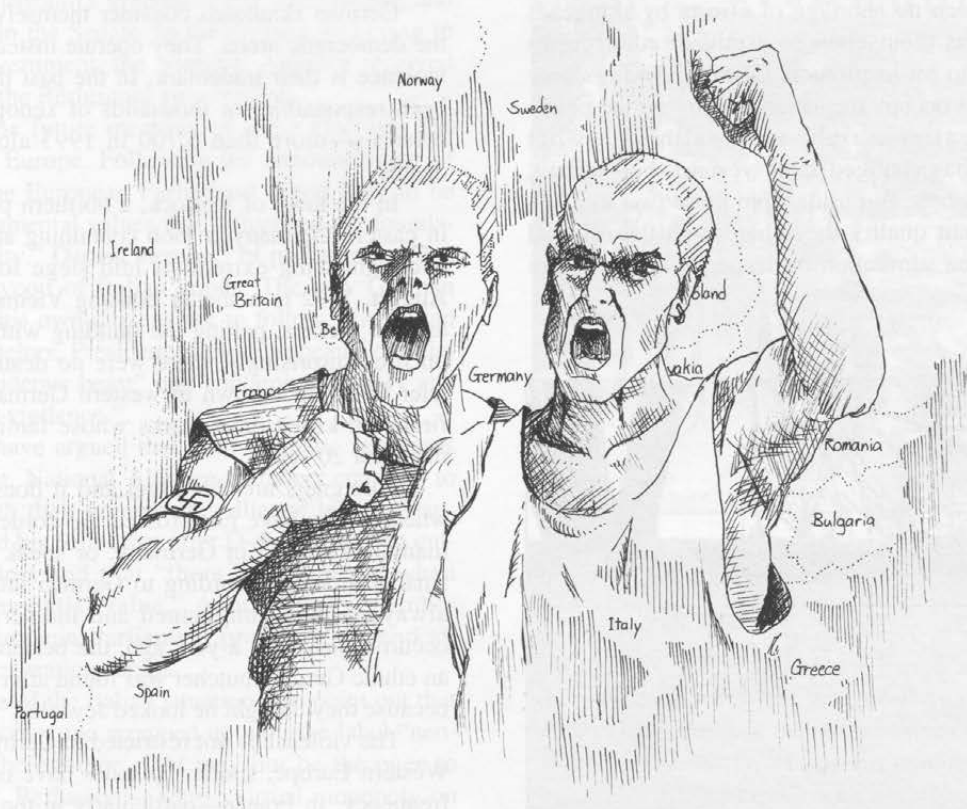


As part of a Western European movement towards right-wing politics, for the past five years neo-Fascist and neo-Nazi movements have become more visible both on the streets and in political seats. While comparisons with their namesakes of the inter-war period may be overstated, their presence in contemporary European society points to a new mood in which a series of issues—immigration, citizenship and economic policy among them—must soon be addressed.

## Neo-Nazism and Neo-Fascism



[David Wysotski]

## The Rise of the Extreme Right in Western Europe

by Erik Schatzker

Commemorations surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the Allied D-day landings in June of this year have acted as a reminder that the horrors of World War II are not so far removed from today—that the past remains inextricably intertwined with the present and holds distinctive meanings for different peoples.

They have also drawn attention to the increased popularity and visibility of politically and socially right-wing movements

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in Europe. There is the rise of skinhead violence, particularly in Germany, in which disaffected young men are looking to the Nazi past for role models. And, with five members of Italy's National Alliance in the new cabinet of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a political party claiming at least some ties to a fascist ideology now shares the reigns of power in Italy for the first time since Benito Mussolini.

More and more, the actions of modern right-wing extremists are being scrutinized, not only because they are disruptive and harmful, but because they invite historical comparisons with the violent outcome of the last wave of European extremism from the 1920s through the 1940s.

