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MEREDITH W. WATTS
American Behavioral Scientist 2001; 45; 600
DOI: 10.1177/00027640121957376

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Aggressive Youth  
Cultures and Hate Crime

Skinheads and Xenophobic Youth in Germany

MEREDITH W. WATTS  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Contemporary bias crime in Germany increased dramatically after unification and remained at a relatively high, though fluctuating, level for the decade. Right-wing skinheads and neo-Nazis played a significant role in the violence, but at least one third of the violent incidents came from informal groups of young males who were not affiliated. This represents a shift in anti-Semitic and antiforeigner violence from the 1980s and earlier, when the perpetrators were likely to be older and affiliated with identifiable ideological groups. Contemporary xenophobia is not only linked to aggressive elements of youth culture but appears to be increasingly connected to local and international ideological networks. Electronic media such as the Internet have given both the political and commercial entities of skinhead and right-wing culture a means of support and growth.

Xenophobic aggression in postunification Germany is not identical with what is called hate crime or hate violence in the United States, nor are the official data kept by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution to monitor bias-inspired crimes directly comparable with U.S. definitions. The law in the Federal Republic of Germany reflects a reaction against the Nazi past and aims to forbid “Nazi” speech and propaganda. The law also provided for the monitoring of acts motivated by right-wing extremism, anti-Semitism, and antiforeigner bias. This produces several special categories of crime that may seem unusual to citizens of the United States, such as (a) disturbing or defaming the dead (the charges invoked to sanction desecration of Jewish grave sites and memorials), (b) “public incitement” and “instigation of racial hatred” (charges used to suppress racist public speech), and (c) distribution of Nazi propaganda or “literature liable to corrupt the young.”

Other aspects of German law forbid the promotion of a Nazi-like political party, denial of the Holocaust, and use of the symbols associated with officially banned groups. The latter provision criminalizes the display of Nazi-era symbols (e.g., the swastika, the “Hitler greeting”) but has been steadily expanded to
forbid a wide variety of flags, emblems, and other symbols that were employed by groups banned by the Federal Constitutional Court.

What these laws do not do (compared to bias crime legislation in the United States) is define hate crime or hate violence as such, nor do they include any special recognition of gender, disability, or sexual orientation. On the other hand, they go much further than laws in many other contemporary democracies in limiting certain types of biased or racist speech, particularly when it is directed at groups victimized in the Holocaust.

Although the German law obviously reflects a special set of historical and legal circumstances, it results in an exemplary national data effort in certain categories of bias crime. The law requires national reporting of incidents by all police agencies. This ensures data gathering that is more intensive and more complete than is currently the case in most other nations (particularly in comparison with the United States where hate crime reporting is still voluntary and highly variable). As a result, German data provide a better basis than that of most nations for examining trends and developments in certain categories of hate-motivated violence. This feature of the law makes it possible to analyze trends in right-wing and xenophobic violence in Germany, developments that reflect a particular national situation but that also show international characteristics that may help us understand hate violence in other societies as well.

THE COURSE OF RIGHT-WING VIOLENCE

Perhaps the first question concerns the basic historical development of right-wing violence in Germany. Table 1 and Figure 1 place the era of "modern" xenophobia in Germany in perspective. In 1989 and 1990, immediately prior to unification, there were fewer than 200 violent incidents per year. That figure more than quadrupled by 1992 and reached its contemporary peak in the following year. Shock of the German public (expressed dramatically by candlelight processions in sympathy with the victims), consolidation of the criminal justice agencies in the new federal states in the east, and stepped-up enforcement activities by security agencies all played a part in the decline. Since then, there have been oscillations between 600 and 800 violent incidents per year—a decline from the peak but still high compared to the preunification period (for a more extended discussion, see Watts, 1997, chap. 2).

