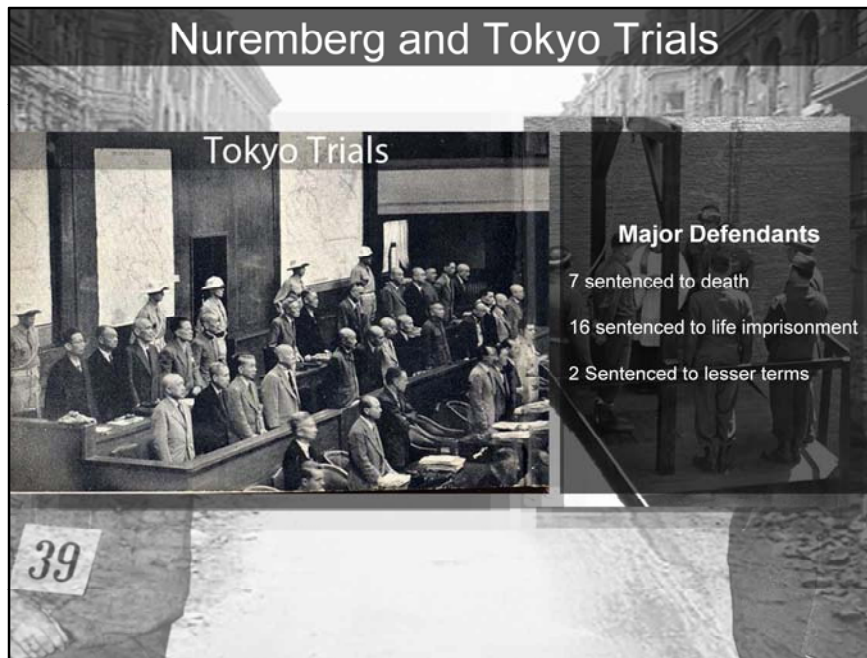


At the end of World War II, the victorious Allied powers faced a difficult situation. The German and Japanese governments had committed heinous crimes against humanity, and most people wanted to punish those who were responsible. On the other hand, the world leaders recognized that the harsh terms imposed against Germany in the Treaty of Versailles had helped Hitler become the leader of Germany. They did not want to repeat history and create such harsh punishments for the losing countries that it would lead to future wars.

How could the victors balance the desire to punish those who violated human rights on a mass scale while avoiding punishments that were too harsh?



Before the allies could rebuild the destruction from the war, they needed to punish those responsible for starting the war and engaging in crimes against humanity. One of the lessons that the United States and European leaders had learned after World War I was that it did not make sense to punish an entire country for the actions of a few. Instead, they would only prosecute true war criminals who they believed were guilty. Instead of punishing all of Germany for the war, the Allied leaders held trials for the major Nazi leaders in Nuremberg, Germany. Although many of the top Nazi leaders committed suicide before the end of the war, more than two hundred Germans and Austrians were prosecuted for war crimes, and most were found guilty. A small number of top Nazi leaders did receive the death penalty. Similar trials were held in Tokyo, Japan. Tojo, the prime minister during the war, was one of the leaders found guilty of war crimes and he was sentenced to death, along with seven other top military and political leaders. Others received life sentences and lesser terms.

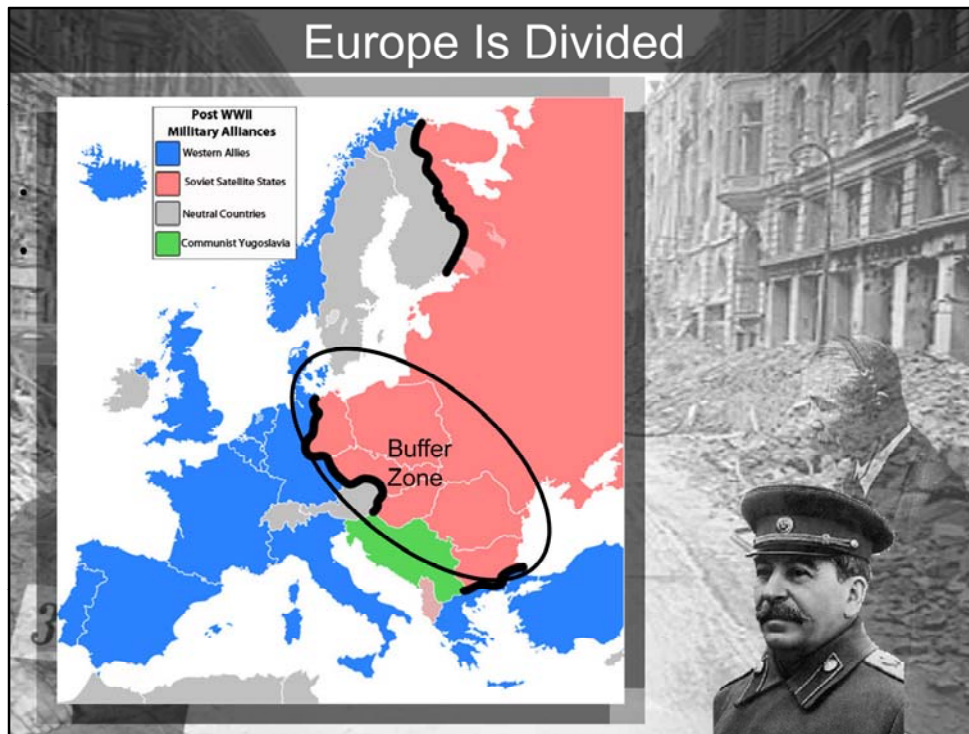
These actions showed that both military and political leaders would be held accountable for their actions during wartime. These trials were only the beginning of Allied plans for post-war Japan and Germany. The victorious powers occupied post-war Germany and Japan in order to make sure that the governments of the defeated nations reflected the values of the Allies.



