



# 2003 Iraq, 1945 Germany, and 1940 France: Success and Failure in Military Occupations

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**T**HE IRAQ WAR brought the issue of military occupations to the forefront of American foreign policy. For the first time since 1945, the United States became engaged in a full-blown military occupation aimed at democratization by force. Key figures in the Bush administration, including Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz, drew parallels between the American occupation of Iraq and the American occupation of Germany, the paradigm of a successful American exercise in radical regime change. In both cases, the United States had similar objectives: the removal of an authoritarian, criminal, and antagonistic regime by force and its eventual replacement with a friendly democratic government that would adhere to the tenets of liberal democracy and capitalism. Many policies implemented by Paul Bremer, III, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq, were purportedly modeled on the American occupation of Germany.

Yet the differences between Germany in 1945 and Iraq in 2003 made the American occupation of Germany an implausible model. The levels of destruction and mayhem were incomparable. By the end of World War II, 3.5 million German combatants and 2 million civilians had been killed—about seven percent of the total German population. The war had reduced most German cities to rubble, and the collapse of the Nazi party and the elimination of its leaders had left an ideological and political vacuum. By the end of the war, the Allies had annihilated the Wehrmacht, the Waffen SS, and the Gestapo and crushed the German will to fight. American occupation forces did not face active armed resistance. As a result, American troop levels in Germany decreased with time. In 1945, 1.6 million U.S. troops were in occupied Germany, but by the end of 1946 there were only 200,000.<sup>1</sup> Even after the hardships of the 1991 Gulf War, the sanctions against Saddam Hussein's regime, and the 2003 war, the situation in Iraq did not come close to the humanitarian crisis that engulfed Germany in 1945. Operation Iraqi Freedom caused minimal military and civilian casualties and scant urban destruction—less than 6,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime released Shi'ites and Kurds from the shackles of Sunni dominance, and this translated into retributive violence and tribal confrontations. The Americans never faced this issue in Germany. True, the pre-occupation regimes in Germany and Iraq

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PHOTO: Adolf Hitler and his entourage after a visit to the Eiffel Tower, June 1940 (The German Federal Archive).

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embraced hypernationalist tenets, but religious, political, and ethnic schisms fragmented Iraq. Hitler had tried to convince Germans of the unity of the *volk*, and based his nationalist agenda on the exclusion of unwanted minorities and the simultaneous attempt to strengthen German collective identity. Nazi propaganda, the Holocaust, the war, defeat, and military occupation cemented the perception of national unity. Saddam Hussein, on the other hand, did not succeed in homogenizing Iraq, and Iraqi nationalism did not suffice to unite Shi'as, Sunnis, and Kurds under a single imagined community. Even anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism have not proven to be unifying currents strong enough to overcome the religious, ethnic, and political schisms in current Iraq.

However, another development was even more significant than the above. The Bush administration did not remember an important lesson of the American occupation of Germany. For a military occupation targeted at radical regime change to be successful, the occupiers must have an accurate understanding of the political situation in the occupied country to develop their agenda without alienating its population. The occupying power must be able to navigate the political waters carefully and garner the support of the occupied population. The ultimate objective is the conversion of the former enemy into an ally, an objective that the United States failed to achieve in Iraq.

## **1945 Germany**

Planning what to do with Germany after the collapse of the Third Reich proved difficult and contentious. The War Department, under Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and the State Department, under Secretary Cordell Hull, favored a “soft peace.” They put a high priority on the reconstruction of the German economy, suggested that Germany pay moderate war reparations, and lobbied for German political unity. In 1944, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., the Secretary of the Treasury, became involved in the debates on the future of

postwar Germany. Morgenthau rejected the plans of the War Department and the State Department. Morgenthau championed a “hard peace.” He believed that to ensure a lasting peace it was essential to destroy German heavy industry, arguing that “Germany’s road to peace leads to the farm.” Furthermore, he considered denazification a long-range project, and thought that to overcome Nazi ideology a whole generation of Germans would have to be educated in a new political atmosphere. The tension between the two approaches was not fully reconciled by the time of the occupation.<sup>3</sup>

