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Germany, but Normal: Radical Right Populism in Eastern Germany

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Germany, but Normal: Radical Right Populism in Eastern Germany

Jordan Groff

Honors Thesis

German Studies Department

CISLA Senior Integrative Project

Connecticut College

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
INTRODUCTION: A NEW PARTY JOINS THE BUNDESTAG.....	4
CHAPTER 1: WHAT DOES THE AFD REPRESENT?.....	12
Other Radical Right Parties in Germany	13
Economic Policy and the EU	15
How the ‘Refugee Crisis’ Changed the AfD	18
Immigration Politics of the AfD	22
AfD’s Stance on COVID-19	26
CHAPTER 2: WHAT ATTRACTS AFD VOTERS?	30
Support for the AfD between 2013 and 2015	32
Radicalization	35
Culture or Economics? The AfD as a Protest Party	37
CHAPTER 3: THE LEGACY OF THE GDR AND THE POWER OF MEMORY	41
The Radical Right in the GDR	42
Ghosts of the Past	45
The Police State	50
CHAPTER 4: THE LEGACY OF REUNIFICATION	54
Overview of Reunification	55
Protest Voting in the Aftermath of Reunification	59
The AfD as a Protest Party	64
CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE AFD.....	67
BIBLIOGRAPHY	71

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Introduction: A New Party Joins the Bundestag

In 2017, the German political establishment received a rude awakening. A new party was elected to the German parliament, the Bundestag, for the first time since the 1990s. The *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) received 12.6 percent of the national vote, well over the 5 percent threshold that German parties must meet in order to be represented in the Bundestag. This was enough for it to become the third largest party in Germany and the leader of the parliamentary opposition. Up until this election, no party to the right of the CDU/CSU had ever experienced such success in a national election in postwar Germany, which had made Germany somewhat of an anomaly among its peers in Europe. After the 2017 election, the AfD had proven that the Federal Republic of Germany was not immune to right-wing extremism.

The AfD formed in late 2012 in opposition to the Euro. They were a conservative, populist party from the start—even in the name, ‘alternative’ implies an alternative to the establishment—but they were not originally an extremist party. However, they would continuously radicalize over the following years, and by 2017, they were widely recognized as a radical right party.¹ How this radicalization happened and continues to happen is one of the primary subjects of this thesis. Angela Merkel’s decision to open Germany to hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa in 2015 resulted in the AfD taking a much harsher stance on immigration, refugees, and Islam, and this shift to the right has continued to the present. Messages exchanged in AfD chat rooms show the extent of bigotry in the most extreme wings of the party. In these chat rooms, AfD members and politicians express the fear that “Germany is becoming an Islamic republic” along with explicitly racist ideas of ‘Muslim No-Go-Areas,’

¹ Kai Arzheimer and Carl C. Berning, “How the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Their Voters Veered to the Radical Right, 2013–2017,” *Electoral Studies* 60 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2019.04.004>.

while asylum seekers are said to be “invaders in Europe” and “dirt, garbage, not white, not German.”² Publicly, there have also been numerous incidents of high-ranking party officials making extremist and racist statements. One of the most radical AfD politicians is Björn Höcke, the head of the party in Thuringia, who has called for a “180-degree turn” on the issue of Holocaust remembrance and atonement and maligned the Holocaust memorial in Berlin as a “monument of shame.”³ The co-chair of the party, Frauke Petry, has said that officers should “use firearms if necessary” to “prevent illegal border crossings.”⁴ Many other party officials have made similar statements regarding immigrants.

The rise of the AfD is accompanied by and closely related to a rise in right-wing extremism in Germany. According to the *Mitte-Studie* of 2020-2021, an annual study which attempts to measure the state of the political center of German society, Germany has experienced more right-wing extremist violence in the past few years than any other European country.⁵ One attack which signaled this rise occurred in Hanau on February 19, 2020. The perpetrator believed he was fighting a ‘race war’ and that by committing the attack, he was defending a white male race whose dominance he considered to be threatened. Other prominent examples include the anti-Semitic attack in a Synagogue in Halle on October 9, 2019, as well as the murder of the district president of Cassel, Walter Lübcke on June 2, 2019.⁶ Rhetoric from AfD politicians often echo the assumptions of extremists such as those who committed these crimes. For instance,

² “Geheime AfD-Chats legen Extremismus offen,” accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.zdf.de/uri/e714f1b9-ab16-4f58-8f7e-5da2024352ce>.

³ Philip Oltermann, “AfD Politician Says Germany Should Stop Atoning for Nazi Crimes,” *The Guardian*, January 18, 2017, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/18/afd-politician-says-germany-should-stop-atoning-for-nazi-crimes>.

⁴ “AfD Leaders and Their Most Offensive Remarks,” DW, September 28, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/afd-leaders-and-their-most-offensive-remarks/g-37651099>.

⁵ Sabine Achour et al., *Die geforderte Mitte: rechtsextreme und demokratiegefährdende Einstellungen in Deutschland 2020/21*, ed. Andreas Zick, Beate Küpper, and Franziska Schröter (Bonn: Dietz, 2021), 75.

⁶ Achour et al., 75.

Alexander Gauland, the former chair of the party, called Merkel's immigration policies "a policy of flooding" and an "attempt to replace the German people through an arriving population from all parts of the world."⁷

Despite the far-right's disapproval, Merkel retired as an enormously popular figure in Germany. However, the 2021 election in September marked the end of the streak of the Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) as the largest party in the Bundestag. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) overtook the CDU with 25.7 percent of the vote, compared with 24.1 percent for the CDU/CSU. The Greens also earned 14.8 percent of the vote, marking a 5.8 percent increase from 2017 and the best electoral performance they have ever had. The Bundestag itself is also more diverse than ever: about 11.3 percent of elected representatives have a migration background (*Migrationshintergrund*), 3 percent more than the previous Bundestag.⁸ The AfD received 10.3 percent of the vote, losing 2.3 percent from 2017. They were surpassed by both the Greens and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and have gone from being the third largest party to the fifth. This election also marks the first national election since the founding of the party in which the AfD has lost votes. Although this might seem like a poor performance, the party had a relatively positive outlook on the results. In an interview, Tino Chrupalla, the co-chair of the party, said that he considered any result over 10 percent to be good, considering that it meant that the other parties had failed to significantly diminish the AfD's appeal to its base.⁹ Jörg Meuthen, another co-leader at the time, said the results proved

⁷ Achour et al, 229.

⁸ "Bundestag mit mehr Abgeordneten mit Migrationshintergrund," *Die Welt*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.welt.de/politik/wahl/bundestagswahl/article234096910/Bundestag-mit-mehr-Abgeordneten-mit-Migrationshintergrund.html>.

⁹ "Bundestagswahl 2021: Reaktionen der Parteien," accessed September 30, 2021, <https://www.zdf.de/uri/d051ea03-cfe6-4f6e-8e57-28328394d1ba>.

that the party had ‘stabilized.’¹⁰ As a whole, the party considers the election to be stable, solid, and “not a defeat.”¹¹

While the AfD is strong throughout Germany, it is especially strong in the East. That being said, it has massively outperformed the best results of all other radical right parties in the Western *Bundesländer* (states). Additionally, the AfD has received more votes in raw numbers in the West than in the East due to the West’s much higher population. However, a significantly higher percent of the vote in the eastern *Bundesländer* goes to the AfD. In 2021, the AfD earned 18.9 percent of the vote in the East, 5.2 percent behind the SPD and 1.8 percent ahead of the CDU. In the former West, it received 8.2 percent—still a sizable result, but nowhere near the success in the East. In the Southeastern *Bundesländer* of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia, they were the winners of the *Zweitstimmen* (the vote Germans cast for the party they want represented in the Bundestag). The AfD placed second with a strong performance in the northeastern states of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Brandenburg. It received between 16 and 25 percent of the vote in most northeastern electoral districts. The expansive voter base that the AfD has built up in the East means that the AfD is likely to remain a significant player in German politics for the foreseeable future.

What explains the success of the AfD in eastern Germany over the past decade? Much research has been done on the motivation of populist-right movements, as well as on the AfD specifically. In general, explanations for these movements fall into one of two main categories: cultural grievances or socioeconomic deprivation. However, these explanations fail to explain the whole picture of the AfD’s success in the East specifically. On one hand, those who favor

¹⁰ “AfD feiert ‘solides’ Wahlergebnis trotz Verlusten,” n-tv.de, accessed October 15, 2021, <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/AfD-feiert-solides-Wahlergebnis-trotz-Verlusten-article22829142.html>.

¹¹ “AfD feiert ‘solides’ Wahlergebnis trotz Verlusten.”

cultural explanations tend to emphasize right-wing positions on controversial issues as the most important predictor of support for the AfD. While right-wing ideology is certainly correlated with support for the AfD, this conclusion is neither surprising nor helpful because it does not explain the prevalence of these right-wing ideas in the first place. The AfD openly supports right-wing positions, so it should come as no surprise that their voters also hold right-wing positions. On the other hand, socioeconomic status has an indirect influence on the likelihood of an individual to vote for the AfD at best. The party also does not market itself using policies that would help the poor, preferring to fear-monger and scapegoat marginalized groups.

I attempt to explain the source of right-wing attitudes with a special focus on the different experiences of people living in the former East German states, or the ‘new states’ (*neue Bundesländer*). I conclude that the AfD’s appeal in the East is better thought of in terms of two historical legacies: the legacy of the East German state—the German Democratic Republic (GDR)—and the legacy of reunification. The appeal of an anti-establishment protest party like the AfD is deeply embedded in the experiences and psyche of the people it tries to appeal to. This does not mean that AfD voters would loyally vote for the AfD forever, but rather that their mindset makes them more prone to support a party like the AfD. This mindset is influenced by the legacy of the GDR and of reunification, which makes their electoral choice difficult for outside observers to understand. Even for eastern Germans who grew up after reunification, the experience of growing up around those who were directly influenced by these historical legacies has a significant impact on their political and personal beliefs.

This thesis is divided into four chapters: chapter 1 covers the history of the AfD and the issues that the AfD has represented; chapter 2 reviews different attempts to explain the AfD’s

appeal; chapter 3 discusses the historical legacy of the GDR; and chapter 4 covers the legacy and aftermath of reunification.

The first chapter gives an overview of the history, policies, and rhetoric of the AfD. This chapter focuses on the three most important issues for the AfD in chronological order. In the first stage of the party, economic policy and euro-skepticism were the driving forces of the party. The second stage featured an increased focus on anti-immigration and anti-Islam policies and rhetoric, accompanied by a decisive shift to the right. The third stage features the entrance of the COVID-19 pandemic as an issue, which the AfD has not hesitated to use to garner populist support. This chapter clarifies the question of what the AfD stands for and what issues it focuses has focused on throughout its lifetime.

The second chapter reviews different attempts to explain the AfD's appeal. It discusses how the leadership of AfD radicalized over time and how this radicalization affected who voted for the party. Then, it moves to the difficult task of explaining why people vote for the AfD—and for radical right populist parties in general—focusing on the cultural backlash hypothesis and the economic insecurity hypothesis, theorized by Inglehart and Norris.¹² Proponents of the cultural backlash hypothesis argue that right-wing ideology is the best predictor of support for the AfD. They point to the lack of correlation between statistics like unemployment and income level with the likelihood of an AfD vote, arguing that the most important determinants of a vote for the AfD are attitudes towards immigrants and attitudes towards democracy.¹³ Others argue that economic

¹² Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2818659>.

¹³ Holger Lengfeld, "Die „Alternative für Deutschland“: eine Partei für Modernisierungsverlierer?," *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 69, no. 2 (June 2017): 209–32, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-017-0446-1>; Michael A. Hansen and Jonathan Olsen, "Flesh of the Same Flesh: A Study of Voters for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the 2017 Federal Election," *German Politics* 28, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1509312>.

grievances are essential to understanding the appeal of the AfD, highlighting issues such as economic disparity between the East and West, underrepresentation of eastern Germans in politics and business, and problems with the economic integration of East Germany in the reunification process.¹⁴

The third chapter discusses the historical legacy of the GDR and how it shapes the populist appeal of the AfD. I focus on three elements in particular: first, the resurgence of the radical right towards the end of the GDR; second, the official memory policy dictated by the Socialist Unity Party (SED) and the national mythology they tried to implement; and third, the GDR as a police state under the Ministry for State Security, more commonly known as the Stasi. Then, I connect these aspects of the GDR's legacy with the AfD, showing how the AfD appeals specifically to these memories. Especially important are the differences in the memorialization of the second World War in East and West Germany and how the different politics of memory in the two states have contributed to different attitudes and assumptions toward democratic values, nationalism, and racism.

The fourth chapter discusses the legacy and aftermath of the reunification process and how reunification resulted in persistent grievances in the East. This chapter provides an overview of the events of 1989 and 1990 that led to reunification, focusing on the experiences of East Germans themselves, for many of whom this period was extremely confusing and emotional. Then, I move to the aftermath of reunification and describe the socioeconomic disparities that

¹⁴ Richard A. Easterlin and Anke C. Plagnol, "Life Satisfaction and Economic Conditions in East and West Germany Pre- and Post-Unification," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 68, no. 3 (December 1, 2008): 433–44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2008.06.009>; Andreas Tutić and Hagen von Hermanni, "Sozioökonomischer Status, Deprivation und die Affinität zur AfD – Eine Forschungsnotiz," *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 70, no. 2 (June 1, 2018): 275–94, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-018-0523-0>; Jennifer A. Yoder, "'Revenge of the East'? The AfD's Appeal in Eastern Germany and Mainstream Parties' Responses.," *German Politics and Society* 38, no. 2 (June 22, 2020): 35–59, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2020.380202>.

persisted and developed in the following decades. This also includes policies that exacerbated distrust of the government in the East, such as the Hartz IV reforms of 2004, which led to widespread protests in eastern German cities. To better understand the AfD's appeal in eastern Germany, this chapter and the previous one take a historical approach that incorporates the legacy of both the GDR itself and the legacy of the reunification process.