After its defeat, Germany was a devastated nation and was occupied by the Allies. At the Yalta Conference, just before the end of the war, the Allied powers decided to occupy Germany for a short time until a new government was formed.

France, Great Britain, the U.S., and the Soviet Union each controlled part of the country, as well as part of Berlin, the capital. Although the Allies all believed that Germany's government needed to be reformed in order to prevent future aggressions, the Western democracies and the Soviet Union were distrustful of each other's motives. In 1949, the areas under control of the major Western powers were united into one zone, West Germany, under a democratic government with a capitalist economy. This included West Berlin.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union gave up control of its territories in name only. East Germany became a communist dictatorship under the control of the Soviets. With West German-controlled West Berlin deep inside East Germany, this would cause future problems for East and West Germany, as well as the Soviets.



The Soviet Union had nearly twenty million casualties during the war. Joseph Stalin did not trust the Western democracies' motives. At the end of the war, Stalin's troops occupied much of Eastern Europe. Although Stalin had promised to allow free elections in these countries, the Soviets installed a number of communist dictatorships that were essentially under the control of the Soviet Union. These states provided a “buffer zone” to protect the Soviets from attack by the Western capitalist powers.

The black line on this map represents the divide between communist Eastern Europe, and capitalist, democratic Western Europe. Winston Churchill famously referred to this line as the Iron Curtain behind which people lived under communist dictatorships with few personal freedoms.

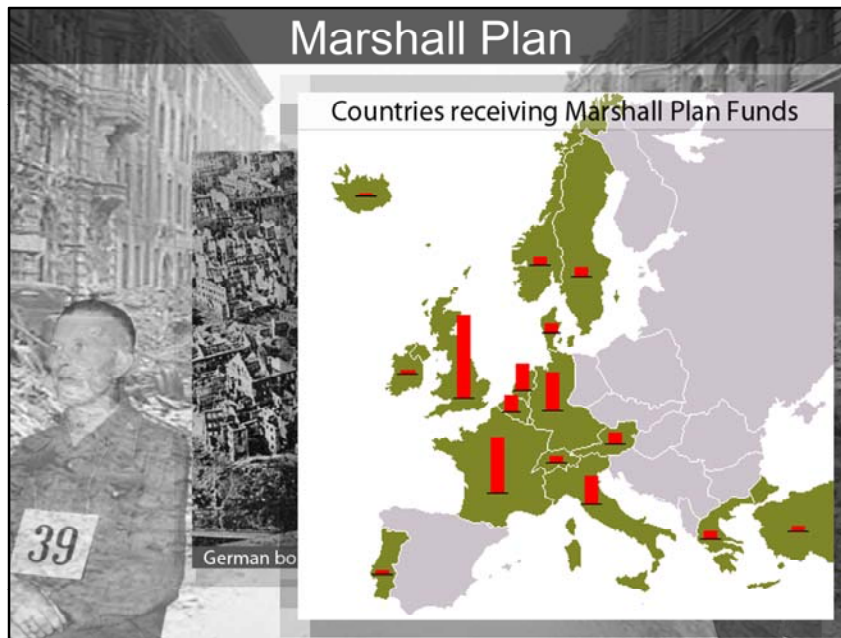
*[Map courtesy Sémhur]*



The Iron Curtain separated most of Europe into two military alliances, one of which is still active today.

The communist nations formed the Warsaw Pact under the leadership of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, much of Western Europe joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, under the leadership of the United States. Even though the U.S. was not part of Europe, as a capitalist democracy, the Americans felt a strong connection to the powers of Western Europe. Unlike after World War I, the U.S. was not going to return to its isolationist roots. NATO continues today as a partnership amongst nations that undertakes military and peacekeeping missions in times of need.

As a result of World War II, most of Europe had been severely weakened, leaving the world with two dominant superpowers – the Soviet Union and the United States. The struggles between these two superpowers resulted in the Cold War. The era known as the Cold War started shortly after the end of World War II and dominated world history until the 1990s.



The Allied powers knew that economic problems were an important cause in the rise of fascism during the 1930s. They wanted to prevent that from happening again. Plans to rebuild were quickly put in place. Instead of punishing Germany with large war reparations as had happened at the end of World War I, the U.S. provided aid to help Germany rebuild its economy and strengthen the new democratic government.

