

The Aftermath of World War II:
How the War Changed the Lives of People From Both Sides of the Conflict

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World War II ended in a field of grey. Flying over the energized Rhine River an American soldier and his pilot were celebrating the beginning of the end when they came across an unusual sight. They dodged the cables carefully arranged by the Germans to snag their plane only to find a vast, unending plain of grey. At first the wonder of what was planted there filled their minds, only to be drastically changed as they approached. The plane was slowly descending and now was within 20 feet of the ground when amazement struck. The grey slowly turned into hundreds of thousands of soldiers. All dressed from head to toe in Germany's grey uniforms. They had already surrendered and pointed no arms towards the plane. Instead the American soldiers in the plane were greeted with welcoming waves from the endless army. As they continued into Germany they could only wonder what would happen next for those soldiers who would now be left with very little, if anything at all.

World War II left behind a mountain of problems, but also brought about new opportunities. The end of the war was a time of excitement, realization, and disbelief depending on where and who you were. On May 8, 1945, when Nazi Germany surrendered, and on September 2, 1945, when Japan surrendered, what led up to that point was a gruesome war that had already lasted six years. In Germany, cities were left in pieces, citizens had nowhere to go with the small feeling of relief that they had made it, money was worthless, and the economy barely even existed. However, life in the United States was the opposite. Despite the harsh reality of what was happening overseas, Americans were overjoyed as they greeted returning soldiers and stormed streets with the news of the victory. The economy was booming ever since the war began and the return of prosperity as it became the world's richest country. Overall, the end of

World War II and the impact it had on Germany and even the United States changed the way the world continued on afterwards.

What the world looked like after the war would not have come to be without the war itself. World War II started on September 1, 1939 when Germany attacked Poland who was already allied with Britain and France.¹ The war continued to spiral while both sides gained allies and the bloodshed continued. The war was mainly fought between the Axis powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan—and the Allies—France, Great Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. The war took over 40 million lives, becoming known as one of the bloodiest conflicts, as well as one of the largest wars. The impact left on what remained of Germany and Japan was devastating.

“Things were terrible in Germany,” recalled Robert Lyon, “I mean it was famine and terrible casualties.”² Robert was a gunner on a Martin Marauder Bomber in the Army Air Corps at the time. Robert clearly remembers how “they had been bombed out of all their cities.”³ This was not all that occurred as Poland was given back its land and, more importantly, Germany was split into four separate zones. Each zone was controlled by a different country: the Soviet Union, the United States, Britain, and France.⁴ This didn’t last long as Germany was divided differently into two separate countries, East Germany and West Germany. East Germany was a communist country under Soviet control, while West Germany was non-communist and was controlled by the Soviet Union’s former Allies.⁵ Citizen’s lives in Germany were not much better. There were

¹ *United States history: reconstruction to the present*. Pearson, 2016.

² Lyon, Robert. Personal Interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 8, 2017

³ Lyon, Robert. Personal Interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 8, 2017

⁴ *United States history: reconstruction to the present*. Pearson, 2016.

⁵ *United States history: reconstruction to the present*. Pearson, 2016.

probably somewhere between 1 million and 1.5 million deaths in Germany after the war and that is just an educated guess. Sometimes people didn't report their dead because there was not always someone to report them to.⁶ An example of this is how curfews were put in place and anyone out after dark was liable to be shot.⁷

After the war Jews began to return to their previous homelands, but were still met with anti-semitism. They wanted their property, that had already been divided and shared among other people, returned to them. The Jews were either scared away again or violence was used to get rid of them.⁸ There were also many other people who were uprooted during the war. These people had lost all of their possessions and lived in displaced persons camps waiting to be sent back to their own country.⁹ As men who were killed in battle were not returning home, women and their children were left to hold together what was left of society. Germany's towns were in ruins because of the bombings. Robert tells of how later on he was still reminded of the destruction, "When I went up to Wilkesbarre with Jack and saw Wilkesbarre it reminded me of Europe at the end of the war and I threw up. It made me sick," he said. "It was the flood then, the big flood. It just struck me as... war ravaged Europe."¹⁰ Germany was not the only country experiencing hardships, but they are one of the most noticed because of the previous Nazi leaders.

⁶ Lindley, Robin. "The Chaotic and Bloody Aftermath of WWII in Europe." *History News Network*, historynewsnetwork.org/article/151464.

