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German nationalists mark war's end

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KNIGHT RIDDER

BERLIN - On a stage under Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, during ceremonies marking VE Day -- the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe -- German President Horst Koehler proclaimed Sunday that "racism and right-wing extremism have no chance" in a modern Germany.

But about a mile down Unter den Linden, a path central to Adolf Hitler's plans for the capital of the Third Reich, as Germany was called under Hitler's rule, as many as 3,000 neo-Nazis and nationalist sympathizers in a fenced-in area applauded as a singer noted, "Our hearts are with our heroes, like Rudolph Hess," Hitler's deputy.

A speaker added: "Stop 60 years of liberation lies. Stop the cult of guilt." He was referring to Germany's repeated expression of remorse for German actions during World War II.

Despite Koehler's statements, the National Democratic Party, or NPD, of Germany and other parties commonly associated with the neo-Nazi movement are gaining support in his country.

In the state parliament of Saxony, voters recently elected 12 NPD members. More than 300 local German politicians today are from nationalist parties. In February in Dresden, 5,000 neo-Nazis marched during ceremonies for the 60th anniversary of the Allied bombing of that city.

"The person who hasn't learned from history is sinning against their own nation," Koehler said Sunday. "There are still a few unteachable in this country, but racism and right-wing extremism have no chance here today."

Police, citing fears of clashes with the more than 10,000 anti-Nazi demonstrators nearby, did not allow a planned march by neo-Nazis.

At the rally, a man who would identify himself only as "Frankie" noted that he was tired of the anti-German politics of the West, and even of German politicians.

"Is it fair to call us neo-Nazis?" he asked. "I don't care. I'm a nationalist. That's why I'm here."

Many in the crowd wore T-shirts and buttons referring to the nearby 60th anniversary celebrations, saying, "Celebrate Surrender? No Thank You."

Karl Ulmer, 70, said he was present because he remembered the fall of Berlin and remembered it as a sad time, one that led to decades of the Soviet Union.

"Are we Nazis here, no," he said. "Germany is so far left that anything right of center is seen as Nazi, but that is not the case."