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## Germany's Growing Hate Problem Populist, Pernicious and Perilous

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**Even as Germany has welcomed its refugees, another, uglier side has been festering with the return of the anti-Muslim Pegida movement. The threat posed by the far-right has the potential to spiral out of control. By SPIEGEL Staff**

*Even as an image of a Germany taking great pains to welcome hundreds of thousands of refugees has bolstered the country's image abroad, it has also been accompanied by a wave of hatred that cannot be played down. At the center of this second, disturbing narrative is Patriots against the Islamization of the West, or Pegida, a xenophobic grassroots movement that has manifested itself with demonstrations each Monday mostly in Dresden in the east, but also in other parts of Germany. But Pegida is only one part of a much larger problem, as the following feature from the new issue of SPIEGEL illustrates.*

Germany has a hate problem -- one that is growing.

"You're as big of an asshole as that idiot Ralf Stegner," a certain Birgit M. recently wrote in a letter to Thomas Kutschaty, justice minister of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. It was a reference to the deputy party leader of state chapter of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), who recently said the organizers of the weekly Pegida marches in Dresden and elsewhere should be investigated by intelligence services. "You should all be put in a sack and have a hammer taken to you," Birgit M. wrote in her tirade.

Then there was the man who called Dorothea Moesch, a local SPD politician in Dortmund, late in the evening on June 30. "We're going to get you," he threatened. "We're at your door."

Another local SPD politician in Hesse, district administrator Erich Pipa, has been similarly threatened. "We can have you taken out at any time," he was informed in a letter.

And in Bernau in the eastern state of Brandenburg, graffiti scrawled on the wall of a warehouse namechecking the local mayor reads, "First Henriette Reker (the mayoral candidate stabbed in Cologne last weekend), next André Stahl."

These are but a few examples -- four politicians who have taken a stand, and, if the threats are to be taken seriously, may now need to fear for their lives. Kutschaty fell into the crosshairs for saying, "Pegida is not about protecting the Western world, it's about its demise." Moesch, for her part, attracted ire because she organized a protest against right-wing extremism. Pipa became the target of hatred because he was recently awarded a Federal Cross of Merit, Germany's highest civilian honor, for his longtime lobbying work on behalf of refugees. Finally, Stahl was the subject of denigration because of his public declaration that he wants refugees to feel welcome in his city.

So far, none of them have scaled back their political work. They all still say it's more important than ever. But since the knife attack against Reker last Saturday on the eve of her election as mayor of Cologne, they can no longer feel entirely safe. District administrator Pipa is wondering whether he should take police advice and wear a bullet-proof vest.

## **Rampant Hatred**

Germany these days, it seems, is a place where people feel entirely uninhibited about expressing their hatred and xenophobia. Images from around the country show a level of brutalization that hasn't been witnessed for some time, and attest to primitive instincts long believed to have been relegated to the past in Germany. The examples are as myriad as they are shocking, and include the bloody attack in Cologne as well as the mock gallows for Angela Merkel and her deputy Sigmar Gabriel carried by a demonstrator at a Pegida rally in Dresden on Oct. 12. But they also include the abuse shouted at the German chancellor when she visited a refugee hostel in Heidenau near Dresden in August, where she was called a "slut" and other insults, or the placards held aloft by demonstrators on the first anniversary of the Pegida rallies listing the supposed "enemies of the German state" -- Merkel, Gabriel and their "accomplices." The lack of inhibition when it comes to vicious tirades took on a whole new scale on Monday, when Turkish-born German author and Pegida supporter Akif Pirincci, said there are other alternatives in the refugee crisis, but "the concentration camps are unfortunately out of action at the moment."

There have been more than twice as many attacks on refugee hostels during the first nine months of this year as in the whole of 2014. The rising tide of hatred is now reaching the politicians many hold responsible for the perceived chaos besetting Germany. The national headquarters of Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party in Berlin fields thousands of hate mails every week. As the architect of the "we can do it" policy of allowing masses of refugees into the country, Chancellor Merkel is their primary target. Within the SPD, it is

General Secretary Yasmin Fahimi, whose father is Iranian. "Open the doors to the showers, fire up the ovens. They're going to be needed," read one recent anonymous mail addressed to her.

