

Denying the real continuity in German history

Why Social Democrat Ludwig Stiegler has infuriated Germany's Christian Democrats and Liberals

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Germany's conservative parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU), walked out of discussions over planned new German immigration laws with their heads held high. A disputed historical comparison regarding the two parties made by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) parliamentary deputy chairman, Ludwig Stiegler, offered them the welcome pretext for this step.

In the recent controversy concerning the work of state undercover agents in neo-fascist parties, Stiegler accused the conservative opposition of hesitancy in the trial to ban the neo-Nazi German National Party (NPD): "In the CDU/CSU and FDP [Free Democratic Party], whose forerunners helped bring Hitler to power on March 23, 1933, after they had initially played down his significance, historical guilt should give rise to all manner of activities, at least today to resist the initial upsurge [of neo-Nazism]" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 12 February 2002).

Stiegler's words unleashed a howl of indignation from the opposition. The FDP's parliamentary chairman, Wolfgang Gerhardt, spoke out first. Gerhardt said Stiegler had lost control, and that the accusation was a diversion from the shortcomings which had arisen in the trial to ban the NPD. Deputy FDP Chairman Rainer Brüderle called Stiegler's words "obscene insults" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 18 February 2002).

The representatives of the Union parties (CDU/CSU) voiced their own protests. CSU Secretary-General Thomas Goppel said Stiegler's position was untenable "as deputy leader of the SPD parliamentary group" and that "to attribute a particular guilt for National Socialism [Nazism] to the conservatives and liberals" was "historically unsustainable". He said the fact that Stiegler had made his accusations in connection with the trial to ban the NPD "bordered on infamy" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 12 February 2002).

Friedrich Merz (CDU), parliamentary leader of the Union parties, called on his SPD opposite number Peter Struck and Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD) to dissociate themselves "immediately and unambiguously" from Stiegler's statement, threatening that if they did not do so then the CDU would abandon cross-party dialogue over the new immigration law. "We will not allow ourselves to be insulted by a party that is cooperating in the Berlin city administration with former communists, and wants to link us to the Nazis," Merz told *Bild* newspaper (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 12 February 2002). To talk about the Union, the most successful *Volkspartei* (people's parties) in post-war Germany, in such a context is "absurd, disparaging and insulting".

The bourgeois press reacted with similar indignation. The conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine* called Stiegler's comparison "historically dubious" (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 February 2002) and accused Stiegler of "betraying German politics", "politics which, when it

concerns the essence of democracy, have endeavoured for many decades, and not in vain, to meet up to their historical responsibilities." The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* called Stiegler's words an inadmissible "instrumentalisation of the past" and an expression of "civic self hate" (12 February 2002).

Stiegler did receive backing, however, from Peter Struck, the SPD parliamentary group chairman, who stressed that he saw no need to call his vice chairman to order. According to Struck, Stiegler was "right when he said that the conservative parties have a special responsibility to disassociate themselves from extremist right-wing parties" (*Hamburger Abendblatt*, 15 February 2002).

Stiegler defended his disputed comparison. In radio interviews, he said he had given a "historical value judgement", which was why there could be no talk of an apology. Nothing had to be taken away from his statements about the "historical guilt of the conservatives and liberals", he said. According to Stiegler, whoever studies the latest historical research cannot overlook the fact that the bourgeois camp shared a large responsibility for the strengthening, and in the end the bringing to power, of the Nazis; one must resist "the beginnings" of such a movement today. Therefore all democratic parties must concentrate "on the essentials" in the trial to ban the NPD, instead of "carping about procedural errors, which had indeed occurred in the interior ministry". He said the evaluation of the damage caused by the information from undercover agents was "completely exaggerated by the conservatives" (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, 11 February 2002).

The controversy escalated when CDU leader Angela Merkel and her FDP counterpart Guido Westerwelle addressed a joint letter of complaint to Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. In their letter they twisted Stiegler's words to the effect that he was claiming their parties bore joint political responsibility for the seizure of power by Hitler. Merkel requested that Schröder dissociate himself from Stiegler's statement. His assertion was an attack on the honour and history of her party, Merkel said. Stiegler reacted promptly by correctly stating that he had not spoken of the CDU/CSU and FDP, but of their political predecessors.

