

FAR-RIGHT TERRORISM IN GERMANY A PERSISTENT AND GROWING THREAT

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Late in the evening on 19 February 2020 in the city of Hanau, Germany, a man already known to local authorities as a right-wing extremist entered two shisha bars and began [executing patrons](#) he perceived as “foreigners”, ultimately killing nine and injuring five more. Branded an act of terrorism by the German government, the horrifying murders prompted waves of shock and outrage across the country and even the world, with over 10,000 people attending a rally to mourn the victims and denounce racism and fascism four days later. Although by no means the first racist killing to happen in Germany in recent years, the nature of the shooting in Hanau appeared to strike a nerve in a way that other recent murders, such as the 2019 assassination of [Walter Lübcke](#) in Kassel, had not.

Before being overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic several weeks later, the terrorist shootings in Hanau also prompted a renewed debate in domestic and international media about the nature and scale of right-wing terror in Germany—a country that generally prides itself on how well it has dealt with its fascist past and where, at least according to the official narrative, far-right forces have since been marginalized. But is this really the case? After all, what happened in Hanau was not without precedent. Last fall, a [massacre of the Jewish congregation](#) in the city of Halle was narrowly avoided when the attacker failed to pry open the local synagogue’s doors. He nevertheless killed two innocent victims. In 2018, the [city of Chemnitz](#) made headlines after a racist mob marched through the city harassing anyone they perceived to be left-wing or foreign. And lest we forget, it was less than a decade ago that the [National Socialist Underground](#) (NSU) was exposed as a neo-Nazi terrorist network that had engaged in targeted murderers of immigrants since the 1990s. Right-wing violence, it seems, is nothing new in Germany—it’s just getting more attention.

Loren Balhorn sat down with Friedrich Burschel, the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung’s in-house expert on far-right extremism and a long-time observer of how the German state deals with neo-Nazis, to get a better understanding of how far-right violence in modern Germany has grown in recent years and what, if anything, can be done about it.

First Chemnitz, then Kassel, now Hanau. Has there actually been an increase in the number of incidents of far-right violence in Germany over the last two years, or does it just feel that way because they're getting more attention?

Chemnitz does not quite fit into that list, since it refers more to a political moment than an act of right-wing violence, even if some of the Nazis in attendance did attack the police. The political moment occurred when all the actors of the "racial uprising" in the country gathered in front of the big statue of Karl Marx's head there: the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) leader [Björn Höcke](#) (leader of the AfD parliamentary group in Thuringia) and his entourage, consisting of Andreas Kalbitz (leader of the AfD parliamentary group in Brandenburg), Uwe Junge (leader of the AfD parliamentary group in Rhineland-Palatinate), and Jörg Urban (party head in Saxony), were joined by the tireless PEGIDA founder Lutz Bachmann as well as the crème de la crème of the self-dubbed "right-wing intellectuals", namely Götz Kubitschek from the new right-wing think-tank Institut für Staatspolitik, or Martin Sellner from the Identitarian movement, but also notorious members of the ultra-right group Pro Chemnitz, organized and violent neo-Nazis from all over the country, Nazi hooligans from the Chemnitz football club fan groups, as well as Stephan Ernst and Markus Hartmann, who were later accused of murdering the politician Walter Lübcke.

In this respect there is of course a connection between this political event and the nation-wide self-empowerment of armed Nazis who are willing to commit murder. But to answer your question, there certainly is a rapid increase in right-wing attacks or preparations for attacks. Of course, right-wing terrorism has always existed in this country, even if it has often not been named as such and prosecuted accordingly. To this day, we still do not know which network was actually behind the 1980 Oktoberfest bombing, and even after 438 days of litigation and more than five years of hearings in the Munich Higher Regional Court, the essential questions about the broader network of the NSU (National Socialist Underground) remain entirely answered. In the recently submitted written verdict, there are no references to the Nazi network in Germany, nor to the state's involvement in the events via, among other things, the domestic intelligence service known as the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*), nor to institutional racism among the investigating authorities, which hindered the production of reliable findings for over 13 years and exposed those affected by right-wing terror to racist harassment and suspicion.