A second question concerns the targets of violence. Unlike federal (and some state) hate crime statutes in the United States, German law does not provide for special reporting of violence based on sexual orientation, gender, or disability. However, it is quite specific about crimes that can be attributed to anti-Semitic, antiforeigner, or right-wing motivation. Since unification (beginning officially in 1990), the targets of attack have remained relatively constant. As Table 2 shows, about 60% of the violent incidents have been directed against foreigners. Anti-Semitic attacks, including desecration of graves and memorial sites, have
TABLE 1: The Course of Right-Wing Violence in Germany, 1989-1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Violent Acts (^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>1,485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>1,322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>708</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^a\) The official term refers to violent acts “with demonstrated or assumed right-wing motivation.”

accounted for about 2% of all violent incidents. Foreigners are a significant presence in Germany (with a population of more than 7 million) and account for the vast majority (60%) of attacks against persons. By contrast, the number of Jews in Germany is probably not much more than one hundredth that of foreigners, even allowing for a doubling of the Jewish population over the decade (due primarily to immigration from the former Soviet Union). Thus, whereas only 2% of the total offenses involve Jewish persons or institutions, the per capita rate is high.

Political opponents such as “autonomous” leftist groups and rival youth cultures accounted for another 14% of the total. The last category (“other”) contained 24% of the incidents; it refers to offenses where the perpetrators were identifiable right wing but the victims were not foreigners, Jews, or political enemies (examples might be damage to property during a demonstration or assaults against police or bystanders).

WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS?

But who are these “rightists?” Increasingly, the perpetrators of hate violence of the past decade have tended overwhelmingly to be young males, usually acting in groups. But how young? And in what kind of groups—skinheads, neo-Nazis, or informal groups of young men looking for excitement? \(^2\) As Table 3 shows, modern xenophobia indeed has a youthful face. Data from 1996 show that 30% of the perpetrators were ages 16 to 17 and that more than two thirds of all perpetrators were 20 years of age or younger.

This aggressive activism on the part of teenaged and young adult males represents a historical “modernization” of xenophobic violence. Prior to 1980, those
TABLE 2: Targets of Right-Wing Violence in Germany, 1995-1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Number of Offenses&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antiforeigner</td>
<td>1,269</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Semitic</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against political opponents</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,122</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<sup>a</sup> The official term refers to violent acts “with demonstrated or assumed right-wing motivation.”

<sup>b</sup> “Other” includes acts of violence where the perpetrators are identified as “rightists” but where the incident or target does not involve the previous three categories. Examples might be a march in which store windows are broken or a confrontation with citizens or bystanders.

younger than 20 years of age accounted for only 40% of the incidents (see Watts, 1997, p. 269). The earlier form of rightist activism involved somewhat older perpetrators who were more likely to be associated with neo-Nazi groups (and, presumably, had more developed right-wing ideological positions than today’s younger activists). In comparison with this earlier period, today’s typical activist is much younger<sup>3</sup> and less likely to be a member of a neo-Nazi organization.

Accompanying this shift toward youthful activism has been a trend away from classic, membership-based organizational forms. The young perpetrators
TABLE 3: Age of Perpetrators (1996)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16-17</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older than 40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz [Federal Office for Protection of the Constitution] (1996). (For earlier years, see Watts, 1997, p. 269.)

are less likely than their predecessors to be ideologically sophisticated and organizationally connected. This does not mean they are isolated; on the contrary, they are part of a xenophobic culture that includes both the older organizational forms and a heterogeneous (and often highly spontaneous) youth culture. This last point is not an obvious one, but we can make sense of it looking at recent skinhead history and at the data on the organization connections of actual perpetrators. Here, we have two questions: How have developments in the skinhead scene contributed to the subculture of racism? and How much have skinheads contributed to the rise in violence?

TRENDS IN EXTREMISM AND AGGRESSIVE SUBCULTURES

Historically, only a portion of the skinhead style has been explicitly racist or neo-Nazi. Most histories of the movement point to its British working-class origins and to its multiracialism in membership and music tastes. But, those accounts also point to the split of the skinheads into “left” and “right” factions in the 1980s. Somewhere in between these politicized factions are the apolitical skins (who probably make up the majority). The actual numbers in each group are difficult to identify because the boundaries are fluid, and stylistic variations are not always recognizable to the outsider. To make things more difficult, it is not unusual for German skins to refer to themselves as “more or less left” when they actually mean that they are not right. For young Germans in the east, to be truly left was largely discredited with the fall of the East German regime. This was particularly the case for skinheads, who were likely to see being right as the logical place for rebellion to take place in a socialist society.

