

## **Why the Flag? Podcast**

### **Episode 7, Part II: The German Flag: The Fall & Rise of the Bundesflagge**

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Show Transcript

Welcome back to another episode of Why the Flag? The show that explores the stories behind the flags and how these symbols impact our world, our histories, and ourselves. I'm Simon Mullin – and this is Part II of the German Flag: The Fall & Rise of the Bundesflagge. If you haven't listened to Part I, I strongly recommend that you pause right here and listen to the first episode in this series before you dive into Part II.

On the last episode, we discussed the creation of the German Empire and the rise of their black-white-and-red imperial tricolor banner. We explored the history of the black-and-white flag of the Kingdom of Prussia and their adoption of those ancient colors – colors which originated with the crusading knights of the Teutonic Order in northern Israel in 1205 before the order marched their black-and-white banner north and established a stronghold in Germany and the Baltics. We also explored the story of the white-and-red flag of the Holy Roman Empire, its origins with Emperor Charlemagne and the medieval crusades, and how those colors were appropriated by the northern German states of the powerful Hanseatic League in the 13th Century. We watched how the destinies of these two flags collided in the 19th Century with the creation of the Prussian-dominated North German Confederation – and finally, with the establishment of the German Empire. And all the while, from the height of the Roman Empire to Byzantines and from the Prussians to the German Empire, we watched how the German eagle kept its place as the symbol of the highest authority – a symbol which remains at the center of German federal flags to this very day.

On today's this episode, we'll continue the story of the German Empire and follow its rise to a colonial world power. We'll span the globe and see how they forced the black-white-and-red flag of imperialism on native populations from western Africa to the South Pacific. And we'll explore the collapse of the German Empire after WWI, the retirement of the old flag, and the resurrection of Germany's black-red-and-gold banner of democracy during the short-lived Weimar Republic. And of course, we'll discuss the return of the imperial colors under the darkest chapter of Germany's history, giving rise to the most infamous flag in modern human civilization: The Swastika Flag of the Nazis.

Before we dive in, I want to apologize upfront: The history of the Weimar Republic, WW2, and the rise of Nazism has been one of – if not the – most well-documented and deeply analyzed period in European history. And as I said in Part I, for me, my family, and my tribe, this is the most emotionally-charged and devastating period since the fall of the second temple in Jerusalem in 70AD. That said, in order for us to focus on the flags of the era, we're just going to have to breeze over a lot of the political and historical details of the war. It's not that we don't care or think it's important – in fact, quite the opposite – we're just trying to stay focused on what we're all here to learn more about: the German flag.

So today, we'll ask, where do the black-red-and-gold colors of the Weimar flag come from, and what do they mean? Why did the Nazis reject the flag of the Weimar Republic and resurrect the imperial tricolor of Germany – only to retire it for the Swastika flag two years later? And what is the secret behind the Swastika flag – and what makes it such a powerful symbol? As always, we'll ask, why the flag? And once again, why the flag of Germany? We'll be right back after this.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

Where we left off in Part I, the North German Confederation had just smashed through the French lines, laid siege to Paris, and proclaimed the birth of the new German Empire with its black-white-and-red tricolor banner from the steps of the Palace of Versailles. With their surrender, France became the first to recognize Europe's newest superpower as an empire – and their emperor as the Kaiser, the Caesar of Germany. And by 1871, the old balance of powers guaranteed by the 1815 Congress of Vienna, unsuccessfully defended by Napoleon III, was relegated to the ashbins of history.

By the early 1880s, Europe's imperial powers had grown exhausted by wars in their own backyards and started looking far beyond their neighbors for territorial expansion. So, they set their sights on the massive, resource-rich, and mysterious land just south of their continental borders. You guessed it – The Conquest of Africa had begun, and the new German Empire would play a starring role.

In 1884, Otto von Bismarck – the Iron Chancellor and architect of the German Empire – organized the West Africa Conference, which was essentially a forum for the major powers of Europe and the United States to agree to terms on the partition and colonization of the African continent. With Belgium, UK, France, and others already leading the charge in the Scramble for Africa, this conference – cloaked as a humanitarian undertaking, because of course – set the stage for other jealous European powers to get a piece of the African pie without stumbling into another devastating European war.

After 104 days of negotiations, the conference proved to be a huge success for the colonization programs of Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm I. Between 1884 and 1885, the German imperial flag would fly over huge swaths of African territories, including over the modern-day nations of Namibia, Botswana, Cameroon, Togo, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and even as far away as parts of Papua-New Guinea. And under the even more hardline imperialist ruler Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German Empire would flood into the Pacific by the turn of the century, staking claims to far-flung regions like the Solomon Islands, Nauru, the German Marshall Islands, the Mariana Islands, Micronesia, Palau, Samoa, and even parts of China. In fact, just before the breakout of WW1 in 1914, the German colonial territories expanded to an area four and a half times bigger than Germany itself. The German Empire was no longer simply a European power – they were a major world power, matched only at the time by the UK, France, Belgium, and Russia.

Now, without ignoring nor downplaying the horrors and daily humiliations that come with colonization and occupation – including the oppression, violence, and genocide of native peoples – for our purposes, the German colonial experiment is interesting to this podcast for two particular reasons: first, unlike Britain and France, the Germans took no real efforts to mold their protectorates in their image. For the most part, with some exceptions in German East Africa and Samoa, it doesn't appear that they forced the German language, culture, or education on most of their subjects – these territories were instead primarily used to strip-mine resources and enrich the German aristocracy back home. And second, unlike their British counterparts, German colonies were not granted their own heraldic devices or flags. Instead, much like the Portuguese and Dutch empires, German colonies were treated as territorial possessions – extensions of the Empire itself – and the imperial tricolor banner would fly wherever the Germans claimed new land. But this banner had one major difference to the flag back home: the colonial flag featured the Reichssturmflagge, the black imperial German eagle, at its center. And above the eagle's head sat the crown of the Kaiser.

It goes without saying that all forms of colonialism are objectively terrible. But with the Germans, historians can argue that it was even more so. By denying any semblance of autonomy or self-rule, along with their extremist ideals of white supremacy and racial superiority, as well as the German colonial practice of slave labor, rape, and the confiscation of native land for white settlers – they set their colonies up for disaster. This all led to mass uprisings and rebellions against the German occupiers – which were systematically put down with extreme violence, brutality, and acts of genocide. In one instance in early 1904, the Herero and Nama peoples of German South West Africa – which is modern-day Namibia – took up arms and launched a well-planned surprise attack against the German settlers, taking forts and cities in an effort to kill German morale and push them from their lands. According to Robert Gaudi, author of *African Kaiser*, he explains that “The Germans suffered more than defeat during the early months of 1904; they suffered humiliation, their brilliant modern army unable to defeat a rabble of ‘half naked savages.’ Cries in the Reichstag, and from the Kaiser himself, for total eradication of the Hereros grew strident.” The German response to this humiliation would be swift and total. Gaudi continues, “At last, Leutwein” – the commander of German South West Africa at the time – “despised by many in Germany as a weakling ‘lacking ruthlessness,’ was sacked in favor of the ferocious General Lothar von Trotha...[who] believed only the most draconian measures would defeat the Hereros. ‘I know the tribes of Africa,’ [von Trotha] wrote. ‘They are all alike. They only respond to force. It was and is my policy to use force with terrorism and even brutality. I shall annihilate the revolting tribes with streams of blood...only after a complete undoing will something else emerge.” According to historians, what happened next would be described as the first genocide of the 20th Century. Tens of thousands of German reinforcements were poured into Namibia to quickly put down the rebellion. The Germans removed Herero and Nama people's status as protected subjects of the Empire, and between 1904 and 1908, they were systematically massacred, enslaved, and imprisoned in concentration camps across the country, and even subject to horrific medical experiments – all reminiscent of Nazi tactics that would come decades later. In all, between 65-100,000 natives would perish in the genocide. And this is just but one instance of resistance and tragedy in German colonial Africa. For example, between 1905 and 1907, the Muslim Maji Maji

Rebellion in German East Africa – modern-day Tanzania – led to a scorched-earth campaign by the German command, resulting in upwards of 300,000 tribespeople dead from violence and famine.

