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Nazi, Confederate symbols of hate took different historic paths

Source: McClatchy Washington Bureau, adapted by Newsela staff

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BERLIN, Germany — The flags were torn down while defeated German cities still burned. At the time, citizens crawling from the rubble were only just realizing that the Nazi government the flags represented was no more.

Essentially the same narrative of defeat played out in both Nazi Germany in 1945 and the Confederate States of America in 1865. However, what happened to the symbols of the two governments differed greatly.

In Germany, the swastika calls forth memories of Adolf Hitler's final solution and the systematic murder of 6 million Jews and 5 million others, and of Germany's role in causing a world war that killed up to 70 million people. Such symbols are rarely seen — and when they are, they are in a setting, such as a museum exhibit, that is highly critical of Nazism. The conquering Allies banned display of the symbols in October 1945; the new Federal Republic of Germany enshrined that ban in German law in 1949.

After War, Nazi Images Were Destroyed

After 1945, almost anything connected to the Nazi era was destroyed. Unmarked graves became the norm for Nazi officials, chiseled swastikas were ground off buildings, and monuments and statues were torn down.

The Soviets ripped Hitler's chancellery, the seat of Nazi government, to pieces. Until recently, the ground where Hitler's body was found, above the bunker in which he killed himself, was left as an unmarked parking lot. Spandau Prison, a Berlin military jail that was used to house high-ranking Nazis such as Albert Speer and Rudolf Hess, was torn down to prevent it from becoming a holy place for neo-Nazis. Officials went so far as to smash the bricks to bits and throw the remains into the North Sea.

Things were very different for the Confederate battle flag, which was reclaimed by the Ku Klux Klan in the early 20th century. It found its way into cemeteries and flag stands and even became part of some official state flags. The flag itself would fly over statehouses in several former Confederate states.

Deidre Berger, director of the American Jewish Committee office in Berlin, notes that it is difficult to compare anything to the mass genocide of the Holocaust. However, she said, the symbols of the Holocaust and of slavery both represent intense hatred.

German Ban Seen As Protecting Victims

"They're symbols of a way of life that is completely unacceptable," she said. "I think with the fall of the Nazi regime, Germans realized the only way to again become a valid nation was to eliminate the symbols — banning them was appropriate. Americans made a different choice with the symbols of the Confederacy."

She said the ban in Germany has been important, because it protects the victims and children of victims from a constant reminder. Beyond that, she noted, "the symbols serve as a rallying point for all hate groups," and banning them helps prevent them from being used that way in Germany. Outside of Germany, Nazi symbols today are used by everyone from white supremacists in the United States to Islamic extremists in the Middle East. Still, she believes making it more difficult for hate groups to use the symbols in Germany mattered, at least in that country.

“It’s important not to underestimate the power of symbols,” she said.

“Symbols are important; they’re a shorthand groups use in a single image to convey a world of information,” said Mark Potok, an expert on U.S. extremism. Potok notes that some Southern states took to flying the battle flag in the 1960s to protest the integration of schools. “The official reaction in recent weeks against the Confederate battle flag has been impressive, though you could argue it was 150 years late.”

Swastika Now Used By White Supremacists

It is notable that when Ku Klux Klan members recently rallied in South Carolina, they carried both the battle flag and the Nazi swastika. The two flags in recent years have been commonly seen together at white supremacist gatherings.

“Those who fly both flags rely on horribly distorted versions of history,” said Potok. “They both say that the Civil War wasn’t about slavery, and that the Holocaust was exaggerated, or didn’t happen.”

Just how many human beings were enslaved in the United States is a much debated topic.

Records show that an estimated 450,000 Africans were kidnapped in Africa and brought to what became the United States. However, generations of children born to those captives were slaves, too, and they numbered in the millions. By the time the Confederacy fell in 1865, the number of people who had been held as slaves over the decades would be similar to the 11 million murdered by Nazi Germany.

Students Today Must Study Holocaust

While Confederate flag advocates discuss the positives of the pre-Civil War years, German students spend a part of each year studying the horrors of Nazi Germany. All students must visit at least one former concentration camp to be reminded that the stories of the Holocaust were not only real but happened nearby.

In Germany, wearing or publicly displaying Nazi symbols can result in up to three years in prison, and abusers can be stripped of their right to vote.

According to German historian Paul Nolte, while the Allied victors in October 1945 made all symbols of Nazi Germany illegal to display, that was not the primary reason they disappeared in the country.

With the defeat in 1945 “the power of those symbols was over,” he said. “The Nazi regime was crushed, and its symbols had to die with it.” Over time, he added, “there was also a slow transformation of the understanding in what the symbols stood for.

“At first, Nazi symbols represented defeat,” he said. “It took time for them to come to represent the Holocaust, and a deep and abiding German shame.”

Possible Response Questions:

- Write a response that explains the central idea of the article. Use at least two/three details from the article to support your response.
- How do the symbols of the Nazi Germany flag and Confederate States of America flag compare? How do they contrast? Explain your response.
- Select any passage and respond to it.