

# **RETURN TO WEIMAR: WHY EXTREME RIGHT-WING PARTIES THRIVE DURING FALTERING ECONOMIC TIMES**

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Given the economic malaise of the Eurozone, speculation over whether Greece will exit or not takes full stage over the more insidious impacts of such crises. Looking around Europe, right-wing extremism is on the ascendancy against a backdrop of anger, resentment and finger pointing over who is at fault. As a result, xenophobic if not outright neo-Nazi activity is now prevalent in countries victimized by the original version several decades earlier. Since we have been there before, the issue now arises whether we recognize and give pause to the implications of future economic decisions on the people. Unless it addresses the sentiment on the street, history teaches us that charismatic people waiting in the wings have a ready list of scapegoats to bear this brunt instead.

In Greece for example, the violent Golden Dawn group of youths is hardly an anachronism when 20% of the electorate voted for sympathetic or even like-minded parties during the last election.<sup>1</sup> As if Germany's newer generations had not already tired of the stereotype stigmatizing their parents and grandparents, we now have youths performing recreations of 'Kristalnacht' on shop windows.<sup>2</sup> What makes this era different however is the street battles between skinheads and Muslim Salafist extremists on German streets; a unique scenario where each needs the other in order to get violence out in the open.<sup>3</sup>

Even in places where the older generations fought against Hitler there are groups espousing intolerance. In Poland, 'Blood and Honor' maintains a blacklist that we assume will someday serve a purpose once implemented. In Poznan recently, police turned a blind eye while 'All Polish Youth' descended upon a public

demonstration of gays and lesbians.<sup>4</sup> Russia as well boasts strong representation of skinheads while the older generation knows well the public rants of Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a long-established, nationalist political fixture there.

In France, perennial right-wing ultra-nationalist candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen beams with fatherly pride as his daughter Marine carries on the name, picking up 18% of the vote in the first round of national elections.<sup>5</sup> Similar results were reported in elections in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands with such gains also expected for Austria and Finland. While not historically neo-Nazi, we have to ask ourselves whether Spain and Portugal will explore their own legacy of Fascism by resurrecting the ghosts of Franco and Salazar?<sup>6</sup>

For most, this backlash could be dismissed as a coping mechanism; one that allows Europe's disenfranchised and under-employed 20 to 30 year-old males<sup>7</sup> to 'let off steam.' The truth is 15-20% voter sentiment across Europe spells out anything but 'youthful misadventure.' Instead people are dying. If Anders Breivik's 69 victims in Norway<sup>8</sup> influences copycat killings in Toulouse, France,<sup>9</sup> where would Europe be if others copied the 'Hungarian Arrows' example by firebombing homes belonging to Hungary's politicians and ministers?<sup>10</sup>

A disclaimer then is in order before proceeding. Examining a problem neither excuses nor condones such violent repercussions. While the notion of blame is a natural discourse for national political pundits or the family gathering, it is who ultimately pays where the fabric of societal order and social peace becomes undermined. *If there is high unemployment, resentment of foreigners and mistrust of pooled national sovereignty within the European Union, is violence really the natural outcome that links all of this together?*<sup>11</sup>

*Apparently yes and here's why.* When the civil service receives pay and benefits, it is paid for right off the top or directly from the pay stub of the average worker. When trade unions strike, the whole economy suffers until wage or benefit demands are met. These critical services are monopolized meaning that trade unions or the civil services are able to force the rates up for everyone else. In turn this decreases the ability of everyone else to maintain a predictable standard of living. When there is pressure on personal consumption from both the front and the back ends, who out there represents the rest? In regards to austerity, the

answer is no one. *The reason is because politicians who gave in repeatedly to such interests are already tainted by their inability to address the problem.*

Put another way, not everyone is a trade unionist or a civil servant. Many families earn marginally lower incomes since competition by foreign guest workers force competitive wages down. While not everyone can be stereotyped into this lower economic or social mobility threshold,<sup>12</sup> the elites too have aided their nationalist backlashes in the past in order to compete for power.

This issue of voice and expression or its inability to do so by a majority of people becomes a repeat of the past – in this case a return to Weimar. What doomed democratic Germany in 1919 was that ordinary citizens were forced to pay an onerous form of post-war restitution to the point where massive inflation and high unemployment obliterated any hope for a normal existence.<sup>13</sup> The loss of family members due to war aside, the parallel between Weimar and the problems of the Eurozone are that people are forced to clean up the mistakes of others for a party they were not invited to attend to begin with. In other words, what is the likelihood that most of the families of these skinheads either coerced a pay increase or received an EU subsidy that impacted them favorably? Violence therefore was planted by the seed of frustration much earlier in their lives. As opposed to the older generations, they intend to exact the respect denied to their elders - even if they have to beat it out of people to get it.

What made Weimar was the causality of monarchic, militarist and industrial interests losing the war and the short-sighted outside interests exacting revenge . As a result, reparations not only destroyed the currency but the lack of payment led to foreign military occupation of the Ruhr industrial belt.<sup>14</sup> How is today any different? In Greece it has been layoffs, the talk of selling sovereign islands, receiving dictats from foreign leaders and the prospect of leaving a currency as a rejection of austerity. To paraphrase diplomatic historian E.H. Carr's summation of what led to the Second World War, 'elegant superstructures' like the League of Nations 'must wait until some progress has been made in digging the foundations.'<sup>15</sup> If the premise of the EU is solidarity and weathering the storm, what good can come from a situation where voters' 'sending a message' leads to no EU-friendly politician staying around to receive it?