How do you explain the rise in right-wing terror in recent years? Is it—as not only conservatives claim—related to the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015? Do you see any connection at all with the increase in the number of asylum seekers in Germany?

Basically, as I just said, right-wing terrorism, right-wing and racist violence are as old as the Federal Republic of Germany itself (and much older if you go back further in German history). There is a sizeable trail of blood that can be traced back to the beginning of the Federal Republic’s history. After the fall of the wall and German “reunification”, in the 1990s there was a massive rise in nationalist activism which cost the lives of dozens of people in the early years of reunified Germany. These included people perceived as non-Germans, homeless people, punks, and leftists, but also LGBTQ people and people with disabilities. The acts of violence and pogroms associated with the names Hoyerswerda, Solingen, Rostock-Lichtenhagen and Mölln occurred in this period.

Not to mention all the Germans who flew into a panic of *Überfremdungsangst* (the fear of being flooded by foreigners) when tens of thousands of refugees arrived in Germany and were greeted with Angela Merkel’s *wir schaffen das* (“we can do it”) and welcomed by hundreds of thousands of helpers throughout Germany. This has of course also led to an explosion of right-wing and racist violence and terror, the victims of which include the two “random victims” of the attempted anti-Semitic attack in Halle in October 2019, Walter Lübcke in Kassel in June 2019, and the nine young people in Hanau in February 2020. The 15-year-old Jeside Arkan Hussein Khalaf from Celle, who was stabbed to death by a right-wing perpetrator in broad daylight on a public street in mid-April, must unfortunately be added to this list.

In addition to murder, other forms of violence have increased since 2015. In response to a formal request to parliament on the topic from members of Die Linke, only fire and bomb attacks on refugee shelters in 2016 as well as attacks on refugees and their supporters were included in a list of 2,500 entries, which contains postal codes throughout the country, East and West, North and South. Only crimes recognized by the police were included here, not the millions of instances of hostility, insults, verbal abuse, and unreported bodily harm against asylum seekers, migrants, minorities, and citizens that did not fit into the perpetrators’ world view.

You've been tracking right-wing networks in Germany for a long time. Who do you see as the key players in this field, and how relevant are political parties like the AfD or the National Democratic Party (NPD)? Should we be focusing our attention on the hardcore neo-Nazi cells?

Each of the parties and groups you mentioned present their own danger to an order that seeks to be democratic and constitutional in any way, and more directly, to the people they single out as "enemies". However, they are either not perceived as a danger by the authorities at all, since terrorist threats and fantasies of overthrow are rarely directed in a meaningful way against the state as the frame of the nation and the people, but always either against "those at the top", who supposedly endanger the racial, national state, or against minorities who, for racist motives, are regarded as *Volksschädlinge* (parasites of the people) and "corrupters of the Aryan race", or even as troops, agents or instruments of *Umvolkung* "re-population", the "death of the race" or "replacement" of the German race.

These are also connected to fantasies of extermination or expulsion, which are almost always more or less openly connected with the historical reference to National Socialism and the Shoah. For example, the honorary chairman of the AfD, Alexander Gauland, would never question the murder of European Jews, but by declaring Hitler's state and the Holocaust to be a mere "speck of bird shit" in the course of history, he downplays the civilizational break it entailed and declares the murder of the Jews to be a regrettable blip in one thousand years of glorious German history.

Although German efforts to come to terms with the Nazi era are admired and praised all over the world, when it comes down to it, this coming to terms with the past was never really completed: at every opportunity a German "victim myth" emerges that suggests that Germany has received disproportionate punishment for a crime that, while certainly bad, happened so long ago, and that the country has already done so much to atone for it. But it's just not true, and the thing is that when there are many of them, positive references to National Socialism can boil over even when the flame is low. Recently, we saw this in the protests against the restrictions of certain liberties due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Protestors affixed yellow stars of David to their clothes to suggest they were in the hands of sinister global puppet-masters like Bill Gates and George Soros, who were planning their extermination through "forced vaccinations". The naming of Soros in this context, a Jewish billionaire, plays into all the familiar anti-Semitic conspiracy ideologies. As does the slogan *Impfen macht frei* (vaccines make you free), a reference to the *Arbeit macht frei* sign at the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp.