Chapter 1: What does the AfD Represent?

The question of what the AfD represents may receive a wildly different answer depending on who you ask. To many Germans, it represents a threat to democracy and the dangers of resurging nationalism. To its supporters, it may represent a return to neoliberal, *laissez-faire* economics, a defense of German national identity, or a means to end unnecessary pandemic restrictions. However, the populist appeal of the party lies in something more all-encompassing than far-right ideology or specific policy positions. Most supporters of the AfD are attracted to the party because it makes them feel represented, or alternatively, because they do not feel represented by the other parties. This feeling of representation may be closely related to the issues the AfD chooses to focus on, but the decision to vote for the AfD is not necessarily an ideological one.

In this chapter, I focus on the origin of the party and the policies it has represented throughout its lifetime. The purpose is to analyze the issues that have been most important in attracting voters to the party. The European financial crisis was the issue that sparked the founding of the AfD, so naturally the party's policy towards the EU is an attractive point to its voters. The second issue is migration. In the aftermath of the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015, the AfD was able to garner a lot of support by radicalizing its immigration politics and fanning the flames of a growing anti-Islam nationalist sentiment. Finally, I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided the AfD with a third core issue to attract populist support. The AfD has consistently opposed pandemic restrictions, such as lockdowns, mask mandates, and vaccine mandates. The longer the pandemic drags on, the more popular these positions become. People yearn for a return to normal, and 'normal' is what the AfD's slogan emphasizes: *Deutschland, aber normal*. Germany, but normal.

Other Radical Right Parties in Germany

It is important to put the AfD in the context of other far-right German parties to understand what makes it exceptional. Other than the AfD, the most notable radical right parties in the Federal Republic have been the National Democratic Party (NPD), the Republicans (*Republikaner*), and the German People's Union (DVU). These parties all had some success in state elections, but never received enough support to enter the national parliament. They never experienced the same success as the AfD or other radical right parties in Western Europe, such as the *Rassemblement nationale* (national rally) in France, the Freedom Party in Austria, *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) in Belgium, and the Danish People's Party.

German radical right parties have faced strong opposition in public discourse, in large part because of the lingering memory of National Socialism. However, they have still appealed to some fringe extremists in the West and the East. The eastern authoritarian state repressed Neo-Nazi groups, as it did with all political dissenters. In the West, some neo-Nazi groups were banned, but there was more room for right-wing extremists to organize. The first notable far-right party of the new Federal Republic was the NPD, formed in 1964. At its strongest in 1969, it had 30,000 members and was most successful in Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Lower Saxony, and Hesse, but it slowly lost support over the following decades. After reunification however, the NPD gained a bit of momentum. Like the AfD, the NPD had its most notable results in the East: in Saxony, it received 9.2 percent of the vote in the 2004 state election, and in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, it received 7.3 percent in 2006. The NPD still campaigns there to this day:

their posters can be seen in the leadup to every state and national election. Their best nationwide result occurred in the 2005 *Bundestagswahl*, in which it received a mere 1.6 percent.¹⁵

The German Republicans were founded in 1983 and were originally successful in the Southern states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg. They understood themselves as a party ‘right of center’ and, like the AfD, claimed to support democratic values, describing themselves as a nationalistic and ‘law and order’ party. In this way, they differed from their competitors—the NPD and the DVU—which were more openly extremist. In 1989, they reached 7.5 percent in the Berlin state elections: the first time a far-right party was represented in a German state parliament since the NPD at the end of the 1960s. In the 1990s, the *Republikaner* had short-lived success in Baden-Württemberg: they won 10.9 percent of the vote in 1992 and 9.1 percent in 1996, after which they failed to surpass the 5 percent threshold. Despite minimal successes, they have been consistently active in elections across the country.¹⁶

Finally, the DVU was founded in 1987. Its first successes came in Bremen, when it entered the state parliament in 1987 and 1991. In 1992, it was successful in Schleswig-Holstein with 6.3 percent of the vote, but it failed to repeat that success. Once again, the strength of the DVU proved to be in the East. In Saxony-Anhalt, it had the best result of any radical right party in postwar Germany until the AfD, with 12.9 percent of the statewide vote. In Brandenburg as well, the DVU was represented in the Landtag (regional parliament) from 1999 until 2009. The DVU, like the NPD, spoke directly to East Germans who felt underappreciated in their new country, taking advantage of the potential for protest voting in the East, much like the AfD over

¹⁵ Norbert Lepszy, “Rechtsextreme Parteien,” bpb.de, accessed October 23, 2021, <https://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/lexika/handwoerterbuch-politisches-system/202097/rechtsextreme-parteien>.

¹⁶ Lepszy.

the past decade.¹⁷ The history of these parties shows the context of German right-wing extremism in which the AfD was formed.

Economic Policy and the EU

Unlike these other radical right parties, the AfD was not founded as an extremist party. Although it is now known for its extreme anti-immigration and anti-Islam politics, the party was founded in response to Angela Merkel's handling of the European economic and financial crisis, which began in 2008. Ultimately, Merkel made the decision to bail out Greece and other EU states with a trillion-dollar bailout package, which included German-imposed austerity measures designed to prevent the crisis from reoccurring. However, the bailout package violated the Maastricht Treaty and angered many German economists who felt that she had betrayed German values and the German constitution.¹⁸ In 2012, Alexander Gauland, Konrad Adam, and Bernd Lucke formed the *Wahlalternative 2013* (2013 Electoral Alternative), which would later become the AfD. Their main policy goal was to abolish the Euro as a currency and to promote economic liberalism within the EU, which is shown in their 2013 manifesto.¹⁹ The AfD's 2013 manifesto was only a few pages long—much shorter than most. It focused on policies transitioning away from the Euro, returning to national currencies or smaller currency unions. It emphasizes “a Europe of sovereign states” with a shared domestic market.²⁰

¹⁷ Lepszy.

¹⁸ David Art, “The AfD and the End of Containment in Germany?” *German Politics and Society* 36, no. 2 (June 22, 2018): 76–87, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2018.360205>.

¹⁹ It is typical for German parties to publish a long manifesto (*Wahlprogramm*) detailing their policy positions for the upcoming election. 2013 Wahlprogramm, “Wahlprogramm,” April 14, 2013, <https://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de/bundestag/wahl-2013/wahlprogramme>.

²⁰ “AfD 2013 Wahlprogramm,” 1.

One especially notable section of the 2013 manifesto is called “Constitutionality and Democracy” (*Rechtsstaatlichkeit und Demokratie*). Most supporters of democracy would agree that nothing in this section is objectionable on the surface, but based on what the AfD chose to emphasize, we can make some assumptions as to who it was trying to appeal to in 2013. Merkel’s bailout package in response to the financial crisis was clearly on the authors’ minds as they wrote this section. They write, “the people should determine the will of the parties, not the other way around.”²¹ The founders of the AfD were clearly angered by Merkel’s politics and viewed her as authoritarian. This rhetoric appealed especially to conservative CDU supporters who felt betrayed by Merkel and by those who already felt unrepresented by the parties, two groups who would support the AfD in this election and future elections.²² The last bullet point of this section of the 2013 manifesto is also interesting: pledging to discuss ‘unconventional opinions’ openly (as long as they do not go against the constitution). While support for freedom of speech in itself is not generally a controversial topic, the term ‘unconventional opinions’ gives a definitive nod towards extremists.

The AfD received a lot of media attention in the leadup to the 2013 *Bundestagswahl*. According to Charles Lees, their founders were “well informed and well networked, and their joint manifesto was endorsed by an impressive array of economists, journalists, business leaders, and political activists, many of whom were former members of the CDU.”²³ Despite this, the AfD failed to attract five percent of the vote in the 2013 German elections, meaning that it would not be represented in the *Bundestag*. However, this was a remarkable result for such a new party, and it was more than enough to keep the AfD in the national conversation.

²¹ 2013 Wahlprogramm.

²² Art, “The AfD and the End of Containment in Germany?”

²³ Charles Lees, “The ‘Alternative for Germany’: The Rise of Right-Wing Populism at the Heart of Europe,” *Politics* 38, no. 3 (August 1, 2018): 300, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718777718>.

The next opportunity for the new party to prove itself was the 2014 European Parliament election. In this election, it won 7.1 percent of the national vote, improving on its result from the previous year. Like the previous year, their 2014 manifesto focuses primarily on the decentralization of the EU.²⁴ However, it was much longer and more extensive than the previous year's iteration. It used populist language to criticize powerful European institutions, such as the European Central Bank, the European Commission, the European Stabilization Mechanism, and the Bank Union, which, according to the AfD, are growing in influence after the financial crisis and subsequent bailout. The manifesto states that these institutions were growing "without democratic control" and becoming increasingly out of touch (*bürgerfern*).

The rest of the 2014 manifesto mostly expands on this fundamental criticism. The second section focuses on the Euro, making the case that the common currency of Europe was a fundamental cause of the debt crisis. The AfD criticizes the German government for being one of the biggest supporters of the Euro and for meddling in the affairs of southern European states. Specifically, they argue that a European common currency is harmful because individual states cannot adjust their own interest rates or exchange rates based on their own needs. As a result, the Euro is overvalued in southern Europe and in France while simultaneously undervalued in Germany. Therefore, German taxpayers must (unfairly) carry the burden of financial crises in southern Europe. The AfD sees this as evidence that an abrupt and chaotic end to the Euro is not unlikely. To avoid this, they argue that a gradual and controlled transition away from the Euro.²⁵

²⁴ AfD Wahlprogramm 2014, "Mut zu Deutschland: für ein Europa der Vielfalt," March 22, 2014.

²⁵ AfD Wahlprogramm 2014.

How the ‘Refugee Crisis’ Changed the AfD

If the financial crisis was the issue that sparked the AfD, the ‘refugee crisis’ during the summer of 2015 was the one that intensified its radicalization process. The AfD already represented a harsh stance on immigration prior to 2015, but after 2015, immigration became the party’s central issue. The term ‘refugee crisis’ (*Flüchtlingskrise*) refers to the arrival of millions of refugees in Europe beginning in 2015. That year, 890,000 people arrived in Germany to seek asylum, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In the beginning, German society proved to be remarkably welcoming towards refugees. Media coverage was surprisingly positive which led to the development of a ‘culture of welcome’ (*Willkommenskultur*). However, the positivity was short-lived, and the issue was increasingly framed in a crisis narrative. Pundits warned that the number of refugees entering Europe, specifically Germany and Sweden, would rise to three million in 2016, making it easier for the AfD and other right-wing groups to capitalize on political backlash to refugee acceptance. This led to the prevalence of the term ‘refugee crisis,’ both in English and in German. This term made it easy for critics of Angela Merkel’s policy of welcome to denounce the issue as “Germany’s descent from supposed order into chaos and emergency.”²⁶

As refugees arrived in Europe, media coverage of their suffering encouraged political leaders such as Angela Merkel to act. Stories of asylum seekers in crowded detention camps in Budapest showed the inadequacy of Europe’s asylum regime. Other stories appeared so tragic

²⁶ Bock and Macdonald note that in addition to the term ‘crisis’ (*Krise*), German academics have also criticized the term *Flüchtling*. The suffix -ling carries a diminutive and negative connotation and implies permanence. Additionally, the term emphasizes the act of fleeing, as opposed to the English term ‘refugee,’ which emphasizes “what is sought at arrival,” that is, refuge. Some academics proposed the term ‘*Geflüchtete*,’ which roughly translates to ‘one who has fled’ and implies a more temporary state. Others suggested borrowing the English term ‘refugee.’ Despite its problems, *Flüchtling* was the term that stuck in practice. Jan-Jonathan Bock and Sharon Macdonald, *Refugees Welcome? Difference and Diversity in a Changing Germany* (Berghahn Books, Incorporated, 2019) 4.

that they automatically drew attention to the plight of refugees. Stories such as 71 dead bodies of refugees that were trapped in a locked van on the A4 motorway in Austria or the heartbreaking story and pictures documenting the death of Alan Kurdi, a young boy whose body washed ashore on the beach, were difficult to ignore.²⁷ Merkel made the politically brave decision not to close Germany's borders to asylum seekers, appealing to a growing *Willkommenskultur*. Merkel defended her decision by arguing that Germany had a unique obligation to help refugees. Part of this was due to "Germany's historical responsibility to protect political refugees after the experience of the Nazi dictatorship."²⁸ In this way, she appealed strongly to the ideas of the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In her mind and in the minds of many Germans, this was a chance to prove that Germany could put racism and nationalism behind. On a personal level, Merkel also felt empathy for refugees because of the history of East Germans who had grown up behind the Iron Curtain and were unable to migrate for a better life.

Merkel's decision received strong reactions, both positive and negative. For a short time, the response was relatively positive due to the effect of *Willkommenskultur* that Merkel and immigration activists had created. Ulrike Hamann and Serhat Karakayali document how the number of people volunteering for refugee-aid organizations in Germany had been steadily increasing prior to the summer of 2015. They write that "every major political party, trade union, company, all kinds of associations and the media joined in the welcoming campaign," including the populist, right-leaning tabloid 'BILD.'²⁹ However, the attitude towards refugees changed drastically at the beginning of 2016 following extensive coverage of attacks at a New Year's Eve celebration in Cologne. A group of men, some asylum seekers and others German citizens, were

²⁷ Bock and Macdonald, 1.

²⁸ Bock and Macdonald, 2.