The Union parties, meanwhile, broadened their stand against the SPD parliamentarian. Thus the Sudeten German Homeland Association withdrew its invitation to Stiegler to attend its conference in mid-February as a guest, following threats by the Bavarian state government and the CDU/CSU parliamentary group not to participate in the meeting (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16 February 02).

Chancellor Schröder and the federal government have so far exhibited only a curious ambivalence in relation to the controversy. While Schröder has refused to respond to the letter from Merkel and Westerwelle, SPD

Secretary-General Franz Muentefering has dissociated himself from Stiegler's statement (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 13 February 2002). The interior ministry has also distanced itself: "No citizen of our country would understand if the new immigration law failed because of such a question," the interior minister's spokesman said. According to the press, Interior Minister Otto Schily made clear his rage over Stiegler's statement (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, 16 February 02). Within the SPD parliamentary group, Stiegler's statement over the guilt of the forerunners of the CDU/CSU and FDP for the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship also encountered disapproval. The faction leadership spoke of being "unhappy", "quite sour" and "irritated" after Stiegler's "unnecessary utterances". Circles close to SPD faction head Peter Struck spoke of "great surprise" at what Stiegler, the parliamentary group vice-chair with responsibility for legal matters, had said (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, 11 February 2002).

The indecisive attitude of the SPD only encouraged the Union parties to launch further attacks. Their parliamentary group leader, Merz, said that as long as Stiegler's accusations were hanging in the air, there could be no basis for discussions with the SPD. In the meantime, like Merz, CSU boss Edmund Stoiber has also called for SPD Chairman Schröder to issue a clarification about Stiegler's assertion regarding the responsibility of the bourgeois parties for the ascent of Hitler. "In the interests of a fair *Bundestag* [federal parliament] election campaign," the CDU/CSU candidate for the chancellorship has requested Schröder issue a "clarification" about this affair. Stiegler's statements gave rise to "personal concerns", Stoiber told the chancellor in a letter. "They were not only historically wrong, but also tarnished the honour of many hundreds of thousands of men and women who had been active inside the CSU since 1945. Among the leading founder members of the CSU were numerous avowed opponents of the Nazis. The struggle against dictatorship, extremism and totalitarianism has always been at the heart of CSU politics, Stoiber said, which is also why Stiegler's utterances were 'infamy'" (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 February 2002).

The agitation that Stiegler's historical comparison has unleashed in the bourgeois political establishment is a clear indication that the most fundamental historical questions are by no means clarified, after even more than 10 years since German reunification.

Without doubt, the Union parties were only looking for a pretext to avoid making a compromise on the immigration question, which they regarded as unfavourable from a tactical electoral standpoint. Nevertheless, the attempt to dismiss the furore unleashed by the opposition following Stiegler's statement by reference to the approaching elections falls far short of the mark. The reaction from the Union and FDP shows that prominent representatives of these parties feel the criticism has found its mark.

Stiegler broke a taboo that is maintained by all parties in Germany: the myth of the year zero. According to this, 1945 was a new democratic beginning, when all the bridges to the Nazis—in terms of personnel, institutions and politics—were broken. Stiegler will not easily be forgiven for breaking this taboo, since Germany is now hoping to get a permanent seat in the UN Security Council and is once again striving to become a great power, sending soldiers to all parts of the world.

A correct evaluation of Stiegler's historical comparison is possible only if its two components are analysed and evaluated independently; firstly, the statement that the forerunners of the CDU/CSU and FDP "helped bring Hitler to power on March 23 1933, after they had initially played down his significance".

A glance at German history confirms the absolute correctness of this assertion. The forerunners of the CDU/CSU and FDP were not only jointly responsible for the social and political crisis that led to the Nazis' electoral successes. After they had made Hitler acceptable to the bourgeoisie and helped him gain the chancellorship, they then also gave

him the absolute authority that he so urgently needed to establish his regime.

