



2021

## A Perfect Recipe: The Reemergence of Democratization in the Federal Republic of Germany

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### Recommended Citation

Williams, Rachel (2022) "A Perfect Recipe: The Reemergence of Democratization in the Federal Republic of Germany," *Res Publica - Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 26

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica/vol26/iss1/12>

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### Abstract

After German dictator Adolf Hitler presumably committed suicide in 1945, his authoritarian regime fell, the Allies won World War II, and democracy reemerged in the form of the Federal Republic of Germany (F.R.G.). The transition to democracy was made possible by the intervention of international actors (the western Allies), the discontinuity of the Nazi party and its elites, and the formation of new, democratic parties (the Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union, and Social Democratic Party). Each of these factors combined to result in a high-functioning democracy by 1960 in which democratic participation was encouraged. This case is unique in its smooth transition and successful outcome.

# A Perfect Recipe: The Reemergence of Democratization in the Federal Republic of Germany

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## **Abstract**

After German dictator Adolf Hitler presumably committed suicide in 1945, his authoritarian regime fell, the Allies won World War II, and democracy reemerged in the form of the Federal Republic of Germany (F.R.G.). The transition to democracy was made possible by the intervention of international actors (the western Allies), the discontinuity of the Nazi party and its elites, and the formation of new, democratic parties (the Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union, and Social Democratic Party). Each of these factors combined to result in a high-functioning democracy by 1960 in which democratic participation was encouraged. This case is unique in its smooth transition and successful outcome.

Today, the Federal Republic of Germany is a robust democracy and among the freest countries in the world. In 2019, the Freedom House Index rated the Federal Republic of Germany a 94 out of 100 on their scale based on political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House Index). This healthy condition of democracy has not always been the norm for Germany, however. With the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party in the 1930s, the Weimar Republic fell to authoritarianism. The Allies' victory over the Third Reich in World War II marked a turning point in German history. The country's transition from authoritarianism to democracy was uniquely successful. Providing a foundation for the strong regime Germany has today, the transition brought about a new democratic constitution and widespread political enfranchisement. This case, the Federal Republic of Germany from 1945 through 1960, was, indeed, the perfect recipe which created a prospering democracy.

This case's reemergence of democracy began in less than ideal conditions. The Allies' victory on May 7, 1945, left Germany in shambles. The economy was in complete distress as it collapsed in 1945. With the war over, Germans who had fled to the countryside now found their city homes destroyed, contributing to an estimated 15 million German refugees at the end of 1945 (Dobbins et al. 2003). On top of this, the German people were obviously low in spirits as they again found themselves to be the blamed party and on the 'short end of the stick.' So, while democratization may have seemed rather difficult and far from voluntary, the German people had no other option.

With Hitler's unconditional surrender, the Allies were in complete power. The Soviet Union took control of all East Germany, while the United States, the United Kingdom, and France split West Germany. When it was clear Joseph Stalin was unwilling to cooperate in the democratization in Germany, the ironically titled German Democratic Republic became a separate entity. West Germany, or the Federal Republic of Germany, consisted of eleven Lander, or states. In retrospect, this separation was of great importance to the democratization process. The people of West and East Germany had many social cleavages which would have made a cooperative transition far more challenging. When referring to Allies in the future, it should be assumed the Soviet Union is not included.

By 1949, the effects of the Allies' influence in West Germany was becoming clear as the country held its first free and fair federal parliamentary election. This election marked the gradual stabilizing democracy. West Germany became a member of the second phase in the classic three waves of democracy. After 1949, the Allied military governments began returning sovereignty to Germany (Dobbins et al. 2003). The reemergence of democracy cannot be entirely accredited to international actors, however. In fact, along with international actors,

democratization in Germany may not have been achievable if not for party and elite discontinuity and the emergence of new, democratic parties. These three ‘ingredients,’ each occurring in ideal measure, contributed to the ‘perfect recipe’ that the reemergence of democracy in Germany post-WWII through 1960 created.