The terms most often used to describe skinheads and

extreme right-wing politicians alike are neo-Fascist and neo-Nazi. These adjectives are used interchangeably by some. For others, Fascist is used to label any action or belief perceived as aggressively authoritarian or markedly right-wing, while Nazi is used when xenophobia and racism are thrown in.

Today's linguistic usage—and tendency to historical comparison—may very well be too loose. While much can be gleaned from the past, many historians argue that Fascism and Nazism are best understood as historical terms referring to specific events of the first half of the twentieth century. In reality, little direct link can be made between the Fascist and Nazi parties of old and the neo-Fascist and neo-Nazi parties operating in Western Europe today.

Still, there has been no shortage of efforts by skinheads and rightist politicians themselves to establish connections with a past they look to for inspiration. Certainly, today's neo-Fascists and neo-Nazis occupy the same territory on the political spectrum: the extreme right-wing (although what "right-wing" means has changed from yesterday to today). Many are also rabid racists. But aside from those two similarities, the only consistent quality they share with the original Fascists and Nazis is an admiration for leaders who died more than four decades ago.



Voicing dissent in Frankfurt.  
[Ingrid Schenk]

### From the streets...

*Ausländer Raus* is a German slogan that means "foreigners get out." Since the unification of West and East Germany in 1990, it can be heard shouted, day and night, along with racist slurs and the occasional *Heil Hitler*. The people doing most of the shouting are male youths between fifteen and thirty each wearing an identical costume: military surplus bomber jacket, black combat boots, and shaved head.

These skinheads (they too use the English word) represent a grassroots nationalist movement that strives to identify with Germany's Nazi past—a past they do not necessarily understand. Precious little is known about them because of their

seeming lack of institutional framework and isolationist culture. Nonetheless, it is clear that these skinheads seek to rid the country of its foreign inhabitants, whether legal immigrants, guest workers, or asylum-seekers.

Many observers believe that the movement—although fragmented and lacking formal political cohesion—is rapidly becoming stronger, if for no other reason than its growing size. Neo-Nazi gang bosses are said to roam the German countryside recruiting young, disillusioned men out of beer halls and amusement parlors. Estimates of the number belonging to their groups exceed 65,000. Officially, the German government counts 82 right-wing extremist organizations with combined membership of 41,900, including over 6,000 skinheads.

German skinheads consider themselves radicals and shun the democratic arena. They operate instead in the street where violence is their trademark. In the past three years, they have been responsible for thousands of xenophobically motivated offenses—more than 6,700 in 1993 alone—and at least 28 deaths.

In the town of Rostock, a northern port on the Baltic Sea in eastern Germany, a mob containing at least 500 skinheads and right-wing extremists laid siege for five nights in late August, 1992 to a shelter housing Vietnamese and Romanian asylum seekers, pelting the building with rocks and setting it on fire. Surprisingly, there were no deaths. But three months later in Mölln, a town in western Germany near Hamburg, a firebomb killed three Turks whose family had lived in Germany for 20 years.

Foreigners are the target and it does not seem to matter whether they have just crossed the border, have lived in Germany, were born in Germany, or speak fluent German. The smaller attacks, according to German intelligence, are almost always random, unplanned and indiscriminate. In one that occurred just over a year ago, the beaten and burned body of an ethnic German butcher was found after skinheads killed him because they thought he looked Jewish.

The violence is not restricted to German soil. Elsewhere in Western Europe, similar episodes have occurred with relative frequency. In France—particularly in the southeast and in the area around Paris—Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians, and other Maghrebi (North Africans) are often the target of racial attacks. Between 1986 and 1991, 20 foreigners were murdered in France. Nineteen of the victims were Maghrebi and more than half the incidents have been attributed to violent racism.

Blacks and asylum-seekers from Eastern Europe generally are subject to the worst treatment in Italy. Racial intolerance there received international attention in 1991, when foreign news cameras filmed Italians harassing, assaulting and pelting stones at Albanian refugees fleeing from overcrowded boats. In Belgium, in the Netherlands, in Switzerland, in Denmark—in virtually every country of western Europe—stories of thuggery and abuse are not dissimilar.

