Behind the electoral success of the AfD in the German election

Peter Schwarz
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"How could it come to this?" Many people are asking themselves this question following the far right Alternative for Germany's (AfD) electoral success in the federal elections held on Sunday.

With the AfD, more than 90 deputies—open Nazis, racists and xenophobes—are entering parliament 72 years after the downfall of Hitler's Third Reich. Alexander Gauland, the 76-year-old lead candidate, made this abundantly clear, calling for Germans to be proud of the achievements of German soldiers in two world wars—that is, to take pride in a criminal war of aggression, complicity in the Holocaust and the cold-blooded murder of millions of civilians, partisans and prisoners of war.

While many workers and young people are deeply appalled by the rise of the AfD, the outrage of the media and established parties is worse than hypocritical. They have paved the way ideologically and politically for this party and are now exploiting its electoral success to justify a further lurch to the right. Without understanding this context, it is impossible to understand the rise of the AfD and how to fight it.

There is not a single statement from Gauland and other AfD politicians that has not been uttered in a similar form by politicians from the "respectable" parties or journalists of the establishment media.

This began seven years ago with the racist tract "Germany abolishes itself" by Social Democrat (SPD) politician Thilo Sarrazin. Before the book had been printed, Sarrazin appeared on one talk show after another. The media-manufactured hype around the book boosted its sales. Ever since, the most despicable racist prejudices have once again become acceptable forms of public discourse.

Then, in early 2014, a systematic revision of history was initiated. While leading government representatives proclaimed the end of military restraint, *Der Spiegel* published the article "The transformation of the past." It appealed for a reevaluation of German guilt in the World War I and World War II. It was based on the views of two historians from Berlin's Humboldt University, Herfried Münkler and Jörg Baberowski.

Münkler described as "absurd" the charge that Germany bore chief responsibility for the First World War. Earlier, he explained the reason for this revision of history, stating, "It is hardly possible to carry out a responsible policy in Europe if one takes the view that we were to blame for everything. With regard to 1914, this is a myth."

Baberowski downplayed the Nazis' crimes during the Second World War. He defended Ernst Nolte, the most well-known Nazi apologist among post-war German historians, and claimed that Hitler was "not vicious," because he "didn't want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table."

Not one journalist, academic or politician took issue with this extraordinary apologia for Hitler. Only the sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) and its youth organisation, the IYSSE, protested these statements and referred to other historical falsifications in Baberowski's writings, including the assertion that Stalin "imposed" the war of annihilation waged in the east by the Wehrmacht.

A storm of slander was subsequently unleashed. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Cicero*, *Die Zeit* and a number of other newspapers and publications denounced the IYSSE and accused it of bullying a renowned professor.

This did not change in 2015, when Baberowski made use of all available channels to agitate against Chancellor Angela Merkel's refugee policy, for which he was applauded by neo-Nazi publications in Germany and the United States. Even after a Cologne court found that he could be described as a right-wing extremist, Sabine Kunst, the SPD president of Humboldt University, authored a resolution that declared criticism of Baberowski to be "unacceptable" and threatened students critical of him with consequences.

There is hardly a single statement by the AfD leader Gauland that has not already been heard from Baberowski. The Baberowski case shows that such political views enjoy broad support among the academic and political elite. Along with the SPD, the Left Party also backed Baberowski. Evrim Sommer, who is now a Left Party parliamentary deputy, invited him to a party event and threw everyone out who criticised him.

Then earlier this year, Ben Gomes, who is responsible for Google's search engine, met with leading German politicians. Shortly afterwards, Google censored the *World Socialist Web Site* and other progressive sites. WSWS articles about Baberowski largely disappeared from search results.

The months-long campaign surrounding the events in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015-16 served as an advertising

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campaign for the AfD. A few incidents of jostling and assaults, which often occur at events where large amounts of alcohol are consumed, were grossly exaggerated by the media in order to foment an anti-refugee campaign. This campaign was directed at reversing the broad wave of sympathy for refugees and spreading fear and panic. Feminist and pseudo-left organisations led the way in supporting this filthy campaign on the pretext that the issue at stake was defending women from mass rape.

Finally, the clashes on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Hamburg—provoked by the police—served to legitimise a campaign against "left-wing extremism," i.e. any left-wing criticism of capitalism. Justice Minister Heiko Maas even demanded a "rock against the left" concert. By contrast, the terrorism by right-wing extremists was largely ignored or downplayed, even though, according to figures from the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, 179 people in Germany have died as a result of right-wing extremist violence since 1990.

The same attitude has characterised the established parties' response to the AfD's electoral success. The ruling elite is concerned above all by potential resistance from the left. This is the reason the SPD decided to go into opposition. The SPD intends to block the development of a genuine left-wing opposition to the rightward shift of official politics.

All of the parties are seizing on the AfD as a pretext to carry out a further shift to the right. They claim that the right-wing extremist party gained support because their own policies were not right-wing enough.

In reality, exactly the opposite is true. Their right-wing policies are chiefly to blame for the AfD's success. This applies particularly to the SPD, Left Party and Greens, which like to portray themselves as socialist, left-wing or progressive. Decades of social spending cuts and the redistribution of wealth to benefit the rich under their watch have made it possible for the AfD's right-wing demagogues to appeal to impoverished and angered sections of the population. This is particularly evident in the poor areas of eastern Germany, which in the past were strongholds of the Left Party and have now voted for the AfD.

This process is an international phenomenon. In the United States, the close ties of the Democrats to Wall Street and the military made it possible for the right-wing billionaire Trump to portray himself as a fighter against the establishment. In France, decades of attacks on the working class by the Socialist Party led to the growth of the National Front.

The AfD's electoral success provides a devastating indictment of what has been regarded as the "left" since the 1968 student movement. Influenced by the theoretical conceptions of the Frankfurt School and postmodernism, they opposed an orientation to the working class and focused instead on questions of identity, the environment and lifestyle.

The Greens, which emerged as the true embodiment of the 1968 protest movement, abandoned even its verbal commitment to socialism at its founding in 1980. With its entry into an SPD-led government, the former pacifists were transformed in 1998 into advocates for war, and supported the social cutbacks within the framework of the Agenda 2010. They are now preparing to form a government with the conservative Christian Democratic Union and neoliberal Free Democratic Party.

The Left Party is following a similar path. Emerging out of the remnants of the former Stalinist ruling party (SED) in East Germany and a wing of the SPD and trade union bureaucracy in western Germany, the party saw its main initial task to be the suppression of opposition to the horrendous social consequences of capitalist restoration. The Left Party has since become firmly integrated into the state apparatus in eastern Germany and campaigns as an openly right-wing party of the bourgeois order.

To retain its left facade, the Left Party relies on pseudo-left groups like Marx21 and SAV, which falsely portray themselves as socialists while supporting the Left Party's right-wing policies and making successful careers in its ranks. They do not seek to win workers for socialism, but to subordinate the widespread anger toward the AfD to the Left Party, which bears chief responsibility for the AfD's rise. These groups are neither left nor socialist, but speak for well-off sections of the middle class concerned with a "more just" distribution of wealth within the top 10 percent of society.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei is the only party fighting for a programme connecting the struggle against social inequality, fascism and war with the fight for a socialist society. Together with its sister organisations internationally, the SGP is building a revolutionary socialist party to unite workers around the world. This is the only viable perspective to stop the rise of the AfD and other right-wing extremist tendencies.

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