

Europe's Grand Parties in a Vise. . .

By JOSEF JOFFE

MUNICH—If the European Parliamentary elections don't matter, why is everybody so upset?

Margaret Thatcher, the British prime minister, conceded "disappointment" (pol-speak for "disaster"), and Helmut Kohl, her West German counterpart, simply declared a "heavy defeat" for his conservative party. French President Francois Mitterrand, a Socialist, normally does not descend from his Olympian perch to proclaim on such mundane matters as ballot counts, but he, too, hardly can be amused by the victory of the center-right list, led by former president and rival Valery Giscard d'Estaing.

Some governments have lost to the right (France, West Germany), others have lost to the left (Britain, Italy). There is a pattern in here nonetheless. With few exceptions (the Netherlands, Belgium), the watchword has been: Whoever is in power, gets clobbered.

Shift Toward Extremes

The balloting for the European Parliament has obeyed a classic rule of American mid-term elections: Hit the incumbents. In West Germany, the ruling Christian Democrats suffered a bloodletting of eight percentage points. Mrs. Thatcher has lost 13 seats out of 45 to Labor—along with her aura of invincibility. In Italy, the opposition Communists are back in business after a five-year eclipse. In France, Mr. Mitterrand's Socialists were outpolled by Mr. Giscard's center-right even though the center-right had been mauled by Mr. Mitterrand in the 1988 presidential elections.

Yet the most disturbing in all this is that Europe's political landscape is shifting toward the extremes of the right and the left. In Ireland, the left-wing Labor Party and the even more leftist Worker's Party made hay at the expense of the two establishment parties. In Italy, the Greens came from nowhere to pick up five of the country's 81 seats in the Strasbourg parliament while the Communists, having halted their decline, were quick to declare themselves the moral victors of the contest.

In Belgium, Greens and ultra-nationalists sliced into the possessions of the establishmentarian Christian Democrats and Socialists; in France—the country of untrammelled nuclear power, double-creme and unfiltered Gauloise cigarettes—the Greens went from zero to nine seats while the extreme right-wingers, the National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen, seemingly on the way out before, took 10 mandates. Together, the French Greens and the Le Pen xenophobes took in 23% of the total vote, suggesting that almost a quarter of the French population is ready to opt for radical politics.

Nowhere has the message of discontent

rung more loudly than in West Germany, heretofore Europe's steel-and-concrete beacon of "stability ueber alles." The beating inflicted on Chancellor Kohl (eight percentage points less than during the previous European elections) did not boost the opposition Social Democrats; they, too, lost (one point). The Greens stayed about where they were (8.4%), and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher's Liberals picked up less than one point. The big winner (from zero to 7.1%) was a certain Franz Schoenhuber, formerly a noncommissioned officer in the Waffen-SS and today leader of an extreme-right party that goes by the misnomer "Republicans." That 7.1% is the largest nation-wide take by any extreme-right party in the 40-year-history of the Federal Republic.

In Bavaria, West Germany's high-tech wonderland, the Republikaner scored a

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staggering 15%; in some precincts of boomtown Munich the neo-right surpassed the 20% mark, pushing the Social Democrats off their No. 2 perch.

Why—after 40 years of ultra-stable democratic development in West Germany during which the small radical parties disappeared one by one? We are not witnessing a simple re-enactment of the Weimar Republic when the Nazis floated to power on a rising tide of economic misery and social deprivation. There is no comparison with the 1920s when a young World War I veteran might have joined Hitler's storm troopers for three meals a day and a shiny pair of jackboots. Today, West Germans are individually and collectively among the three or four richest nations in the world; even the unemployed live like kings when compared with the down-and-out in Liverpool or in the South Bronx.

So what has Herr Schoenhuber been selling to make his Republicans the hottest item in German politics? Unlike the Nazis, the "Reps" have no coherent program; instead they are pushing a grab bag of resentment, envy and anti-Western nationalism. In part, this is a message that sells just as well in France and Belgium. His target is "foreigners"—not just Turkish guest workers without whom German industry would grind to a halt. Animosity is also being whipped up against ethnic Germans (yes, members of the German race) who are streaming into the country from the Soviet Union and Poland at the rate of

400,000 this year—allegedly pushing aside "real" Germans in line for jobs, housing and pensions.

Although Mr. Schoenhuber disclaims anti-semitism, he portrays the Central Council of Jews in Germany as the "fifth occupying power." Although he proclaims a liking for NATO, "Russia is nearer to us than America," not just geographically but also "spiritually," and hence "our fatherland" must have a "positive relationship with Russia."

It is codewords and a message that, alas, not only the German right savors. There is the ancient myth of Germany-the-victim (we are "too good to be cannon fodder"); there are well-worn attacks on the U.S. mass media that is accused of a "smear campaign" against Germany; there is the call for "comradeship and tradition" which is a familiar battle cry against the free market and modernity; there is the call to arms against the rest of the world that seeks to oppress Germany by shackling it to the past. And thus, "German history must be decriminalized."

Influence of "1992"

Mr. Schoenhuber indignantly turns aside all comparisons with the Nazis. But the "Republican" message is just coded enough to have breached a 40-year-old wall that used to keep the traditional neo-Nazis locked up beyond the pale of respectability. It isn't just yesteryear's brownshirts but their grandchildren who are flocking to the cause: policemen, petty bureaucrats, peasants and workers. The Reps have racked up their largest pluralities in predominantly blue-collar precincts—among people who were traditionally drawn to the Social Democrats and who now feel threatened.

Some resent the permissiveness of German society and hanker for law and order; others fear the stiffening winds of competition blowing in from the Single European Market. Some, lacking skills, resent the high-tech company next door; others hate Turks and German ethnics who allegedly rob them of scarce jobs.

It is a motley bag of motives, but they will not dwindle. As "1992" becomes reality, protected markets will crumble even more quickly, cross-migration and competition will accelerate, and resentments will soar—throughout Europe. Last week's European elections and the swings to the left and the right are but a taste of things to come. The established parties which have managed the great success story of post-war Europe have been bloodied—and worse: They have no idea how to stop the hemorrhage.

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