### ...to the seats

Today, national political parties of the far right operate all over Europe. The proportional-representation structure of many European electoral systems helps foster political extremism—allowing even the most marginal viewpoints a forum. Seats in European, federal, regional, and municipal elections are often contested by dozens of parties, many of them radical. Coalition

governments are frequently the rule.

In recent elections the popularity of the European political right has increased. Over the past decade parties of the extreme right have won as much as ten percent of the popular vote. The largest and most successful parties of such groups include: the German Republican Party, the National Democratic Party, and the People's Union List-D; the National Front of France; the Freedom Party of Austria; the British National Party; the Italian National Alliance; the Swiss Democrats; and the Central Democrats and Centre Party '86, of the Netherlands.

In the most recent round of Italian federal elections, held in March, 1994, the "post-Fascist" *Alleanza Nazionale*, or National alliance, filled 105 out of 630 seats in the Chamber of Deputies (one by Mussolini's granddaughter Alessandra), and 43 out of 315 seats in the Senate. In the ensuing jockeying to form a coalition government, the National Alliance received five cabinet posts in the Berlusconi government.

Concern over the future meaning of these elections has been widespread in Europe. Following the announcement of the cabinet posts, the European Parliament urged Italy to be "faithful to the fundamental values that influenced the foundation of the Community." Danish members of parliament called for an economic boycott of Italian goods. The new German president cautioned his own citizens not to follow "the Italian example." Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission raged that "a hideous beast" had contaminated Italy and exhorted "concerned vigilance."

Commentators have argued that such dramatic responses are unwarranted. Yet, National Alliance members continue to fuel controversy with their comments. Alliance leader Gianfranco Fini expressed his belief that after D-day, European cultural identity was lost and that "there are moments when freedom is not an essential value." Another party member standing for the European Parliament promised to send all homosexuals to concentration camps.

Political analysts of the Italian situation also point out that it is dangerous to become too wrapped up with the label "neo-Fascist." Those of the extreme right may not be the ones to worry about. Rather, Berlusconi—whose virtual monopoly on Italian television stations, through private ownership and political power, has left him with great controlling potential—may well prove to be the wolf in sheep's clothing.

Although few official ties exist between right-wing politicians and skinhead gangs, national political figures have helped to legitimize extreme nationalism and xenophobia. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the French ex-President, has more than once referred to the threat of an immigrant "invasion" and has demanded that France close its borders to new settlers and embrace *ius sanguinis*, the principle of strict blood-citizenship. His opinions have been reinforced by another former French President, Jacques Chirac, as well as by Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the rightist and nationalist Front Nationale. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl has run hot and cold over the issue of immigration, which he called Europe's "central challenge" in May.

During an Austrian provincial parliamentary debate in June, 1991, Jörg Haider, head of the Freedom Party, praised the Third Reich for implementing "a competent employment policy." He was subsequently forced to resign from his post as *Landeshauptmann*, or governor, of Corinthia, but stayed on as

leader of the party and saw its popularity soar over the next six months.

## Defining Fascism and Nazism

Seventy years ago, in Italy and Germany, Fascism and Nazism each found support within a desperate populace. For Italy, World War I was catastrophic. The country lost an entire generation of young men—400,000 in one battle alone—and was riven with grief and anger. By 1921, civil war appeared imminent, with rioting in Bologna, Florence, and Milan. Mussolini,



First European fascist leader: Italy's Benito Mussolini (1883-1945)

a former journalist, was able to capitalize on Italian frustration, the industrial strife that gripped Italy in the early 1920s, and the ineffectiveness of the parliamentary system.

In 1922, King Victor Emmanuel III conceded to the demands of Mussolini's Fascists and invited him to become Prime Minister—if for no other reason than to avoid a revolution. After heading a coalition government of Fascists and nationalists, Mussolini consolidated his hold on Italy in 1926, seven years before Adolf Hitler, as leader of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers Party, or Nazi), became Chancellor of Germany.

