difficult to determine who should bear responsibility for crimes. The British prime minister Winston Churchill, for instance, advocated the use of summary execution for National Socialist leaders, while Joseph Stalin, the leader of the Soviets, suggested executing 50,000 to 100,000 German officers. The treaties signed after World War I provided little guidance, particularly regarding the use of weapons in war – while there were many treaties written about the use of gas in war, there were no treaties about the appropriate uses of air power. Gas had been a common weapon used in the First World War; in World War II little gas was used, but there were many aerial assaults. The degree of violence in World War II was unprecedented, and laws and war treaties did not address this scale of violence. Additionally, after World War I there was inadequate pursuit of those who had waged war. While the delegates at the Paris Peace Conference had discussed the need for an international war tribunal to try the German kaiser, the kaiser was able to flee to the Netherlands (a neutral country in the war) and avoid prosecution. The Allies instead allowed the German *Reichsgericht* to try 900 Germans for war crimes at the Leipzig Trials. The list of 900 names was eventually reduced to 12 individuals who were either acquitted or given prison sentences of two months to four years. This previous attempt at a war crimes tribunal was largely seen as lenient and ineffective.

During World War II, the Allies' desire to punish the Germans solidified. In 1942 the Soviet Union, China, the United States, and the United Kingdom issued the Declaration of the Four Nations on General Security, which stated the Allies' intention to prosecute the major war criminals responsible. This intention was reiterated at the Yalta Conference in Berlin in 1945. The Allied powers agreed on the legal basis and format of the trial on August 8, 1945, in the London Charter, and allowed France a place on the tribunal. Nuremberg, inside the U.S.-controlled zone of West Germany, was chosen as

the location for the trials despite the protest of the Soviets, who wanted Berlin to host the trials. Nuremberg, however, was largely intact following the destruction of the war and the Palace of Justice was mostly undamaged, large enough to hold the trials, and was adjacent to a large prison complex. The city had also been the site of the Nuremberg Rallies (Nazi propaganda rallies held in the 1920s and 1930s) where the Nuremberg Laws, which codified Nazi ideology and anti-Semitism, were introduced. As such, the city was seen as a fitting place to try the leaders of the war. The trials were restricted to the “punishment of the major war criminals of the European Axis countries.” Two hundred German war criminals were tried at Nuremberg, while 1,600 others were prosecuted under the same principles through subsidiary tribunals.

The International Military Tribunal prosecuted three categories of crimes: crimes against peace (such as planning, preparing, initiating, waging a war of aggression), war crimes (violations of the laws or customs of war, such as the murder or ill treatment of prisoners of war or civilians), and crimes against humanity (murder, extermination, deportation, enslavement against any peoples during or before the war, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country in question). The third category of crimes was, of course, closely connected to the discovery of the German death camps; nearly three million Jews and one million other Europeans (including Roma, Russians, Poles, communists, and homosexuals, among others) were murdered in the camps.

The first session of the International Military Tribunal opened in November 1945 and indicted 24 individuals and seven organizations, including the leadership of the Nazi Party, the Gestapo (secret police), and the Sturmabteilung (or SS, the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party). Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, and Joseph Goebbels were not tried, as all three had committed suicide in the months before the indictments. The majority of those convicted were sentenced to death by hanging. This trial also helped to set a precedent for future convictions.

More trials followed at Nuremberg that dealt with other segments of society most to blame for making the war and its atrocities possible. These trials focused on people in the medical, legal, and industrial sectors of German society. The medical trial was held from December 1946 to April 1947. Twenty-three of the leading doctors in the Nazi program were tried for their experimentation in the concentration camps and in hospitals. Sixteen were found guilty and seven were executed. This trial led to the creation of the Nuremberg Code of research ethics for medical experimentation on human beings.

The German legal system was another focus of the Nuremberg trials. Sixteen defendants from the Ministry of Justice, the Special Courts and the People’s Courts were tried to determine if they were responsible for enforcing and furthering the Nazi program of racial purity through racial laws. Ten of the defendants were found guilty.

Other trials dealt with business leaders who were charged with enabling the Nazis to prepare for war and engage in war crimes. IG Farben, for instance, was a conglomerate of German chemical firms that supplied the death camps with Zyklon B, the poison gas used in the gas chambers. They also helped the war effort in Germany by developing a process to synthesize gasoline and rubber from coal. Of all the Nuremberg trials, these were the least successful. The nature of the crimes was ambiguous and contested. In the IG Farben trial, for instance, of the 24 defendants, 10

were acquitted and 13 were sentenced to prison sentences of 1½ to 8 years (one of the defendants, Max Brüggemann, was removed from the trial because of illness).

