Why the AfD Wins

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Three weeks before the German state of Sachsen-Anhalt went to the polls to elect a new legislature on September 6, Germany's leading news magazine, *Der Spiegel*, ran a cover story with a mug shot of Ulrich Siegmund, lead candidate of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, under the legend "Germany's Most Dangerous Man." What made him so dangerous was not evident at first glance. Siegmund is young, untested, a bit of a glad-hander, and in some respects odd. He studied aromachology and marketing at university and takes a particular interest in the influence of smells on consumer behavior. He likes to ride around on old East German motorbikes. But that wasn't what bothered *Der Spiegel*. They were more

unsettled by the worry that a politician of the extreme right was about to take power in Germany—albeit at a local level—for the first time since Adolf Hitler.

Naturally what constitutes the "extreme right" is in the eye of the beholder. The German state has an elaborate constitutional system meant to identify threats from within and snuff them out early. Devised in the late 1940s as Germany was re-establishing its state under Allied tutelage, it is sometimes called *wehrhafte Demokratie,* an expression coined in the 1930s by the sociologist Karl Loewenstein to describe a fortified democracy, a democracy that can fight back against those who would wreck it.

Germany's version requires parties to get 5 percent of the vote before they can take seats in the legislature, on the theory that there is something "fringy" about small parties that cannot be left to fester. It has a federal office for the defense of the constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz) that is replicated in all states. Officers of the Verfassungsschutz can surveil the contacts and tap the phones of those who belong to parties deemed extremist. Based on evidence, they can give the party a classification that leaves it liable to banning by the federal constitutional court (Bundesverfassungsgericht). Less formally, Germany has developed a custom of partisan ostracism known as the "firewall" (*Brandmauer*) in which rival parties withhold cooperation and deny the parliamentary and social prerogatives to which an outcast party is customarily entitled. Germany is not the only Western society with taboos against dissident ideas, images, and rhetoric—but for eighty years, it has been the one in which those taboos are most powerfully defined, enforced, and protected from challenge.

If the AfD really is the extremist party that *Der Spiegel* implies it is, then something has gone terribly wrong with Germany's fortified democracy. For the AfD is now—by far—the most popular party in the country; 28 percent of voters nationwide say they would vote for it in the next national election,

ahead of the 21 percent who would vote for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Chancellor Friedrich Merz, which has (in coalition) ruled Germany almost continuously since Angela Merkel first won in 2005. In September, elections are being held in three eastern states where the AfD is popular: In Sachsen-Anhalt it was polling at 42 or 43 percent of the vote, a multiple of its closest rival. It was near the lead in Berlin and leading in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Young people in particular find little connection to the *Altparteien*—the "old parties," as the CDU and its rivals the Social Democrats (SPD) are called. Sven Schülze, the CDU minister-president running against Siegmund, has only 24,000 followers on social media to Siegmund's 1.7 million.

The case that the AfD in this part of the country has a radical side is not without evidence: At least four prominent members of the Sachsen-Anhalt branch of the party, including a spokesman for Siegmund, took part in the Heimattreue Deutsche Jugend, a youth organization called neo-Nazi by the Verfassungsschutz until it was disbanded in 2009. (The organization's name might be translated as "German Youth Loyal to the Homeland"; the word *Heimat* evokes ideas of ethnic exclusivity that over the last generation have been considered offensive in almost any context.) But 2009 is quite some time ago: Siegmund was a teenager at the time. (When the Berlin Wall fell, Germany's Most Dangerous Man had not even been born.) If the AfD has fallen afoul of authorities, it is not as a nest of unreconstructed and revanchist mid-twentieth-century Nazis proposing to remilitarize the country and make war on its neighbors—at least, not solely. It is rather for protesting against certain elements of modern progressivism. Siegmund is particularly passionate about homeschooling. He is a skeptic about climate change. The Sachsen-Anhalt AfD was classified as "proven right-wing extremist" for its ethnic conception of German citizenship. The national party was also designated extremist when Social Democrats controlled the interior ministry in 2025, but this decision was criticized, not just in the AfD,

as partisan. In February, the AfD was granted an injunction forbidding the government from using that designation until the case was resolved.

Perhaps the problem is not that fortified democracy has outlived its effectiveness but that it has outlived its logic. It can lay a trap for those who wield it. In Sachsen-Anhalt, the old parties, even assuming they gain the votes, will be able to thwart the AfD only by, in effect, conspiring against it with what, to many Germans' eyes, is an even more radical party: the Left Party, descended from the old Socialist Unity Party of the communist era, which increasingly focuses its wrath on Israel.