During the 1920s, a constellation of forces came together to make Germany's post-war Weimar Republic increasingly unstable. The order for reparations payments written into the Versailles peace treaty (1919) paralyzed the German economy. Staggering unemployment and inflation prompted Germans to gravitate towards political extremes.

Psychologically, Germans considered the signing of the Versailles Treaty a "stab in the back" since they did not believe that they had lost the war in the first place—no foreign troops had touched German soil before the signing of the armistice. The Weimar government received the brunt of the frustration, anger and blame over the settlement.

For many veterans, World War I may have been a horrible experience but one that nonetheless marked a time of great national unity, when soldiers and citizens had felt a great sense

of belonging and comradeship. In the aftermath years, this romantic sense of connection was lost in bitter factional politics and economic competition. Many Germans sought to retrieve their nation's wholeness.

While their substance and style were certainly singular, Nazism and Fascism were not entirely dissimilar. Both existed as "anti" movements, defined less by an ideology or coherent set of beliefs than by a nationalistic anti-ideology, a negative reaction to communism, socialism, international finance, Western capitalism, and the League of Nations. These were all symbols of the modern world and the perceived isolation of the individual in it. Professor Thomas Childers of the University of Pennsylvania has called the Nazis "a catch-all party of protest."

Both sought to establish a strict authoritarian state based on a new arrangement of economic life (known as Corporatism in Italy and National Socialism in Germany) whereby government, business and workers would act as one unit dedicated to maximizing productive output while providing the highest possible standard of living to society.

Most significantly, both movements were simultaneously directed and personified by their leader: Hitler, *der Führer*, and Mussolini, *il Duce*. The prominent characteristics of Fascism and Nazism—the populist following, the imperialist drive, the military style, the emphasis on masculine authority, and the affinity with violence and conflict—were all affixed to the single, charismatic leader of the party, the mesmerizing orator. This was a secular religion in which society would act in unity through the leader.

Historian Robert Wistrich captured the remarkable nature of this leader figure while commenting in *The Longest Hatred*, a documentary film about the history of Jewish persecution. "In National Socialism...Adolf Hitler is presented as a kind of messianic Christ figure, only of a German kind, with a sword in his hand, who has come to purify and cleanse the world of an original sin." With his bombastic

oratory style and penchant for posturing whenever in public, Mussolini too orchestrated a divine status for himself.

Historians are deeply split today over the role of ideology and the leader, theoretically so important, in the reality of Fascist and Nazi rule. The German historian Hans Mommsen has called Hitler a "weak dictator" who maintained far less control over the direction of policy than traditionally been thought

because of the *Führer's* tendency not to take a side in decision-making debates.

During the inter-war period, a number of other right-wing extremist parties flourished, particularly in Spain and France. Indeed, France, with three such parties in the political mainstream, teetered on the brink of a "fascist" revolution in February 1934. In Spain, the fascist Nationalists under the leadership of Francisco Franco emerged victorious from a bloody civil war in 1939 and established a dictatorship that lasted until Franco's death in 1975. And in Great Britain, Sir Oswald Mosley organized the "blackshirts" and touted his political vision in the salons of the aristocracy. As radical parties of the extreme right, the Spanish Falange and the French Faisceau, Action Française, and Croix de Feu shared certain—though by no means all—qualities with the Italian Fascists and German Nazis. In its specifics, Fascism was unique to each country.

### The monstrosity of its rule

Neither Mussolini nor Hitler was ever internally defeated once installed in power. Rather, both were the architects of their own demise. As Juan J. Linz explains, "Fascism was displaced from the political scene, not only by its failure to satisfy the expectations of many of its supporters but by the monstrosity of its rule, particularly in the case of Nazism, and ultimately by its involvement in the war and its defeat in 1945."

