The Recent Rise of the Radical Right Within the German Political Spectrum:

Just a Temporary Surge of Nationalism or Is History Being Repeated?

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In 1933 Adolph Hitler's rise to power marked the beginning of a period of thirteen years of Nazi rule in Germany. Though the postwar division of Germany into allied spheres of influence, the allied program of de-Nazification, and the Nuremberg trials regarding Nazi war crimes were just some of the measures thought to rid Germany, and the world, of this right-wing national socialist party, the dark shadow of the Third Reich continues to loom over the newly unified country as a constant reminder of Germany's past. Today, elements of the radical Right can be found throughout Western Europe with National Front organizations in nations such as England and France, to name, just a few. However, the recent rise of right-wing activity in Germany, as seen in the Republikaner Party within the system and new-Nazi and skinhead groups on the fringes of legality, poses a unique set of questions, given Germany's past. First, is German democracy strong enough to combat and defeat racism?; and second, are the outbreaks of racist violence in Germany since reunification indicative of a continuing xenophobia and proclivity for further racial and ethnic unrest? These were the two questions President von Weizsacker posed to the German people during the 1992 march on Berlin in protest against rising right-wing activity, which had resulted in 20,000 incidents of racism that year. <1> This landmark march on Berlin occurred on the eve of the anniversary of the 1936 Kristallnacht, and the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. In citing these two dates to the crowds, von Weizsacker not only reminded Germans of their past, but called to question the present and the future of German democracy. He thus implicitly raised a third question: is the right-wing activity in Germany reminiscent of the kind of fascist extremism that plagued that country nearly sixty years ago? It is the answers to these three questions which is the prime object of this research paper.

The Second World War did not eliminate Nazism, it simply eliminated it as a mass-based organization working within the German political structure and turned it into a sub-cultural movement. In considering the historical evolution of post-war right-wing activity, one can more easily assess the current concern regarding the recent rise of the Right in Germany. During the years immediately following the war, the Allies set forth on a road of re-education and de-Nazification in Germany. However, when they realized that they were ill equipped for re-education and that the country could not function properly if every member of the Nazi party was excluded from German society, these programs began to lose steam. <2> As early as 1950 those who played an important role in 1945 politics were returned to their former duties, excluding high ranking Nazi officials, of course. For the most part, these former Nazis were loyal to the new regime and did not try to undermine it internally. On the other hand, a number of former Nazis found it impossible to reconcile themselves to German defeat and held steadfast to the concepts and goals of Nazism. <3> In the 1950's and early 1960's those who felt sympathy for the Nazi cause began meeting in unobtrusive places and producing internal

newsletters. They rallied around the ideas of "law and order," release of political prisoners, and the protection of traditional German values, as well as expounding discontent with so called "collaborationists such as Konrad Adenauer. <4> Within the system, views resembling those employed by the Nazis were heard from the leaders of legal parties such as the BHE (expellees), the German party, and occasionally from the far right conservatives in the CDU. <5> However, the stigma of Nazism carried by most post-war Germans allowed these extremist elements little or no success. Eventually, the inability to reach a consensus regarding the direction and policies of these organizations caused further fragmentation, and the membership in these organizations declined.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's a new set of situations emerged in Germany, as well as in Western Europe, making the formation of the so called "New Right" possible. The increasing number of foreign immigrants, as well as the world wide economic crisis of this period, sparked a renewed interest in right-wing activity. However, by the early 1970's those who had been youths in Hitler's Germany were growing older and became cautious, as well as disillusioned. Furthermore, with the membership in neo-Nazi youth groups growing increasingly smaller, it appeared as if the extreme right was dying out with the generation of the Third Reich. <6> Nevertheless, the influence of the "Nouvelle Droite" in France and the resurrection of the idea of the need for a "third road between capitalism and communism," paved the way for the rise of the New Right in Germany. <7> The leaders of this movement belonged almost exclusively to the postwar generation and had studied with the same teachers who had influenced their left-wing contemporaries. Common to almost all elements of the New Right was a distinctly European orientation and a concern for the natural environment. Outwardly they rejected the crude theories of racial superiority of the German people, though they still held on to racist beliefs by disguising them in a more socially acceptable manner. <8> Furthermore, the New Right chose to loosen its ties to Germany's Nazi past and has tried to manifest its ideas within the realm of main stream conservatism.