That is what turned the Sachsen-Anhalt election into a vote on the integrity and viability of the political system. The last two decades have seen a succession of crises that have both worsened Germany's prospects and reduced its autonomy—instability in the euro, uncontrollable immigration, COVID, war in Ukraine, a collapsing industrial model, and an increasingly unpredictable American protector. The AfD has risen to prominence because of these crises. Suspicion has arisen across society that the established parties are ill-equipped to deal with the country's largest problems, and, worse, refuse to be frank and honest about them. Increasingly, thinking clearly about the future of Germany requires understanding the mind of the AfD. The party has been shaped by a critical decade and a half in which its preoccupations, some of them straightforwardly conservative, some genuinely disruptive and radical, have continually bumped up against an establishment consensus built for a different world than ours. This in turn has permitted Germans to discuss the AfD only in warped and euphemistic ways.

Beginnings

The AfD sprang into being as the result of pressures that built up after the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009. The instability of borrowers' collateral worldwide provoked a crisis of the euro. Funny that the euro should have caused such an eruption in Germany. Economists around French president François Mitterrand thought France would gain by eliminating the Deutsche Mark, the perennially strong currency that had allowed Germany to dominate the European economy. What a blunder they made. The euro trapped Europe's indebted, import-dependent economies in a single market with Germany's more efficient corporations, and individual countries no longer had their own currencies, which in the old days could be devalued to mitigate trade imbalances.

Fifteen years ago, Germany held an unassailable position as the top Western European economy. It was an export powerhouse, built around the auto industry and a sturdy business model that needed only three things: cheap Russian energy, cheap central European labor, and the exponentially rising Chinese demand for cars and industrial machinery. There was a mystery, though. At a time when all seemed to be going well, voters were souring on the CDU and SPD—to the extent that those two parties essentially had to merge in three of the four coalitions through which Angela Merkel ruled Germany from 2005 to 2021. It seemed that whomever you voted for, you got the same parties in power.

A diagnosis was offered by the former Berlin finance official Thilo Sarrazin in his book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* ("The Abolition of Germany") in 2010. Sarrazin, a Social Democrat, argued that Germany was making a lot of bad investments, which over time would undermine its economy. The very worst of these was mass migration. Far from aiding the economy, it was building up invisible liabilities in the pension, education, and health systems. And part of the reason, the blunt Sarrazin added, with educational statistics at the ready, was that the migrants were generally not as bright as the natives whose places they were taking. The book sparked an unprecedented

intellectual rage. It was as if all the books by the American social scientist Charles Murray—about welfare, intelligence, and inequality—had been published at once. So unused to frank discussions of such matters had Germany become that there was an immediate move to expel Sarrazin from the Social Democrats. The process took eleven years, but it confirmed Sarrazin's overarching point: Germany's biggest problem was the system it had devised for not talking about its problems.

Though Sarrazin has never had anything to do with the AfD, his notion that threats to Germany's well-being were being covered up by taboos is what called the party into being. The main grievances were already there, but easy to miss, when the AfD was founded in 2013. The trigger was an almost technocratic one: It looked as if heavily indebted Greece, unless it could find an outside guarantor for its debts, was going to spiral into bankruptcy and exit the euro. That guarantor could only be Germany. Most European Union economists in Brussels saw this as simple justice. But a group of Frankfurt economics professors and businesspeople were convinced that Germany could not afford a Greek bailout. They established the AfD largely to make that case. Its first leaders were the charismatic entrepreneur Frauke Petry, the conservative journalist Konrad Adam, and Bernd Lucke, an awkward and affable macroeconomist from the University of Hamburg. It was Lucke who led the fledgling party in national elections. To nobody's surprise, the AfD got no seats—but to the shock of the establishment parties, it only missed the 5 percent hurdle by a hair. Otherwise, it would have won dozens.

Had Lucke taken those seats, the AfD might have gone down a different route. It might have become a technocratic "watchdog" party, lambasting mismanagement and waste as the Free Democrats had once done—rather than a "people's party" aiming to channel all of society's aspirations and grievances, as the Christian Democrats once did. But in 2013 the Christian Democrats were still strong enough to coast to victory. At an election-night party to celebrate her reelection, a triumphant Angela Merkel did something

that has since become a symbol of horror for AfD activists. Crossing the stage before a dancing, chanting crowd, Merkel was handed a little German flag. She looked down at it with visible repugnance and rushed to the edge of the stage to get it out of sight. Unlike in England or Italy, outright withdrawal from the European Union never became a fundamental aspiration of German populism, not even in the AfD. But Merkel's gesture rankled. A new kind of nationalism was growing.

