

Neo-Nazi ideas can't go unchallenged

By
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This guest column was submitted by Alvin H. Rosenfeld of Bloomington. He holds the Irving M. Glazer Chair in Jewish Studies at Indiana University and serves as director of IU's Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism.

Hatred comes in many forms. The worst of these in recent decades has been Nazi hatred. It took the lives of tens of millions of innocent people during World War II and focused on the total destruction of Jews. Unrestrained for too long, Nazi power brought catastrophe upon Germany, the country that nurtured and empowered it.

Today's Germany, a free, thriving, and democratic country, prohibits the public display of Nazi signs, slogans and salutes. While some people in the country are trying to revive far-right sentiments, anyone defying these bans on introducing Nazi symbolism into the public domain is denounced and subject to the penalties of German law.

Astonishingly, as we just saw in Charlottesville, Virginia, the streets of American cities are now venues for large-scale rallies in which Nazi insignia (the swastika), Nazi slogans ("blood and soil"), and Nazi chants ("Jews will not replace us") are proudly put on open display.

To encourage participation in this hate-fest, a poster produced by the extremist website the Daily Stormer features a drawing of a muscular man aiming a sledge hammer at a Jewish star. Designed as a recruiting tool for a newly energized white supremacist movement, the poster reads, "Charlottesville, August 12, Unite the Right, End Jewish Influence in America."

Lots of people responded to this call and marched in the streets of Charlottesville, many carrying torches reminiscent of both Nazi and KKK nighttime rallies. Some accompanied their hateful chants against Jews, blacks, and others with stiff-armed Nazi salutes. And some wore T-shirts featuring words of exhortation to get out and fight. The words are pointedly ascribed to their infamous author: Adolf Hitler.

Who would have thought that Hitler's name and the political program it represents would find their way unabashedly onto the streets of today's America? Yet, that is just what we have been seeing.

James Alex Field Jr., the man accused of ramming his speeding car into a crowd of counterprotesters, reportedly idolized Hitler. The minds of some of his fellow marchers appear to be similarly distorted. Christopher Cantwell, one of the rally's most vocal leaders and a man given to voicing extreme anti-Semitic views, angrily condemned President Trump, in a widely seen videotaped interview, for "giving his beautiful daughter to a Jew."

In this same interview, one of his fellow marchers spat out, "this city is run by Jewish communists and criminal n-----s." Anti-black and anti-Jewish hatreds are integral to the world views of "Unite the Right" partisans. More than any longing to safeguard the monuments of the old Confederacy, these attitudes help to energize the white supremacy project.

We know where these despicable notions come from. Hitler's "Mein Kampf," whose reprint has been banned in Germany, is circulating broadly these days in many countries, including our own. Anyone who reads it or listens to Hitler's speeches should have no trouble understanding the toxic ideas and destructive passions that animated the man and all he stood for. The Nazi leader's followers, whose numbers were modest in the beginning, grew in a relatively short time into a mass movement. It began with rallies in German cities, rapidly developed into street brawls, and ultimately brought ruin on their country and much of the rest of Europe.

That's a history that we dare not repeat, yet some of its early signs are now apparent in this country. They need to be quickly and effectively opposed, and from every quarter of American public life. Otherwise, we run the awful risk of seeing Charlottesville as merely the prelude to more and worse to come.