These uncritical references to the Nazi era are widespread and are anchored in varying degrees to the different spheres of the right-wing movement in Germany, depending on the degree of organization and ideological intensity. The perpetrators of the series of NSU murders, for example, imagined their network and its actions as part of a “race war” in which the Aryan people had to resist their downfall, which was being plotted by the leaders of international conspiracies. Elements of these beliefs have always been found in the rhetoric and politics of the NPD (which nowadays only plays a subordinate role) and regularly appear in the uninhibited and brutal statements of well-known AfD politicians. The main slogan of a demonstration of organized Neo-Nazis in Dortmund two years ago was: “Anyone who loves Germany is an anti-Semite!” In a certain sense, it’s hard to disagree.

And then there are the aforementioned prepper groups and the uniformed civil servants and soldiers organized within them, who—especially now during the lockdown—see “Day X” approaching. These heavily armed men’s groups are downplayed and made out to be “gun-happy fools” and—just recently in the media—“explosives enthusiasts” (on 2 March 2020 in the Regional Court of Hagen), and are showered with depoliticizing empathy for their “concerns” in court. The court cases are divided up in such a way that the magic number of three members involved, which would make prosecution as a “terrorist organization” possible, is never reached.

The former special forces police officer Marko Groß in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, for example, could be confident that he would be viewed with understanding by the judges of the Higher Regional Court in Schwerin, who were obviously out of their depth with regard to their knowledge of organized Neo-Nazism in the state. As a chat administrator for the right-wing prepper group Nordkreuz, Groß was also responsible for Nazi posts and was part of a group that included at least two other men—one of them another a police officer—who are now being prosecuted for “preparing a serious crime that endangered the state”. Groß himself, however, got off with a suspended sentence that was completely unreasonable in view of the connections and unsolved questions about the origin of the weapons and vast amounts of ammunition confiscated from him. A good portion of these tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition could have come from uniformed collaborators all over Germany and found its way to Groß via links between the state apparatus and the right-wing prepper scene, of the kind uncovered by journalist Dirk Laabs at a professional shooting range in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

But this fascist organization and militarization in Germany is also about “intellectual violence”, to quote Alex Demirović. In small discussion groups, concepts, phrases and terms are used that have been fished out of the darkest corners of the twentieth century, having somehow survived the disastrous times from which they originated. Much

of this language is now undergoing an ideological renaissance, which is terrifyingly reinforced by the internet, by so-called social media, and the echo chambers of horror, providing a soundtrack to right-wing terror. From a hatred of “cultural Marxism” to the phantasm of the “death of the race” otherwise known as the “great replacement”, to the amorphous structure of an “Occident” (sometimes designated as Christian so as to demarcate it from the Islamic world), the concepts of the ancient “fascist thinkers” are today enjoying a resurrection.

From their point of view, “Day X” is just around the corner, because they expect the so-called population replacement to soon enter a dramatic phase. And they are completely serious. This applies to the aforementioned Gauland AfD right through to fanatical criminals such as the NSU, the murderers of Walter Lübcke, the perpetrators in Utøya, Norway (July 2011), in Charleston (June 2015), Charlottesville (mid-2017), Kassel (June 2019), Halle (October 2019), Pittsburgh (October 2018), or most recently Hanau (February 2020). They ramble on about the “great replacement”. This theory was originally proposed by the fascist French “philosopher” Renaud Camus, whose book *Le Grande Remplacement* was published in German by the right-wing publisher Antaios, run by the racist, New Right figurehead Götz Kubitschek. It was also used by the Christchurch shooter as the title of his manifesto, while at the nationalist Kyffhäuser meeting of the right wing of the AfD in 2018, Alexander Gauland went on about how “the German government wants us to work so that the immigrants can be left alone to have babies, and bring the population replacement to fruition”.

