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Neo-Nazi Violence in Germany

Recent months have seen an escalation of anti-foreign and antisemitic violence in Germany, particularly in the former East Germany. It was natural that any time when people used Nazi symbols and slogans in post-war Germany, it made more news than when similar or related events occurred in other European countries, and sensitivity to any revival of pro-Nazi feelings and acts was deservedly higher. But these past few months have been different – more serious and going beyond the concerns of Jews.

The recent rash of attacks on foreigners, the newly aggressive tactics of the extreme right "National Democratic Party" (NPD) and the sharply stepped-up neo-Nazi activity on the Internet, has made the issue the principal topic of public debate in the Federal Republic. It has also raised questions about attitudes among ordinary Germans and about their country’s image in the world. At the same time, the intense and continuing public discussion, as well as a series of new initiatives against the extremist fringe, are indicative of a desire to face the problem head-on.

From President Johannes Rau to Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer to regional officials, federal and regional parliaments, civic leaders and especially spokesmen for the Jewish community, the reaction has been one of alarm. The event that had the most dramatic impact was an attack on a group of immigrants in Duesseldorf, among them six Jews, some of whom were injured. The fact that it had occurred in one of West Germany’s major cities and that Jews were among those assaulted, triggered both top level responses and front page headlines that continue to this day.

As a result, there has been a tougher police response and more prompt judicial action against perpetrators. In addition, there has been intense discussion on the following issues:

1. Whether to ban the NPD, which is seen as the organisational and ideological hub of the extremist actions.

2. How to stimulate sustained and effective opposition to the violence and its perpetrators among the general public.
3. How to deal with the misuse of the Internet as a means of both communication among the extremists and as a source of propaganda and strategy.
4. How to come to grips with one, if not the most important underlying cause of the extremist violence: frustration, alienation and a continuing sense of division of the country in the formerly communist-ruled eastern region, from where most of the perpetrators originate and operate.

The first result of the policy of prompt and effective action against violent attackers was the life-sentence for an adult and nine-year sentences for two teenagers who were found guilty of beating an African immigrant to death in the eastern city of Dessau. The authorities hope that this rapid-response policy will help deter would-be neo-Nazi assailants.

On the political side, the NPD is today's most active neo-Nazi party. Though it has only some 6,000 members country-wide, and can reach no more than a couple of percent at the polls for regional parliaments, its new leadership, with the use of current technology, can be far more effective than its numbers or support would suggest. This brought up the idea of outlawing it.

The problem is whether forcing the party and its sympathisers underground would make them harder to combat. Moreover, there is the question even prior to this, of whether legislation to prohibit the party would be approved by the country's Constitutional Court. Should the Court, in the name of freedom of speech and assembly, turn down the proposed law, the NPD could count it a success and exploit the situation. With this in mind, the Schroeder administration has set up a commission to assess the chances of approval by the Court.

As for the response of the public, it has been less prompt and spontaneous than when violent attacks on foreigners and immigrants first occurred in the early nineties. In part this may be due to the fact that the earlier assaults were more massive and cost many lives, but letters to the editor and to civil rights groups, including the Jewish community, suggest a widespread feeling of fatigue about reminders of guilt.

However, many ordinary people have demonstrated in many cities and communities against racial violence. On 9 November 2000, the anniversary of Kristallnacht, 200,000 people marched in Berlin, led by Chancellor Schroeder and President Rau, along with political leaders and celebrities.

Legislation for the protection of citizens who protest the neo-Nazi activity is in preparation. The Federal Government has also established a new agency within the Ministry of Interior known as the "Union for Democracy and Tolerance – Against Extremism and Violence". Its purpose is to coordinate citizen initiatives, exchange experience and information and generally support "Show your Face"-type activity. Prominent people in the arts, in sports and the media have expressed themselves publicly against the violence and the attitudes that produce it.

One of the prime vehicles enabling the small number of NPD activists and neo-Nazis to raise their voices loudly and communicate among themselves and to the public is the Internet. Within the past two years, racist websites have increased from 32 to 350, and much of the material comes from the USA. While Germany can and has outlawed certain categories of racist sites, US law precludes such action under First Amendment protection. Efforts are underway to work out legislative coordination between Europe and America and, in the meantime, to work with publishers to take action against the sale and distribution of hate materials.

Yet when all this is done, deeper questions remain:

- How to deal with the frustrations in the east, resulting in what polls indicate is a 10-20 percent extreme right-wing potential.
- How to address the feelings of many people who are neither extreme nor antisemitic, yet resent reminders and new claims by victims of the Nazis.

On the first issue, there is no shortcut to fundamental change. The east German population has gone through close to 60 years of dictatorship – 12 under the Nazis and 45 under the Communists. It took close to two decades for democracy and remembrance to take root in the west, and this under allied occupation and with western influence. In the east, state control and all that is associated with it, such as the secret police and youth indoctrination, continued for almost half a century after World War Two.

The Communist regime deliberately distorted history, omitting the special nature of the Jewish experience. All responsibility for the crimes of the Nazis was assigned to the west, particularly the west Germans and the "capitalist system", while east Germans were declared "anti-fascists" and clear of guilt – as though the division of Germany had existed under Hitler, with the east Germans as the good people. Ethnic and religious differences were not recognised. All those who were murdered by the Nazis were "anti-fascists", as called for by communist dogma. When schoolchildren were taken to the Buchenwald concentration camp, where thousands of Jews suffered and died, teacher

guides pointed out the place where Ernst Thaelmann, the leader of pre-war Germany's Communist party, was kept.

It is against this background that freedom came to the east at the end of the 1980s. Yet freedom also meant dislocation, and all the wrenching changes that led to massive unemployment, lower wages than those who did the same work earned in the west, a sense of second citizenship and the disorientation of young people who had been regimented in the "Free German Youth" organization of the Communist regime.

The conditions were ripe for finding a scapegoat for all the disappointment, frustration and disorientation. As one writer put it: "The young people were looking for something they couldn't find: their own identity. And so they went on looking and found others – not just others, but those others who looked or were different. They found immigrants, including Jews."

German political and economic leaders expect that time and the accelerating economic development in the "new Laender" of the east will create conditions in which anger and intolerance among the general population will subside, and it will become easier to isolate and curb the violent perpetrators.

In part, however, the issues transcend the east and pose questions for all Germany. There is an uneasiness and a sense of resentment among many Germans who would never commit a violent act, that enough has been paid, that the reminders of what their parents or grandparents had done seem never to end, that foreigners are flooding the country, and that "they" are demanding too much of "us". "They" are by no means all or even in the first place Jews. "They" are immigrants, many of them residents and quite a few citizens and taxpayers. But the image among many Germans is that of Germans and foreigners – a concept that does not fit an immigration country and that Germany, with close to ten percent of people of foreign origin, can no longer afford.

Germany needs a new basis of its identity – of what it means to be German. It can no longer be birth or ancestry, but a set of values that include a recognition of equal rights and responsibilities without regard to race, religion or colour.

Germany represents an opportunity. Public debate has become sustained. Government, educational authorities and a critical mass of private institutions and individuals are facing up to the issues, and there is a growing sense that the country cannot afford to slacken in nurturing the roots of tolerance.

** This report has been adapted for publication by the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation Commission Inc. from a paper prepared by Robert B. Goldmann, European Consultant of the Anti-Defamation League (USA).*