

# OMGUS Survey of Trends in German Public Opinion (1945–49)

## Abstract

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After the economic upswing that followed the currency reform in the summer of 1948, concerns about the supply of food and consumer goods finally showed a noticeable decline. The currency reform was met with broad approval, even though many now faced growing concerns over earning an adequate living. Skepticism about the Germans' capacity for democracy remained, and more than half of those surveyed ranked economic security – of the kind held out by the Socialist planned economy, for example – higher than political liberty. On the other hand, a large majority supported the course – embarked upon in 1947/48 – toward a partial government for western Germany. However, interest in politics and the willingness to inform oneself about politics tended to remain low. The two large parties together had suffered a massive loss of support. The percentage of those who did not fundamentally reject National Socialism remained high, though willingness to acknowledge Germany's responsibility for the war was on the rise again. What had grown substantially in the West was the rejection of Communism. Thanks to the Marshall Plan, confidence in American efforts to rebuild Germany was growing, but confidence in Germany's own inherent powers was also slowly increasing. In the face of growing tensions between East and West, Germans favored integration into a Western European union. Most expected that the U.S. would become the most influential power in the world in the years ahead and expected another World War in the medium term. Although Berlin had proven a source of conflict, a large majority supported the Allies' commitment to the city.

## Source

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### Trends in German Public Opinion

*Sample:* an unspecified number of persons in the American Zone, West Berlin, and Bremen.

*Interviewing dates:* from October 1945 to February 1949 during which time sixty-seven full-scale surveys were conducted. (71 pp.)

This report summarizes in graphic form major trends of German opinion in the American occupied areas, covering ten major issues: cares and worries, reorientation, politics, economic affairs, food, international relations, Berlin, the occupation, media, and expellees.

*Cares and Worries.* Up to June 1948, the outstanding trend was the rise in anxiety over food. By April 1948, 54 per cent of the AMZON public mentioned this as the greatest worry. The next in importance was adequate clothing and shoes, which had risen to four in ten by 1948. Anxiety about prisoners of war and missing persons leveled off at about ten per cent in 1947. The category "unemployment and no means of support" dropped in 1947 to about 12 per cent.

The currency reform produced a remarkable shift. From the April 1948 high of 54 per cent, concern about food dropped to 19 per cent by July 1948, and by 1949 it was as low as ten per cent. Concern about clothing and shoes also sharply declined from 40 per cent in April 1948 to one per cent in February 1949. From July 1948, money trouble took over as the all-pervading claimed worry. Indeed, well over 60 per cent mentioned financial problems, far exceeding the peak figure of 54 per cent that had mentioned food as a major concern.

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*Reorientation.* A plurality of Germans appeared doubtful of their ability to carry on democratic self-government. If forced to make a choice between a government offering economic security and one guaranteeing civil liberties, six in ten Germans said they would pick the former. The same number, however, said they would not give up the two civil rights of the franchise and freedom of the press; four in ten would do so.

In 1946 the average figure for the number of persons who felt that National Socialism was a good idea badly carried out was 40 per cent. In 1947 it had risen to 52 per cent and by 1948 it was 55.5 per cent. Given the choice between a communist and National Socialist government, the trend was from neither to National Socialism: In November 1946, 17 per cent selected National Socialism; in February 1949, 43 per cent preferred it, as against two per cent for communism. During this period the "neither" vote dropped from 66 per cent to 52 per cent.

From November 1946 until January 1948 majorities held that Communists had a right to radio time. From then on the trend changed and by February 1949 about six in ten opposed giving Communists a chance to air their views.

On the question of war responsibility, more Germans in January 1949 than in November 1947 blamed Germany for the outbreak of World War II.

*Politics.* The number of Germans who claimed to be informed about politics dropped from 1945 to 1947 and interest in politics remained consistently low at about four in ten. Disinterest did not, however, imply lack of opinion. Approval of the idea of a West German government was consistently high and most people felt that its establishment would not prove a permanent bar to unification. Although confidence in local government officials was not very high, there was a definite upward trend.

Concerning political parties, in AMZON the SPD continued to gain in preference over the CDU/CSU, although the gain was only marginal. In West Berlin the SPD got much higher preference than in AMZON. Since 1945 both parties lost favor among the population.