Under George C. Marshall, a former U.S. general and then U.S. Secretary of State, the United States sent over 13 billion dollars to help Germany and other European economies recover. This aid package became known as the Marshall Plan. This plan was a success in helping increase industrial production to levels that exceeded pre-war Europe. This map shows the countries that received aid under the Marshall Plan. The larger the red bar graph, the more funds that the country received. The countries of Eastern Europe behind the Iron Curtain refused any assistance from the West, and as a result, their economies did not grow quickly.

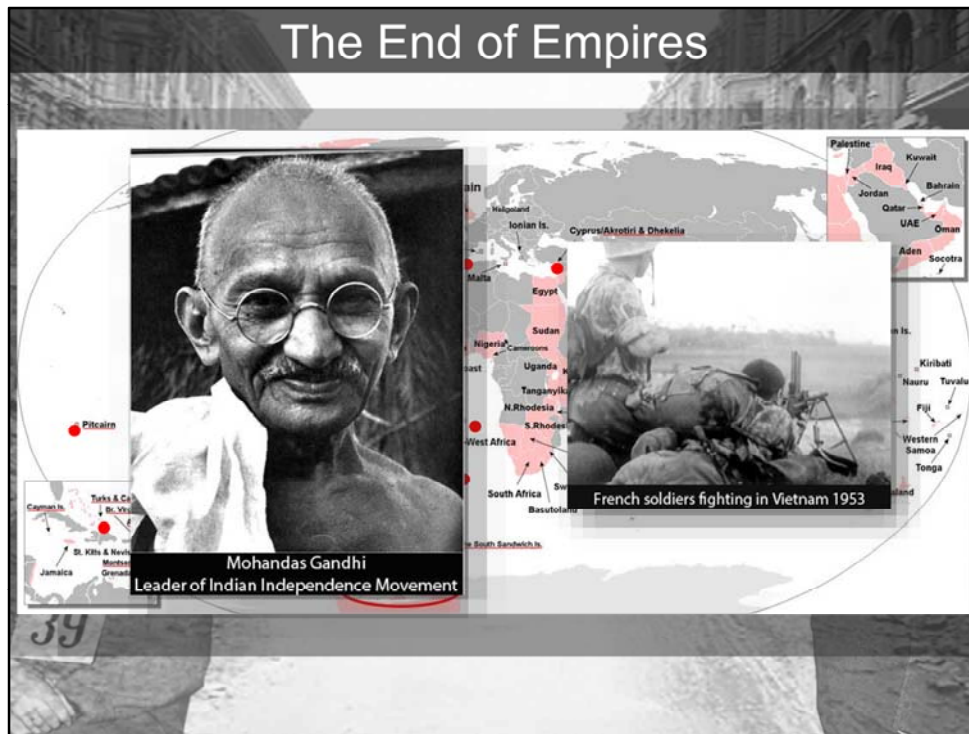
West Germany benefited heavily from the Marshall Plan. Under its new, democratic government, West Germany's economy grew rapidly and the country quickly joined the ranks of the world's largest economies. By 1980, per capita income in West Germany was higher than in the U.S. By the late 20th century, West Germany was an economic superpower and an important ally to the U.S.



Similar efforts were underway in Japan after its defeat in World War II. Unlike Germany, Japan came under the control of the United States, with limited forces from Australia, India, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. After the main heads of the Japanese government were tried during the Tokyo Trials, the U.S., under the leadership of General Douglas MacArthur, ruled the country until 1951.

The U.S. occupation had three main goals. First, the victorious powers wanted to eliminate Japan's ability to wage war by demilitarizing the country. Japan was allowed to maintain defensive military forces, and the Americans would guarantee Japan's security. Japan's postwar constitution, adopted under Allied supervision, included a "Peace Clause," which renounced war and banned Japan from maintaining any armed forces other than for self defense. Next, the U.S. installed a democratic government based on Western models. Japan kept its Emperor, but became a constitutional monarchy, similar to Britain. The Emperor also renounced claims that he was divine. Finally, the occupation tried to get the economy back on track so that Japan could support the population and become an important trade partner.

Japan's economy recovered quickly, and the country became the dominant economic power in Asia. By 1951, America ended its occupation of Japan, and Japan became an important ally for the U.S. in the Cold War.



With Europe in ruins, its global empires began to fall apart. After the war, many colonies pushed for independence and the colonial powers did not have the resources or the political will to stop them. This map shows all of the territories that were once part of the British Empire. These red dots show what's left of that empire, many of these territories small islands.

The Europeans did not give up their overseas territories quickly or out of goodwill. The majority of the colonies gained independence over a period of thirty years following World War II thanks to the efforts of their citizens, sometimes through political movements and sometimes through armed struggle. Often, these struggles involved other superpowers, as in Vietnam's struggle for independence from France. The end of World War II also triggered the beginning of the end of the European empires.