“AJC WAS THE FIRST JEWISH ORGANIZATION TO SEEK CONTACT WITH GERMANY AFTER THE HOLOCAUST, AND AJC REMAINS TODAY AN IMPORTANT PARTNER FOR GERMANY—BOTH IN TERMS OF DIALOGUE WITH AMERICAN JEWRY AND TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS IN GENERAL.”
—Angela Merkel, German Chancellor

Germany has been part of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) DNA since the leading global Jewish advocacy organization was founded in 1906, chiefly by Jews of German descent, to protect the well-being of Jews around the world.

For many Americans—especially Jews, six million of whose brethren had been murdered by the Nazi regime and its accomplices—the future of Germany after 1945 was hardly high on the priority list.

AJC was the exception. Taking a long-range view, AJC understood that Germany would eventually resume its place as a major European power. It was therefore vital, both for the cause of world freedom and for the future of the Jewish people, to ensure that Germany would reject the antisemitism of its past and adhere to the principles of democracy.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, AJC was the first American Jewish organization to embrace the renewed unification of Germany. AJC was the only international Jewish group to establish a permanent office in Berlin, in 1998.

Today, AJC remains uniquely active in working together with Germany on threats to the Jewish people, to Israel, and to democracy.
IN 1944, AJC AND NBC RADIO BROADCAST LIVE THE FIRST JEWISH SERVICE HELD ON LIBERATED NAZI SOIL.

AJC closely monitors the postwar situation in Germany, with frequent reports from visiting AJC staff and correspondents in Germany. AJC works on resettlement for Jewish displaced persons in the U.S. and elsewhere, and intensifies research on the sources and patterns of antisemitism and authoritarianism. Cooperating with U.S. occupation authorities, AJC focuses on education programs in Germany and the promotion of democracy.

October 29, 1944 From the Aachen battlefield, AJC-NBC radio broadcast the first Jewish religious service from Germany since the advent of Hitler.

1945 The Office of Advisor on Jewish Affairs, attached to the U.S. Army headquarters in Germany, is established, based on an AJC recommendation, to deal principally with the situation of Jewish displaced persons in camps in Germany. AJC member Judge Simon H. Rifkind is appointed to the post.

1946 To promote democracy in Germany, AJC organizes and finances the Gotthold Ephraim Lessing Association for the Promotion of Tolerance, dedicated to building a new generation of leaders in the country. “If we build up Germany materially at the present time without doing a complete spiritual and educational reorganization job, we are building up a Frankenstein monster who will infect and menace the world,” says AJC Executive Vice President John Slawson.

1946 AJC Executive Committee Member Lessing Rosenwald, former chairman of Sears, Roebuck and Company, co-founds the Citizens Committee on Displaced Persons to campaign for admitting to the U.S. Jewish DPs in Germany.

1948 AJC’s Make Way for Youth film promoting tolerance and democratic values is screened by the U.S. Army occupation authorities to German youth groups, teachers, and parents. Army representatives inform AJC that the film helped gain community support for a U.S.-sponsored youth program in Germany.

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Top: Kindergarten class at the Bergen Belsen DP Camp, circa 1948
Left: A young Buchenwald survivor at the Feldafing DP Camp, 1947

Top: A group of women waiting on line to receive soup, circa late 1940s

AJC-NBC Jewish radio broadcast from the Aachen battlefield, October 29, 1944
AJC becomes the first American Jewish organization to call for active engagement with Germany, as well as supporting the re-emergence of Jewish life in Germany. AJC also is the first Jewish organization to advocate for German re-education. Working with the West German government as well as U.S. occupation forces, AJC supports ongoing education and democracy efforts in Germany, while publishing constant alerts about the growing numbers of Nazis in government, resurging popularity of neo-Nazi groups, and antisemitism.

1951
In a groundbreaking policy statement, AJC becomes the first international Jewish organization to call for active engagement with postwar Germany.

1951
AJC leadership plays a critically important role in creating the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany and pressing for German government compensation payments to survivors and the State of Israel.

1951
AJC is the first Jewish organization to advocate for German re-education following WWII. An AJC educational program supported by the U.S. Department of State and U.S. High Commission for Germany, as well as important German leaders, advocates for denazification and a reorientation toward democracy.

