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Understanding the “Alternative for Germany”: Origins, Aims and Consequences

Interview of Professor Donald Abenheim of the Naval Postgraduate School by Professor Rachel A. Epstein of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver.

The election of Donald J. Trump to the presidency in the United States presents some clear parallels with populist movements in Europe (see Martin Rhodes’ [post on Trump, Brexit and Nationalism](#)). We examine some of those parallels here with Professor Donald Abenheim of the Naval Postgraduate School and author of *Rettet den Staatsbuerger in Uniform: Gedanken zu einem deutsch-amerikanischen Problem*, a series of essays on military professionalism and contemporary conflict.

While extremist parties in countries such as France and Austria celebrated Trump’s victory as a potential harbinger of a broader populist transformation, at least some members of the “Alternative for Germany” cited the impossibility of such a figure rising to prominence in Germany, given the vulgarity of the American campaign ([see the FAZ](#)). The Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, henceforth AfD) is a right-wing, populist party in Germany noted for its Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant positions. The AfD has been building momentum in local, regional and EU parliamentary elections since 2013 and hopes to cross the 5% electoral threshold to enter the German parliament in 2017. We examine the party’s origins and its significance to Germany, Europe and the Transatlantic relationship.

[Epstein: Are anti-Semitism and Islamophobia among AfD supporters interchangeable? Would you say these are similar or parallel phenomena in German and European politics, or does each have distinctive strains?](#)

Abenheim: At the outset, my views are those of a contemporary historian, not a political scientist. This fact notwithstanding, I have witnessed politics and society in the FRG since the early 1970s. Hatred and hostility towards Jews in Germany remains a feature of national life, but it is subject to strong taboos as well as a body of law that places heavy penalties on the political use of ethnic hatred. But such restraint is weakening in the contemporary coarsening of political debate and the sharp increase of political violence across the board. Such taboos scarcely apply to open hatred of Muslims where an anti Islamicist plank is prominent in the party platform. With an obeisance to the worst habits of the Austrian FPÖ and the Hungarian Fidesz, the revived sense of an Ottoman assault on Europe as in the 1683 siege of Vienna and the campaigns of Prince Eugene of Savoy in the 18th centuries has shown itself since the terror assaults in western Europe. The Syrian refugee turned ISIS infiltrator has made political hatred of Muslims more than politically acceptable, as political hatred of Jews as mass politics became generalized from the 1880s onward, but especially after 1918. One hardly needs mention the

specter of the denizen of the Frankfurt ghetto, foolishly allowed out of medieval and estate based shackles, who then hoodwinks the nobles in Stuttgart to let him don court attire and office and then plunders and rapes the goyim in the scenes made immortal in Veit Harland's film Jued Sues. This weaponization of ethnic hatred through sexual violence is an old canard of anti-Semitism, which has been adapted to the needs of the present with a cunning deftness.

The contribution of social media as a place to recycle traditional forms of hatred needs no explanation. After the Cologne crotch grabbing spasm of New Year's 2016, the tabloids and especially the social media exploded against the Syrian refugees and an ever longer list of other foreigners. AfD has done its part to break down these taboos of political debate in its willingness to make common cause with the spitting racism of PEGIDA and to recycle NPD old wine in new skins, particularly as concerns Turks, Arabs and other Muslims. As one who closely watches German TV political talk shows, this decline of civility means that it is politically acceptable in Germany today well beyond the ranks of AfD to defecate rhetorically on citizens of many nations and ethnic groups

This trash talk first struck down the Greeks in 2013 as Euro crisis continued, but rapidly spread as targets presented themselves. The revival of ethnic Feindbilder, i.e. the practical application of the friend-enemy relationship of Carl Schmitt is now exercised with abandon and energy, in which a Muslim or Arab dark invader, sexual predator, ritual murderer and so forth has filled a space once occupied by Jews in radical right wing and/or Nazi thought and deed in the period from the 1880s through war's end. The anti-Muslim dogma as it has eventuated since the Breivik manifesto in 2010 nonetheless includes pro-Israeli sentiments, and solidarity with Zionism for its resistance to Arabs, but such statements are put in the shadow by the general increase of hatred of Jews in Europe as a whole along with the right wing surge of the present which can never shake loose of its antagonism to Jews.