²⁹ Ulrike Hamann and Serhat Karakayali, "Practicing Willkommenskultur: Migration and Solidarity in Germany," *Intersections* 2, no. 4 (December 2016), 74-75, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v2i4.296>.

accused of sexual assault and rape of numerous women at the celebration. Stereotypes surrounding Muslim refugees and immigrants suddenly abounded in right-wing circles. Even in more centrist publications, Muslims and refugees were suddenly viewed with higher levels of suspicion. This resulted in a sharp uptick in nationalist terrorism: in 2016, there were 595 attacks on asylum seekers, 123 arson attacks on accommodation for asylum seekers, and 3,056 further acts of violence perpetrated by right-wing extremists. These attacks occurred disproportionately in the East: 43 percent of right-wing terror attacks were committed there, despite the East comprising only 20 percent of the population of Germany.³⁰ Bock and Macdonald write that “especially in the East, rejection, often hatred, of foreigners was expressed in brutal attacks,” as well as through electoral support for the AfD. “Discontent and anger were also directed at the political establishment and Chancellor Merkel in particular.”³¹

Despite the calls for *Willkommenskultur*, anti-refugee and anti-Islam sentiment (the German radical right often conflates the two) was already high in the leadup to the ‘crisis.’ A few years prior, Thilo Sarrazin’s book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany is Doing Away with Itself) brought the topic of Islam in Germany into the national debate.³² Sarrazin argued that Muslims in Germany are unwilling and incapable of integrating into German society and that Muslims lack intelligence. The book proved that “seventy years after the Holocaust, it is possible to express ideas of racial superiority openly, discriminate against minorities, and to deny them respect as human beings.”³³

³⁰ Bock and Macdonald, *Refugees Welcome? Difference and Diversity in a Changing Germany*.

³¹ Bock and Macdonald, 7.

³² Thilo Sarrazin, *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* (DVA, 2011).

³³ Karolin Machtans, “Navid Kermani: Advocate for an Antipatriotic Patriotism and a Multireligious, Multicultural Europe,” in *Envisioning Social Justice in Contemporary German Culture*, ed. Jill E. Twark and Axel Hildebrandt (New York, NY, United States: Camden House, 2015).

The year of 2014 was the peak of anti-refugee protests organized by the AfD and a closely related far-right organization known as PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamification of the Occident.)³⁴ In the winter of 2014, PEGIDA mobilized up to 25,000 supporters in Dresden to protest refugee acceptance. These demonstrations were known merely as ‘*Spaziergänge*,’ which translates roughly to ‘walks’ or ‘strolls.’ They were engineered to resemble the atmosphere of 1989, before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Then, ‘Monday demonstrations’ were a series of protests in Leipzig which kickstarted the fall of the GDR. In 2014, ‘Monday demonstrations’ referred to the anti-immigrant, far-right PEGIDA protests in Dresden.

The most emblematic slogan of German reunification, “*Wir sind das Volk!*” (We are the people) made a resurgence in these protests as well. The return of this slogan shows the type of people who far-right activists were targeting. *Wir sind das Volk* carries much more significance in the East than in the West because of the memory of the pro-democracy demonstrations in 1989. Easterners specifically attribute the phrase to democracy, the fall of authoritarianism, and national pride. However, the use of the phrase has changed significantly since then. Former President of the Bundestag Wolfgang Thierse, who grew up in the GDR, described the new rhetoric as a reversal of the original meaning. It had changed to represent nationalism and

³⁴ The reach of the PEGIDA movement can be seen through their presence on Facebook. In one month from November to December 2014, the numbers of followers on the PEGIDA Facebook page multiplied by 10, from 3,300 to 33,000. By the end of January, the number was 160,000. Noura Maan and Fabian Schmid, “Strategien von AfD, Pegida & Co. : ‘Wir Sind Das Volk’ - Auch Im Netz,” Tagesspiegel, March 20, 2017, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/strategien-von-afd-pegida-und-co-wir-sind-das-volk-auch-im-netz/19542352.html>.

xenophobia, “the opposite of 1989.”³⁵ Richard Schröder, a theologian and civil rights activist, notes that this change is represented in the emphasis in the phrase. In 1989, as demonstrators called for democratic representation, the emphasis was clearly on ‘*das Volk*’—the people who the state is supposed to represent. Under PEGIDA and the AfD, the emphasis shifted to ‘*Wir*’—*We* are the people, but refugees and Muslims are *not* the people. Despite this shift, positive associations with the phrase make it an effective tool for nationalist extremists, even its new meaning represents the antithesis of the 1989 objectives.³⁶

Immigration Politics of the AfD

Even as early as 2014, the AfD had connections to the PEGIDA demonstrations. Prominent AfD politicians, such as Björn Höcke, praised PEGIDA.³⁷ The 2014 manifesto of the AfD reflects this anti-immigration sentiment.³⁸ Immigration and asylum politics took a central place in their 2014 manifesto in a section titled “For a Capably-Competitive and Social EU” (*Für eine wettbewerbsfähige und soziale EU*). Here, they begin with positive-sounding language, emphasizing a “humane” (*menschenwürdig*) immigration and asylum policy, promoting an “open and foreigner-friendly Germany” (*ein offenes und ausländerfreundliches Deutschland*). They write that Germany’s demographic development requires *qualified* immigration. The welfare system is also a major theme of their immigration section: “immigration into German social welfare” is portrayed as a significant threat to German society, and they argue for the need

³⁵ Franziska Hein, “»Wir sind das Volk« - Wie die Neue Rechte die Parole von 1989 benutzt (nd-aktuell.de),” accessed February 14, 2022, <https://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1124696.afd-und-pegida-wir-sind-das-volk-wie-die-neue-rechte-die-parole-von-benutzt.html>.

³⁶ Hein.

³⁷ David F. Patton, “Protest Voting in Eastern Germany: Continuity and Change Across Three Decades,” *German Politics & Society* 37, no. 3 (September 2019): 80, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2019.370306>.

³⁸ AfD Wahlprogramm 2014, “Mut zu Deutschland: für ein Europa der Vielfalt.”

to defend the social welfare system from abuse by immigrants. The AfD used considerably less inflammatory rhetoric and was also much less extreme on these issues than they would become in the following years. However, behind the moderate-sounding language, these policies would have severe consequences for many people in Germany. Immigrants who do not have the means to support themselves through earned income, assets, and social benefits, would have to “return to their homeland” (*Heimat*), which would essentially amount to deportations.

By the 2017 election, immigration and Islam were the unquestionably the main issues of the AfD. In comparison with their previous election manifestos, the 2017 manifesto places a significantly stronger emphasis on the topic of immigration and asylum.³⁹ The chapter is called “Asylum needs borders: Immigration and Asylum” (*Asyl braucht Grenzen: Zuwanderung und Asyl*) and begins with the claim that African and Arab populations are ‘exploding’ due to a much higher birthrate than that in Europe or in Germany.⁴⁰ The authors disdainfully note that international aid has contributed to a decrease in the global child mortality rate. The implication here is that nonwhite Africans and Arabs are primitive and unable to take care of themselves. In addition, they provide statistics showing that a large portion of Africans, especially young men, are ‘willing to emigrate’ (*auswanderungswillig*).⁴¹ They estimate this number to be approximately 350 million. The term ‘*auswanderungswillig*’ hides the reasons why people flee their homeland. The vast majority of asylum seekers in Germany or in the rest of the EU have fled not because they were ‘willing’ to, but because conditions at home made it physically unsafe for them to live there.

³⁹ 2017 Wahlprogramm, “Programm Für Deutschland,” April 23, 2017.

⁴⁰ 2017 Wahlprogramm, 27-32.

⁴¹ 2017 Wahlprogramm, 28.

However, the biggest shift in policy and rhetoric for the AfD between 2014 and 2017 was not on immigration, but on Islam. For the AfD, these issues became interconnected due to their assumption that refugees are Muslim. This is shown in the following chapter of the manifesto is titled “Islam in Conflict with the Free Democratic Basic Order” (*Der Islam im Konflikt mit der freiheitlich-demokratischen Grundordnung*).⁴² It begins with the blunt statement that “Islam does not belong in Germany,” a statement which has been repeated numerous times in the past few years at far-right protests. Specifically, the AfD say they want to prevent “Islamic parallel societies” from expanding in Germany, in which Islamic courts practice Sharia and undermine the German state. They argue this on the basis of protecting basic freedoms, ironically including freedom of religion and freedom of thought (*Glaubens-, Gewissens-, und Bekenntnisfreiheit*). Clearly, they do not include the practice of Islam in their understanding of the freedom of religion. In defense of this obvious contradiction, they argue that all they are doing is “a rational critique of religion,” and calling it Islamophobia or racism is a ‘defamation’ thereof.⁴³

Even though the issue of migration did not receive as much attention from mainstream media outlets in the leadup to the 2021 election, this did not mean that it ceased to be an important issue for the AfD. Like many populist movements, the AfD has developed a strong social media presence on websites such as Facebook and Twitter. It has been especially successful on Facebook, where the official page of the AfD has over 542,000 followers.⁴⁴ In comparison, the official page of the CDU has around 228,000, less than half as many, while the SPD has a mere 86,000 followers.⁴⁵ Both the CDU and SPD received significantly more votes than the AfD in the 2021 election, but the AfD has clearly been more successful at reaching

⁴² 2017 Wahlprogramm, 33-35.

⁴³ 2017 Wahlprogramm, 34.

⁴⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/alternatiefuerde/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/CDU/>; <https://www.facebook.com/spdbundestagsfraktion/>

voters through Facebook. In many ways, the rhetoric that AfD politicians use on social media is more important than what they write in the election manifesto. Far more people are likely to read and share a post on social media than will read the official manifesto because social media is simply more accessible.

Anti-immigration sentiment be clearly seen on the social media pages of AfD politicians, and it is still a key issue that they are using to attract their voters. One twitter post on November 10, 2021, by Gerrit Huy, a speaker for the AfD in the Bundestag, reads “BKA statistic confirms: clear connection between immigration and crime!” The post calls for the deportation of ‘criminals’ (*Straftäter*) and ‘potential threats’ (*Gefährder*), “even to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.”⁴⁶ Deporting refugees to war zones is against international law. Another post on July 3, 2021, from Dr. Malte Kaufmann reads, “Drugs, break-ins, clan-swamp (*Clan-Sumpf*)? We do not want immigration like this! The AfD has long demanded a fundamental change in migration policy. Out with unconditional ‘*Willkommenskultur*’. Our land—our laws, norms, and values!”⁴⁷ Both of these posts appeal to the prejudice that immigrants—specifically those from Middle Eastern countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria—are much more likely to commit crime than white Germans, and that this is an inherent aspect of their identity. However, what Huy and others fail to mention is that many ‘crimes’ committed by immigrants and documented by the BKA (Federal Office of Criminality) are often not crimes that would apply to native-born Germans, such as illegally crossing the border or forgetting their pass.

⁴⁶ Gerrit Huy, „#BKA - Statistik belegt,“ Twitter post, Nov. 10, 2021, <https://twitter.com/GerritHuy/status/1458320364853936128>.

⁴⁷ Malte Kaufmann, „Drogen, Einbrüche, Clan-Sumpf?“ Twitter post, Jul. 3, 2021, <https://twitter.com/MalteKaufmann/status/1411243554513502208>.

AfD's Stance on COVID-19

In the last few years, the pandemic has largely overshadowed migration in the news and in public discourse. Like many countries, Germany has been hit hard by the pandemic. According to the WHO, Germany has recorded approximately 24.7 million cases and 135,000 deaths of COVID-19 as of April 2022.⁴⁸ However, this shift in focus has not taken away from the AfD's appeal. Even though immigration was not a major topic in the media during the leadup to the 2021 election, the AfD did not suffer significant losses. To the contrary, the pandemic seems to have provided the AfD with a completely new realm of anti-establishment politics to explore.

Throughout the pandemic, national and state governments have imposed strict restrictions in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19 and save lives. However, many people who have come to disagree with pandemic policies, such as vaccine mandates, are not necessarily right-leaning on other issues, and may feel attracted to the AfD's stances against further restrictions. One group which became known for anti-lockdown ideas is the *Querdenker* movement. They have been responsible for spreading false conspiracy theories about COVID vaccines, which a significant portion of Germans have come to believe. The movement was marked for surveillance by Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) April 28, 2021. Interestingly, the BfV created a new category for the *Querdenker*. According to the intelligence agency, "the movement does not fall into pre-existing categories of concern—such as far-right, far-left, or Islamist—but a new category," which they call "delegitimization of the state where relevant to constitutional protection." The movement had shown that "their agenda goes beyond mere mobilization to protest against the state's coronavirus protection measures."⁴⁹ The

⁴⁸ "Germany: WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard With Vaccination Data," accessed May 1, 2022, <https://covid19.who.int>.

⁴⁹ "Germany Puts Anti-Lockdown Querdenker Group under Observation," DW, April 28, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-puts-anti-lockdown-querdenker-group-under-observation/a-57360414>.

Querdenker have ties to far-right separatist organizations such as the *Reichsbürger* and *Selbstverwalter* groups, which are using COVID protests to gain support.⁵⁰

German protests against pandemic restrictions have drawn international media attention. Most of these protests are organized by far-right groups with ties to the AfD. In Brandenburg, many protests are organized by “*Zukunft Heimat*” (Future Homeland). Founded in 2015 during the ‘refugee crisis,’ the group spreads nationalist and anti-refugee ideas. One of its co-founders, Christoph Berndt, is the parliamentary leader of the AfD in Brandenburg. Berndt has made a long list of controversial statements about the pandemic, questioning “whether anyone has died of COVID,” questioning the existence of the virus, and refusing to wear a mask “because it is a ‘symbol of suppression.’”⁵¹ Like the protests organized by PEGIDA in 2014, these protests take advantage of the nostalgia and pride of the protestors in 1989. ‘*Wir sind das Volk*’ has once again made a resurgence, this time serving the argument that pandemic restrictions are unpopular. It is a populist message which criticizes elite policymakers and pandemic experts for implementing unpopular, arbitrary policies, which the AfD and its supporters criticize as authoritarian. Additionally, ‘no dictatorship!’ is one of the slogans which can be heard at these rallies and could easily be perceived as a slight reference to the East German memory of authoritarianism under the SED.

