

The second time as farce

by GWYNNE DYER

'History repeats itself - the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce,' said Karl Marx. He was talking about European history, of course, and here it comes again, a century later, doing a tribute act to the 1920s.

In Germany, we have had a replay of Hitler's failed coup attempt of 1923. The first of three trials opened in Stuttgart this week, targeting nine alleged ringleaders of the 'military wing' of the far-right 'Reichsbürger' group who were arrested two years ago on charges of high treason, attempted murder, and membership of a terrorist organisation.

Further mass trials will follow in Frankfurt this month for the 'political wing' and in Munich in June for what the prosecutors chose to call the 'esoteric wing'. There's a clue there, if you are paying attention. These would-be emulators of Adolf Hitler are not actually ex-stormtroopers hardened by years in the trenches. They are nasty but marginal fantasists.

Another clue lies in the name of their leader, a 72-year-old self-styled aristocrat calling himself Heinrich XIII, Prince Reuss. They really did want to take over Germany and remake it as a neo-fascist state, they really did hate the Jews, and at least some of them were willing to kill, but they were never a serious threat.

In Italy, where the other great inter-war dictator, Benito Mussolini, seized power and created the world's first fascist state in 1922, there is already a neo-fascist in power. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni formed her first government in 2022, but she uses no violence, she's loyal to the NATO alliance, and she seems almost harmless.

Maybe she's just biding her time, but there's no sign that she is planning to invade Ethiopia or even Greece. There are no gangs of fascist thugs beating people to death, and no political prisoners. Life in Italy is pretty normal, in fact.

So it is in Spain, although you wouldn't think so if you listened to the People's Party (PP), the increasingly hard-right, ultra-nationalist opposition to Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's Socialist Workers' Party. The PP calls him a 'psychopath', a 'traitor', and a 'terrorist sympathiser' who deserves to be 'strung up by his feet,' but it obeys the law.

Claims that the Spanish prime minister's wife is really a man and that her family runs the drug trade in Morocco were so hurtful that Sánchez took five days off to ponder whether he really wants to stay in politics. However, it's really just the online rules of engagement leaking into the real world. There's no new Franco plotting an armed fascist rebellion.

And in Poland the ultra-nationalist, militantly religious Law and Justice Party was voted out of power last year despite claiming that the opposition leader, Donald Tusk, is planning to give half the of Poland to Russia and bring 'German order' to what's left. (You know, exactly like the Nazis did).

The point is that the Law and Justice Party didn't win, and neither did the PP in Spain.

Meloni only won by pretending very hard not to be a fascist, and the Reichsbürger in Germany were just a comic opera group (albeit with loaded guns).

Marine Le Pen in France may come closer to winning the presidency on her fourth try in 2027 than ever before, but her Rassemblement National party has achieved that by ditching almost all of its extreme-right policies except for its trademark hostility to immigration.

Britain's Conservative Party has shifted steadily to the right during its fourteen years in power, but whatever influence that might have had in the alleged rightward migration of other European parties was nullified by its lunatic obsession with 'Brexit' and its

stunning incompetence and indiscipline. It will be all but annihilated in the election due this year.

The Labour Party which will take its place is pretending to have no intention of shifting the United Kingdom even a millimetre to the left, because it is superstitiously terrified of scaring the voters back into the arms of the Conservatives, but that is not a realistic possibility. After it wins, it will set about rescuing the welfare state.

The results of the forthcoming elections to the European Union's parliament may provide some apparent evidence for a rightward drift in European politics, but that's because people use their EU votes as a safe way to express their dissatisfaction with the economy, However, national elections really matter.

Americans may elect Donald Trump this November and Canadians may elect Pierre Poilievre next year, but Europe is not leading a charge to the right.