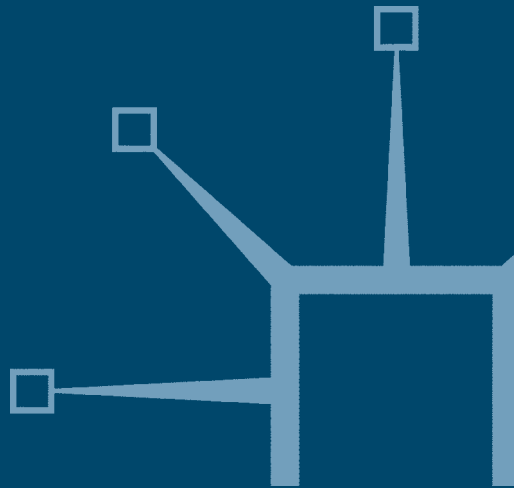


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Right-Wing Extremism in Contemporary Germany

Gerard Braunthal



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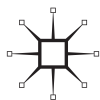
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Foreword

This book presents a well-balanced analysis of the past, present, and future of the German radical right by one of the foremost scholars on the history of contemporary Germany. Gerard Braunthal's reputation rests particularly on his investigations of post-World War Two German Social Democracy (SPD) and civil rights in the Bonn and Berlin republics. His present work focuses directly and implicitly on the contrast between the contemporary German radical right and its predecessor under the ill-fated Weimar Republic (1918–1933), which gave birth to the Third Reich and the atrocities and power politics associated with it. The comparison takes into account the international environment and the domestic shape of the German extreme right.

The rise of German National Socialism and of kindred movements after the Great War took place under the shadow of the catastrophic German defeat by the Western Allies, of the painful losses of German territory and colonies, and of the traumatic collapse of two mighty empires and imperial dynasties, Hohenzollern and Hapsburg. Many German patriots felt humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles, which required the admission of German responsibility for the war and the surrender of the German emperor for trial (this was never carried out), of the imperial navy and air force, and the imposition of size limits on the armed forces. Many were haunted by paranoid fantasies of having been “stabbed in the back” by their own successor government – especially the centrist and left-wing politicians in it – who signed the Versailles Treaty of Peace. They thought of revenge, against both the Western victors and their alleged domestic collaborators some of whom were assassinated by military conspirators. There were unsuccessful right-wing coup attempts against the national government and against at least one state government – Bavaria – where a Workers and Soldiers Council had seized power in imitation of Bolshevik takeovers in St. Petersburg, Budapest, and Vienna. There was also an underground border war along some of the new frontiers, for example with Poland and, after the Franco-Belgian invasion of 1923, with the occupation of the Ruhr area. We must acknowledge all these factors in the minds of the rising Nazis in the midst of many extreme right-wing organizations at that time; however, nothing similar was in the minds of the defeated Germans after World War Two. The defeat of 1945 was actually far more devastating and, this time, the Germans really admitted total defeat. The Allies had insisted on “unconditional surrender” and imposed years of military occupation, denazification, and democratic reeducation on the Germans, which also involved the suppression of any Nazi revivals.

Another important aspect of the Weimar situation that enabled Adolf Hitler and his movement to rise to power in 1933 was that Germany in many ways had not matured enough to support a thriving democracy. Two telling images come to my mind, which show the particular weaknesses of Germany's first attempt at democracy: one is of a session of the Reichstag (Parliament) in 1932, which features a large section of its membership in Nazi storm-trooper uniforms. It was a sign of the Nazis' contempt for parliamentary democracy and heralded the coming of dictatorship with the help of a combined popular majority of Nazis and communists in imminent elections as well as the battles of the militant armies of both in the streets. The second image emerges from an interview with Fritz Schäffer, the conservative (CSU) finance minister who had been in the thick of Weimar politicking with the equally conservative Bavarian People's Party (BVP). Mr. Schäffer described to me the incredibly hectic and violent election campaigns at all levels, as he raced from one rally to the next, constantly threatened by extremist street violence from the right and the left. There was simply no room for a moderate politics of democratic discussion. At the same time, so many basic structures of German society were coming undone, as the German historian Karl D. Bracher and others have explained: relations between capital and labor, farming, capitalism, civil-military relations, the civil service, the greatly reduced army amidst militant veterans' organizations, the federal system; everything was in tenuous transition or outright crisis. Even the prewar political parties were splitting up, particularly on the moderate right and left where new radical mass movements such as the communists and Nazis experienced explosive growth and threatened to take over the unloved republic.