First, the focus remains on the influence of international actors in the case. Morlino emphasized that cases in the discontinuous pattern, where democracies emerge after warfare, heavily rely on international actors (Morlino 2019). This reliance applies to this case as Germany was in too poor of shape to survive long without any aid. Furthermore, “developing a successful ending of democratic transition can be explained by the role of international actors” (Morlino 2019). The Allied powers guided the democratization process through bringing about stability and order, growing democracy from the ground up, and reeducating the German people.

After the violent trauma of WWII, the Allied powers immediately worked to restore stability and order. Taking complete control of a people they had just defeated, the Allies had to ensure minimum resistance and maximum peacefulness. The U.S., for example, formally established an organized constable force to keep civil order in their zone in July 1946 (Dobbins et al. 2003). These efforts worked toward laying a stable foundation for the democratization process to build upon. The Allies also provided an abundance of humanitarian assistance and financial aid (Dobbins et al. 2003). Keeping crime low and people fed and housed led to greater acceptance of the Allies by the Germans.

Next, the Allies began building democracy from the ground up. This method is one Mill would particularly be fond of. He believed that effective democratic education should begin at local levels (Mill 1976). This way citizens are able to actively participate in decisions that directly impact them. The Allies, especially in the U.S. sector, focused on a “grass roots”

approach (Dobbins et al. 2003). German citizens were taught democratic principles in their small communities before their lessons were applied on a larger scale. Parties, for example, were only allowed at the community level from August 1945 until November that same year when the Allies permitted state-level organizations (Bernhard 2005). Again, this tactic taught the German people how parties should function democratically in an easily accessible and participative way. Because of this, the German people learned the basics of democratic political participation on a smaller level so they could later apply their learnings to the more intricate and complex federal system, just as Mill would have liked.

The Allies also understood that democratization would not be successful without the reeducation of the German people. With hopes of eliminating the influence of the Nazi party on young minds, the Allies permanently shut down all Adolf Hitler schools, National Political Education Institutes, and Nazi Leaders colleges (Plischke 1947). These schools were founded on authoritarianism and the principles of the Nazi party and, therefore, could not exist in the reemerging democracy. The Allies also purged all ordinary schools, revising textbooks along the way so courses are now “oriented towards developing democratic and humanitarian principles and values” (Plischke 1947). The Allies made sure the German youth were no longer being fed propaganda in their education. Moreover, the Allies prohibited anyone with Nazi ties or loyalties from becoming or continuing as a teacher (Plischke 1947). Each of these steps ensured that the youth would no longer learn authoritarian ideals and could begin a reeducation in democracy. Thus, the Allies reeducated the German people through the promotion of democratic ideals.

Overall, the Allies helped the F.R.G.’s transition to democracy immensely. Without the assistance and guidance of these international actors, the West German people may not have reached such a strong democracy so soon. This is not to say that the intervention of international

actors is generally successful in building democratic regimes abroad, especially when the transition is more forced than it is voluntary. Now haunted by the memories of Afghanistan and Iraq, Americans especially may struggle to find instances in which their country was successful in guiding a foreign nation to democracy, but this case is an exception. Alongside the U.K. and France, the U.S. did an exceptional job in West Germany. The intervention of international actors was incredibly helpful in the reemergence of democracy in the F.R.G.

Intervention of international actors is a common theme in Morlino's discontinuity pattern, a pattern founded on the discontinuity of parties and party elites during a democratic transition. Morlino believed party and elite discontinuity was a normal result of warfare and actually named Germany post-WWII as an example of this pattern (Morlino 2019). After defeat in WWII, authoritarian Hitler was assumed to have committed suicide in his bunker. This left the Nazi party to dissolve at the hands of the war victors. Discontinuity of the Nazi party and its elites took place in two major phases: the Nuremberg trials and general denazification in society.