Immigration Crisis

Germany's (and the EU's) ground rules for welcoming asylum seekers and other migrants were being loosened. In 2015, thousands of migrants began marching into Europe from the Syrian civil war. Merkel led all of Europe in a haphazard resolution to welcome hundreds of thousands of them. *Wir schaffen das,* was her motto: "We'll get it done." Those Syrians would soon be joined by opportunistic migrants from other Muslim countries. Merkel expected about 800,000, but even today it is hard to say how many migrants came. Germany's foreign-born population, 8.1 million in 2014, on the eve of the migrant crisis, had reached 13.4 million by 2022, the year after Merkel left office. The timing of the massive arrival was not propitious. The year 2015 began with the murder by Islamist terrorists of much of the editorial personnel of the magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, and it ended with hundreds of sexual assaults in central Cologne on New Year's Eve, most of them committed by gangs of "migrant background," to use the official description.

The AfD was well equipped to address this crisis, at least rhetorically. At its founding, it had been a coalition that would have fit well in the American Republican Party: championing free-market capitalism and given to patriotic gestures. But, unsurprisingly in retrospect, its promise of an "alternative" almost immediately drew to it a variety of rebels, revanchists, and hardline

conservatives. That was the glory and the danger of the party. Bernd Lucke considered immigration primarily an economic issue; Frauke Petry considered it a threat to the social fabric and argued that any party that called itself an "alternative" would have to address mass migration frontally. The party agreed. In 2015, she ousted Lucke, and the AfD's rise began. So did the big arguments over its reputation that are now continuing in the Sachsen-Anhalt elections.

In 2015, the party had to make a choice between power and purity that nearly split it in two. Lucke's supporters were building a hobby-party, one that could use economics to win the allegiance of a sliver of respectable opinion. Petry's supporters were building a movement, an uprising. She was a most intriguing bridge between the two sides of the party—a businesswoman comfortable in western Germany's cosmopolitan cities, but a native of eastern Germany.

Her eastern German origin was important, because there was a special, eastern aspect to the migration crisis. Eastern Germany was hollowing out. The city of Bitterfeld in Sachsen-Anhalt, for instance, had lost half its population. Such cities, which had not known mass migration before, became an attractive place for authorities to lodge the Syrians and Pakistanis who had marched uninvited into Germany. Suddenly they were piled up in eastern Germany's emptying public housing. Already a rather thuggish eastern German movement called Pegida was sponsoring anti-immigrant marches. (The movement's name was an acronym for Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West.)

The AfD, in this second phase, found itself debating how closely to align itself with such movements. The debate led rather naturally to the conception among the public that the AfD was actually two parties: an eastern and a western one, a radical and a moderate one, a party that called for "responsibility" about the euro and one that was "obsessed" with

migrants, a good AfD and a bad AfD. What was actually happening was that an intellectual project (even if not all of its members were intellectuals) was being turned into a mass party overnight. A preoccupation with the euro's challenge to national sovereignty was giving way to a preoccupation with national survival.

A clash was inevitable, for the AfD's project now fell afoul of Germany's most solemn taboos. These concern how, or even whether, Germans can talk about themselves as a nation, as a people. Germany remains a country in which virtually everyone is catechized by virtually every institution that violating these taboos is what once turned their country into a living hell and an international pariah. This is why Merkel frowned and refused to wave the German flag: Chauvinism is dangerously irresponsible. Anti-patriotism is the true form of German patriotism.

Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, along with its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, had played an almost constitutional role in the construction of Germany's "fortified democracy." Franz-Josef Strauss, who dominated Bavarian politics from the 1960s through the 1980s and nearly became Germany's chancellor himself, turned his arch-conservatism into a kind of virtuous moderation: "To the right of the Union," he said, "there can be no democratically legitimate force." For Strauss this meant the CDU and CSU had to be really, really conservative, because no other formation could represent conservatives legitimately. He was capitalist, populist, and traditionalist.

Merkel understood Strauss's dictum in a way that was diametrically opposed. If all right-wing rivals to the CDU were ipso facto illegitimate, the sensible, game-theoretical move was to shift the party steadily to the left. Merkel introduced gay marriage (while voting against it herself), phased out nuclear power, suspended the draft, and opened the borders—essentially passing the program of her party's historical opponents. To jilted conservatives, Merkel

doesn't look like a well-meaning leader who made some mistakes. She looks like the most cynical chancellor in the history of the republic. (See "Merkel's Country," First Things, March 2025.)

