

# THE NEW REFUGEE

VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN UNIFIED GERMANY AND BEYOND

MICHAEL SCHMIDT



# THE NEW REICH

*Violent Extremism in Unified Germany and Beyond*

MICHAEL SCHMIDT

*Translated from the German  
by Daniel Horch*

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*This book is dedicated to the  
cause of moral courage*

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## Foreword

NEO-NAZIS—IN THE FALL OF 1988 I BEGAN, GINGERLY, to investigate this subject. Half a year later it was my only interest. My goal was to produce a film that would show present-day Nazis as they really are. By the summer of 1991, I had amassed over 110 hours of raw footage; two years of research and months of filming had to be condensed into just sixty minutes. The result, "*Wahrheit macht frei*," (Truth Will Make You Free)\* has since been shown in sixteen countries; in some places, many times.

By the spring of 1992, I had another goal: a book that could provide more background and context than a film possibly could. For those who prefer to look away and deny the truth, this too can be dismissed—as was the film—as "nothing new." Certainly I do not make any claim to completeness. On the contrary, these are but fragments of an iceberg. No one has yet seen it all. But what I have seen is enough to terrify me as surely as any nightmare.

Michael Schmidt

Paris

January, 1993

\*The film's title is a slogan of the neo-Nazi revisionist movement and is itself a play on "*Arbeit Macht Frei*," the sign that hung above the entrance to Auschwitz. This film is available from Filmmakers Library, 124 East Fortieth Street, New York, N.Y. 10016.

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I

# INSIDE THE SCENE



# I

## THE SECOND REVOLUTION

THE HEAVY DOORS CLICK OPEN AND I LOOK CAUTIOUSLY down the aisle of the courtroom. A slim man dressed in black, the defendant, is in mid-sentence: “. . . I am indeed a National Socialist, and I publicly acknowledge it. . . .”

I am in the right place. Not Munich circa 1924, but the state court in Frankfurt am Main in the spring of 1989. The bailiff's head appears and I quickly flash my press card. With a wave he directs me to the spectators' bench. There are only two other visitors in the courtroom. One shakes his head repeatedly with disapproval as the defendant continues his arguments; the other is zealously taking notes. The trial concerns neo-Nazi propaganda, which is forbidden under German criminal law. The defendant is Michael Kühnen, who is charged with writing inflammatory documents that glorify violence, praise the Third Reich, and deny the historicity of Nazi war crimes.

One example is an article in the journal *NS-Kampfruf* (National Socialist Battle Cry), where Kühnen's work often appears. Complete with imperial eagle and swastika, this “Combat Publication of the National Socialist German Worker's Party” is designed to look like a mainstream newspaper. To the right of the logo, next to the date, the number 100 is printed in brackets, denoting the centenary of Adolf Hitler's birth. The article reads:

“Soon after 1918, historians and researchers around the world were quick to establish that Germany had not wanted a war. . . . But after 1945, and up to the present day, the situation has been completely different. . . . Today a revision of the ‘War Guilt Question’ and a withdrawal of Germany’s enemies is neither planned nor imagined. The morality of a victor-nation whose people managed to build atom bombs and use them against human beings is being enforced. . . . The frg [Federal Republic of Germany—lowercased in the original] and the other German states are political entities of inferior authority. . . .”

It is a historical fact that the Nazis began the Second World War. It is also a historical fact that the Americans dropped the first atom bomb. The author of this article suggests that this was an immoral act but prudently keeps silent about an otherwise readily quoted fact: namely, that the Germans themselves were working feverishly on rocket and nuclear technology, right up to the last moment, hoping to change the course of the war with the help of a “retaliatory weapon”—the atom bomb.

According to another article: “History does not repeat itself in exactly the same form! Therefore we neither strive for a copy of the Third Reich nor do we let references to the alleged atrocities of the past make an impression upon us. . . .”

These documents, which dismiss systematic genocide and crimes against humanity as “alleged atrocities,” are published by the NSDAP-AO, which is based in Nebraska. NSDAP is the original name of Hitler’s party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei—National Socialist German Workers’ Party); AO stands for Auslands- und Aufbau-Organisation (Foreign and Development Organization). The NSDAP-AO has become known through its worldwide mass-mailings of neo-Nazi propaganda. And as I would soon learn from the man sitting in the defendant’s chair today, there is far more to it than propaganda.

Kühnen’s seat is in the middle of the courtroom. Again and again he reaches for his mirrored sunglasses on the table before him and fiddles with them while he speaks. He seems pale, especially so given his dark hair. But he calmly and skillfully takes advantage of

every possibility to make a political statement; his dedication to the cause of National Socialism is clear.