In general, however, the process of adjudicating war crimes was quite successful. The public nature of the trials brought attention to the atrocities of World War II and led to a sense of German responsibility and shame. The trials also instilled universal notions of justice that are binding, even if not written in international law. The main principle – that the world community was willing to prosecute indisputably criminal acts, even acts taken by the people in power in a major country – has guided subsequent legal campaigns against disreputable regimes ever since.

Remembering the Holocaust

The Nuremberg trials were one of the first attempts to deal with the Holocaust. Perhaps the most important efforts at remembrance have occurred in Germany, the country whose people had perpetrated this genocide. Though German leaders – and the German people – were initially reluctant to face the enormity of their country's crimes, their eventual attempts to accept responsibility have been praiseworthy.

A member of the Christian Democratic Union, Konrad Adenauer took office in 1949 as West Germany's first chancellor, and he stayed until 1963. He had previously been the mayor of Cologne. Adenauer had difficulty accepting that Germans were being tried for war crimes. In his first state of the union address, he said that the government would look "to put the past behind us." He was worried about Germans getting expelled from the rest of Europe (several million Germans were expelled from neighboring countries after the war – more on this in subunit 8.3.3). Many Germans shared these concerns, so Adenauer's desire to protect the expelled Germans won him much support.

While Adenauer was convinced that by 1949 Germans were tired of denazification, which involved prosecuting Nazi leaders and removing Nazis from positions of authority, his opponent, Karl Schumacher of the Social Democratic Party, was a strong advocate of dealing with the past. He had lost an arm in Dachau (he'd been there because he was a Social Democrat), and was very frail, but he was a powerful speaker. Schumacher believed that the people who had committed war crimes should be punished for their actions. Adenauer prevailed, however. Both he and the Americans believed that some former Nazis could be assets to West Germany; although they had disreputable past, their ability to do technical or specialized work made them essential to the country's success. By 1950, therefore, West German denazification efforts had mostly stopped.

Despite Adenauer's reluctance to speak of Nazi atrocities, Germany nonetheless made some amends. As denazification began to diminish, Adenauer chose to place greater emphasis on reparations than on the prosecution of Nazis. After 1945, Israel began to ask for restitution, saying that it was Germany's moral responsibility. Adenauer tried to push the issue away, but the Israelis put strong pressure on both Germany and the U.S., and they had great influence in both places. It took time, but eventually West Germany agreed to pay restitution for the Holocaust in the Luxembourg Agreement of September 1952. The payments were intended as compensation for Jewish slave labor,

the persecution of the Jews, and theft of Jewish property. Germany continued these payments to Israel for fourteen years; the Israelis used it to invest in infrastructure for their new state.

Germany continues to make payments to individuals affected by the Holocaust. Holocaust survivors, for instance, received compensation payments from the German government beginning in 1951. In the 1990s, relatives of Jews who were killed in the Holocaust investigated the theft of money that murdered Jews had deposited in Swiss banks. Other investigations, such as one into what happened to the life insurance policies of Jews killed in the Holocaust, are ongoing.

The East German government made no attempt to memorialize the Jews or recognize German responsibility for the Holocaust. The Communists said that the Holocaust was the result of capitalism, so they did not need to take any responsibility. More attention was paid to Communists who had suffered in the Second World War, especially Russian Communists, than to Jews. For instance, the East German government paid no compensation to Jews, but it did compensate Poles and Russians for Germany's role in the Second World War. This emphasis reflected a tendency throughout communist Eastern Europe to emphasize the suffering of Communists over all others. The Polish communist government, for instance, built subdivisions that abut the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp; many argue that these construction projects showed a profound lack of respect for Jewish victims.

Despite the reparations payments that West Germany made beginning in the early 1950s, most of its citizens were reluctant to reckon with the country's Nazi past. This changed in 1958 when a police officer was found guilty of murdering 4000 Jews. The trial served as a wakeup call; many Germans wondered how someone like that could be living among them. Justice ministers in the German provinces – though not the federal minister – began to investigate crimes by individuals involved in the Holocaust. Up to that point, war-crimes trials had only focused on those in high office, and those who had been involved at lower levels had gone free.

Though the statute of limitations for war crimes was twenty years, the West German government steadily pushed the limitation back, and then abolished it entirely. They did not want the date to pass and then later find that someone who had committed atrocities was still free.

Summary

- Allied leaders hoped to avoid the mistakes of the interwar period by founding a series of powerful international organizations. The United Nations was designed to be the more powerful successor to the League of Nations, while the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade sought to create open markets and avoid another worldwide depression.
- The Allies sought to punish the perpetrators of the Holocaust and of Nazi war crimes in the Nuremberg trials.
- Germans were initially reluctant to accept the full measure of their responsibility for the Holocaust, but they eventually did – and still do today.