The hatred comes in many forms. It's expressed on the streets and on the Internet. Sometimes it's loud. Other times it's unspoken. It emanates from every class and every section of society. According to studies conducted by Andreas Zick, the respected head of the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence at the University of Bielefeld, who has been researching German prejudices against different groups for many years, almost 50 percent of Germans harbor misanthropic views. Zick warns of a shift in norms that will be difficult to get back under control.

### **Tougher Response Needed**

Politicians need to find a way of dealing with rampant hatred. Dialogue and compromise -- the bedrock of Germany's culture of debate -- no longer appears to be working at the moment. It's hard to get through to people who have been consumed with a hysterical degree of hatred.

The country's security agencies also need to take a decisive stance. Are they once again being too slow in monitoring and clamping down on this new radical scene? In most states, Germany's domestic intelligence agency is not keeping tabs on Pegida. Theoretically, however, police and public prosecutors do have the tools to take action to squash troublemakers.

When it comes to dealing with radicals, society needs an inner compass. It has to decide how indifferent to politics it can afford to be and how far voter turnout can fall -- it reached a record low in Sunday's mayoral elections in Cologne. In short, it has to decide how much room for manoeuvre it is willing to grant far-right firebrands.

But the damage already runs deep, as evidenced not only by the attack on Henriette Reker. Politicians across Germany are reporting a rise in the number of serious threats issued against them.

In Dortmund, Dorothea Moesch is used to being the butt of hostility. Four years ago, she opened a home in the district of Westerfilde for needy locals, immigrants and their children. Volunteers taught German language classes and helped translate letters from the authorities for the residents. Mainly they simply made themselves available. Moesch promoted a "welcoming culture" long before the term was coined. Protest was inevitable. Until now, abuse along the lines of "Bloody Turks, get them out" and "Piss off, cripple" bounced off her. Wheelchair-bound due to a joint disease, Moesch is all too familiar with discrimination.

### **'You're Going to Burn, Witch!'**

But it's different these days. On June 30, after registering a demonstration against the far-right, she received an anonymous call on her mobile phone. "You're going to burn, witch, just like all the other cunts," said a male voice. He called again that evening. Moesch was frightened. "You can't shrug that sort of thing off," she says.

Sebastian Koch is the Social Democrat mayor of Wenzelbach near Regensburg in Bavaria. He feels the same. He's accused of pandering to asylum-seekers and regularly gets told he should deport himself to Syria. He drew criticism for berating a man who rents out refugee accommodations for leaving furniture and stoves broken and exposed electrical wiring dangling off walls. He also complained about the way refugee children had to take trains and buses from Wenzelbach to get to school, arguing that it was too much to ask of kids their age who couldn't speak German.

A letter subsequently reached the town hall saying that what the refugee children needed wasn't a train to school but to a concentration camp. Germany's domestic intelligence agency, which monitors extremist activity, has launched an investigation to ascertain if this amounts to incitement to hatred, and police regularly patrol the area around the refugee home. "It's not that I'm afraid," says Koch. "But these expressions of hatred got to me and unnerved me."

Exposure to such anger on the part of the people, through letters, Tweets, Facebook postings and physical attacks like the one in Cologne and through the hateful epithets of the type being volleyed against them in Dresden is a new experience for most politicians.

Heinz Bude, a sociology professor at the University of Kassel, describes the Pegida movement as a "communications-free high-pressure chamber." "The people who go to Pegida have the feeling their problems are existential, but they feel there's no one they can turn to. That reinforces the feeling that politicians aren't facing up to reality." Based on his surveys, he says the potential for the number of people who could feel degraded in this way is 25 percent.

### **From the Margins to the Mainstream**

Groups on the far-right spectrum discovered long ago the potential of frustrated people.

For example, the people behind the German blog Politically Incorrect (PI), founded in 2004, the same year the Dutch film director and Islam critic Theo van Gogh was murdered, have long pursued their goal of discrediting people they deem to be "Islam sympathizers" or "do-gooders" using all means conceivable, an internal missive states.

