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West Germany Joins NATO

How the Act of One Nation Changed the World

How did the actions of one country joining a treaty, put the world at the brink of nuclear war? In the mid 1950s, West Germany were invited to join NATO, to ensure national security against the Soviets and their satellite states. This event was a small piece of the large puzzle of the Cold War but it was one of the most impactful. It was this event that almost pushed the world to the closest point of no return.

In March 1954 the Soviet Union sent letters to the US, France and the UK regarding the possibility of joining NATO. The Soviets stated that they believed this would be beneficial since “the North Atlantic Treaty in the present form was certainly an “aggressive pact” but its nature could change if the USSR, the principal member of the former Anti-Hitler coalition, joined it.”(Vynokurov). The Soviets also clearly outlined their opposition to Germany being allowed to join NATO. The nations of NATO did not believe this was a sincere offer but rather a propaganda exercise. In replying to the Soviet note the NATO committee felt the need to be clear that the Soviets could not join NATO since it “was directed defensively, at least, against the USSR.”(“Summary Record of a Meeting of the Council Held at the Palais De Chaillotg Paris, on Wednesday, 7th April at 10.15 A.m”)

The Soviets were therefore very angry when the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) joined NATO in the following year. As a NATO member, West Germany would be allowed to start re-militarizing, and bolstering up their defences to protect themselves against the Soviet Union. While some nations in NATO were skeptical of having a German nation gaining military power even as an ally, the USA, as the self-proclaimed most important nation of NATO, believed it would be essential for West Germany to have its own defence to fend off any eastern satellite state. At a ceremony in Paris leaders of the 14 existing NATO countries gave speeches of welcome to Germany. The West German Chancellor Dr Adenauer thanked the countries for their welcome and expressed what joining NATO meant to the German people: “Today, everywhere in Germany, peace and freedom are felt to be the greatest treasures as was true in the best periods of her history.” (“BBC ON THIS DAY | 9 | 1955: West Germany Accepted into Nato”)

Just over a week later, the head of the Soviet Union and their satellite states met in Warsaw. They wanted to create their own treaty agreement to match NATO. The original members of Warsaw Treaty Organization were the Soviet Union, Albania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and the German Democratic Republic. The Warsaw Pact was a direct response to Germany being allowed a military force and meant that both the East and West were now under a formal alliance, and all of the member nations would now defend any nation within their treaty under any circumstances.

Therefore the signing of the Warsaw Pact formalized the big divide between the east and the west in Europe. The Iron Curtain became much more prominent and a rivalry was growing. The Soviet Union now had much more power in Eastern Europe and were able to control elections to go exactly how they wanted them to. The satellite states were now more Soviet influenced than ever before. The world was primed and ready for a third world war. Had any nation of any size made an invasion, anywhere around the world, we would have very likely had nuclear war. "With the world divided into two power blocs, and each side armed to the teeth and obsessed with the threat from the other, perhaps it was miraculous a general war did *not* break out." (Citino)

This rivalry between the two factions increased tensions drastically. "NATO adopted the strategic doctrine of "Massive Retaliation" – if the Soviet Union attacked, NATO would respond with nuclear weapons." ("A Short History of NATO") This spurred the arms race between the two superpowers, whether it be nuclear weapons or army size. The Space Race was also just starting to heat up. The successful launch into orbit of the Russian satellite Sputnik I caused major fear in the US of falling behind as "the Soviet Union's demonstration of its potential reach, as well as its perceived display of technological superiority, struck at the heart of the assumption of technology as the guarantor of US security." (People's)

The driving force during these years was for each superpower to demonstrate their dominance to the entire world. Any leg up on the other side was a win. The goal was to strike fear into the opponent, having the biggest army meant you could invade nations with ease. Having the most nuclear weapons meant you could blow the other nation into smithereens. Being able to go to space meant you could put your nuclear weapons up there. None of this happens without the threat of major world war.

So, how did West Germany's actions almost put the world at nuclear war? It formalized the east and west factions, it gave both sides a reason for war, and all around it just created way more tension throughout Europe and more specifically in the two Germanys. Thankfully in the late 80s, the tensions eased, the Berlin Wall was dismantled, and the iron curtain ceased to exist and the two Germanys were eventually able to reunify. With the dissolving of the Soviet Union the Warsaw Pact ceased to exist. NATO continues to this day and has expanded to include further European countries. In the end the mutual defensive portion of the treaties were never tested during the Cold War, however they certainly were a key piece of the 1000 piece puzzle that was the Cold War.

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