

# Terror from the Right: Revolutionary Terrorism and the Failure of the Weimar Republic

Brian E. Crim

Volume 27, Number 2, Winter 2007

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs27\\_2art04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs27_2art04)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Crim, B. E. (2007). Terror from the Right:: Revolutionary Terrorism and the Failure of the Weimar Republic. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 27(2), 51–63.

Article abstract

*The First World War damaged the European psyche, and physically and mentally maimed a whole generation of European men fortunate enough to survive the maelstrom. Nowhere was this more apparent than in post-war and Weimar Germany. For some young German veterans, the war never ended; they simply brought it home to continue the fight in the chaotic streets of the new republic. They revelled in the experience of violence, which they directed against their enemies, real and imagined. Between 1919 and 1923, dozens of loosely organized groups embarked on a campaign of revolutionary terrorism designed to spark a civil war and unite the disparate elements of the German Right behind the goal of creating an authoritarian state. After the failure of the Hitler Putsch in November 1923, the extreme Right altered its tactics and developed sophisticated political organizations capable of competing for influence in the government it once worked to destroy. While the Weimar Republic weathered multiple attempts to bring it down through violence, it was overcome by a combination of internal events and the misguided attempt by the mainstream conservatives to co-opt the Nazis. Assassinations and other terrorist acts alone did not destroy the Weimar Republic, but those responsible for such acts conducted a protracted, multi-faceted effort to undermine its legitimacy. The extreme Right's early campaign of violence destabilized the Weimar government and both intimidated and enthralled the German people. The Nazis deployed revolutionary terrorism in their political struggle and delivered the death blow to the Weimar Republic.*

**Terror from the Right:  
Revolutionary Terrorism and  
the Failure of the Weimar Republic**

by  
*Brian E. Crim*

**ABSTRACT**

*The First World War damaged the European psyche and physically and mentally maimed a whole generation of European men fortunate enough to survive the maelstrom. Nowhere was this more apparent than in post-war and Weimar Germany. For some young German veterans, the war never ended; they simply brought it home to continue the fight in the chaotic streets of the new republic. They revelled in the experience of violence, which they directed against their enemies, real and imagined. Between 1919 and 1923, dozens of loosely organized groups embarked on a campaign of revolutionary terrorism designed to spark a civil war and unite the disparate elements of the German Right behind the goal of creating an authoritarian state. After the failure of the Hitler Putsch in November 1923, the extreme Right altered its tactics and developed sophisticated political organizations capable of competing for influence in the government it once worked to destroy. While the Weimar Republic weathered multiple attempts to bring it down through violence, it was overcome by a combination of internal events and the misguided attempt by the mainstream conservatives to co-opt the Nazis. Assassinations and other terrorist acts alone did not destroy the Weimar Republic, but those responsible for such acts conducted a protracted, multi-faceted effort to undermine its legitimacy. The extreme Right's early campaign of violence destabilized the Weimar government and both intimidated and enthralled the German people. The Nazis deployed revolutionary terrorism in their political struggle and delivered the death blow to the Weimar Republic.*

People told us that the War was over. That made us laugh. We ourselves are the War. Its flame burns strongly in us. It envelops our whole being and fascinates us with the enticing urge to destroy. We obeyed . . . and marched onto the battlefields of the postwar world just as we had gone into battle on the Western Front: singing, reckless and filled with the joy of adventure as we marched to the attack; silent, deadly, remorseless in battle.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The First World War began with an act of terrorism. The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Gavrilo Princip, a young member of the secretive Bosnian Serb organization known as *Mlada Bosna* (Young Bosnia) which was linked to another – the Black Hand – sparked a series of events that helped plunge Europe’s great powers into a total war. Few contemporary observers realized just how devastating the conflict would be. In fact, most soldiers and statesmen who cheered the declarations of war in Europe’s capitals in August 1914 fully expected to be home by Christmas. This optimism was soon extinguished and Europe dug in for four years of a bloody war of attrition. The war damaged the European psyche and physically and mentally maimed a whole generation of European men fortunate enough to survive the maelstrom. Historian Michael Geyer interpreted the First World War as a “rupture in civility,” an event marking the opening shots in an extraordinarily violent twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

