

# The public debate on right-wing violence in Germany

## Politicians, media call for "strong-state tactics"

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For over three weeks now, public discussion in Germany has been dominated by the topic of right-wing violence. Not a day passes without editorialists, commentators, statesmen and politicians coming up with new proposals and resolutions on how to counter the brazen conduct of neo-fascist groups and the wave of violence against foreigners.

These proposals fit into one of two categories:

The first category centres on giving greater repressive powers to the state apparatus. These proposals range from banning the most aggressive and best organized neo-fascist party, the NPD (a demand that is now also supported by the German government) to increased activities by the police and the semi-military Federal Border Police (BGS), total video-camera surveillance of city centres and limitations on freedom of expression, including a general restriction of the right to demonstrate and the right of assembly.

The common feature of these proposals is that they ride roughshod over democratic rights and principles. It doesn't seem to occur to their proponents that such a strengthening of the state's repressive apparatus, although superficially aimed at the neo-fascists, ultimately undermines democracy itself.

A typical example is the editorial in the latest issue of the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. Writing under the banner headline "Fight the Nazis!", journalist Toralf Staudt enthusiastically projects a society in which there is a policeman standing on every street corner—something which up to now was generally considered to be the characteristic feature of a police state. "Officers of the Federal Border Police can ride the regional trains, and mobile police buses should be ready in waiting wherever violence-prone youth

gather—at market squares, in pedestrian zones and at gas stations", writes Staudt.

In another article published in *Die Zeit*, headlined "With the Full Force of the State", prominent Social Democrat Klaus von Dohnanyi summarily dismisses democratic objections to such a strengthening of the state's repressive powers. According to von Dohnanyi, the "allegedly 'liberal' warnings" that wire-tapping homes and using undercover agents or video camera surveillance lead to a police state ignore the concept of a "democracy able to put up a fight".

A slogan popular in anti-fascist groups, "Fascism is not an opinion, it is a crime", also tends in this direction. Even accepting that this is an honest expression of revulsion against the extreme right wing, its logical conclusion is that fascism is an issue of criminal law, not of politics. That is a false approach which, in the final analysis, hinders the development of an effective counter-strategy.

The second group of proposals—often interlinked with the first category, although not proclaimed so loudly—consists of educational and propagandistic initiatives: political education, discussion in schools, financial support for anti-fascist initiatives and appeals for more personal courage on the part of the general population.

Like the first category, however, such proposals only address exterior symptoms and not the root cause of the problem. While the proponents of state power approach the issue solely from the vantage point of policing and criminal law, the advocates of increased enlightenment see the source of the fascist threat exclusively in individual consciousness and personal conscience. This is despite the obvious fact that the escalation of right-

wing violence has more profound political and social roots.

These roots lie, on the one hand, in the crisis of society, which is driving more and more sectors of the population into economic insecurity or outright poverty, and, on the other, in a political climate that seems to offer no progressive way out of the societal blind alley. It is the interaction between these two factors that is the source of the growth of neo-fascism and xenophobia.

In itself, the social crisis expressed in high unemployment and the growing gap between rich and poor does not by necessity have to result in a shift to the right. Such crises can also provide the impetus for a broad-based movement of solidarity at the “lower end” of society—at least, this is what happened in the past. However, the prerequisite for such a movement is the existence of a political alternative to the existing order which is capable of captivating the imagination of the masses and which constitutes a genuine opposition to the ruling parties that are responsible for the social crisis.



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