The democratic post-World War Two fathers (and mothers) of the West German Federal Republic were determined to base their democratic politics on strong, resilient institutions and a constitution, the Basic Law, that the major parties vowed to defend "militantly" against all extremists of the right and left (*streitbare Demokratie*), unlike their Weimar predecessors who had never defended Weimar's constitutional democracy. Never again, they resolved, should German democracy be left to the tender mercies of the sworn enemies of democracy. Among other steps, such as the electoral barriers to splinter parties described in this book and the special anti-extremist powers of the Federal Constitutional Court, the Bonn government created a *Verfassungsschutzdienst* (constitutional protection service) which played an important role investigating subversion and, in the 1970s, the terrorist conspiracies of the Red Army Faction (RAF). It publishes annual surveys of political extremism, including the radical right. The surveillance and intrusion of this secret service into German civil liberties, for example by tapping telephones, has also attracted much criticism from German civil libertarians and representatives of the political left, as Braunthal has described in his book on the subject.

A major challenge to West German stability before 1990 was posed by the East German Stasi, the communist secret service of the self-styled German Democratic Republic (GDR) which, among other things, sent out and embedded spies in the highest West German offices, such as in the Foreign Office and in Chancellor Willy Brandt's staff. The Stasi also compiled voluminous secret files on many prominent West Germans for potential blackmail purposes, and to embarrass them before the Western public and abroad. German unification in 1990 posed new major challenges including that of integrating the public services of the communist east into the democratic state and society, especially the schools and universities. This process of systematic cleansing was not always fair and even-handed, and was often accompanied by dire warnings that the elimination of communist rule would inevitably lead to a revival of Nazism. The old state Communist Party, the SED, transformed itself into a strong extreme left successor, the PDS (now part of the Left Party), even as its remnants in the public services of the east were spotted and removed. The Stasi archives were now firmly in Western hands.

Because the rehabilitation and development of the formerly communist economy of the GDR by West German leaders fell far short of the "blossoming" promised by the unification chancellor, Helmut Kohl, the unification left behind a legacy of failures and resentments which have been reflected in East German voting: after initially following West German political patterns, East Germans soon began to distinguish themselves not only by voting for a large successor party to the communist SED (now PDS), but in recent elections also in great numbers for the neo-Nazi NPD and DVU; however, in all these elections no extreme right party has been able – except for a few stealth candidates in the 1950s – to elect a neo-Nazi to the Bundestag. East Germany remains a major trouble spot in the control of the extreme right in the Berlin Republic.

In the early decades of the Bonn Republic, perhaps as late as 1970, public opinion polls clearly revealed the spell of Nazi opinions over the public, for example on such nationalistic issues as acceptance of the Oder–Neisse line as the German–Polish border or German responsibility for World War Two, as the work of Anna and Richard Merritt, among others, has shown. After the end of Allied occupation, successive waves of neo-Nazi parties under names like the Socialist Reich Party (SRP) or the National Democrats (NPD) scored minor regional victories in spite of the hostility of democratic governments. Their activists and voters were mostly diminishing numbers of old Nazis and their families and offspring. As long as these parties were small and could be kept under control by local and state-level measures of harassment, the first West German chancellors, and especially Adenauer, avoided direct confrontation – for example by attempts to outlaw or suppress them. The democratic leaders were probably afraid to provoke these elements into forming a *Fronde*, a "national opposition" that would have obstructed democratization as had happened in the Weimar Republic. Or perhaps they too still held some partial

Nazi views that inclined them to tolerate old Nazis and Nazified groups and to spare them rigorous judgement – cases such as Hans Globke and others seem to suggest this. As new generations of democratic young Germans with strong anti-Nazi views grew to voting age and their political activities began to dominate German opinion, the neo-Nazi parties found that they could no longer expect a ready reception for their views. They began to shift towards issues like German unification and opposition to the progressive policies, foreign and domestic, of the Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt administrations.