One of the war’s many legacies was the concept of industrialized killing. Millions of men were subjected to systematic extermination at the hands of machine warfare. Troops were dispatched to the front in trains where they were unloaded and quickly eliminated by machine guns, poison gas, and the constant barrage of artillery fire. The trenches acted as mass graves and those who survived the ordeal had no objection to subjecting others to the very process they survived. Historian Omer Bartov originated this concept and carried the analogy to its logical conclusion when writing that “the images of violence and fantasies of destruction that became so prevalent during the interwar period were directly related to the reality and trauma of the front experience of 1914-1918. It was these fantasies that played such a major role in the enactment of genocide two decades later.”<sup>3</sup> However, before some veterans and their followers engaged in the ultimate state terrorism in the form of genocide, they first took to the streets in Germany and waged a relentless and brutal war of terror against a host of perceived enemies.

Competing with the sentimental pacifism of Erich Maria Remarque and his *All Quiet on the Western Front* were a flood of memoirs and war fiction from veterans who gloried in the experience of total war and found in it something liberating. Ernst Jünger, a right-wing luminary and hardened veteran, declared the triumph of the “new men, the running battle-tested men who are ruthless to themselves and others.” Junger continued,

This war is not the end but the prelude to violence. It is the forge in which the new world will be hammered into new borders and communities. New forms want to be filled with blood, and power will be wielded with a hard fist. The war is a great school, and the new man will bear our stamp. . . . The festival is about to begin, and we are its princes.<sup>4</sup>

The “princes” were radicalized veterans convinced of their moral, physical, and racial superiority. Jünger and others armed those veterans with a nihilistic philosophy brimming with revolutionary implications. All that was needed was the will to act.

Men like Jünger and Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz provided the literary voice for what some commentators in the early 1920s called the “White Terror.” Thousands of right-wing radicals involved in the campaign of political violence during the first years of the Weimar Republic sought the destruction of the first German democracy and the conquest of portions of Eastern Europe in the months and years after the First World War. Heinz was part of a wave of returning veterans and radicalized young men who responded to the total collapse of imperial Germany by organizing themselves and committing violent acts. Between 1919 and 1923, dozens of loosely organized groups embarked on a campaign of revolutionary terrorism designed to spark a civil war and unite the disparate elements of the German Right behind the goal of creating an authoritarian state. After the failure of the Hitler *Putsch* in November 1923, the movement altered its tactics and developed sophisticated political organizations capable of competing for influence in the government it once worked to destroy.

The most successful group to adapt to the post-1923 environment was the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP), which we know as the Nazi Party. The NSDAP, which eventually co-opted most of the groups responsible for the terrorism campaign of the early 1920s, brought down the Weimar Republic from within. Among the NSDAP’s tactics were low-level street violence, mass-media propaganda, and seeking patronage from respectable figures and organizations. Like many terrorist organizations in recent history, the NSDAP began as a movement committed to terrorism before evolving into a semi-legitimate political organization.

Historians of political violence during the interwar period and terrorism scholars should benefit from each other’s research and theoretical frameworks. Despite the inherent difficulties in defining terrorism, there can be little doubt that the postwar actions of veteran and paramilitary groups were examples of terrorism. The definition of revolutionary terrorism posited by Martha Crenshaw Hutchinson best applies to the right-wing extremists active in interwar Germany. The definition includes four major features: first, terrorism is part of a revolutionary strategy used to seize political power from an existing government; second, terrorism is manifested in acts of socially and politically unacceptable violence; third, the targets of the violence are symbolic; and finally, the actors intend terrorism to create a psychological effect on the population and alter its political behavior and attitudes.<sup>5</sup> Dozens of right-wing groups and parties followed these precepts during various stages of their pursuit of power. Gradually, as the NSDAP engineered unions by force and bribery, and evolved into the *de facto* leader of the extreme Right in Germany, the party mixed revolutionary terrorism