It is very dangerous when these destructive ideas and groups come together. In this respect, in order to finally answer your question, it is important to keep an eye on all the elements of this ethno-nationalist movement and hope against hope that some cell won’t see the coronavirus as an opportunity to unleash the “Day X” uprising.

Since Hanau, right-wing violence in Germany has made international headlines. The [*Economist*](#) recently published a graph showing that between 2016 and 2018, Germany experienced significantly more right-wing violence than other European countries. At the same time, Germany is also the largest country in Europe. Greece, the country with the second highest-number of attacks, has a population that is eight times smaller than Germany’s. Considered in relation to population size, is there really a more significant amount of right-wing violence in Germany than elsewhere?

I'm not familiar with the statistics from the *Economist* and don't know what figures and surveys it's based on. Whether or not Germany is one of the countries with the worst levels of right-wing terrorism is not really important for evaluating on the situation. But with reference to my remarks on historical National Socialism, I would certainly venture the thesis that to this day the German past cannot be regarded as something that has been dealt with, but rather as a fermenting, underlying sediment that determines the national sentiment, and more specifically, it does so through an inversion of the victim-perpetrator relationship.

Another narrative that fits into the same spectrum of conspiracy theory ideologies is the one that claims the Germans were severely punished and brainwashed (by vapid American culture) after the war, and lost their national self-determination. This kind of argument forms the core of many right-wing myths, from the notion of the "cult of guilt" to the open disavowal of Germany's civilizational break. With the rise of the AfD, the core content of this attitude—a victim narrative centred around the misunderstood Germans who have already repented enough for their sins—has now not only conquered parliaments and committees all the way down to the level of local government, but also the sphere of public opinion via the catalyst of social media and a multitude of print and online media.

The ideology of many *Reichsbürger* (a fringe right-wing movement similar to "Sovereign Citizens" in the US) longs for a return to the German Reich and denies, if not the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany as such, then at least its sovereignty as a state and legal form. These people seriously believe that they must take up arms to defend themselves against the advances of this puppet state, which is controlled by the USA or other dark forces. Variations of these paranoid ideas can be found right across the right-wing spectrum, from organized Nazi groups to elected AfD officials and seemingly apolitical hippies at the "hygiene protests" against the government's policies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the wake of the racist massacre in Hanau, the German public finally seems to be taking the danger posed by the right at least a bit more seriously. Does this give you hope?

Anyone who, like me, has been following the way the NSU was handled after its exposure in 2011 has few illusions that anything could actually change for the better. Angela Merkel promised before the whole country and the world that there would be a full investigation of the crimes of the NSU and also that the people behind them and "state

failures” would be uncovered and those responsible would be brought to justice. The disillusionment lasted over five years until the verdict was handed down, which essentially reduced the 370 days of evidential review to one crime carried out by just a small handful of people in some dark room in the “underground”.

Although it had become clear to lay observers in the course of the trial and in the hair-raising findings of independent research carried out parallel to the trial by Antifa groups and journalists, the court did not mention the involvement of the domestic secret service, the institutional racism of the police force and other authorities, nor the very obvious existence of a nationwide “National Socialist” network of supporters, helpers, and accomplices. With the partial acquittal of one of the accused, whom even the Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office classified as the “fourth member” of the “core cell” of the NSU and who left the building as a free man to the cheers of his supporters present in the courtroom, the court made a mockery of the results of the hearing and snubbed the relatives of the 10 murder victims, the targets of 43 attempted murders, and victims of 15 robberies.

By presenting a 3,000-page opinion almost two years later, the court has taken this indifference, lack of empathy and ignorance of the results of the evidence that was heard to extremes. To me it seems naive to now expect that after Hanau and the unctuous words of high-ranking politicians, something fundamental would change in the way the state and society deals with racist violence and right-wing terror. And unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has made sure that the mass murder in Hanau has been reduced to a marginal topic in the media.