1952
AJC President Jacob Blaustein plays a key role in negotiating an $822 million agreement between the West German government and the Claims Conference to provide compensation to Israel and Holocaust survivors.

1954
In a letter to German Jewry, AJC Honorary President Jacob Blaustein pledges AJC support for the community. “I pray to God that from the tragedies of the past you will draw the strength to look to the future with hope, secure in the knowledge that we have not forgotten you,” writes Blaustein.

May 11–13, 1956
AJC's Executive Board calls on the West German government to take prompt action against an upsurge in antisemitic and anti-democratic propaganda, specifically noting renewed interest in the notorious forgery, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.
AJC ENCOURAGES REFORM OF THE GERMAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND PROMOTES DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

AJC steps up efforts to encourage reforms of Germany’s educational system and promote democratic education, reaching out to high-level German officials and creating annual study trips to the U.S. to expose leading German educators and academics to American-style discussion forums and teaching methods. AJC lodges protests with West German politicians about policies in the Mideast threatening Israel.

February 1960 AJC presents recommendations on fighting antisemitism and anti-democratic influences at a meeting of the German Permanent Conference of the Ministers of Education.

Early 1960s AJC protests cancellation of West German arms shipments to Israel and the military work of German scientists in Egypt on missile development.

June 1960 AJC Honorary President Jacob Blaustein meets with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to warn about resurgent neo-Nazism and antisemitism, after reports of over 1,000 antisemitic incidents in Germany that began with the desecration of a Cologne synagogue on December 25, 1959.

1965 AJC’s Foreign Affairs Committee meets with West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt in New York, where they discuss German education, war-crimes trials, Holocaust restitution, and the Middle East.

1960 to 1971 AJC sponsors the “German Educators Program,” a series of annual three-week study trips by West German educators and academics to observe the teaching of democratic values in the U.S. and to study American methods of social and civic education.

1960 AJC Honorary President Jacob Blaustein meeting with West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt, March 23, 1966

Above: John Slawson, AJC Executive Vice-President, meets with West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt, March 23, 1966

Top: German educators visit a NYC classroom to observe American methods of social and civic education for use in German school curricula, circa 1960s

Top: The Brandenburg Gate in East Berlin behind the Berlin Wall. A sign in German warns of the border between East and West Berlin, August 13, 1965

A JC delegation meets with West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt, center, April 19, 1966
AJC intensifies efforts to eliminate antisemitic stereotypes in the well-known Oberammergau Passion Play. AJC leaders work to abolish the statute of limitations regarding murders of Jews during WWII. AJC conducts intensified discussions with German officials regarding ways to strengthen bridges between the German government and the U.S. Jewish community.

February 1978 An AJC delegation travels to Munich, Germany, to participate in a major conference with Catholic partners on antisemitism in passion plays, and meets with organizers of the Oberammergau Passion Play to discuss changing the antisemitic script and staging, and eliminating its anti-Jewish features.

1970s

1979
AJC President Richard Maass heads an AJC delegation to the Federal Republic of Germany that convinces Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and other government figures to abolish the country’s statute of limitations on the murder of Jews during the Nazi period.

Above: West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt receives a Chaim Gross lithograph presented by AJC President Richard Maass, June 8, 1979. Left to right: Helmut Schmidt, Richard Maass, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum

Top: West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in Cologne synagogue for commemorative service on 40th anniversary of 1938 Nazi pogroms, November 9, 1978

AN AJC DELEGATION TO GERMANY CONVINCES CHANCELLOR HELMUT SCHMIDT TO ABOLISH THE COUNTRY’S STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS ON THE MURDER OF JEWS DURING THE NAZI PERIOD.

NEW YORK, June 8.... At a meeting today with German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, a delegation of American Jewish Committee leaders welcomed the “many new and positive relationships” developing between the German people and Jews throughout the world.

Richard Maass, President of the American Jewish Committee, made these remarks to the German Chancellor as he presented him with a Chaim Gross lithograph.

"Days must be found to reinforce and deepen these relationships," Mr. Maass said, adding: "Not only as Americans, but also as Jews, we are deeply affected by what happens in your country for in a sense all Jews living today are survivors of the Holocaust. Together we must strengthen those forces which can immunise the youth of the world against the poison of anti-Semitism and racism.'’