with modern political methods. However, without the systematic weakening of the Weimar state through constant violence, the NSDAP probably would not have defeated its rivals, let alone capitalized on the final death throes of the government to gain power.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that the NSDAP assumed power legally should not diminish the fact that revolutionary terrorism during the first years of the Weimar Republic created favorable conditions for the party's eventual success. This article will demonstrate the ways in which right-wing extremists in interwar Germany behaved as domestic terrorists by examining the origins of their extremism, the leading personalities and organizations involved in terrorism, their guiding philosophy, the tactics they used, and the targets they slated for destruction. One will immediately identify similarities between the rise of the NSDAP and other organizations that began in the realm of revolutionary terrorists, although the implications for the NSDAP's success were more consequential. Most recently, *Hamas* scored a stunning political victory in the Occupied Territories. Both a terrorist organization and a sophisticated political party, *Hamas* uses terror as a tool against its stated enemy (Israel) and for the propaganda value among its own people. The NSDAP distinguished itself among dozens of similar organizations by harnessing the simple urge to destroy and integrating it into a well-articulated program. The NSDAP never abandoned political violence because it undermined confidence in the Weimar government by exposing its inability to provide law and order.

### **Right-Wing Terrorism**

In November 1918, the German emperor abdicated the throne in the face of military collapse and revolution at home while the mainstream German Social Democratic party (SPD) and German communists, known as the "Spartacists," engaged in a violent struggle to determine who would fill the vacuum. It was during this chaotic environment that the *Freikorps* (Free Corps) were born. Returning soldiers, many of whom were enraged at the uprisings in Germany, organized themselves around usually younger officers and sought to defend Germany's borders from a possible invasion by the Russian and Polish communists and to restore law and order at home. The *Freikorps* were private armies numbering between two hundred and four hundred thousand that received assistance from the SPD-dominated Weimar government formed in January 1919. The feeble new government feared the communists and relied on the *Freikorps* to prevent further revolutionary activity. The *Freikorps* despised the SPD but appreciated the veil of legitimacy provided by the Weimar government. Under the guise of restoring order, they committed multiple atrocities against suspected communists and others on the Left throughout Germany and during their military adventures in Eastern Europe. After being dissolved in 1920, the remnants of the *Freikorps* turned against the very government that had supported them. It was the breeding ground for the decade of revolutionary terrorism that preceded the

Third Reich.<sup>7</sup> Not only was the *Freikorps* one of the first venues in which young veterans were exposed to racial anti-Semitism, many of the leading figures in the Third Reich served in the *Freikorps* in some capacity.<sup>8</sup>

The catch-all enemies of the extreme Right in interwar Germany were the collective forces of “international Jewry.” Beginning in the late nineteenth century, a handful of European academics and followers of growing pseudo-sciences, such as eugenics, popularized notions of race among broad segments of the population. Writers like Paul Lagarde and Houston Stuart Chamberlain delineated the special genius and creativity of the “Aryan” race while denigrating Jews as racially inferior and threatening to non-Jews. Race was conceived of as a historical force that was determined by biology. Conversion, assimilation, or any other form of integration into the nation could not change the fact that Jews were inherently dangerous to non-Jews. Fearing the effects of rapid industrialization, increasing democratization, and social dislocation, many Germans embraced racial anti-Semitism as a simple answer to a complex phenomenon. It was not until the First World War, however, that this minority sentiment increased in intensity and popularity.<sup>9</sup>

One reason for the spike in anti-Semitism, especially in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, was the widespread belief among veterans that Germany was “stabbed in the back” by left-wing revolutionaries at home while the German army was bravely fighting on two fronts. This myth was propagated by national heroes like Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, although he never directly stated that Jews were to blame.<sup>10</sup> Those already predisposed to attack Jews made the infamous “stab-in-the-back” charge their rallying cry. According to the logic of the extreme Right, it was not German military incompetence, exhaustion, starvation, or disease that were to blame for Germany’s crushing defeat – it was international Jewry, personified by rampaging Bolsheviks in the East and manipulative capitalists in the West. German Jews could not be trusted since their loyalty must be somewhere other than Germany. Faced with such irrationality, Jews and democratic forces on the Left were vulnerable to the well-organized campaign of domestic terrorism perpetrated by a host of paramilitary organizations with some government support.

