

Germany's Post War Changes

The atrocities of the Second World War are well documented. For those living in the United States, what occurred in Germany in the years directly following the end of the war is not as well known. Germany's post-war history has had a profound impact on its modern society, and the effects of the continuous societal and cultural changes that the country has undergone last to this day.

Starting on May 8th, 1945, Germany submitted to unconditional surrender, ending WWII on the European front. The Allied Powers of Britain, France, the United States and the Soviet Union occupied Germany and divided it into four areas of oversight, dividing the capital city of Berlin into four zones as well.¹ The Allied Powers took Germany's state sovereignty, placing all powers of the German government under management of the occupying nations. By 1949, the different intentions between the Western allies and the Soviet Union became clear, and the former British, French and American blocks formed into the country known as the Federal Republic of Germany or FRG, with the Soviet zone turning into the German Democratic Republic or GDR.² Berlin, the former capital of a once-whole Germany, was also split down the middle. This division was both political and economic, with West Germany adopting a capitalist economy and democratic government, while East Germany followed a socialist model under strict Soviet influence.

West Germany quickly rebuilt its economy with help from the U.S. and grew into a strong democracy and a key member of Western alliances, such as NATO and the European Economic Community, now the European Union. Comparatively, East Germany struggled economically and was marked by political repression, particularly through the Stasi, its secret police.³ Between 1949 and 1961, around 2.5 million East Germans fled to West Germany. Among them were many skilled workers, professionals, and intellectuals, giving rise to serious

¹ "Vor 75 Jahren: Vier Mächte Erklärung von Berlin," BPD, June 3, 2020, <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/hintergrund-aktuell/310889/vor-75-jahren-vier-maechte-erklaerung-von-berlin/>.

² "West Germany," Britannica, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/West-Germany>.

³ "Deutsche Demokratische Republik," BPD, accessed October 18, 2024, <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/politiklexikon/17333/deutsche-demokratische-republik-ddr/>.

concern for East Germany's economy. To stop this large-scale emigration, the East German government built the Berlin Wall in 1961, aiming to prevent further movement to the West.⁴

28 years later, the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989 and Germany reunified months later on October 3, 1990, when the GDR in the east joined the FRG in west Germany, to form a single nation.⁵ However, although families could be reunited again and East Germans could participate in western democracy, East Germans dealt with economic and social struggles in this new Germany. In privatizing the state-held socialist industry in the east, a German government organization saw to the sale of 13,000 East German companies and the loss of millions of jobs that had been stable and secure under the socialist system. 94% of these companies were bought by West German businesses, who sometimes promptly closed them to fight competition, or moved the business to the west.⁶ As a result, economic production in the east dropped to 73 percent from 1989 levels.

The stark economic and cultural differences between the East and West are still felt today. Studies published by the Pew Research Center have found that unemployment is consistently higher in the former East Germany than in the west, with the average unemployment rate in the five states of the former East Germany at 6.9% in 2018, compared to 4.8% in the ten states of the former West Germany. What's more, in 2017, people in the former East Germany earned 86% of the income of their West German counterparts.⁷ Germany's decades-long division, and its somewhat sudden reunification has hindered the prosperity and cultural inclusion of East Germans up until the present day. This has led some East Germans to identify more with being from East Germany than with being from Germany as a whole.⁸ Such difference in cultural identity extends into how Germans from east and west view each other and has impacted Germany's evolving political environment.

⁴ Kenneth Barkin and Peter John Heather, "The Reunification of Germany," Britannica, August 30, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Germany/The-reunification-of-Germany>.

⁵ Barkin and John Heather.

⁶ Morgan Dethlefsen, "Gross Domestic Reunification: The Tragedy of East Germany Post-Reunification," *Brown Political Review* (blog), March 20, 2023, <https://brownpoliticalreview.org/2023/03/tragedy-of-east-germany-post-reunification/>.

⁷ John Gramlich, "East Germany Has Narrowed Economic Gap with West Germany since Fall of Communism, but Still Lags," Pew Research Center, November 6, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/11/06/east-germany-has-narrowed-economic-gap-with-west-germany-since-fall-of-communism-but-still-lags/>.

⁸ Damien McGuinness, "German Reunification: Young Germans in Search of Their Eastern Roots," BBC, October 2, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54370658>.

