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ETHNIC CLEANSING IN GERMANY

by Martin A. Lee

In a scene starkly reminiscent of the Hitler era, hundreds of neo-Nazi militants stormed a refugee hostel in the Baltic seaport of Rostock in late August, terrorizing Vietnamese guest workers and their families with molotov cocktails, bricks and bats. As the housing complex went up in flames, local residents cheered and sang "Deutschland, Deutschland uber alles."

Even more disturbing than the latest wave of Nazi riots is the German government's ambiguous response to the epidemic of hate crimes that has swept the country. When order was finally restored in Rostock, city officials disclosed that they had learned of plans for a well-coordinated Nazi attack nearly a week before the violence began. They passed the information to the German Interior Ministry, but federal officials did not take any preventive measures. Instead, Interior Minister Rudolf Seiters demanded the immediate repeal of the German constitutional guarantee of asylum for political refugees.

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of immigrants from wartorn Yugoslavia and economically ravaged Eastern Europe have flocked to Germany, where they are frequently the target of racist vilification. According to statistics issued by the German government, there were 2368 Nazi assaults--mainly against foreigners--in 1991, resulting in thirteen deaths and hundreds of injuries. The violence reached such an appalling level that the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution declared the situation was "out of control."

Neo-Nazi attacks have escalated to the point where, for the first time since World War II, foreigners have fled Germany to safe havens in other European countries. A British High Court judge recently halted deportation proceedings that would have sent a Sudanese asylum-seeker back to Germany, where he had been repeatedly brutalized. Dozens of similar cases are being considered in the Netherlands.

Last year the German Interior Ministry ordered the deportation of 269 Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. Under tightened regulations, Jews from Eastern Europe will only be allowed to live in Germany if they have relatives already residing in the country--a policy that amounts to a morbid joke

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given that most German Jews were exterminated by Hitler.

Many of those who persist in seeking asylum in Germany are subjected to degrading procedures that harken back to the racist practices of the Third Reich. For example, new rules in some German states require non-European-Community and non-U.S. citizens who are applying for residency to have their nose and skull size measured. Immigration questionnaires specifically ask what type of nose a person has. A German nose is considered to be a "normal" nose, while the "abnormal" nose shapes of people from other ethnic backgrounds are coded accordingly. The policy of coding noses was approved by the German Interior Ministry.

These days top German officials speak blithely of "Middle Germany" when describing what until recently had been East Germany. Listed in the official German budget--which also refers explicitly to "Middle Germany"--are government funds earmarked for Vertriebenen groups that seek to repatriate Germany's so-called Eastern Territories, including Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia, Silesia, Pomerania, Prussia, and other alleged German enclaves.

Deputy Interior Minister Eduard Lintner, a leading member of Chancellor Helmut Kohl's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), is himself a key figure within the Sudeten German Landsmannschaft, a right-wing extremist group founded by SS officers at the end of World War II. Lintner's organization advocates German expansion into neighboring Czechoslovakia.

Why is the German government underwriting groups that demand a return to the bloated borders of 1939? The answer, in a word, is politics. German economic hegemony is already an established fact in Eastern Europe, but this apparently is not enough to satisfy many of the CDU's erstwhile political supporters, who are casting their ballots in increasing numbers for neofascist parties such as the Republikaners.

In an effort to stop the mass defection of CDU voters, Chancellor Kohl has played the nationalist card--a tricky business in Germany under the best of circumstances. In so doing, Kohl inadvertently bestowed a kind of legitimacy upon neo-Nazis and other right-wing extremists, who had long been vegetating on the margins of German politics.

Purporting to be more-nationalist-than-thou, far right demagogues have seized the political initiative in Germany and other parts of Europe, successfully using the issue of foreigners as a campaign strategy. In response to a nakedly racist agenda set by mass-based, neofascist parties, mainstream politicians including Chancellor Kohl (who has been described by author Gunter Grass as a "white collar skinhead") have jumped on the anti-immigrant bandwagon, adopting the jargon and scapegoat tactics of the far right and inciting an atmosphere of hatred.

against non-Germans. The Christian Democrats recently entered into negotiations with the Republikaners in an effort to form regional governing coalitions.

Commenting on Germany's rapid goose-step to the right, Graeme Atkinson, a special investigator for the European Parliament's commission on racism and xenophobia, was not optimistic: "That country is sitting on a time bomb."

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Martin A. Lee, co-founder of FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting), is writing a book on the neofascist resurgence in Europe.