As one would expect, the pandemic was a major issue in the AfD’s 2021 manifesto leading up to the election. In a section titled “Health Policy” (*Gesundheitspolitik*), the manifesto calls for an end to ‘disproportionate’ COVID measures, which they criticize as limiting basic rights through arbitrary and incomprehensible rules. They oppose mask mandates, especially in

⁵⁰ “Germany Puts Anti-Lockdown Querdenker Group under Observation.”

⁵¹ Kate Connolly, “Peace, Freedom, No Dictatorship!': Germans Protest against Covid Restrictions,” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2022, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/25/peace-freedom-no-dictatorship-germans-protest-against-covid-restrictions>.

schools and day-care centers, as well as lockdowns. They also oppose vaccine mandates, whether they are directly imposed by the government or imposed by employers or stores, which they believe should not be able to reject people based on vaccination status. The official manifesto does not express explicit anti-vaccine conspiracy theories. The AfD places an emphasis on voluntary vaccination, defending their position on the basis of “bodily integrity” (*körperliche Unversehrtheit*).⁵² However, this is all they need to appeal to vaccine skeptics across the country, as the AfD remains the party most opposed to all pandemic restrictions by far.

One might expect these issues to fall under a section about health policy. However, the AfD goes on to suggest an investigation into the COVID policies implemented by the government. The manifesto proposes investigating a “lacking scientific discourse” in policy-making decisions, limitations on constitutional rights, and the physical and psychological effects of pandemic restrictions. In addition, the party speculates about pandemic-related corruption through the personal enrichment of government representatives and officials during the pandemic.⁵³ This conspiratorial thinking appeals to those who already distrust the government. By calling for an investigation, they give legitimacy to the idea that pandemic restrictions are not actually designed for the best interests of Germany, which is a belief that could still be held even while disagreeing with individual restrictions or mandates. For those who distrust the government, which includes most AfD supporters, the fact that this corruption has not been proven by an investigation—which will most likely never happen, as the AfD is not part of the governing coalition—will not matter.

⁵² 2021 Wahlprogramm, “Deutschland. Aber normal.,” *Alternative für Deutschland* (blog), accessed September 9, 2021, <https://www.afd.de/wahlprogramm/>.

⁵³ 2021 Wahlprogramm.

Like the issue of immigration, the AfD's stance on the pandemic is also clearly visible on social media. On its main Facebook page, the party posted on April 29, 2022 arguing against the mandatory vaccination for health care workers.⁵⁴ The AfD opposes the vaccine mandate for everyone of course, but this post is especially interesting because they are using the anti-vaccine movement to appear to care for health care workers. They write, "We from the AfD stand by health care workers—not only with words, but also with actions." They write that health care workers have been going to work discouraged for a long time and are now facing the unfair choice whether to lose their jobs or give up their 'bodily integrity' (*körperliche Unversehrtheit*).

The AfD's stance on pandemic issues shows their most recent attempt to appeal to anti-establishment sentiments in German society. Like the issue of refugee acceptance, which radicalized the AfD and allowed them to become relevant on the national stage, Germans who are already predisposed to distrust the government are more likely to be convinced that pandemic restrictions are unnecessary and that the AfD is looking out for their interests. The difference between pandemic issues and immigration may be that resistance to pandemic restrictions are not as inherently nationalistic, whereas anti-immigration politics are often inextricably tied with racism and nationalism. Then again, the pandemic is also temporary. Even if the coronavirus never disappears, restrictions will at some point, and so will the politics of opposing them. It is unclear how the pandemic will affect the AfD's future electoral chances, but it is certainly possible that the *Querdenker* protests and internet rabbit holes will introduce more people to the radical right and the AfD, even after the restrictions themselves are gone.

⁵⁴ AfD, „Impfpflicht in Gesundheit und Pflege muss weg!“ Facebook post, April 29, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/alternativefuerde/posts/5375460439150918>.

Chapter 2: What Attracts AfD Voters?

At the end of the Cold War, there was a consensus in the West that liberal democracy had triumphed over communism. Some Western elites were so optimistic that they believed the end of the Cold War to mark the ‘end of history.’⁵⁵ Liberal democracy would spread everywhere unchallenged and eventually would lead to global prosperity, leaving no reason for anyone to oppose the system. However, the rise of populist radical right parties is one way in which this rosy view of the world is being proven false. Liberal democracies are not necessarily stable or equitable societies and democratic backsliding is possible.

The most widely accepted definition of populist radical right parties comes from Cas Mudde.⁵⁶ According to Mudde, the three most important features of radical right parties are nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Nativism combines nationalism and xenophobia, and the central idea of it is that non-native elements of society, such as immigrants, threaten the stability of the nation. Radical right parties also usually contain authoritarian tendencies, meaning that they are unusually aggressive to their opponents and question democratic norms and institutions. Many radical right parties also contain elements of populism, which Mudde interprets as an ideology that sees the elites of society as malevolent and selfish actors in conflict with the poor or working class.

Much of the traditional explanation for the success of right-wing populism hinges on economic factors. For example, Inglehart and Norris describe how these dynamics are playing out in populist-authoritarian movements around the world. According to them, the story begins

⁵⁵ Francis Fukuyama

⁵⁶ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/conncoll/detail.action?docID=325995>.

with the onset of relative existential security in Western democracies after World War II. This made people in these societies more accepting and tolerant of new, postmaterialist ideas, which were “less conformist, more open to new ideas, less authoritarian, and more tolerant of outgroups.”⁵⁷ This process is known as the Silent Revolution thesis.

However, Inglehart and Norris also argue that ideas of cultural tolerance are dependent on continually high levels of economic and physical security. Their theory is cyclical in nature. It begins with stable economic conditions in liberal democracies, which led to the emergence of new cultural issues. In general, according to them, societies became more tolerant, especially on issues such as immigration and LGBTQ rights, for example. This may have angered older, traditionally conservative groups, but not in large enough numbers for these groups to stop this progression. However, Inglehart and Norris argue that this focus on cultural issues coincided with economic issues being ignored. Left wing parties had traditionally been oriented towards the working class and had pushed for policies of wealth redistribution in the twentieth century, but began to increasingly give attention to cultural issues at the expense of redistribution. Many liberal democracies have experienced unprecedented levels of economic inequality despite increasing GDP, which has contributed to a populist backlash against liberalism. Especially among members of dominant racial or ethnic groups of a certain society, the populist anti-elite sentiment easily became weaponized by nationalism and the radical right.

However, the explanation for the rise of the AfD in Germany is much more complex. Many scholars have observed that traditional measures of socioeconomic status, such as income and employment, have little to no correlation on the likelihood that an individual will vote for the

⁵⁷ Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: The Silent Revolution in Reverse,” *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 2 (June 2017): 444, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717000111>.

AfD.⁵⁸ This fact appears to contradict traditional theories for the appeal of populism, such as the one proposed by Inglehart and Norris. To understand the appeal of populism and the radical right in Eastern Germany, we should discuss the history of how this issue has been approached in academia.

Support for the AfD between 2013 and 2015

When the AfD emerged with unexpectedly strong results in 2013, many people attempted to explain its appeal. Although it had a populist message, it was not yet clear that the AfD would embrace right-wing extremism as it has. Many scholars noted that Germany had finally joined the group of countries with a significant euro-skeptic party, sometimes seeming surprised that it had taken so long. For example, Kai Arzheimer wrote “The AfD: Finally a Successful Eurosceptic Party for Germany?”⁵⁹ Arzheimer described the AfD as a ‘soft euro-skeptic’ party, and concluded that it did not belong to the group of radical right parties in Europe at that time. He pointed to political disaffection and anti-immigrant attitudes as the most important factors motivating AfD voters. In a very similar vein, Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri wrote “The AfD and its Sympathisers: Finally a Right-Wing Populist Movement in Germany?”⁶⁰ They aimed to study the ideological profile of AfD sympathizers. They found that most AfD sympathizers had voted for the CDU/CSU in the previous election. Interestingly, most also placed themselves in

⁵⁸ Manès Weisskircher, “The Strength of Far-Right AfD in Eastern Germany: The East-West Divide and the Multiple Causes behind ‘Populism,’” *Political Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (July 2020): 614–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12859>; Jennifer A. Yoder, “Revenge of the East? The AfD’s Appeal in Eastern Germany and Mainstream Parties’ Responses.,” *German Politics and Society* 38, no. 2 (June 22, 2020): 35–59, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2020.380202>.

⁵⁹ Kai Arzheimer, “The AfD: Finally a Successful Right-Wing Populist Eurosceptic Party for Germany?,” *West European Politics* 38, no. 3 (May 4, 2015): 535–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1004230>.

⁶⁰ Nicole Berbuir, Marcel Lewandowsky, and Jasmin Siri, “The AfD and Its Sympathisers: Finally a Right-Wing Populist Movement in Germany?,” *German Politics* 24, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 154–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2014.982546>.

the political center. In its early days, the AfD tried to present itself as a ‘catch-all-protest party’ that was open to anyone who felt dissatisfied with the political establishment, regardless of ideology. However, the authors note that this goal was undermined by some of the strongest positions of the AfD at that time, such as a strong aversion to multiculturalism and the “condemnation of non-heteronormative lifestyles such as same-sex unions or ‘political correctness’.”⁶¹ This pointed to an element of radicalism beyond traditional conservatism within the party, which is often employed by the Christian right and nationalist groups. Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri concluded that at that time, the AfD was a “projection screen for different concerns and purposes” and a “functional equivalent for right-wing parties in a country where open right-wing extremism and right-wing populism is tabooed.”⁶²

Although the AfD before 2015 may not have been as radical as other right-wing populist parties in Europe, as the only party to challenge Germany’s long-held consensus on supporting the European Union and the Euro, it was already somewhat radical by German standards. So, who voted for them in this early stage and why? Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck’s analysis of a survey conducted by the German Longitudinal Election Study provides many helpful insights.⁶³ He shows who AfD voters in 2013 voted for in 2009. The AfD drew votes from all parties, but they drew disproportionately from voters who chose a non-mainstream party, non-voters, and those who were not eligible to vote in 2009. They also drew many votes from the FDP, which had a strong performance in 2009, but, like the AfD, failed to surpass the five percent threshold in 2013.

⁶¹ Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri, 165.

⁶² Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri, 173.

⁶³ Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, “Euro-Kritik, Wirtschaftspessimismus Und Einwanderungsskepsis: Hintergründe Des Beinahe-Wahlerfolges Der Alternative Für Deutschland (AfD) Bei Der Bundestagswahl 2013,” *Zeitschrift Für Parlamentsfragen* 45, no. 1 (2014): 94–112.

Schmitt-Beck also provides a statistical analysis of the attitudes of AfD voters in 2013 on the economy and on the Euro-crisis. He found that there was an extremely strong correlation between voting for the AfD and being pessimistic about the prospects of the economy. While only 22 percent of those surveyed shared this view, many of them were AfD voters. Interestingly, AfD voters were not any more likely to feel personally threatened by the economy than voters of any other party. This suggests that at this early stage, economic issues were the driving force of the AfD, but also that AfD voters were not voting out of personal desperation. Another issue which aligned with support for the AfD was the Euro-crisis. AfD voters were likely to name the Euro-crisis as the most important political problem for Germany and were also likely to express fear of its effects. Additionally, AfD voters strongly opposed the bailout of Euro-crisis countries, which is no surprise since the party was founded primarily in opposition to that policy.⁶⁴ Although economic issues were probably the most important for the majority of AfD voters in 2013, cultural issues also played a role. The most notable correlation among cultural issues was the attitude of AfD voters on the integration of immigrants, with AfD voters being extremely likely to agree with the statement that “immigrants should integrate themselves” into society. However, AfD voters as a whole were not more likely to name immigration as the most important issue facing Germany, probably in part because many of them considered that to be the Euro-crisis.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Schmitt-Beck.

⁶⁵ Schmitt-Beck.

Radicalization

As established in Chapter 1, Germany's acceptance of refugees in the summer of 2015 was the most important issue for the radicalization of the AfD. This radicalization resulted in significant changes in party leadership. Within the AfD, there were vigorous debates about the future of the party. Part of this also had to do with the fact that the party was still relatively new and unestablished. However, the nature of the party as an 'alternative' party that was supposed to welcome all ideologies may have also contributed to the extent of the inner instability that it experienced. After the 2014 European parliamentary elections, the socially conservative wing of the party increasingly pushed for the AfD to give more attention to cultural issues. They did not wish to be perceived as a single-issue party and believed that they could earn more votes by representing hardline conservative positions on many cultural issues. This included immigration but was not limited to it. As well as representing skepticism towards multiculturalism, Sara Ceyhan notes that the party also represented a conservative vision of 'family politics.'⁶⁶ The founder of the AfD, Bernd Lucke, disapproved of the direction that the party was heading and attempted to stop it with the '*Weckruf 2015*' (wake-up call) initiative in May, 2015. Lucke and other members of this initiative saw the AfD as threatened by representatives of the 'new right.' However, when Lucke was up for reelection as chair of the party, he lost. He was replaced by Frauke Petry, representing a huge victory for the nationalist wing of the AfD. Lucke then withdrew from the party, not wanting to associate himself with it anymore. Petry proceeded to

⁶⁶ Sara Ceyhan, "Konservativ oder doch schon rechtspopulistisch? Die politischen Positionen der AfD-Parlamentskandidaten im Parteienvergleich," *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 26, no. 1 (March 2016): 53, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41358-016-0020-9>.

strongly oppose Merkel's open-door policy toward Syrian refugees and open up the party to blatantly xenophobic rhetoric.⁶⁷

The conservative wing's strategy to focus on cultural issues worked: in the 2017 federal election, the AfD's voter base expanded tremendously, receiving more than three times as many votes as they did in 2013. Wurthmann et al. calls the AfD the 'one winner' of the election, noting that the 2017 election was the biggest loss ever for the CDU/CSU and SPD.⁶⁸ Many studies have found strong evidence that the ideology of AfD voters shifted along with the party's policy positions. Immigration was now listed as the number one issue by AfD voters, whereas in 2013, the most important issue for AfD voters had been the Euro-crisis. Hansen and Olsen argue that for those voters, the AfD served as a single-issue party for anti-immigrant sentiment.⁶⁹ Interestingly, Arzheimer and Berning note that although the AfD galvanized support from anti-immigration politics, their success did not coincide with an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment on a national level.⁷⁰ Additionally, AfD voters now self-identified further to the right on the political spectrum than voters of any other party. After the 2017 election, the AfD could be considered a radical right populist party, in line with other populist right parties in Western Europe.

