Germany, May 9th 1945

From Chris Knowles's policy paper *Germany 1945-1949: a case study in post-conflict reconstruction:*

The situation in Germany in 1945

In May 1945 Germany was in chaos. Observers reported that the destruction in some of the larger cities had to be seen to be believed with, for example, 66% of the houses in Cologne destroyed, and in Düsseldorf 93% uninhabitable. The economy was at a standstill and no central government remained to implement instructions issued by the Allies. Millions of people were homeless, or attempting to return to homes that no longer existed. They included German civilians evacuated from the cities or trying to escape from the fighting on both Eastern and Western fronts, former forced labourers from across Europe (known as 'Displaced Persons' or 'DPs') and ethnic Germans expelled from Czechoslovakia or from former German eastern territories now ceded to Poland. Ivone Kirkpatrick, later appointed head of the German Department and subsequently Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, described his first impressions of Germany in 1945: there were 'hundreds of thousands of Germans on foot, trekking in all directions … as if a giant ant-heap had suddenly been disturbed.'

Although numerous plans for the occupation had been compiled during the war by officials based in London, and a set of directives issued by the War Office in October 1944, these seemed inappropriate for the conditions the soldiers found on the ground in Germany, once victory had been achieved. Field-Marshal Montgomery, appointed Commander-in-Chief and Military Governor of the British zone of occupation on 22 May 1945, later recalled the immediate problems they faced: what to do with 1.5 million German POWs, a further million wounded German soldiers, similar numbers of civilian German refugees and Displaced Persons of many different nationalities, no working transport or communication services, industry and agriculture at a standstill, a scarcity of food and the risk of starvation and epidemics of disease. He added that: 'I was a soldier and I had not been trained to handle anything of this nature … However something had to be done, and done quickly.'

In his second 'Note on the Present Situation' in July 1945, Montgomery wrote that they had only recently become aware of 'the full extent of the debacle' and 'the magnitude of the problem that confronts us in the rebuilding of Germany.' Part of the problem, he continued, was 'a tendency to adhere too rigidly' to earlier instructions which were now out of date and a new general directive was required. A week later he added, 'Our present attitude towards the German people is negative, it must be replaced by one that is positive and holds out hope for the future.'

A snapshot of Germany in 1945:

Human Losses and Displacement

- **Total German deaths:** Approximately 6.9 to 7.5 million Germans died, which represented roughly 8.5% of the population.
- **Military deaths:** An estimated 5.3 million German military personnel were killed or missing. This meant that 25% to 30% of men aged 18 to 35 had died.
- **Displacement:** Around 12 million Germans were refugees or displaced persons, primarily from the former eastern territories that were ceded to Poland and the Soviet Union.

Physical and Economic Destruction

- **Housing:** An estimated 3.6 to 4.8 million housing units were destroyed, which amounted to about one-fourth of the country's total housing stock.
    - **Homelessness:** Over 7 million people were left homeless.
- **Cities:** Many cities experienced catastrophic destruction, with their urban cores almost entirely leveled.
    - Cities such as Bremen and Hamburg experienced 75% destruction.
    - Cologne had 66% of its houses destroyed.
    - Würzburg was one of the worst-hit, with 75% of its housing destroyed.
    - About a third of Berlin, especially the inner-city, was in ruins: 600,000 apartments had been destroyed, and only 2.8 million of the city's original population of 4.5 million still lived in the city.
- **Rubble:** An estimated 400 million cubic meters (14 billion cubic feet) of rubble needed to be cleared across Germany.
- **Industry and Economy:**
    - About 20% of the industrial capital and residential housing stock was destroyed or heavily damaged.
    - Agricultural production was only 35% of its pre-war levels immediately after the war.
    - The transportation system largely collapsed.

- Initially, the Allies dismantled remaining industrial plants and confiscated patents as a form of reparations.

Transportation and Utility Infrastructure

- **Railways:** An estimated 40,000 miles of railroad track were destroyed.
- **Roads:** Roughly 56,000 miles of roads were damaged or destroyed.
- **Utilities:** Power, water, and communication lines were almost completely out of action in major urban centers.

Police and Fire Services Impact

- **Police:** The existing "Order Police" structure was heavily involved in Nazi crimes, including guarding deportation trains to killing centers. Post-war, one of the immediate tasks of the Allies was to establish new police forces loyal to democratic principles and aid in post-conflict reconstruction.
- **Fire:** Specific, aggregated statistics on the destruction of fire service infrastructure are scarce, but the extensive urban bombing campaigns that destroyed vast portions of German cities naturally overwhelmed and destroyed fire departments and their resources. The ability to fight the large-scale firebombing of cities was virtually non-existent in many cases. Germany's violent history also created obstacles for developing modern emergency and disaster management systems immediately after the war.

Healthcare System Impact

- **Facilities:** Many hospitals and medical facilities were destroyed or damaged during the war. An American general hospital at Bayreuth in late August 1945 was a former German Reserve-Lazarett (emergency hospital) taken over by occupation forces, illustrating the ad-hoc nature of healthcare provision.
- **Personnel & Resources:** There was a severe shortage of doctors, nurses, medicine, and medical equipment due to wartime demands and the departure of personnel for military service. The healthcare system was already strained during the war, with a reported doubling of the death rate in post-war Germany.
- **Public Health Crisis:** Post-war conditions led to surges in infectious diseases such as scarlet fever, spinal meningitis, typhoid, and a tripling of syphilis cases in one dermatology center between 1939-1945.