

Neo-nazis demonstrate against Wehrmacht exhibition

Anti-fascist demonstrators denounce Berlin police tactics

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Around 3,000 supporters of the neo-fascist NPD (German National Party) marched through the middle of Berlin on Saturday, protected by a force of 4,000 police. The NPD demonstration was organised to protest against the exhibition: *The War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-44*. The exhibition, which opened last week in Berlin, documents the role played by the *Wehrmacht*, or German Army, in Nazi war crimes, and makes clear that many wartime atrocities were not exclusively the work of the fascist *Schutzstaffel* (SS) units, but also involved regular *Wehrmacht* units. Since re-opening two years ago the exhibition has been visited by hundreds of thousands. At the same time, it has been the target for numerous provocations by conservative and extreme rightwing political parties, as well as invoking floods of invective from individual politicians ranging across the political spectrum.

Saturday's NPD march was authorised by the Berlin Interior Minister Ehrhart Körting, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The NPD had announced their intention of marching through the middle of Berlin and, in particular, through the Scheunenviertel, Berlin's traditional Jewish centre. Thousands of anti-fascist demonstrators, as well as members of Berlin's Jewish community, gathered in front of the city's central synagogue in the Oranienburgerstrasse to protest the provocative neo-Nazi march on the *Shabbat*, the traditional Jewish day of prayer.

After the demonstration had taken place, Körting admitted that he had, in fact, organised a secret route for the neo-Fascists some weeks ago.

Thus on Saturday, in keeping with this secret deal

made with Körting, the neo-Nazis did not march directly through the Scheunenviertel, but were allowed to demonstrate barely a mile away along the city's Chauseestrasse and Nordbahnhof. The Nazis carried banners defending the role of the *Wehrmacht* in the Second World War and chanted nationalist slogans. Some slogans were aimed directly against the organiser of the *Wehrmacht* exhibition, Jan Philipp Reemtsma.

At the same time, over 1,300 Berliners visited the *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* exhibition on Saturday to express their own solidarity with its organisers and protest the Nazi march. Many, however, claimed they had considerable difficulty reaching the exhibition because police had blockaded streets and railway stations throughout the city centre.

The huge contingent of police kept the neo-Nazis and anti-fascist counter-demonstrators apart. However, under the impression that the NPD would be marching directly through the Jewish quarter, a large number of demonstrators gathered in front of the central synagogue. After some stones were thrown towards the massed ranks of police and a handful of protestors tried to push through police barricades, the police responded with a brutal assault, spraying the demonstrators—including many peaceful Jewish protesters, elderly people and young families—with water-cannon and tear gas.

Representatives from the Jewish community and some local politicians attempted to intervene and restore order. Prominent Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) member Gregor Gysi called for a de-escalation of the situation. Speaking through a police megaphone, Gysi defended the police, complaining, "The police are being forced to bear the brunt of politically unresolved

problems.” Thirteen anti-fascist demonstrators were arrested in the course of the fray.

As is usually the case with such neo-Nazi demonstrations, the right wing German press, the Berlin interior minister and other prominent politicians blamed left-wing and anarchist demonstrators for the violence. In fact the principle source for the heightened tensions on the day of the march was the Berlin Interior Ministry, which refused to make public its secret deal agreeing an alternative route for the fascist march. It is also well known that the Berlin police regularly use agent provocateurs that mingle with the demonstrators in order to provoke confrontations and create conditions where the police can crack down violently.

At the same time, there is an element of ritual in the neo-Nazis’ protests and demonstrations against the *Wehrmacht* exhibition. They are well aware that their own attempts to whitewash the crimes committed by the German army in the Second World War find a profound resonance in the German political establishment. A number of leading politicians—from rightwing Christian Democrat Alfred Dregger, to former vice-chairman of the Free Democratic Party and ex- *Wehrmacht* officer Erich Mende, as well as former SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt—have spoken out in defence of the “besmirched honour of the *Wehrmacht*”. The current SPD defence minister and his Christian Democratic predecessor have banned members of Germany’s conscript army from participating in “events taking place within the framework of the exhibition”. Capitulating to sustained opposition by politicians and rightwing historians, Jan Philipp Reemtsma consented to close the original exhibition and sacked the historian who had developed it.

What is currently being shown in Berlin is a re-worked and weaker version of the original exhibition. (For an article dealing with the controversial shutting down of the 1995 exhibition see: “The debate in Germany over the crimes of Hitler’s *Wehrmacht*”

Following the latest clashes in Berlin, renewed calls have been made for the banning of the NPD which is currently under investigation in Germany as an “anti-constitutional” organisation. The events in Berlin on Saturday confirm, however, that the problem of neo-Nazism goes much further than the activities of a number of ultra-right parties currently active in Germany, and in fact extends to broad layers of the

political establishment and the police.



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