In the *Reichstag* elections of March 5, 1933, the NSDAP (Nazi Party) and its nationalist allies had achieved a slender victory. Immediately following the February 27 *Reichstag* fire, which was started by the Nazis themselves, many leading communists were arrested and interned in so-called "illegal" concentration camps. On February 28, under the emergency decrees "to protect the people and state" (to resist communist acts of violence endangering the state) and "against the betrayal of the German people and treasonous activities", fundamental civil rights were suspended "until further notice", as it said in the declaration. From then on, any opposition to the new ruling powers was considered to be high treason, and those found guilty faced draconian punishments. As a consequence, the press organs of the Communist Party (KPD) and Social Democratic Party were also banned. The *Reichstag* mandates of the KPD, which had gained 12.3 percent of the vote despite substantial persecution and its complete failure in the fight against the Nazis, were annulled.

On March 23, 1933, with 441 votes in favour and 94 against (thus receiving the necessary two-thirds majority), parliament passed the so-called "Law to relieve the emergency of the people and *Reich*", the *Reichstag* deputies thus abolishing their own powers. The "Enabling Act" gave the Hitler government the right to issue laws for four years without the agreement of parliament, effectively disempowering *Reichspräsident* Hindenburg. Of those parties represented in the *Reichstag*, only the 91 SPD deputies voted against the Enabling Act. The Catholic *Zentrum* (Centre Party), Bavarian People's Party (BVP) and the remnants of the German State Party (formerly the DDP) voted in favour, and thereby gave Hitler full powers to establish the fascist regime. Finally, the bourgeois parties concluded their political bankruptcy by dissolving themselves under laws pushed through by the Nazi government. In the case of the *Zentrum*, this was achieved through political horse-trading. In the *Reichskonkordat*, which is still valid today, Hitler granted Catholicism extensive political concessions (the collection of church taxes by the state, guaranteeing religious education in state schools, etc.) subsequently initiated by the Pope and Prelate Kaas in Rome.

Even if the CDU/CSU and FDP parties were newly established after the Second World War, in actuality and as the conscious intention of their founding members, they were nevertheless linked to the bourgeois and liberal parties of the Weimar Republic. To disavow their joint responsibility for the seizure of power by the NSDAP denies the crucial extent to which the German middle classes had supported the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship by helping Hitler come to power, because he had promised to free Germany from Bolshevism. At the same time, such a view defends their unscrupulous and criminal policies, which were directed primarily against the organisations of the working class.

However, the SPD and the trade unions also bear a crucial responsibility for Hitler's rise. Their opportunist and anti-democratic policies contributed to the weakening of the working class and played into the hands of the NSDAP.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* recalls the fact that, in the first weeks, the SPD leadership said Hitler's coming to power was "constitutional" and was "based on parliament".

"Of course, the Social Democrats could not know what would come," the paper then says apologetically (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 February 2002).

When the SPD press was proscribed, and as a condition for being allowed to operate again, Goering demanded the "agitation in foreign social-democratic papers" had to stop, the party on March 30, 1933 declared its withdrawal from the Second International. Two weeks later, the leaders of the general trade union federation voted to accept the installation of a Nazi *Reichskommissar* for the trade unions, and only one week thereafter welcomed the introduction of the "holiday of national

labour”.

On May 17, 1933, the SPD, together with the DNVP (Deutschnationale Volkspartei—German National People’s Party) and BVP, approved Hitler’s government declaration on foreign policy. This followed the May 10 book burning and the Nazis’ seizure of all SPD party property, business premises and finances. At the beginning of May, the trade unions had been dissolved; trade union offices were forcibly occupied and leading officials arrested. In leaflets, the SPD said their support for Hitler’s foreign policy did not represent a vote of confidence for Hitler, but was an expression of a peaceful foreign policy. At the same time, in the *Reichstag* SPD Chairman Otto Wels criticised the “exaggerations” in the foreign press about the Nazi terror. On June 19, the members of the SPD executive committee who still remained in Germany voted out its Jewish members. That did not prevent the Hitler government banning the SPD only three days later, shortly afterwards withdrawing its parliamentary mandates in the *Reichstag* as well as in all the state and municipal governments, including civic honorary offices.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* also recalls the fact that it was the SPD under Ebert, Scheidemann and Noske (“someone has to play the bloodhound”), who in collaboration with the *Reichswehr* (Imperial Army) and the notorious *Freikorps* (the forerunner of Hitler’s Brown Shirts) were responsible for the bloody suppression of the November 1918 revolution and the January 1919 Spartakus rebellion, with the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The SPD’s role in aiding the divided ruling class not only prevented the victory of the socialist revolution in Germany, it also contributed crucially to the growth of the extreme right wing in the Weimar Republic.

