

The debate over a "defining culture" in Germany

German Christian Democrats attack the Central Jewish Council

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The campaign launched by the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) for a "German defining culture" has made clear that in relation to many conservative politicians in Germany, anti-Semitic prejudices lurk just below the surface. From the ranks of the CDU has come vehement criticism of Paul Spiegel, the chairman of the Jewish Central Council. Spiegel, at the Berlin demonstration of November 9, dared to criticise the CDU cultural campaign, which is tainted with anti-foreigner racism.

At the November 9 rally, held under the slogan "Standing up for Humanity and Tolerance," Spiegel directed comments at the politicians assembled on the podium. He said, "I want to remind all politicians of their duty and call upon them to curb their populist speeches. What is all this talk about a German defining culture? Put an end to incendiary speeches." Then he posed the rhetorical question: "Does a defining German culture include hunting down foreigners, setting synagogues alight, killing homeless people?"

There is a prehistory to Spiegel's unmistakable warning addressed to the CDU.

A few days before the Berlin demonstration, CDU chairperson Angela Merkel and the head of the CDU fraction in the German parliament, Friedrich Merz, paid a visit to the offices of the Jewish Central Council. Both of them argued that the term "German defining culture" was not racist in character and pledged that the term would not appear in the CDU position paper on immigration.

The next day, in contravention to their promise to Spiegel, both Merkel and Merz voted in favour of the inclusion of the term in the party's statement. Spiegel reacted with disappointment and decided to speak out

openly. Fraction head Merz, who received a copy of Spiegel's speech shortly before the demonstration, attempted to persuade Spiegel to retract the passages attacking the CDU, but without success.

Spiegel's comments unleashed a torrent of indignation from within the CDU. Merkel, Merz and the chairman of the Christian Social Union (CSU)—the CDU's sister party in Bavaria—listened with grim faces to Spiegel's speech and could barely stop themselves from prematurely leaving the demonstration.

Merz's deputy Günther Nooke (CDU) stated that the CDU had to oppose Spiegel—otherwise people would think "we haven't noticed who is dragging us by the nose across the Pariser Platz (site of the November 9 rally)". Spiegel had done a disservice to democracy and his fellow Jews, Nooke declared.

The head of the CSU fraction in the Bavarian state parliament, Alois Glück, accused Spiegel of "polarisation". And the head of the CSU fraction in the German parliament, Michael Glos, remarked: "Anyone who exaggerates in such a fashion must ask himself if he isn't doing more harm than good to his own just cause."

The anti-Semitic undertone of these arguments is unmistakable. The image of Jews leading the CDU across the Pariser Platz by the nose recalls anti-Semitic clichés and would be understood as such in right-wing circles.

How can one interpret Glos' statement as anything other than an open threat when he declares that, with his criticism of the CDU's racist campaign, Spiegel is damaging the interests of Jewish people in Germany? There is a definite implication in Glos' outburst that when Jews take up the issue of racism and xenophobia,

they are responsible for their own persecution, including the fire-bombing of synagogues and other anti-Semitic attacks.

Even the notion held by many CDU politicians that the Jewish Central Council, which represents 85,000 members of the Jewish community in Germany, should not interfere in topical political issues is revealing. For such politicians, Jews remain alien elements called upon to exercise diplomatic restraint with regard to domestic politics—even if, like Spiegel, the son of a cattle-trader from Westphalia, they were born and spent their entire life in Germany. (Spiegel's only period of prolonged absence from Germany was his residency in Belgium during the period of the Holocaust.)

If there were any remaining doubts regarding the evident right-wing bias of the campaign for a “German defining culture,” they have been dispelled by the reaction to Spiegel's speech.



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