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For Germany, Far-Right Extremism Is a Problem From Hell

Paul Hockenos | Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2021

BERLIN—No European country does more than Germany to confront right-wing extremism—namely xenophobic, anti-democratic movements that perpetrate or extoll violence. Since the end of World War II, against the backdrop of the Nazi regime's crimes, the country has battled far-right extremism in a vast array of ways: using the security apparatus, democracy promotion, educational campaigns and even bans on extremist parties and organizations, among other measures.

One might even say that Germans are specialists in the field—although in Europe, the phenomenon of a violent far right is not unique to Germany. Yet even though Berlin bends over backward to address the scourge, its efforts are often akin to fighting the Hydra monster of Greek mythology: Every time one of its heads is cut off, two seem to grow back.

“If there were an easy answer, we'd have solved this by now,” admits Natascha Strobl, a Vienna-based political scientist and author of books on the far right. “It's not like one policy or program will eliminate the rightist extremism.”

To be clear, Germany is not on the brink of a right-wing takeover—whether by violent extremists or far-right parties like the nationalist-populist Alternative for Germany, or AfD, which garnered 10 percent of the vote in the September general elections and has been represented in Germany's legislature, the Bundestag, since 2017. In fact, surveys show that among the larger population, and especially young people, liberal values are more entrenched than ever (<https://de.statista.com/themen/5671/demokratie-rechtsstaat-und-gewaltenteilung/#dossierKeyfigures>). Yet the actions of a small but very active minority of right-wing extremists endanger immigrants, refugees, Jewish communities and people of color, among others, while contradicting basic democratic standards. Their actions and statements shock most ordinary Germans, but despite regular calls for harder measures and larger budgets to confront the problem, the menace persists.

Since reunification in 1990, right-wing extremist violence has claimed more than 200 lives across Germany. A neo-Nazi terrorist group called the National Socialist Underground terrorized the country for 12 years, carrying out bombings, bank robberies and 10 murders until 2011, when two of the group's three core members committed suicide and the other turned herself in.

More recently, in June 2019, Walter Luebcke, a regional leader of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, was assassinated by one or perhaps two far-right extremists (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28284/in-germany-right-wing-violence-is-a-problem-no-one-wants-to-see>) after publicly supporting Merkel's decision to admit greater numbers of



Demonstrators protest against a rally of right-wing extremists in Dortmund, in Germany's western state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Oct. 9, 2021 (DPA photo by Roland Weihrauch via AP).

refugees in 2015. In October of that year, an extremist gunman unsuccessfully tried to enter a synagogue in the eastern German city of Halle during the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur before turning his weapon on passersby and others, killing two people.

Then, in February 2020, nine people were killed and five others wounded in a terrorist shooting spree by a neo-Nazi in the town of Hanau (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/world/europe/germany-hanau-shisha-bar-shooting.html>), near Frankfurt.

There are regular reports of far-right cells that exist within the police and military. And according to Germany's internal intelligence service (https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/themen/rechtsextremismus/zahlen-und-fakten/zahlen-und-fakten_node.html), the number of known right-wing extremists shot up in 2021 for the second year in a row, reaching 33,300, with 13,000 of them inclined to violence—the highest such figures since the 1990s.

In response, Germany's most recent federal budget has allocated more than \$1.1 billion to programs designed to eradicate rightist extremism. Special police and intelligence divisions, surveillance of the internet, civil society programs and ever-tougher laws are the pillars of a larger strategy to bring the problem under control. Earlier this year, a special government committee recommended spending yet more money and instituting further measures to combat radicalism. "Never before has a federal government done so much to combat right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism as this one. It is a central concern of this government to strengthen our democracy," Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said at the time. (<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/hanau-anschlag-bundespressekonferenz-1.4809324>)

Indeed, the country's top politicians speak out against right-wing extremism consistently and clearly. "Racism is a poison," said Chancellor Angela Merkel after the Hanau shooting. "Hate is a poison. And this poison exists in our society, and it is to blame for far too many crimes already," she said, vowing—again—that the state would do all that it can to counter the scourge.

This year, the federal government topped off the budget with an additional \$200 million for more projects like those already underway. But the blight appears to endure no matter the response, raising the question of whether it is even possible to stamp it out, as virtually the entire German political elite have pledged to do.