That is not to say that radicalism was ended, and this is seen in the fact that the 1970's and 1980's saw incidents of right-wing terrorism and violence, including, for example, the murder of foreign workers in Nuremberg, and the attacks against U.S. soldiers in Frankfurt in 1982. <9> In essence, since the 1970's the right-wing movement in Germany has been polarized, resulting in basically four categories of right-wing activity. To begin with, the "moderate, conformist, disciplined right-wing," works within the German political system and is composed of small parties such as the NPD, the Republicans, and the Deutsche Allianz They consider themselves to be part of the nationalist, conservative bourgeoisie, and remain loyal to Germany's democratic constitution. This conformist sector of the right stands for "law and order," anti-liberalism, and anti-socialism. <10> Furthermore it considers reunification as only being partial in regard to what it considers to be unrecovered German territories east of the Oder-Neisse line. Increasingly, the moderates are coming to be seen as a "melting pot" for those who want to translate feelings of racism and fear into political action. <11> Thus, if they are to have any success, a complete break with Nazi symbols and rhetoric is imperative.

The "theoretical circle of the 'new right,"' emerged in the1970's out of the right's "attempt to develop a modern theoretical orientation out of the intellectual quarry of Weimar's 'conservative revolution.'" <12> It stands for a "Third Way" between capitalism and communism, and the belief that "genetic and cultural factors must serve to prove national identity, racial segregation, and autonomy of the peoples." <13> This is the intellectual arm of the right and it is not cohesive. Instead, competing "theory-circles" have emerged. Ultimately, the "theoretical circle" aims at aligning with the moderate right and seeks to appeal to these conservatives, as well as to the unsatisfied and politically undecided. <14>

The final two categories of right-wing groups, the "neo-Nazis," and the "unorganized right-wing protest scene," differ from the first two groups in their blatant use of racially motivated violence combined with Nazi symbolism. For the most part, the neo-Nazis are led by "men of yesteryear" and are supported by relatively uneducated young adults hailing from the lower echelon of society. <15> They are not able to provide a concrete political agenda and prey on the willingness of their young recruits to use violence. Furthermore, they can be classified as anti-bourgeois and they adhere to rigid Nazi fundamentalism. <16>

The final sect of the German right-wing is the "unorganized right-wing protest scene." This type of activism appeals to skinheads and involves the provocative use of Nazi symbolism. Through its use of technology (especially computer games), and its emphasis on reaching children in schools or in youth groups, it often upsets local communities. <17> Thus, it is primarily through these two factions, the "neo-Nazis" and the "unorganized right wing protest scene," that the Right threatens the majority culture.

As far as an actual threat from the Right is concerned, these groups are regarded as more of a political embarrassment than a political threat; and the post-reunification surge of xenophobic neo-Nazi activity can be interpreted as "manifestation of a cultural crisis," <18> rather than a return to the Third Reich. Although some scholars contend that the Third Reich is not just a skeleton in the closet of German history and that the rise of right-wing activity poses a true and serious threat to German Democracy, the vast majority of scholars agree that the conditions in Germany between 1918 and 1933 comprise a particular social, political, and psychological phenomenon which will most likely not be repeated in the modern world. Thus, in order to form a rational and relevant conclusion on the degree of threat posed by the right-wing movement in the 1990's it is helpful, in comparison to asses the conditions surrounding Hitler's rise to power in the 1930's.

The humiliation and resentment felt by the German government and the German people as a result of the Versailles Treaty, the constitutional and political weaknesses of the Weimar Republic, and the state of the German economy during the inter-war period, are generally cited as the three main reasons for the success of Hitler and the Nazi Party in 1933. <19> The Treaty of Versailles, concluded in 1919 to end the First World War, was viewed as unfair in procedure as well as in content by the Germans. To begin with, in contrast to previous peace settlements in Europe the defeated nation in this case

Germany, was not allowed to take part in the negotiation of the peace settlement. Yet, Germany was forced to accept the terms of this treaty or face the resumption of hostilities. <20> Furthermore, the terms set by the Versailles Treaty were unreasonably harsh, demanding that Germany pay a ridiculous sum in reparations, lose a tenth of its pre-war population, an eighth of its territory (including all gains made in the duration of the war), turn over its high seas fleet to the Allies, and submit to the demilitarization of the Rhineland As a final humiliation, Germany was forced to accept article 231 of the Treaty, often known as the "war guilt clause" which placed sole responsibility for the tragedy of the first World War on Germany and its allies. <21> Thus, it is not difficult to see that within these unjust aspects of the Treaty lay the seeds for the economic and social decay of German society that was to take place over the next fourteen years. Thus, when the demoralized, and by this time economically debilitated, German people heard Hitler's call to restore the glory of the German nation, they seemingly found a ray of hope. Hitler and the Nazi party gave the masses the quickest and easiest solution to their problems by blaming the rest of the world while exalting the German people as the "superior race." Hitler claimed that the only explanation for the defeat of Germany in World War I was a conspiracy fueled by "the French, the Marxist, the plutocrats, and especially the Jews," a theory readily accepted by the masses. <22>