Mr. Maass recalled the speech made by the Chancellor in the Great Synagogue of Cologne last November, in which he said that “It is not for us to call upon the Jews of the world to achieve reconciliation, but we may perhaps ask them for reconciliation with us,” and “Anyone desirous of reconciliation must raise his hand and look the other in the eyes.

"It is in that spirit of reconciliation that we present this lithograph to you,” Mr. Maass said.

Other issues raised by the group with Chancellor Schmidt were:

Steps to be taken by western countries, particularly the U.S. and West Germany, to ease the current worldwide energy crisis, and the potentials for danger, both in the Middle East and elsewhere, in current OPEC country policies.

A JC Press Release, June 8, 1979

TOP: West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in Cologne synagogue for commemoratory service on 40th anniversary of 1938 Nazi pogroms, November 9, 1978
AJC, TOGETHER WITH THE KONRAD ADENAUER FOUNDATION, LAUNCHES A PATHBREAKING U.S. JEWISH–GERMAN EXCHANGE PROGRAM THAT REMAINS ACTIVE MORE THAN 40 YEARS LATER.

1980
AJC, in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which is linked to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), launches an annual U.S.-German exchange program that participants call “a life-changing experience.” The exchange program brings American Jewish leaders to Germany and German young professionals to the U.S. to learn about contemporary politics and Jewish life.

1983
AJC begins exchanges and transatlantic programs in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, linked to Social Democratic Party.

1985
AJC intervenes to ease a serious strain in German-American Jewish relations raised by the projected visit of Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President Ronald Reagan to the Bitburg military cemetery, where SS officers are buried.

1987
AJC and the prestigious transatlantic organization Atlantik Bruecke (Atlantic Bridge) launch a decade of cooperation on a highly-regarded series of conferences exploring German and Jewish attitudes toward one another in post-WWII Germany.

AJC launches unique exchange programs between American Jews and Germans to introduce them to Jewish life in the U.S. and deepen commitments in Germany to fight antisemitism and strengthen democracy.

Above: AJC Statement on German Reunification, May 17, 1990
Top: Konrad Adenauer Foundation exchange group from Germany visits the U.S., 1982
Right: Fall of the Berlin Wall, 1989
The first systematic study conducted in a unified Germany on issues of Jewish concern revealed surprising and disturbing findings...

May 7, 1990 A “Statement on German Unity” passed at AJC’s annual meeting declares that “democracy and human dignity are the winners; fear, repression and control economies are the losers.” As conditions for unification, the statement lists education about the Holocaust, Jewish life and history; settlement of Holocaust survivor claims in East Germany; the end of East German support for terrorist groups attacking Israel; a unified German commitment to democracy and Holocaust memory; and a pledge to remain in NATO and promote European unification.

1992 AJC partners with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation an annual study program that promotes democratic thinking among young leaders of emerging Central and East European democracies.

1994 AJC publishes German Attitudes Toward Jews and Other Minorities, showing that more than one in five Germans harbor negative attitudes toward Jews and nearly a third believe Jews exert too much influence on world events. While factual knowledge of the Holocaust is high, a third of Germans show little interest in maintaining its memory. It was the second study AJC commissioned from the Emnid Institute.


1998 After decades of engagement with Germany, AJC becomes the first American Jewish organization to demonstrate its enduring commitment to German Jewish relations by establishing a permanent office in Berlin.

1999 AJC donates medical supplies to Kosovo refugees, forced to flee by Serbia, living in camp facilities in Macedonia administered by the Johanniter, a German Protestant relief organization. The supplies are flown to Macedonia by the Bundeswehr, in a poignant symbol of German-AJC cooperation to aid Muslim refugees.