Hapless US visitors to Berlin are treated to crowds screaming anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish slogans, while incidents of violence against Jews in German cities have also increased among the shocking increase of radical right wing hate crimes since the unmasking of the National Socialist Underground in 2011. As the German-Israeli Dan Diner and the American Andy Markowitz have wisely pointed out, a significant number of AfD adherents voice anti American prejudices that recycle anti-Jewish patterns of thought within hostility to NSA, Wall Street, Silicon Valley and the Pentagon. That is, the misdeeds of the United States find their authors among a powerful Jewish elite among whom Mark Zuckerberg, Sheryl Sandberg and the Pritzkers of Chicago play a notable role. The incident of the AfD parliamentarian, Wolfgang Gedeon, of the Swabian legislature in Stuttgart blithely recycling passages from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and then openly questioning whether such ideas were anti-Semitic marked a low point in contemporary political discourse, which, nonetheless caused this person to be disciplined by his party comrades.

These varieties of rhetoric, however, stand in the shadow of the slogans and gestures more or less adopted from PEGIDA as well as the NPD and FPÖ and which first showed themselves in the anti-mosque movement in Cologne in 2012 and then with particular vehemence in the radical right wing demonstrations in Dresden with an openly neo Nazi contingent. Most reminiscent of an unhappy past in the 1920s through the 1970s in which organized political violence was a fixture in German political life have been the pogroms in Saxony and Brandenburg, with the firebombing of refugee quarters, the advent of neo Nazi controlled villages in the Pomeranian

countryside, the creation of citizen militias, and the firebombing of left wing politicians and journalists. To be sure, the young male Syrian sexual molester of German girls resembles the images in Streicher's Stuermer, but the principal energy of ethnic hatred in Germany today and among AfD, PEGIDA and Reichsbuerger focuses on Arabs and Turks. Such a fact can offer little succor to thoughtful and alert Jews in Central Europe, alive to the potential for chaos to bulk disaster.

Epstein: How has the AfD changed German politics thus far? For example, have mainstream parties, particularly the CDU/CSU, altered any of their policy positions to try to keep support away from the AfD?

Abenheim: Politics among the established western democracies witnesses a climacteric of radical right wing populism, white nationalism, and social nationalism which rejects the political and economic order of the last quarter century. The swift rise of the AfD in this decade has put the traditional national parties of the left and the right on the defensive, and, though this phenomenon may fade as in the episodes from the early 1950s until the 1990s, realism suggests that this form of politics has made an epochal break through with the Trump presidency and the turmoil it portends for a post 1945 political world that may be in its death throes.

Two examples suggest themselves: firstly, the impact of AfD on the Bavarian CSU, itself between the hammer of the former party and the anvil of the FPÖe on its path to electoral power in Austria has shoved the Bavarian party far to the right, where it does its best to drag the rest of the CDU along with it. Horst Seehofer's critique of Angela Merkel in the refugee crisis, as well as his tendentious pro-Russian policies in favor of German agricultural exports to eastern Europe, are evidence of this fact. This attempt to out do the AfD and thereby to soak up its voters like a sponge especially operated in the period from when the refugees descended on the Munich Central Train Station in September 2015 until the regional elections in the Spring of 2016. The Trump effect on the national election in 2017 will show whether this sponge process to the right has merit or not.

Perhaps it is too pessimistic to nonetheless assume that the German development of the established parties will resemble what has unfolded, secondly, with the dead-locked presidential election in Austria, where the FPÖe has dragged the established parties to the right, especially in the realm of security. For his expert crisis management of the refugee crisis in the fall of 2015 on the axis between Budapest and the Austrian border---made famous originally in the uprising of 1956 and the cutting of the wire in the summer of 1989---a social democratic former regional police officer, Hans Peter Doskozil, became Austrian defense minister in 2016. He carried out a beefing up the internal security and border defenses that more or less originated with the agenda of the FPÖe. While Germany is not Austria in its political culture, political developments in Austria are linked by tradition and custom to Bavaria. Anyone who doubts this dynamic has only to deepen themselves in the events before and after of the defenestration of Prague in 1618 or the pilgrimage of the artistically inclined denizen of the Vienna homeless shelter who came to Munich in 1913. Thus, this phenomenon of being pushed to the right is visible in those federal states where coalitions of Christian Democrats, Socialists, and Greens face a trenchant AfD block in local parliaments. In the shadow of Hofer and Trump, this question awaits an answer in the national elections of the fall of 2017. The best hope for those who adhere to a tolerant, multi-national and civilized order of prosperity and security in Europe that yet may retain some useful insights from the disaster of 1919-1939 is to meet the enemies of the democratic order with all