*Freikorps* proclamations, advertisements, and situation reports emanating from the newly formed units are riddled with references to the dangers that “Jewish-international sentiment” posed to the general population and to soldiers in particular.<sup>11</sup> Fueled by fear and rage at the sudden loss of conquered territory in the East and spectacular rumors of an imminent Bolshevik invasion, the *Freikorps* went on a rampage across neighboring Poland and the Baltic States. The legacy of these campaigns – and a chilling preview of the Holocaust – was that Jewish populations in central Europe suffered the majority of the atrocities committed by the *Freikorps* in the interwar period. Few original *Freikorps* records survived the Second World War but those that did include several anec-

dotes concerning violence against Jews. *Freikorps* memoirs are even more explicit in singling out Jews as a hated enemy.

The *Freikorps* operated in an atmosphere of lawlessness and casual violence that easily translated into domestic terrorism inside the fledgling Weimar Republic. A diary entry from a *Freikorps* captain stationed in Silesia recounted what happened when a local Jew asked to see him. "Although I avoid meeting Jews, I let him in to hear what he wanted from me," the captain wrote. "And there he stood and made a suggestion to me as an old Prussian officer!!! – I should sell him a machine gun, which he would then give to the Poles. My answer was the only correct one. An extremely forceful blow from my horse whip over his crooked nose! Then my men came in and beat him half dead and took the 1000 marks he brought to buy the machine gun." The entry stated that the Jew was then brought before the rest of the unit where he received further beatings, enough "so that he would have to spend six weeks in a hospital to recover his health."<sup>12</sup>

Attacking Jews was a symbolic act on the part of the extremists. *Freikorps* advertisements and internal communications suggest that they used the fact that some well-known German communists were Jews to galvanize public support and attract new members.<sup>13</sup> Riddled with references to communists and revolutionaries, the *Freikorps* papers implied that the German Jewish population was synonymous with treason and Germany's destruction. This propaganda fueled the rage of those elements of the movement already predisposed toward regarding Jews as natural enemies of the German people. For the *Freikorps* and their successor organizations, the war at home was to be conducted with the same brutality that characterized their campaigns in Eastern Europe. The first wave of assassinations by the German Right targeted leading communist figures with Jewish backgrounds, like Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Kurt Eisner.

In January 1919, Luxemburg and Liebknecht helped create the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) with the goal of participating in the Weimar Republic. Some communists, however, chose a revolutionary path, and the *Freikorps* were called in to crush disturbances in Berlin. Both Luxemburg and Liebknecht were captured and murdered. Luxemburg was beaten to death with rifle butts and thrown into a river, and Liebknecht was shot in the back of the head. These murders sparked an orgy of violence perpetrated by the *Freikorps* against suspected communists and socialists. Several corps members stood trial and were convicted for the Luxemburg-Liebknecht murders, but they received extremely light sentences. The German judicial system was notoriously biased toward right-wing forces from the inception of the Weimar Republic. The defense lawyers argued successfully that the Free Corps members acted out of fear because they were involved in a chaotic situation.<sup>14</sup> The defense also invoked the evils of Bolshevism and noted that the defendants had a legitimate claim when they testified that beating an unarmed woman to death was a logical response to com-

munism.<sup>15</sup> The court exonerated the defendants by handing down laughable sentences and openly celebrating the deaths of those high-profile communists.

The Luxemburg-Liebknecht murders were planned, and many more followed. The commanding officer of *Freikorps* defendant Otto Runge told him during a jail visit, “You are an honorable man, you have carried out the orders well, you are a hero to the whole world, and you have performed a good deed.”<sup>16</sup> There should be no doubt that the *Freikorps* had a license to murder from their own officers and, by extension, from certain branches of the Weimar government itself. The murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht were the opening shots in a national terrorist campaign to undermine confidence in the Weimar Republic during its most vulnerable period.