The initial American agenda was punitive, inflexible, and harsh. During the war, American propaganda insisted that the similarities between Americans and Germans were only skin deep, and that they hid irreconcilable moral differences. In December 1944, the Office of War Information—the American directorate for strategic propaganda during World War II—insisted that the primary task of the American occupation was to make Germans realize that they were guilty. Joint Chiefs of Staff Directive 1067, the first military directive that informed American policy in 1945 Germany, explicitly rejected the idea that the United States was liberating a population held captive by a dictatorship. The directive stated that Germany “will not be occupied for the purpose of liberation but as a defeated enemy nation.”<sup>4</sup> In March and April 1945, as the U.S. military discovered concentration camps scattered across Germany and liberated those held captive there, the U.S. Army forced Germans to *see* Nazi atrocities. The U.S. military organized the confrontation policy, bringing German civilians to the sites of murder, slave labor, and torture, thereby exposing them to evidence of Nazi criminality.

Yet, the Office of Military Government, United States, in Germany adapted its policies to the circumstances on the ground. The American occupation authorities quickly realized that the punitive agenda was alienating the German population and ran the risk of making the Germans susceptible to Soviet propaganda. The confrontation policy was



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**U.S. Army Soldiers and equipment pour across the Remagen Bridge, Germany, 11 March 1945.**

short lived—it ended before V-E Day. The Office of Military Government also revised its collective guilt agenda, its nonfraternization policy, and the way in which it carried out denazification. Prompted by the initial successes of Soviet cultural policy in occupied Germany, the Office of Military Government became engaged in cultural warfare and propaganda. With the advent of the Cold War, the limits of American tolerance were redrawn and American strategic propaganda and censorship became focused on anti-Communism. By 1947, the American objective was no longer punishing Germany but rather transforming the former enemy into an ally. In 1948, currency reform set West Germany on a path towards economic recovery.

### 2003 Iraq

In 2003, the coalition forces created more problems than they solved. The military *blitzkrieg* failed to secure Iraq's arsenals of conventional weapons, and insurgents gained access to armaments and ordnance. From that moment on, security in Iraq was in jeopardy. Without security, reconstruction and economic development were virtually impossible. This experience stands in stark contrast to

the effectiveness with which the Allied occupation forces disarmed Germany, where the absence of insurgency allowed the U.S. military government to begin reconstructing the American sector in 1945.

Equally important, the rigid de-Baathification policy carried out by the Coalition Provisional Authority was a political disaster. In May 2003, Bremer banned the Baath Party, removed all senior Baathists from the government, and dissolved Iraq's 500,000-member military and intelligence services. He dismissed military officers above the rank of colonel as well as all 100,000 members of Iraq's various intelligence services. The dismantling of the Iraqi army and security services created massive unemployment and engendered discontent, hostility, and resistance. With these Sunni officers dismissed, the Shi'a dominated the new Iraqi security forces; in fact, the new Iraqi security apparatus was a barely disguised Shi'a death squad.<sup>5</sup> In April 2004, the Americans changed their strategy and tried to reincorporate some senior ex-Baathists into the security forces. Yet the displaced Sunni minority became the kernel of the insurgency.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, de-Baathification crippled U.S. capabilities in counterinsurgency. Without the collaboration of the Iraqi

army and security services, the coalition forces were operating virtually blind, and insurgency erupted.