Under such circumstances, it is hard to get a bead on the AfD. The vocabulary that would allow the party to know its own mind is not readily available. It would take years to unite the AfD, and the project to this day is still an awkward one.

Against Historical Memory

Young people flocked to the AfD. They formed youth groups. Early in the election year of 2017, Björn Höcke, a young schoolteacher who had been among the party's first members, gave a talk in Dresden to one of those groups. It has been held up ever since as a synopsis of what is frightening about the party. West German–born but temperamentally attached to the east and a resident of Thuringia, Höcke called for a reorientation in Germany's way of remembering its past. He mentioned the reconstruction of the *Frauenkirche* in Dresden:

> *[It] was a glimmer of hope for us patriots. With little sparks of German self-affirmation. So far it's only on the surface. So far our state of mind is totally that of a defeated people. . . . We Germans . . . are the only people in the world to put a monument of shame [ein Denkmal der Schande] in the heart of their capital. Instead of introducing the rising generation to the great benefactors—the renowned, world-changing philosophers, the musicians, the brilliant discoverers and inventors of whom we have so many— . . . that history —German history—is being disparaged and ridiculed.*

Someone born in the English-speaking world in the 1950s, familiar with the account his fathers and uncles would have given of what World War II was *about*, will be startled by the speech. The monument of shame to which Höcke is referring is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, a dramatic and solemn field of stone blocks that covers five acres in the center of Berlin. But to someone born in the 1990s in eastern Germany, as Ulrich Siegmund was—and thus separated from a rich cultural birthright not just by Hitler but also by two generations of communist dictatorship—the need to reconnect with what is glorious and pious and wholesome about Germany might seem desperate, and Höcke's offense against conventional opinion no more than an impropriety.

Höcke is a radical rightist, and something of a troll. He is also, for all his energetic speaking, a local politician—a member not of the Bundestag in Berlin but of the Thuringian Landtag in provincial Erfurt. His speech is ambiguous about whether the "shame" he is talking about is the Holocaust or the overzealous commemoration thereof. But the fact that a single ambiguous remark from one politician's nine-year-old speech should still be Exhibit A against the party is an indication that offenses against the canons of Western democratic decency are rare among AfD members. The AfD maintains a thirteen-page "incompatibility list," enumerating parties and movements its members cannot belong to—and cannot have belonged to. Every party in Germany has such rules, but the rise of the AfD may be undermining their utility. In Sachsen-Anhalt this year, the CDU declared it would not do business with either the AfD (polling at 43 percent) or the Left Party (polling at 13 percent)—a solid majority of the electorate. The CDU was effectively asking voters to let it join a government (of whatever complexion) that it had promised not to join.

The widely published social scientist Rolf Peter Sieferle had died the year before Höcke's 2017 speech. Sieferle was incredibly versatile. His interests included the environmental history of mining; the interaction of warfare,

technology, and politics since antiquity (subject of a 1,500-page book); and early-twentieth-century (that is, pre-Hitler) German conservatism. This last enthusiasm turned out to represent not just a curiosity but an affinity. Two of his posthumous works published in 2017 drew attention and (for non-rightists) alarm, because he seemed to be offering a more *salonfähig* version of Höcke's argument. Manuscriptum, a publishing house affiliated with the contrarian quarterly *Tumult* (which bills itself as "a magazine for disturbing the consensus") published Sieferle's *Das Migrationsproblem*. Here, Sieferle followed Sarrazin in asking an uncomfortable question: Was mass migration compatible with a built-out welfare state?

Sieferle's other book, *Finis Germania*, gave an even more uncomfortable answer. A collection of notes drawing on an earlier work and focused on the decline of German political culture, it was published by an AfD-friendly house in Sachsen-Anhalt called Antaios. The house was founded by Götz Kubitschek, a formidable essayist and theorist in his own right. Close to Höcke and his wing of the party, Kubitschek runs an ideological enterprise of extraordinary range: a bimonthly magazine called *Sezession*, a website on which *Sezession* writers and various politicians and theorists debate one another, and Antaios itself, which has published, among other things, a series of hard-hitting, short books of widely varying quality that often dissect an unexamined social phenomenon or make a radical historic or political argument. Sieferle's *Finis Germania* is one of these; there are now about a hundred.

