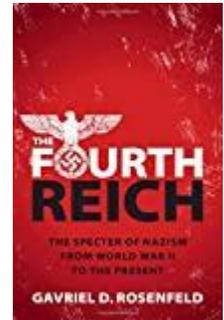


**Gavriel David Rosenfeld.** *The Fourth Reich: The Specter of Nazism from World War II to the Present.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xi + 399 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-49749-7.



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## A Nightmare Averted? The Fourth Reich in History and Memory

“Ever since the collapse of the Third Reich in 1945, a specter has haunted western life—the specter of resurgent Nazism” (p. 2). This is how Gavriel Rosenfeld introduces his comprehensive and absorbing study of an idea that never came to be, the Fourth Reich. An influential advocate for counterfactual history, Rosenfeld goes to great lengths to remind us that just because a Fourth Reich did not rise from the ashes of the Third, in Germany or elsewhere, does not mean it was beyond the realm of possibility.[1] Rosenfeld demonstrates that our established memories of events are determined as much by what might have happened as what did. Rosenfeld reveals that master narratives about Nazism’s afterlife are incomplete and perhaps overly optimistic, specifically West Germany’s inexorable path to economic and political stability after 1949, the seemingly fanciful plots to resurrect a Nazi regime in South America or some other safe haven, and the flashes of neo-Nazi activity in Germany and the United States

that ultimately go nowhere. We dismiss the Fourth Reich as a tired cliché or rhetorical weapon at our own peril, Rosenfeld argues. By historicizing the concept, uncovering its complicated (and often surprising) intellectual, cultural, and political legacies, Rosenfeld has given the Fourth Reich the scholarly attention it deserves.

Rosenfeld begins by locating the origins of the Fourth Reich in the Third. Originally indifferent to the term “Third Reich,” which conservative intellectuals like Arthur Moeller van den Bruck and Dietrich Eckhart used to denigrate the Weimar Republic, Hitler eventually embraced it as a metaphor for national regeneration. Once in power, opponents of the Third Reich conceived of the Fourth Reich as either a vibrant, democratic alternative or an authoritarian regime stripped of Nazi extremism and Hitler’s cult of personality. The German Jewish émigré Georg Bernhard wrote the Draft of a Constitution for the Fourth Reich envisioning a “Reich of Peace” dedicated to “freedom

of conscience ... and the equality of all classes and races” (p. 36). Contrarily, Otto Strasser, an early Nazi Party member exiled for challenging Hitler’s position as party leader, continued to push for a socialist platform. Strasser later returned to West Germany to rally former Nazis and other like-minded citizens behind failed political parties like the Socialist Reich Party and German Social Union.

Rosenfeld notes that in the 1930s and early 1940s the Fourth Reich “came to acquire a Jewish inflection” because émigré communities like Washington Heights, New York, invoked the term ironically, hopeful that the Third Reich would pass quickly (p. 36). As the war entered its final phase, the Fourth Reich acquired a more sinister tone. German resistance hardened and Nazi officials used the term as a propaganda weapon to instill fear. The Allies responded by associating the Fourth Reich not with a democracy-in-waiting, but a restored Nazi regime capable of wreaking havoc during the occupation and beyond.

Chapter 2 covers the period between the end of the war and the establishment of West Germany in 1949, emphasizing the failed albeit dangerous Werewolf movement and lesser-known plots by former Nazis to strangle the nascent German democracy in the crib. While the Werewolves were dedicated to preserving the Third Reich by evoking terror among the war-weary German population and approaching Allies, they failed to alter events. However, their example inspired those working for a Fourth Reich on German soil. Two such efforts include an abortive coup in the spring of 1946 instigated by Artur Axmann, the Hitler Youth leader between 1940 and 1945, and a failed rebellion by a Nazi underground organization called “Deutsche Revolution” in the spring of 1947. The US Army Counter-Intelligence Corps crushed both conspiracies handily, but Rosenfeld asks why historians neglect these episodes. “Seen from the perspective of early 1947—a time when Germany’s reconstruction was barely underway

and its democratization far from assured—fears of a Nazi comeback were hardly irrational” (p. 88).

In chapter 3, Rosenfeld extends this perspective by emphasizing the contingent nature of post-war Germany’s success. Like Monica Black’s excellent book *A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder Doctors, and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany* (2020), Rosenfeld challenges and complicates the whiggish interpretation of West Germany as an inevitable success story. Black’s work explores the strange ways Germany’s profound and enduring guilt and unresolved trauma manifested itself in postwar society. Rosenfeld reveals that the Nazi movement was still strong, disorganized perhaps, but dangerous to the Konrad Adenauer government, which faced enormous pressure to grant a general amnesty for tens of thousands of ex-Nazis and integrate them fully into West German society. Of course, many prominent former Nazis served in the Adenauer government. Rosenfeld entertains another counterfactual—what if Social Democratic Party leader Kurt Schumacher had guided West Germany through the 1950s and not Adenauer? Rosenfeld argues very little would have been different, noting that the integration of ex-Nazis was “unavoidable” (p. 157). His conclusion is difficult to dispute.