The court and the district prosecutor are anxious to present the case against him soberly and carefully. This is not easy, since Kühnen is constantly aiming for effect. An associate judge asks him to explain his high regard for the totalitarian "Führer principle," with its focus on a single leader, and by way of response Kühnen talks about his military service. When the judge, irritated, asks what the army has to do with it, Kühnen sees his chance.

"Well," he says, "I don't know how *you* imagine the army, but when a company is at the front, the soldiers are certainly not going to take a democratic vote on whether or not to attack."

There is general laughter, and the district attorney and judges grimace in embarrassment. The court secretary, who seemed to have fallen asleep, is startled awake. Kühnen, enjoying his triumph, gazes out at the audience. The mood lightens and even my head-shaking neighbor grins briefly. Kühnen's lawyer, Herr Loebe, laughs sardonically. Laughter makes it so easy to forget the past. I flip through my notes. Colleagues told me confidentially that Loebe's firm had also handled business in Germany for Josef Mengele, the notorious chief doctor at Auschwitz.

My information about Kühnen himself is sketchy. He was born in 1955 into a middle-class family, was raised a Catholic, and has been politically active since the age of fifteen. Kühnen was even, briefly, a Maoist, and he stands by his past.

"Today I still consider Maoism to be a sort of Chinese National Socialism," he explains to the court.

It is tempting to write off Michael Kühnen as an unrealistic, radical crackpot. But no one in this court underestimates him and, sad to say, his record shows that they are right not to. Of his eighteen years in the extremist movement, he has spent seven and a half in prison, mostly for crimes like those he is accused of today. The charges are not restricted to propaganda, but also include "defamation of the state," "wearing a forbidden uniform" (the brown shirt of the SA, with belt buckle and ammunition), and even assault and battery. Kühnen has always been a ringleader, a danger-

ous man—the sort of person my instincts and better judgment would ordinarily have kept me far away from.

Nevertheless, I am, through a strange chain of events, sitting here, trying to get to know him. Like millions of other Germans, in the fall of 1988 I watched a profusion of special televised reports commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht—the Nazi regime's prelude, on November 9, 1938, to the merciless persecution of the Jews, which would end in the historically unique mass extermination of millions of people. Like many others, I was certainly moved. But, then, I thought, ah well, this is all in the past. One report, though, changed my mind completely. A certain Dr. Fritz Hippler, a white-haired old gentleman, appeared on the screen and explained that simple envy was the motive for the persecution of the Jews: the Nazis envied the talented and wealthy. And then the program showed an excerpt of a film Hippler had made for Joseph Goebbels: *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew), a smear film that compared Jews to rats. I couldn't understand it, how could this man speak so calmly?

That got me started. Reading everything I could find on the Third Reich, I soon came across books that were even more shocking, in particular *Die kalte Amnestie* (The Cold Amnesty) by Jörg Friedrich and Ingo Müller's *Die furchtbaren Juristen* (The Terrible Judges). The first describes the reintegration of Nazi criminals into postwar German society, and the second discusses those judges and lawyers who issued verdicts of terror during the Third Reich and who were either allowed to continue their legal careers uninterrupted or were treated mildly by their "colleagues" in the Federal Republic. Thanks to legal technicalities, even the worst offenders received mercy instead of justice. For example, in March 1957 the state court in Stuttgart sentenced Dr. Günter Venediger to two years' penal servitude for acting as an accessory to murder. As the Gestapo chief in Danzig, Venediger had murdered four English prisoners of war. The verdict stated: "Perpetrator regarding the execution of these four officers in Danzig was Adolf Hitler, the former Führer and Chancellor. He acted illegally and with criminal intent."

This brazen miscarriage of justice disturbed me deeply. What, I wondered, were those old Nazis up to these days? And the ones out

yelling “Germany for the Germans!” today—were they just chips off the old block? These are the new Nazis, I thought, a sentiment that grew and grew in me. I would feel guilty myself if I did not do something to fight them. But what could I do?

Months later, here in Frankfurt, I am studying the defendant. Neither of us experienced the National Socialist reign of terror directly. Yet Kühnen is the very model of the unscrupulous and fanatical *Führer* whom millions followed into suffering and disaster.

For months now I had been researching the neo-Nazis, together with Graeme Atkinson, the European editor for the English newspaper *Searchlight*. Graeme is also an adviser to the European Parliament’s Committee of Inquiry into Racism and Xenophobia in Europe and has devoted his life to investigating such activities. In the course of his work he has often disguised himself and infiltrated neo-Nazi groups. Today, for the first time, I am meeting an actual representative of the neo-Nazis. According to Graeme, Michael Kühnen is an important, if not central, figure in the German scene. During a pause in the hearing, I approach the defendant, who doesn’t bat an eyelash. I almost have the impression that he expected to speak with me, and he agrees immediately to an interview after the next session.

