

Neo-Nazis the only winners on Hitler's 105th birthday

Memories of the Second World War cannot simply be wiped out for the sake of international harmony, says **Josef Joffe**

TO borrow from Shakespeare's Juliet: What's in a date? Too much when it comes to Germany and football. England will not play against Germany in the Berlin Olympic Stadium this month because the date is wrong: 20 April happens to be the birthday of Adolf Hitler, who would have turned 105 this year.

Too much respect for the most hateful character of 20th-century history? Quite the opposite: the motive for the cancellation was fear – and cowardice on the part of the German host, the German Football Federation (DFB). Rumours had been swirling for months that German neo-Nazis would make the match a fitting tribute to the Führer, complete with baseball bats, bottles and mayhem.

That English football functionaries, still trying to live down the fearsome reputation of their fans, chose discretion over valour is understandable. After all, English clubs were banned from UEFA Cup games for several years after the massacre triggered by British hooligans in Brussels' Heysel Stadium in 1985.

But why did their German counterparts retreat? Clearly they were not too unhappy with the British bow-out. Indeed, they had signalled to their English comrades that cancellation would be met with grateful understanding. Former national coach Franz Beckenbauer had this to say: "No football game is worth riots and bloodshed."

True enough, but the answer does not tell the full story. Almost 50 years after the demise of the Third Reich, Germans are looking at their past with renewed jitters. One reason is the resurgence of Nazis, young and old. The old ones are busily "reconstructing" the past in obscure but proliferating publications. The Holocaust? It never happened. The gas chambers? They never existed.

The young punks, would-be storm-troopers with bald pates and black jackets, eschew history books in favour of petrol cans and baseball bats. The spectacular firebombings of immigrant hostels have abated, but hardly a day goes by without random violence against foreigners or attacks on Jewish institutions.

And there are those dates which keep dragging history forward to haunt the present. Instead of simply being ignored, Hitler's birthday on 20 April occasioned the first instance of appeasement in football history. Instead of deterring the punks with a display of police power, which would have been easy, the Berlin authorities imitated Chamberlain in Munich in 1938, thus bestowing an enormous victory to Germany's neo-Nazis.

Another date – the 50th anniversary of D-Day – has haunted the Germans in a different way. On 6 June, 15 leaders of the wartime coalition against Nazi Germany will convene in Normandy to celebrate old comradeship and commemorate the huge toll the invasion took.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl asked discreetly for an invitation – and was just as discreetly rebuffed. As *Le Monde* put it: "It is hard to imagine François Mitterrand and the English queen celebrating the 180th anniversary of the battle of Waterloo next year." Indeed, how can victors and losers celebrate one and the same event?

Kohl should have let that cup pass him by, understandable though his attempt at party-crashing may have been. In the company of Clinton, Major and Mitterrand would have been a fine occasion, he thought, to lay the past to rest. It would have been a demonstration of reconciliation – and more: of the light years that liberal, democratic Germany has put between itself and the Nazi horrors.

He failed to see, however, that memories do not fade so fast. Kohl should have been the first to know. On the



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Bully boys and girls: almost 50 years after the fall of the Third Reich, Germans have renewed jitters about their past

occasion of the 40th D-Day anniversary in 1984, he said: "For a German chancellor there is nothing to celebrate when others commemorate their victory in a battle, in which tens of thousands of Germans met a frightful death."

When memories clash, reconciliation suffers. And apparently time does not help, as *Le Monde* so delicately noted. If 180 years are not enough to forget Napoleon in favour of the Franco-British alliance since 1939, how will Europe forget the Second World War, which the British historian John Keegan called the "largest event in human history"?

Many Germans, of course, would like to shelve that past. Increasing majorities of those polled keep saying that "the time has come to draw a line under the past". Unfortunately the past is an unruly guest who refuses to slink away.

The past does not even need a particular date or anniversary to intrude on the present. Sometimes a product made in faraway Hollywood explodes forgetfulness and repression like a cleverly

hidden bomb. *Schindler's List* opened in Germany in March and the reverberations are still travelling through the tectonics of Germany's collective psyche.

Why? The Spielberg movie did what the *Holocaust* TV series did 16 years ago: it compressed the anonymous annihilation of six million Jews into the story of flesh and blood characters with whom viewers could identify. The impact was 100 times more powerful than countless books and documentaries.

The movie, based on the life of Oskar Schindler, exploded the strongest post-totalitarian myth: that individuals were unable to help in the face of an omnipotent machinery of repression. Schindler, *bon vivant* and profiteer, was neither noble nor good in the conventional sense. Yet this skirt-chasing drunkard saved a thousand Jews from the SS.

On the Right, even in a paper like *Welt am Sonntag*, the response was furious and vicious. One movie critic, Will Tremper, thought that the Jews of the Cracow ghetto, on whose testimony

the book *Schindler's List* was based, "had overdramatised their suffering". He opined that the liquidation of the ghetto could not have been such a "blood-thirsty" affair. The SS just did their duty.

The good news is that these attacks remain confined to the fringes, while young people continue to flock to the cinemas. The good news is also that the extreme Right continues to languish in the polls. If there were an election, the mislabelled Republicaners would garner no more than three per cent of the vote – too little to jump the five per cent hurdle for representation in parliament.

Mark the next and biggest date of them all in your calendar: 8 May 1995, the 50th anniversary of Germany's capitulation in the Second World War. Maybe Kohl will be lucky and lose the national elections slated for 16 October. Then some other chancellor will have to confront a past that will not pass away.

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