By the early 1910s, it was becoming clearer to the German Empire – and to the rest of the colonial world – that this level of violence and racial animosity in their colonies was simply unsustainable. A softer, quieter exploitation of African territories would be much better for economic expansion – and for public relations – than wide-scale armed conflict with the natives. But for this white supremacist German regime, greater autonomy and Black self-rule was out of the question. However, in 1913, one idea did come across Kaiser Wilhelm II's desk that piqued his interest: and that was to boost native morale by granting these colonies their own national flags.

Now, Otto von Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm's father – Kaiser Wilhelm I – understood the symbolic power that flags and heraldic devices could have over a deeply divided populous. If you remember from Part I, in 1867, Bismarck and Wilhelm went to great lengths designing the black-white-and-red imperial tricolor flag for the North German Confederation. With that flag, the black and white represented Prussian dominance, and the white and red were for the state of Brandenburg and the colors of the Hanseatic League. By 1913, Bismarck and Wilhelm I were long dead, but their lessons would be carried on by an imperial loyalist by the name of Dr. Wilhelm Solf.

Now, Dr. Wilhelm Solf spent 11 years as the first governor of German Samoa before being promoted to Secretary of the Imperial Colonial Office in 1911. Between 1912 and 1913, after the Herero genocide and the disastrous Maji Maji Rebellion, he was sent to tour both German and British colonies with the express goal of finding new ways to create a “reformed image” of German colonialism. When he returned to Germany in 1913, Dr. Solf gave a report to Kaiser Wilhelm on his findings – and he emphasized one point in particular where the British had been successful: that the granting of symbolic national flags can have a positive effect on the native peoples' morale. This seemed to be such a simple fix to the problem that Kaiser Wilhelm enthusiastically agreed and instructed Dr. Solf to design coats of arms and flags for each of the German colonies. He would have to find symbols in which the native peoples could proudly identify – but still maintain allegiance to their German occupiers. Thus, each colonial shield he designed followed a strict and almost comically obvious hierarchy: at the top was the imperial crown of the Kaiser, in the middle would be the Reich eagle, and on the bottom sat the chosen symbol of the colony – just in case the natives forgot their place in the social order. And for their flags, each banner would retain the imperial tricolor and would simply add the colony's shield at its center. Following the British practice, the Germans selected natural characteristics of the landscape for their colonial symbols. For example, Cameroon would be an elephant's head; Togoland, a tree and two cobras; for Samoa, three palm trees on water; and German South East Africa was given the head of lion. Kaiser Wilhelm II personally approved Dr. Solf's flags in the summer of 1914; however, for better or for worse, these flags would have to be postponed indefinitely with the breakout of WWI. In fact, these flag designs were lost for nearly a century, only unearthed from the German central archive as recently as 2010 – and I'll leave

these flags for you guys to see in the show notes; they're quite fascinating to see. So, it would happen that, after decades of enslavement and exploitation, not only would these colonial subjects not even get the small dignity of having their own flags, many would soon find themselves on the front lines of this world war, fighting for the German imperial tricolor against British and French colonial troops in Africa – and even in the trenches and the killing fields of the European Western Front.

And speaking of the Western Front, when we come back from the break, we'll follow Germany into their disastrous defeat in WWI and explore the fall of the German Empire and their imperial tricolor flag. We'll also witness the rise of the Weimar Republic and the resurrection of Bundesflagge the black-red-and-gold banner first unveiled during the Revolution of 1848. So next, we'll ask, why did Germany abandon their imperial flag after the war and adopt the old colors of the revolution? What do the black-red-and-gold colors mean, and where did they come from? Stick around, we'll answer that and more right after the break.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

“From black night through red blood towards the golden sun.” In one source I found, this is how solidier and poet, Theodor Körner of the Lützow Freikorps, describes Germany's long road to a unified state in 1813. A once-promising dramatist in Vienna, Körner was one of the thousands of young men who enlisted in the Freikorps – the unpaid volunteer force of the Prussian Army – to chase Napoleon from Fatherland while he was in retreat from a failed campaign in Russia. Körner would die in battle at age 21, but his poems and songs would live on to inspire generations of men and women who fought for the nationalist cause of a unified German state. And it is believed that these words – and the uniforms of this Lützow Freikorps – directly inspired the black-red-and-gold colors of the Bundesflagge. So, who were these Lützow Freikorps anyway? And how did their colors inspire the flag? Well, let's start with a quick recap.

If you recall from last time, Napoleon's conquest ended the near-thousand-year Reich of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. And from 1806 until 1813, these German territories were under the thumb of Napoleon's French Empire, with much of western Germany consolidated into the *Rheinbund* – or the Confederation of the Rhine – a collection of French puppet states used as a strategic buffer between the French mainland to the West and the large German states of Prussia and Austria to the east. The forced alliance between the Prussian State and the French army crumbled in the winter of 1812 and 1813 as Napoleon retreated from his catastrophic campaign in Russia. In response, his former Prussian allies turned their guns on Napoleon's retreating army, pushing them further west back toward France. With Prussia's defection – and with the formation of the European Sixth Coalition to fight against Napoleon – a young, idealistic Prussian army major named Ludwig von Lützow had a brilliant idea.

To aid the smaller German states against the French, Ludwig Lützow would raise a volunteer force, a Free Corps, of students, republicans, nationalists, and revolutionaries from across the

country to fight for the whole of Germany against Napoleon's bloodied army. You see, at the time, there was a palpable air of pan-German nationalism coursing through the veins of German society, and this new Free Corps would play right into this romantic idea. There was also a lack of money, so not only would these volunteers be unpaid, they'd have to supply their own equipment and uniforms – even taking enemy uniforms when necessary. And this is where the colors of the uniforms come into play. While Prussian regulars wore blue, the cheapest dye at the time was black – and to have a consistent color across the Free Corps, as well as to make sure other colors didn't bleed through the fabric, volunteers had to dye black whatever uniform they were able to bring along with them. Like the black dye, brass buttons were the least expensive and the most widely available, so golden brass buttons were worn on their black coats. Then, to establish rank, the Freikorps used red trim on the collars and cuffs – something that was easy to see on their black tunics. Thus, the Lützow Freikorps – named after their commander, Lützow – would fight against French army while dressed in black, red, and gold. And it's these colors that would be ingrained into the minds of proud and victorious pan-German revolutionaries, inspiring the flag that was first unveiled at the Hambach Festival in 1832, and then raised as the republican banner in Frankfurt after the short-lived Revolution of 1848. So, that's why we have the black-red-and-gold colors of the Bundesflagge. But that just leads us to another question: why was the flag of 1848 chosen as the national banner of the Weimar Republic 71 years later? Well, as do most histories of flags, this story begins with tragedy and bloodshed. And in this case, the Bundesflagge was reborn from the deadliest war the world had ever seen.

