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Addressing Neo-Nazism and Right-Wing Extremism in Germany: A Focus on Social Harmony

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses how a significant demographic shift has intensified debates on immigration policies and the integration of newcomers into German society. Challenges have grown more complex since the 2015 refugee crisis, with various factions responding differently. Right-wing ideologies rooted in ethnic and cultural identities have increasingly influenced contemporary German nationalism, leading to the rise of populist movements advocating for stricter immigration controls. Additionally, neo-Nazi groups have gained prominence, influenced conservative views and fostered intolerance. This contrasts sharply with left-leaning advocates who promote Germany as a multicultural and inclusive society. The ongoing tensions between these perspectives continue to shape public debates and the future of German identity in a changing Europe.

Key Words; Germany, Immigration, Neo-Nazism, Skin head Groups, Conservatism, Right-wing movements, Social harmony.

Introduction

Immigration and diversity have emerged as pivotal sources of conflict in European politics and social discourse. These debates fundamentally challenge and interrogate traditional notions of nationhood, nationality, national culture, and community cohesion. Germany exemplifies the broader trends throughout Europe, as it receives the highest influx of immigrants. Culture and nation, these two terms, were always significant, controversial, and closely intertwined in the German context. The concept of culture was an essential factor that influenced national self-definition and the lack of a stable nation-state before unification under the Prussian Empire. The common language, history, and cultural heritage provided the basis for projecting a national identity. The German understanding of culture and nation became increasingly ethnically coded throughout the nineteenth century. The dominant discourse defined German culture as expressing a unique ethnic quality deeply rooted in German nationalism (Dirke 1994: 513). German cityscapes in the 21st century serve as a stage for racism, violence, and confrontation; however, the same streets and neighborhoods also provide a space for dialogue, communication, encounters, and refuge (Stehle, 2012, p. 168). The German immigration and integration debate has long been characterized by party polarization between the conservative (authoritarian) right and the liberal left. After years of "adequate immigration, the conservative political discourse on migrants was that " the boat is full" (Loch, 2014, p. 684).

The Dynamics of Right-Wing Politics in Germany

Based on their approach to immigration and immigrants, we can divide German political parties into conservatives and liberals. The Conservatives and Liberals have adopted markedly different approaches and implemented opposing policies regarding the welcome and accommodation of new and established immigrants. Since the 1970s, the German media has promoted a racialized perspective on the increasing ghettoization of immigrants, framing it as a significant threat to social cohesion in Germany. Throughout the 1990s, the concepts of racialism and "Germanness" became more pronounced. This climate contributed to the normalization of minority exclusion and violent attacks against immigrants during this period. Organized patterns of violence were evident in various racial attacks, such as those in Hoyerswerda, Rostock, and Riesa. By the late 1980s, a network of skinhead groups had emerged in both East and West Germany, expanding to approximately 6,500 members, with around 3,000 residing in eastern Germany by 1991.

The groups in question primarily comprised working-class teenage boys whom neo-Nazi organizations influenced during this period. They emphasized loyalty to their group, hostility toward adult society, and the use of violence against relatively vulnerable groups, particularly foreigners and leftists (Karapin, 2002, p. 160). These groups adopted aggressive tactics, such as setting cars on fire to create barricades, and demonstrated strong leadership. The notion of "Germanness" became increasingly pronounced after the unification of East and West Germany, fostering a robust sense of ethnic nationalism that garnered substantial support. However, in the 1990s, this sentiment began to take a negative turn as extreme right-wing and skinhead groups started to influence the political landscape. These groups manipulated and deceived people increasingly aggressively by exploiting public concerns about national identity.

Throughout history, the number of these groups has fluctuated in response to immigration trends in Germany. According to a report from the intelligence agency, membership in right-wing extremist parties declined from 14,200 to 7,300 between 2007 and 2011. Conversely, neo-Nazi membership increased from 4,400 to 6,000 during the same period. Moreover, the number of right-wing extremists prepared to resort to violence rose from 9,500 in 2010 to 9,800 in 2011 (BBC News, Europe, 18/07/2012). In Germany, various organized political groups and social movements vehemently oppose immigration, integration, and cultural diversity. These groups have played significant roles in numerous anti-immigrant attacks that have taken place over the past few years. The growing number, membership, and visibility of neo-Nazi organizations indicate that a considerable portion of the population is not particularly supportive of the government's policies on immigration and integration. Recent trends indicate that the percentage of the population supporting extreme right-wing groups in Western Germany has declined. In contrast, there has been a notable increase in support for these groups in Eastern Germany (Arzhmeir, 2007). This divergence highlights a growing polarization within the country. In many instances, political parties in Germany are capitalizing on existing resentments among local populations towards immigrants. By doing so, they are strategically cultivating a voter base that is motivated by fear and discontent regarding immigration policies. This tactic shapes public opinion and influences electoral outcomes, reflecting deeper societal divides based on geography and attitudes towards multiculturalism. Pew Research in 2024 found that 26% of German men viewed the AfD positively, while only 11% of women did. The percentage of men with this opinion has increased by 10 points since 2022 (Volk, 2025; BBC News).

Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland; AfD)

It was formed in 2013 as an anti-European Union Party in response to the financial crisis in the EU during that period. Later, it turned its focus mainly to immigration and Islam. According to AfD, Islam is a threat to German values, and it also calls for immigration curbs. AfD is the current main opposition party in Germany. Through the 2017 elections, it entered the federal parliament for the first time. It won 94 seats in the 709-seat lower house (Bundestag). In the 2017 elections, the party gained 13% of the votes. The other mainstream political parties called it a "political earthquake". The party's election manifesto said that "Islam does not belong to Germany," and that Germany's Muslims are "a significant danger for our state, our society and our system of values (BBC News (Europe), 2019). The party has also set a maximum number of Refugees permitted to enter the country and supports only the immigration of high-skilled labour immigrants. People are attracted to populist movements happening in the country that play an important role in reshaping the politics in Germany and all over Europe (Schütz, 2018). Pre-polls regarding the 2025 election say that AfD will gain 24% of the seats and remain in its second position (Kinkartz, 2025: DW News).

National Democratic Party

The National Democratic Party (NPD) was founded in 1964 and considered the oldest amongst right-wing extremist parties. In many ways it is been considered as a successor party of successor of Nazi party of Hitler (NSDAP). So, the ideology of the NPD is based on xenophobic, antisemitic, inhuman, and anti-democratic values. The party's stands for Nazism, Catholic ideologies, anti-Bolshevism and conservatism. In the 70s the party took more radicalized nazists stand and started to chant anti-immigrant slogans. The NPD continued to contest in national, Land, and municipal elections but hardly succeeded in gaining less than one percent of the vote. The government has tried to ban the party but has never succeeded. The last attempt was in 2016. In Saxony, it won 9.2% in 2004 and 5.6% in 2009. In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, it won 7.3% in 2006 and 6.0% in 2011 (BBC News (Europe), 18/07/2012). The NPD has previously won scattered representation in local state parliaments but has never won any seats in the Bundestag (Independent (UK) 2019).

The Republicans (Die Republikaner, REP)

The Republicans are a neo-fascist movement that was founded in 1983. On their official homepage, they call themselves liberal conservative patriarchs who stand for preserving German culture and identity. They have often been accused of indirect or direct racism because of their affiliation with right-wing extremism. They won 15% of the vote in Munich in the 1989 elections. In 1983, the party was created by two former MPs who belonged to the Christian Democratic Union, who openly criticized and disagreed with the CSU/CDUs' approach to the GDR. While comparing with other established right-wing groups, the Republicans are much younger and moderate in their actions. Franz Schönhuber became chairman of REP in 1986. He was a former TV journalist and anchor. For almost 10 years, he succeeded as a chairman in shaping the party's image and gaining support from the public. He argued that REP is a far-right substitute for CDU and altogether avoided any mention of Nazi past. It argued against limiting the welfare benefits for native Germans and supported Germany as a welfare state. For years, this political idea of REP dealt with diverse German nationalism. It considered itself a protector and promoter of German nationalism, which is why it strictly opposes any immigration, whether legal or illegal. It also stands for law-and-order policies, whilst they hint that most foreigners are crooks and vice versa. Usually, the REP avoids openly hostile statements on foreigners (which could result in a lawsuit or even raise the question of whether the party is constitutional). However, one finds a lot more subtle cues to racist and anti-Semitic ideas in their propaganda (Arzheimer, 2007).

The German People's Union (German: Deutsche Volksunion, DVU)

The German People's Union (DVU) was established in 1971, emerging as a notable political entity in the landscape of post-war Germany. During the dynamic political climate of the 1990s, the DVU successfully gained representation, marking a significant milestone in its journey. It garnered electoral

victories in Schleswig-Holstein, showcasing its appeal in that region, and demonstrated impressive performance in eastern Germany, where support for such parties was on the rise.