For Sieferle, Germany's culture of memory and repentance after World War II, admirable though it was on its own terms, was unsuited to a newly dangerous, globalized world. Largely because of this culture, Germany was unable to say no to the migrant wave that threatened it in 2015. The country had embarked on an unsustainable multicultural enterprise. It was "living morally beyond its means," in Sieferle's memorable phrase. The book created

a scandal: *Finis Germania* hit #9 on the Nonfiction Book of the Month listing —at which point the listing's sponsors suspended its publication.

The edgiest parts of the German right, around *Sezession* and *Tumult*, now took on a vanguard aura. They began to influence mainstream outlets that might not even have acknowledged themselves as AfD-adjacent. Previously, German readers seeking a more ideologically varied diet had been drawn to the Swiss press, which had not been enlisted in the effort to work off the national guilt. As the once-conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* drifted toward a more progressive stance on cultural issues, German conservatives looked to the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, or even the more defiantly populist, Zurich-based magazine *Die Weltwoche*. The relatively conservative monthly *Cicero* had been founded in 2004 to cover cultural matters, and former *WirtschaftsWoche* journalist Roland Tichy started *Tichys Einblick* in 2014. These publications did not support the AfD, but they weren't alarmed by it, either. They were a sign of the times. In the 2017 elections, the AfD did not just enter parliament: It took ninety-four seats.

Eclectic Conservatism

In the period that followed, the present-day AfD took shape through a set of internal battles that have been little mentioned in the press. Bernd Lucke's successor, Jörg Meuthen, a fellow economist, undertook to reduce the influence of Höcke's part of the party. It was not just a tendency or a current of opinion—it was an organization called Der Flügel ("the Wing"), which Höcke had founded in 2015 and led in cooperation with the brawling Pegida activist and Brandenburg Landtag member Andreas Kalbitz. Kalbitz, according to AfD colleagues, was more tightly bound into extremist networks—specifically, the same Heimattreue Deutsche Jugend that Siegmund's aides in Sachsen-Anhalt were accused by *Der Spiegel* of frequenting. Under German law, it is very hard to expel someone from a

political party, and pinning irregularities on Kalbitz was difficult. As noted, the neo-Nazi youth organization was dissolved in 2009, and that was long ago, even then. Nonetheless, Kalbitz, who had attended Heimattreue events until 2007, was shown to have concealed this right-wing affiliation when applying for party membership in 2013. Telling the truth would have meant rejection.

Kalbitz was expelled from AfD by the narrowest of votes, amid bitter recriminations. Höcke's Flügel organization was put under observation by German investigators and dissolved by the AfD in 2020. Meuthen wound up a casualty of this intra-party struggle. He lost the presidency and left the party in 2022. But his expulsion of Kalbitz may be the pivotal moment in AfD history.

Radical movements tend to radicalize further. Members who think a movement has an ideological mission are more likely to devote their efforts to it than pragmatists, and over time this difference tells. The AfD was undergoing such a radicalization. Yet, ironically, surveillance by the German state made the AfD more durable—it strengthened the hand of pragmatists who warned that, satisfying though free-spirited ideological debate might be, a certain decorum would have to be respected if the movement were to continue at all. Just as paradoxically, removing the threat of Kalbitz did not have the effect of watering down the party's ideology. The party's co-leader and best orator, Alice Weidel—who fascinates the public with her lesbianism, her conversational Chinese, her career at Goldman Sachs, and her Swiss residence—had been a Höcke detractor, but by the time of the 2025 federal elections, they were reconciled.

This strange German context made the party more attractive than it would otherwise have been. Because its survival rests on certain principles about respecting diversity of opinion, the AfD became, willy-nilly, an eclectic

conservative formation that tolerates a surprisingly wide variety of viewpoints, not just extreme ones.

That profile allows it to rally a corresponding diversity of voters. Its magnetism was apparent during the COVID crisis. COVID was not a central policy concern for the AfD, but the AfD was the only party that opposed mandatory vaccination. Among European countries, Germany's protocols were neither the most draconian (a distinction that belongs to Spain) nor the most effective (a distinction that low-regulation Sweden shares with a couple of other Nordic countries). But the COVID rules were delivered and enforced with a certain Teutonic sanctimony, both by the government and in the media backing them up. People who objected to lockdowns were described as *Corona-leugner,* or "denialists," a word borrowed from discussions of the Holocaust. In other words, an opinion on a health matter was likened to an opinion that could lead to one's permanent disqualification from public debate. Lockdown opponents and other protesters described themselves, somewhat defensively, as *Querdenker,* people thinking outside the box. Some were well-versed in science, some were not, but the important thing is, there were a lot of them. Hectored by the mainstream, they began gravitating to the AfD, and all the more so after the 2021 elections, when Social Democrats returned to power at the head of a new coalition and appointed their unpopular COVID spokesperson, Karl Lauterbach, minister of health. In elections last year, the public repudiated the Social Democrats, returning their historic rivals the Christian Democrats to power and making Friedrich Merz the chancellor. But Merz could not form a government without the SPD. So back they came. On the strength of 16 percent of the vote, the Social Democrats were given important economics ministries, control of climate policy, and—significantly for the AfD—defense.