This story begins on June 28, 1914, when the Archduke of Austria, Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, Sophie, the Duchess of Hohenberg, were assassinated by a group of young Serbian nationalists while on an official military procession in Sarajevo. You see, Austria-Hungary had annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908 – land that some nationalist Serbs saw as rightfully theirs. This assassination set off a tragic chain of events, with Austria-Hungary declaring war on Serbia on July 28. Now, Serbia had a military alliance with the mighty Russian Empire – and at the same time, Austria-Hungary was given a blank check of military support by Kaiser Wilhelm and the German Empire. Soon, open conflict was raging between Austria-Hungary, Germany, Serbia, and Russia. Then, Russia's allies – Great Britain and France – joined in the fight – and the whole of Europe was thrown into a massive continental war at a scale not seen since the Napoleonic Wars a century earlier. By August 1914, The Central Powers of the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria were at war with the Allied Powers of Russia, Serbia, Britain, France, Belgium, Japan, and others. And by 1917, what began as a European conflict had set fire around the globe, bringing virtually the entire world to a state of total war. OK – because we want to stay focused on the story of the German flag, we're not going to dive too deep into the history of World War I. Instead, we're going to jump ahead to the end of the war where the story of the German flag continues.

In the spring of 1918, the German Empire had scored a major military victory on its eastern front against Russia. A year earlier, the Russian Empire had collapsed with the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, who was replaced by a revolutionary Bolshevik government. With Russia torn apart by hunger, poverty, disease, and civil war, the Russian army officially surrendered to the

Kaiser's forces on March 3, 1918. Emboldened by this victory, and with the Americans soon entering Europe to support the Allies, the Germans launched a massive military offensive on the Western Front in a last-ditch effort to win the war before the Americans could arrive and turn the tide. The offensive was successful at first, pushing the battle lines so far west that German shells could rain down on Paris. However, this quick success caused the German supply lines to stretch far too thin to reinforce the exhausted soldiers at the front. Then, the allied counteroffensive, strengthened by a massive influx of American soldiers and resources, sent the tired German army in retreat. By September 1918, it was clear to everyone that the Central Powers and the German Empire had lost the war. In a last-ditch effort, the Kaiser offered peace talks on September 15, but with the Allies on the path to victory, they would accept nothing short of German surrender. And this is where things get really interesting for us. In an attempt to gain more favorable terms in their imminent surrender to the Allies, the German generals insisted that the liberal prince, a man named Max von Baden, immediately form a new democratic government. He tried, but the prince was unable to control the royalist passions of the imperial navy who were determined to continue the fight for their Kaiser. But time was running out for the Empire, and the hubris of these naval officers would alter the course of German history – and the German flag – forever.

The German naval high command was not going to surrender – and was certainly not going to back a new democratic government. The imperial navy was ready to go down fighting and planned for an epic final battle against the British Royal Navy in the English Channel. But the men and boys on the doomed ships had no interest in being cannon fodder for the Kaiser any longer. On October 29, the German sailors mutinied and led an uprising against the Kaiser in the port city of Wilhelmshaven. In less than one week, a revolution in support of these sailors had quickly gripped every power center in the country, sparking mass uprisings across the German mainland against the imperial government. On the verge of defeat, the German Empire was now crumbling from within – something that seemed impossible just weeks earlier. And then, on November 9, 1918, the revolutionary leadership seized Berlin and announced the swift end of the German Empire. They also announced the formation of a new republic under the control of the Social Democratic Party, the SPD, a left-wing political party who had majority control of the Reichstag. The Kaiser abdicated his throne and fled in exile to Holland the following day, and on November 11, 1918, the new German government surrendered to the Allies, marking an official end to the Great War. But it also marked the beginning of civil unrest at home.

Needless to say, four years of war had caused extreme hardship on the German population. On the one hand, the Empire had poured nearly all of its resources into the war effort with little regard for the poorer and lower classes – and on the other, the ongoing British naval blockade of Germany unleashed widespread famine, starvation, and disease; a blockade that historians say was responsible for the deaths of nearly 800,000 German civilians. So, by the war's end, labor strikes and protests were commonplace, and – inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia – socialist, nationalist, and anti-aristocratic fervor had swept across the nation.

Immediately after seizing power in 1918, infighting between the centrist and left wings of Social Democratic leadership put the country into a political tailspin. In fact, on the same day that they declared Germany a parliamentary republic, the prominent Marxist-leaning politician, Karl Liebknecht, declared Germany to be a Free Socialist State in the style of the Bolshevik workers councils in Russia. That same Karl Liebknecht, along with his co-revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, would head a communist uprising in early January 1919, leading their so-called Spartacus League – a communist group named after the leader of the Roman slave rebellion – in an attempted overthrow of the Berlin government. Unfortunately for them, the SDP leadership unleashed a mercenary army of German war veterans, known as the Freikorps, to crush their revolt, and they were executed on January 16. But this was far from the only incident.

As these center-left Social Democrats consolidated their power with free parliamentary elections and popular social reforms – like eight-hour workdays, health care, and women’s suffrage – radical groups across Germany continued to agitate for an armed communist revolution, which did see some short-lived success. The communists rejected the black-white-and-red imperial tricolor banner still in use by the SDP government, and the red flag of communism began to emerge in the streets and hung from government buildings during the revolutionary period of 1919.

On January 10, during the Spartacus uprising in Berlin, the northern Hanseatic German state of Bremen declared itself to be the Bremen Soviet Republic, flying the red communist flag of the worker’s council from the banners of the town hall. And in the east German state of Saxony, the Soviet Republic of Saxony cast aside the tricolor for the red communist star. Even in the south, the Bavarian Soviet Republic was governed under the red flag from Munich, and was strong enough to raise a Bavarian Red Army – tens of thousands of men strong. There, full-scale battles and bitter street fighting between the communists and the German Freikorps left hundreds dead and thousands of communist prisoners executed, until the Soviet Republic finally met its demise in early May 1919.

After nearly a year of civil unrest, the revolutionary period ended on August 11, 1919, as Germany’s first president, Friedrich Ebert, signed the German constitution into law, establishing what is commonly known as the Weimar Republic, named after the city from which the constitution was written. On that day, – under the watchful eye of the Allied armies, the freedom of the press, speech, movement, and assembly, free elections, and many other modern republican freedoms were sewn into the fabric of German law. This new Weimar Constitution borrowed heavily from the revolutionary Frankfurt Constitution of 1848 – including one of the most controversial articles of all: the establishment of a new national flag for a new, modern German republic. And this new flag would be the old pan-German black-red-and-gold tricolor of the 1848 Revolution and the symbol of German republicanism. The *Bundesflagge* was back.

But – and this is a big but – not everyone was happy about the adoption of the Bundesflagge. In fact, the national banner was one of the most hotly debated and emotionally-charged topics in the early Weimar Republic. The Bundesflagge was a reviled symbol by both political extremes.



To the conservatives and monarchists, this flag was a slap in the face. It was a rejection of the proud history of Prussia and the German Empire, a snub to the millions of men who fought and died for the Reich's flag in the Great War, and – on top of the devastating Treaty of Versailles imposed by the Allies following the war – just another humiliation for the ailing German nation. To those on the right, including the budding National Socialist German Workers' Party and its enthusiastic young orator, Corporal Adolph Hitler, the liberal democratic Weimar Republic was nothing but an alien form of government, a puppet regime imposed on them by foreign powers, and their Bundesflagge, a symbol of foreign oppression. But like I said, this rejection of the flag wasn't just on the right. To those on the extreme left, like the radical socialists and the communists, they believed that the political and social reforms of the Weimar Republic didn't go nearly far enough. They saw the black-red-and-gold flag as a wolf in sheep's clothing, a mere disguise, hiding the truth that – even though the actors have switched roles – the same kinds of aristocratic, economic, and military powers of the old regime still controlled Germany. To them, only a dictatorship of the proletariat under the red banner of Soviet communism could ever set them free.