Until 1934 *il Duce* was the sole fascist national leader, and model, for Europe. Soon after the March 5, 1933 elections,

Hitler, buoyed by the success of his political maneuvering, began to incorporate racism into the dictatorial style of leadership he borrowed from Mussolini. Gradually, Mussolini deferred to the *Führer* and the Nazi system of rule, mimicking in Italy its style of propaganda, its emphasis on mass mobilization, and its increasingly anti-Semitic policies.

By 1939, Nazism had left a striking mark, first on Germany, and then on Western

Europe. Nazi Germany produced a miraculous five-year turnaround in the national economy: massive industrial redevelopment, near-full employment (from 6 million unemployed in 1933) and military rearmament. Hitler also redefined German society according to the Nazi ideal which emphasized adherence to authority, Aryan superiority, subordination of women to men and the importance of German unity.



Military style, masculine authority: boy blackshirts emulate *Il Duce's* posture.

His party introduced a series of laws that excluded and repressed those who did not conform to the ideal, either racially or politically. For example, in April, 1933 Jews were barred from government service, universities, and professions. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws stripped them of virtually all remaining civil rights. Then, in order to create a great German (*GrossDeutsch*) state, Hitler began the series of inva-

sions that would lead him into Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, France, the Soviet Union and others.

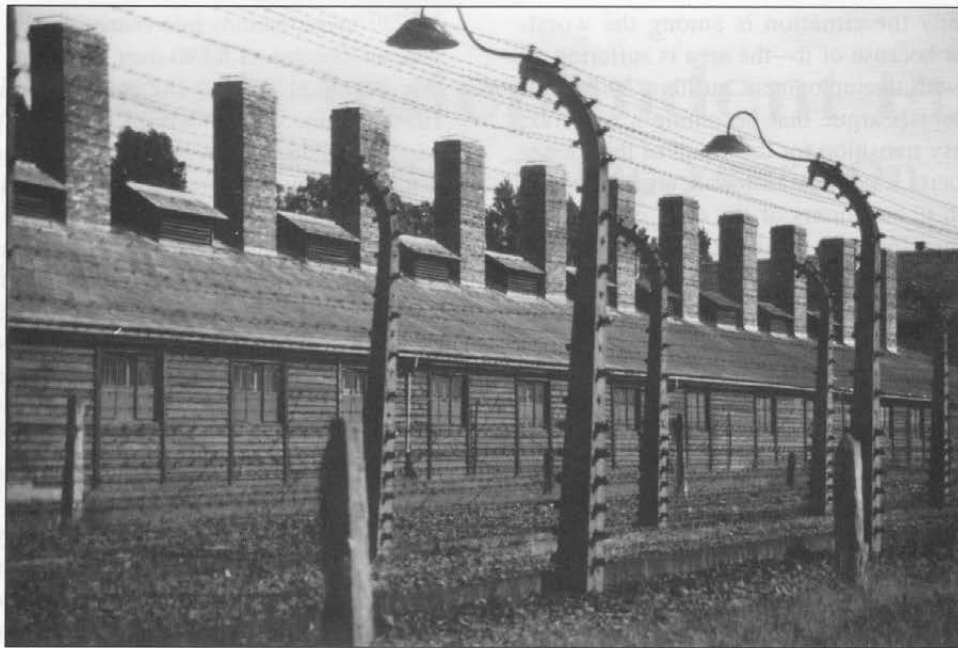
### Three decades of silence

Hitler's suicide on April 30, 1945 combined with Mussolini's execution only days before, effectively buried the extreme right in post-war European politics. With Allied occupation forces stationed throughout Europe, there was little room for any Nazi or Fascist holdovers to organize—especially true once the horrors of the Nazi regime were made public.

In Western Europe, the Allies opted to rebuild, not punish Germany as they had—to disastrous effect—after the First World War. From 1948 to 1952 the Organization for European Economic Cooperation administered \$17 billion worth of American Marshall Plan aid earmarked for European industrial redevelopment. Over the next 15 years it produced phenomenal economic results, notably in the three countries where the extreme right flourished during the inter-war period: in Germany, a 6.8 percent average annual rate of growth of output per capita between 1948 and 1962; in Italy, 5.6 percent; and in France, 3.4 percent. The demands for production became so acute that some countries had to import guest workers.

