Right wing violence in Germany and the government's response

Peter Schwarz
11 August 2000

For nearly two weeks violence aimed at foreigners has dominated political discussion in Germany. Something that previously had been largely suppressed or minimized has suddenly become the centre of attention. Innumerable editorials, commentaries and background reports in the press, as well as special television programmes, have been dedicated to this topic. Nationwide reports are appearing about incidents that earlier would have received only an occasional note in the local press, if that.

For the first time the extent of anti-foreigner violence in Germany has become clear. Such racist attacks have developed substantially since German reunification in 1990. Since then, over 100 people have died as a result of right-wing terror. In the first half of this year alone the police registered 5,223 crimes involving anti-Semitism, xenophobia or extremist right-wing violence—almost thirty a day. The real number of attacks, which largely go unrecorded, can only be guessed at.

Particularly in the east, in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), there are regions which are systematically terrorized by right-wing gangs. Whoever possesses dark or yellow skin, homeless persons, left-wingers or those who just appear a bit different and do not fit the norm are under threat on the streets. They are advised to avoid railway stations, gas stations and other crowded places at night. In the eastern Harz region even unmarried mothers have been attacked by thugs who demanded that their victims start a “proper” German family.

In the west of Germany, the probability of foreigners becoming victims of violence is substantially smaller. However, neo-fascist groups, characterised by ruthlessness and brutality, are active here too. This was already clear in 1992, when in the west German towns of Solingen and Moelln two Turkish families fell victim to xenophobic arson attacks.

Just two weeks ago, a hand grenade attack in Duesseldorf injured nine immigrants, some critically, and indicated that a new level of violence had been reached. So far the culprits have not been found, but the public prosecutor's office is assuming neo-fascist involvement due to the identity of the victims, most of whom were Russian émigré Jews.

The extent of right-wing violence is not new, however. The media and politicians have only “discovered” it after much delay.

If the statistics of the Federal Office for Protection of the Constitution (the name given to the German secret service) can be believed, the total number of right-wing crimes, including those involving violence, has been stable for the past two years and has even decreased slightly. In 1998, the last year for which overall figures are available, 708 acts of violence with an extremist right-wing background were registered, about half as many as 1992, the previous record high. In addition, there are approximately 11,000 further offences, among them so-called propaganda crimes such as the displaying of symbols of organizations ruled to be unconstitutional.

What has changed is the organisational structure of the extreme right. Since 1980, the German state has banned some 20 right-wing organizations, mostly in the first half of the 1990s. This led to a temporary decrease in organised neo-fascism, while at the same time the so-called skinhead music scene increased considerably. Concerts by racist and anti-Semitic bands became the gathering point for neo-Nazis. The number of such concerts increased rapidly, from 30 in 1993 to 128 in 1998. Recordings (tapes and CDs) by right-wing groups were widely available. In a nationwide action in 1997, the police seized 45,000 CDs with illegal content.

The right-wing scene began to organize itself in *Freie Kameradschaften* (free associations). These have no centralised structure, but keep in close contact via the Internet and other means of communication. In the meantime, over 150 such *Kameradschaften* have been catalogued by the secret service. Most can be found in Lower Saxony (in the west), Mecklenburg-Pomerania (east), Saxon-Anhalt (east), Brandenburg (east) and Berlin. The secret service estimates that approximately 2,200 activists out of a potential 2,400 neo-Nazis are involved in such *Kameradschaften*.

Over the past four years the German National Democratic Party (NPD) and its youth organisation (the Young National Democrats—JN) have begun to organize the *Kameradschaften* centrally. The NPD called several demonstrations predominantly attended by neo-Nazis. One such demonstration in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin made the headlines in the spring of this year.

The NPD was founded in 1964 and achieved some spectacular election results at the beginning of the 1970s. Their influence soon decreased, however, and the numerically weak, mainly elderly party membership dedicated itself predominantly to nostalgic attempts to try and improve the image of the Nazi regime.

Following the election of Udo Voigt from Brandenburg as NPD national chairman four years ago, the party undertook a change of course. It concentrated its work in the former GDR, where it gained new and, above all, young party followers. Most members are now under 30 years old. Approximately 1,000 of the NPD's national membership of 6,000 come from the state of Saxony in the former GDR, where the party has representation in several local councils.

Ideologically, the NPD strives to exploit bitterness over the social consequences of the dissolution of the GDR. It stands for a “German *völkisch* socialism” and dispenses anti-capitalist and anti-Western slogans “against globalisation and the European Union dictatorship”. Some party officials from the east say the GDR was a better state than West Germany. Among the party theoreticians is Michael Nier, a former university teacher of historical materialism in the GDR.

Even if the numbers provided by the secret service are regarded with reservation, due to their blurred criteria, they make clear that the extreme right does not represent a mass phenomenon, but rather an active minority.

The secret service differentiates between “neo-Nazis” and “right-wing extremists with a propensity for violence”, ascribing 2,400 to the first group and 8,200 to the second. Above all, the second group includes “extremist right-wing skinheads”. In addition, there are the 6,000 NPD members, 18,000 members of the German Peoples Union (DVU) and 15,000 members of the *Republikaner*. The two latter parties are particularly active in elections. The DVU obtained a surprise success in

1998, winning 13 percent of the vote and representation in the east German state parliament of Saxony-Anhalt.