⁶⁷ Ceyhan.

⁶⁸ L. Constantin Wurthmann et al., "Many Losers – One Winner? An Examination of Vote Switching to the AfD in the 2017 German Federal Election Using VAA Data," *Party Politics*, April 16, 2020, 1354068820914959, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820914959>.

⁶⁹ Hansen and Olsen, "Flesh of the Same Flesh."

⁷⁰ Arzheimer and Berning, "How the AfD and Their Voters Veered to the Radical Right."

Culture or Economics? The AfD as a Protest Party

Many studies have concluded that the AfD functions as a protest party as well as a single-issue anti-immigrant party. One of the opinions commonly shared by AfD voters in 2017 was a disapproval of German democracy, and many of them were dissatisfied in part because of the government's handling of immigration. Notably, high levels of dissatisfaction with the government was shared by voters of the Left Party, although for different reasons. Proportional to the size of the Left, the AfD took more votes from the Left than from any other party. The Left is often seen as a traditional protest party in eastern Germany. Historically, it represents the old Socialist Unity Party (SED) of East Germany and West German leftists who deserted the SPD when it shifted right in the 2000s. However, many of its voters in the East tended to vote for it less out of an ideological affiliation with the party and more because of the party's anti-establishment message. In 2017, it appears that many protest voters from the Left Party who were dissatisfied with the government chose to express that dissatisfaction with a vote for the AfD.⁷¹ Hansen and Olsen find that over half of AfD voters are motivated "not out of conviction for the AfD itself but rather out of frustration with all the other parties," which supports the idea that the AfD functions as a protest party to a large extent.⁷²

The ideological profile of AfD voters is somewhat easier to establish than their demographic and socioeconomic profile. Some things were clear: AfD voters were overwhelmingly male and were more likely to live in the East than voters of the other parties in the Bundestag. AfD voters also tended to be younger or middle-aged. Arzheimer and Berning find that voters above the age of 60 were significantly less likely to vote AfD, "presumably

⁷¹ Lees, "The 'Alternative for Germany'"; Hansen and Olsen, "Flesh of the Same Flesh."

⁷² Hansen and Olsen, "Flesh of the Same Flesh," 4.

because they identify with one of the established parties.”⁷³ The most likely age group to vote AfD was between 30-39 years, although the authors also note that “the effect is small” and that “the differences between this and the two next age groups are themselves not statistically significant.”⁷⁴

Socioeconomically, however, AfD voters do not have a particularly specific profile in comparison to voters of other parties. Hansen and Olsen suggest that this may be partly due to the fact that the AfD has drawn voters from all of the other parties.⁷⁵ Regardless, it appears that AfD voters are not especially disadvantaged in terms of income, unemployment, or education level. This is somewhat surprising and does not align with the typical view of right-wing populism as appealing to economically disadvantaged segments of society.⁷⁶ This fact led Holger Lengfeld to conclude that socioeconomic status is simply an unimportant factor in explaining the motivation to vote for the AfD, and that AfD voters should not be thought of as ‘losers of modernization (*Modernisierungsverlierer*).’⁷⁷ According to Lengfeld, none of the indicators of socioeconomic status provide evidence for the ‘losers of modernization theory’ (*Modernisierungsverliererthese*). Rather, the ‘nationalism theory’ (*Nationalismusthese*), according to which people vote for the AfD simply because they prefer cultural homogeneity and feel attracted to calls for political and economic autonomy, is much more accurate in explaining support for the AfD. Even those who see themselves as ‘losers of societal development’ are not especially likely to vote for the AfD. Lengfeld also points out that the AfD’s economic policies

⁷³ Arzheimer and Berning, “How the AfD and Their Voters Veered to the Radical Right,” 6.

⁷⁴ Arzheimer and Berning, 6.

⁷⁵ Hansen and Olsen, “Flesh of the Same Flesh.”

⁷⁶ For example, Inglehart and Norris, “Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties.”

⁷⁷ Holger Lengfeld, “Die „Alternative Für Deutschland“: Eine Partei Für Modernisierungsverlierer? | SpringerLink,” accessed September 8, 2021, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11577-017-0446-1>. Although this was published before the 2017 election, it uses data from polls on the 2017 election and is representative of this viewpoint.

do not even appear to appeal to poorer classes of society. In terms of economic policy, it has maintained its neoliberal stances on market competition and government spending, even if it does not speak about them much.

However, not everyone is ready to conclude that socioeconomic status plays no role in the decision to vote for the AfD. Tutić and von Hermanni argue that the decision to discount socioeconomic status is based on a misevaluation of economic factors.⁷⁸ For example, Inglehart and Norris omit income level as a variable, and Lengfeld does not adjust for the size of the household when working with income variables. According to Tutić and von Hermanni, support for the AfD is socially layered and heavily influenced by lower education levels, lower income, unemployment, or working-class employment. However, they also note that their findings do not by any means reject the validity of the cultural backlash hypothesis. According to them, right-wing positions opposing immigration, refugees, and feminism obviously influence right-wing voters to vote for the AfD, because the AfD explicitly shares these opinions in their platform and rhetoric. Rather, their results show a connection between the right-wing ideology that motivates someone to vote for the AfD and socioeconomic status.

Clearly, the relationship between economics and support for the AfD is complicated. Jennifer Yoder notes that, in the case of the AfD, prior experiences with economic hardship may play a more significant role than present socioeconomic status. She writes that “for many, experiences with unemployment and economic uncertainty in the 1990s were wholly unfamiliar and were felt as individual and collective existential crises.”⁷⁹ These experiences were not limited to those who lived through the 1990s, but also “conditioned the way the next generation

⁷⁸ Andreas Tutić and Hagen von Hermanni, “Sozioökonomischer Status, Deprivation und die Affinität zur AfD – Eine Forschungsnotiz,” *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 70, no. 2 (June 1, 2018): 275–94, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-018-0523-0>.

⁷⁹ Yoder, “Revenge of the East?”

or two perceived their individual status and the well-being of their families and communities.” She also finds a relationship between the fear that one’s socioeconomic status is at risk in the future and support for the AfD.⁸⁰

On the one hand, it is not helpful to say that right-wing ideology is the only factor that motivates support for the AfD, since this explanation does not address the source of that right-wing ideology in the first place. On the other hand, it is also difficult to say that economics are the main driver of the AfD without a direct correlation with current socioeconomic status. Even though Tutić and von Hermanni show that a higher income makes someone less likely to vote for the AfD, it is not the case that AfD voters represent the poorest segment of the population. These findings have led me to propose a more historical focus on the motivations of AfD voters. In the next two chapters, I look at two historical legacies that could help explain the AfD’s appeal in the East. First, I analyze the legacy of the GDR and how that affects attitudes on cultural issues, such as memory, race, and democracy. Then, I move to the legacy of reunification and how the policies surrounding this momentous historical event affect socioeconomic status and Easterners’ attitudes towards the federal government.

⁸⁰ Yoder, 45.

Chapter 3: The Legacy of the GDR and the Power of Memory

In the fictional film ‘Good Bye, Lenin!’ the main character, Alex, takes care of his mother, who fell into a coma just before the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁸¹ The doctors tell him that his mother should not be exposed to any stimulating or surprising experience, which could trigger another heart attack. His mother loves the GDR, so he decides to hide the fall of the wall from her. Of course, this becomes more difficult as the East becomes more and more westernized, and the methods he resorts to in order to keep the secret become more and more extravagant. The film is funny, but also sad and nostalgic.

‘Good Bye, Lenin!’ represents a concept known in German as *Ostalgie*, a term which combines the words for ‘East’ and ‘nostalgia.’ *Ostalgie* refers to the positive memories Easterners have of the GDR. When looking to the past, it is a common psychological phenomenon to elevate good memories over bad ones. We tend to look back on ‘the good old days’ with fondness, and this is what is captured by *Ostalgie*. ‘Good Bye, Lenin!’ was released in 2003 and was one of the most successful German films, both in the East and in the West. In the first few months after its release, nearly 6 million Germans went to see it in movie theaters, and it won the 2003 German Film Prize. Interestingly, the director of the film, Wolfgang Becker, is West German, but the film’s popularity and success shows the prevalence and importance of *Ostalgie* in German society. The notion of positive associations with the GDR might come as a surprise to Western audiences, since we tend to think of East Germany as an oppressive, authoritarian state whose citizens were trying to escape its borders. However, Becker notes that his research for this film made him understand that “the typical East German life story doesn’t

⁸¹ Wolfgang Becker, *Good Bye, Lenin!* (X Verleih AG, 2003).

exist, not this one pattern. Some found their country a prison, you could still feel how strong the hate was. Others simply lived in there. I wanted to get a feeling for the country.”⁸²

What does the success of ‘Good Bye, Lenin’ have to do with support for the AfD in the East? The key factor is that the experience of the GDR, positive or negative, is something that causes those living in the East to feel misunderstood by the rest of the country. Sometimes, the experience was simply different and was perceived by East German citizens neither positively nor negatively. Nostalgia for the GDR has been amplified by socioeconomic disparities between the East and the West and by a rejection of the cosmopolitanism and globalization that came with reunification.⁸³ Political groups like the AfD take advantage of this feeling to gain more support. This legacy has led to skepticism of German institutions and politics, which the AfD exploits through ambiguous relationships with even more radical neo-Nazis and neo-Nazi ideas, as well as by standing against immigration and the political establishment. In this chapter, I focus on three aspects of the GDR’s legacy: the state of the radical right in East Germany; the differences in memory culture between the East and West, which played a significant role in the development of the East German radical right; and the police state of the GDR.

The Radical Right in the GDR

The success of the radical right in the East is nothing new. During the 1980s, the radical right began to take advantage of the weakening East German state. Neo-Nazi organizations began to emerge within groups of skinheads, rock fans, and rowdy football fans. An important

⁸² “‘Goodbye, Lenin,’ Wins German Film Prize,” DW, July 6, 2003, <https://www.dw.com/en/goodbye-lenin-wins-german-film-prize/a-888132>.

⁸³ Lars Rensmann, “Divided We Stand: An Analysis of the Enduring Political East-West Divide in Germany Thirty Years After the Wall’s Fall,” *German Politics and Society* 37, no. 3 (September 22, 2019): 32–55, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2019.370304>.

turning point in the politicization and radicalization of these groups occurred in October 1987 at a rock concert in East Berlin's Zion church, which was attacked by 25-30 skinheads. In the aftermath of the attack, the perpetrators "instantly became the focus of intense public attention in both Germanys," and they were prosecuted and severely punished.⁸⁴ This attack was perpetrated by a group called the Lichtenberg Front, which was founded in 1986. Many of its members had come from a fan club of the East German football team 'Berliner Fußballclub Dynamo,' which reflects a connection between football and far-right activism. The Lichtenberg Front changed their name in 1988 to 'The January 30 Movement', "evoking the Nazi takeover of power in 1933."⁸⁵ That year, they were responsible for vandalizing a Jewish cemetery at Schönhauser Allee.

In the final years of the GDR, groups such as the January 30 Movement began to show themselves much more openly and benefited from the patriotic, pro-democracy atmosphere of reunification. The radical right protested alongside pro-democracy demonstrators, calling for a 'united German fatherland.' The weeks following the fall of the Berlin Wall saw extremely high levels of neo-Nazi violence and terrorist attacks, usually targeting immigrants and former GDR contract workers. The first prominent case of this occurred in 1991 in the town of Hoyerswerda in Saxony.⁸⁶ Neo-Nazi skinheads rioted and attacked Vietnamese market stall owners, who had been employed under the GDR as contract workers. They also used petrol bombs to attack two housing estates for asylum-seekers. The riots lasted from September 17 to September 23 and triggered anti-immigrant violence in at least 20 other towns across Germany. Perpetrators of the violence proceeded to declare the town of Hoyerswerda '*ausländerfrei*'—free of foreigners. The

⁸⁴ Gideon Botsch, "From Skinhead-Subculture to Radical Right Movement: The Development of a 'National Opposition' in East Germany," *Contemporary European History* 21, no. 4 (2012): 559.

⁸⁵ Botsch, 559.

⁸⁶ Weisskircher, "The Strength of Far-Right AfD in Eastern Germany."

following year, another outbreak of violence became prominent in the town of Rostock-Lichtenhagen. Neo-Nazis attacked residents of a hostel for asylum seekers with Molotov cocktails. Onlookers joined in and the crowd grew to a total of 3,000. They chanted the slogan ‘Germany to the Germans, foreigners out!’⁸⁷ All in all, anti-immigrant violence increased dramatically in the early 1990s. In 1990, there were approximately 300 attacks per month in all of Germany. In October 1991, there were 961 and in September 1992 there were 1,100. The violence reached a peak at 1,400 attacks in June 1993.

