

Germany: Der Spiegel idealises far-right leader Björn Höcke

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The German weekly *Der Spiegel* has published a flattering portrait of Björn Höcke in its edition of October 27. As *Der Spiegel* notes in its article, Höcke is the most right-wing leading figure in the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Melanie Amann, who has been reporting on the AfD for *Der Spiegel* for four years, met Höcke in his home village Bornhagen for a long walk in the forest and then wrote a six-page article based on their encounter. She was clearly fascinated by the head of the AfD in the East German state of Thuringia.

She describes the man who “in his speeches and new book” ever more frankly “reveals his anti-democratic, völkisch worldview” as a lonely “forest walker” prepared to fight for his convictions. Amann bases her interpretation on a 1951 essay titled “The Forest Passage” (*Der Waldgang*) by the far-right German author Ernst Jünger. Throwing aside any sort of journalistic objectivity, Amann engaged in re-staging Jünger’s essay with Höcke as the central figure.

Silence, beech leaves, roebucks, barking dogs, cackling chickens, a rocky plateau and a crooked riverbed are the leitmotifs going through the entire article. Höcke “wears short blue pants and crude hiking boots. In addition, a white short-sleeved shirt.” He enthuses: “The beech forest is so peaceful” and “hikes in nature are a source of strength.” He feels compassion for a dead wasp and for “people who unwittingly forgo family happiness.” “That does not leave a sensitive person like him cold,” Amann remarks, because “after all, he is only human.”

The *Spiegel* author also explains the significance of the *Waldgang* metaphor: Jünger describes how “people behave when their state evolves into a dictatorship,” when “elections serve only to simulate freedom.” Most citizens are quite prepared to submit to this farce. “But any one brave enough to say ‘no’ and reject the system is, in Jünger’s view, a ‘forest walker’: such a lonely wanderer

will not be told what to do by any superior power, either through propaganda or force. And he intends to defend himself.”

Summing up the essence of her essay Amann writes: Jünger linked “the love and longing of Germans for their forests with the political fate of the people (Volk).” “The *Forest Passage* represents readiness to sacrifice and, if necessary, violent resistance.”

The use of so much romantic kitsch to glorify a neo-Nazi is enough to make one vomit. Göring, Hitler and their cronies all struck similar poses. Amann is not a member of the AfD and she even wrote a book about the far-right party titled *Fears for Germany* (*Angst für Deutschland*). But like many of the educated German petty bourgeois who embraced Hitler in the 1930s, she is fascinated by the right-wing extremists as they increasingly gain influence. There are both ideological and political reasons for this.

Amann has obviously taken to heart Höcke’s text message to her prior to their meeting in Bornhagen: “The desire to understand is the foundation of the journalistic ethos.” She wants to understand the motives of Höcke and the AfD, rather than understand what the AfD objectively represents. She is full of empathy for the motivations of AfD members, which she portrays as favourably as possible. At the same time, she completely ignores the political background to the rise of the far-right party—the role of the state, the media, mainstream politics and the universities.

This was already evident in Amann’s 2017 book about the AfD. It begins with the statement: “The AfD existed before it was formally established. It was not physically tangible, but rather a thought, a feeling in the heads of many Germans.” The AfD is “a genuine people’s party.”

The fact is that far from being a creation conjured up in the “heads of Germans” the AfD was created in behind-the-scenes manoeuvres in the back rooms of political

circles, the media and the universities. The party was founded by right-wing professors such as Bernd Lucke, big business lobbyists such as Olaf Henkel and veteran politicians such as Alexander Gauland. Civil servants, police officers and army officers are disproportionately represented in the party's ranks. The media devoted a huge amount of attention to the AfD long before it entered into state and eventually the federal parliament. The recent scandal surrounding secret service chief Hans-Georg Maassen has made clear that the AfD has the full support of Germany's domestic intelligence agency (BfV).

The German ruling elite needs the AfD to suppress growing resistance to social inequality and militarism. It is responding to trade war and growing international tensions by invoking its former traditions of authoritarian and fascist rule. That is the real reason for the growth of the AfD.

The *Spiegel* author ignores all this entirely—and not due to any naivety on her part. The argument that the “AfD emerged out of the heads of Germans” allows her to close ranks with the AfD and take up the party's policies. In the introduction to her book she writes, “What was decisive for me was the realisation that meaningful engagement with the AfD is only possible if one has an open mind to the party's milieu.”

In order to win back AfD supporters, she recommends that Germany's conservative Union (Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union) “constructively embrace conservative issues such as patriotism or the urge for freedom. Issues which evoke fear such as internal security or the criminal activities of refugees should not simply be left to the AfD.”

Of course there are AfD voters who are not genuine fascists, but one cannot break them from the party by adopting the policies of the AfD. Instead it is necessary to oppose the AfD and build a party that fights capitalism with a socialist program. The pro-capitalist policy of the SPD, the Left Party and other so-called “left” parties is the main reason why far-right parties can gain influence even among oppressed layers of the population.

Der Spiegel has deliberately published its hymn of praise to Höcke. For years the magazine has played a leading role in paving the way for far-right ideology. In February 2014, it published the article “Culpability Question Divides Historians Today” by Dirk Kurbjuweit, now deputy editor. Kurbjuweit argued in favour of a reassessment of German history, aimed at playing down the crimes committed by German imperialism.

In the article, Herfried Münkler, professor at Berlin Humboldt University, denied Germany's responsibility for World War I. His colleague Jörg Baberowski defended the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte and claimed that Hitler was not vicious. Nolte himself blamed Poland for World War II and wrote that the Jews were in part responsible for the concentration camps.

When the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) protested against the trivialisation of Hitler by Baberowski, the media, led by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper, responded with an outburst of slander. The book *Why are they back?* by Christoph Vandreier, published by Mehring Verlag last month, documents this discussion in detail.

It should be noted that Amann's article repeats many of the quotations—some almost literally—used by Baberowski and Nolte, which were criticized by the SGP at the time. Only this time they come from the mouth of Höcke.

For example, Amann cites an interview with Höcke in the *Wall Street Journal*. In the interview Höcke claims that the “big problem” is “that one presents Hitler as absolutely evil. But of course we know that there is no black and no white in history.” When this is raised by Amann, Höcke replies, “What's really bad today is that one is not even allowed to say what is self-evident, i.e., that despite all the atrocities, Hitler was only a human being.”

Further on in Amann's article one finds almost literally the quote by Nolte relating to the Poles and the Jews. In AfD circles much thought was given to “how the fatherland could finally shake off the burden of the Nazi period” and “when will the world finally realize that Poland also bears responsibility for the war and that, with some justification, one could describe not just the Germans, but also the Jews as a “people of perpetrators.”

Der Spiegel's idealisation of Höcke confirms the warnings made by the SGP for years: In order to enforce its policy of militarism and social cuts in a world rocked by war and trade war, the ruling class of Germany is reviving its most barbarous traditions. Only a mass socialist movement of the working class can stop this development.



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