However, the seeds of economic and social decay, planted by the Versailles Treaty, could not have blossomed without being properly fertilized by the instability of the Weimar republic. To begin with, the constitution of the Weimar Republic contained certain elemental flaws that predetermined its inefficiency and ultimately its downfall. Perhaps the most notable of these mistakes was the adoption of the proportional representation electoral system which resulted in the infiltration of small anti-system parties within the parliament. This allowed a forum upon which parties such as the Nazis could publicize their agenda. <23> Another down side to the proportional representation system is that it allowed the formation of a large number of ideologically diverse parties. This not only fragmented public opinion, but it also made the formation of a parliamentary majority impossible. Furthermore, as the economic situation worsened and voters became impatient with the moderate parties, the center of the German political spectrum disintegrated leaving the Right-Wing with, 44.4% of the vote in the 1932 elections. <24> However, this was not a majority, but when Hitler refused to cooperate in any coalition in which he was not Chancellor, Hindenburg, under great pressure from younger, conservative elements who believed they could control Hitler, appointed him Chancellor. <25> The ultimate loophole in the Weimar constitution can be found in Article 48 which gave the Chancellor emergency powers in the midst of situations that "threaten or seriously disturb" public order and safety. <26> In blaming the 1933 Reichstag fire on a communist conspiracy against Germany, Hitler created the national emergency needed for him to assume the powers granted in Article 48. <27>

However, the failure of the Weimar Republic does not lie solely in its constitution, it also lies in the mind-set of the German people. Weimar has often been referred to as "a republic without republicans." <28> Because the legacy of Germany's political past was dominated by figures such as Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm II, the institution of a republican form of government after World War I seemed, to most Germans, a

frightening prospect. Finally, when soaring inflation and high unemployment brought an increasing level of insecurity, the republican system was repudiated by many. The third major reason for the rise of the Nazi party can be attributed to the economic nightmare that plagued Germany beginning in 1923, which improved only marginally until Hitler came to power in 1933. As unemployment rose to six million and the exchange rate of the Deutschmark stood at four trillion to the dollar in 1923, members of the middle class began to lose their sense of identity along with their life's savings. <29> In blaming the Jews and other ethnic groups for this economic burden, the Nazis offered the quickest and easiest solution to the uneasy masses.

Those who claim that the recent rise of the radical right in Germany is indicative of a return to the kind of fascism displayed in the Third Reich, are obviously alarmed by the similarities that exist between the past and the present. For example, reunification has resulted in feelings of uncertainty, both economic and social, as West German democracy attempts to absorb the formerly communist East Germany. <30> As unemployment rises and conflicts emerge regarding the higher living standards enjoyed by the West Germans, one also witnesses a growing animosity towards foreigners, who are labeled as the problem by the right-wing. These foreigners, most of whom are Turks, entered Germany as workers in the 1970's and 1980's and have remained there until the present day. The lenient stance on immigration, taken by Article 16 of The Basic Law, making mandatory the acceptance of all political refugees, has been cited as a reason for Germany's large foreign population. <31> "Resentment felt by Western Germans about Eastern Germans, feelings of irritation and anger at the alleged slowness of Eastern Germany to recover, and the unemployed resenting the loss of their jobs," are all disturbing symptoms in present day Germany. <32> However, the overwhelming commitment to reunification is such a pervasive sentiment that these feelings of resentment and economic and social insecurity are unlikely to manifest themselves in a popular movement of violence and extremism. Though the problems experienced in Germany during the Weimar Republic do exist on a somewhat smaller scale today, one must take into account the provisions that have been made by post-war Germany in order to adequately address the possibility of another rise of the Right. By revoking its liberal immigration laws, Germany has partially countered the xenophobia and uncertainty caused by the influx of foreigners. Furthermore, the banning of overtly anti-system and racist parties (such as the right-wing Alliance for German Comrades), has been a measure used by the German government to keep the right-wing under control. <33> Moreover, recent mass demonstrations against racism further attest to the strength and cohesiveness of the German mainstream culture.

