

The People Have Messages for Thugs and Bonn

By Josef Joffe 9. 12. 92

MUNICH — Munich is justly famous for Fasching and the Oktoberfest, festivities that celebrate the city's enormous capacity for making and slaking beer. Munich is also famous for the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 when Adolf Hitler tried a bit too soon to grab the power that would be his for the taking in 1933. Last Sunday the city decided to open a different chapter in its 800-year history.

In the twilight of a December afternoon, some 350,000 citizens began taking to the streets. They did not bring posters or prepared speeches, but candles, lanterns and flashlights. They did not obey orders from the left, the unions or the churches — from the usual suspects in the business of demonstrating goodness. This time the good burghers of Munich had invited themselves, so to speak.

They wanted to make a loud point by lighting candles in silence. Each of the 350,000 wanted to tell Hitler's great-grandchildren, those bald-headed boys in their motorcycle boots, that the candles shall prevail against the fire bombs, that xenophobia, Nazism and anti-Semitism are out. This was not a bad time to make the point. The statistics for 1992 tell of 18,000 right-wing and racist incidents in the third year after reunification of the fatherland, 70 percent more than in 1991. These "incidents" cover a large spectrum: Sieg-Heiling in public (legally verboten), unfurling Nazi flags (ditto), smearing swastikas on Jewish gravestones, beating up foreigners, throwing firebombs, and stomping asylum-seekers to death. Subtracting the more symbolic expressions of volkish sentiment still yields a fearful crop: some 2,000 actual assaults, and 17 dead.

Lining 40 kilometers of city streets, those 350,000 Munichers actually had two messages. One, of course, was addressed to the young storm troopers whose ideology consists of one part "Mein Kampf," one part beer and one part

citizens show up to say "no," then cowardice will tell. And that's O.K. Politics is not psychiatry, and whatever the "root causes," the issue is more simple than the priests of sociobabble pretend. Society lives off its taboos, and when these break down, as they did last summer, society can reaffirm their potency by going into the streets.

Before Munich, similar demonstrations had taken place all over Germany. Lo, we already have the polls to underscore the point. Just two sets of figures: The percentage of Germans rejecting the right-wing slogan "Foreigners Out" has suddenly risen from 43 to 69. And, more apropos: The percentage of Germans professing to "understand right-wing radical tendencies because of the foreigner problem" has plummeted from 33 to 12.

This will surely change the electoral assumptions of the center-right government in Bonn, which for months refused to mobilize its considerable repressive powers against the would-be storm troopers. When three Turks were murdered in late November, the machinery honed in a two-decade war against left-wing terror suddenly sprang into action. The two confessed killers were caught within the week.

The moral of the story (so far, at least) is as illuminating as those 350,000 lights of Oktoberfest City. Munich '92 is not Munich '23, and Bonn is not Weimar. This time there is no cynical populace like the one that shrugged or cheered as the shock armies of the extremes proceeded to destroy Germany's first democracy.

By taking to the streets, as in Munich, the silent majority ever so politely told the government that there is no electoral profit in a strategy that steals the thunder of the extreme right. This time the German center seems to hold.

The writer, editorial page editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, contributed this comment to the *International Herald Tribune*.

gasoline. The message: "There are many more of us than of you, and you can't count on swimming like fish in the water. What you have to sell, we, the people, won't buy. Some of us may worry about too many foreigners coming in too fast (there have been 450,000 asylum-seekers, and 250,000 refugees from ex-Yugoslavia this year), but we are not going to accept this as a pretext for arson and murder. This is not 1932."

The second message was directed to the powers that be. It read more or less like this: "When the violence against foreigners first broke out in

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Rostock last summer, all of us were taken by surprise, and so we might forgive you for having reacted like the Keystone Kops. Today, some thousands of incidents later, you no longer have an excuse. And if you have any doubts about where the majority stands, just come and count us."

Maybe strolling out into the streets on a crisp Sunday afternoon isn't much of a statement. And if the good citizens of Munich had only fielded 50,000, the swastika-bearing skinheads might have celebrated their very own Oktoberfest in December. But one-third of Germany's third-largest city? That will surely change the electoral calculus of the politicians who have been nervously eyeing the right end of the spectrum, and the "market analysis" of the Nazi punks.

First of all, none of the latter dared show his unshaven head during the candlelight vigil — which tells us something about their character and the nature of "civic deterrence." If enough