

# Why 1992 is different from 1932

**E**ighteen thousand racist and rightist incidents in Germany, an increase of 70 percent from 1991, have left 16 people dead this year—a grim crop, and 1992 is not even over.

Germany in 1992 is a tense and eerie country—light-years away, it seems, from the placid place that used to look like Switzerland writ large. But make no mistake. It is also light-years away from Germany, 1932, when the Weimar Republic, in December, had only six weeks to live before it collapsed at Hitler's feet.

The good news first: Most Germans are just as sickened by the violence as worried Germany watchers in Tel Aviv and Chicago. The papers are brimming with somber editorials and ads inveighing against xenophobia and antisemitism. There are manifestoes and rallies, appeals by church and civic leaders—and a government that has finally awakened to the threat from the neo-Nazis.

The good news is also that these murderous punks do not a movement make (yet). They have no *führer* and no ideology; "Mein Kampf" to them is a clean-shaven head and a pair of studded motorcycle boots. Their music is closer to Ice-T than to the Nazis' "Horst Wessel Lied"; their "program" is emptying a six-pack of beer and replacing the swill with gasoline. If there were an election today, the extreme-right parties would barely make it into parliament.

The bad news exploded two weeks ago in the north German town of Mölln, the legendary home of Till Eulenspiegel, medieval prankster extraordinaire.

Not only were three Turks burned to death but the arsonists' fire also consumed two comfortable homilies about the New Germany.

One was that violence against foreigners was an "Officer Krupke" problem, to be handled by dedicated social workers, as in "West Side Story." The "root causes" were poverty and hopelessness, a "lost generation" in eastern Germany where jobs and order vanished along with the Berlin Wall. The solution: Restore growth, and civility will return.

But Mölln, a cozy Brothers Grimm locale, is in western Germany and in part of the larger Hamburg region that is now booming, thanks to reunification. Mölln is more like Kennebunkport than south-central Los Angeles.

The second verity to go up in flames was the "King Canute Corollary." According to that assumption, the victims were to blame—the flood of 450,000 asylum seekers who, lured by easy, constitutionally mandated entry, have flooded into Germany this year. That was just too much

for a nation that still defines citizenship in terms of bloodline and "Germanitude." (In order to become a German citizen, it is better to have a German shepherd in the family than a Ph.D. in German literature.)

So, this bit of sociowisdom went, once the immigrant tide was turned back by constitutional amendment, the skinheads and their cheerleaders in Germany's Archie Bunker milieu would run out of targets and all good Germans would go back to watching soccer on TV.

**Wrong again.** The triple murder in Mölln claimed the lives not of recently arrived Gypsies or Lebanese, but of

Turks, members of an old community of "guest workers" who have added to Germany's GNP—and its tax base—for 30-odd years. The desecrated Jewish graves have been around much longer.

If it is neither Germany's liberal asylum law nor poverty in the east, what is causing the acrid smell of 1932? Boredom? Racism? The spiritual void of late capitalism? Liberal permissiveness? The breakdown of the family?

Maybe all of the above; ask your neighborhood sociologist. Luckily, there may be a simpler answer: Lugging a gas can to the next immigrant shelter was all too easy in the summer and fall of 1992, and the reward was not prison but breathless TV coverage.

The triple murder in Mölln was—at last—a three-alarm political fire. A vast apparatus of police and prosecutors, reminiscent of the FBI's southward swoop in the 1960s when Mississippi was burning, finally cranked into motion. And lo, the two arsonists,

one a *sieg heiling* kid of 19, were tracked down within a week. The moral of the story, though not yet a happy ending, is that a determined government plus good police work can contain the neo-Nazi fringe.

This is the critical difference between 1932 and 1992. Then, the Weimar government was beset by near anarchy, abandoned by a cynical populace and blindsided daily by shock troops of the right and the left. Today, the violence is disorganized, almost private and no match for law-enforcement machinery honed in a 20-year battle against left-wing terrorism. Hitler's great-grandchildren have no support system and no sanctuary.

That is the best news of '92. The bad news is that the junior storm troopers will not run out of targets. To 450,000 asylum seekers add 250,000 refugees from ex-Yugoslavia, an influx that dwarfs that of any other European nation. Germany can change its laws but not its geography. It is Ellis Island minus the Atlantic. Just take the autobahn. ■



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