But the SDP saw this differently. After suffering a disastrous military defeat, and now stuck in economic hardship under the harsh terms of Versailles, the exhausted German leadership desperately needed to chart a new course not only for the soul of the nation – but for its very survival.

Now, I'm no historian so, take my words with a grain of salt, but here's how I see it: The new German government not only had to break the chains of their imperial, monarchical past – but they also had to resist the sirens on the radical left who tried to lure the masses to the false promises of a communist utopia. In other words, the center had to hold to ensure that Germany could join the community of nations as a modern republican state. And, although unpopular at the time, this is what the black-red-and-gold Bundesflagge represented in 1919. The revolutionary banner stood for the ideals of political freedom, representative government, and equality under the law – ideals that were just as important then as in 1848. Therefore, in my eyes, they had no other option than to resurrect the Bundesflagge as the flag of their new republic.

Before Napoleon and his French troops were driven from Germany in 1814, they had planted the seeds of French revolutionary ideology, like the ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. And those seeds blossomed into a national movement with a new pan-German national flag, the Bundesflagge – with its tricolor shape inspired by the flags of modern republics across the continent. And I think it's clear that these republican ideals had never truly gone away in Germany; they were simply suppressed by the social and military might of the Kaiser and his once-global Empire. I've said this before, but these two ideologies, these two flags – the black-white-and-red of imperialism and the black-red-and-gold of republicanism – coexisted in the streets and in the minds of the German people. A political tug-of-war to decide where Germany would fit in the world: would it be the world's master or its companion? Would Germany be its king or its compatriot? Over the past two centuries, both sides have won, both flags have been flown – hell, even today, in the Federal German Republic of 2020, rising right-wing political

parties like the NDP use the colors of the old Empire to galvanize their crowds around an imagined, gloried past. And while I'm on this tangent, let me just say this: this tactic works. It's the same cheap and effective tactic used in Fascist Spain as Franco resurrected the shield of the Catholic monarchs to claim his legitimacy; the same tactic of using Roman symbolism in Holy Roman Empire Germany to claim their lineage; and even the same one used way back in the 15th Century when Henry Tudor used the mythical red dragon on his banner to secure safe passage through Wales on his way to conquer England. And yes, it's the same tactic used by the right, right here in the United States, with the resurrection of the confederate battle flag – and the use of simplistic, revisionist, and quite frankly fascistic slogans like Make America Great Again. It's not new, and it works. It's not just the dark side of politics, it's the truly dark side of vexillology, and something we'll discuss shortly with the rise of Nazism and the Swastika flag. It's been over 100 years since the fall of the German Empire and 75 since the collapse of the Third Reich, but in Germany, the black-white-and-red lives on, and the same battle lines are still drawn, if only less socially acceptable today than it was back then. What fascinates me most – and terrifies me the most – is that the history of these flags is never finished being written. Their power never truly goes away. Alright, now let's get back to the story and finish up this segment.

On August 11, 1919, with the signing of the constitution, the newly established Weimar Republic cast aside their imperial colors, and the center-left Social Democratic government adopted the black-red-and-gold Bundesflagge as Germany's national flag. But, because German history is so complex, even that is not as cut-and-dry as it seems. In 1922, as a compromise to the rising right-wing parties in the Reichstag, they were forced to concede and reintroduced the old imperial flag to represent German diplomats during trips abroad. And the imperial flag continued to be the flag of the military, albeit with the Bundesflagge in its top left. Like we've said: One nation, two flags, a tug of war for the political destiny of the German people.

When we come back from the break, those German people will choose a new destiny, both in the streets and at the ballot box – and the black-red-and-gold banner of the Weimar Republic will fall for the second time, only to be replaced with the Swastika flag of the Nazis. We'll be right back after this.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

1923 was both a beautiful and perilous year for the young Weimar Republic. Known as the Weimar Renaissance, cultural, architectural, and intellectual life in the German cities was flourishing. German art, music, philosophy – freedoms that were for so long suppressed by imperialism – were gaining world renown. At the same time, however, these achievements were overshadowed by economic hardship, foreign aggression, and political violence. Even if Germany was at fault for the horrors of WWI – a position I subscribe to with some nuance – the punishing reparation demands of the Treaty of Versailles made it impossible for Germany to succeed economically, and this only fueled the peoples' anger at the Allies and toward its own

Weimar government. And then, in January 1923, France and Belgium invaded Germany – and shit really hit the fan.

You see, within the Treaty of Versailles – which were the terms of peace signed after the war on June 28, 1919 – there were demands that reparations be paid to France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom. And these reparations were paid in a number of ways. For example, land in the West was given to France and Belgium, and territory in the East back to Poland, with the Rhineland – a large swath of land in the West – still German, but controlled by Allied armies. They were also forced to give all of the coal and other industry in the Saarland region to the allied powers. And on top of that, huge amounts of gold and hard currency had to be paid over time. It was such a huge debt that the final payment was made only ten years ago, in 2010. But by January 1923, Germany had fallen far behind on their reparation payments. So, in response, France and Belgium invaded and took the heavily-industrialized Ruhr region of Germany, so they could control the coal production and get some of the payments they were owed in coal. But the Allies didn't stop there. The occupation army went so far as to march the 150,000 Germans living in the Ruhr who were not involved in coal production out of the area, dumping them over the border into Germany, and then forcing the remaining coal workers practically at gunpoint to work the mines and factories. Now, Weimar Germany had no real army to retaliate with and no real allies of their own, so they responded instead with passive resistance – a resistance that would lead to a series of calamities.

While small groups of Germans in the Ruhr and other nationalist groups took up arms against the Allies and began guerilla attacks – like blowing up coal factories – German resistance was for the most part peaceful. They went on strike and refused to work under occupation – acts of disobedience that were met with gunfire and violence from the French and Belgian troops. But they held their resolve, and as the Germans continued to strike, the Weimar government responded by continuing to pay the workers even though they weren't getting any of the proceeds. This means that the German government had to start printing out more and more cash to pay their striking workers. And by mid-1923, this passive resistance – however honorable – led to hyperinflation, mass unemployment, and near-total economic collapse. And this economic collapse only fueled the radical parties on both sides of the spectrum – and was especially useful as a recruitment tool to swell their ranks.

In August 1923, Germans took to the streets, and strikes erupted across the country. First, the German Chancellor Wilhelm Cuno was forced from office. Amid the political chaos, radicals took up arms in Hamburg and staged a communist uprising – an uprising which was summarily crushed by the police with extreme brutality. And then, on November 8, in the face of a weak government, a bad economy, and massive anti-communist backlash following the failed coup in Hamburg, nearly 2,000 armed stormtroopers from the small but growing Nazi Party saw their opportunity to strike and took to the streets of Munich in a coup of their own against the Weimar Government. Along with their machine guns and pressed brown uniforms, these Nazi thugs brandished a mysterious new flag in the colors of the old imperial banner: a black swastika atop a white disk laid over a red ground. Known as the Beer Hall Putsch, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi insurgents tried to seize power in Munich by kidnapping the local government

leaders and forcing them to publicly align with the Nazi cause. But to make a long story short, after a long night of confusion and chaos on all sides, the Putsch failed and ended in a firefight between government forces and Hitler's agitators, leaving four police killed and 16 Nazis dead in the streets before they disbanded and fled. Although Hitler failed in his coup and was sentenced to prison, the news of his uprising and the drama of his spectacular show trial were splashed across the papers from Berlin to London to New York. Slowly but surely, the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch would prove to be the spark that transformed Hitler and his Nazis from minor players in Bavarian politics into internationally recognized figures of the nationalist right. And the swastika flag they introduced to the world in the streets of Munich – a flag once reserved for dark beer halls where men like Hitler could spew their anti-Semitic bile and anti-Bolshevik hysteria – this flag, in 10 years, would come to represent not just a backwater nationalist movement, but the largest democratically elected party in the Reichstag.