AJC is the first global Jewish organization to advocate for German unification after the fall of the Berlin Wall, while also cautioning about the need to fully integrate eastern Germany into a united, democratic Germany. AJC launches a special partnership with the German military. After decades of engagement and activity with Germany, AJC opens an office in Berlin, the first American Jewish organization to demonstrate its enduring commitment to German-Jewish relations by establishing a permanent presence in Germany.
May 2000  German President Johannes Rau, on his first visit to the U.S. since his inauguration, addresses the AJC Global Forum in Washington, D.C., where he is joined by U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson. “It is no coincidence that I am giving my first speech in the United States as Federal President before the American Jewish Committee. For over fifty years, AJC has been among the avant-garde when it comes to American-German relations,” says President Rau.

2001  During a visit to Germany by AJC President Harold Tanner and CEO David Harris, AJC Berlin initiates the first in a series of Turkish-Jewish roundtables, with prominent representatives from both communities living in Germany.

2002  AJC Berlin commissions the first major study to evaluate daily newspaper coverage of Israel in Germany. The study, by the Duisberger Institute for Language and Social Research (DISS), “MidEast Coverage of the Second Intifada in the German Print Media, with Particular Attention to the Image of Israel,” concludes that the image of Israel in the German press is often negative, replete with oversimplifications and antisemitic stereotypes.

2002  After a significant rise in antisemitism in German schools, AJC Berlin co-founds the Task Force: Education on Antisemitism. It has become the leading professional forum in Germany for educational experts and practitioners dealing with pedagogical approaches to antisemitism, Holocaust education, and issues regarding Israel and the Mideast.

November 2004  AJC CEO David Harris receives the Golden Cross, the German military’s highest honor, in Berlin. “The Bundeswehr sees the AJC as an important enrichment for our officers. We would not want to be without the partnership,” says Defense Minister Peter Struck, who presents the award at a ceremony marking the 10th anniversary of the special relationship between AJC and the German Armed Forces.

2005  AJC persuades German officials to include an educational pavilion with the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, in the center of Berlin, which was inaugurated in 2005. Without it, AJC argued, visitors would be left without historical detail about the Holocaust.

May 2006  German Chancellor Angela Merkel addresses the AJC Centennial Gala Dinner in Washington, D.C., together with President George W. Bush and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. “This special trust in a democratic Germany, expressed in your invitation to me tonight—as the German Chancellor—fills me with profound gratitude,” says Chancellor Merkel.

March 2008  Charlotte Knobloch, a Holocaust survivor and the then president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, becomes the first recipient of the AJC Sidney Lefkowitz Award for International Jewish Renewal, in recognition of her tireless efforts to revive Jewish life in Germany after the Holocaust. In addition, Michael Blumenthal, Founding Director of the Berlin Jewish Museum, and a German-born survivor and former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, receives the AJC Ernst Cramer Award for Outstanding Transatlantic Achievement.

AJC Berlin expands its network of contacts and partners in Germany. It launches new initiatives to promote democratic education, and to memorialize the Holocaust. AJC intensifies outreach efforts to the German Turkish community. AJC exposes one-sided reporting of Israel in the German print media and establishes an important forum for educators addressing issues of antisemitism.

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**“THIS SPECIAL TRUST IN A DEMOCRATIC GERMANY, EXPRESSED IN YOUR INVITATION TO ME TONIGHT, FILLS ME WITH PROFOUND GRATITUDE.”**

—Chancellor Angela Merkel, AJC Centennial Gala, May 2006, Washington, D.C.
AJC broadens its exchange programs with Germany for a younger generation of AJC leaders and young German professionals. AJC Berlin launches a pathbreaking model project to create memorial sites at five Holocaust mass graves in western Ukraine, an initiative later continued by the German government. The office undertakes numerous initiatives to promote positive perspectives on Israel, including numerous missions to Israel and the 50/50 conference series examining German-Israel relations. The office releases pathbreaking studies that illuminate complex problems of antisemitism within some Muslim circles, while continuing outreach to various groups within the Muslim community.

2010
AJC and Allianz create the “Third Generation Alliance” exchange program for young managers at Allianz and AJC young professionals from across the U.S. They explore together the past and the present during a ten-day joint study trip to Berlin in partnership with Germany Close Up.

2010
The AJC-Konrad Adenauer Exchange program celebrates 30th anniversary. The program has produced hundreds of ambassadors for German-Jewish relations on both sides of the Atlantic. It is the longest-running collaborative project between a German political foundation and an American Jewish organization. “This program was one of many elements intended to further consolidate German democracy, which is founded on human rights and committed to protecting freedom,” says Chancellor Angela Merkel.