So it makes perfect sense that those behind Politically Incorrect have joined forces in recent years with similar people sharing their views to form a right-wing network that includes groups like the Bürgerbewegung Pax Europa (the Pax Europa Citizens' Movement), the German Defense League and the Bürgerbewegung Pro Deutschland (Pro Germany Citizens' Movement). Together, they have been trying to push their political views from the margins into the mainstream, and this is where Pegida's role comes into play.

Just one example of the extent with which Politically Incorrect's thought leaders and followers are working closely together with Pegida is Michael Stürzenberger. A prominent opinion leader at PI, he's also the chairman of the far-right extremist party Die Freiheit (The Freedom) and appears regularly as a speaker at Pegida events.

In the city of Duisburg in western Germany this summer, he told the crowd how a young woman had almost been raped by three asylum-seekers in Miesbach, a small town in his home state of Bavaria. Stützenberger said he received news like this every day. "Do you really want for our women to no longer be able to walk on the streets at night without worrying?" he shouted into the microphone. "No," the crowd chanted back. What Stürzenberger didn't tell his audience, however, was that police announced shortly after the alleged incident that the woman had fabricated her story.

Platforms like Politically Incorrect have long cultivated this form of agitation, and Pegida is now bringing it into the town squares of Germany's cities, bringing the virtual and analog worlds together and making the hatred tangible, audible and physical.

"Pegida is a grassroots movement," says Jürgen Elsässer, "It's perhaps the last chance we have left to save our people." Elsässer is a former teacher and member of the now defunct Communist League in West Germany, who may have once written for prominent far-left publications but is now a popular speaker at Pegida events.

Even today, he continues to lash out at the "imperialism" imposed by the Americans and calls for "resistance against the international financial capital and its warmongers in Washington, London and Jerusalem." Writing on his blog in September, Elsässer called on the Bundeswehr, Germany's armed forces, to occupy stations along the German borders in order to stop the flow of refugees. "Fulfill your oath!" he wrote. "Don't wait for orders from above." In his magazine *Compact*, Elsässer currently features an image of Angela Merkel with the headline, "The Queen of the People-smugglers."

Elsässer is one of the people shaping Pegida's political views. He's also illustrative of how perfidious far-right intellectuals are when it comes to the issue of violence.

### **A New Culture of Hate**

On his blog, Elsässer distanced himself from the attack on the Cologne mayoral candidate. He also rejects the use of the gallows as a symbol. "People, let this absolutely misleading nonsense be," he wrote. At the same time, though, he also posted an interview with the man who carried the gallows at a recent Pegida march in Dresden on his magazine's website, providing the man, who does not reveal his name, with a platform to state that the gallows for Merkel and Gabriel was intended as "satire." The teaser for the video states that the "courageous man" is now going to tell his story, which will give you "goose bumps." The idea of heroification while at the same time feigning distance is one of the hallmarks of the new culture of hate.

Elsässer is expected to give another speech in November, this time at the invitation of the so-called Institute for State Policy, which is housed in a manor in Schnellroda in the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt. The organization's co-founder was Götz Kubitschek, who studied at university to become a teacher and was forced to leave his position as a first lieutenant in the Bundeswehr in 2001 after participating in "right-wing extremist endeavors."

On Oct. 5, Kubitschek spoke to protesters gathered at Dresden's Neumarkt square, where he called for civil disobedience and propagated the alleged right to resist. "It's good that things are starting to escalate!" he told the audience. The crowd chanted back, "Re-sis-tance."

Kubitschek enjoys moments like that because they show him that theory can also be turned into practice. In small groups of like-minded people, he spent years mulling what could be learned from the leftists when it comes to the battle for minds. He invited people in Internet forums to conceive original and provocative forms of agitation. In one form of "conservative-subversive action," he and other activists gatecrashed left-wing events like a 2008 reading by Günter Grass.