During the Cold War, Western Europeans enjoyed relative political peace. American influence and military presence buoyed democracy, and the extreme right found few opportunities to organize. Mainstream politics co-opted anti-communism, thereby removing what had been a prime mobilizing factor for Fascism and Nazism. In West Germany, where democracy grew strong and where a new constitution guarded against a return to Nazism, membership in extreme right-wing organizations dropped from 76,000 to 17,300 between 1954 and 1979.

In Germany, while political aspects appeared purged, the Nazi past continued to have an impact on post-war politics, identities, attitudes and actions. Living with the guilt and trauma of a lost war—one in which the very notion of a “crime



*The Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz: an ever-present reminder of the need for vigilance.*  
[Aldis Purs]

against humanity” was created—posed cultural dilemmas. “Were Germans inherently violent and warlike, or was the Nazi era an aberration?” was a question that, while not always discussed, was at the front of German's minds. The West German public were *betroffen*, which Ian Buruma, in his *Memories of War in Germany and Japan*, translates: “to be reduced to silence by a feeling of guilt—to be made speechless.”

East Germans did not have to face the repercussions of the Nazi past in the same manner as their Western compatriots. They lived instead with official proclamations asserting that, as communists, East Germans were heroic resisters to Nazism while their Western neighbors had been its primary perpetrators.

### From the 1980s to the 1990s

During the 1980s widespread nationalism and xenophobia began to reappear across Western Europe—partly in response to a worsening economy, to the arrival of a new generation and to the break-up of the Soviet Union. Since then, right-wing extremism has outpaced communism to become the most popular radical political alternative, especially since the landmark fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Europe is still feeling the effects of the collapse of Soviet communism. Western Europe has also experienced a massive population immigration. In France and Germany, for example, the influx of millions of refugees is straining social services and local economies. As well, Eastern European governments, such as Ukraine and Russia, have begun to rely on Eastern aid as key to basic survival.

Combined, the global recession and the eastern burden have had a serious impact on economies: standards of living have dropped and unemployment has increased dramatically. Across the continent, asylum-seekers and guest workers have become a largely unwelcome commodity. At the same time, plans to construct the European Community have created fears of homogeneity and loss of national pride and culture.

The insecurity that so many Europeans feel about their identities, their jobs, and their future has fueled the rise of the extreme right. Local and national parties hold public rallies to stir fear and make promises: to end immigration, to send all guest workers and unwelcome foreigners “home,” to nationalize businesses currently under foreign control, and to crush the liberal opposition.

In eastern Germany the situation is among the worst. Despite unification—or because of it—the area is suffering an economic depression with unemployment pushing 30 percent in many areas. Sociologists argue that becoming a neo-Nazi skinhead may be an easy transition for the youth of the former DDR. Geoffrey K. Roberts, a political historian, argues that the characteristics common to supporters of the extreme right are almost identical to those fostered by the former communist regime: gang members pledge allegiance to authority, claim to possess an absolute truth and clear ideological distinctions between friend and foe, and desire a homogeneous populace.

With unification, residents of the DDR were guaranteed all the benefits that German citizenship gave residents of West Germany. But along with the comforts of social security came the demands of an open border. When the German constitution was drafted under Allied supervision in 1949, Article 16, section two stated that “persons persecuted for political reasons enjoy the right of asylum.” Because the right is constitutional, it was extended to the eastern *Länder*, or provinces, with unification. Yet, the German government paid little heed to warnings that the East was incapable of providing asylum and failed to realistically assess the ability of local Eastern authorities to protect foreigners. Asylum seekers were attacked regularly. Under pressure from political conservatives and right-wing extremists, Germany amended Article 16 in 1993, a move that prompted widespread international criticism.