So, my question is, what is the real meaning behind the Swastika flag that Hitler and his Nazis brought to the world's attention in 1923? Why those colors – and most importantly, why the Swastika?

Well, to describe the flag for you – which I will not be displaying in the show notes – the Nazi flag was a simple black Swastika design overlaid on a white disk on top of a large red ground. At first glance, the black-white-and-red hierarchy pays homage to the old tricolor banner of the German Empire – the same flag and Empire which Hitler himself had fought for during the First World War. Conservatives, ethno-nationalist, and monarchist parties in post-War Germany never adopted the colors of the Bundesflagge, so this color scheme could be simply described as showing allegiance with right-wing movements in Germany at the time. But there's so much more meaning behind this flag if we can understand its context.

When Hitler joined the small German Worker's Party in September 1919, the movement had no party badge, no emblem, and no flag – something he describes as a serious disadvantage against their most hated rivals: the communists, who flew their striking red banner. In Hitler's prison manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, or *My Struggle* – a book I do not recommend that you read – he explains the need for a party flag with animated detail.

*“The lack of these tokens”* – here he means party symbols and flags – *“was not only a disadvantage at that time but would prove intolerable in the future. The...party possessed no outward token of membership which linked them together, and it was absolutely unthinkable that for the future they should remain without some token which would be a symbol of the movement and could be set against that of the International.”* – The international of course meaning the Bolsheviks and the Jews.

He continues.

*“More than once in my youth the psychological importance of such a symbol had become clearly evident to me... In Berlin, after the War, I was present at a mass-demonstration of Marxists in front of the Royal Palace... A sea of red flags, red armlets and red flowers was in itself sufficient*

*to give that huge assembly of about 120,000 persons an outward appearance of strength. I was now able to feel and understand how easily the man in the street succumbs to the hypnotic magic of such a grandiose piece of theatrical presentation.”*

So, when Hitler designed the Nazi flag in 1920 – three years before he wrote Mein Kampf – it shows that he had a deep understanding of the power of graphic design and how to use easily recognizable symbols to get people to identify with a political movement.

Once again, from Mein Kampf.

*“The new flag had not only to become a symbol expressing our own struggle but on the other hand it was necessary that it should prove effective as a large poster. All those who busy themselves with the tastes of the public will recognize and appreciate the great importance of these apparently petty matters. In hundreds of thousands of cases a really striking emblem may be the first cause of awakening interest in a movement.”*

But Hitler never saw this flag as just the symbol of a movement or a political party. The Nazi flag was always meant to be a national flag for a new German state, using the imperial colors to craft a new Aryan vision for Germany.

Back to Hitler.

*“We National Socialists recognized that hoisting the old colors would be no symbol of our special aims; for we had no wish to resurrect from the dead the old Reich which had been ruined through its own blunders, but to build up a new State.”*

In Mein Kampf, Hitler lays out his argument for a flag to represent the new German nation – and he explains in-depth the power that a banner can have to arouse interest in his national movement. But he doesn’t explain why the Swastika itself was chosen to represent this new movement. To get the heart of answering why the Swastika was the symbol of the Nazis, we first have to understand what that symbol meant in Europe in the early 20th Century.

We first have to point out that the Nazis did not invent the Swastika. In ancient Indo-European Sanskrit texts, the word Svastika and its corresponding symbol has always represented auspiciousness and good luck. In Buddhism, the Swastika is thought to represent the footprints of the Buddha, and the Swastika had been and still is used as a religious symbol in both Hinduism and Jainism. In fact, for nearly 15,000 years, the Swastika has appeared across the globe from ancient Mesopotamia and East Asia to Navajo blankets all the way in North America. And by the early 20th Century, the Swastika had become a well-established symbol, a good luck charm of sorts in white western culture, appearing in Coca-Cola ads, Boy Scout badges, military insignia – even on packs of chewing gum. Hell, there’s even a town in upstate New York still named Swastika to this very day. When young Hitler was coming of age, the Swastika was already a ubiquitous symbol in Europe and the West. So, if it was such a well-known symbol, how did Hitler appropriate the Swastika for his fascist nationalist movement in 1920? Well, to

know that, we have to go even further down the rabbit hole and dive into the Aryan racial theory that was widely popular in pseudo-scientific and philosophical circles in Germany at the time. And that all began in the late 18th Century with a linguist named Sir William Jones.

It goes like this: In 1786, Sir William Jones gave a speech proposing the existence of a relationship among European, Indian, and Iranian languages. He proposed the idea that the languages of Europe, Iran, and the Indian subcontinent all derived from a single language way back in history, a language group he coined as Indo-European. At the same time, some western scholars studying ancient Hindu and Sanskrit texts noticed that some of the authors referred to themselves as *Arya* – or Aryans – and they classified this root language not as Indo-European, but Indo-Aryan. Now, stick with me here. In late Bronze Age texts, these Indo-European speakers in Northern India designated people who were honorable, respectable, or noble as Aryans. And in the case of Iran, the root of this place-name comes from the root *Arya* – in reference to the Zoroastrian mythical homeland, *Airyanem Vaejah*. So, if this word is found in India and Iran, and the European languages are connected to this ancient region, some scholars then hypothesized (incorrectly) that the word Aryan must refer not just to a language, but to an ancient race of proto-Europeans – the same Europeans who eventually founded ancient Greece, the glorious Roman Empire, and western civilization as we know it. In short, this racial theory believes that these Aryans moved through Europe and Asia, interbreeding with the other tribes, diluting their Aryanism, thus creating all the different “races” and languages across the continent. And the theory adopted by people like Hitler and Nazis was that Germany was the last bastion of this pure Aryanism – an inheritance they had to protect, as they were constantly victimized by non-Aryan outsider groups, namely the Jews, Slavs, and Russians. Now, as we climb out of that Aryan rabbit hole, you can think about this Aryan racial theory kind of like we think of QAnon: it’s intellectually dishonest, has very limited empirical evidence, is a favorite of the far-right, and they keep trying to connect dots that just aren’t there.

Now, going back to Hitler’s Nazi state flag, which he describes in *Mein Kampf*, he says, *“The red expressed the social thought underlying the movement. White the national thought. And the Swastika signified the mission allotted to us – the struggle for the victory of Aryan mankind and at the same time the triumph of the ideal of creative work which is in itself and always will be anti-Semitic.”*

For Hitler, the Swastika here represents these Aryan peoples and their struggle for victory over the Communist Jew. However, this still doesn’t answer the underlying question: why is it that the Swastika represents this Aryan racial group? Well, that idea was not entirely unique to Hitler, even though he did popularize it through the Nazi state. And we can trace this Aryan-Swastika symbology theory back to a 19th Century German archaeologist and wealthy businessman by the name of Heinrich Schliemann.