Many victims of the attacks in East Germany were so-called ‘guest workers’ (*Gastarbeiter*). Both East and West Germany made treaties with other countries with the idea that their economies could benefit from foreign labor, while the guest workers themselves could earn more money from working in Germany than they would in their home country. They could send money home to their families and most likely return home with some savings after the end of their contract. However, there were some important differences between the guest worker programs in the West and in the East. In the West, most guest workers came from countries in the Mediterranean basin, most notably Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Italy.⁸⁸ In contrast, guest workers in the East often came from socialist ‘sister countries’ outside of Europe, such as Vietnam and Mozambique. They usually lived in small, isolated communities with very low levels of integration.⁸⁹

Many West Germans tended to think of these attacks in the new *Bundesländer* as remnants of an ‘other Germany’ which was still plagued by fascist tendencies. Although it came

⁸⁷ Esther Adaire, “‘This Other Germany, the Dark One’: Post-Wall Memory Politics Surrounding the Neo-Nazi Riots in Rostock and Hoyerswerda,” *German Politics & Society* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 46, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2019.370405>.

⁸⁸ Carol Schmid, “Gastarbeiter in West Germany and Switzerland: An Assessment of Host Society-Immigrant Relations,” *Population Research and Policy Review* 2, no. 3 (1983): 233–52.

⁸⁹ Weisskircher, “The Strength of Far-Right AfD in Eastern Germany,” 619.

to be seen as an Eastern problem, the violence was by no means confined to the East. According to Esther Adaire, “outbreaks of violence against foreigners were occurring in the West and the East but the magnitude of those in Hoyerswerda and Rostock-Lichtenhagen caused it to be seen as an Eastern phenomenon.”⁹⁰ Additionally, the fact that Western neo-Nazis moved to the East during the reunification process shows that it may not be accurate to think of the radical right as a purely Eastern phenomenon. However, despite Western elements of the radical right, radical right ideas certainly caught on in the new *Bundesländer* and arguably became more prevalent than they ever had been in the Federal Republic. This prevalence of radical right ideas also extends to attitudes toward national pride and the role of democracy, which are not harmful by themselves but may contribute to sympathy for the radical right in some contexts.

Ghosts of the Past

Many explanations for the resurgence of the radical right had to do with memory culture and memory politics. Many people in the West saw their country as already having effectively combatted the remnants of National Socialism with the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In the West, the Holocaust had been portrayed as the “central tragedy of the Nazi era,” and racism and antisemitism had been blamed as the primary causes of the rise of Nazism.⁹¹ Racism and antisemitism came to be seen by many to be incompatible with democracy, as did German national pride. The idea of collective guilt (*kollektive Schuld*) became very widespread, which meant that West Germans often felt personally responsible for the Holocaust in some way, even if they had not personally participated in the atrocities. Even future generations who had not even

⁹⁰ Adaire, “This Other Germany, the Dark One.”

⁹¹ Adaire.

been born until after World War II felt as if they were obliged to atone for the crimes of their parents' generation, which sometimes led to difficult intergenerational conflicts within families.⁹² Many West Germans were reluctant to even identify with the German nationality. Instead, many preferred to emphasize a European identity or a 'constitutional patriotism' based on pride of the values expressed in the new constitution (*Grundgesetz*) rather than national identity. On the governmental level, this was one reason that the Federal Republic has always supported further European integration. Importantly, German suffering during World War II was a controversial topic in the West. Cities that were bombed in the air raids, such as Hamburg, Pforzheim, and Kassel held annual commemorations but often avoided "thorny questions of agency and causality."⁹³

Memory culture in the GDR stood, in many ways, in complete opposition to that in the West. Influenced by the Soviet Union, the SED attempted to implement a strict interpretation of the events of World War II and German history. Their narrative was based in Marxist thought, which argues that the workers' revolution towards communism was inevitable, and the creation of the GDR was part of this narrative. While portraying themselves as building a socialist utopia, they simultaneously attributed negative aspects of German society to the West. The Federal Republic came to represent capitalism, imperialism, and militarism, which were the most important contributing factors to the rise of National Socialism according to the SED.⁹⁴ This narrative was important to help the SED achieve its most important goal: proving that East German citizens respected its legitimacy.

⁹² Peter Sichrovsky, *Schuldig geboren* (Köln: Kiepenheuer u. Witsch, 1996).

⁹³ Jörg Arnold, "Beyond Usable Pasts: Rethinking the Memorialization of the Strategic Air War in Germany, 1940 to 1965," 26, in John Niven and Chloe Paver, *Memorialization in Germany since 1945* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁹⁴ Jon Berndt Olsen, *Tailoring Truth: Politicizing the Past and Negotiating Memory in East Germany, 1945-1990* (New York, NY, United States: Berghahn Books, Incorporated, 2015), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/conncoll/detail.action?docID=1707813>.

World War II was the defining event of recent history in the late 1940s and 1950s, so naturally the framing of the events of the war was very important to the SED. Unlike in the West, where the idea of collective guilt meant that the Holocaust was considered the central crime for which all Germans were guilty, the GDR focused much less on the Holocaust itself. Its version of history focused primarily on capitalism and greed as the causes. According to the GDR, National Socialism was created to represent capitalist interests, primarily to create profit for German businesses. Anti-Semitism existed, but rather than being seen as an endemic problem in German and European society, the SED believed that it was manufactured by capitalists as “a means of distracting the masses” while the Nazis fought against working class interests by dismantling trade unions and left-wing political parties.⁹⁵ The Holocaust played a relatively small role in this history, and when it was discussed, the suffering of Jews and racial minorities was overshadowed by the political persecution of communists.

According to the SED, the end of the war marked the triumphant victory of socialism and resulted in a society that was supposed to offer equality to all East German workers. They supposedly achieved egalitarianism with the defeat of fascism. The SED portrayed themselves as having eradicated greed, anti-Semitism, and racism from the East, and that these problems were now purely an issue in the West. One of the ways that the SED perpetuated this narrative was through memorials, and one of the most prominent memorials was the Buchenwald memorial. The Buchenwald memorial commemorates the victims of the Buchenwald concentration camp. It is located at the site of the former Bismarck Tower on Ettersberg Hill, which the SS used as a mass grave of prisoners who they murdered near the end of the war. At the memorial, visitors walk down a steep set of stairs toward the graves. Sculptures there depict the seven years of the

⁹⁵Bill Niven, “Nazi Anti-Semitism in the GDR,” 205, in Niven and Paver, *Memorialization in Germany since 1945*.

camp, focusing on communist resistance. After walking past the graves, visitors walk up a staircase towards the Tower of Freedom, where a sculpture depicts prisoners standing up against their fascist guards.⁹⁶

At the dedication of the new memorial, the minister president of the GDR, Otto Grotewohl, said that it should represent not just the memory of the “horrible Nazi dictatorship” and “remembrance for the deaths of our great fighters,” but that it should also “provide us with a renewed warning” and remind us to not “surrender our fight against every form of inhumanity too soon, until we have removed every form of fascism in every country and for all time.” Grotewohl’s words show the ideological focus of the memorial. The memorial focuses on the story of Ernst Thälmann, who was killed by the Nazis at Buchenwald. Thälmann was born in Hamburg in 1886. He joined the German Communist Party (KPD) in the 1920s and was active in several labor protests in Hamburg. He became the leader of the KPD in 1925 and played a significant role in joining KPD interests with Soviet interests. The KPD portrayed him as “the only alternative” to Nazi dictatorship and years of oppression and warfare.⁹⁷ A few weeks after Hitler was named chancellor, Thälmann was arrested. He spent the next eleven and a half years in prison until he was murdered under Hitler’s direct order in August 1944.

The Buchenwald memorial “elevated Thälmann’s legacy to one of national importance.”⁹⁸ Prominent East German communists would mention his name in speeches, proclaiming that ‘Ernst Thälmann is among us!’ Thälmann’s image became prominent in East German film and art as well. Multiple films were produced about Thälmann, such as ‘Ernst

⁹⁶ This description of the Buchenwald memorial comes from Susanne Scharnowski, “Monuments and Memorials in the GDR,” in *Memorialization in Germany since 1945*.

⁹⁷ Russel Lemmons, *Hitler’s Rival: Ernst Thälmann in Myth and Memory* (University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 54.

⁹⁸ Olsen, *Tailoring Truth*, 61.

Thälmann—Son of his Class’ and its sequel, ‘Ernst Thälmann—Leader of his Class.’⁹⁹ The Buchenwald memorial and the elevation of Thälmann’s legacy show how the SED depicted the relationship between socialism and capitalism. According to Jon Berndt Olsen, “the state needed the public to view the communists as the greatest victims so that their triumph (the creation of the GDR) would be even more heroic.”¹⁰⁰

In stark contrast to the West, East Germans were less reluctant to discuss German suffering in the war. In fact, acknowledgement of this suffering was part of the SED’s strategy to foster an East German national identity. After all, if communists were the greatest victims of the Nazis, and if East Germans are supposed to be communists, then it makes sense for the SED to commemorate German suffering as part of the official narrative. Specifically, the bombing of Dresden on February 13-14, 1945, obtained a special place in East German memory. According to Jörg Arnold, the destruction of Dresden “served state-sponsored propagandists as a powerful symbol of both ‘imperialist’ atrocity and German victimhood.”¹⁰¹

While it was true that communists were brutally murdered at the hands of the Nazis, the focus on exclusively communist victims resulted in racism and antisemitism being swept under the rug. Since the SED believed that economics and class consciousness had been the root of the rise of National Socialism, the official narrative predicted that racism and antisemitism would naturally disappear in an egalitarian socialist society. For most of the GDR’s history, the radical right played a minimal role, but this was mainly due to the state’s efforts to suppress all forms of political dissent. However, by the 1990s, the commemoration of the bombing of Dresden had

⁹⁹ Films in the GDR were mostly produced by DEFA (*Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft*), the state-owned film studio. Ernst Thälmann – Sohn seiner Klasse, directed by Kurt Maetzig (1954); Ernst Thälmann – Führer seiner Klasse, directed by Kurt Maetzig (1955).

¹⁰⁰ Olsen, *Tailoring Truth*, 69.

¹⁰¹ Jörg Arnold, “Beyond Usable Pasts: Rethinking the Memorialization of the Strategic Air War in Germany, 1940–1965, in Niven and Paver, *Memorialization in Germany since 1945*.

grown into a space for the radical right to spread their ideas and played a role in their expansion in the years following reunification. According to Weisskircher, “neo-Nazis have commemorated the anniversaries of the Allied air raids against the city—in the late 2000s sometimes bringing together more than 5,000 followers.”¹⁰² The activity of the radical right contributed to the founding of PEGIDA in Dresden, which was closely related to the success of the AfD in the 2017 election.

The Police State

The legacy of the GDR is not limited to the memory of World War II. Rather, East Germans had to deal with a second authoritarian regime. East Germans had to deal with a state that intruded into their personal life and freedoms on a daily basis. The memory of the authoritarian police state today influences East Germans’ attitudes towards democracy and the function of government, which are significantly different from the West. The police state of the GDR was infamously known for its invasion into the private lives of its citizens. The Ministry for State Security (MfS) went to extreme measures to control its population and crackdown on all forms of dissent. More commonly known as the Stasi, it intended to “crush the slightest opposition.” Everyone would fear the Stasi so that the GDR looked like a “quiet land.”¹⁰³ The MfS grew out of the Komissariat 5 (K-5), which was formed in 1947 to arrest political opponents of the Soviet occupation. According to Edward Peterson, the K-5 “arrested so many enemies that concentration camps had to be opened or reopened” and “acquired a reputation as bad as that of Stalin’s Secret Police and worse than that of the Gestapo,” the secret police under the Nazi

¹⁰² Weisskircher, “The Strength of Far-Right AfD in Eastern Germany,” 616.

¹⁰³ Edward N. Peterson, *Secret Police and the Revolution: Fall of the German Democratic Republic* (Westport, United States: Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated, 2001), 19, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/conncoll/detail.action?docID=3000534>.

regime.¹⁰⁴ On February 8, 1950, the MfS was officially created in the image of the Soviet Secret Police, and the Soviets took great care to ensure that the Stasi was managed up to their standards.

While the SED attempted to glorify the MfS with the motto of ‘the sword and the shield of the Republic,’ for most people it became a source of fear and an invasion of privacy. It ended up expanding its involvement “far beyond the normal service of a Secret Police” and even attempted to “compel production and technological advance.”¹⁰⁵ The need for such an expansive role for the MfS came partly as a result of economic competition with the West. In the 1950s, the ‘economic miracle’ of West Germany widened the gap in living standards between the two countries and caused approximately two million East Germans to move to the West in the 10 years before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961.¹⁰⁶ The head of the SED at the time, Walter Ulbricht, believed that the continuation of an open border with the West would cause the country to collapse internally. The MfS was supposed to shut down dissent by ensuring that citizens could not escape while simultaneously compelling businesses to be more productive in the hopes of maintaining reasonable economic standards.

The MfS grew steadily and eventually reached 100,000 full-time employees.¹⁰⁷ Including the ‘unofficial informers’ (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*), who were not formally employed by the MfS but still relayed information to them, this meant that there was approximately one Stasi or Stasi informant for every 66 individuals.¹⁰⁸ Everyone living in the GDR always had to assume that they were being watched or heard by the Stasi at all times, and that if they said or did anything that the state did not approve of, they could face harsh consequences. According to Peterson, “it

¹⁰⁴ Peterson, 19.

¹⁰⁵ Peterson, 30.

¹⁰⁶ Peterson, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Peterson, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Peterson, 26.

penetrated dissident circles so effectively that every fourth member seemed to be in its pay.”