the energy the task requires. This call to greater energy constitutes the warning to us from the years 1930-1932, which a new generation may choose to heed or may not as the flags wave, the torches burn, the crowd roars, and the bullets fly.

Epstein: Does the AfD represent a major change in German politics in terms of rejecting the lessons stemming from the horrors of World War II? Or is the AfD just another fringe party (like the Republikaners of an earlier era) that will likely disappear when and if the refugee crisis is resolved or contained?

Abenheim: The AfD embodies a revival of German nationalism at the expense of the EU, NATO and US world leadership, despite German prosperity and strength in a united Europe. The refugee crisis in 2015-2016 made into reality the propaganda of blood and soil struggles of the party's world view. But AfD has been thrust forward as much by the single European currency, and by Gerhard Schroeder's economic and welfare reform of 2003, as well as by the twists and turns of globalization upon the reality of the German social market economy in the quarter century of German unity.

The epochal character of AfD coincides with a Germany no longer endowed with a stable and ideologically placid form of government, despite general prosperity beyond the dreams of anyone in the year 1959. Since the bright moment of the world football cup in 2006, the onset of perennial economic stagnation in Europe and the endurance of grand coalition cabinets have promoted political opposition from what has normally been the extremity. In the last four years of AfD's ascent to prominence, the shadows have darkened over a Europe faced with a wrong headed austerity policy in the maw of the Euro crisis, the rise of Russian Eurasianist revanchism, the jihadist terror assaults, all of which have sparked a new, old integral nationalism with resonances of the epoch 1919-1939. This process may have started on the Danube after 2008 in Viktor Orban's semi authoritarian Hungary, and spread to the United Kingdom, but it has also manifested itself in Germany.

The refugee crisis neither created AfD, nor is this party likely to vanish entirely even if the bulk of refugees presently learn to speak German and join local choirs and football clubs. In the same vein, the shocking advent of the Trump presidency in the US hardly promises that his enraged and weaponized electorate will suddenly revert to quietude, but will likely radicalize even further with the prospect of power and its many contradictions.

The politics of the FRG has distinguished itself since 1949 by its renunciation of blood and soil nationalism or integral or ethnic nationalism that was the prominent feature of German politics from the 1880s until 1945. Whether this custom has constituted a lesson of war or not, the social and political sources of such integral nationalism had lost any political credibility after 1945 as the proponents of this world view had been physically annihilated in the epoch of total war. Christian Democracy, German liberalism, which has previously been the core of such nationalism in the 19th century, as well as German social democracy addressed the fate of Germany in Europe via the integration in the Euro-Atlantic sphere and a constitutional patriotism and belief in a united Europe. The adherents of blood and soil endured on the fringes, and made occasional short lived-forays into national life: the unrepentant, stay-behind Nazis of the Sozialistische Reichspartei (SRP), which was banned in 1952, and, more important, the rise of the Nationale Demokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD) in the grand coalition epoch of 1966-1969. Since the social liberal coalition to the Kohl era, that is, from the 1970s through the 1990s,

right wing nationalists lurked in the German attic or cellar as the Maximilian Schell character in Vittoria di Sica's film of 1962, the Condemned of Altona. Nonetheless, such ideas and persons did constitute a force in the body politic of the five new federal states, i.e. the former DDR, that became a constant in national life after 1990. All the same the old right wing parties (NPD, DSU, Republikaner, Schill Party etc.) never achieved significant electoral successes.

