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Reeducation in the American Zone:
The Quest For Democracy in Post-War Germany

by

Lael D. Sharp
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"There is an embarrassment . . . about trying to force people to have freedom."¹ This statement, given in 1943 by Stringfellow Barr, a member of the General Advisory Committee on Reeducation for the State Department, proved to be prophetic for the reeducation and denazification efforts of the United States in post-war Germany. Faced with a lack of consensus about policy goals, a severe shortage of resources, a scarcity of qualified Germans untainted by National Socialism, and a decimated educational infrastructure, the direct results of reeducation were predestined to be meager. However, if democracy was to take root and flourish in Germany this time around, these efforts were critical. Experience had shown that the mere establishment of the outward forms of democratic government was worthless -- what was needed was an inner spirit to give them meaning. This was the task of reeducation.

The first battle to be faced in creating a reeducation policy for Germany was to resolve the ongoing conflict over the fundamental purpose of the Occupation. Due to intense rivalry between the various branches of government (and Roosevelt's increasing inability to impose order as his illness progressed), "the Washington bureaucratic maze in World War II was not conducive to developing consistent or logical plans for the Occupation, and all facets of national policy, including the notion of reeducation, suffered accordingly."² The main struggle was between those who favored rehabilitation, including most State Department officials, and those who advocated punitive measures, for whom Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. was the most prominent spokesman. From the beginning this

conflict was embedded in the very heart of the policy directives issued for the governing of Occupied Germany. According to JCS 1067, issued in April of 1945, the basic objective of Military Government was

to prevent Germany from ever again becoming a threat to the peace of the world. Essential steps in the accomplishment of this objective are the elimination of Nazism and militarism in all their forms, the immediate apprehension of war criminals for punishment, the industrial disarmament and demilitarization of Germany, with continuing control over Germany's capacity to make war, and the preparation for an eventual reconstruction of German political life on a democratic basis.³

Thus, while immediate attention was focused on negative measures such as denazification, demilitarization, and deindustrialization, the ultimate goal was democratization. On the whole, however, JCS 1067 reflected the desire of the Morgenthau clique to ensure the pastoralization of Germany and its inability to ever wage war again. Examples of these provisions include directives that "no action will be taken in execution of the reparations program or otherwise which would tend to support living conditions in Germany or in your zone on a higher level than that existing in any one of the neighboring United Nations,"⁴ or, even more bluntly, that "you will take no steps (a) looking toward the economic rehabilitation of Germany, or (b) designed to maintain or strengthen the German economy."⁵

However, as the importance of Germany for Europe's economic recovery became evident, it was recognized that the philosophy behind Morgenthau's proposals was one of revenge rather than practicality.⁶ His influence, although still considerable, waned steadily, and his dismissal under Truman cleared the

way for a more reconstructionist approach. From then on, the obstacles had more to do with resources than policy.

These obstacles could be severe. In May of 1945, there were only ten education officers in the Control Council to administer the critical operations of denazifying and reviving a zonal educational system for nearly twenty million people.⁷ That this was a severe underallocation of resources, especially in light of the importance that was placed on reeducation and denazification, is clear. In December of 1945 a report was issued that wryly remarked that "the best that could be said for the American effort to date was that its ongoing 'shortage of staff . . . contributed indirectly to a further development of local German enterprise.'"⁸

This was compounded by (and partially a result of) the low status held by Education and Religious Affairs, which was in charge of these operations. It remained a "mere section" until January of 1946, when it became a branch, but it was not until March of 1948 that it became a full division.⁹ Lacking a prominent spokesperson in either the Military Government or in Washington, E&RA faced a continual shortage of manpower and funds. It is true, however, that this was the case throughout the military bureaucracy and General Lucius Clay, the regional commander, wisely realized that priority went to alleviating the massive malnutrition which threatened the German people.

