

Denazification

Process instituted by the Allies after World War II to remove all traces of Nazism from Germany.

Even before the war ended, the Allied leaders met at the Yalta Conference where they agreed to wipe out the Nazi Party and its influence. This view was restated in the Potsdam Agreement of August 1945. By that time, the Allies had created a list of 178,000 suspected Nazis who were put under "mandatory arrest," while the Soviets arrested 67,000 people. Their aim was to remove all Nazi officials from public life.

After the war, the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union each occupied a part of Germany—and each occupier went about "denazifying" its zone differently. The Americans were very strict about allowing former Nazis to fill any public posts. They wanted to help the Germans learn to function in a democratic society, but they also distrusted them and considered them to be guilty of terrible crimes. The British were more moderate about allowing former Nazis to hold important positions; to rebuild their zone's destroyed economy, they decided to let anyone familiar with the area, even Nazis, take on public responsibilities. The main goal of the French was to weaken their former enemy (Germany) and use the resources in their zone to rebuild France's destroyed economy, so they allowed Nazis from other zones to work in their area. The Soviets aimed to make their zone into a Communist society; those former Nazis who were willing to conform to Communism were not removed from public life.

In October 1946 the Allies began classifying former Nazis into five categories, intending to punish those in the first four: Major Offenders; Offenders; Lesser Offenders; Followers; and Persons Exonerated. Nazis were made to fill out a questionnaire and classify themselves; most true major offenders lied about their participation in Nazi actions, and were not punished at all. By the beginning of the Cold War, the denazification process was turned over to German authorities (except in the Soviet zone, where it ended altogether), and many Nazis began returning to important positions.