The right-wing scene has been notorious for its fluidity and unpredictable actionism, a frustration both for the more orthodox rightists who would like to organize them and for the security agencies who would like to monitor them. However, there is a countervailing tendency that seems to have been
accelerating throughout the decade—there are signs that such international
groups as the Blood and Honour (British) and the Hammerskins (United States)
have added discipline, ideology, and an international network to the right-wing
skinhead culture. Not only do both movements have global pretensions, but the
latter group refers to itself, ominously, as the Hammerskin Nation.

All this points to a rightist milieu that contains a diverse mix of elements—
informal groups of xenophobic youth; “subcultures” with a recognizable,
aggressive style (such as skinheads); and ideological groups that are disciplined
and organized. Those who identify themselves as rightist skinheads are a dra-
matic presence among perpetrators (Anti-Defamation League, 1995; Hamm,
1993), but available data suggest that they are only one part of a much broader
class of aggressive xenophobes.

In his study of perpetrators in the early 1990s, Willems found that 38% of
those arrested for antiforeigner violence in the early 1990s were identified as
skinheads (Willems, 1995). Heitmeyer and Müller (1995) found that 46% of
their interviewees who were involved in antiforeigner violence thought of them-
selves as skinheads. Prior to 1990, however, the term skinhead hardly surfaced
with respect to anti-Semitic or antiforeigner violence—not only was there a
smaller amount of violence, but some 90% of the perpetrators in that earlier
period were identified with neo-Nazi or other classic right-wing extremist
groups (Kalinowsky, 1990). In other words, the 1990s were characterized by a
surge in xenophobic violence that was carried by aggressive subcultures that
were different from the traditional ideological groups on the right.

In comparison to Germany, information on the role of skinheads in the United
States is somewhat less systematic and therefore less conclusive. Levin and
McDevitt (1993) estimated that the most ideological perpetrators of hate crimes
are probably no more than 1% of the total perpetrators. The authors suggested
that skinheads are part of this group of violent perpetrators who attack out of an
ideological “mission” to drive out the target group. However, data from Ger-
many and elsewhere suggest that skinheads and other aggressive subcultures
may not act primarily from racial or ideological motivations but are motivated
by “thrill-seeking” and other opportunistic or criminal motives. Thus, it is diffi-
cult to estimate the contributions of skinheads in the perpetration of hate crimes
or bias-motivated attacks and just as difficult, at the moment, to compare accu-
rately the various types of perpetrators from one nation to another.

Direct comparison across nations is also made difficult because of the nature
of the data (compared to Germany, police reports in the United States are less
systematic in establishing the political motivation or membership of the perpe-
trators). As a result, figures from the United States are not comparable (either in
relative accuracy or in estimated magnitude) with that of Germany; however, it
is clear that racist skinheads are involved in a number of dramatically violent
incidents nationally and internationally (Anti-Defamation League, 1995;
Southern Poverty Law Center, 1998).
Thus, to reiterate an obvious point: Only some skinheads are racists, and most racists are not skinheads. Yet, skinheads have played a growing role in xenophobic violence. But, what do we know of the “skinhead” contribution to the broader culture of aggressive xenophobia? To put the numbers in perspective, Willems (1995) found that in addition to the 38% who were identifiable with skinhead culture in some way, about 25% of the perpetrators were associated with right-wing extremist groups. Another 19% were members of informal groups or cliques with no specific ideological identification (most of the remaining perpetrators not accounted for in the above categories had prior records and were classified as “criminal,” though this category no doubt overlaps the others). Heitmeyer and Müller (1995) found that roughly 27% of the rightist youth they interviewed were associated with neo-Nazi (rather than skinhead) groups. Taken together, these studies indicate that skinheads make up the largest single category of perpetrators in Germany, with members of neo-Nazi organizations a distant second. By either account, at least one third of the attacks are committed by youth who are not associated with these easily identifiable groups.