Florian Henckel von Donnersmark shows the extent of this fear in the 2006 film, ‘The Lives of the Others’ (*das Leben der Anderen*).¹⁰⁹ The film features a young couple, the playwright Georg Dreyman and actress Christa-Maria Sieland, who are placed under surveillance. The Stasi official who leads the operation, Gerd Wiesler, bugs their apartment and spends his time listening to their intimate conversations and trying to find evidence that Dreyman is conspiring against the state. He begins as a remarkably unsympathetic character, but as the film progresses, he comes to realize how the surveillance is slowly ruining their lives. One of the themes of the film is the arbitrary nature of the surveillance and the overreach of the state into personal affairs.

The legacy of the GDR is constantly in the background of East German politics, and East Germans often feel like this history is misunderstood by West Germans, who may not have personal connections to it. The GDR’s narrative of the West, the refusal to acknowledge racism in East German society, and the oppressive police state have contributed to the skepticism that East Germans feel about the role of government and the role of democracy, which is one area where East Germans today still significantly differ in opinion from West Germans. This is especially visible in the COVID-19 pandemic in debates over lockdowns, masking, and especially the potential for a vaccine mandate. During the pandemic, eastern states have seen much higher levels of opposition to precautionary measures such as these, in part because of higher levels of suspicion that stem from the legacy of the GDR.

On one hand, German reunification brought together East and West Germans who shared the same ethnicity, spoke the same language, and shared similar cultural values. On the other hand, their histories had diverged directly following the traumatic experiences of World War II,

¹⁰⁹ Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen* (Buena Vista International, 2006).

which would come to shape German culture and politics for the foreseeable future. East Germans had been exposed to a very different understanding of German crimes in the Nazi era. On top of this, they had essentially transitioned from one totalitarian government to another. This meant that—although suffering under the GDR was by no means comparable to that during the Third Reich—East Germans now had a second difficult history to unpack. The legacy of the GDR provides an explanation as to why concepts of national belonging and democracy tend to be viewed differently in the East and the West, as well as why the racism of the AfD is met with less opposition and less skepticism in the East. However, to get the full picture of eastern Germany today, the legacy of the GDR must be viewed in combination with the legacy and aftermath of reunification.

Chapter 4: The Legacy of Reunification

Thirty years after reunification, a significant socioeconomic divide persists between East and West Germany. In 2018, the average income in the East was 32,108 euros per year compared to 42,971 in the West. However, the divide is even more visible through the concentration of political and economic power in the West. Lars Rensmann finds that 464 of Germany's 500 biggest corporations have their headquarters in the West, while only 36 are located in the East. Additionally, Germany's cultural and academic elite are still largely Western. No university president grew up in the East. All in all, only 1.7 percent of top-level leadership positions in administration, politics, and the economy are held by East Germans. On an individual level, life satisfaction is consistently lower in the five eastern states, but Rensmann notes that there are signs of convergence. Most importantly perhaps, surveys show that East Germans still tend to think of themselves as second-class citizens in relation to the West.¹¹⁰ This perception is without doubt influenced by political groups such as the AfD and PEGIDA, who take advantage of Eastern discontent in order to fuel their own support. However, it is also partly a result of the process and effects of reunification on the East.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the relationship between socioeconomic status and the AfD is complicated. A lower socioeconomic status does not strongly correlate with a tendency to vote for the AfD. However, as a whole, the knowledge that the East German economy still lags behind the West can contribute to the appeal of the populist radical right, even if those to whom it appeals are not necessarily personally members of the lowest socioeconomic class. Especially when combined with the cultural and historical legacy of the GDR, socioeconomic status is yet

¹¹⁰ Rensmann, "Divided We Stand," 33.

another factor that allows the AfD to attract support in Eastern Germany. However, because of the indirect effect it has on support for the AfD, I prefer to refer to socioeconomic factors under the umbrella term of the legacy of reunification. This term makes socioeconomic factors less personal and more part of the East German identity and experience. It also places a greater emphasis on the problems with the reunification process itself as opposed to the socioeconomic status of individuals. I argue that the reunification process contributed to the distrust in the political system that we see today and to support for the AfD in the East.

Overview of Reunification

In the 1970s and 80s, reunification was not really on most people's minds. However, when Gorbachev came to power in 1985, the Soviet Union relaxed its grip on the Eastern bloc and events started progressing rapidly in previously unexpected directions. The first noticeable changes in the GDR began as other Eastern bloc states began to open up their borders, allowing the opportunity for many East Germans to leave the struggling economy of the GDR in search of better economic opportunities. In the summer and early autumn of 1989, thousands of East Germans were fleeing their homeland. According to Anna Saunders, "once Hungary officially opened its borders in September, the stream of refugees became a veritable flood."¹¹¹

October saw the first large-scale demonstrations against the SED. From this point on for about a year, events progressed at an astounding and unpredictable speed. Weekly Monday demonstrations began in Leipzig on October 9, two days after the GDR's state-run fortieth anniversary celebration. After people saw that the state was not cracking down hard on

¹¹¹ Anna Saunders, "October 1989–October 1990: The Rise and Fall of a GDR Identity," in *Honecker's Children, Youth and Patriotism in East(Ern) Germany, 1979-2002* (Manchester University Press, 2007), 117, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt155jfr2.9>.

demonstrations, the Monday demonstrations grew quickly. The following week, around 150,000 people gathering in Leipzig on October 16. Two days later, the *Politbüro* (the policy-making committee in the GDR) responded to the protests by dismissing Erich Honecker as Secretary General of the SED. He was replaced by Egon Krenz, who promised a coming *Wende*—German for a major reversal or change. From this point on, it was clear that the GDR would be undergoing major reforms, but it was still unclear what those reforms would be. In the first week of November, the entire East German government resigned. The new government suddenly lifted the travel ban to the West and on November 9, the Berlin Wall was opened, which millions of East Germans immediately took advantage of by visiting West Germany. As many as 2,000 per day stayed in the West. Saunders writes that during this time, “the severity of the country’s economic and environmental problems rapidly became evident, and it was clear that the state would need more than a simple overhaul of the system in order to survive in the long term.”¹¹²

It was only after the GDR’s first elections on March 18, 1990, that reunification became a certainty. In these elections, the CDU-backed ‘Alliance for Germany’ party won decisively with 48.1 percent of the vote, more than twice as many votes as either the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, formerly the SED) or the SPD. This result “effectively endorsed the rapid reunification process.”¹¹³ In the West meanwhile, chancellor Helmut Kohl had been pushing for a swift reunification. According to Schweiger, his approach “was mainly targeted towards containing the growing tide of East Germans emigrating towards the West by bringing the D-Mark as well as West Germany’s social market economy and the welfare state to them.”¹¹⁴ One

¹¹² Saunders, 118-119.

¹¹³ Saunders, “October 1989–October 1990,” 138.

¹¹⁴ Christian Schweiger, “Deutschland Einig Vaterland? East-West Cleavages in Germany Thirty Years After Reunification,” *German Politics and Society* 37, no. 3 (September 22, 2019): 20, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2019.370303>.

of the most important aspects of this plan was the introduction of the D-Mark as the currency to replace the Eastern Ostmark. This exchange was done on a 1:1 basis, which economists criticized as irresponsible, since the real exchange value of the Ostmark was around 0.12. This meant that East Germans benefited economically from the currency transition, at least more than they would have if the real exchange rate had been used. Kohl also planned to invest heavily in Eastern infrastructure in order to bring the Eastern standard of living up to that of the West.¹¹⁵ Later that summer, on August 23, the GDR parliament voted for reunification. Germany was officially unified on October 3, 1990, almost exactly a year after the beginning of the widespread protests in the GDR.

Saunders finds that this eventful year was an extremely intense, emotional, and confusing time for many East Germans, especially for younger generations. Before the elections on March 18, many young people had hoped for democratic socialism, a system between capitalism and communism. One poll of young East Germans found that 88 percent of them supported a “reformed, socialist GDR,” whereas only 5 percent supported a capitalist solution.¹¹⁶ The demonstrations had provided many young East Germans with a newfound identity and even patriotism, as they felt that for the first time, they could make a difference in the direction of the country. Saunders notes that “the concept of patriotism radically changed during these months, for once the power of the SED was broken, loyalty to the GDR no longer also entailed loyalty to the party,” which made an enormous difference in East Germans’ relationship with their home country.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Schweiger.

¹¹⁶ Saunders, 125.

¹¹⁷ Saunders, 119.

Attitudes toward the West were changed by this new East German patriotism. Many young East Germans who previously felt indifferent toward West Germany felt annoyed at Western presence in the protests because they felt that the GDR was their country to fight for and change, while West Germans had no experience living there and no understanding of their problems. On the other hand, East Germans who favored reunification usually did so out of practical considerations. They may not have thought of the transition to capitalism as ideal, but at the same time, they saw it as the most practical way to try to solve the economic problems of the East. At the same time, many people had friends or relatives who had moved to the West in the past year, and reunification felt like a natural way to keep families together. In the end, the victory of the Alliance for Germany confirmed that these practical concerns won out over the more idealistic desire for democratic socialism.

Wolfgang Becker's film 'Goodbye Lenin' portrays these complicated emotions remarkably. The main character is a young man who participates in the protests prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and while his mother feels a connection with the GDR, he had never cared much for it previously. However, over the course of these few months, he develops a personal connection with the country. One line in the film captures this sentiment above all. The narration reads, "the GDR that I created for my mother became more and more the GDR that I would have wished for." The film shows how, for many East Germans who had previously never felt a strong identity with the GDR, the year that preceded reunification was a time when they had first discovered this identity, only to lose it when reunification actually occurred.

Protest Voting in the Aftermath of Reunification

Reunification had many positive effects on the lives of average East Germans. Today, 70 percent of people living in the former East Germany say they consider themselves ‘winners rather than losers’ of reunification.¹¹⁸ To some extent, the practical considerations that led to East Germans’ to vote for reunification materialized. In unified Germany, East Germans now enjoyed political freedom, democracy, and freedom of movement. Economically, they also benefited from access to a much stronger currency with the D-Mark. The government now had the funds and the political will to invest in the infrastructure in Eastern cities as Kohl had promised. Today, happiness reports show positive trends in eastern Germany despite the socioeconomic disparity with the West. Lars Rensmann summarizes that “there is a widespread sense that life is better since unification and people got ahead, yet citizens are not where they wanted to be and feel somewhat stuck in the wrong lane of Germany’s economic traffic.”¹¹⁹

With all the problems that reunification solved, it also brought many challenges to the new *Bundesländer*. Much of this was attributable to the Treuhand Commission, the organization responsible for economic restructuring and integration of the East. According to Schweiger, “the legacy of the Treuhand turned out to be fatal for the social fabric of eastern Germany.”¹²⁰ The Treuhand was responsible for assessing the competitiveness of eastern firms, which had formerly been owned by the state, and assisting them in restructuring to compete with Western firms. This meant that Eastern firms were privatized. In spite of, or perhaps because of the Treuhand, Eastern companies were unable to compete due to the more-established production capacity of Western companies. Additionally, Western consumers already tended to be better off

¹¹⁸ Rensmann, “Divided We Stand,” 98.

¹¹⁹ Rensmann. 99.

¹²⁰ Schweiger, “Deutschland Einig Vaterland?” 21.

economically than Eastern consumers, which gave Western companies another insurmountable advantage. Within a few years, many Eastern companies were bought and often shut down by western competitors. The results of the Treuhand's policies caused many Easterners to feel a lack of representation under their new government. Schweiger writes that it "contributed to the perception that the East is essentially governed by West Germans."¹²¹ Some have even referred to reunification as strongly as 'colonization of the East.'¹²²

The result of the closure of so many eastern businesses was mass unemployment in the East over the following years. Between 1990 and 1994, around 2.6 million East Germans lost their jobs. This would lead to the perception of East Germans—often of middle-aged men, who are the AfD's primary voting demographic—as having "broken biographies" and "devalued careers."¹²³ As would be expected, these changes had a strong impact on Eastern communities. One example of a community that quickly deteriorated in value after reunification was Lütten Klein in Rostock, which "quickly transformed from a socially integrated area to a neighborhood of the left behind."¹²⁴ Interestingly, this district neighbored Rostock-Lichtenhagen, where the violent anti-immigration riots of 1992 took place as described in the previous chapter. Only two years after reunification, this example already shows a relationship between the legacy of reunification and the resort to right-wing extremism as a way to express this anger.

Many East Germans expressed dissatisfaction with the political system with a protest vote at the ballot box. One definition of a protest party comes from Grigore Pop-Eleches, who defines it as "an electoral option driven less by the positive appeal of the chosen party's

¹²¹ Schweiger.

¹²² Saunders, "October 1989–October 1990, 119."

¹²³ Weisskircher, "The Strength of Far-Right AfD in Eastern Germany," 618.

¹²⁴ Weisskircher, 617.

ideological/policy platform than by the rejection of other possible political choices.”¹²⁵ Protest voters in the 1990s were attracted mostly to the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). The PDS was a successor of the SED, the former governing party of East Germany. It seemed like the PDS was on the decline when it received only 11.1 percent of the vote in the East in the 1990 Bundestag elections. However, it was much more successful in the following years, such as in local elections in the eastern half of Berlin in 1992 and in Brandenburg in 1993. In the 1994 Bundestag elections, the PDS “nearly doubled its vote share in the east to 19.8 percent and garnered support among voters that held a negative view of the economic situation, lacked confidence in the country’s political institutions, and were more disillusioned with politics than other eastern voters.”¹²⁶ However, it was not long before the right also began to appeal to protest voters. The DVU would have their best results in the East beginning in 1998 when they earned 12.9 percent of the vote in the regional election in Saxony-Anhalt. Since then, radical right parties, such as the DVU, NPD, and recently the AfD, have consistently performed better in the East than in the West.

