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# Introduction

This study focuses primarily on the activities of German right-wing extremist parties, groups, and individuals since the Berlin Wall's fall in 1989 and the unification of the two Germanys one year later. German scholars, journalists, and government officials have written much on the topic in German, but much less has been published in English. Thus this volume seeks to make a contribution to the literature on a subject matter that remains topical and, no pun intended, explosive. To understand German history since 1990, which has been marked by the end of the Cold War, increasing social inequalities and pockets of poverty, and the pressures of immigration and inter-ethnic tensions, a look back in history, especially to post-1945 divided Germany, is necessary. This post-1945 period was strongly influenced by the policy-makers rejecting the Nazi past but, as will be seen, not by the fledgling right-wing extremist movement, especially in West Germany, that accepted aspects of the Nazi past.

In classifying German rightist parties and groups on a political chart, one must note that they dare not accept the totalitarian features of the Nazi dictatorship. Yet their positions on domestic and foreign policies hardly resemble those that the democratic governments in Bonn and Berlin have espoused. In such a classificatory scheme, the German right-wing extremist movement represents a more virulent form of right populism, which is a political movement that appeals to the common man but that has hardly been successful in post-unification Germany.<sup>1</sup> This extremism has always been of concern for the country's policy-makers and to many of its citizens – and also to foreign observers. In light of the disastrous Third Reich era (1933–45), such individuals worry about a comparatively small but shrill right-extremist movement that has not fully rejected the Nazi past and that does not believe in a pluralist society, democracy, and individual human rights. Such a movement, whose policies are backed on occasion by centrist politicians, has increasingly shed its political inhibitions and has espoused a nationalist position, not unlike that of some of its European neighbors or even, to a lesser extent, Germany's democratic parties.

From 1949 on, four years after the Nazi state collapse, new right-extremist parties and groups operated openly to challenge the programs and policies of the newly formed mainstream parties of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). In the postwar German Democratic Republic (GDR) small rightist groups, alienated by a communist system that did not respond to their concerns, also formed. Since the two Germanys' unification in 1990 the small right-extremist parties have not fared well in most national and Länder (state) elections, and neo-Nazi groups and skinheads have increasingly taken the non-party political route. They intermittently assault, injure, and kill those individuals seen as "other," who are primarily the permanently settled foreigners and political asylum-seekers coming from the Third World or from the less developed Eastern European countries, but who may also be German leftists, the handicapped, the homeless, and the Gypsies. The anti-Semitic neo-Nazis and skinheads also desecrate synagogues and Jewish cemeteries.

Some observers fear that in the future the country's democratic political system, especially in eastern Germany, may face increasing rightist challenges or that governmental policy-makers may incorporate even more of the rightist planks, such as a tightening of immigration, into the democratic parties' political agenda. These observers also worry that a charismatic leader heading a right populist movement might arise some day to challenge the country's democratic system, with unknown consequences. This might happen if the major parties remain clustered in the middle of the political spectrum and provide, as the New Social Movement theorists call it, a "political opportunity space" to the right populists. The latter's incendiary populist messages may one day get a positive response from dissatisfied citizens who are already opting out as members of the democratic parties, and who feel that these parties are not offering meaningful policy alternatives to pressing economic and social problems, which have been exacerbated by the major worldwide recession engulfing most states in 2008 and 2009.<sup>2</sup> If Germany's economic situation fails to improve and tumbles into a serious depression, will right-extremist parties and groups reap dividends from a surge in protest and anger among those negatively affected? Could this mean that there will be a repetition of Weimar when the government could not cope with mass unemployment and major social dislocations, resulting in the rise of Nazism?

I address in this volume the question of the German democratic system's strengths and weaknesses, and its ability to appreciably reduce the potential sectarian threat from the right of the political spectrum. What strategies should the government, the public and private sectors, and citizens adopt to minimize the threat? If there is a congruence of views between mainstream and right-extremist Germans, how much support for rightist views exists among the centrist elite and the ordinary Germans? Do the rightist views originate in the middle of the political spectrum and spread to the right-extremist scene or vice-versa? Are there significant differences, especially in the number of violent acts, between western and eastern Germany?

Is German right extremism more dangerous to the survival of the German democratic state than rightist forces in other European democracies? Does the post-1990 violence in Germany parallel the Nazi violence leading up to the Weimar Republic's demise in 1933? Does the current violence represent a transitory phenomenon or is it a consequence of embedded structures in society? Are there parallels between the electoral support received by rightist parties in the Weimar era and in the Federal Republic, which could endanger the present democratic system in Germany? Or, on the contrary, is the Bonn Republic and its successor the Berlin Republic not comparable to Weimar, as the path-breaking book by Fritz René Allemann suggested in 1956?<sup>3</sup>

In order to answer these questions in terms of the post-1990 unified Federal Republic, which is the focus of this volume, Chapter 1 defines right extremism, assesses its causes, and examines the impact it has on German society and politics. Chapter 2 looks briefly at the pre-1945 historical antecedents of right-wing extremist parties and groups, and then examines their development in West and East Germany from 1945 to 1990. The chapters that follow deal more extensively with rightist developments in united Germany from 1990 to the present. Chapter 3 covers the numerous right-extremist parties that have not been able to coalesce. Some of them grew and declined in power, others have maintained longevity. Chapter 4 assesses the strength of neo-Nazi groups and xenophobic skinheads, chronicles the rightist public demonstrations, and examines the periodic violence against foreigners, leftists, the homeless, and other groups. Chapter 5 surveys the tactics of rightist parties and groups in recruiting more members and followers. The parties and groups have developed their own media, a publishing industry, and internet websites. They have also staged rock concerts. Chapter 6 considers the controversial writings of New Right academics and journalists who, especially in the 1990s, have put new accents on the legacy of Germany's past but who distance themselves from right extremism. Chapter 7 assesses the responses to the rightist threat by the courts, the police, the government, democratic political parties, trade unions, churches, and the public. The concluding chapter provides an overview and assessment of the German right-extremist scene in the past, present, and, speculatively, the future. It will seek to answer the question of whether Germany can maintain its democratic system in the face of a major recession that began in 2008 and that could slide into another Great Depression. If the answer is yes, the central thesis of this book that the Berlin Republic is not Weimar can be answered satisfactorily.

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