What about left-wing responses to the violence? Last year’s *#unteilbar* (“indivisible”) demonstrations brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets against racism and for social unity, but if you look at the parliamentary arithmetic, with Die Linke failing to gain ground, the collapse of the SPD and opportunism of the Greens (not to mention the rise of the AfD), it will be difficult to put together a centre-left government in the coming years. Where do you see hope or starting points for combatting the rising tide of xenophobia?

Powerful movements such as *#unteilbar*, *#wannwennnichtjetzt*, “Fridays for Future” or the school strike, the *Kein Schlusstrich* campaign, the NSU Tribunal, the promising signs of a “Migrantifa”, alongside concrete support campaigns like *#leavenoonebehind* and *Seebrücke* give me hope, and help to show the way forward, despite the desolate situation in this country.

People doing antifascist work could make use of the information outlined here to continue to point out the social connections that promote the emergence of a new fascist movement in Germany and elsewhere. The work of antifascist research (which is of a genuinely scholarly calibre) must be brought to bear against a discourse of extremism which benefits the state, as do other forms of antifascist activism. These include the systematic monitoring, documentation, and attendance of trials against Nazis, as has been demonstrated by [NSU-Watch](#), which could become quite a challenge in the coming months, when the trials of the murderers from Halle (in the Higher Regional Court in Naumburg) and Kassel, as well as the proceedings against the right-wing Bundeswehr soldier Franco A. (both in the Higher Regional Court Frankfurt) all get underway more or less simultaneously. The NSU trial in Munich demonstrated just how drawn out efforts to “monitor” these trials can become: the 438 days of the trial spread out over five years, and it is still a focus for anti-fascist protests almost two years later, after the court’s written opinion was handed down at the end of April.

Drawing attention to the scandalous judicial, political, and state trivialization and de-politicization of Neo-Nazi organizations and activities and calling out the anti-communist consensus of West Germany, which has always stood in the way of a consistent approach to combatting fascist ideologies of extermination, are all part of an anti-fascist tradition, to anti-fascist community building, education work, journalism and archival research, just as commemorating the Shoah, condemning the German wars of extermination and the impunity for the majority of the Nazi perpetrators, as well as unflinching campaigns of self-defence and of defending vulnerable groups. Protests, demonstrations, blockades, and vigils were and will continue to be effective forms of action under whatever pandemic-related restrictions on the right of assembly might be in force. Creative forms of anti-fascist initiatives will hardly be limited by these restrictions. The really great ad-busting campaigns taking place all over the country are another exciting example. These actions were so effective in striking a nerve that the state combatted them with repression, vilification, and the secret service. We have to expose and agitate these nerves!

The racism of the bureaucratic and sometimes pedantic measures used to enforce the physical distancing of citizens—some of which are punishable offences in some federal states—lies in the fact that non-citizens are included in this authoritarian health care. For example, they are held in overcrowded refugee shelters where they wait to get infected, often without even understanding what is happening to them because of the lack of the most rudimentary interpretation services.

Thus, it is no use at all for a radical Left to continuously emphasize the fascist threat and to counter it with a fundamental anti-fascist attitude. The task of radical left-wing organizing must be to underscore a kind of capitalist intersectionality: those who do not wish to speak about the racism inscribed in bourgeois society, which manifests itself in its approach to refugees (within and outside our own borders), minorities such as Sinti and Roma, migrants of all generations and illegalized people, but also the homeless and precarious, in their classification as citizens of secondary importance or even “non-citizens”, should keep quiet about the looming threat of fascism. It is important to identify the overlaps and commonalities of the various protests and left-wing movements and to link up these struggles: the connections between anti-fascism, anti-racism, climate protests, social struggles, and feminist struggles are obvious and need to be identified. Networks need to be built, and above all, they need to show solidarity with each other.

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