2010
20 years after German unification, AJC Berlin, in cooperation with the Berlin state government, launches “Hands for Kids,” the first democracy-building curriculum for elementary school pupils, based on AJC’s successful “Hands Across the Campus” in the U.S. and Germany. The Berlin/Brandenburg State Institute for Education and Media, the German Society for Democratic Education, and the RAA educational network help in compiling the curriculum.

2011
AJC CEO David Harris leads an AJC delegation to Berlin to bestow the “Light Unto the Nations” award, AJC’s highest diplomatic honor, upon German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

2011
AJC partners with Germany Close Up, a German government-funded program, to bring young American Jews to Germany. Eventually, more than 200 AJC ACCESS young professionals, AJC Goldman fellows, and student leaders participate in the ongoing programs.

2012
AJC Berlin helps defeat a parliamentary resolution to outlaw circumcision in Germany by producing a landmark report for decision-makers and government officials that exposes the fraudulent claims of circumcision opponents. Chancellor Merkel cites the AJC study in expressing her opposition to the resolution.

2014–15
AJC Berlin convenes “50/50—The Next 50 Years: A Transatlantic Dialogue Project,” a series of three conferences in Berlin and Tel Aviv on the German-Israeli relationship, marking 50 years of German-Israeli relations. This initiative earned AJC Berlin a special award from the Israeli Embassy as the leading NGO working on German-Israeli relations.

2015
AJC Berlin launches a pathbreaking pilot project to create memorial sites at five Holocaust mass graves in western Ukraine, an initiative funded by the German government.

2016
AJC Berlin obtains the signatures of 85 mayors of German cities for AJC’s “Mayors United Against Antisemitism” campaign, a ten-point action plan to combat antisemitism signed by more than 500 American and European mayors.

2018
AJC Berlin marks the 20th anniversary of its opening. A delegation of 50 AJC leaders from across the U.S. participate in the three-day program, highlighted by an hour-long meeting with Chancellor Merkel. Josef Schuster, president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, becomes the second recipient of AJC’s Sidney Lefkowitz Award for International Jewish Renewal, and Gerd Oezdemir, a member of parliament from the Green/Alliance 90 Party, receives the AJC Ramer Award for Courage in the Defense of Democracy.

2020
AJC planned to mark 75 years since the end of WWII and its unique record of engagement with Germany by convening its annual Global Forum in Germany, the first time in its 114-year history that it has held this signature event in Europe. It was cancelled due to the pandemic.
“It is up to us whether we allow ourselves to be prisoners of our history or architects of our history,” says AJC CEO David Harris. That axiom has underscored the pathbreaking relationship between the leading global Jewish advocacy organization and the Federal Republic of Germany. We celebrate the profound achievements, but their durability should not be taken for granted. AJC, through its pioneering Berlin office, is poised to continue to be the advocate for addressing the new challenges, including the reemergence of neo-Nazi and other hate groups, the task of successfully absorbing immigrants, many of them Muslims, in German society, and rising antisemitism.

The partnerships AJC has established with the highest levels of government, with political foundations, with the military, and with civil society reinforce the shared commitment to German democracy, one that will ensure a vibrant Jewish life in Germany, protection of all minorities, a close relationship with American Jews and with Israel, and with the U.S., as a cornerstone of the transatlantic partnership. Much has changed for the Jewish people, for Germany, and for the relationship between them over the past 75 years, an ongoing process in which AJC has been a major, forward-looking actor.

Convening the 2020 AJC Global Forum in Berlin was intended to be a significant milestone, but, even with its regrettable but necessary cancellation, the essential work of building a new era in AJC-Germany relations will continue.

“PERHAPS NO OTHER ISSUE BETTER CAPTURES AJC’S UNIQUELY FORWARD-LOOKING, RESULTS-ORIENTED APPROACH THAN OUR POSTWAR ENGAGEMENT WITH GERMANY. THE PATHWAY HAS BEEN ENORMOUSLY DIFFICULT, BUT WE’VE PERSEVERED. THE RESULTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES.”

—AJC CEO David Harris