⁷ Lindley, Robin. "The Chaotic and Bloody Aftermath of WWII in Europe." *History News Network*, historynewsnetwork.org/article/151464.

⁸ Lindley, Robin. "The Chaotic and Bloody Aftermath of WWII in Europe." *History News Network*, historynewsnetwork.org/article/151464.

⁹ Lindley, Robin. "The Chaotic and Bloody Aftermath of WWII in Europe." *History News Network*, historynewsnetwork.org/article/151464.

¹⁰ Lyon, Robert. Personal Interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 8, 2017

The United States was experiencing almost the opposite of this after the war. This war was even seen as the good war, even though it was not that clearcut.¹¹ Of course there were many families mourning the loss of fathers, brothers, sons, and husbands, as well as the overall mourning of the President Roosevelt who died just before the war ended.¹² The way most were feeling was quickly overrun with celebration when the news spread of the Allies winning the war. Robert Lyon remembers how soldiers returned home after the war ended.

Immediately they established a point system and you were given so many points if you were over thirty-five, if you were married you were given extra points, if you had children you had extra points, and overseas service you had extra points. Well I had a hell of a lot of points, so I was one of the first to be sent home and it was interesting. I was stationed in Fenlow, in Holland and then they sent me to Luxemburg and then they sent me to Paris and I was outside the French capital, it was where the French had negotiated World War One treaties and so forth. Versailles. So they sent me when they saw I had enough points they sent me to Holland, Antwerp and I went on one of these boxcars that they had used in World War One and they were called quatorze chevaux and wei, that meant forty horses and eight men. So I got to ride in one of those the whole way from Paris to Antwerp, that's where I caught the ship to come home and of course every town we'd go through we'd wave at the girls. We had a great time. But when we got to the states it was nice, a barge came out, a big barge came out from New York Harbor just filled with young girls and there was a big sign on it that says, Welcome Home, Well Done.¹³

There were many soldiers who returned in worse condition as they were greatly injured. Mustered out soldiers that were discharged searched for jobs and depending on their age went on to college.

¹¹ "After WWII, Europe Was A 'Savage Continent' Of Devastation." *NPR*, NPR, 24 July 2013, www.npr.org/2013/07/24/204538728/after-wwii-europe-was-a-savage-continent-of-devastation.

¹² Lyon, Robert. Personal Interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 8, 2017

¹³ Lyon, Robert. Personal Interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. October 8, 2017

After the war America was “wealthy, militarily powerful, and confident” and was known as one of the two superpowers along with the Soviet Union.¹⁴ The United States was led by President Truman who became president when Franklin D. Roosevelt died unexpectedly during his fourth term. Many programs were set into action in order to try and keep peace throughout the world. The United States signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which encouraged more trade around the world and lowered the average tariffs about 35%.¹⁵ The establishment of the United Nation (UN) was also a way for countries to sort out issues, maintain peace, and, cooperate. The UN was responsible for setting up an agency that helped those who were displaced during the war, created Israel, and provide both food and aid where it was needed.¹⁶ Ever since the war started the United States economy was booming since there was suddenly a need for war materials that had to be made in factories that then hired more workers to help fulfill the new demand. The war also gave a foundation for later changes in a woman’s role in society. Because of the war a combination of men leaving their industrial work positions and new jobs being created, women were need to work in industrial jobs and did so happily even with pay differences.¹⁷ Even though some women left their jobs after the war, this was an important part of the movement to come for women’s equal rights. The United States played an important part in not only the outcome of the war, but also the direction the world headed in afterwards.

¹⁴ *United States history: reconstruction to the present*. Pearson, 2016.

¹⁵ *United States history: reconstruction to the present*. Pearson, 2016.

¹⁶ *United States history: reconstruction to the present*. Pearson, 2016.

¹⁷ “The World War II Home Front.” *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, 16 Aug. 2012, www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/world-war-ii/essays/world-war-ii-home-front.

In conclusion, the way the world continued on after the war was because of the impact World War II had on Germany and the United States. Germany, like most of Europe, was mainly ruins of the towns that used to stand there previously, but was also struggling as the country was divided and reorganized. On the other hand, the United States was wealthy, confident, and powerful with many ideas on how to keep peace around the world. The after effects of World War II, and how they would be dealt with, on Germany, the United States, and the rest of the world would determine and greatly affect the future of society.

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