In the meantime and especially since German unification, youthful new groups have emerged that in their own ways vie for the mantle of Hitler and his movement, often with little or no knowledge of the old ideology. Many of them are extremely violent skinheads operating in small groups and their lethal hostility is directed mostly at foreign migrants and refugee hostels, which they have attacked and set on fire. They are motivated as much by alcohol and the psychological stimuli of youth gang activity as by a general ideology of racism. There is a difference between a personal reaction against people of color and an elaborate ideology. To the extent that they rationalize their anti-foreigner hatred, it translates into a kind of “welfare chauvinism”: a mistaken belief that these migrants and refugees receive public benefits above and beyond what the frequently unemployed and down-and-out right-wing skinheads get. In east German urban ghettos and small towns they also feud with young socialists who like to wear their hair in dreadlocks as a kind of uniform. In some east German locations, extreme right coordination is so dominant it creates a terror regime for leftists and people of color. Even the DVU and NPD are not sure how they can integrate the unruly skinheads into their political activities. But the youth gang-like street violence of today’s Germany – not unlike the vicious urban warfare of the Bloods and Crips, two large African-American gangs in Los Angeles – is different to the political marching, proselytizing and fighting of the storm troopers of another day. By contrast, the young neo-Nazis of today make the old Nazis of the 1920s and 1930s look almost rational.

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List of Acronyms

ANR	Aktion Neue Rechte (Action of the New Right)
ANS/NA	Aktionsfront Nationaler Sozialisten/Nationale Aktivisten (Action Front of National Socialists/National Activists)
BfV	Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution)
BHE	Bund der Heimatvertriebenen und Entrechteten (League of Expellees and Dispossessed)
BMI	Bundesministerium des Innern (Federal Ministry of the Interior)
CDU/CSU	Christlich-Demokratische Union/Christlich-Soziale Union (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union)
DA	Deutsche Alternative (German Alternative)
DA/VR	Deutsche Allianz – Vereinigte Rechte (German Alliance – United Right)
DGB	Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (German Trade Union Federation)
DKP-DRP	Deutsche Konservative Partei-Deutsche Rechtspartei (German Conservative Party-German Right Party)
DL	Deutsche Liga für Volk und Heimat (League for a German People and Homeland)
DNVP	Deutsche National Volkspartei (German National People's Party)
DRP	Deutsche Reichspartei (German Reich Party)
DVP	Deutsche Volkspartei (German People's Party)
DVU	Deutsche Volksunion (German People's Union)
EU	European Union
FAP	Freiheitliche Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (Free German Workers Party)
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei (Free Democratic Party)
FPÖ	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (The Freedom Party of Austria)
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
JN	Junge Nationaldemokraten (Young National Democrats)
MAD	Militärischen Abwehrdienst (Military Counter-Intelligence Corps)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDPD	National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party of Germany [GDR])

NF	Nationalistische Front (Nationalist Front)
NPD	Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party of Germany)
NRAO	Nationalrevolutionäre Aufbauorganisation (National Revolutionary Building Organization)
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party)
NSDAP/AO	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei/Auslands-Organisation (National Socialist German Workers' Party/ Foreign Organization)
NZ	National-Zeitung/Deutsche-Wochenzeitung
PdA/DS	Partei der Arbeit/Deutsche Sozialisten (Party of Work/ German Socialists)
PDS	Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (Party of Democratic Socialism)
SA	Sturmabteilung (Storm troopers)
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SRP	Sozialistische Reichspartei (Socialist Reich Party)
SS	Schutzstaffel (Elite guards)
Stasi	Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Ministry for State Security)
WAV	Wirtschaftliche Aufbau-Vereinigung (Economic Reconstruction Association)

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Introduction

This study focuses primarily on the activities of German right-wing extremist parties, groups, and individuals since the Berlin Wall's fall in 1989 and the unification of the two Germanys one year later. German scholars, journalists, and government officials have written much on the topic in German, but much less has been published in English. Thus this volume seeks to make a contribution to the literature on a subject matter that remains topical and, no pun intended, explosive. To understand German history since 1990, which has been marked by the end of the Cold War, increasing social inequalities and pockets of poverty, and the pressures of immigration and inter-ethnic tensions, a look back in history, especially to post-1945 divided Germany, is necessary. This post-1945 period was strongly influenced by the policy-makers rejecting the Nazi past but, as will be seen, not by the fledgling right-wing extremist movement, especially in West Germany, that accepted aspects of the Nazi past.