The Coalition Provisional Authority was not able to change the basic structure of Iraq's economy, and could not fulfill a basic requirement of successful regime change: job-creation on a large scale. Underemployment and unemployment plagued Saddam Hussein's Iraq, as it did other oil-based economies. In 2003, 28 percent of the labor force was idle, and women (52 percent of Iraq's population) were just 23 percent of the formal workforce. Unemployment and underemployment did not change significantly from 2003 to 2008. In 2007, 57 percent of Iraqis between 18 and 24 years old—the potential recruits of the insurgency movements—were unemployed. In 2008, unemployment still predominantly affected younger men and uneducated women.<sup>7</sup>

The political and humanitarian quagmire in Iraq was a result of the occupation, not a product of the 2003 war. The fight against the insurgents resulted in the destruction of whole cities, as illustrated by the fate of Fallujah. The occupation of Iraq and the subsequent attempt to pacify the country also brought about a massive health crisis, accompanied by a dramatic rise in malnutrition and infant mortality. Many factors contributed to this catastrophe, including the exodus of health professionals, the collapse of the sanitation system, the shortage of electricity and clean water, and the destruction of housing. The U.S. military government solved

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problems in Germany, but the Coalition Provisional Authority created them in Iraq. It was unable to provide the security to make the reconstruction of the country possible or to foster effective collaboration between Iraqis and coalition forces.

### **1940 France**

The Coalition Provisional Authority tried to apply the American experience in Germany in 2003 Iraq, but the context required something else. Paradoxically, the situation in Iraq in 2003 and France in 1940 have some interesting points in common. Both countries were occupied after a short war that did not damage their infrastructure and did not affect the civilian population greatly. Their armies were defeated, but certainly not annihilated. Furthermore, long-seated religious, regional, and ideological antagonisms divided both countries.<sup>8</sup> The German occupation of France could have provided some insights on how to approach the American occupation of Iraq.



Coalition Provisional Authority human rights officer Sandy Hodgkinson briefs Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld on the Mahawil mass grave site, 6 September 2003.

The Nazis exploited the preexisting divisions in French society to structure their dominion and limit the use of force. They took advantage of the deep anti-Semitic and anti-Republican currents that pervaded French society and used them to garner support and create compliance with Nazi policies. The Germans divided France into two zones and maximized French involvement in the day-to-day management of the country. Instead of antagonizing the French, the Nazis tried to gain their collaboration. From 1940 to 1942, the authorities did not have to confront large-scale insurgency, and German repression was somewhat moderate except, of course, for the persecution of the Jews.<sup>9</sup> The first two years of the German occupation of France were a success for Germany.

At the time of the “Strange Defeat,” the Nazi invasion of France in 1940, France was deeply divided politically, polarized between the right and the left. The French right was Catholic, anti-Semitic, fanatically anti-communist, and anti-socialist. It had a long history of grievances against the Republic, dating all the way back to the French Revolution and peaking with the Dreyfus Affair. The right was eager to abolish liberal parliamentary democracy and replace it with a strong state based on obedience, discipline, and respect for authority. The French left was the minority—a heterogeneous group of communists, socialists, anarchists, republicans, and liberal democrats. The French elected Leon Blum, a Socialist and a Jew, Prime Minister in 1936 as the head of the Popular Front, a coalition among the left, the syndicates, and the Republican center. Yet by 1937, the Popular Front government was on the brink of collapse.

The French military defeat offered the anti-Republican majority a chance to imagine a radically new country freed from the shackles of parliamentary democracy. After the defeat of the French army by the Nazis, the majority of the French parliament gave Marshall Philippe Pétain, the reactionary Catholic hero of Verdun, full political power. The Germans abolished the French parliament, eliminated political parties, and ended what the French right wing considered the moral corruption of democracy. The French right wing welcomed the Nazis, and many French politicians were eager to collaborate with the Germans to restore France to its “greatness.”

The Wehrmacht occupied Paris and the north and west of France, and left the south in the hands of Pétain, who established a pro-Nazi regime in Vichy. For the Germans, controlling Paris had symbolic meaning—it was the jewel of Europe. The rest of the occupied zone was key because it included 67 percent of the French population, 66 percent of the cultivated land, 75 percent of the industry, and most of the financial capital. Moreover, anti-Republican feeling ran deep in the zone, making the area amenable to German control. In Vichy, Pétain led a right wing, paternalist, and autocratic regime, controlled by a technically efficient, modern bureaucracy. The Vichy government was eager to reform the French state, creating a corporatist economic model closely integrated with the German economy. Nominally, all France was under the governance of Vichy, but the Germans were the supreme arbiters and decision-makers.

