Politics & Policy

Germans Should Review the Lessons o Weimar

Today's far-right agitation is nothing like the nightmare of the early 1930s, but the silent majority still needs to mobilize.

By Leonid Bershidsky
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Anti-Nazi music festivals aren't enough. *Photographer: Matthias Rietschel/Getty Images*

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German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas made an impassioned call to his compatriots to "show our faces" against a rise in right-wing extremism. The plea is a stark warning that Germany should guard against succumbing to the kind of boiled-frog effect that ended up killing the Weimar Republic in the 1930s. There is some justification for the alarmism.

Maas, a member of the Social Democratic Party, or SPD, became the German right's favorite hate figure as justice minister in Chancellor Angela Merkel's government. His wake-up call, in an interview with Bild am Sonntag, was in response to an outbreak last week of far-right violence in the eastern city of Chemnitz after the knifing of a local citizen, allegedly by Middle Eastern immigrants. The city was briefly overrun by a neo-Nazi mob, and later, anti-immigrant demonstrations attracted a bigger crowd than the counter-demonstration.

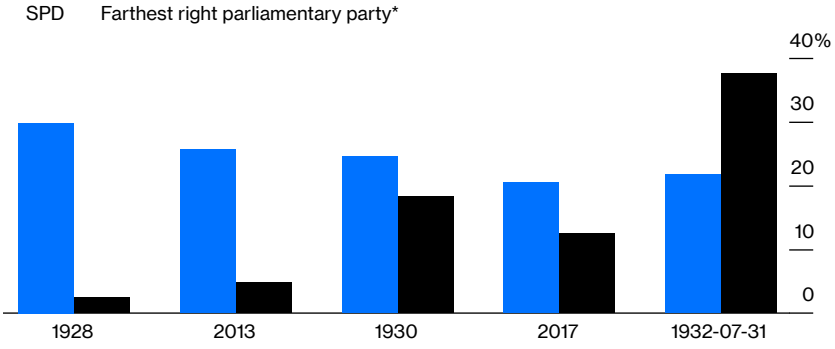
Maas said:

> My generation received freedom, the rule of law and democracy as gifts. We didn't have to fight for them and we sometimes take them for granted. A complacency has unfortunately spread in our society that we must overcome. That means we must get up off the sofa and open our mouths. The years of a discursive waking coma must end. Our democracy is what we make of it.

The minister's appeal to the "silent majority" to "finally get louder" is rooted in history. In his book about the Weimar Republic, the historian Ulrich Kluge wrote that the Nazi party, the NSDAP, "grew thanks to the factor of a 'silent majority' that kept mum," even as the far right, which started with scant public backing, built itself into a force incrementally, through localized violent action.

Maas's party is perhaps best positioned to warn against complacency. Although the SPD was a clear winner of the 1928 election, its support melted as the NSDAP's grew. Within four years, the Nazis were the biggest parliamentary party.

A Weimar Replay?
Share of the vote won by the Social Democrats and the farthest right parliamentary party in Germany



Source: Bundestag
* NSDAP in 1928-1932, AfD in 2013-2017

There's a worrying parallel today: The anti-immigrant Alternative fuer Deutschland party, or AfD, is ahead of the SPD in the most recent INSA poll.

The AfD, of course, stops short of open neo-Nazism; in Chemnitz, it distanced itself from the violence, even though some of its legislators helped incite the riot through social networks. But the party is generally at pains to reject any parallels between itself and the NSDAP. Still, comparisons are inevitable, if only because both parties share a distinction as the parliamentary political force that is farthest to the right.

There are other parallels. Last year, Heidrun Debora Kaemper of the German Language Institute in Mannheim found linguistic and stylistic similarities between NSDAP program documents from the 1920s and the AfD manifesto from 2016. Davide Cantoni, Felix Hagemeister and Mark Westcott of the University of Munich found in 2017 that the AfD's best recent electoral results occurred in the same municipalities where the NSDAP got the most support during the Weimar Republic. They theorized that the AfD's switch to nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric from its early focus

on euroskepticism "activated" historically persistent attitudes in these areas.

Could it be that Germany is sliding down the same slope today as during the Weimar Republic, only more slowly?

It's easy to reject this theory by noting that the situation looks far more dire for the SPD than for German politics as a whole. In the Weimar years, the SPD was Germany's biggest political force. The Center Party, the historic predecessor of Merkel's Christian Democratic Union and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, won 12 percent of the vote in 1928 and 12.5 percent in July 1932. Now, however, the CDU/CSU is the strongest player in German politics, even though its support is at a post-World War II low. In addition, the German political system is far more stable than before the Nazis came to power. Coalition-building may not be much easier, but governments don't fall as often.

In the Weimar era, the Nazis won much of their influence through confrontations with an equally violent anti-democratic force, the Communists. Today's German left is decidedly less radical, which reduces the possibility of nationwide armed clashes and overreach by the government in response. During Weimar, the political violence led to an erosion of democracy and the strengthening of executive powers, which Hitler then completed.

Finally, the 1932 Nazi victory came on the heels of a global economic crisis that hit Germany after the onset of the Great Depression in the U.S. The German economy crashed for the second time in little more than a decade, destroying trust in the ability of centrist parties to maintain living standards. In 1932, a third of the German workforce was estimated to be jobless (though the official number was lower). Today, unemployment is at record lows, and the economy is booming. Short of a crash, it's difficult to imagine the AfD could overtake CDU/CSU, no matter how worried Germans might be about immigration and related social problems.

None of this means, however, that Maas is wrong when he calls on the majority of Germans to take a more convincing stand against the far right. One reason that's necessary is that, when it comes to Germany, the outside world tends to to lean toward the worst historical parallels. Years of repentance and rebuilding haven't erased the Nazi-era memories. Germany has to run just to stay in place, to maintain the reputation it has won; incidents like Chemnitz set it back.

Events like Monday's anti-Nazi concert in Chemnitz, attended by 65,000 people, don't quite cut it, because they look more like parties than protests. It's important both for the government and for peaceful Germans to ensure that the far right doesn't feel it owns the street, even in traditional strongholds like Saxony, the state where Chemnitz is located. Maas's worry that something might be going wrong with Germany's democracy may be premature, but his call to pay attention isn't.

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