The Alternative fuer Deutschland arose in 2013 initially as a critique of EU and German policy to master the Greek sovereign debt crisis. Its founders sprang from a disaffected milieu of affluent, educated middle class males and especially irate professors and industry notables (i.e. Bernd Luecke and Hans Olaf-Henkel) who had taken a page from Thilo Sarrazin's manifesto of 2010 against German politics, economy, culture, gender and society in the 21st century. This critique against globalization, post-modern society and an all embracing culture soon fixated on resistance to the statecraft of Chancellor Angela Merkel and her cabinets since 2005.

The most important aspect in this swift evolution from 2013 until today is the trajectory from a free market and Deutsch Mark conservatism a la Konrad Adenauer or Ludwig Erhard to a right wing nationalist agenda in the AfD and the rise of organized political violence in German society and politics signified by the personalities of Frauke Petry and Bjoern Hoecke. This process eventually led to the purge of both Luecke and Henkel, who eventually left the party in disgust. The party swerves between these two poles. Hoecke has played coquette with the Horst Wessel Lied inflected dog whistle and citations of immortal German Reich, while Petry has revived the term "voelkisch" in the lexicon of contemporary German politics. To be fair, not all of Hoecke and Petry's allies in the party ascribe to this ideal of Hermann the Cherusker, the blood and soil of the Reichsnaehrstand in 1936 and the racial theories of Houston Stewart Chamberlain. A significant fraction in the school of Luecke and Henkel just long for Franz Josef Strauss and the verities of what now shimmers in memory as a simpler age, but, which in reality was anything but in the forgotten crises of the 1960s through the 1980s. Added to this politically problematic nostalgia of old men and women is the racist rage to kick the political and economic elite in the ass as operates in the followers of Donald Trump, Viktor Orban, Vladimir Putin, and Marine Le Pen. When these forces accumulate between the Rhine, Oder and Danube, however, they are imbedded in a German experience of cultural nationalism, populism, and, to put it with some care, "social nationalism." This latter idea has made it safe again openly to recycle Nazi dogmas, whose young proponents often do not realize or do not want to recognize, the source of such odious political goals. At the same time, many in the AfD, if challenged, would eschew a Nazi political ideology and take intense umbrage to one mentioning the unsavory origin of specific political concepts.

These east German personalities have swiftly eclipsed the socially and economic conservative/liberal goals of what might be described as a party of nostalgia for Helmut Kohl's DM prosperity. The provincial elections in the FRG of spring and late summer of 2016, notably in Saxon-Anhalt, Baden-Wuerttemberg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern brought the AfD real national power via the state houses. It may or may not be the kind of parliamentary revolution unseen since the breakthrough of the Greens at the end of the 1970s, but such a comparison falls wide of the mark. AfD represents a fundamentally antagonistic world-view and practice in a beleaguered Europe in the maw of populist, anti globalization revolt as well as geopolitical threats of a grave kind. The year 1979 was also one of crises, to be sure, but the crises of 2016 appear to this writer, at least, as more severe and the ecological universalism of the Greens rather innocent compared to key AfD tenets of nationalism a la Putin and Orban. The latter all

point in the direction of political conflict at first in the domestic and then in the international arena.

In this connection, a comparison with the breakthrough of the Austrian FPÖe (Freedom Party) since its post-Joerg Haider integral nationalist and social nationalist incarnation since the late 1990s is instructive on what may or may not eventuate in the FRG in 2017. That is, a transition from a centrist consensus among right and left to the spoiling role in domestic politics of integral nationalists with an authoritarian or totalitarian bent. These politicians stand oriented away from Euro Atlantic integration and gaze with awe to the neo Tsarist fata morgana of Eurasianism. They long to build the bulwark against the invading Ottoman. The success of such radical right wing, Euroskeptic, extreme nationalist parties in Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland are also instructive of the climacteric unfolding before us with the imperatives of blood and soil and Brussels can go screw. The retrograde social goals of the AfD as regards women, divorce, and society in general seem so out of touch with the reality of German and European society in the present as to be swiftly damned to the junk heap. Yet the appeal of blood and soil to the enraged, marginalized, and politically mobilized cannot be denied in Germany, where the Trump election has enlivened these ideas and figures, as this shock has unleashed glee in authoritarian nationalists in France, UK, Austria and beyond.