There are, however, areas of society where the extreme right dominate. In particular, in the former GDR some schools are terrorised by the extremist right. Pupils who do not fall into line must fear for their safety and their lives. A poll among 15-year-old pupils in Brandenburg found that up to 30 percent tended to support right-wing extremist conceptions.

Those who publicly oppose the extreme right must reckon with death threats and could until now expect little protection from the police. The case of trade union secretary Uwe Zabel in Schleswig Holstein became known nationwide. He had sought to warn about the neo-Nazis by publishing his own brochure and was subsequently publicly threatened. As a result, the social democratic state interior minister, Klaus Buss, told Zabel he only had himself to blame, since he had behaved "provocatively" towards the right-wing extremists. Uwe Zabel is not an individual case. It is no wonder, therefore, if in some places small groups of right-wingers act like they control the place.

After a long silence, and the systematic minimising of anti-foreigner attacks, the representatives of government and the establishment parties are trying to outdo one another in demanding that the state act against the extreme right.

Speaking from his holiday residence in Mallorca, Social Democratic Party (SPD) Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder announced that both federal and state governments would proceed harshly against xenophobia: "It calls for severe action by the police, and severe action by the judiciary." Interior Minister Otto Schily wants to deploy the Federal Border Police against the extreme right.

The Christian Democratic opposition announced a draft bill clamping down on the right to demonstrate, and the Bavarian state government has called for the NPD to be banned and for harsher laws dealing with youth crime. Censorship of the Internet is once again up for discussion.

The loudest call for strengthening the state came from the Green Party. Green Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer has adopted the notorious slogan of New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, calling for "zero tolerance". Environment Secretary Trittin announced "the end of liberalism" and was the first cabinet member to demand an NPD ban. "We use the word repression, even if at first it shocks many Greens," was his comment.

Such demands mean that democratic rights and principles fall by the wayside. Moreover, as an antidote to the extreme right they are patently ineffective. No other country possesses so many laws against right-wing extremism as Germany. The display of fascist symbols is forbidden, as is the purchase of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* —even if one seeks a copy out of purely historical interest. But this has proved just as ineffective in preventing an increase in the ranks of neo-fascists as the prohibition of twenty right-wing organizations since 1980. The breeding ground for fascist violence remains untouched by such repressive state measures.

Many statistics point to the connection between increasing xenophobia and social decay. The centres of the neo-Nazi scene are situated in areas where the unemployment rate exceeds 20 percent. But in and of itself, this cannot explain why increasing despair predominantly takes a right-wing form. For that to happen, a public climate is necessary, which means any solution to the crisis based on social solidarity appears hopeless from the start, and self-interest, a dog-eat-dog attitude and nationalism are officially promoted.

All the policies of the present government and its conservative predecessors were directed towards creating such a climate. German reunification took place under the banner of the market, personal enrichment and the rejection of any sort of social responsibility on the part of the state. Since then, one round of welfare cuts has followed the next and millions of jobs have been destroyed. The return of a reunited Germany onto the stage of world politics and the first combat mission by the German army in Kosovo have been accompanied once again by the call for Germany to aggressively pursue its national interests. From there it is no great leap to the slogan of the Nazis, "Proud to be German".

The responsibility of the state for the present situation can be seen most clearly in its attitude towards foreign refugees. When in 1992 hostels for asylum seekers and immigrants burned as a result of fascist attacks, all of the establishment parties reacted by restricting the right to asylum.

The skinheads, who today attack foreigners with baseball bats, are merely translating into their own primitive language the message communicated by the government every day. The inhuman methods with which asylum-seekers are deported back to their homeland—sitting for months in custody pending extradition, robbed of elementary democratic and social rights—have the official blessing of a constitutional state, but are barely to be distinguished from the brutal actions of the extremist right.

The vehemence with which the political establishment and the media have suddenly reacted to right-wing violence has little to do with concern for the fate of foreigners. It is more a case of concern for Germany's international reputation. Reports of anti-Semitic violence and pictures of neo-Nazis marching in front of the Brandenburg Gate are very unwelcome for a government seeking to strengthen the status of Germany as a great power and proclaiming its interests everywhere in the world. Moreover, the recruitment of international computer experts under the so-called Green Card scheme is hindered when such people have to fear for their lives in Germany.

The aggressive reaction to the extreme right shows as well that a development that had been tolerated or even promoted by the state over a long period of time has gotten out of control. The last thing the government wants is the mobilisation of broad social layers against the extreme right, under conditions where it is initiating a new round of welfare cuts under the guise of tax and pension reform.

That is the reason the beefing up of the state is promoted as the only answer in the "fight against the right". If the government really wanted to pull the rug from under the extreme right, it would have to launch an offensive in behalf of their victims, eliminate the pervasive discrimination of foreigners and support a genuine right of asylum. But that is not what it seeks. The government is primarily concerned with defending the state's monopoly of force—not only against the extreme right, but also with an eye to the future opposition of broader social layers.

It is within this context that demands for party prohibitions, restrictions on the right to demonstrate, harsher state censorship and the like must be judged. Such measures are at most only temporarily effective against the extreme right. They create, however, a precedent for the restriction of democratic rights, which on a long-term basis will inevitably be at the expense of broad social layers. The fight against the extreme right thus becomes the mechanism by which the state itself moves further to the right—which ultimately only strengthens the political right.

To effectively fight right-wing violence and the dangers that accompany it, broad social layers must be involved. To this end, the struggle against the right must be linked with the fight against increasing social inequality. Only in such a way can a social climate develop in which today's desperate losers can regain hope and the ground be cut from beneath the extreme right.