Heinrich Schliemann was a guy obsessed with finding the lost city of Troy from Greek mythology. In the 1870s, while digging in Hisarlik, on the Aegean coast of Turkey, he began to unearth layers of civilizations dating back thousands of years – and declared the oldest findings to be this lost city of Troy. And among the astonishing ruins, along with bronze, silver, and gold,

he discovered more than 1,800 depictions of a hooked-cross symbol: Heinrich Schliemann found ancient Trojan Swastikas. Needless to say, news of this Trojan discovery spread like wildfire around the globe and led to the popular adoption of the Trojan-Indo-European Swastika across the western world. And because the Swastika had already been found in both India and on proto-German tribal artifacts – if you mix in a little Aryan racial theory – it didn't take long for ethnonationalists to conclude that the ancient Greeks and the Germans both descended from this mystical pure Aryan race. In other words, the Swastika provided the evidence, the link, between the Aryan language and German Aryan racial theories. In an article in the online academic publication, *The Conversation*, author James Skidmore explains how Hitler stole this “Aryan” symbol for his movement and incorporated it into his new flag:

“If you believe that Germans form a separate “race” superior to other ethnic groups around it, it becomes easier to claim that you need to keep that “race” pure. In that context, anti-Semitism followed. The Thule Society, an anti-Semitic organization promoting the superiority of German, was founded at the end of the First World War. It used a stylized swastika as its logo. The society sponsored the fledgling Nazi party, and in a bid for a greater public profile, the party created a banner that incorporated the Swastika as we know it today. Hitler was convinced that a potent symbol would rally the masses to his xenophobic cause. With a black swastika rotated 45 degrees on a white circle set against a red background, the Nazi banner modernized the ancient symbol while evoking the colors of the recently defeated German Empire.”

And there you have it. The Swastika had already been appropriated by anti-Semitic German nationalists; and Hitler, armed with the popular Aryan racial theory, masterfully designed it into a banner that paid homage to the old German Empire, creating a flag that clearly connects the idea of the superior Aryan race to the anti-Jewish movement of German ethnonationalism.

When we come back from the break, we'll be joined by fellow flag nerd and vexillologist Michael Green to explore the power of the Swastika flag and discuss the resurgence of divisive symbols in politics today. You won't want to miss this interview. We'll be right back.

[BREAK]

[Michael Green Interview]

Welcome back to the show.

Historians may still argue about the exact date on which the Weimar Republic fell, but one thing is for certain: the hope for liberal democracy in Germany was all but hanging on by a thread when Adolph Hitler became Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933.

Hitler's rise to power – from his arrest following the Beer Hall Putsch in 1923 to his consolidation of power ten years later – was anything but meteoric. The Nazi Party's popularity waxed and waned from election to election, and in the months and years before the Great Depression of 1929, their message of economic populism often fell on deaf ears as Germany

slowly recovered from the economic collapse of 1923. In other words, his journey to totalitarian power did not follow a linear path. But the chaos of the global financial crisis following the Great Depression – including the unpopular austerity cuts in Germany, the rise of extremist parties on the left and right, the inability to form coalition governments, and the increasing vehemence against foreigners, immigrants, and Jews – played directly into the Nazi Party's hands. If chaos is a ladder, the Nazis knew how to climb it. And following a series of national and parliamentary elections, along with a number of shady backroom deals, Hitler emerged victoriously, and his Nazi Party held a plurality of seats come 1933.

Although the Nazis did win the January 1933 elections, Hitler came to power with only 33% of the vote – it was not a full majority, and it was certainly no mandate. Drastic measures were needed to consolidate his power – and we'll discuss that in just a minute.

One of the obstacles to electoral victory for Hitler's Nazis, aside from the rising communist party, was a group that has been largely forgotten to contemporary history outside of Germany: this group called themselves the *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, Bund aktiver Demokraten*, or the *Black, Red, Gold Banner of the Reich, League of Active Democrats*, named after the colors of the Weimar Republic's flag. Founded on February 22, 1924, the Reichsbanner was an alliance of the Social Democrats, German Democrats, and the Catholic Center Party – essentially, a radically centrist political alliance that was built to defend the parliamentary and democratic principles of the Weimar Republic and its flag against the extremism of the Nazis, Communists, and monarchists. Keenly aware of the dangers posed by these elements, the organization had nearly 3 million members at its height, working to provide political education for young people about the importance of active participation in the German democratic political process. And, although unpopular to many, they chose for their flag the very banner of the Weimar Republic – the black, red, and gold Bundesflagge – elevating it to the ultimate symbol of democracy in Germany. At the center of their flag was the Reich's eagle, a unifying symbol of German history. And on the flag were the words *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold*, The Realm's Banner of Black-Red-Gold; and below the words Unity, Justice, and Freedom.

In 1931, in response to the rise of Nazism and their violent Brown Shirt gang, the Reichsbanner joined forces with a paramilitary organization called the Iron Front – a collection of social democrats, unionists, and liberals who shared the same values of the Reichsbanner: defending German democracy against totalitarian extremists from all sides. These Iron Front guys were like the original Antifa – literally fighting fascists and white supremacists in the streets. The Iron Front flag, aptly known as the Three Arrows flag, had three arrows aiming down and diagonally left, representing their struggle against the three enemies of the Weimar Republic: The Monarchists, the Nazis, and the Communists. By November 1932, the SPD officially adopted the Three Arrows as their party flag during the parliamentary elections, and in the decades since, the flag has been adopted by anti-fascist groups across the globe. It's even made a resurgence in 2020, right here in the United States, from Portland to Kenosha, to represent Antifa movements against now one-term President Donald Trump's pseudo-authoritarian tendencies.



However, the Reichsbanner, the Iron Front, and The Arrows Flag would not survive long on the streets of Berlin. Like I said, drastic measures were needed to consolidate Hitler's power and squash his political enemies – and on February 27, 1933, he was handed the perfect opportunity to do both.

Around 9:00pm on February 27, the Reichstag building in Berlin went up in flames. While we may never know who started the fire, we know for certain that Hitler told his cabinet members, "This is a God-given signal. If this fire, as I believe, is the work of the Communists, then we must crush out this murderous pest with an iron fist." Within hours of the fire, Hitler persuaded President Paul von Hindenburg to invoke Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, an invocation that – whether Hindenburg knew it at the time or not – would end the Weimar Republic forever and elevate Hitler from German Chancellor to totalitarian dictator. Article 48 states that "If public security and order are seriously disturbed or endangered within the German Reich, the President of the Reich may...suspend for a while, in whole or in part, the fundamental rights provided in Articles 114, 115, 117, 118, 123, 124 and 153." These fundamental rights included the freedom of speech, the freedom of assembly, the freedom of the press, and of privacy – all the fundamental rights that made Weimar Germany a modern democratic republic. Within hours, more than 4,000 people were arrested and tortured – including many of the opposition leaders in the parliament – leaving the Nazis free to do as they pleased. Along with the communist party, the Iron Front and the Reichsbanner would soon be abolished. An election was held a week later, on March 5, 1933, giving Hitler 44% of the vote and complete control of the Reichstag. It would prove to be the last multi-party German election until 1990.

On March 12, 1933, barely a week after securing legitimacy in the election, Hitler went to task securing a new flag for his Nazi state. For the second time in a century, the black-red-and-gold Bundesflagge – the flag of democracy and freedom and liberalism and modernity – would fall, replaced once again by the imperial tricolor banner of the old German Empire. But raising that imperial banner – that flag of expansionism, colonialism, and war – was not enough for Hitler. Jews, Africans, and even socialists had all fought and died for those colors during the First World War. No, even that horrible flag was too inclusive of these undesirable classes. So, Hitler raised the Swastika flag alongside it – the flag of the Aryan struggle over the Bolshevik Jew – to be the co-national flag of the new genocidal Third Reich.