The most startling moments of the refugee crisis in summer 2015 have ended as of this writing, a year after the refugee migration swept to the gates of Budapest, Vienna and Munich. The onset of jihadist terrorism in Paris and Brussels, to say nothing of the handful of incidents in Bavaria from the fall of 2015 until the summer of 2016 have or have not substantiated the AfD image of the enemy at the basis of its nationalist message. The more or less Austrian and Danubian coup de main of closing the border in the course of 2015-2016, reinforced, in turn, with the EU diplomatic Realpolitik with Erdogan's Turkey has stemmed the refugee columns to a great degree. Such policy is in no way reflected in the Feindbild rhetoric and the generalized smear by radical right wing parties on the AfD/Austrian FPÖe/Front National/UKIP model of refugees as dark invaders, rapists, and terrorists. The culmination point in this regard came with the November 2015 terror assaults in Paris, the Sylvester's Eve pogrom against German women in Cologne and elsewhere and the terror assaults and siege of Brussels in April 2016. That is, the emergency of more or less uncontrolled borders has been abridged, but the Feindbild rhetoric by the AfD and by the FPÖe (which are more or less carbon copies of each other...) has become a kind of perpetual motion machine of political discourse. In all likelihood, AfD has come to stay as a feature of German and European politics, even though the skills of its leading figures to negotiate the rigors of government are plainly deficient.

Epstein: Who in the German electorate is supporting the AfD and why? Referring to the first question, is the AfD's rise tied to recent policy debates or does it reflect a longer-standing and deeper-rooted resentment of international interpretations of German war guilt?

Abenheim: In the AfD's initial phase from 2012 until 2014, the leadership of the party drew its numbers from disaffected educated middle class men, of whom Hans-Olaf Henkel, Bernd Luecke, Alexander Gauland and Bernd Meuthen were more than exemplary---West German critics of the Merkel CDU/CSU/SPD grand coalition, which they believed had abandoned conservatism in favor of consensus with ideologically repugnant multi cultural and gender neutral forces on the left and supranational technocrat and vultures of Wall Street or Singapore bankers in their number. As if this educated and well heeled critique was not enough, fate swiftly shoved Europe

from the Greek sovereign debt crisis to Crimean annexation and, then, to the Syrian refugee columns from the Aegean to Burgenland in the east of Austria along the Danube. The profile of the AfD voter changed with the radicalization of German and European politics in the interim and the appeal broadened across the span of political milieu to gather from the left and the right.

Prior to this acceleration in crisis, in the 2013 national election, the AfD voter mostly drew the votes of males not only from what were once called “die erwuenschten Kreisen,” or “Adel der Gesinnung” but also from the working class of those who felt endangered by the Schengen regime of open borders, by the veritable Polish plumber or by the Slovak production line workers at Volkswagen in Bratislava. These AfD voters came not simply from right wing, but also from the left wing. The AfD found notable success in the five new federal states, above the all-crucial five percent mark, where it took votes especially from the heirs of the old SED, the former PDS or Die Linke. In 2014, a study by the social science institute Forsa found that the party at the time drew its members from the old elite and middle strata of German society, and thus could not simply be equated with traditional right wing extremists.

This fact was underscored in the opening forays of the party’s leaders by a high level of education as well as by above average income among prominent AfD persons. Take, for instance, the lawyer, ex CDU official, conservative theorist and journalist, Herr Dr. Alexander Gauland, today well ensconced in the State parliament of Brandenburg. He is noteworthy for his gentry tweed coats and his navy blue Jaguar sedan which he illegally parks next to the rebuilt Stadtschloss in Potsdam and which until now has escaped anarchists in Berlin who otherwise take a torch to BMWs and Mercedes Benzes. Well heeled is his elegant but dour gold dealing European parliament colleague, the former lawyer and banker Frau Beatrix von Storch, with her Almanach de Gotha manners enlivened by her machine gun firing rhetoric bolted onto a stare on television talk shows that resembles the contemptuous smug of Hermann Goering at Nuremberg in 1946. What unites them all is a spitting hostility to Angela Merkel, a scorn for gender mainstreaming, a contempt for homosexual marriage, the white hot hatred of the Euro because it robbed everyone of the Deutsche Mark, horror at the faceless bureaucrats of the European Union, rage at the Pentagon puppet masters in NATO and NSA, and veiled threats to naive foreigners admiring the Brandenburg Gate, while passersby sing German folk songs in the spirit of Ernst Moritz Arndt. Professor Dr. Frauke Petry hardly embodies the working class habitus of either the sunken SED world, when her talk show appearances routinely end in verbal duels in which her stiletto tongue contrasts so sharply and painfully with the quiet, deliberate and even plodding rhetoric of Angela Merkel.