Skinheads have represented a major portion of the problem, but they were still only one part of a much broader pattern of violence. According to the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the total estimate of “right-wing extremist potential” in Germany grew steadily in the last half of the 1990s. A closer look at the various groups (see Table 4) shows that the largest single numerical change has occurred in the estimated strength of right-extremist political parties (these are parties that are “on watch” by the agency but are not classified/banned as “neo-Nazi”). The number of hard-core ideologues represented by the neo-Nazis has remained relatively constant; other growth areas have been among those classified as “violence-prone rightists” and “other groups” (see Figure 2). The latter category contains a diverse cluster of Kameradschaften, discussion groups, and informal cliques that seem to have proliferated (but whose numbers are notoriously hard to estimate due to their informal organizational forms).

Also hard to estimate is the exact number of persons in the violence-prone category; yet, it is on this diffuse group that the federal office has focused much of its concern over the decade. This category contains the heart of the perpetrator category—potentially violent young people (mostly males); its numbers are largely a matter of estimate (because there are no “organizations” to infiltrate or membership records to confiscate). It is this category that contains the skinheads, the group with the most identifiable style and appearance among the violence prone. Obviously, the German government views this category as a growing source of danger. The rise in the number estimated to be violence prone thus reflects an increase in aggressive youth. It is also likely that the increase in their estimated numbers results from a heightened perception on the part of monitoring agencies that the danger from unorganized, aggressive youth is growing. If the numbers are truly on the rise, then it is an increase in the potential—rather
TABLE 4:  Estimated Right-Wing Extremist Potential, 1995-1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violence-prone rightists</td>
<td>6,200</td>
<td>6,400</td>
<td>7,600</td>
<td>8,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neo-Nazis</td>
<td>1,980</td>
<td>2,420</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>2,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td>35,900</td>
<td>33,500</td>
<td>34,800</td>
<td>39,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other groups</td>
<td>2,660</td>
<td>3,700</td>
<td>4,300</td>
<td>4,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46,740</td>
<td>46,020</td>
<td>49,100</td>
<td>54,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total minus multiple memberships</td>
<td>44,610</td>
<td>45,300</td>
<td>48,400</td>
<td>53,600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 2: Trends in Right-Wing Potential

than the actual—rate of perpetration. In recent years, the number of violent offenses has declined somewhat (see Table 1).

EVOLUTION AND CHANGE IN SKINHEAD CULTURE

The skinhead scene actually consists of many scenes with elements borrowed from other subcultures. For this reason, it is impossible to speak of skinheads as if they all shared an identical culture, ideology, or organizational structure; there
are also evolution and change in the scene. Three types of development are worth noting: The first is adaptation of the skinhead style to fit the local political culture. The second is in the increased networking of skinhead groups; this includes organization diffusion above the local level and reflects the internationalization of skinhead style. The third is in the commercialization and commodification of skinhead culture.

In the first development, the international skinhead style (much like other subcultural styles) can be “downloaded” from international media and adapted to fit local conditions. This produces variation not only in the groups themselves but in their local “partners.” As local variations include cultural elements that respond to the particular culture and community, the network of potential supporters varies from one place to another. For example, in the United States, racist skinhead groups may be allied locally with neo-Nazi groups, with traditional organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, or with such groups as Aryan Nations or the World Church of the Creator. In Germany, rightist skinheads may find political partners with neo-Nazi groups or with Kameradschaften and political “discussion groups.” White supremacist groups (often imported from the United States) also have some appeal because they offer a racist model that is not associated with the Nazi era (thereby avoiding both the stigma of association with the Nazi period and reducing the likelihood of being banned or prosecuted).

This ideological and associational variation has counterparts in the United States, as in the example of the Nazi Low Riders of Antelope Valley, California. Although the name conjures up images of Los Angeles Latino subculture, this group combined elements of skinhead culture, Nazi ideology, racism, and a business sideline in the methamphetamine trade (Finnegan, 1997). Local variations such as these show that such subcultures are dynamic and difficult to capture in a simple ideological or political definition. Local scenes show a kind of cultural entrepreneurship that combines national and international models with the political culture of the local community.

There also appears to be a growing network of rightist culture on both the local and international levels. Though their impact is difficult to estimate, there is evidence from a number of sources that the right-wing elements of the skinhead scene have become more structured and that they have increased their capacity to cooperate with other groups. Those partner groups often provide the organizational structure, capacity for logistics, and tactical planning (e.g., for demonstrations) that skinheads have traditionally lacked. Most of all, those groups may provide ideological structure and tutelage.

