

Sixty-two years after the Nazi pogrom of 1938

Two hundred thousand demonstrate in Berlin against neo-Nazi terror

By Stefan Steinberg
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Over 200,000 turned out in a Berlin demonstration on November 9 to declare their opposition to the activities of neo-Nazi radicals, responsible for thousands of brutal racist attacks and over a hundred deaths since German reunification. The demonstration was attended by people from all walks of life, including pensioners who had personally experienced the horrors of Nazism and entire school classes eager to demonstrate their repugnance for fascism and racism.

Anti-Nazi demonstrations attended by thousands of people also took place in a number of other German cities, including Mainz, Münster; Schwerin, Rostock, Stuttgart, Dresden and in a number of cities in the Ruhr area. In the north German town of Bremerhaven, where extreme right-wing radicals are particularly active, 20,000 took part in a human chain protest.

November 9 is an historic day in Germany. It marks the sixty-second anniversary of the night when the Nazis burnt hundreds of synagogues and smashed Jewish shops, setting in motion the chain of events that finally led to the Holocaust. The date also marks the eleventh anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The November revolution of 1918 also erupted on the same date.

The Berlin demonstration was instigated by the Social Democratic-Green Party coalition government, which has conducted a propaganda campaign against right-wing violence since the summer. The main concern of the government has been the damage done to German business interests abroad by neo-Nazi activities and the fear that the escalation in violence was politically destabilising the country. At the centre of its campaign has been the strengthening of the state security forces and the demand for a ban on the

neo-fascist National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). But under conditions where public hostility towards the increasingly brutal activities of skinheads and fascist groups was becoming more and more apparent, the SPD-Green coalition called for a demonstration under the slogan: "We are standing up for humanity and tolerance".

All of the main German parties fell in line to support the demonstration. Amongst the signatories were politicians notorious for their xenophobic and nationalist views, like Bavarian Minister President Edmund Stoiber and the head of the Christian Democrat parliamentary faction, Friedrich Merz. There were also some notable exceptions, including the notorious right-wing CDU interior minister for the state of Brandenburg, ex-general Jorg Schönbohm, who declared that he would be boycotting the protest. A number of prominent artists, television personalities and sport stars also gave their support to the rally and took part in the demonstration.

For weeks the organisers had predicted that between 30,000 and 35,000 people would take part in the Berlin demonstration. In the event, more than six times as many turned out. The initially predicted attendance of 30,000 had already been reached as a huge crowd assembled in front of the main Jewish synagogue in Berlin, where a protest march began to Berlin's Brandenburg Gate. Because of the large attendance at the outset and blocked streets, security officials and bodyguards had difficulty escorting leading members of the German government and establishment along the march.

The huge turnout was not a sign of confidence in the policies of the government and politicians heading the

demonstration. Rather most people turned out despite their hostility to the way in which Germany's leading parties, including the governing SPD-Green Party coalition, have themselves been encouraging xenophobia and the destruction of social gains.

Despite the obvious attempts by the rally organisers to dampen the political content of the demonstration, the reaction of many of those attending revealed a healthy distrust of the government's motives, with some participants carrying banners openly criticising the anti-immigrant policies of SPD Interior Minister Otto Schily. A brief statement to the crowd by SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was greeted largely by silence and the appearance on a video screen of the leader of the right-wing CSU party, Edmund Stoiber, precipitated a chorus of cat-calls and booing from the audience.

Stoiber and his party have a reputation for repressive activities against foreign workers and asylum-seekers in the state of Bavaria. Together with CDU/CSU fraction chief Friedrich Merz, Stoiber has played a leading role in the recent campaign that non-Germans living in Germany should recognise and subordinate themselves to a so-called "German guiding culture". This has now become the official line of the CDU/CSU.

Just two speakers were officially allowed to address the rally: Johannes Rau, the president of Germany, and Paul Spiegel, the president of the Central Jewish Council. Apart from brief solidarity statements from political and entertainment figures, no other parties were allowed to speak. A ban was also declared on political organisations setting up stands at the rally.

President Rau (SPD) won polite applause for his condemnation of neo-Nazi terror. He then used his speech to attempt to draw a distinction between patriotism and nationalism, arguing mystifyingly that the two were mutually exclusive.

In contrast to Rau, Jewish Council President Spiegel was rewarded with enthusiastic applause from the crowd when he broke the consensus not to criticise those present on the platform and openly attacked the CDU and CSU for initiating a debate over a "German guiding culture". He said: "After the attacks on synagogues in Düsseldorf and Berlin, what is the use of condemning anti-Semitism with well-intentioned speeches in a special session of the German parliament,

when the next day politicians choose words which can be misunderstood? What is all this talk about a 'guiding culture'? Does a guiding German culture include hunting down foreigners, setting synagogues alight, killing homeless people?"

Spiegel also condemned the incendiary speeches of those who decide between "useful and non-useful foreigners"—a reference to statements by Bavarian Interior Minister Beckstein understood by all those present.

While the audience was intensely applauding, the face of CDU leader Angela Merkel, sitting behind Spiegel, visibly winced. The enthusiastic response to Spiegel's speech indicated a well of opposition to the cynical attempt by the government and opposition to pose as consequent opponents of racism.

In a series of discussions with this reporter participants at the rally not only expressed their dismay and anger at the activities of the neo-Nazis in Germany but also declared their opposition to the current debate over a "guiding culture".

Some participants at the rally reported that they had thought twice about attending, not wishing in any way to give their support to the current government. In the event, their hostility to the extreme right overcame their misgivings about government policy.

One young man from Canada at the rally was planning to travel to the Auschwitz concentration camp the following day and then visit the home of his former family in Poland, many members of which suffered at the hands of the Nazis. He recalled that Hitler was constitutionally brought to power in Germany and expressed his scepticism about plans by the German government to ban the neo-fascist NPD party.

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