There was one area in which policy proved to be more of an obstacle than resources, and that was denazification. "Denazification proved to be a source of unending dissatisfaction in Military Government. All Occupation personnel supported it in principle as indispensable to the creation of a

healthier society. It was the precondition to the positive programs desired by the reconstructionists. Yet, in practice, denazification proved impossible to execute with the limited Military Government resources on hand."¹⁰ The problem was especially acute in education. It was recognized in SWNCC 269/5, the Long-Range Policy Statement on German Reeducation prepared by the State Department, that for both practical and ideological considerations any effective reform of education must come from the Germans themselves; there were nowhere near enough E&RA personnel to supervise, much less conduct, instruction, and participation by the Germans was crucial for lasting results.¹¹ However, all male and most female teachers had been required to join the Nazi Party, and even if they had only been "nominal participants" in National Socialism, they could still be forbidden "to be active as a teacher, preacher, editor, author, or radio commentator."¹²

Whether or not they would actually be banned depended upon a number of factors, but often the most prominent was the state of public opinion back in the United States. The degree of rigor to which denazification was carried out was in a state of constant flux, "depending on which pressure Military Government felt most keenly at the moment: the desire to preserve trained personnel or the fear of criticism by the American public."¹³ On the one hand was the basic policy of denazification, proclaimed by the Potsdam agreement as one of the fundamental purposes by which the Four-Power Control Council would be guided, and on the other was the need for trained and competent German leaders to supply the immediate hands-on direction the Military Government simply did not have the resources to provide.

However, the total pervasiveness of National Socialism was such that it was usually impossible to find sufficient staff who were totally uncompromised.

In October of 1945, after some particularly stinging press criticism of allegedly lax denazification efforts, a new law, Military Government Directive No. 8, encouraged the consideration of cases under the most stringent terms possible. People were banned from holding any post, in government or industry, for any sort of connection with National Socialism, whether active or nominal; while this was not strictly required by the letter of the law, the political environment was such that most officials would have rather been accused of being overzealous than of coddling Nazis. Under this law, 70 to 90 percent of all teachers were dismissed by November of 1947.¹⁴ Obviously, this had a serious impact on the ability of the Education and Religious Affairs Branch to carry out school reopenings.

The scope of the denazification program soon grew to the point where Military Government could not handle it all. Some thirteen million *Fragebogen* (questionnaires on political activities before and during the Nazi regime) were returned to headquarters, where each was to be carefully investigated and the appropriate action taken.¹⁵ Three measures were taken to attempt to attack the growing piles of *Fragebogen* which began piling up in hallways, closets, and cellars: First, an amnesty was granted to those born after January 1, 1919, unless they could be classified as Major Offenders or Offenders;¹⁶ a second to those whose incomes had been less than 3,600 Reichs Marks during the Nazi regime and "who therefore were not regarded as the beneficiaries of the vast looting of German industry undertaken by Goering

and other Nazi leaders;" and a third to the disabled. These three actions cut down the size of the problem immensely, but some two million active cases remained to be processed.¹⁷

Thus, the denazification corps was forced to resort to the same expedient as every other Military Government agency; they began to employ the Germans themselves to rule on denazification cases. This was authorized by the Law for the Liberation from National Socialism and Militarism of 5 March 1946 (German Law 104), in which the Military Government magnanimously declared it had "decided that the German people may share the responsibility for liberation from National Socialism and Militarism in all fields."¹⁸ Problems cropped up almost immediately. In contrast to Military Government Law No. 8, German Law 104 approached denazification as a process of rehabilitation rather than a purge, with the results that after five months the German tribunals had examined 583,985 cases and dismissed 530,907 of them without trial. Out of the two million active cases, only 930,000 were ever brought to trial and only 1,549 were found guilty as major offenders.¹⁹

If the experience of the Military Government and the later German civilian tribunals offered any concrete lessons, it was that the truth was extremely hard to discover. Personal testimony was notoriously unreliable. "After a few months of experience, most investigators and Military Government personnel grew wary of accusations and statements by individuals. After twelve years of political repression, followed by defeat, there were too many old scores to settle."²⁰ The German people soon grew

alienated with a system they viewed as capricious and harsh. A 1945 telegram to the Secretary of State summarized local reaction admirably:

intelligence reports constantly suggest that while all non-Nazi Germans welcome our denazification policy, they are often critical of its application. They feel it is too 'schematic' and too rigid with insufficient provision for making numerous exceptions to the general rules. Germans usually feel that many persons who were only nominal Nazis are falling under the axe unjustly and that some active Nazis are being missed . . . There is apparently no agreement among Germans as to how far the denazification program should be carried. Two things seem chiefly to irritate them: What appears to their uncritical eyes to be mass discharges and penalties applied to all Party members regardless of individual merits of the case, and the unavoidable lack of uniformity in the application of the denazification policy in different localities.²¹

Many Americans had the same criticisms.

