

## The Fourth Reich

Ever since the collapse of the Third Reich, anxieties have persisted about Nazism's revival in the form of a Fourth Reich. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld reveals, for the first time, these postwar nightmares of a future that never happened and explains what they tell us about western political, intellectual, and cultural life. He shows how postwar German history might have been very different without the fear of the Fourth Reich as a mobilizing idea to combat the right-wing forces that genuinely threatened the country's democratic order. He then explores the universalization of the Fourth Reich by left-wing radicals in the 1960s, its transformation into a source of pop culture entertainment in the 1970s, and its embrace by authoritarian populists and neo-Nazis seeking to attack the European Union since the year 2000. This is a timely analysis of a concept that is increasingly relevant in an era of surging right-wing politics.

**Gavriel D. Rosenfeld** is Professor of History at Fairfield University. He has published widely on the Third Reich, the Holocaust, and the Second World War, including *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture*, which won the Sybil Halpern Milton Memorial Book Prize for the best book dealing with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-49749-7 — The Fourth Reich  
Gavriel D. Rosenfeld  
Frontmatter  
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The Specter of Nazism from World  
War II to the Present

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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 Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
 New Delhi – 110025, India  
 79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108497497](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108497497)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108628587

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First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow Cornwall

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

NAMES: Rosenfeld, Gavriel David, 1967– author.

TITLE: The Fourth Reich : the specter of Nazism from World War II to the present / Gavriel D. Rosenfeld.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2019.

| Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2018042760 | ISBN 9781108497497 (alk. paper)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Germany – Politics and government – 1945–1990.

| Germany – Politics and government – 1990– | Germany – History – Errors, inventions, etc. | National socialism – History. | Nazis – History. | Right-wing extremists – Germany. | Political culture – Germany. | Collective memory – Western countries. | Fear – Political aspects – Western countries. | Political culture – Western countries.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC DD257.4 .R67 2019 | DDC 320.53/3–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018042760>

ISBN 978-1-108-49749-7 Hardback

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## CONTENTS

*List of Illustrations* page vi  
*Preface* ix

Introduction 1

- 1 Between Fantasy and Nightmare: Inventing the Fourth Reich in the Third Reich 19
- 2 From Werewolves to Democrats: The Fourth Reich under Allied Occupation 56
- 3 The Fourth Reich Turns Right: Renazifying Germany in the 1950s 106
- 4 From Germany to the United States: Universalizing the Fourth Reich in the Turbulent 1960s 158
- 5 “Hitler in Argentina!”: Fictionalizing the Fourth Reich in the Long 1970s 191
- 6 Re-Germanizing the Fourth Reich: From Reunification to the Reich Citizens’ Movement 241

Conclusion 285

*Acknowledgments* 297  
*Notes* 298  
*Bibliography* 371  
*Index* 392

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1.1 SPD poster, “Das Dritte Reich!” page 26
- 1.2 Colossus from the Book of Daniel 29
- 1.3 Fourth Reich diagram from *Adolf Hitler and Those Who Are Still to Come* 33
- 1.4 Georg Bernhard 35
- 1.5 Otto Strasser 40
- 1.6 Cover of *Phantom Victory* 51
- 2.1 Dolf Sternberger 62
- 2.2 Hans-Adolf Prützmann 66
- 2.3 Artur Axmann 77
- 2.4 Klaus Barbie 83
- 2.5 Poster of *The Stranger* 90
- 2.6 Poster of *Snowbound* 92
- 2.7 Victor Klemperer 98
- 2.8 Carlo Schmid 100
- 3.1 Cover of *Nazis Preferred* 111
- 3.2 Otto Ernst Remer 115
- 3.3 SRP poster 118
- 3.4 Werner Naumann 124
- 3.5 Cover of *Das Vierte Reich* 137
- 3.6 Konrad Adenauer 139
- 3.7 Kurt Schumacher 145
- 4.1 Swastika graffiti in Cologne 163
- 4.2 Cover of *Heusinger of the Fourth Reich* 167
- 4.3 Adolf von Thadden 174

## vii / List of Illustrations

- 4.4 George Lincoln Rockwell 180
- 4.5 H. Rap Brown 182
- 4.6 Poster of “The Rise and Fall of the Fourth Reich” 184
- 4.7 Album cover of *The Fourth Reich: The Communazis Exposed* 187
- 5.1 Simon Wiesenthal 195
- 5.2 Martin Bormann 197
- 5.3 Adolf Eichmann 202
- 5.4 Cover of *The Strasbourg Legacy* 210
- 5.5 Poster of *The Odessa File* 212
- 5.6 Cover of *The Holcroft Covenant* 213
- 5.7 Page from *Captain America* featuring Red Skull 215
- 5.8 Poster of *The Boys from Brazil* 218
- 5.9 Still from *The Quiller Memorandum* 235
- 6.1 Manfred Roeder 252
- 6.2 Michael Kühnen 254
- 6.3 Cover of *Staatsbriefe* 257
- 6.4 Reinhold Oberlercher 261
- 6.5 Fourth Reich flag, based on 1943–44 design by Josef Wirmer 263
- 6.6 Horst Mahler 265
- 6.7 German PEGIDA protesters 270
- 6.8 Greek protesters in Athens 279

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Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

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## PREFACE

What kind of person would write about something that he knows doesn't exist?