In classifying German rightist parties and groups on a political chart, one must note that they dare not accept the totalitarian features of the Nazi dictatorship. Yet their positions on domestic and foreign policies hardly resemble those that the democratic governments in Bonn and Berlin have espoused. In such a classificatory scheme, the German right-wing extremist movement represents a more virulent form of right populism, which is a political movement that appeals to the common man but that has hardly been successful in post-unification Germany.¹ This extremism has always been of concern for the country's policy-makers and to many of its citizens – and also to foreign observers. In light of the disastrous Third Reich era (1933–45), such individuals worry about a comparatively small but shrill right-extremist movement that has not fully rejected the Nazi past and that does not believe in a pluralist society, democracy, and individual human rights. Such a movement, whose policies are backed on occasion by centrist politicians, has increasingly shed its political inhibitions and has espoused a nationalist position, not unlike that of some of its European neighbors or even, to a lesser extent, Germany's democratic parties.

From 1949 on, four years after the Nazi state collapse, new right-extremist parties and groups operated openly to challenge the programs and policies of the newly formed mainstream parties of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). In the postwar German Democratic Republic (GDR) small rightist groups, alienated by a communist system that did not respond to their concerns, also formed. Since the two Germanys' unification in 1990 the small right-extremist parties have not fared well in most national and Länder (state) elections, and neo-Nazi groups and skinheads have increasingly taken the non-party political route. They intermittently assault, injure, and kill those individuals seen as "other," who are primarily the permanently settled foreigners and political asylum-seekers coming from the Third World or from the less developed Eastern European countries, but who may also be German leftists, the handicapped, the homeless, and the Gypsies. The anti-Semitic neo-Nazis and skinheads also desecrate synagogues and Jewish cemeteries.

Some observers fear that in the future the country's democratic political system, especially in eastern Germany, may face increasing rightist challenges or that governmental policy-makers may incorporate even more of the rightist planks, such as a tightening of immigration, into the democratic parties' political agenda. These observers also worry that a charismatic leader heading a right populist movement might arise some day to challenge the country's democratic system, with unknown consequences. This might happen if the major parties remain clustered in the middle of the political spectrum and provide, as the New Social Movement theorists call it, a "political opportunity space" to the right populists. The latter's incendiary populist messages may one day get a positive response from dissatisfied citizens who are already opting out as members of the democratic parties, and who feel that these parties are not offering meaningful policy alternatives to pressing economic and social problems, which have been exacerbated by the major worldwide recession engulfing most states in 2008 and 2009.² If Germany's economic situation fails to improve and tumbles into a serious depression, will right-extremist parties and groups reap dividends from a surge in protest and anger among those negatively affected? Could this mean that there will be a repetition of Weimar when the government could not cope with mass unemployment and major social dislocations, resulting in the rise of Nazism?

I address in this volume the question of the German democratic system's strengths and weaknesses, and its ability to appreciably reduce the potential sectarian threat from the right of the political spectrum. What strategies should the government, the public and private sectors, and citizens adopt to minimize the threat? If there is a congruence of views between mainstream and right-extremist Germans, how much support for rightist views exists among the centrist elite and the ordinary Germans? Do the rightist views originate in the middle of the political spectrum and spread to the right-extremist scene or vice-versa? Are there significant differences, especially in the number of violent acts, between western and eastern Germany?

Is German right extremism more dangerous to the survival of the German democratic state than rightist forces in other European democracies? Does the post-1990 violence in Germany parallel the Nazi violence leading up to the Weimar Republic's demise in 1933? Does the current violence represent a transitory phenomenon or is it a consequence of embedded structures in society? Are there parallels between the electoral support received by rightist parties in the Weimar era and in the Federal Republic, which could endanger the present democratic system in Germany? Or, on the contrary, is the Bonn Republic and its successor the Berlin Republic not comparable to Weimar, as the path-breaking book by Fritz René Allemann suggested in 1956?³

In order to answer these questions in terms of the post-1990 unified Federal Republic, which is the focus of this volume, Chapter 1 defines right extremism, assesses its causes, and examines the impact it has on German society and politics. Chapter 2 looks briefly at the pre-1945 historical antecedents of right-wing extremist parties and groups, and then examines their development in West and East Germany from 1945 to 1990. The chapters that follow deal more extensively with rightist developments in united Germany from 1990 to the present. Chapter 3 covers the numerous right-extremist parties that have not been able to coalesce. Some of them grew and declined in power, others have maintained longevity. Chapter 4 assesses the strength of neo-Nazi groups and xenophobic skinheads, chronicles the rightist public demonstrations, and examines the periodic violence against foreigners, leftists, the homeless, and other groups. Chapter 5 surveys the tactics of rightist parties and groups in recruiting more members and followers. The parties and groups have developed their own media, a publishing industry, and internet websites. They have also staged rock concerts. Chapter 6 considers the controversial writings of New Right academics and journalists who, especially in the 1990s, have put new accents on the legacy of Germany's past but who distance themselves from right extremism. Chapter 7 assesses the responses to the rightist threat by the courts, the police, the government, democratic political parties, trade unions, churches, and the public. The concluding chapter provides an overview and assessment of the German right-extremist scene in the past, present, and, speculatively, the future. It will seek to answer the question of whether Germany can maintain its democratic system in the face of a major recession that began in 2008 and that could slide into another Great Depression. If the answer is yes, the central thesis of this book that the Berlin Republic is not Weimar can be answered satisfactorily.