The hard street-fighting style of many skins has long been used by other rightist groups for its intimidation value. According to former neo-Nazi Ingo Hasselbach (1996), “The skins were our storm troopers—the idiots who cleared the streets for us and intimidated our enemies—and enjoyed a bit of violence anytime” (p. 171). However, there is evidence that by the end of the decade skins had expanded beyond this role of “useful idiots” (Hasselbach’s term) and that they had done it beyond national boundaries. In early 1999, skinheads from
Croatia, Slovenia, and Germany joined neo-Nazis from Hungary and elsewhere for a demonstration in Budapest. Rightist skins were a common sight at Aryan Nation meetings in the United States, the White Aryan Resistance actively recruited violent skinheads in the early 1990s, and a well-known watchdog organization argues that the skinhead scene is moving “from chaos to conspiracy” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 1998, p. 23). In Germany, connections have developed between the skins and various neo-Nazi groups and, more recently, to rightist political parties; in particular, the National Democratic Party and its youth organization, the Young National Democrats, have actively sought contact and cooperation with right-wing skins (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c).

If the actual extent of political networking is a bit difficult to estimate, the evidence for the international commercialization of skinhead culture seems more easily quantifiable. In Germany, data on this trend come from the fact that police and government agencies monitor both “hate speech” and material that is considered “harmful to youth.” For example, music and public speech can be targeted for official repression if they are placed by authorities under either of these categories. Thus, in a 1993 operation that would seem unusual to citizens in the United States, German national and provincial agencies prosecuted rightist and “White power” skinhead bands and took legal action against commercial distributors of their music.

In a similar action in 1997, police and security agencies in 10 federal states searched the homes and places of business of 24 individual and corporate distributors of music judged to be racist. Confiscated in the action were several thousand CDs and various Nazi memorabilia and propaganda material. Also captured were computers, business files, and, in one case, an automatic weapon with ammunition (Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 1998).

Despite these periodic waves of concerted suppression and interdiction by authorities, the number of concerts and distributors of skinhead materials (and literature) increased steadily through the late 1990s (see Figure 3). The number of bands also increased, showing a 20% surge in 1 year alone (from fewer than 80 in 1997 to roughly 100 in 1998). Repression efforts run up against two major obstacles. The first is the increase in commercialization and commodification, in which skinhead and racist culture is turned into products (e.g., music, clothes) and marketed for economic gain. This produces an economic incentive for the continuation and exploitation of skinhead and racist culture.

The second, interrelated, trend is the internationalization of that commercial culture that allows concerts and distributors to operate effectively from other countries. To escape German sanctions, bands, literature, and concerts are likely to appear in Denmark or Sweden (in fact, it was from Denmark that American neo-Nazi Gary Lauck was extradited to Germany in 1995). Of course, the United States is the prime international center for the distribution of skinhead, White power, and extremist material. The development of electronic networks such as the World Wide Web has promoted this globalization, increased the
commercial availability of rightist materials, and undermined German attempts to suppress skinhead culture. Ideological/commercial Web sites (usually based in the United States but reachable from virtually anywhere) have expanded; Web sites suppressed in Canada, Germany, and elsewhere reappear in the freer cyberspace of the United States where they exist alongside entrepreneurial American extremists.

**DISCUSSION**

Germans are not alone in the surge of xenophobia and hate crime. There are signs that similar developments are occurring throughout industrial societies undergoing modernization and structural change, stress in employment markets, and a significant influx of people perceived as foreign. Though these structural and social problems all affect Germany, they are common throughout contemporary democracies. So, too, is xenophobic violence and bias crime.