In chapter 4, which covers the turbulent 1960s, the Fourth Reich becomes a transatlantic phenomenon. Once universalized, “an all-purpose signifier of contemporary evil,” the Fourth Reich lost its specificity and, in Rosenfeld’s view, became subject to “symbolic inflation” (p. 159). Politicians, civil rights activists, antiwar activists, and the fourth estate in West Germany, East Germany, and the United States used the term so indiscriminately that the concept was devalued. The ubiquity with which American activists cited Fourth Reich analogies “reflected the increasing universalization of the Nazi past” (p. 186). Those familiar with Rosenfeld’s *Hi Hitler!* will recognize his discomfort with releasing Nazi signs and signifiers from their original context for the purposes of com-

menting on contemporary sociopolitical issues. This is not to say doing so is never warranted, but Rosenfeld applies a high standard.

Rosenfeld addresses cultural representation in different sections of the book, but chapter 5 —“Hitler in Argentina!”—is devoted to the Fourth Reich’s captivating fictional life in the “long 1970s.” Already universalized as a political and rhetorical weapon in the 1960s, the Fourth Reich was increasingly portrayed in pop culture as “an international conspiracy being plotted by a diaspora community of fugitive Nazis in Latin America, the Middle East, and even the United States” (p. 192). From *The Boys from Brazil* (1978) and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) to the ubiquitous “Nazisplotation” books and films blanketing pop culture, the Fourth Reich’s cultural turn reflected the growing popularity of Hitler biographies, increased knowledge of the Holocaust resulting from the Adolf Eichmann trial, and fascination with Third Reich history and memorabilia. Rosenfeld’s wariness of aestheticizing the Third and Fourth Reichs is apparent, but he is careful to discern between earnest and superficial appropriation, recognizing a distinct generational difference between authors who were actually WWII vets and those who came of age after 1945. The Fourth Reich existed on several planes, one in which the memory of the Nazi era served to educate and motivate positive action, and another in which Nazis were simply fodder for entertainment. In either case, the fictional Fourth Reich was another indication of the normalization of memory.

The Fourth Reich understandably made a comeback with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and reunification. Chapter 6 “re-Germanizes” the Fourth Reich, tracing its uses and abuses from the late 1980s to the present. The prospect of a unified German state in the heart of Europe, an economic hegemon with a dangerous past, alarmed neighbors and allies. Rosenfeld cites some of the more alarmist op-eds and political speeches all but declaring that the new Germany was destined to be-

come a Fourth Reich. Margaret Thatcher even convened a group of historians to seriously interrogate the possibility, ultimately listening to more measured advice. Just because an aggressive, anti-democratic Germany did not materialize in 1990 does not negate the fact that a significant population of Germans wanted it to. Once again, Rosenfeld reminds us of how rocky the road to stability truly was for unified Germany. A new generation of extremists and political parties unleashed a wave of anti-immigrant violence and marshalled surprising gains in regional elections, particularly in the East. From the resurrection of the National Democratic Party of Germany and creation of the Alternative for Germany Party (AfD) to explicit calls for a Fourth Reich by the Reich Citizens Movement, the New Right was emboldened by the end of the Cold War. The financial crisis of 2008, which placed Germany at the center of the EU response, elicited hyperbolic and alarmist charges against Angela Merkel’s austerity measures. Greece, in particular, accused Germany of the most egregious crimes, proving the Fourth Reich analogy has lost none of its rhetorical appeal.

Obviously, the threat emanating from extremist groups longing for a Fourth Reich has not dissipated. Germany just placed the AfD under domestic surveillance as a threat to democracy, a move Rosenfeld would interpret as proof that worrying about the Fourth Reich has value. “If it is a myth,” he writes, “it has been a necessary one. The role of the Fourth Reich in postwar Germany history underscores the probationary power of memory” (p. 292). Rosenfeld is characteristically circumspect about casually dropping the “f-word” when it comes to Donald Trump’s political legacy. Those familiar with the often tedious “Is Trump a fascist?” debate might appreciate Rosenfeld’s demand for specificity and context, but his calls for vigilance are all the more powerful because of this. Rosenfeld succeeds brilliantly in prompting readers to think critically about the Fourth Reich, writing the definitive history of “a nightmare

averted” that nonetheless “could foretell a disaster to come” (p. 295).

Note

[1]. See Rosenfeld’s previous works, specifically *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of the Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), and *Hi Hitler!: How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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