### **'Increasingly Martial Language'**

He discussed which issues would be well suited for making neo-fascistic ideas palatable to the masses. And how normal people could be convinced to accept breaches of the law or misdemeanors in the pursuit of them. How could the right-wing prevail over the "cultural hegemony?" In Pegida, Kubitschek has finally found precisely the type of agitation he had long been searching for.

Experts like political scientist Armin Pfahl-Traughber of the German government's Federal University of Applied Administrative Sciences categorize Kubitschek's movement as right-wing extremist. "With their writings, they are striving for a recasting of the Conservative Movement during the Weimar Republic that had positioned itself clearly against the democratic, constitutional state," says Pfahl-Traughber. In recent weeks, he says he has also observed "increasingly martial language" among its leaders and followers.

Last Sunday, a friend of the right-wing extremist revolutionary appeared on Germany's leading talk show. What was most conspicuous about his appearance on Günther Jauch's show was that, at the very beginning, he hung a German flag from the right armrest of his chair. The guest, Björn Höcke, is a former physical education and history teacher at schools in the western state of Hesse. Now he's the head of the state chapter of the Alternative for Germany (AFD) party in the eastern state of Thuringia. Höcke has maintained an interest in the ideologies of the new right for many years.

Höcke is also leading protest marches against the "stream of refugees," like one that took place on Wednesday in the eastern city of Erfurt. At the event, Höcke sought to portray himself as a victim of the "lying press" -- the term being used by the far-right these days to disparage the media -- the last true patriot standing in a society that has otherwise been blinded. Höcke said he didn't bring the flag from the talk show because someone told him he should take good care of it given that it might wind up exhibited in a history museum someday. It's exactly the kind of thing he likes to hear. In his state of megalomania, he apparently already seems to view himself as the history-making leader of a new movement. It appears that the AFD party's national leader Frauke Petry is wising up to this as well. She cancelled her scheduled appearance at the Erfurt demonstration.

The way in which the party deals with Höcke is proving to be an acid test for leaders of AFD, which has grown increasingly populist in tone since its creation in 2013. AFD's deputy leader



Alexander Gauland may view him as a "legitimate voice in the AFD choir," but Petry would prefer to neutralize far-right outsider Höcke. "He doesn't speak for the national party," she recently clarified in a letter to party members that has also created pressure for her. This letter was not agreed to by the executive committee and isn't supported by me," Gauland says. The truth, he says, is that Höcke "is not a Nazi."

Petry's desire to distance the party from the far-right and anchor it firmly in mainstream society will be very difficult to fulfill so long as Höcke, AFD's best-known representative, continues with his bluster about the "thousand-year Reich." Björn Höcke's version of AFD is precariously close to the organized right-wing extremism of the neo-Nazis. He even openly admits to having ties to Thorsten Heise, a leading figure in the National Democratic Party (NPD), which the German government sought to ban in the past because of its xenophobic and anti-Semitic positions. Höcke's friend Kubitschek was keen to join AFD, but the party leadership refused to let him in.

Undeterred, Höcke continues to consolidate his links with the Pegida movement, saying he would like to see his party work with it "much more closely" -- and also with Germany's new far-right intellectuals. Along with Jürgen Elsässer, Höcke will be speaking at the fall conference in Schnellroda hosted by Götz Kubitschek in what is expected to be a summit of the far-right's masterminds.

### **A Weak Official Response**

Even as the organized far-right is exploiting public unease about the refugee crisis and frustrated citizens are venting their anger in hate mails, the authorities' response has been astonishingly weak. Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière might describe Pegida's leaders as "hard-core right-wing extremists" but the domestic intelligence service he oversees states that it isn't even monitoring the movement -- so far, it says, there has been insufficient reason to do so.

Gordian Meyer-Plath, president of Saxony branch of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, also seems reluctant to take on the increasingly radical movement. "We're not watching it," he says, because the argument that it is harmless has so far prevailed. Its organizers distanced themselves from violence, for example. "People held up pictures of Merkel in an SA uniform at the demonstrations," says Meyer-Plath. "Real neo-Nazis would never do that." So far, he maintains, it's a "populist far-right movement rooted in anger but not a threat to German's freedom and democracy."