In the 2000s, new policies and reforms provided East Germans with still more reasons to resent the government. Economically, many were still struggling. Unemployment was already high at 18.7 percent in 2000 and rose to over 20 percent from 2003 to 2005. Additionally, the average Eastern income was still only 80 percent of the West.¹²⁷ However, the neoliberal economic reforms passed by the SPD-Green coalition government under chancellor Gerhard Schröder only made things worse in the eyes of many East Germans. In particular, the Hartz IV

¹²⁵ Grigore Pop-Eleches, “Throwing Out the Bums: Protest Voting and Unorthodox Parties after Communism,” *World Politics* 62, no. 2 (2010): 236.

¹²⁶ David F. Patton, “Protest Voting in Eastern Germany: Continuity and Change Across Three Decades,” *German Politics & Society* 37, no. 3 (September 2019): 75, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2019.370306>.

¹²⁷ Patton, 77.

reforms led to protests across Germany, especially in the East. Hartz IV limited unemployment benefits, and since unemployment in the East was already so high, it had a disproportionate impact there. The idea was to incentivize unemployed people to get back to work, but of course, this was not always a realistic expectation. On the technical side of the law, Walwei criticizes some of the calculations for their failure to accurately calculate the needs of families and individuals, arguing that Hartz IV failed to proportionally assess people's assets when determining whether they were eligible for benefits.¹²⁸ Walwei proposes that assets should be calculated with less strict criteria, side jobs should be calculated at a lower percentage rate, employment history should be considered and favor those with long-term employment history, and more opportunities for tax exemption should be given.

Regardless of the technical problems with Hartz IV, the impression that most East Germans had of it was that it was working against their interests. The Hartz IV reforms brought about a return of the Monday demonstrations in the summer of 2004. The Monday demonstrations drew a direct comparison between anti-establishment sentiment in the Eastern states and the pro-democracy protests of 1989 that brought reform to the GDR and eventually resulted in reunification. The protests were backed by trade unions, anti-globalization activists, self-help groups, and left-wing political parties.¹²⁹ The protesters were disproportionately males in their early 50s, many of them were unemployed or economically insecure, and many of them were politically left-wing. Protesters gathered in over 200 German cities and towns, and in

¹²⁸ Ulrich Walwei et al., "Hartz IV — Reform einer umstrittenen politischen Maßnahme," *Wirtschaftsdienst* 99, no. 4 (April 2019): 235–55, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10273-019-2439-3>.

¹²⁹ David F. Patton, "Monday, Monday: Eastern Protest Movements and German Party Politics since 1989," *German Politics* 26, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 483, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2017.1365136>.

Leipzig, crowds reached 20,000 to 30,000 by August 30, 2004. Because Hartz IV mostly affected the East due to its higher unemployment rate, protests in the East were much bigger.¹³⁰

The demonstrations also revived support for the PDS, which had previously been in decline due to the perception that it had become too much like the established parties. It had failed to cross the 5 percent threshold in the 2002 federal elections, but the first few months of protests in 2004, the PDS had jumped to 7.5 percent nationally. However, yet another party formed in opposition to the Hartz IV reforms: the Electoral Alternative for Jobs and Social Justice (WASG). This party was formed by trade union officials and left-wing Social Democrats who were angry with the SPD over Hartz IV. The PDS and WASG formed an alliance in the 2005 federal election, where they would win 8.7 percent of the vote nationally, with 25.3 percent of the eastern vote. The radical-right NPD also benefited from protest voting in the 2005 election, receiving 8 percent of the vote in the East. Sixty percent of NPD voters chose the party specifically because of its opposition to Hartz IV. David Patton writes that “workers and unemployed, above all in eastern Germany, turned to left-wing and right-wing protest parties in the 2005 federal election.”¹³¹ In 2007, the PDS and WASG officially merged to form the Left Party. The Left, which was driven by protest voters, would transform German politics into a five-party system. The Left would have its best election result in 2009 after the 2008 financial crisis, where it won 11.9 percent of the vote nationally and 28.5 percent in the East.

¹³⁰ Patton, 483.

¹³¹ Patton, “Protest Voting in Eastern Germany,” 79.

The AfD as a Protest Party

By the AfD's first national election in 2013, the Left Party was already beginning to lose its appeal to eastern protest voters. It quickly became perceived as part of the eastern political establishment and lost credibility as a protest party.¹³² Therefore, when the AfD arrived on the scene, it was able to fill a gap in the German political system. In the AfD's first election in 2013, they criticized the *Alternativlosigkeit* of Merkel's government after Merkel had explicitly said that there was no alternative to the bailout of the Euro crisis. The premise of the party as an 'Alternative' references the 'electoral alternative' of the short-lived WASG party. In 2017, which was the AfD's first national electoral success, it drew votes from all other parties. However, in proportion to the size of the other parties, it drew the most from the Left. On the surface, this is a surprising fact, since the parties should theoretically lie on opposite sides of the political spectrum. Despite this, the populist style of the Left and the AfD is remarkably similar, especially in their criticism of the political establishment and their preference for more direct democracy. Additionally, both parties are skeptical of globalization, the EU, and free trade agreements, and both parties have a friendlier position toward Russia.¹³³ Most importantly perhaps, both parties appeal specifically to the Eastern identity and issues.

In the 2021 election, the AfD continued to draw support from former Left Party voters. While in this election, the AfD lost votes to most parties, the only major party that it drew votes from in this election was the Left. Approximately 110,000 people who voted for the Left in 2017 voted for the AfD in 2021.¹³⁴ While the AfD had a stable election result, the Left failed to break

¹³² Yoder, "Revenge of the East?"; Patton, "Protest Voting in Eastern Germany."

¹³³ Jonathan Olsen, "The Left Party and the AfD: Populist Competitors in Eastern Germany," *German Politics and Society* 36, no. 1 (March 22, 2018): 70–84.

¹³⁴ "Wählerwanderungen," tagesschau.de, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/bilder/uvotealbum-1327.html>.

the 5 percent threshold and is only represented in the 20th Bundestag due to its performance in three specific districts. That being said, it is important to note that the Left lost votes to every party in the 2021 election, especially to the SPD (-590,000) and to the Greens (-470,000).¹³⁵

It is safe to conclude that the AfD has overtaken the Left as the primary protest party of eastern Germany. Exit polls from the recent 2021 federal election show that AfD voters say that their vote is motivated by a disdain for the political establishment. A Tagesschau poll from 2021 shows that 86 percent of AfD voters say that the AfD is the only party with which they can express protest against the establishment.¹³⁶ However, protest is not the only thing motivating AfD voters, as polls show that most AfD voters clearly agree with the party's stances on controversial issues. The same poll found that 95 percent of AfD votes agree with the AfD's stricter immigration control, and 97 percent agree that the AfD "understands better than the other parties that many people don't feel safe anymore."¹³⁷ A sizeable majority of voters also agreed with the party's position on the pandemic, with 77 percent agreeing that it was good that the AfD began to oppose Covid restrictions early.

The connections of the AfD with the Left party and with right-wing ideology are complex. As discussed in Chapter 2, right-wing ideology is often viewed as one of the most important predictors of a vote for the AfD. However, it seems that this statement requires a caveat, namely that right-wing AfD voters today did not necessarily always identify with a right-wing ideology. Recall that at the demonstrations against Hartz IV, most protesters identified with a left-wing ideology, and that these protests were instrumental in the formation of the Left Party, many of whose voters proceeded to vote for the AfD. Of course, it is difficult to say whether

¹³⁵ "Wählerwanderungen."

¹³⁶ "Wer wählte die AfD - und warum?," tagesschau.de, accessed November 5, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2021-09-26-BT-DE/umfrage-afd.shtml>.

¹³⁷ "Wer wählte die AfD - und warum?"

right-wing AfD voters today are the same people as the left-wing anti-Hartz IV demonstrators in 2004, but there is likely to be at least some overlap. This relationship shows that in East Germany, the anti-establishment politics are sometimes more important than the theoretical political ideology. It also shows that, while the East has had a long history of left-wing protest voting, right-wing protest voting has taken over. This could be due to a generational shift, or it could be the result of pent-up anger causing people to resort to right-wing politics, which allow them to take out their anger on immigrants and minorities.

To summarize, there is still a significant socioeconomic divide between eastern and western Germany, but on an individual level, the relationship between socioeconomic factors and a vote for the AfD is not clear-cut. This is not surprising, since the AfD does not talk much about individual welfare. However, the fact that this divide still exists and is partly a result of the reunification process is a driving factor of the AfD vote and plays an important role in the history of eastern German politics. The Hartz IV reforms of 2004 further entrenched the idea in the East that the Western-dominated government and economic institutions were not working for them, and the Left Party, formed partially by former PDS members, grew out of this discontent. The appeal of the Left and the appeal of the AfD as protest parties are intricately linked, and there is a clear connection between the legacy of reunification and the success of the AfD.

Conclusion: The Future of the AfD

With the AfD's entrance in the Bundestag after the 2017 election, the German political landscape was changed for the foreseeable future. In the few years since its creation, the party radicalized quickly. When it was founded in 2012, it focused almost purely on opposition to Merkel's bailout of debtor countries in the financial crisis. For the first couple years of its existence, it advocated primarily for the abolition of the Euro as a continent-wide currency and supported euroskeptic ideas, but it was not yet considered a radical right party. However, by the 2017 election it had radicalized and shifted its emphasis toward anti-immigrant and anti-Islam sentiment. In this election, it became the most successful radical right populist party that postwar Germany had ever seen. One thing that was especially notable about the AfD's success was the disproportionate number of votes it received in former East Germany. It is important to note that the AfD was also more successful in the West than most other radical right parties had ever been, and that the majority of its support in raw numbers comes from the Western states due to the West's much higher population. However, this does not change the fact that, in proportion to the population, the AfD performed much more strongly in the East.

The party's success in the East drew attention to the fact that significant ideological and socioeconomic divides still persist in eastern Germany. The extent to which ideological and socioeconomic factors played a role in the motivations of AfD voters became a highly contested topic in academic discourse. Some argued that right-wing ideology and anti-immigrant sentiment were the main drivers of the AfD vote in the East and provided evidence that socioeconomic factors, such as current income level, education level, or employment status, had little to no impact on the likelihood of a vote for the AfD. Others were not satisfied with this conclusion and found that socioeconomic factors play a less direct role in a vote for the AfD, albeit a complex

one. They argued that, while current socioeconomic factors were not significant motivators, past employment status and expectations for the future did play a role in the decision to vote AfD.

In this thesis, I have taken a different approach that attempts to incorporate the source of the ideological divide as well as the complexities of the socioeconomic divide. In order to achieve this, I have examined the relationship between two historical legacies and the AfD: the legacy of the GDR and the legacy of reunification. I have focused on three aspects of the legacy of the GDR: the radical right in the GDR; the differences in memory culture between the East and West; and the police state of the GDR. Anti-immigrant sentiment in East Germany is closely related to the immigration policies of the East, but also the resurgence of neo-Nazi organizations in the lead-up to and the aftermath of reunification. This relates to the memory culture of the East, which was highly centralized and did not identify racism and antisemitism as causes of the rise of National Socialism. Lastly, the police state of the GDR severely limited its citizens' freedoms, and the memory of this contributes to Eastern skepticism of government overreach.

The legacy of reunification is essential in understanding both the relationship of AfD support to socioeconomic issues and the history of eastern German protest voting that precedes the AfD. The reunification process itself took place over the course of about a year, beginning with protests in the fall of 1989. That year was an intense and emotional time for East Germans, many of whom were eager for reform but not necessarily for unification under a capitalist system. Reunification seemed to be the most practical option to solve the country's economic problems. However, while eastern cities received considerable investment in infrastructure and East Germans enjoyed new political freedoms, new economic problems arose. Eastern firms struggled to compete with Western firms, which led to their closure and a sharp rise in the unemployment rate that would remain significantly higher than that in the West. The Hartz IV reforms of 2004,

which restricted unemployment benefits and disproportionately impacted the East, brought a resurgence of protest voting for the newly created Left Party. By 2017, many protest voters in the East were angry about Germany's relatively open immigration policies, which they saw as a danger to German society. This resulted in the AfD's success as a radical right protest party, which continued in the 2021 federal election.

The long-term future of the AfD remains unclear, but it will likely continue to radicalize further, as it has done for the past decade. However, there is likely a limit to how radical it can get, given that 46 percent of AfD voters in 2021 say that the party is already not doing enough to distance itself from extreme right positions.¹³⁸ The party has long been internally divided between more radical elements and more moderate elements. It was this division that caused the original founder of the AfD, Bernd Lucke, to leave it back in 2015 after Frauke Petry took over party leadership. Since then, the radical side of the party has tended to have the upper hand. The AfD is currently led by Tino Chrupalla and Alice Weidel, who are known for their stances on immigration as hardliners in the party.¹³⁹ Earlier this year, Jörg Meuthen, who co-chaired the AfD after the 2021 election with Chrupalla, resigned as chair because of what he viewed as rising totalitarian tendencies within the party. Meuthen says that he does not see a way to bring the party on a more 'measured' course.¹⁴⁰

Like other right-wing populist movements around the world, the rise of the AfD in German politics has perplexed and concerned many observers. When the AfD catapulted to over 12 percent of the vote in 2017, it simultaneously became the first radical right party to enter the

¹³⁸ "Wer wählte die AfD - und warum?"

¹³⁹ "Bundestagswahl 2021 - Weidel und Chrupalla zum Spitzenduo der AfD gewählt," Deutschlandfunk, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/bundestagswahl-2021-weidel-und-chrupalla-zum-spitzenduo-der-100.html>.

¹⁴⁰ "Meuthen zum AfD-Austritt: 'Ich sehe ganz klar totalitäre Anklänge,'" tagesschau.de, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/meuthen-207.html>.

Bundestag and became the third-largest party in Germany. In this thesis, I have attempted to show that, for many eastern German AfD voters, the party's appeal is rooted deep in the historical legacies of the GDR and in reunification. AfD voters are not necessarily more loyal to the party than voters for other parties, but the aspects of East German identity that have led them to support the AfD are still strong.

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