To be consistent, Stiegler’s historical comparison thus has to include social democracy, although in the case of the SPD it was not a new party formed after the war but the continuation of a party that already existed.

If Stiegler consequently demands “the historical guilt” of these parties “should give rise to all manner of activities, at least today to resist the beginnings [of neo-Nazism]”, then from a principled standpoint one can only agree. However, at the same time he claims—and this marks the limitation of his historical comparison, that the trial to ban the NPD represents a serious attempt to “resist the initial upsurge”—in other words, to effectively combat right-wing extremism.

The views of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board about the court case to ban the NPD have been stated often, but bear repeating:

“The banning of political parties by the capitalist state, even extreme right-wing parties, constitutes a fundamental infringement on democratic rights. The Constitutional Court, whose judges are not elected and thus lack the slightest democratic legitimacy, simply usurp the population’s right to decide which parties they have access to and which they don’t...

“But despite the fact that it is, for the moment, directed against the extreme right wing, an NPD ban would also set the precedent for restricting the political rights of the population and strengthening state authority and control. In the future such bans will be used to criminalize and suppress any opposition to the existing social and political conditions.” [See “German government moves to ban neo-Nazi party”]

The real causes for the strengthening of right-wing extremist tendencies lie in the constant aggravation of social contradictions and the absence of a perspective that provides a serious answer to crucial social problems. In fact the trial to ban the NPD has nothing to do with being part of an attempt to “resist the initial upsurge.” Instead it creates a dangerous precedent for the suppression of democratic rights. The uncovering of a constantly growing number of undercover secret service agents within the NPD gives rise to the suspicion that this was a case of an organisation being built up not only to create a “raison d’être” for the secret service, as critics contend, but with the intention of creating a domestic pretext for the repeal of all democratic rights.

In the first instance, this criticism of Stiegler’s historical comparison

does not diminish its validity. Consciously or unconsciously, Ludwig Stiegler has stuck his finger into the sore spot of bourgeois German historiography. By once again highlighting the historical continuity of political responsibility, he also points to the fact that the basic social contradictions have remained the same since 1933. The class that ruled in politics, economics and military affairs made its own arrangements with Hitler and the NSDAP. The essential structures of society, based on the private ownership of the means of production, remained untouched. Thus after the fall of the Third Reich, the same social forces came to power again that had already delivered Germany to the Nazis in 1933 and which had, in part, even played a leading role in Hitler’s state.

Although the CDU/CSU and FDP were first established after the war, the founding members of these parties quite consciously stood in the traditions of their bourgeois forerunners—the DDP, DVP (Deutsche Volkspartei—People’s Party) and Zentrum/BVP. It was not without reason that CDU leader Merkel and FDP leader Westerwelle distorted Stiegler’s comparison, to imply that the CDU and FDP were directly responsible for the rise of Nazism. They obviously identify their parties with their bourgeois and liberal forerunners. This identification is quite justified, also with regard to the continuity of personnel. For example, following the demise of the Third Reich, several former party leaders of the Weimar Republic were among the prominent founder members of the CDU/CSU and FDP/DVP, some of whom had sat in the *Reichstag* and had personally voted for Hitler’s Enabling Act.