While someone must ultimately pay, the measures needed to get there are not always pleasant. For economists, what happens afterwards is the domain for the other social sciences. In other words, this fusion of economics, public policy and public sentiment often leads to unintended consequences of which Weimar offers a prime example.

What led Hitler to power was not necessarily his leadership of the majority party but the freedom of interpretation regarding the emergency powers (Article 48) given to him under the Weimar constitution. According to Article 48, the civil service and the Army were consolidated under the President to combat any assaults on the state.<sup>16</sup> For Hitler it was the 1933 Reichstag fire that consolidated his power. If a right-wing political party today has a 40% simple majority over two of the other major parties they are fully in control. If we are seeing right-wing extremists with 15-20% across-the-board election results, are they not already halfway there?

Who then is to say that a similar emergency or crisis won't be carried out by a civil service and military loyal to the ideals of preserving national sovereignty and integrity? The answer is they always will. Regardless of whether the interpretation is by an ultra-nationalist, right-wing politician, the emergency will not be opposed if civil servants and officers want to keep their title or their rank. If not, the rank and file of the party stands ready to insert their own into the civil service or in the case of the military elevating junior, more energetic officers.

It is extreme economic crises that breathe life into right-wing nationalist political power. As if bad economic times doesn't already play into their hands, a national emergency is what truly consolidates their power. Anyone who thinks that foreigners cannot instigate a large-scale, national crisis today has never heard of 9-11. Despite the fact that it occurred over a decade ago, the impact on flying to the United States has left its indelible mark.<sup>17</sup> One can only guess what a European country would do in a similar situation. This much is clear: in the event the neo-Nazis regain power in Europe, we will all be able to identify each other. Everybody in the camp gets to wear a badge that identifies our offense to the state be it trade union affiliation, political party, ethnicity, religion or orientation.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Kounalaki, X. (2012). "Threats against Journalists: The Aggressive Tactics of the Greek Right-Wing." Spiegel Online: International [online], 3 May 2012, [Accessed 17 May 2012] <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/a-greek-journalist-recounts-being-threatened-by-right-wing-extremists-a-831218.html>

<sup>2</sup> Dick, W. (2012). "Neo-Nazi attacks on the rise in western Germany." DW [online], 23 May 2012, [Accessed 17 May 2012] <http://www.dw.de/dw/article/0,,15905231,00.html>

<sup>3</sup> Hans, B. and Jüttner, J. (2012). "Similar in the Extreme: How Right-Wing Extremists and Islamists Are the Same." Spiegel Online: International [online], 9 May 2012, [Accessed 17 May 2012] <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-similarities-between-right-wing-extremists-and-islamists-a-832294.html>

<sup>4</sup> DW. (2012). "Right-Wing Extremism in Poland Gathers Momentum." DW [online], n.d., [Accessed 17 May 2012] [http://www.dw.de/dw/article/0,,1921525\\_page\\_0,00.html](http://www.dw.de/dw/article/0,,1921525_page_0,00.html)

<sup>5</sup> LeDuc, S. (2012). "Le Pen shocks France as far right hits historic heights." France 24 [online], 23 Apr 2012, [Accessed 17 May 2012] <http://www.france24.com/en/20120423-france-marine-le-pen-national-front-nicolas-sarkozy-francois-hollande-election>

<sup>6</sup> Lulko, L. (2012). "Fascists Launch the Offensive Against the European Union." Pravda.ru [online], 12 May 2012, [Accessed 17 May 2012] [http://english.pravda.ru/world/europe/12-05-2012/121093-fascists\\_european\\_union-0/](http://english.pravda.ru/world/europe/12-05-2012/121093-fascists_european_union-0/)

<sup>7</sup> Goodwin, M. (2011). "Right Response: Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism in Europe." Chatham House Report [Available online], September 2011, [Accessed 17 May 2012]

[http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/r0911\\_goodwin.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/r0911_goodwin.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Friedrichsen, G. (2012). "Anders Breivik's World: How Sick is Norway's Mass Murderer?" Spiegel Online: International [online], 24 Apr 2012, [Accessed 17 May 2012] <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/was-anders-breivik-s-killing-spree-spurred-by-intent-or-insanity-a-829145.html>

<sup>9</sup> Wright, S., Andrews, E. and Allen, P. (2012). "'There's a monster on the loose': Sarkozy's warning as it's revealed Toulouse serial killer could have filmed horrific murders using camera recommended by Breivik." Mail Online [UK Daily Mail][online], 19 Mar 2012, [Accessed 17 May 2012] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2117014/Toulouse-shooting-Nicolas-Sarkozy-warns-theres-monster-loose.html>

<sup>10</sup> OSAC. (2012). "Hungary 2012 Crime and Safety Report." U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Diplomatic Security [online], [Accessed 17 May 2012] <https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportPDF.aspx?cid=12021>

<sup>11</sup> German-Foreign-Policy.com. (2011). "Europe Adrift (I)." [online], 21 Dec 2011, [Accessed 17 May 2012] <http://www.german-foreign-policy.com/en/fulltext/57984>

<sup>12</sup> Goodwin, M. (2011).

<sup>13</sup> Mazower, M. (2000). "Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century." Vintage Books: New York.

<sup>14</sup> Reinhardt, K. (1986). "Germany 2000 Years: The Second Empire and the Weimar Republic (Revised Edition Volume II)." Ungar: New York.

<sup>15</sup> Carr, E.H. (2001). "The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939." Perennial: New York (Reprinted from Original 1939 Work).

<sup>16</sup> Schmitt, C. (1996). "The Concept of the Political." University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

<sup>17</sup> Lustick, I. (2006). "Trapped in the War on Terror." University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia.