10 years of the Alternative for Germany: How the state, its political parties and the media promoted the far right

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Ten years after its founding on February 6, 2013, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is today an integral part of official political life in Germany. Its members sit in the German parliament (Bundestag) and—with the exception of Schleswig-Holstein—in every state parliament. If one adds together parliamentary allowances, parliamentary faction subsidies, lump-sum expenses and state party funding, the AfD is financed every year from the state treasury with a sum totaling hundreds of millions of euros.

AfD representatives chair important parliamentary committees, are quoted extensively by the media and are regular guests on political talk shows. *Tagesthemen*, Germany's main public news program, devoted a third of its airtime to the party's 10th anniversary, allowing AfD leader Tino Chrupalla to promote the party's völkisch-chauvinist and xenophobic policies at length.

This is despite the fact that the AfD's fascist orientation is well known. The party is teeming with racists, anti-Semites and militant neo-Nazis who repeatedly seek to minimise the crimes of fascism. Even Germany's domestic intelligence agency, the *Verfassungsschutz* (BfV), which shielded and supported the AfD for many years, is currently investigating the party for right-wing extremism.

Björn Höcke and other representatives of the völkisch "Wing" group with the AfD, which formally dissolved in 2020, now set the tone in the party. "Whoever is circulating at the top of the party today is doing it by Höcke's grace," declared Jörg Meuthen, who led the party himself until a year ago and worked closely with Höcke. According to Meuthen, there are "clearly right-wing extremist tendencies in the party."

How could this come about? How is it possible that less than 80 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, Nazi sympathisers are again spreading their despicable, inhuman slogans all over Germany?

The most common explanation, repeated dozens of times in the media, is that the respectable professors and national conservatives who founded the AfD 10 years ago as an anti-euro party were swept aside by a wave of "right-wing populism." The party's initial leadership had failed to "contain the ever louder right-wing extremists in the ranks of the AfD" (Caren Miosga, *Tagesthemen*).

This is a legend aimed at concealing the fact that the AfD was not swept upwards by a populist wave from below, but rather has been systematically promoted from the top. The state apparatus, the establishment political parties and the media have deliberately supported the party. They have fueled the xenophobic, nationalist and militaristic climate in which the neo-fascist swamp could flourish. They promoted both the party and the violent elements in its orbit. They have welcomed AfD MPs into parliaments with open arms and paved the way for them to assume leading posts while bathing in the media spotlight.

Even where the AfD has gained broader influence—it is currently polling at 15 percent nationwide and between 20 and 30 percent in east German states—it owes its prominence to the SPD, the Greens and, above all, the Left Party, whose policy of social cuts implemented under a "left" banner has driven many frustrated and angry voters into the clutches of the right-wing demagogues.

Under conditions where the Greens, the SPD and the Left Party unreservedly support NATO's war offensive in Ukraine, which increasingly threatens to turn into a third world war, the AfD is even able to pose as a "party of peace." In fact the party, whose ranks are teeming with former and active Bundeswehr officers and soldiers, is militaristic to the core.

The AfD celebrates the massive rearmament of the Bundeswehr as the implementation of its own programme. Some of its leaders, however, believe that Germany is fighting the wrong war and should ally itself with Russia against the US. Björn Höcke, for example, declared last year on the Day of German Unity: "It was and is US strategy, as a foreign power, to create divisions on our continent between nations that could actually work very well together. ... The natural partner for our way of working and living is Russia, a country with almost inexhaustible raw materials. In addition, Germans and Russians have a similar mental outlook."

The founding of the AfD and the revival of German militarism

The founding of the AfD 10 years ago coincided with a turning point in German domestic and foreign policy. In the same year, more than 50 leading politicians, journalists, academics, military officers and business representatives, under the auspices of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), prepared the paper "New Power—New Responsibility," which served as a blueprint for the foreign policy of the grand coalition of social democrats (SPD) and conservatives (CDU/CSU) that took over government at the end of 2013.

The paper advocated that Germany return to a great power policy and massively rearm in order to pursue its interests as a "trading and exporting nation" worldwide by military means. The return to militarism and great power politics required the building of a party that trivialised the crimes of the Nazis, fomented chauvinism and intimidated opponents of militarism and the social cuts associated with such a policy. This task is fulfilled by the AfD.

The party was founded by the Hamburg economics professor Bernd Lucke, long-time CDU politician Alexander Gauland, former *Die Welt* and *FAZ* newspapers editor Konrad Adam, former president of the Federation of German Industries (BDI) Hans-Olaf Henkel and some

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others, who knew very well what forces they were unleashing. The fact that some of them later quit the party, including three chairpersons—Bernd Lucke, Frauke Petry and Jörg Meuthen—changes nothing. Such leadership battles are common in far-right parties.

The rejection of the euro bailout following the financial crisis of 2008, the immediate reason for founding the party, was linked to aggressive nationalism. The AfD did not object to the orgy of enrichment for speculators and banks that accompanied the bailout. What the party did object to was any form of financial equalization between the richer and poorer euro countries. Its chauvinism attracted neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists—including Björn Höcke and Andreas Kalbitz—who were welcomed with open arms.

The ideological climate in which the AfD was able to thrive had already been created years before. In the summer of 2010, Thilo Sarrazin, a member of the SPD and the board of the Bundesbank, had published a book, *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (*Germany Abolishes Itself*), a racist diatribe that linked the slander of Muslim immigrants with social-Darwinist prejudices and theories once advocated by the racial hygienists of the Third Reich.

The media created a hype that quickly gave the book a circulation of 1.5 million. The weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* and the yellow press *Bild* newspaper printed excerpts in advance. Sarrazin was allowed to spread his racist agitation in countless interviews and talk show appearances. The magazine *Cicero* even voted him fifth on its list of the most important German intellectuals.

Support for Sarrazin was not limited to the mainstream media. Left Party politicians Oskar Lafontaine and Sahra Wagenknecht also espoused his xenophobic slogans. Lafontaine presented one of Sarrazin's other diatribes, *The State at its Limits*, to the public as late as autumn 2020, at a time when even the SPD was trying to get rid of Sarrazin.

The efforts of the Berlin historian Jörg Baberowski to rehabilitate the Nazis also played an important role in promoting the AfD.

In February 2014, *Der Spiegel* published an article "Culpability Question Divides Historians Today," which argued for a reassessment of "German guilt" in the First and Second World Wars. In it, Baberowski advocated the rehabilitation of the Nazi apologist Ernst Nolte (who also was quoted in the article) and attested that Hitler was "not vicious" because he allegedly "didn't want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table."

When the Socialist Equality Party and its youth organisation IYSSE protested against this attempt to play down the crimes of Hitler and the Nazis, almost the entire German media and the majority of the academic establishment lined up behind Baberowski and denounced the SGP. Even after a court ruled that Baberowski could justifiably be called a right-wing extremist, and after he insulted and physically attacked students opposing his views, he was still defended by the media and the social democratic leadership of Humboldt University.

When Björn Höcke later denounced the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin as a "monument of shame" and Alexander Gauland trivialised Nazi rule as a "speck of bird's shit in over 1,000 years of successful German history," they were following the same path long since trodden by Baberowski and his defenders.

In the 10 years since the AfD was founded, the media and main political parties have repeatedly organised xenophobic campaigns that boosted the far-right. In 2015, when large numbers of refugees from war-torn countries poured into Germany and were welcomed by willing helpers, the media gave extensive coverage to a handful of anti-immigrant marches and demonised the refugees. Among the most vigorous agitators was Jörg Baberowski, who raged against foreign cultures in the *FAZ*, the *NZZ* and other papers.

This was then followed by a media campaign devoted to the city of "Cologne's New Year's Eve." Cases of sexual harassment during New Year festivities were blown out of all proportion and instrumentalised for a racist smear campaign against refugees and Muslims. Similar campaigns culminated most recently with "Berlin's New Year's Eve," in which youths with a migrant background allegedly attacked police with unprecedented violence. In the event, it was revealed that most of the allegations made against the immigrant youth were false.

The AfD and the *Verfassungsschutz*

Support for the AfD was not limited to right-wing propaganda. Germany's security agencies have deliberately promoted the party.

Hans-Georg Maassen, who headed the *Verfassungsschutz* from 2012 to 2018, actually advised the AfD leadership on how to evade surveillance from his agency. Since his early retirement in 2018 after defending a far-right demonstration in Chemnitz, Maassen made no secret of his far-right opinions. In a recent tweet he accused "influential forces in the political-media sphere" of possessing an "eliminatory racism against whites" and a "burning desire for Germany to perish." The CDU has since decided to expel Maassen.

It was also Maassen who ensured that the Socialist Equality Party was included in the annual report drawn up by the *Verfassungsschutz*, charged with alleged left-wing extremism. When the SGP filed a complaint against this, the Ministry of the Interior justified the observation of the Trotskyist party on the grounds that "arguing for a democratic, egalitarian, socialist society," "agitation against alleged 'imperialism' and 'militarism'" and "thinking in class categories" were all unconstitutional.

The *Verfassungsschutz* and other security agencies also supported the right-wing terrorist networks of neo-Nazis and so-called *Reichsbürger*, which thrive in and around the AfD and extend deep into the ranks of the Bundeswehr and police.

One example is the far right grouping Thuringia Homeland Security, from which the fascist NSU murder trio emerged. The grouping was extensively funded by the *Verfassungsschutz*, which claimed to be ignorant of its string of murders and bank robberies—despite the fact that more than two dozen undercover agents were active in and around the milieu of the NSU. Even after the neo-Nazi Stephan Ernst (who emerged from the same circles as the NSU) murdered the Kassel district president Walter Lübcke (CDU) in 2019, the secret service files on the case remain under lock and key for decades.

The Hannibal Network and other groups that hoard weapons, draw up death lists and maintain close ties to elite units of the German armed forces and police have also not been prosecuted, or have only been charged with petty offences. The racist and anti-Semitic attacks which took place in recent years in the cities of Halle and Hanau, as well as numerous attacks on refugee shelters, emerged from this political climate.

The promotion and strengthening of fascist parties by national ruling elites is not limited to Germany.

In the US, former president Donald Trump attempted to prevent the election of his successor Joe Biden with a coup on January 6, 2021. The Republican Party, one of the two major bourgeois parties in America, is dominated by fascists. Nevertheless, Biden insists on working together with his "Republican friends."

In France, the far-right Rassemblement National emerged as the second-strongest party in the last two presidential elections. In Italy, Mussolini's successors, the Fratelli d'Italia, lead the government following elections three months ago. In Germany, Chancellor Olaf Scholz has rolled out the red carpet for Giorgia Meloni in Berlin only a week ago and assured her of his "firm determination" to work together. In numerous smaller European countries—Austria, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and others—far-

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right parties were or are currently represented in government.

This alone shows that the danger of fascism and dictatorship has deep objective causes. It is rooted in the hopeless crisis of capitalism. The extreme increase in social inequality and growing international rivalry are destroying the mechanisms of democracy and social compromise.

In 1933, a conspiracy of the political, economic and military elites brought Hitler to power because they needed the Nazis to crush the workers' movement and prepare for a war to conquer "*Lebensraum*"—i.e., raw materials and exploitation opportunities for German capital. Once again and for the same reasons, fascist parties are being created, built and promoted across the globe.

That is why it is impossible to fight fascism with state repressive measures or in alliance with supposedly democratic bourgeois parties. Only an independent movement of the working class, which combines the struggle against social inequality, fascism and war with the struggle against their root cause, capitalism, can put an end to the menace of fascism.

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