Some prominent West German politicians who were already active in the bourgeois and liberal parties of the Weimar Republic include:

Konrad Adenauer —CDU chairman and the first chancellor of post-war West Germany. Since 1906, he had been a member of the *Zentrum* and in 1933 sat on its national executive committee.

Thomas’s Dehler —a founder and for a time leader of the FDP. Since 1919, he belonged to the DDP and was a founding member of the *Reichsbanner* “Black-Red-Gold”, a right-wing militia founded in 1924.

Theodor Heuss —the first president of West Germany and an FDP member. In 1918 he joined the DDP and was *Reichstag* deputy until 1933, voting for the Enabling Act.

Heinrich Luebke —a CDU member, he succeeded Heuss as president. He sat in the Prussian state legislature for the *Zentrum* from 1931 to 1933. During the war, as a member of an architects and engineers office, he completed defence construction contracts for the Nazis. In 1960, he had to resign prematurely as president because of his Nazi past.

Alois Hundhammer —a joint founder of the CSU who occupied ministerial office in Bavaria several times. He represented the BVP in the Bavarian state parliament.

Reinhold Maier —the first post-war premier of Baden-Wuerttemberg, later leader of the FDP. In the *Reichstag* he justified the agreement of the *Zentrum* parliamentary group to the Enabling Act.

Many high-ranking representatives of the CDU/CSU even belonged to the NSDAP and/or the SS and served the Nazi state. All those listed below also received the Grand Order of Merit with Star, the highest civilian honour in post-war West Germany.

Otto Freiherr von Fricks —an SS *Obersturmfuehrer* during the war, participated in both domestic and foreign forced repatriation operations, in which “unwanted” Poles and Jews were driven from their homes—usually at night—and replaced by those of “pure” German origin. After 1952, Fricks was director of the “federation of refugees” (representing Germans driven out of East European countries following the end of the Second World War), a programme adviser of the NDR state broadcaster and represented the CDU, starting from 1963, in the Lower Saxony state parliament, and from 1969 in the *Bundestag*.

Friedrich Kempfeler —the mayor of Bayreuth in 1938-45, a member of the NSDAP, the Nazis’ transport corps (NSKK) and the SS. He was an SS *Standartenfuehrer* in the Central Reich Security Office. Kempfeler was a

CSU member for many years in the *Bundestag*.

Kurt George Kiesinger —a member of the NSDAP since 1933. From 1940 to 1947 he worked in the foreign ministry, where in 1943-45 he was deputy director of the political department responsible for broadcasting, and was director of Department B, responsible for “general propaganda, coordination of the work of the state departments, relationships with the Reich propaganda ministry” as well as for the pre-censorship of all foreign broadcasts. In 1958, Kiesinger became CDU premier of Baden-Wuerttemberg and in 1966 was chancellor of the CDU-SPD grand coalition government.

Franz Josef Strauss —in 1937 a member of the NSKK, a political adviser for the Nazi *Sturm 23/M 6* in Munich; a member of the Nazi student federation (NSDStB), in 1943 he was a first lieutenant in charge of the headquarters battery and an “officer for military morale” (NSFO) in an anti-aircraft unit in Schongau. After 1949, Strauss sat in the *Bundestag* for the CSU and was a federal minister several times. He dominated the CSU and in 1978 became Bavarian premier.

Rudolf Tesmann —rose in the SS to become *Obersturmbannfuhrer* and regional committee leader of the NSDAP in Spain, he was a contact man to the Nazi party leadership of Martin Bormann. From 1948, he worked in leading positions at the Horten-Konzern and was for many years a leading member the CDU’s economic council.

Siegfried Zoglmann —from 1939 leader of the Hitler Youth in the Nazis’ “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia” and a department head for the *Reichsprotektor*, he was also standard-bearer for the SS “Adolf Hitler” unit. Starting from 1950, Zoglmann was a press spokesman for the FDP regional organisation in North Rhine-Westphalia, where from 1954 he was a member of the state legislature, entering the *Bundestag* in 1957, first for the FDP and then for the CSU.

(Source for the personal records quoted above: Brockhaus encyclopaedia, twentieth updated and revised edition, Mannheim 2001.)



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