The yearlong Nuremberg trials began in November 1945 in Nuremberg, Germany. The purpose of the trials was to punish officials and organizations that had committed war crimes or crimes against humanity. The International Military Tribunal served as prosecutors. Of the 185 officials indicted, the Allies "issued an indictment against 24 men, charging them with systematic murder of millions of people and with planning and carrying out the war in Europe" (Dobbins et al. 2003). A handful of convicted were sentenced to death and some committed suicide to escape sentences. Organizations as a whole were also convicted, including the Nazi leadership corps, the Schutzstaffel, and the Gestapo (Plischke 1947). Not only had these officials and organizations committed heinous war crimes, but many were actively involved in the carrying out the genocide in the Holocaust. These members of society had broken a trust Robert

Putnam spoke so highly of. Giving a description applicable to the case, Putnam said: “if the state has coercive force, then those who run the state will use that force in their own interest at the expense of the rest of society” (Putnam 1993). The Nazi elites took advantage of public support by wreaking havoc on the world and Jewish citizens. They broke the honesty and trust that Putnam held so dearly. While high-ranking elites were ‘discontinued’ through punishment in the Nuremberg trials, most ordinary members of the party remained in society.

The F.R.G., then, had to undergo a denazification in its society. The Potsdam Agreement, produced in the mid-summer 1945 conference of Allied leaders, called for the destruction of “all Nazi institutions, to ensure that they are not revived in any form, and to prevent all Nazi and militarist activity or propaganda” (Plischke 1947). Nazism had become the norm in German society in the past decade, and the reversal of their influence required immediate dissolution. Any Nazi officials or supporters were removed from public and semi-public office (Plischke 1947). This discontinuity closed off their public appeal to the people. The Allies also put an end to all Nazi propaganda. All German information services, “including the radio, press, books and periodicals, films, theaters, concerts, and other forms of entertainment were placed under strict Military Government supervision” to eliminate the flow of anti-democratic ideals (Plischke 1947). Even seemingly frivolous and harmless entertainment had been susceptible to Nazi messages and was immediately under the control of the Allies. The Allies had to monitor the media so Nazi sympathizers would not encourage resistance. In the workforce, Military Government Law No. 8 forbid businesses from employing a member of the Nazi party in a position above ordinary labor (Plischke 1947). This law was intended to keep Nazi loyalists from managerial positions. All these denazification tactics served toward one common goal in society:

“a realization that the German State is a servant of the people” (Plischke 1947). This realization acknowledged that the government must be democratic and responsive to the will of the people.

The discontinuity of the Nazi party and its top elites was essential to the reemergence of democracy in the F.R.G. As Morlino pointed out, it was natural, of course, as a result of warfare. The victors (the Allies) had control over the elites’ fate. Had elites not been taken out of places of power, they may have encouraged the German people to resist the Allies’ occupation, therefore, slowing the democratization process. Besides, with the Nazi party eliminated, room was made for new players in the game.

The final ingredient in Germany’s “perfect recipe for democracy” was the emergence of new, democratic parties. Returning to Morlino, party organizations often emerge “during the final period of transition” and become anchors in young democracies (Morlino 2019). These anchoring parties provide dissatisfied people an outlet to voice their frustration as opposed to turning to rioting the streets in anarchy. Additionally, “parties acquire some measure of direction over civil society through . . . the organization of the parties themselves and the creation of binding collective identities” (Morlino 2019). Parties gauge public opinion and set policies and agendas, inviting voters to consider party membership as an identity shared with many others. At the Potsdam Conference, it was decided that “all democratic political parties with rights of assembly and public discussion shall be allowed and encouraged throughout Germany” (Dobbins et al. 2003). Three parties emerged as big players after the war: the right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its sister Christian Democratic Union (CSU), and the left Social Democratic Party (SPD). These parties served as “catch-all” entities where they bridged more identities than they bonded. For example, the CDU/CSU combined Catholic and Protestant voters. Some credit the moderateness of the parties to democratic success as they promoted compromise and stability

(Bernhard 2005). While many other parties formed, these three remain the biggest players in Germany today.

These parties, along with the supervision and guidance of Allied governments, worked to create the F.R.G.'s new constitution. The constitution, referred to as Basic Law (or Grundgesetz in German), was enforced on May 23, 1949, just months before the first election. It had been “drafted and passed by the Parliamentary Council in 1948-49. This council consisted of 65 members delegated by the Lander parliaments” (Kincaid et al. 2005). Western in style, Basic Law created a federal, bicameral system with three branches. In the legislative branch, the Bundestag became the lower house of parliament in which half the representatives are elected in single-member districts in “first-past-the-post” contests and the other half through proportional representation from party lists. The Bundesrat became the upper house which represents the Lander.