The German occupation zone, which included the nucleus of the French economic, industrial, financial, and intellectual power, was subject to a system of indirect rule. “King” Otto Abetz, the German ambassador in France, followed the ideas of Werner Best, an SS intellectual. Best developed the concept of “supervisory administration” to govern the Western European countries occupied by the *Wehrmacht*. According to Best, supervising the operation of a complying French state would achieve a peaceful occupation while reducing psychological stress on the occupied. The Nazis did this by creating a sense



A Frenchman weeps as German soldiers march into Paris on 14 June 1940.

Courtesy National Archives, photo no. 242-EB-7-35.

of normalcy. They usually did not interfere with the day-to-day affairs of the French bourgeoisie. They left the French bureaucracy, police, and intelligence services essentially untouched, as long as the French followed German directives.

The Germans supervised a rigorous anti-Semitic policy both in the occupied zone and in Vichy. They barred Jews from participating in French society, systematically expropriated Jewish properties, and made plans for the deportation of French Jews and Jews residing in France. The French population accepted these policies. Even some French Jews were comfortable with the ideas of expelling nonassimilated (foreign) Jews from France.<sup>10</sup> The Germans let the French bureaucracy, the French security services, and the French police perform the task of rounding up Jews (native and expatriates), communists, and anti-German activists. The French police, following German directives, were involved in the massive repression in Marseille and in the destruction of the *Vieux-Port*.

In the cultural field, the Nazis allowed compliant French artists and intellectuals some level of freedom. Of course, the Germans did not tolerate criticism of the Third Reich and its leaders and excluded Jews, Marxists of all stripes, and Freemasons from French cultural life. Yet the Germans enticed French intellectuals to participate in the cultural construction of a new Europe led by the Third Reich. German propaganda stressed Franco-German friendship and insisted that the Nazi regime would ensure the development of French culture. German military administrators actively organized art exhibits, concerts, and conferences with prominent German intellectuals, and promoted French cultural life. Thus, occupied Paris, even in the midst of deprivation and anxiety, was a thriving intellectual center where book publishing, theater, cinema, and fashion flourished.

The two years of indirect German rule in France under the Vichy government and outright military occupation suggest that the Nazi strategists had a reading of the political situation in France. This allowed them to take advantage of three preexisting ideological patterns in French society: anti-Semitism, anti-Republicanism, and anti-liberalism. The Germans also respected French nationalism as long as it helped them accomplish the Nazi agenda in Europe and in the French colonies in Africa. Above all, the Nazis were able to recruit the French bureaucracy,

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police, and security services to enforce law and order, thus reducing the need for German occupation troops in France.<sup>11</sup>

## **Lessons to be Learned from 1940 France and 1945 Germany**

Occupations aimed at regime change are cultural and political wars. The ideology of the occupiers is irrelevant to the fact that, to succeed, they must win the hearts and minds of the occupied populations. The occupiers must provide security in the aftermath of the war, and they need to convince the local population that the occupation is providing a better future. In short, the occupiers must win a battle of perception. Furthermore, the occupiers must be selective in their choice of enemies because they cannot antagonize all sections of the population at the same time and with the same intensity. Lastly, the occupiers must utilize the native security apparatus to advance their agenda.

The Bush administration did not read the Iraqi political landscape correctly, nor did it accurately gauge the American capacity to occupy a country in the Middle East. It is one thing to win a war against a weak enemy, and another to set up a military government aimed at regime change. The Pentagon and the State Department had mistaken expectations concerning Iraq. They believed that Iraqis would greet the coalition troops as liberators and that Iraqis would want to emulate the American model of society. Because of these faulty assumptions, the American strategic planners drew a scenario in which the democratization of Iraq would occur by default. With the removal of Saddam Hussein, they predicted, Iraqis would automatically embrace liberal democracy. The Americans did not realize that it would require a huge amount of political work to convince Iraqi society that the United States was not acting exclusively on the basis of self-interest, and that the American model was desirable, attainable, and worth pursuing.