We'll be right back.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

Where we left off, Hitler declared that both the imperial tricolor flag and the Nazi Swastika flag were to be co-national banners for the Third Reich. But, as we discussed on Part 1, he replaced the imperial tricolor with the Nazi flag just two years later, on September 15, 1935.

So, why did Hitler elevate the Swastika banner to be the sole flag of Germany just two years after making the imperial tricolor the flag of the nation? Well, that surprising story begins with an act of anti-Nazi resistance right here in New York City, on Pier 86 on the west side of Manhattan, just a few miles from where I'm recording this podcast. One flag, six American sailors, and a Jewish-American judge would unexpectedly change the course of German history forever.

On July 26, 1935, a luxury German passenger liner called the SS Bremen was anchored in the Hudson River at Pier 86, right in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York City. But this was no ordinary ship; described as a "floating palace" and the pride of the German fleet – the SS Bremen was the most advanced ocean liner of its day, catering to the rich and powerful for their transatlantic trips. As it was docked, a spotlight was cast on the Swastika flag hung proudly on its mast – like an arrogant middle finger to the City of New York. So, late into the evening of July 26, during a black-tie gala before its midnight departure for Germany, six American sailors snuck onboard the Nazi vessel determined to show those fascists whose city they were in. The ringleader of the group, a truly badass 20-year-old Irish-Catholic kid named William Bailey, fought his way past the guards, climbed to the top of the bow, ripped the Nazi flag from its staff, and threw it into the oily waters of the Hudson River below. According to the news archives I've found, the hundreds or possibly thousands of American anti-Nazi demonstrators on the harbor below were electrified by Bailey's actions, and a full-fledged anti-fascist riot ensued outside the SS Bremen, which continued for hours after the ship finally set sail. All six American sailors on board were quickly arrested by NYPD.

What had started as a local act of defiance against the Nazi flag exploded into an international incident overnight, with the sensational story plastered on the front pages of almost every major newspaper around the world. According to the diary of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, Hitler was furious, and in response – shamefully, I might add – President Franklin Delano Roosevelt drafted an apology to the dictator on behalf of the United States, saying that the act was a protest against the Nazi political party, not the German state itself. But the story doesn't end there. Bailey's second act was just getting started.

The trial of the Bremen Six drew huge attention in the international media – no less because the judge, Justice Brodsky, was a Jew, sympathetic to the defendants and their anti-Nazi beliefs. Popular opinion, however, was against the Bremen Six, as the United States – and the world – would rather appease the dangerous German dictator than prod him with another humiliation. The defense team, led by a prominent U.S. Congressman from New York named Vito Marcantonio, argued that no, the defendants were not criminals at all – they were modern successors of the American patriots who tossed tea into the Boston Harbor in 1773 in protest of an oppressive government. It was a bit of a stretch, but to the shock of the world, Judge Brodsky wholeheartedly agreed. On September 10, 1935, the judge read a lengthy, 14-page verdict dismissing nearly all the felony charges against the Bremen Six while eviscerating the government of Nazi Germany for their violence and oppression. Citing a widely forgotten precedent nearly 200 years old from the time of the Boston Tea Party, Judge Brodsky declared that the men had the right to regard the Swastika flag as "the black flag of piracy" and thus

were within the legal bounds to desecrate it. And the six American sailors were allowed to leave the courtroom as heroes.

But across the Atlantic Ocean in Berlin, Hitler was incensed. Not only had his Swastika flag been thrown into the Hudson River by rabbleroxing American sailors, but a foreign judge – a Jew no less – sided with these criminals, lauding them as heroes against his regime. Even though FDR and his government shamefully apologized to Hitler for the transgression, Hitler went to task making sure this kind of thing would not happen again. So, five days later, on September 15, 1935, at a government rally in the German city of Nuremberg Germany's Reich Flag Law was announced. The imperial tricolor flag of the old German Empire, the official flag of the Third Reich for barely two years, would be permanently replaced by the Swastika flag of the Nazi Party.

Not only were Jews forbidden from flying the new German flag – a flag that represented the Aryan struggle over the Jew – under the Nuremberg Laws, Jews would be declared foreigners in their own country and stripped of whatever civil and economic rights still existed in the Reich. And over the next six years, the Jews trapped under the regime of the Swastika flag would be subject to hundreds – if not thousands – of anti-Semitic laws banning them from everything from practicing medicine and law to owning their gardens or attending the cinema. And following the breakout of World War II, Jews across Europe would be systematically imprisoned, enslaved, and executed in death camps and in the streets, until nearly 6 million Jews – 2/3rds of Europe's entire Jewish population – were eradicated by the Nazis and their collaborators. As of the recording of this podcast, the worldwide Jewish population has still not rebounded from the genocide of the Holocaust. While the Jewish population is around 14 million, there are still nearly 2.5 million fewer Jews alive today than in 1939. And that's why for many Jews like myself, there is no greater reminder of these horrors – nothing more sinister, no more gut-wrenching a symbol of our own destruction at the hands of the German people – than the black-white-and-red Swastika flag of Nazi Germany.

When we come back from the break, Hitler's thousand-year Reich will be cut drastically short by the Allied Powers in the summer of 1945, and the black-red-and-gold Bundesflagge will rise once again, reclaiming its rightful position over a democratic Germany now and forever – or so we can only hope. We'll be right back.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

On April 30, 1945, as the Battle of Berlin raged in the streets above him, Adolf Hitler swallowed a cyanide capsule to take his own life instead of being captured by his Communist enemies. And then, just for good measure, with Soviet troops advancing mere blocks from his bunker, Hitler shot himself in the head with a pistol, and his body was cremated in the garden by his loyal survivors.

One of the bloodiest battles in world history, the Battle of Berlin cost nearly 1 ½ million lives in just two weeks, finally ending in a resounding Soviet victory over the Germans as the Communists captured Berlin on May 2, 1945. Soviet war photographer Yevgeny Khaldei was there in Berlin and took what is possibly the most famous image of the entire war: titled *Raising a Flag Over the Reichstag*, Khaldei captured the moment a Soviet soldier hoisted the red hammer-and-sickle communist flag over the Reichstag building, overlooking the smoking ruins of the German capital. And five days later, on May 7, the Germans surrendered unconditionally to the Allies, ending 12 years of Nazi terror – and relegating the Swastika flag to history, once and for all.

Immediately following the war, in response to the heinous crimes committed over the past 12 years, Germany was denied their right to self-governance by the victors. In fact, until May of 1949, Germany was divided into four military control zones, each occupied by an Allied power. The East was occupied by the Soviet Union, and the three quadrants in the West were controlled by Britain, France, and the United States. This means that for years, there was no German government and therefore no German flag. And not only was there no flag, but even the displaying of the old German flag of the Third Reich was punishable with imprisonment and even death. This flag ban was part of the process after the war known as denazification. A process agreed to by the Allied powers, denazification was the effort to totally cleanse German society of anything and anyone deemed Nazi. Nazi laws were lifted, Nazi books banned, streets were renamed, and all National Socialist symbols and effects were totally banished – chief among them, the Swastika flag. While it was easy enough to scrub the German façade of all things Nazi, a much larger problem was the “re-education” of the German citizenry in democratic values – and what the hell do you do with the nearly 8.5 million former members of the Nazi party, and the millions of others engaged in Nazi organizations? From 1945 to 1950, hundreds of thousands of German civilians were arrested and interrogated, questioned, and classified – even sending thousands of Germans to internment and re-education camps until their level of involvement in the Nazi party was determined. Just like they had stripped the Jews of their citizenship in the 1930s, the Germans would get only but a small taste of what it meant, what it felt like, to be a foreigner in their own country.