Philip K. Dick

There is no Fourth Reich. There never has been. So why would anyone write a historical study about it? Philip K. Dick's question implies that the author of such a study must be something of a contrarian. I do not consider myself to be such a person. But I have nonetheless been fascinated by the idea of the Fourth Reich for a very long time. I first came across the idea while writing my books, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (2005) and *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (2015). Both dealt with the subject of counterfactual history – with “what if?” narratives about the Third Reich. In researching these studies, I occasionally came across works of literature, film, and television that imagined postwar Nazis trying to return to power and establish a “Fourth Reich.” At the time, I refrained from thinking deeply about this scenario as it was outside of my area of focus. It did not so much examine what might have happened in the past as what might still happen in the future.

Gradually, however, I realized that the concept of a Fourth Reich was deeply historical. Over the course of the last decade, I noticed how the concept kept surfacing in media coverage of current events. Following the eruption of the Great Recession of 2008, European commentators accused the German chancellor, Angela

x / Preface

Merkel, of imposing a Fourth Reich on Europe by forcing other EU countries to embrace austerity measures. Leftist political activists branded the Israeli government a Fourth Reich because of its military actions in Gaza and Lebanon. And American commentators raised the alarm that President Donald Trump was threatening to establish a Fourth Reich in the United States. Given all of these trends, I became curious why critics were articulating their political fears in such polemical fashion and began researching the Fourth Reich's origins as a concept. I soon realized that it had a long and complex history. The fear of a Nazi return to power had been a constant presence in postwar western political, intellectual, and cultural life.

Studying this fear historically is complicated, as it places us in the difficult position of passing judgment on people who had no way of knowing whether or not their concerns were legitimate. Today, we enjoy the benefit of hindsight and can easily view postwar anxieties about a Nazi return to power in Germany – or anywhere else – as overblown. Those who lived in the early postwar years, however, had no idea how the future would unfold. To place ourselves back into the mindset of those people, to identify with their fears despite our subsequent knowledge, is challenging. But it is doable.

All of us have been held hostage by fear at one point or another in our lives. I think back to my years growing up in the bucolic college town of Bloomington, Indiana. In the summer of 1983, I returned from a month away at summer camp to learn the shocking news from my parents that our local synagogue had been damaged in an arson attack. Unknown assailants had started a fire at the base of the Torah ark, from which it spread to the sanctuary before being extinguished, leaving tens of thousands of dollars of damage.<sup>1</sup> Without any break in the case, unease persisted. Then a year later, in October of 1984, there was another shock: a Jewish fraternity house on the campus of Indiana University, less than a ten-minute walk from my house, was set on fire, killing one student and injuring thirty-four others.<sup>2</sup> Having grown up with a father who was a professor of Holocaust literature and the director of the university's Jewish Studies program, I was well aware of the history of antisemitism and was convinced that a wave of anti-Jewish violence was upon us. My fears were somewhat alleviated by the revelation that the perpetrator of the fraternity attack had been involved in a drunken brawl with several members earlier that night and was seeking revenge rather than acting on antisemitic motives.<sup>3</sup> But

xi / Preface

they were reinforced when the FBI subsequently arrested a white supremacist group for the synagogue attack.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, the group's members were swiftly brought to justice, and the threat was neutralized. Before long, I recognized that my fears of an antisemitic wave had been exaggerated. The constellation of local events had been a coincidence, not a harbinger. My knowledge of the tragic Jewish past had distorted my view of the future.

Ever since those childhood experiences, I have been sensitive to the paradoxes of historical memory. I am well aware of George Santayana's famous claim that those who forget history are condemned to repeat it. But I am equally aware of Otto Friedrich's observation that "those who cannot forget the past are condemned to misunderstand it."<sup>5</sup> Just as we should not be overly naive about the possible recurrence of historical threats, we should also not be overly alarmist. This is an admonition that is especially difficult to heed these days. We are living in an era of omnipresent fears – of economic instability, social dislocation, political upheaval, and cultural conflict. The clash between globalists and nationalists, the potential "clash of civilizations" between the western and Muslim worlds, the resurgence of authoritarian populism, the possible return of fascism – all of these things have left us profoundly uncertain about our collective future. Unsure how things will turn out, we prefer to err on the side of vigilance and highlight the "lessons" of the past in order to guard against their repetition.

It is particularly timely, therefore, to revisit how earlier generations responded to their own fears by analyzing the postwar history of a nightmare that never happened – the creation of a Fourth Reich. It may be comforting to recognize how people not too long ago were paralyzed by concerns that proved to be groundless. Perhaps we, too, will one day look back on our present-day anxieties and sheepishly admit that we worried for nothing. On the other hand, studying the Fourth Reich helps us realize that postwar fears of a Nazi return to power were also grounded in real dangers – ones that might have been realized had circumstances been slightly different. By revealing how contingencies can determine history – by reminding us that our world was hardly inevitable – this book warns against complacency. By revealing how our worst fears have gone unrealized, it cautions against hysteria. By examining how people have contended with fears in the past, it shows how they might cope with fear in the present.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-49749-7 — The Fourth Reich  
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