In the Spring 2016 local elections in the state of Hesse, the party received 12 % of votes; in the federal state elections in Baden Wuerttemberg, Rhineland Palatinate, and Saxon Anhalt, the AfD garnered 15%, 12.6% and, 24.3 % respectively. The Magdeburg vote was the best among the federal states, which in turn has lately been reinforced in September of 2016 by that of Mecklenburg Vorpommern, where the party won 20.8%. This coup was followed by perhaps the more startling 17 September 2016 elections in the sparkling, poor but sexy capital of Berlin. On the Spree and Havel 14.2% voted blue especially in the eastern districts of Marzahn, Treptow and Koepenick. These voters follow ex-Bundeswehr general staff officers with experience in new forms of warfare now applied to the roiled partisan politics of the advancing 21st century. This leader of the Berlin AfD, Georg Pazderski, is a former German army colonel, who, despite his claims of being cosmopolitan from service with the US military in Florida, nonetheless invokes

the threat from refugees as dark invaders to mobilize his east Berlin voters at odds with the cosmopolitan capital and its Kreuzberg hipsters and Charlottenburg bo-bos. Beneath the shiny exterior and tourist throngs on the Pariser Platz, Berlin of today is ever more witness to class conflict arising from gentrification and real estate speculation as well as underworld/red light district feuds with IEDs and fatal early morning drag races in front of KaDeWe.

As concerns the issue of war guilt in the German electorate, the rejection of the most fundamental tenets of FRG statecraft and political culture (the primacy of consensus, a policy of reconciliation across borders, no to Otto von Bismarck's Schaukelpolitik, yes to international organizations and to multi-lateralism, orientation to the Atlantic world) since 1949 does not include, per se, the kind of batty right wing language of former times to the effect that the second world war was imposed by the west on the III. Reich. This radical right wing canard was most recently enshrined in a sharply revisionist book on the causes of the second world war by an ex Bundeswehr general Gerd Schulzte Ronhof who somewhat channeled AJP Taylor, but also ex Nazis in the FRG of the late 1950s. This idea has operated on the fringes for a long time, and is surely not explicitly a plank in the AfD platform nor are such ideas embraced by the overwhelming bulk of persons in national and cultural life.

What is core to AfD, however, is the celebration of German national feeling, and love of fatherland as well as an open tendency to dismiss most foreigners, but especially Greeks, Turks, Arabs, Americans, Israelis and others as proxies for multi-national and remote alien entities of the European Union and NATO. To the extent that the phrase "political correctness" becomes the butt of vitriol among the AfD, there is an implicit rejection of German statecraft, pacifism, and anti-militarism of the past two generations with the Hans von Seeckt tilt to Moscow, the ahistorical celebration of Bismarck over Helmut Kohl, a new kind of cult of power of Germany's Mittellage, and above, the revival of a kind of third path rhetoric invested in the concept of Festung Europa as well as a resistance to the US National Security Agency and to a Silicon Valley that at times has antiestablishmentarian resonances of Martin Luther and or Carl Schmitt. Needless to say, social media originating in California offers the medium for these nationalist messages from AfD-party alt-right agitators. The party does not have a lot to say about defense policy in a specific sense, but the AfD rightly wants to reintroduce conscription in the vein of the school of the nation and also because the Bundeswehr has, indeed, shrunk in size to an alarming degree, made more evident by the refugee crisis and the mobilization of troops to support civil authority in Bavaria. Such a policy idea hardly constitutes a rejection of the generalized understanding that the III. Reich began an aggressive war that ended in genocide. The nationalism embraced by the AfD and by others constitutes an assault on the core ideas that have undergirded a peaceful and prosperous Europe since 1945, as the construction of barriers, their reinforcement by paramilitary police and armies (as in Hungary and even in Austria) constitutes a rupture with the constants of the past six decades.

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