The constitution was written to prevent the rise of another authoritarian regime akin to the Third Reich. In this way, Basic Law made sure no one was disadvantaged by their “language, race, homeland, origin, gender, or political opinions. Basic political rights, such as the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association were also guaranteed” (Kincaid et al. 2005). These promises were made to promote equality for all people, especially after a history of racial superiority feelings. Article 21 of Basic Law also regulated the constitutional status of parties, requiring the “internal organizations of parties [to] conform to democratic principles” (Kincaid et al. 2005). Again, this was written to prevent the rise of anti-democratic parties which were now deemed unconstitutional. Unlike the American Constitution, Basic Law additionally guaranteed enfranchisement to everyone over the age twenty-one in its original form, regardless of gender or race. Comparatively, American women had only been granted suffrage per a U.S. constitutional

amendment not even three decades before, and African Americans were still basically disenfranchised until 1965. Basic Law provided the foundation for the future of the country. Its passage paved the way for the first federal election.

The first federal election was free and fair and a monumental moment in the F.R.G.'s history. Adam Przeworski noted competitive elections are a core element of democracy. It is true that elections are essentially an institution in which “free people can struggle peacefully to improve the world according to their different visions, values, and interests” (Przeworski 2018). They are, then, important to the health of a democratic regime. In this 1949 election, the CDU/CSU won with 31% of the vote over its SPD rival who received 29.2% (Spicka 2018). These three biggest parties received a combined 72.1% of the vote (Spicka 2018), solidifying their fate as highly impactful organizations. The victorious party and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer formed the first coalition government with two smaller parties. While there is no record of voter turnout from the 1949 election or in subsequent elections through 1960, voter enfranchisement was widespread, and participation was encouraged through advertisement.

Beyond the 1949 election, parties grew as did the young democracy. As technology progressed, parties began using surveys, polls, and research. Adenauer was pleased with this new mass of polling as he saw the tool useful for managing public opinion (Spicka 2002). Polls allow parties to easily hear directly from voters on what issues mattered to them, allowing parties to develop more effective platforms and political advertisements. Of course, it is important to recognize that as a result of progressive technology and greater stability in the new regime, parties became somewhat oligarchical. Robert Michels believed that all major parties, even the most democratic, would eventually become oligarchical by default simply because of

fundamental modern organization (Sluyter-Beltrao 2017). In this sense, new elites formed in parties. This time, however, elites knew better than to test the limits of democracy.

In all, the emergence of new parties helped the democratic transition hugely. Three major moderate parties formed as key players in the F.R.G. Serving as anchors, the parties gave the people opportunities to make their voices heard and feel truly participative in their government.

Gradually, the Allies returned sovereignty to the German government. They had immediately shut down all German society at first, but as time progressed power was gradually given back. Occupation officially ended in 1955 after the F.R.G. became a completely sovereign state. Troops still remained in West Germany through the 80s, however, as the tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union escalated into the Cold War.

The case of reemergence of democracy in the F.R.G. directly after WWII through 1960 is a unique one. While there were many obstacles to overcome, namely economic and humanitarian, the mission seemed destined to succeed. The ‘ingredients’ of intervention of international actors, discontinuity of party and party elites, and the emergence of new, democratic parties all contributed to the ‘perfect recipe.’ Democratization in the F.R.G. would probably not have been possible if not for these factors. This perfection makes the case quite abnormal. As history has shown, transitions to democracy are not usually so smooth or successful. It is also important to note that in this case the intervention of foreign countries was beneficial, but that is not typically true. The U.S. has arguably caused more issues than solved in “democratizing” countries. Britain also made a mess of the Middle East in the early 20th century when they drew country lines. Luckily for the F.R.G., the nation was divided in a purposeful and educated way. No single country had control over West Germany either, so cooperation among the western Allies also sealed the success. International intervention, along with party and elite

discontinuity and the emergence of new, democratic parties contributed to the success of the democratic transition. Looking at Germany's position today, it is easy to trace its strength of democracy back to its reemergence directly post-WWII and in the critical decade after.

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