The preceding analysis dealt with rightist potential (and the role of skinheads within it) in one country. The German data are more complete than information available in other nations, but they are not identical with what would be categorized as hate- or bias-crime in the United States. Notably, offenses based on gender and sexual orientation are not included (as indeed they are not in a number of American states). These differences in emphasis make it difficult to compare trends across nations with accuracy. Even so, the data are helpful in pointing out some of the major trends in xenophobic culture in Germany and elsewhere.
Some of our concerns go beyond what the data can clearly tell us. However, we can make some reasonably well-grounded speculations about the role of aggressive youth cultures in contemporary bias crime. I would like to suggest some propositions that seem sensible based in part on the analysis presented here. Each is supported to a greater or lesser extent by current information, but to have more certainty, more comparable data from other nations will be needed. Indeed, we will need far more systematic data for the many jurisdictions of the United States because, unlike Germany, reporting under U.S. hate crime legislation is voluntary and still far from being complete.

- First of all, youth cultures are often not just passing fads. The decline of the skinheads has long been predicted, but it has changed, expanded, and internationalized in the two or more decades since it first appeared. As a style, it has some ephemeral characteristics that will undoubtedly change further and even disappear. But, like rock and roll music (whose death has been predicted for four decades), there is no reason to doubt that this or a similar youth culture will continue to express some form of aggressive xenophobia.

- The early skinhead style originally emerged from British working-class culture as an expression of a strong, working-class masculinity. Segments of it later split into politicized left and right, with the racist segment emerging as an amalgam of aggressive masculinity and explicit xenophobia. This racist tendency was augmented by a sporadic, but growing, connection with ideological elements of the extreme and racist right. What resulted was a three-part poison of aggression, xenophobia, and ideology that has been much more self-sustaining than any of the individual components alone. Where younger persons, particularly males, are confronted with economic modernization and dislocation for which they are ill prepared, and where scapegoats in the form of various cultural “outsiders” are perceived as threats, this three-part poison will continue to produce aggressive subcultures (of which skinheads are only one contemporary variant).

- The skin/fascho scene has developed elements of a subculture that includes music, fanzines (fan magazines), concerts, and other more or less organized symbolic and cultural events. This helps provide an integration of the scene as well as a sense of identity—of being part of something much larger, more powerful, and even somewhat “dangerous.” This provides the basis for a self-sustaining scene—it falls short of being a “movement,” but it provides a network through which movement-like connections can develop.

- The skinhead scene has broken out of its parochial/provincial boundaries to establish important links to ideological groups—groups that provide the “intellectual” part of the fascho program, offer a “standing organization,” and maintain a durable political opportunity structure. The skins might not be interested in organizing, say, a Rudolf Hess Memorial day (a German neo-Nazi tribute day, substituted for Hitler’s birthday, which cannot be celebrated publicly); the neo-Nazis do that. But, the skins can show up, act badly, and lend a show of force and aggressive power. They typically horrify the orthodox rightists, but both groups gain from the odd alliance. Moreover, skinheads have graduated from being what Hasselbach (1996) called “useful idiots”; some have crossed the ideological line and become part of the organizational neo-Nazi right. They maintain links to the skin scene and provide a bridge from the rowdy skinhead style to the more disciplined structures on the right.
The scene of youthful xenophobic aggression has broken out of its provincialism to establish links to international groups. There are many reports of contacts to a variegated international network, particularly in the United States, United Kingdom, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and to a lesser degree Spain (relations with the Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, and other central Europeans are somewhat more strained, but they exist). Explicitly racist groups such as Blood and Honour and the Hammerskin Nation provide an international style that is easily downloaded and adapted from the World Wide Web, music, and literature. In Germany, the government estimates that there are more than 200 skinhead or racist Web sites (in the United States, there are far more, of course); many of them are in English to broaden their impact (or because they use North American Internet providers to avoid German censorship).

Concerts of White power bands are typically discouraged, even prosecuted, in Germany. Bands are raided, CDs confiscated, concerts broken up or forbidden, and leaders prosecuted under German hate speech laws that forbid glorification of Nazis, racist speech, or defamation of victims of the Holocaust. It is even illegal to deny that the Holocaust existed or to slander Jews in public speech. This suppression is undermined by global electronic networks and by support for the scene from abroad.

The example of skinheads provides some insight into the dynamics of international commercialization—a phenomenon that appears to help stabilize the scene, allow it to expand, and give it a longer life than might have been expected. The same is true, but more so, for right-wing extremist groups and sentiment. This commercial dimension includes cultural artifacts, memorabilia, music, and literature that provide an economic incentive for widening and deepening the scene.