The Pentagon and the State Department failed to recruit their potential allies—the Baathists, the remains of the left, and the Iraqi army and security services. The survival of these sectors depended on the containment of Islamic fundamentalism, both Shi'a and Sunni. It should have been evident that it would be impossible to reconcile the objective of democracy with the existence of an antidemocratic majority bent on establishing a theocratic state. Had the planners of the occupation considered the fact that Iraq was a bitterly divided country torn by animosities between sectors of society, they could have designed an occupation strategy that exploited the existing social fractures separating the theocratic, fundamentalist Shi'a, the Baathist Sunnis, and the Kurds. This could have led to the partition of Iraq and to the possibility of success. The United States should have focused its democratization efforts on the center/north of Iraq, and left the south in the hands of the theocratic majority.

We can envision this hypothetical scenario:

- The partition of Iraq along geographic, political, and religious lines into two zones—the south, predominantly Shi'a, and the center/north, predominantly Sunni and Kurdish.
- The partition of Baghdad into two sectors, one Shi'a and the other Sunni.
- The concentration of the coalition's political, economic, and financial efforts in the center/north zone and in the Sunni sector of Baghdad. The center/north zone is rich in oil, and it has a strong secular influence. It was therefore potentially receptive to democratization and modernization. The highly successful experience of the American military government in Germany would have been invaluable in the transformation of the center/north zone and the Sunni sector of Baghdad.
- A very limited de-Baathification program, restricted to the upper echelons of the Saddam Hussein regime involved in the planning and execution of genocidal campaigns against Shi'a and Kurds.
- The suppression of insurgents in the center/north zone by Iraqi armed forces, security services, and police supervised by coalition personnel.
- The concentration of coalition forces on the Iraq-Iran border, to seal the frontier and to block the infiltration of Iranian weapons, money, and personnel into Iraq.

- The emergence of a theocratic autocracy in the south.

## Conclusion

Democratization by force can only succeed if the occupying force is able to garner the collaboration of the occupied population. In 1940 France, the Nazis were able to carry out a successful occupation because they relied on the anti-democratic and anti-Semitic French majority. In this case, collaboration arose from fear and ideological affinity. In 1945 Germany, the United States was able to exploit the physical and psychological destruction of Germany and the German population's fear of the Soviets. Many elements contributed to the pro-Americanism of Western Germany in the immediate postwar period. The United States guaranteed security and order, while encouraging economic and social reconstruction. The Americans not only provided plenty of consumer goods, but they were able to convey a sense of partnership to the West German population, epitomized by the Berlin Airlift. With all its difficulties, life in the American zone and sector appeared to be a better alternative than the dreariness of the Soviet zone and sector. Of course, in Germany, there was no religious fundamentalism to overcome, and the population was highly educated, secular, and eager to participate in the construction of a prosperous and democratic Western Europe aligned with the United States. Even though the Germans did not relinquish their identification with Nazism in 1945, the reality of unconditional defeat and the overwhelming presence of Allied troops made resistance virtually impossible.

In 2003 Iraq, the United States faced a very difficult challenge because the war had not destroyed the country, and the elimination of the Saddam Hussein regime allowed Iraq to spontaneously fragment into three rival population groups with incompatible agendas. In this political context, the United States should have secured the collaboration of the Sunni and Kurdish minorities, helped them build a model liberal democracy in the Middle East, and then left the Shi'as to their own devices while using military means to effectively block any connection between the Shi'a zone and Iran. The partition of Iraq and Baghdad would have allowed the United States to do what it did in postwar Germany with great success:

outshine its competition. No Shi'a regime modeled on the Ayatollahs' Iran would have been able to compete with an American-driven development project

in central and northern Iraq *if* the United States guaranteed security, stimulated the Iraqi economy, and energized Iraqi cultural life. **MR**

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## NOTES

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