Although there is resentment concerning the economic disparity between East and West Germany, the German economy is considered one of Europe's strongest. One measure for countering the disparity felt in the East has been an annual subsidy of 150 billion Deutschmarks towards social benefits. <34> Furthermore, the memory of the catastrophic inflation that plagued Weimar has resulted in the stern attitude exhibited by the current Bundesbank towards the value of the Deutschmark and its fight against rising inflation. Although there has been pressure by other European nations for Germany to abandon its high interest rate policy in defense of the Deutschmark's value, there have only been marginal reductions but no change of policy. <35> The result is that the German currency

has remained seemingly unimpaired by the trauma of reunification. Politically speaking the Germany of today is no Weimar Republic. The established parties such as the CDU/CSU, the SPD, and the FDP, would not consider threatening their positions by aligning with or even displaying support for a radical right-wing party such as the Republikaners or the NPD. <36> Furthermore, the 5% rule, demanding that a party receive 5% of the vote in order to be represented in the Parliament, has also been helpful in excluding subversive parties from the mainstream political culture. Moreover, in international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union, Germany is seen as a leader among democracies. Thus, in tying itself economically and politically to nations such as the U.S. and Japan, modern Germany has displayed to the world a break from its past and a determination for the future.

A final and important difference between modern Germany and the period between 1918 and 1933 is what has been referred to as the "uniqueness of the German psyche" during the Weimar Republic. <37> The period shortly after the defeat of 1918 was a stressful and insecure time for the German people who were faced with rapid changes in their political structure. The collapse of the monarchy, as well as the military, and the appearance of foreign elements of democracy, such as new political parties, induced a collective state of insecurity in the German people. Thus, when this was followed by a relatively long period of political and economic instability, the result was the "loss of the frame of reference for the behavior of both group, and individual." <38> Simultaneously apathy and anxiety set in, creating confusion and detachment on the one hand and willingness to action on the other. Thus, a move to the right was logical. This was because unlike socialism and communism (The former seeking to tie Germany's fate to the western democracies and the latter seeking to tie Germany to the Soviet Union), Hitler's Nazi Party spoke of regaining pride in German nationalism. <39> While it is true that today Germany is heavily tied to the West, it has done so by choice and is currently reaping the benefits of its decision. Furthermore, the stability of democracy in western Germany, even during the Cold War, has provided the German people with a sense of security. Thus, as Europe moves further and further towards integration and cooperation the "German psyche" seems to remain stable and content.

Konrad Adenauer once declared history to be "the total of the things that could have been avoided." In keeping with this theory, Germany has managed to use the rise of the Third Reich as a paradigm of what a government is not supposed to be. In following this paradigm, Germany has managed, in the post-war years, to strengthen its democracy by using constitutional measures, as well as public demonstrations against the ideals and goals of Nazism. Thus, to answer the first question posed in this paper: Is German democracy strong enough to combat and defeat racism? The answer would have to be a definitive "yes!" In regards to the second question concerning the continuance of racial and ethnic unrest, the answer is not so clear. Racial and ethnic violence are problems common to many countries today, particularly those with a high foreign population. However, although there is no clear end for racial and ethnic unrest in sight, the rise in right-wing activity in post-reunification Germany is not indicative of the coming of a new Third Reich. The ability of Germany to maintain a relatively high level of political,

economic, and social stability has given the German people the confidence in democracy needed to combat these subversive elements of society.

Notes

1 Alan Watson, *Dangers From the Right?* pamphlet (1993), p. 3.

2. Walter Laqueur, *Germany Today: A Personal Report* (Boston, Massachusetts: Little Brown andd Company, 1985), p. 149.

3 Ibid., 149.

4 Ibid., 150.

5 Ibid., 151.

6. Ibid., 153.

7. Hans-Gerd Jaschke, "Sub-Cultural Aspects of Right Wing Extremism." *Political Culture in Germany* (New York, New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1993), p. 130.

8 Ibid., 130.

9 Laqueur, 154.

10 Jaschke, 129.

11 Ibid., 130.

12 Ibid., 130.

13 Ibid., 130.

14 Ibid., 131.

15 Ibid., 131.

16 ibid., 131.

17 Ibid., 131.

18 Paul B. Stares, *The New Germany and the New Europe* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1992), 40.

19 Watson 41.

20 Wayne C. Thompson, *Western Europe 1994: 13th Edition* (Harpers Ferry, West Virginia: Stryer-Post Publications, 1994), p. 42

21 Watson, 43.

22 Thompson, 42.

23 Rand C. Lewis, *A Nazi Legacy: Right Wing Extremism in Postwar Germany.* (New York, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), p. 20.

24 Watson, 47.

25 Thompson, 43.

26 Ibid., 47.

27 Watson, 41.

28 Ibid., 42-43.

29 Ibid., 40.

30 Ibid., 8.

31 Ibid., 44.

32 Ibid., 45.

33 Ibid., 43.

34 Ibid., 42.

35 Ibid., 47.

36 Zevedei Barbu, "Security For A Sick Psyche?" *The Nazi Revolution: Germany's Guilt or Germany's Fate?* (Boston, Massachusetts: D.C. Health and Company, 1959), p. 85.

37 Barbu, 86.

38 Ibid., 86.

39 Ibid., 87.

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