

# GAVRIEL D. ROSENFELD. *The Fourth Reich: The Specter of Nazism from World War II to the Present.*

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In his most recent book, *The Fourth Reich: The Specter of Nazism from World War II to the Present*, Gavriel D. Rosenfeld historicizes the recurring idea of a “Fourth Reich”: in terms of anxieties about resurgent Nazism, as a loaded rhetorical metaphor, and as a pulp novel and horror movie plot. A work of counterfactual history, the book sets out to understand something that never existed but which has nevertheless regularly returned in the way of the undead to the forefront of popular culture in various disturbing guises.

The idea of a transcendent Reich—a realm of spiritual perfection where good triumphs over evil—has endured in Europe since the Middle Ages. After the German defeat in World War I, *völkisch* intellectuals resurrected chiliastic hopes for a “new” and redemptive Reich—following in historical succession from the Holy Roman Empire to the Wilhelmine Empire of 1871, the “next” Reich would implicitly be the third. Adolf Hitler himself did not favor the idea of a Third Reich rhetorically, but the Nazi press extolled his 1933 appointment as chancellor as the foundation of that realm.

People spoke of a Fourth Reich even before the Third Reich’s inception. Some visions for it were utopian, imagining a time when a particularistic German empire would yield to a grander, universal

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rebirth. Once the Nazis took power, though, it was their opponents' turn to dream of a democratic post-Nazi Germany. The German Jewish journalist and former Social Democratic Reichstag representative Georg Bernhard even drafted a constitution for a fabled future Fourth Reich. From the other end of the political spectrum came the visions of dissident ex-Nazis, such as Black Front founder Otto Strasser, who imagined a realm that would embody the socialist principles the NSDAP had abandoned. Meanwhile, others hoped for a Christian or monarchist Fourth Reich. And some conservative and liberal members of the anti-Nazi resistance similarly found in the Fourth Reich an aspirational ideal of their own.

In short, the signifier remained quite fluid until the latter stages of World War II, when British and American observers began to refer to a Fourth Reich as what they feared might develop out of Nazism's defeat—an unrepentant rightist resistance. The fear was not without justification. Werewolf groups launched numerous assaults at the war's end, some against the Allies, but most against Germans they feared would defect to the Allies. Even after the Third Reich's total defeat, Allied occupation, economic dislocation, and bitterness over denazification inspired continuing acts of sabotage. Underground groups of ex-SS and Wehrmacht veterans, like Deutsche Revolution, saw themselves as the vanguard of a resurgent Reich.

This specter inspired fear in Western Europe and North America until the mid-1950s. Given what, from today's vantage, appears to have been the stability of Konrad Adenauer's Federal Republic of Germany, such fears may seem misplaced. But as Rosenfeld rightly describes, there were various potential threats to the FRG, not least the ex-Nazis running the state. Norbert Frei has described the deal Adenauer made to amnesty former Nazis' crimes in exchange for their allegiance to democracy. But some forces remained unmoved by the terms of that agreement. Until it was declared "hostile to the state" and then banned in 1952, the Socialist Reich Party rallied its faithful behind the creation of a Fourth Reich. In some districts, the party received nearly 30 percent of the vote, and in a few communities more than that. More disturbing still was the Naumann Circle, led by Werner Naumann, a former state secretary in the Reich Propaganda Ministry. The circle conspired to infiltrate the liberal Free Democratic Party,

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hoping to turn its program to the circle's ends: a rejection of denazification and blanket amnesty for war criminals. British occupation officials arrested Naumann and his collaborators in 1953.

By the mid-1950s, the Fourth Reich idea had become decisively associated with the Far Right, as it has remained to the present. It also began to relocate. In 1959, a wave of neo-Nazi vandalism in West Germany was followed by a similar wave in Western Europe and North America, especially the United States. In small American towns and large cities alike, swastikas appeared on the walls of synagogues, Hillel houses, and other Jewish institutions. The Anti-Defamation League published a study of the attacks in 1961 and found that many of the vandals belonged to neo-Nazi clubs, like Kansas City's Nordic Fourth Reich.

At the same time that the idea was being universalized, Rosenfeld shows, it was also aestheticized. Increasingly emptied of its original historical content, it began to emerge as a more generic moral indictment or outré signifier, as when biker gangs and rock bands called themselves "the Fourth Reich." Yet the term's political potency remained intact. During the Vietnam War era, and amid the unfulfilled promise of the civil rights movement, American activists on the Left weaponized it to describe their own country.

The aestheticization was complete by the 1970s. That decade saw an explosion of pop-culture products of varying quality fictionalizing a Fourth Reich, from episodes of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* to *The Boys from Brazil*. Even when banal, Rosenfeld argues, such works comprised a field of remembrance.

A chapter on recent German history brings the Fourth Reich idea up to the present. Postunification right-wing intellectuals floated the idea that the German Reich never ceased to exist in 1945 and that the postwar German states—all three of them—were illegitimate.

The Nazis are gone and always there. *The Fourth Reich* reveals how regularly, even continually, extreme rightists with fantasies of future dominion have surfaced in liberal democratic polities, though the book admittedly focuses mostly on Germany and the United States. A key contribution of *The Fourth Reich* is its insistence upon taking that fact seriously. As Rosenfeld and scholars like Kathleen Belew show,

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combatting Far Right movements means understanding the nature of the worlds their members want to create, the future realms they imagine, and the fantasies they project.

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