In Germany today, neo-Nazis contrast the socio-economic instability of the new *Deutschland* with the “order” and “stability” of the Third Reich. For their efforts, right-wing extremist parties find themselves winning more German votes municipally, provincially, and federally. In doing so, they are also succeeding, not necessarily fatally, in drawing mainstream German politics to the right.

### Confronting neo-Fascists and neo-Nazis

German opposition to the right-wing radicals is strong. Over the past few years numerous marches commemorating the Holocaust have been held and protests against neo-Nazism have been frequently staged—many of them attended by the President himself. Also, studies seem to indicate that Germans have growing faith in a democratic system. In 1982, 81 percent of people aged 18 to 21 felt that voting was an effective political measure, while in 1950, only 44 percent of men and only 40 percent of women in the same age group felt the same way.

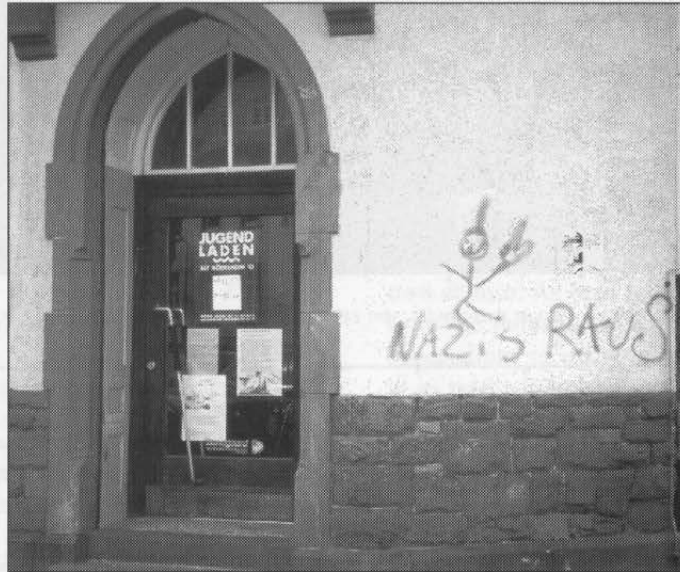
Nevertheless, the German government has only lately begun to attend to the problems of xenophobic nationalism and neo-Nazi violence. Between January and September, 1993, German Public Prosecution Offices and Courts launched

18,729 investigations into crimes linked to right-wing extremism, an increase of 6,690 over the entire 1992 year. In December, Michael Peters, the man responsible for the Mölln firebombing, was sentenced to life in prison, the first such penalty handed out in response to a hate murder. In January, after a wheelchair-bound girl from Halle, an eastern town, alleged that three skinheads had carved a swastika in her cheek the authorities mounted a manhunt that employed over one hundred law enforcement officers and lasted for days.

Criminal proceedings against German right-wing extremists do not always result in conviction, but the rate has been rising. Through the first three quarters of 1993 there were 1,561 such convictions, of which 88 imposed a prison sentence or youth custody of two years or more. Harsh sentences could become more common if the Federal Ministry of Justice succeeds in passing a bill that would provide the German legal system with additional legislative measures to prosecute anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi violence.

To stem the rise of neo-Fascism and neo-Nazism, other countries will have to follow the German example and invest their courts with the power to meet the extreme right-wing on legal grounds—that is, if their citizens want them to. In Germany, Franz Schönhuber’s

right-wing Republican Party already has 23,000 members who will oppose the new legislation. And with the recent success of the *Alleanza Nazionale* in Italy and the perennial popularity of Le Pen’s *Front National* in France, voters in Western Europe may not be blindly marking ballots for neo-Fascist and neo-Nazi parties. The votes may be cast in protest. They may also be cast with conviction. In either case, Europeans must begin an economic, political, social and psychological soul-searching if they are successfully to confront the root causes of such extremism. ●



“Nazis Get Out”: Graffiti on a center for teen counselling, Frankfurt. [Ingrid Schenk]

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