A pivotal moment occurred in the 1998 state election in Saxony-Anhalt, where the DVU secured an impressive 13% of the available seats, a testament to its growing influence and resonance with voters. In 2010, the DVU sought to further consolidate its power by attempting to merge with the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). However, this effort was met with legal challenges from various state organizations within the DVU, highlighting internal disputes that complicated the merger process. Ultimately, in 2011, the DVU completed its merger with the NPD, marking a significant chapter in the evolution of far-right politics in Germany.

National Socialist Underground (Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund, NSU)

The National Socialist Underground (NSU) was a far-right terror cell from 1998 to 2012. Their most significant criminal activities occurred between 2000 and 2007, as noted by DW News on September 12, 2017. The NSU was responsible for a series of serious offenses, including the racially motivated murders of nine men, the killing of a policewoman, two bombings, and multiple bank robberies (AP News, October 7, 2018).

The group comprised three members: two men, Uwe Mundlos and Uwe Böhnhardt, and a woman, Beate Zschäpe. They were involved in the far-right extremist scene in their home state of Thuringia, East Germany. They were recognized by local police as the "Trio" due to their participation in various criminal activities, some of which had political motivations (Graef, 2018). Ultimately, two members of the trio died, while Beate Zschäpe received a life sentence. The group comprised three members: two men, Uwe Mundlos and Uwe Böhnhardt, and a woman, Beate Zschäpe. They were involved in the far-right extremist scene in their home state of Thuringia, East Germany. They were recognized by local police as the "Trio" due to their participation in various criminal activities, some of which had political motivations (Graef, 2018). Ultimately, two members of the trio died, while Beate Zschäpe received a life sentence (Saha, 2021: DW News).

Pegida

The group was established in Dresden, where a small march of a few hundred individuals has rapidly transformed into weekly Monday demonstrations, with the latest count reaching 25,000 participants (BBC News Europe, 16/01/2015). Supporters of the Pegida movement assert that Islam represents a significant threat to German nationalism and urge Germans to awaken and act against it. They consistently demand that the German government halt immigration and criticize it for failing to implement effective integration laws.

On January 12, 2015, Pegida organized a march that attracted approximately 25,000 participants. The name "Pegida" is an acronym for "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West" (in German: Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes). The group claims to defend Judeo-Christian values, and its 19-point manifesto avoids racist language (BBC News Europe, 13/01/2015). Supporters contend that Pegida is against radicalism and any actions motivated by hatred based on religion, language, and other factors, whether politically driven or not. The group firmly opposes violence against women and all anti-women political ideologies. It also critiques the ideas of multiculturalism and political correctness that emerged after World War II. Founded by Lutz Bachmann as a Facebook initiative, the group has garnered significant publicity and support, particularly from other right-wing organizations and ordinary German citizens who perceive Islamic fundamentalism as a threat to their national identity. Some neo-Nazi groups have also expressed their support for Pegida. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) party has allied closely with Pegida, advocating stricter immigration controls. Alexander Gauland, an AfD leader, has referred to Pegida supporters as "natural political allies."

Conclusion

Numerous national and local political groups and parties in Germany actively promote neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic ideologies. In response to these extremist movements, various efforts have been undertaken to ban them; however, these attempts have consistently failed. This lack of success can be attributed to the political affiliations of these parties, their strategic networking, and the significant support they garner from segments of the public who share similar beliefs. In contemporary Germany, neo-Nazi movements are increasingly viewed as a pervasive nationwide phenomenon. Racism and xenophobia have surged, becoming alarming components of mainstream political discourse. The escalation in violent attacks against minorities and immigrants, often targeting vulnerable communities, serves as a grim indicator of this trend. Reports indicate not only a rise in hate crimes but also an environment where such acts are met with indifference or tacit endorsement by certain factions within society. Consequently, conservative political forces have inadvertently paved the way for right-wing extremist parties, such as the Alternative für Germany (AfD), to establish a foothold within the fabric of mainstream politics. Their presence has significantly influenced policy discussions and public sentiment, often sidelining more inclusive perspectives. A thorough review of German history reveals that the endorsement and normalization of far-right groups have invariably led to catastrophic consequences, fostering divisions within society and undermining democratic values. Therefore, both the German government and its citizens need to confront this stark reality, acknowledge the dangers posed by right-wing extremism, and take determined, proactive measures to counteract its influence and safeguard the principles of equality and dignity for all individuals.

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