Brutality against the Left was celebrated by right-wing extremists and excused by others. At the same time the *Freikorps* in Berlin killed hundreds, the Bavarian Socialist Republic was declared by a handful of communist intellectuals led by the poet Kurt Eisner. The fact that the republic existed at all had more to do with the complete power vacuum in Munich than it did with popular support for the soft-spoken Eisner. But the short-lived communist state in Bavaria was an unholy entity for most of the profoundly conservative and Catholic population. After some communists committed atrocities of their own against captured *Freikorps* members, the movement reacted with characteristic excess. In March 1919, a *Freikorps* unit led by Franz Epp marched into Munich and butchered over 600 communists and socialists. The “Epp Lions” took great pleasure in the short and bloody campaign. News of the massacre spread across Germany and served as a warning to other Leftists and the Weimar authorities themselves that the *Freikorps* were a force to be feared.

Epp, like many *Freikorps* commanders, eventually rose to prominence in the NSDAP. In 1921, he purchased the *Volkischer Beobachter*, the official newspaper of the party, and in 1928 assumed control of the *Sturm Abteilung* (SA), the party’s paramilitary force. Epp was devoted to the idea of destroying the Weimar Republic through violence, but this did not prevent him from winning a seat in the *Reichstag* for the NSDAP. Documents found in Epp’s personal papers detail how the *Freikorps* used terror for revolutionary goals, such as eliminating Jewish influence. Targeting Jews was intended to remove them as a threat by intimidating them into silence. One document in Epp’s possession read: “Every disturbance must end against the Jews. Then they will be so afraid that their comrades will say: Leave the Germans alone, or we will wind up in chains.”<sup>17</sup> Violence that delivers a message is a characteristic of terrorism. Intimidating Jews, this hated enemy of the radical Right, was a stated objective of men like Epp and his comrades. The violence associated with the Free Corps was partially the result of the chaos that followed Germany’s military collapse during the First World War, but talented officers like Epp harnessed this violence to drive home the point that “internal enemies” would be treated harshly. As Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz wrote,



the *Freikorps* continued the civil war at home with the same level of violence as the one they left unceremoniously in November 1918.

The severity of the *Freikorps*' atrocities was lost in the chaos of the immediate postwar years. It was not until the movement was dissolved and the Weimar Republic emerged as a political reality that the right-wing extremist community turned to true revolutionary terrorism. The remnants of the *Freikorps* melted into the population and formed more secretive organizations bent on finishing what they had begun in the streets of Berlin and Munich. Between 1920 and 1923, extremists engaged in a calculated campaign of assassinations and other terrorist acts against high-profile and symbolic figures within the fledgling Weimar government. What was more alarming than this organized terrorism was pervasive anti-Semitic violence targeting Jewish cemeteries, synagogues, and businesses throughout Germany. This alarming increase in postwar anti-Semitism had profound implications for the status of German Jews and success of parties like the NSDAP.<sup>18</sup>

The most infamous organization and the one responsible for the most significant assassinations was the *Organization Consul* (OC). The OC was founded by Captain Hermann Ehrhardt, a *Freikorps* leader, coup plotter, and popular luminary of the extreme Right. Ehrhardt reasoned that the only way to destroy the Weimar government was to convince the lower classes that the government was incapable of representing their interests and thus provoke another wave of revolution in Germany. Such chaos would, Ehrhardt believed, unite right-wing elements behind a national dictator. The OC acted to spark this revolution by systematically murdering key Weimar politicians and leftist figures.<sup>19</sup> OC member and popular author Ernst von Salomon actually named the targets: "Scheidemann, Rathenau, Zeigner, Lipinski, Cohn, Ebert and all the men of November [November Revolution of 1918] must be killed. Then we shall see whether or not there are uprisings in the Red Army, the Independent Socialist party, and the Communist party."<sup>20</sup> The official face of the OC was carefully constructed to meet the legal requirements for a political organization in the new democracy. The OC constitution admitted its goals included "struggling against . . . internationalism, Judaism, Social Democracy and radical leftist parties," but so did countless other organizations and political parties. The OC also declared that it would struggle against the Weimar constitution "in word and speech."<sup>21</sup> Weimar authorities knew the game the OC and a host of similar organizations played, but they lacked both the political will and resources to stop them.

