

The Wunder of West Germany



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Introduction

After the close of the Second World War, Germany was in shambles. Seven million Germans had been killed during the war, half of whom were civilians. Millions more were injured, missing, or homeless. Ethnic Germans, expelled from the east by the Soviet Army, joined German women and children who had fled to the countryside and were now trying to find their way to the few habitable buildings left on bombed-out city streets. The Allies carved Germany into four zones of occupation, taking over all governmental tasks at the highest level and closely supervising German governors at the *Land* level. German contemporaries seemed hopeless, calling their predicament “zero hour.” Germany was at rock bottom. And yet, just nine years later, journalist Herbert Zimmermann’s voice would blast exuberantly through millions of German radios, *Germany is world champion!*, as the Federal Republic of Germany’s football team claimed victory at the 1954 FIFA World Cup. In popular memory, Zimmermann’s exclamation refers to much more than the West German footballers’ victory at Bern, rather it symbolizes the Federal Republic of Germany’s victory over the oppressive political and economic poverty of “zero hour.”

“Black-Market Activity in Berlin (1945)”



Photographer Unknown, © Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, found in *German History in Documents and Images: Occupation and the Emergence of Two States*, edited by Volker Berghahn and Uta Pogge, http://germanhistorydocs.gbu.de.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1014

Research Questions

How deep were the challenges facing Germany after the war?

How did West Germany recover politically, economically, and socially from the effects of the war? (What made up the victories that caused an increased quality of life for many West Germans from the end of the war until the football match and moving into the second half of the 20th century?)

What did the 1954 victory (“The Miracle of Bern”) contribute to the recovery, if anything?

How has the “The Miracle of Bern” come to be synonymous with West Germany’s economic and political recovery from “zero hour” until that day?

Methods

For this research I analyzed both primary and secondary sources. Much of the information I utilized to convey the extent of West Germany’s recovery up until 1954 came from military government documents produced in the British and American occupation zones and from the Federal Republic’s Basic Law. For information regarding the 1954 World Cup and German reactions to it, I turned to both the German press and Herbert Zimmermann’s radio commentary on the final match. I also reviewed some American and British articles that convey anxiety about the outburst of German joy after the victory. Finally, I have treated popular representations of the “Miracle of Bern” as primary sources for what the match means today (the symbol it has become).

The Road to Recovery: 1948 – 1954

Despite the apparent lack of German self-government implied by the term “zero hour,” German officials were approved by the western Allies at the *Land* level soon after the unconditional surrender. It was not until July of 1948, however, that the western Allies approved the election of a German assembly to write a democratic constitution. The document that this assembly created was the Basic Law, which governed the Federal Republic from its founding in 1949 until 1989, when it became the constitution of reunified Germany. In August of 1949, the first elections for the new republic were held and Konrad Adenauer became Chancellor, although the western Allies maintained control over the FRG’s foreign affairs through the Occupation Statute until 1955.

Economic recovery came about largely through the Allied monetary reform in 1948. This measure replaced the inflated Reichmark with the Deutsche Mark. As a result, the barter economy dissipated and consumer goods proliferated in stores. By the time of the 1954 World Cup, the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or “Economic Miracle,” was underway. In the four years leading up to the World Cup (the first four years of the Federal Republic’s existence), the West German economy grew at the shocking average rate of 8.8% per year.

“A Young Family During the Early Years of the “Economic Miracle” (1951)”



Hans Hubmann, © Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, found in *German History in Documents and Images: Occupation and the Emergence of Two States*, edited by Volker Berghahn and Uta Pogge, http://germanhistorydocs.gbu.de.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1014

The 1954 World Cup as a Symbol

Prior to Victory:

West German Re-entry to the Global Community

The West Germany media framed their team’s qualification for the World Cup as a formal re-entry to the global community. The tone of coverage of the World Cup tournament prior to the formal play-off round was reserved, and many journalists stressed the importance of a good showing over that of victory. In fact, most articles printed before the West Germans’ advancement through the playoffs seem to push victory aside, as if it were impossible to attain. Even after West Germany’s advancement to the final against Hungary’s “Magical Magyars,” newspaper articles and radio broadcasts were infused with reporters’ wariness of letting themselves exhibit too much hope for victory or zeal for the West German team, lest the watching world perceive a surge in unhealthy German nationalism. Herbert Zimmermann, the radio announcer for the final match, explicitly cautioned his audience in the first few minutes of play, “*Let us not be so presumptuous that we believe [the match] must go successfully*” and affirmed that West Germans should be proud of just making it to the final.

The Victory in Memory:

Fusion of the FRG’s Recovery with the World Cup

It is easy to draw parallels between the West Germans’ 1954 World Cup victory and the Federal Republic’s recovery:

	West German Recovery 1945-1954	Victory at the 1954 World Cup
Challenges facing West Germany	“Zero Hour”	The undefeated Hungarian team – “Magical Magyars”
Low confidence	...in politics, German identity	Worries about making a “good showing”
The achievement(s)	<i>Wirtschaftswunder</i> , increasing sovereignty	<i>Das Wunder von Bern</i> (“The Miracle of Bern”)

Over time, these parallels have taken a firm hold in the way that the 1954 World Cup and the “Economic Miracle” have been remembered. Usually, one is not discussed without some mention of the other, even in scholarly works. The “Miracle of Bern” has become a symbol for the long term recovery of West Germany. This symbolism is most apparent in popular representations of the events like Sönke Wortmann’s film, *Das Wunder von Bern* (2006), and Christian Freidrich Delius’ *Der Sonntag, an dem ich Weltmeister Wurde* (1994).

Das Wunder von Bern - Celebration



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