The standard critique of leftist politicians—as well as many experts and anti-racism activists—is that the German political system has a right-wing bent, and has since the postwar decades. They argue that the conservative political elite, the judicial system and the security services are "blind in the right eye": unwilling or unable to move effectively against right-wing radicals because they don't see them as dangerous. In fact, say these critics, judges and law enforcement officials often sympathize with the rightists, undermining the very institutions designed to protect citizens and the democratic system.

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"The scandals, one after another uncovering rightist groups within the police and military, underscore how much this is at the heart of the problem," says Strobl. "If the police aren't willing to investigate cases tied to extreme rightists, or if they even assist the radicals, then nothing's going to change."

“There’s been racism anchored in Germany’s security apparatus for decades,” says Britta Schellenberg, a researcher of right-wing extremism based in Munich. “The good news is that it’s becoming more visible, which is a precondition to countering it.”

Indeed, in the postwar decades, the ranks of West Germany’s police, military, conservative political parties and justice system were permeated with former Nazis. But this changed during the 1970s, when old Nazis retired or were selectively purged from state institutions. Today, though, the old Nazi-sympathizers have partly been replaced by a new generation of rightists who have embedded themselves in parts of the police and military.

“Security services tend to attract these types everywhere in the world, not just Germany,” notes Erhard Stolting, a sociologist and professor emeritus at the University of Potsdam. “It’s extremely hard to change this culture.”

While German conservatives generally recognize right-wing extremism as problematic, they tend to equate it with left-wing violence, which does exist in Germany, though on a much smaller scale. Conservatives like Seehofer, the interior minister, tend to believe that both kinds of extremism can be fought with ever-more repressive measures, carried out by the security services. Yet not only has this security-focused approach failed to achieve results, but repressive measures like increased surveillance can undercut the rule of law.

In a similar vein, calls to ban far-right parties and groups run up against freedom of speech and assembly issues. In Germany, where the state can outlaw organizations that, for example, deny the Holocaust, bans have proven largely ineffective. Members of banned groups simply regroup in another form, often underground.

A different track with broad backing is to strengthen Germany’s democratic norms and institutions. The rationale is that democratic culture implicitly contradicts and undermines far-right cultures, and where democratic culture is healthy, the far right can’t make inroads as easily. The purpose of the federal government’s largest anti-extremism program, Live Democracy! (<https://www.demokratie-leben.de/>), is to raise awareness of democratic rights and support democratic education—particularly among children and young people. The projects it funds endorse fundamental democratic principles, such as equality, the rule of law, the protection of human rights and social participation in political processes.

“These programs have helped us build up civil society structures that resist a complete takeover of parts of eastern Germany by the far right,” says Michael Nattke, an anti-racism activist working in the east. “In swaths of Hungary and Poland, they don’t even have this, and the right is dominant there.”

The social climate also appears to play an enormous role in the choices of the far right’s adherents and right-wing voters, like those of the AfD. “It’s not just income level,” says Strobl, “but the sense of being forgotten and not respected. This is often very strong in those poor rural areas and small towns where there’s not even a grocery store any longer, much less a cinema or café.” The far right fills a vacuum in these lifeless hamlets, giving young men in particular something to fill their lives, says Strobl.

Indeed, just about everyone across the mainstream political spectrum sees education as crucial, namely imbuing young people with democratic values from early on. Stolting says that western Germany’s tradition of coming to grips with the past helped postwar Germany find its feet in democracy and shouldn’t be abandoned, even if it’s no silver bullet.

He admits that no amount of information about the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes will change the mind of a convinced Nazi. “The young right-wing extremists just smirk,” he says. “They’re for the Nazis not in spite of what they did, but because of it.”

“The German position at present,” adds Stolting, “isn’t sympathy with the extreme right, but rather helplessness. It doesn’t really know what it can do effectively.”

The parties that will likely comprise the next German government—the Social Democrats, the Greens and the pro-business Free Democrats—have indicated they will take up the fight against extremism anew, focusing on civil liberties and the empowerment of groups that suffer racism and violence. Training sessions for officers will aim to address ingrained prejudices in the security services.

Unsurprisingly, though, the country’s future leaders have not announced that they possess a surefire way to beat back the far right.

Paul Hockenos is a Berlin-based journalist who has lived in and written about Europe for two decades. His most recent book is “Berlin Calling: A Story of Anarchy, Music, the Wall and the Birth of the New Berlin” (<https://thenewpress.com/books/berlin-calling>) (New Press).

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