Founded in Bavaria, the OC enjoyed legal protection and even financial resources from a sympathetic government.<sup>22</sup> Bavaria was a hot bed of right-wing extremism, and it was no secret that the government and local military units supported the efforts of the OC and dozens of other paramilitary organizations wholeheartedly. The president of Bavaria, Gustav Ritter von Kahr, openly despised the Weimar government in Berlin and identified with upstart leaders

like Adolf Hitler and Hermann Ehrhardt. Munich served essentially as a secure base where radicals could plot freely against the government.<sup>23</sup> Kahr even protected extremists who were wanted for crimes in other parts of Germany. He and the German military forces in Bavaria acted as state sponsors of terrorism because they provided groups like the OC and the NSDAP with political, financial, and military support. As is the case for many more recent terrorist organizations, state-sponsorship (or at the very least, benign neglect) facilitated the extremists' terrorist acts.

The OC was a tightly organized, hierarchical organization directed by Erhardt and a handful of others comprising the "Munich Central." Below the Central were 13 "gauleiters" responsible for recruiting and supervising local cells. Cells formed wherever possible. The Weimar government estimated that the total strength of the OC was approximately 5,000 members.<sup>24</sup> In addition to murdering politicians, the OC, like the *Freikorps*, meted out swift punishment against members suspected of collaborating with the authorities or in any way betraying the secrets of the organization, specifically the dozens of weapons caches hidden throughout Germany. This punishment, which sometimes included death, was administered by *ad hoc* tribunals comprising extremists. The so-called "*Feme* courts" were modeled after medieval courts that administered swift and violent justice.<sup>25</sup> The fact that the OC was both diffuse and highly organized indicates it operated with relative impunity. Organizations like the OC existed on several planes, only one of which was secretive and conspiratorial. Extremist groups regularly published newspapers and held rallies against the Weimar government, but the core members actually performed the terrorist acts.

The assassination that had the greatest impact was that of Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau. The aftermath of the act, which involved no less than five members of the OC, revealed the extent to which anti-Weimar and specifically anti-Semitic sentiment had become popular in Germany. Rathenau was from a powerful and historically important Jewish family. Intensely patriotic, Rathenau was responsible for organizing Germany's industrial resources and managing its war economy during the First World War. However, his selection as foreign minister confirmed the worst fears of the extreme Right. German racists believed that Jews were responsible for destroying Germany and perceived Rathenau as someone who would deliver Germany on a silver platter to the hated international forces of communism and capitalism. In June 1922, Rathenau was gunned down on his way to work by two assassins. Most Germans were not surprised by the murder, and a significant number celebrated. In the six months since he had assumed the post, German students had begun a popular chant: "Strike down Walther Rathenau/The God-damned Jewish sow!" After his murder the chant was altered: "Someone struck down Walther Rathenau/Hurrah! When is the next Jewish pig?"<sup>26</sup> Alarmingly, more respectable voices shared in this joy. Thomas Mann recalled hearing an eminent professor rejoicing in the prospect of "one less Jew." Nobel prize-winning physics professor Philip Lenard told his students that

they could not observe Rathenau's burial and be "idle on account of a dead Jew."<sup>27</sup>

Although Rathenau's murder sent shockwaves throughout Germany, it failed to provoke the revolution sought by the extreme Right. However, the long-term effects were significant because it was the first time in the four years of political violence that a Jew in a prominent position was murdered for being just that. The murder was more shocking than those of Luxemburg and Liebknecht because Rathenau was a well-respected politician with an international reputation. His crime was his race and his role in trying to legitimize the Weimar government abroad. Other politicians labeled as "November criminals," a reference to Germans who accepted the hated Peace of Versailles, suffered Rathenau's fate. Matthias Erzberger, a well-respected Catholic politician and leader of the moderate Center Party, had been murdered in 1921. Historian Carole Fink maintains that the murder of Walther Rathenau "foretold not only the destruction of the Weimar Republic but also the threat to the existence of the Jews of Germany and Europe."<sup>28</sup>