1

The Setting

A historical review of the array of political and social movements in numerous countries indicates that the extreme right is not a recent phenomenon. The left–right political spectrum originated in revolutionary France’s Assembly, in which the right stood for the *ancien régime* and the left for radical change. At that time, the right, made up of the privileged classes, defended the overthrown monarchy, the Catholic Church, and the feudal economy. The left, constituting the working classes, stood for equal and universal voting rights, a free economy, and an end to the old religious and cultural privileges. Since then, the concepts have changed significantly. Presently the right in various countries does not constitute a monolithic bloc but may have subgroups ranging from moderate conservative to radical to extreme. In most cases, the extremist right has opposed socialist and communist movements on the left that emerged during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A study of Germany’s contemporary right extremism, whose roots go back primarily to fascism and Nazism, must begin with a search for a definition. The movement encompasses a fixed ideology, a pattern of behavior, a set of political activities, and individual attitudes. Hence it is a sociological, psychological, and political mixture that shapes the movement, which is made up primarily of right-extremist parties and neo-Nazi and skinhead groups. Most individuals belonging to these parties and groups have deep prejudices and hatred against persons who they do not include as part of the “superior” German society. The rightists’ prejudices and hatred are manifested in a palette of racism, nationalism, xenophobia, homophobia, and religious intolerance, which are then also directed against the “weak” parliamentary-pluralist democratic government and democracy in general.¹ The effect is that, according to Leonard Weinberg, right-extremist individuals and groups “do not abide by the rules of the game.” They oppose open debate and discussion among competing points of view. They have no inhibitions against using “dirty tricks,” subversion, and violence, unlike most of those who uphold democratic politics.²

Scholarly analyses

The deep political divergences found in democratic societies reflect the sharp economic and social divisions in the population. In the late 1950s, American sociologists, such as Seymour M. Lipset, noted that in studying mass movements comparatively, each country showed evidence of democratic as well as left- and/or right-wing extremist tendencies. To him fascism was “basically a middle class movement representing a protest against both capitalism and socialism, big business and big unions.”³

Some German scholars and the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*), the latter in 1974, made a terminological shift that had political consequences. They dropped the term “right radicalism,” which connoted a lukewarm acceptance of the democratic state, in favor of “right extremism.” This made it easier for the *Bundesverfassungsschutz* to classify right-wing extremist parties and groups as subversive and anti-democratic. Such organizations were considered as a threat to the free and democratic basic order and therefore, under Article 21 of the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*), subject to prohibition if the Federal Constitutional Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*) in Karlsruhe so ruled.⁴

Despite this shift in terminology, many sociologists and political scientists contend that the earlier classificatory term – right radicalism – was not passé. Rather it should be used as a catch-all term to include all political parties and groups to the right of the established conservative parties, but to exclude “right-wing extremist” organizations. Such right-radical parties, imbued with nationalistic and ethnocentric sentiments, should commit themselves to uphold the democratic order.⁵

There are other rightist movements, such as rightist populism, that have surfaced in Germany and in numerous other countries. Rightist populism is less a new ideological movement than an agitation technique in which populist leaders foment or draw on the dissatisfaction of citizens with the establishment parties. The populist leaders claim that these parties have not solved pressing political, economic, or social problems. There have been few right-populist parties in Germany, but many in other countries, such as France, the Netherlands, Austria, and Eastern Europe. The New Right in Germany (see Chapter 6), consisting of ultra-conservative and rightist intellectuals and politicians, is also part of the right fringe scene. Another movement, national conservatism, with its roots in the Empire era (1871–1918), has faded in importance.

During the Cold War some conservative German political scientists, such as Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse, espoused the concepts “left extremism” and “right extremism” as building blocks in their theory of the totalitarian state. Hence to these scholars the democratic constitutional state needed to be defended against its aggressive enemies located on the left and right sides