But with relations quickly deteriorating between the Soviets and the Western Allies, Germany was soon transformed from a fractured occupied territory into two new countries now on the front lines of a Cold War between the Communist east and the democratic West. You see, at first, the Allies pushed de-militarization, denazification, and de-industrialization to make certain that Germany could not equip itself to fight another war. However, this was quickly relaxed when the West realized that Germany needed to be economically strong to protect against the Soviet communists in the East. So, in May of 1949, the three western areas of occupation – that is, the American, French, and British zones – merged to become the Federal Republic of Germany, most commonly referred to as West Germany. Known as the Marshall Plan, massive industrial investments from the United States started to pour into Germany to build it from the ground up and ignite the new West German economy – all in order to halt the spread of communism and create a strong trading partner in Western Europe. So, with the new Federal German Republic now established in the West, it was up to the Germans – under the watchful

eye of the allied armies – to raise a flag that would chart a new course for the young nation. If you think this sounds a lot like Germany in 1918, you're totally right. Once again, the Social Democrats pushed for the Bundesflagge – the flag of the 1848 Revolution and the Frankfurt Parliament and the banner of the old Weimar Republic that was stripped away from them by the tyrannical Nazi regime. And predictably, the conservative parties vehemently opposed the black-red-and-gold tricolor and the humiliation they felt it always brought on their nation following defeat. But instead of fighting for the old black-white-and-red flag of the German Empire – an idea the western allies, let alone the West German government, would never allow – the conservatives instead proposed a flag design relatively unknown outside of German political circles: they said that Germany should instead fly the Wirmer flag.

Known as the Resistance Flag at the time, this Wirmer Flag was a black Nordic cross overlaid on a gold Nordic cross on a red ground – a very similar design to the flag of Norway, if you replace the black and gold and with blue and white. Now, this particular flag was designed by the German hero Josef Wirmer, who was part of a failed plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler with a bomb on July 20, 1944. And his Resistance Flag was designed to be the new banner of Germany if the coup against the Nazi leader was successful. But it wasn't. Unfortunately for Wirmer and his conspirators, he would be hung for treason – but his flag, along with his famous last words, telling the Nazi judge that he would wait for him in hell – would live forever in German political memory.

As proud and intriguing a story that that flag represented, its defenders would fall short. The German Constitution was adopted on May 23, 1949, along with the flag of continuity and liberalism and of the old Weimar Republic – the black-red-and-gold Bundesflagge was here to stay.

Five months after the federal republic was established, the Soviet zone became the German Democratic Republic, known as East Germany, a communist satellite state led by the Socialist Unity Party, and far economically weaker than their republican countrymen in the West. After unofficially flying the black-white-and-red tricolor for a time in the East, the Soviet-German state now had to compete for the hearts and minds of their own German subjects, and, declaring that they were the true heirs to the Weimar legacy, East Germany would also adopt the Bundesflagge as their national banner. This means that from 1949 to 1959, the flags of East and West Germany were identical; however, their fates were anything but. As the Germans in the West flourished in a free and prosperous republic, those in the East were subject to economic stagnation and a police state dictatorship.

It wasn't until October 1, 1959, that East Germany updated a new national flag with Soviet communist iconography to distinguish themselves from the capitalist West. They kept the old Bundesflagge design but overlaid their banner with East Germany's national coat of arms: a compass and hammer surrounded by a ring of rye wheat. With distinctly recognizable communist branding, the hammer was to represent the factory workers – the dictatorship of the proletariat. The compass was for the intelligentsia class, the academics, the writers, and the cultural apparatus. And the ring of rye wheat was the for the farmers, the breadbasket of the

communist nation. Unofficially in the West, this communist flag was known as the *Spalterflagge*, the divorce flag, or the division flag; the word *spalter* a pejorative term roughly meaning trying to pull something apart with nefarious intent. As the Cold War intensified throughout the 1950s, and as East Germany closed their borders in 1952 to the West, this new flag represented totalitarianism and occupation of their countrymen and family members stuck behind the Iron Curtain in the East. So hated was this flag that, along with the Swastika banner, the communist East German flag was deemed “anti-constitutional” and outlawed by the West Germans, a crime enforced by the West German police. This just shows you how jealously protective they were of their new democracy, that they felt compelled to make anti-democratic actions like banning a flag – an action encouraged by their rabidly anti-communist American financiers looking over their shoulders. It wasn’t until 1969, a year after the East and West competed together in the Olympics, that this flag law was finally overturned – an olive branch of peace breaking through the tension of a cold war. But, just like the Soviet experiment, the East German flag would be short-lived.

On November 9, 1989, with the Soviet Union teetering on the edge of collapse and with floods of East German refugees escaping to the West through Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the East German government announced a plan to allow civilian travel between East and West at official crossing points along the border. Legal crossings would also be allowed in the city of Berlin, which was divided by a massive wall built by the Soviets in 1961. Now, the crossings were supposed to open the following day on November 10 to give the border guards time to prepare for the traffic ahead. But this key information wasn’t communicated to the East Berlin party boss, a man named Günter Schabowski, whose job it was to make the announcement. So, during his radio address to the city, he told journalists that the borders were to be opened “effective immediately” and “without delay.” So, immediately following his address, thousands of East Berliners descended at the wall’s official crossing sites demanding that they be let through at once. Outnumbered and unprepared – and refusing their official orders to use lethal force against the crowds – the East German border guards capitulated and opened the gates to thousands of civilians who were met with jubilation in the streets of the neighboring West. Within hours, crowds of Berliners from both sides scaled the now-defunct Berlin wall – a symbol of so much animosity and division and death – and began chipping away at its concrete barriers to cheers of tens of thousands of Germans below. Activists from East Berlin carried with them a new flag – a defaced East German flag with the coat of arms cut out from the center – which became the new rallying cry in the struggle for German unification. And after 45 years of bitter division, 31 years under the *Spalterflagge* of East Germany, and some \$60 billion paid to the crumbling Soviet Union as a bribe to leave German soil, on August 31, 1990, the two Germanys signed a formal treaty of reunification. The East German Democratic Republic was absorbed into the German Federal Republic, and they united under the black-red-and-gold Bundesflagge for the first time since Hitler replaced the flag in 1933 – and for the third time in little over 150 years. And of course, the nation is still united under the wings Reichsadler, the ancient black eagle of Rome, Byzantium, the Holy Roman Empire, the Prussian Kingdom, the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany, and West Germany – and today, the official coat of arms of the Federal German Republic.

To this day – and now stronger than ever – the Bundesflagge flies in the streets of Germany as a symbol of democracy, liberalism, egalitarianism, and hope – a banner of freedom’s inevitable triumph over tyranny, good over evil. It’s a symbol of reconciliation, understanding, and maybe even forgiveness – a flag born of bloodshed that carries the burden of peace for Germany, Europe, and the whole of the western world. In the words of the soldier and poet, Theodor Körner, he sums it up best, “From black night through red blood towards the golden sun.” This is the eternal story of the German Flag: The Fall & Rise of the Bundesflagge.

That’s it for this special two-part episode of Why the Flag. You can read show notes and check out all the flags we mentioned at [flagpodcast.com](http://flagpodcast.com) and follow Why the Flag on Instagram @flagpod. Make sure you subscribe to Why the Flag on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Stitcher, and don’t forget to give us five stars in the app – it really helps. Thank you for listening, and I’ll see you next time.