The Weimar government responded to the wave of political violence by banning organizations like the OC, but this was generally ineffective, as paramilitary groups simply re-surfaced with different names, organizational charts, and constitutions. The government created new law enforcement organizations like the Reich Commissioner for the Surveillance of Public Order and passed a host of laws to entangle groups in court and drain their resources.<sup>29</sup> Left-wing critics also mobilized and attempted to counteract the extremists by properly labeling them in the public mind as terrorists. Journalist Emil Julius Gumbel exposed the blatant favoritism German judges showed right-wing defendants in contrast to those on the Left. Gumbel also analyzed the ideology and motivation behind the perpetrators. Gumbel noted, "The organization's extremist attitudes lead them to believe that by killing one's political opponent, one can thereby do away with the ideas he stands for." Gumbel also highlighted the role youth played as "terrorists" and lamented that they truly believed they were acting in the tradition of Brutus by killing the "few Republicans that Germany possesses."<sup>30</sup>

Government pressure forced extremist groups to diversify their tactics. In response to the crackdown, propaganda took precedence over assassinations and street violence. After the spectacular failure of the Hitler *Putsch* in November 1923, the NSDAP evolved into one of the most sophisticated political organizations in the Weimar Republic. The party mastered multi-media propaganda, developed disciplined fighting units like the SA to combat enemies and attract new members, and exploited the hate and fear of many Germans who would have otherwise ignored a small, militant party like the NSDAP. Hitler enjoyed the irony that he could destroy the government he despised by waging a successful political campaign. Several terrorist organizations in recent history, such as the

Irish Republican Army, *Hezbollah*, and *Hamas*, have made the transition from a pure terrorist group to a semi-legitimate political organization. They diversified in the interest of influencing their respective political environments.<sup>31</sup> The NSDAP also began as a terrorist group before its leadership realized that the government they hoped to overthrow would likely survive simple violence.

## CONCLUSION

The Third Reich was the logical outcome of the campaign of political and racial violence orchestrated by the extreme Right in postwar Germany. As Martha Crenshaw Hutchinson noted, revolutionary terrorism is used “because it seems to be the appropriate means to achieve certain ends, such as general insecurity and disorientation in the state, control of the civilian population, demoralization of the adversary, or publicity.”<sup>32</sup> The high-profile assassinations of Weimar officials and political enemies were aimed at accomplishing all of the above. Breaking down Crenshaw’s four-part definition of revolutionary terrorism, one can state with confidence that the extreme German Right and the NSDAP in particular fit the profile of revolutionary terrorists. They used terrorism to seize political power from an existing government; engaged in both socially and politically unacceptable violence; attacked symbolic targets, such as Jews and socialists; and finally, used violence to alter the political behavior and attitudes of the masses. Only after the Weimar government survived the initial onslaught between 1919 and 1923 did the extreme Right infiltrate the government and bring it down from within. The extremists’ revised strategy was not to defeat the state but to become the state.

Nazi Germany was a terrorist state with all of the resources of an industrialized nation at its disposal. The Nazi quest for a racial utopia was characterized by the ultimate form of state-sponsored terrorism: genocide. The tragedy is that while the Weimar Republic weathered multiple attempts to bring it down through violence, it was overcome by a combination of internal events and the misguided attempt by the mainstream conservatives to co-opt the NSDAP. Assassinations and other terrorist acts did not destroy the Weimar Republic, but those responsible for such acts conducted a 12-year, multi-faceted effort to undermine its legitimacy. The extreme Right in Germany did not pursue revolutionary violence during its most successful years, but its early campaign of violence destabilized the Weimar government, and both intimidated and enthralled the German people. The NSDAP, in particular, deployed revolutionary terrorism in its arsenal and delivered the death blow to the Weimar Republic.