The structural conditions that produced skinhead groups all over the world are still present. Where they are not solved, skinheads or some other subcultural phenomenon is likely to persist. Status anxiety, identity problems in declining working-class culture, and the compensatory needs of underemployed or threatened young people, particularly males, are continuing problems. These problems, and the youth cultures they produced, extend well beyond the boundaries of the less advantaged. Although the expression of such xenophobia may have significant origins in threatened segments of the housing and labor markets, that xenophobia has been transported politically and culturally to a much broader segment of the population (e.g., middle-class youth, young women, and a variety of nations that have developed “copy-cat” scenes).  

The psychological need for an identity and sense of meaning remains. Not all youth can answer that need with conventional achievement in work, education, and family, but some find it easier or more exciting to use physical and symbolic aggression against out-groups. This form of identity can be extremely unrealistic and dysfunctional (especially when based on a mythopoetic White race, or the like, which either does not exist or, if it does, hardly appoints these youth as its “sword and shield”). This is not a productive identity search, but it will continue to have power where other sources of positive identity are not available.

Last, although racist skinheads and other aggressive cliques may seem atavistic, they may actually be on the cutting edge of modern xenophobia. Their spontaneous and unpredictable style was traditionally seen as a disadvantage, but a trend in the far right throughout the decade comes to favor this seemingly primitive form of action. Increased repression of extremist groups by various national governments has led to organizational innovations. In the United States, the concept of leaderless resistance sprang up on the far right to promote action that is not controlled by a specific organizational center. The concept was developed among
American extremists to replace the standard organizational model that proved vulnerable to government infiltration and prosecution. But, small groups of aggressive youth had long been the source of spontaneous, “unorganized” violence. Skinheads and other aggressive subcultures are part of a fluid milieu that is held together by symbols, idea fragments, cultural events, and electronic media—but often without any classic organizational structure. This relatively unorganized base then provides a place from which the more ideological of them are likely to find their way into parties, movements, and discussion circles. Thus, the language and symbols may often sound like the “same old thing,” but underlying the familiar slogans is a significant change—the right has modernized and adapted, and it has taken on a more youthful face than was the case a generation ago.

NOTES

1. The term xenophobia can refer to a generalized antipathy toward out-groups in general or toward a specific target group such as foreigners, Jews, homosexuals, and others. In German usage, the term Fremdenfeindlichkeit refers to antipathy against foreigners, although Xenophobia is increasingly used. I have tried elsewhere to make these distinctions somewhat more carefully. In this discussion, I try (without complete success) to use xenophobia when referring to the more inclusive concept. The terms antiforeigner and anti-Semitic not only denote the more specific antipathies, they also correspond to the primary categories in the official Germany agency reports.

2. This is not the place for an analysis of the causes and appeals of youthful xenophobia, but some useful starting points are Bergmann (1998); Boehnke, Hagan, and Hefler (1998); Hagan, Merkens, and Boehnke (1995); Oesterreich (1998); Watts (1997, 1999); Watts and Zinnecker (1998); and Willems (1995). For a closer look at the role of young females on the right, see Mushaben (1996).

3. Other discussions of aggressive German youth cultures in the early 1990s can be found in Watts, 1997 (particularly in chaps. 1, 6, 7, and 9). For a more detailed analysis of the shift in public opinion and violence during the 1980s and 1990s, see Watts, 1997 (particularly chap. 2). A detailed chronology of postunification xenophobia is provided by Rainer Erb (cited in Kurthen, Bergmann, & Erb, 1997, pp. 263-285).

4. This conclusion obviously refers to the spread of aggressive youth culture, the primary topic of this discussion. I do not mean it to be a global proposition about the origins of xenophobia or to imply that youth are the source of xenophobia. What I have argued from the German data, though, is that xenophobic youth have been the primary source of rightist violence in the past decade.

REFERENCES

NOTE: Sources are provided in English wherever possible, though in many cases the data reported are available only in German. In those cases, I have provided a translation of the original title and institutional name (when a governmental agency is the data source). Readers interested in the extensive German literature on the subject might start with the bibliographies in Watts (1997) and in Kurthen, Bergmann, and Erb (1997).