*Economic Affairs.* Popular opinion on economic matters mirrored the German economic recovery. The trend in confidence in the D-Mark was upward, gaining twenty points from July 1948 to February 1949. Approval of currency reform measures remained at a very high level, averaging about nine out of ten. Although money and high prices in general were great cause for concern, after June 1948 majorities felt that prices would go down. In January 1949, 52 per cent of the AMZON Germans claimed to be better off than they had been a year earlier, at which time 57 per cent had said they were worse off than a year prior to that time. Nonetheless, in February 1949, 57 per cent claimed that they could not make ends meet on their income.

In January 1948, more people thought that conditions would get worse than thought they would get better, but immediately after the currency reform almost three-fourths expected an improvement in the near future. By January 1949, however, it had again fallen, but only to approximately the two-thirds level.

Well over half the respondents continued to feel that a local black market existed to a serious degree and majorities thought that local officials ought to increase their efforts to do something about it.

*Food.* In the spring of 1946 six in ten AMZON Germans claimed that they did not get enough food to do their work well. By January 1949 the situation had been reversed and only four in ten made this claim. Confidence in the fairness of the food-rationing system also appeared to be enjoying an upturn following a decline from the very high point registered in the fall of 1945 and spring of 1946.

*International Relations.* Since February 1948 majorities of varying sizes favored a Western European Union. The consistently large proportion of respondents with no opinion indicated concern over WEU's

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effect on future war or peace; within a period of eight months the majority tendency was that it would lessen the chances for war but, at the same time, the fraction seeing war as a possible result grew. During 1948 there was a steady upward trend in awareness of the Marshall Plan; by December the figure had risen to 83 per cent in AMZON. A majority consistently thought that the prime motive for American aid to Europe was to prevent the spread of communism, although during 1948 belief in an altruistic motive rose nine points. Half the population feared that the United States would not adequately meet Europe's future needs; very few (about four per cent), however, ever stated that the United States would stop all assistance. Nearly seven in ten felt that the United States would have the most influence on world affairs during the next ten years. From August 1948 to February 1949, the proportion thinking that the Soviet Union would be the dominant world power nonetheless rose from 11 to 16 per cent. During the previous year, about six in ten people felt that there would be another world war in the next 25 or 30 years, but an optimistic three in ten said there would be a good chance to avoid it.

*Berlin.* Whereas about seven in ten AMZON Germans expected that the Americans would stay in Berlin, as many as nine in ten West Berliners held this view. In contrast, more AMZON residents than West Berliners consistently felt that the Western Powers were doing all they could to relieve West Berlin's distress. Both AMZON and West Berlin residents gave outstanding support (over 90 per cent) to the correctness of Western policy regarding West Berlin.

*Occupation.* Up to January 1948, majority opinion was that the United States should hasten the reconstruction of Germany to prevent its becoming a prey to communism. By February 1949 the figure had dropped from 57 per cent to 49 per cent; at the same time the view that the Germans should reconstruct their country alone rose from 16 to 20 per cent.

Whereas in November 1947 only 39 per cent had felt that the United States had furthered the reconstruction of Germany, by August 1948, 63 per cent thought so. In 1946 seven in ten said that the Allies would cooperate to bring about a united Germany before withdrawing. In February 1949, eight in ten said they would not do so.

*Media.* In January 1947, three-quarters of the population felt the news to be more trustworthy than it had been during the war; by January 1948 the figure had dropped to 47 per cent, with the less trustworthy column remaining constant at about five per cent but the no opinion column growing steadily. Throughout the postwar period, more than seven in ten AMZON residents consistently claimed to read newspapers regularly or occasionally. The radio audience scarcely varied during the previous eighteen months. And approximately a fourth of AMZON adults claimed to read magazines.

*Expellees.* Both natives and expellees were in constant and almost unanimous agreement that the expulsions had been unjust. During the previous year, native residents tended to become more positive in their views on the ability of the expellees to get along with local residents. A corresponding trend was apparent in the expellees' attitudes toward their reception in Germany. There was little change in native opinion concerning the expellees' wish to return to their homeland; about nine in ten were sure that the expellees wanted to go back. The expellees themselves also expressed a desire to return, although the negative opinion was consistently greater among them than among the native born.

Source: A. J. and R. L. Merritt, *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany. The OMGUS Surveys*. Urbana, IL, 1970, pp. 294-98.

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Recommended Citation: OMGUS Survey of Trends in German Public Opinion (1945–49), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4611>> [May 07, 2024].