Four days later, near the courthouse, we met at a café on a busy commercial street. Kühnen is sitting in the back of the room, behind a barrier of flowers, where we won’t be disturbed. He is not alone. A maternal-looking woman—around fifty, small, with short dark hair and a friendly face—is sitting with him. She was a witness at the trial today, and in the courtroom one got the impression she was no more than a casual acquaintance of Kühnen’s. She “didn’t know” the answers to most of the questions she was asked. In reality she is a key figure in the movement. Her name is Christa Goerth and she is the chairwoman of the HNG (Hilfsorganisation für nationale politische Gefangene und deren Angehörige e.V.—Relief Agency for National Political Prisoners and Their Dependents), an important neo-Nazi umbrella organization. Only later would I discover the HNG’s real mission. Today Goerth does not interest me

nearly so much as Kühnen. Yet I am struck by her ability to argue on topics that create interest and attention, and that perhaps even win sympathy: "Nuclear power is a crime no matter what! It's just so irresponsible to let hundreds of power plants keep running, every day and every minute producing all that poison that can never, ever be disposed of or controlled."

Amazing, I thought. Neo-Nazis against nuclear power! What will the Greens make of this?

Goerth notices my interest and continues.

"It is just such an enormous crime that, really, only with all possible force and might—you know, a gentle excursion just won't work here, only killing will." Maybe the Greens don't need to know about this after all.

Kühnen agrees with her enthusiastically. He examines me closely while Goerth gushes about energy policy. Then, with considerable didactic skill, he shows me just how seriously he and his movement must be taken.

"I think our chances are good," he says. "This system is not solving any of its problems, and problems that aren't solved and are continually put off only get bigger. And the longer they're put off, the more likely it is that one day the living conditions of the masses will become so dire that mass discontent will result. And then, when they are totally discontented, when they are in the mood for rebellion and revolution, the masses will follow those who have carried on the most credible, lengthy, consistent, and firm opposition."

Kühnen speaks forcefully. In the mirror behind him I notice that other guests are looking over at us. Kühnen glances around before continuing more quietly, though no less forcefully.

"And so, right now I see my task as nothing less than to make sure that everyone who is halfway interested in politics knows that this alternative exists. Then, when the crisis situation arises, they will remember it. I am completely certain of it. But I can't make any predictions as to when the time will come."

In 1923, Hitler and a few supporters attempted a sensational putsch. Although it failed, by mythologizing the event and using his trial to spread propaganda he brought himself to the attention of the entire population. Sentenced to five years' imprisonment, Hitler



was released after just nine months. And ten years later he was in power. His “logic” was similar to that now used by Kühnen, who has brought the past into our time.

In Germany, these days, one often hears that “Bonn is not Weimar.” This expression is generally employed to dismiss warnings of the growing danger to German democracy from the radical right. But such a slogan is a hollow reassurance, for the tactics of the right are almost unchanged. Again we see the clever method of spinning political capital out of popular discontent. Earlier, the principal watchwords were “the yoke of Versailles” and “the influence of the Jews.” In 1989 Germany’s division and “the foreigner problem,” and in 1991 Maastricht as “Versailles without a war” and “the refugee problem,” served the same political purpose. The right-wing parties all advance the same arguments. The pronouncements of the REP (Republicans), the NPD (National Democrats), the DVU (German People’s Union), and the openly neofascist FAP (Free Workers’ Party) differ only in their degree of clarity and radicalism.

“The Republicans say what many people think, and I say what many Republicans think.” Kühnen sits opposite me, and his searching eyes register every one of my reactions. Now and then he playfully twists his silver chain bracelet. He drinks “Spezi,” a combination of Coca-Cola and orange soda. He thanks me but refuses my cigarettes, preferring his own menthol brand. His cigarette glows as he inhales deeply, and then he continues.

“Just two days ago I had a small meeting in Bielefeld. Half the people there were members of the NPD and the DVU and the Republicans. One man extremely active in the local Republicans came up to me. He said, ‘I’m a Republican, I belong to the party. I hope that I can use it to accomplish something for my ideas, but naturally I can’t say that to the Republicans.’”

In the background is the sound of glasses tinkling and jazz music. Kühnen flicks the ash off his cigarette and stares at me. “And these people are happy that there are men like me around, that there are platforms, publications, and other opportunities to express them-