"We cannot label every anti-asylum-seeker protest as being far-right," he says.

But intelligence services in other states beg to differ. Pegida movements in Duisburg, Düsseldorf and Thuringia are officially being watched, with authorities concluding that the majority of organizers and speakers belong to the far-right scene.

The authorities were even stymied by the blog Politically Incorrect, deciding that although it propagates anti-Islamic and often racist propaganda, "it does not use typical far-right argumentation" -- as the authorities put it in response to an inquiry from the Left Party. The

authors of the blog have so far managed to out-manoeuvre the authorities by using two simple tricks. Firstly, its stance is overtly pro-American and pro-Israeli, which appears to confuse the German bureaucrats, who assume that to be a neo-Nazi is to be anti-Semitic. Secondly, the most egregious expressions of vitriol appear in the comments, for which the blog's authors cannot be held responsible.

In 2013, the Bavarian intelligence service became the first to start observing PI, a move prompted by the blog's industrious Munich chapter, headed up by the rabidly anti-Islamic Michael Stürzenberger, a frequent speaker at Pegida rallies.

### **Death Threats, Every Week**

The authorities were completely unprepared for the knife attack on Henriette Reker, even though the 44-year-old suspect Frank S., an unemployed painter and decorator from Cologne, had long been a neo-Nazi sympathizer and first become active in the far-right scene in Bonn at the age of 18. In 1993, he was sighted at a memorial march for leading Nazi Rudolf Hess in Fulda; and, in 1994, he was involved in aborted plans for a similar march in Luxembourg to mark the anniversary of Hess' death.

He also appears in domestic intelligence files as one of government informant Norbert W.'s assets. Norbert W. was regional manager of the Free German Workers' Party (FAP), a neo-Nazi political association outlawed by the Constitutional Court in 1995.

In 1995, Frank S. began to attract attention with a series of violent outbreaks. He beat up a man wearing red shoelaces because he thought he was an anti-fascist activist. He threw a beer bottle during a fight in a disco. By 1998, he had twice been convicted of causing bodily harm and once of extortion. He spent several years behind bars.

But in 2000, intelligence services lost track of him. He briefly returned to the radar in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2008 when he appeared to look into joining the NPD. After that, however, he dropped completely out of sight. The intelligence services were unaware that he contemplated suicide three months ago -- as he revealed after his attack on Reker. Nor were they aware of his meticulous planning ahead of it.

The domestic intelligence services' fight to stop spiraling aggression is one thing. Society and politics' answer to the public hatred, anger and frustration is another. Is it still possible to have a conversation with people who send politicians hate mail and death threats? Justice Minister Heiko Maas doesn't think so. His Facebook page regularly overflows with abuse. He was one of the first leading German politicians to deem Pegida a German disgrace. Now trolls -- who even give their names -- leave messages for him on Facebook such as "Heiko, your time's soon up" and "shut your face or I'm coming for you!" The Justice Ministry passes on a handful of death threats to the Federal Criminal Police Office every week.

### **'A Form of Terrorism'**



Maas sees it as his duty to get tough. "We've reached a point where certain things need to be spelled out," he says. He proposes that anyone participating in a demonstration should be made to account for the aims and the organizers of the rally. "It's too easy for people to just go along with it," he says.

SPD General Secretary Yasmin Fahimi has also had enough of the far-right talk of recent months. "It is not the job of politicians to counsel these people," she says. "We're talking about rabble rousers and firebrands who are issuing death threats. They've turned away from the Constitution and towards extremism." She points out that they are also the sort of extremists who accept authority and that it therefore makes sense to show them "the strong arm of the law." This, she argues, requires police, public prosecutors and courts to play their part. She would also like to see associations and employers reacting to rabble rousers and anyone who expresses xenophobic opinions by withdrawing membership, warning them and potentially firing them.

Psychologist Andreas Zick also urges politicians to take a tougher line on far-right populists. "We need to see racist violence in Germany for what it is," he says. "A form of terrorism."