In addition to the havoc caused by the denazification purges, E&RA had to contend with the physical devastation caused by the war and the lack of politically acceptable textbooks. In Bavaria, "virtually all the school buildings that had escaped destruction were now [May 1945] in use as billets, military hospitals, or displaced-persons camps."²² Elsewhere in the American Zone the situation was similar. The universities were particularly hard hit; the University of Munich required six months of heavy labor at reconstruction work before a student could begin studies.²³

The search for textbooks not thoroughly infused with Nazi ideology and militaristic nationalism posed even greater obstacles. None of the texts used during the *Nazizeit* could possibly be used, and books from the Weimar

Republic were no longer to be found. Finally, in desperation, microfilmed copies of pre-Hitler textbooks were shipped over from the collection at Columbia Teachers College.²⁴ Even these were far from ideal, as they tended to glorify nationalism and military conquest; however, it was felt that to censor them would make the Germans feel they were being handed Allied propaganda, so a disclaimer was inserted into each of these "emergency textbooks:"

This textbook is one of a series which is being published by order of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force for emergency use in German schools in the area occupied by his forces. It has been selected after a thorough examination of many of the books in use in Germany before the Nazi accession to power. It is a textbook of German authorship and has been reprinted without textual alteration. Its issue does not imply that it is entirely suitable from an educational point of view or otherwise. It is merely the best book which could be found in the circumstances and must serve until Germany produces better textbooks of its own.²⁵

Unfortunately, this was not to occur for some time; locally produced textbooks were not to appear until 1947, and even then the amounts were severely limited due to paper shortages.²⁶

Thus, the problems seemed to overwhelm even the most dedicated efforts at E&RA. All in all, the record of reeducation in post-war Germany is mixed; heroic efforts were intermingled with excessive interference and underallocation of resources to produce results not wholly satisfactory to anyone. The ultimate significance of the reeducation effort, however, may be much greater than the meager list of Occupation achievements might indicate;

the presence of a strong democratic nation forty years afterwards gives good *prima facie* evidence of lasting accomplishment. In any case, the attempt was inevitable. "[The Americans] had chosen not to eliminate the German people or to garrison the country permanently -- actions that would have been morally and practically impossible. It followed, therefore, that the United States *must* seek to change 'the mentality of the German people to the end that Germany . . . [may] eventually be permitted to live without surveillance and control.'"²⁷ In this, at least, the Americans appear to have succeeded.

End Notes

- ¹ James F. Tent, Mission on the Rhine: Reeducation and Denazification in American-Occupied Germany, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 20.
- ² Ibid., p. 11.
- ³ 1945 Directive to the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Forces of Occupation (JCS 1067) *in* U.S. Department of State, Germany 1947-49: The Story in Documents, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1950), p. 23.
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 24.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 27.
- ⁶ Harold Zink, The United States in Germany 1944-1955, (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1957), p. 154.
- ⁷ Tent, p. 39.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 68.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 48.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 107.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 33.
- ¹² Law for Liberation from National Socialism and Militarism of 5 March 1946 (German Law No. 104) *in* Special Branch, Office of Military Government, Bavaria, German Denazification Law and All Implementations American Directives, 2nd ed., (Place of publication and publisher not given), p. 15.

- ¹³ Tent, p. 83.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 56.
- ¹⁵ Zink, p. 159.
- ¹⁶ German Law No. 104, p. 16.
- ¹⁷ Zink, p. 160.
- ¹⁸ German Law No. 104, p. 9.
- ¹⁹ Zink, p. 163.
- ²⁰ Tent, p. 91.
- ²¹ Memorandum from the United States Political Advisor for Germany (Robert Murphy) to the Secretary of State, September 8, 1945 *in* U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1951), pp. 960-61.
- ²² Trent, p. 46.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 85.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 42.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 43.
- ²⁶ Ibid., pp. 273-74.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 38.