**Brian E. Crim** is Assistant Professor of History at Caldwell College.

## Endnotes

1. Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz quoted in Robert G.L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany, 1918-1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 42.
2. Michael Geyer, "War and the Context of General History in an Age of Total War," *Journal of Military History* 57, no. 5 (1993), p. 159.
3. Omer Bartov, *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 13. Bartov argues this point in greater detail in chapter two of *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
4. Ernst Jünger, *Der Kampf als Inneres Erlebnis* (Berlin: Verlag E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1928), p. 1.
5. Martha Crenshaw Hutchinson, "The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 16, no. 3 (September 1972), p. 385.
6. The best recent scholarship on the rise of the party is Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005).
7. The early histories of the Free Corps were written either by former participants or historians sympathetic to National Socialism. Examples include Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres, *Darstellungen aus den Nachkriegskämpfen deutscher Truppen und Freikorps* (Berlin, 1940); Friedrich Wilhelm Oertzen, *Die Deutschen Freikorps, 1918-1923* (Munich, 1936); Ernst von Salomon, *Mein Buch vom deutschen Freikorpskämpfer* (Berlin, 1938); and Edgar Schmidt-Pauli, *Geschichte der Freikorps, 1918-1924* (Stuttgart, 1936). An excellent, albeit outdated, study is Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952). Another author who considers National Socialism an outgrowth of the Free Corps is Nigel H. Jones, *Hitler's Heralds: The Story of the Freikorps, 1918-1923* (New York: Dorset Press, 1992).
8. Bernhard Sauer, "Gerhard Rossbach – Hitler's Vertreter für Berlin: Zur Frühgeschichte des Rechtsradikalismus in der Weimarer Republik," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 50, no. 1 (2002), pp. 15-16.
9. See George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
10. Paul von Hindenburg, "The Stab in the Back (1919)," in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Sourcebook* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1997), pp. 15-16.
11. *Bericht der 23 Landwehr Division über die Ursachen des Zusammenbruchs des Disziplin, Entwicklung der Zustände und Tätigkeit der Soldatenräte 30.12.1918*, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, PH8III/3. Hereafter cited as *BA-MA Freiburg*.
12. *Auszug aus meinen Tagebuch über die Grenzschutzkämpfe 1918/19 in Schlesien bei Deutsch-Watenberg, Kempen u.s.w.*, *BA-MA Freiburg*, PH 26/34, p. 11.
13. *Das Gesetz über die provisorische Reichswehr vom 6 März 1919*, *BA-MA Freiburg*, W-10/52410 – Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt.
14. Memo 27.2.1919, *BA-MA Freiburg*, PH8V/2.
15. 14.5.1919, *BA-MA Freiburg*, PH8V/17.
16. Statement by Otto Runge, 22.1.1921, *BA-MA Freiburg*, PH8V/10.
17. *Lage von Bayern dem Reich und Berlin*, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, N101/25. Hereafter cited as *BAK*.
18. See Dirk Walter, *Antisemitische Kriminalität und Gewalt: Judenfeindschaft in der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn: Dietz, 1999).

19. See Martin Sabrow, *Der Rathenaumord: Rekonstruktion einer Verschwörung gegen die Republik von Weimar* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994).
20. Howard Stern, "The Organisation Consul," *Journal of Modern History* 35, no. 1 (March 1963), p. 22.
21. *Satzungen der Organisation C., BA-MA Freiburg*, PH26/4.
22. Stern, "The Organisation Consul," p. 23.
23. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), p. 171.
24. Stern, "The Organisation Consul," p. 21.
25. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume Two: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 19.
26. *Die Todfeinde der Republik*, 31.8.1922, BAK, R43 I/2731, p. 257.
27. Carole Fink, "The Murder of Walther Rathenau," *Judaism* (Summer 1995), p. 6.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
29. The single best book on the constellation of paramilitary and veteran organizations populating the interwar period is James Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977).
30. Emil Julius Gumbel, "Organized Murder," in Walter Laquer, ed., *Voices of Terror: Manifestos, Writings, and Manuals of Al Qaeda, Hamas, and Other Terrorists from Around the World and Throughout the Ages* (New York: Reed Press, 2004), pp. 132 and 134.
31. For background on the transition these groups have made, see Judith Palmer Harik, "Between Islam and the System: Sources and Implications of Popular Support for Lebanon's Hizballah," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, no. 1 (March 1996), pp. 41-67; Mary-Jane Deeb, "Militant Islam and the Politics of Redemption," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 524, *Political Islam* (November 1992), pp. 52-65; and Jonathan Stevenson, "Northern Ireland: Treating Terrorists as Statesmen," *Foreign Policy* 105 (Winter 1996-1997), pp. 125-40.
32. Hutchinson, "The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism," p. 394.