Toward a Ban?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 disrupted Germany's politics thoroughly. In keeping with his party's pacifist traditions, Social Democrat chancellor Olaf Scholz hesitated to rush Germany into a war. But within weeks he announced a €100-billion plan to rearm Germany. Merz, newly elected in 2025, went further. In what Germans consider an underhanded maneuver, he used the *outgoing* parliament after his election to reclassify defense spending as exempt from balanced-budget rules, then passed €800 billion on new spending for armaments and infrastructure.

This huge outlay on weaponry, in a historically pacifist country with gaping domestic needs, will almost certainly meet political resistance in coming years. German politicians are constantly justifying their expenditures by assuring the public that Vladimir Putin aims to invade and occupy various distant European countries—or at least he'll do it once he manages to capture the primitive Ukrainian villages that have held Russia at bay for four years.

The Russian invasion changed the AfD's situation in two ways. The first is economic. Due to American pressure—and then the mysterious explosion of the German-Russian Nord Stream 2 pipeline in the early days of the war—Germany has been constrained to buy more expensive energy, much of it in the form of American liquid natural gas. The United States has also pressured Germany to "de-risk" its trade, urging stricter controls on doing business with China. And Germany's car industry, outcompeted by China on electric vehicles, has begun to contract dramatically, shedding tens of thousands of jobs. The collapse was almost wholly unanticipated, and the effects have spread to the many satellite industries that orbit car-making. Merz's arms buildup is partly a way to convert some of Germany's state-of-the-art car factories into weapons plants.

The AfD takes a different approach: It calls for a wholesale revision of Germany's energy policy. Since Merkel's time in office, Germany has banned

nuclear energy and invested billions in wind farms. It now has the most expensive energy in Europe. The AfD is the only party that promises a wholesale reversal of the exit from nuclear power that began under Merkel. Cheap energy is not just popular with voters in its own right. It permits the AfD to lay the blame for high gas prices at the feet of the Green Party—which dominated policymaking discussions from the fall of the Berlin Wall until about five years ago—and the Social and Christian Democrats who imitated them.

But the Ukraine war is affecting the AfD in another way. It strikes many members of the party as an avenue by which rival parties or human-rights foundations (or the two working in tandem) might seek a pretext to ban it. Tino Chrupalla, a housepainter from Sachsen who shares the party leadership with Weidel, has taken a decidedly neutral stance on the war. "He hasn't done anything to me," said Chrupalla of Vladimir Putin last year—a position that appeals to Germany's large pacifist vote. But for the old parties, any attitude of nonbelligerence or skepticism about U.S. or Western motives is "Russian influence," much as American politicians fixated on "Russian collusion" a decade ago. AfD members worry that, should tensions escalate between Russia and the West, politicians might avail themselves of various emergency powers to constrain the activities of the AfD. Or even ban it.

Given Russia's role in thwarting German nationalism over the past century, it is hardly logical to describe the AfD as both pro-Russian and German nationalist. But all the other parties do it. Enthusiasm for officially obstructing or banning the party remains strong, even as the evidence for its "right-wing extremism" ages. A CDU faction led by climate activist Roderich Kiesewetter has gathered evidence that might secure a ban. In June, Kiesewetter reportedly said that Alice Weidel's promises to reopen relations with Russia, should the AfD win a national election, were distorting the national debate. When an AfD delegation visited Russia last November, the CSU general secretary Martin Huber accused them of "treason." In June, a

Green-affiliated human rights league published a three-thousand-page brief for a ban. It brought up everything from feminism to COVID, while explaining that many of the party's messages can be understood only by "reading between the lines."

Luigi Pantisano, new co-leader of the Left Party told *Bild* newspaper this past spring that he saw "no difference between the CDU, which pursues fascist policies, and the AfD, who are fascists themselves." But the Left Party itself is certainly more radical than the AfD on such matters as German relations with Israel. Various parties have been trying to convince German voters that a vote for the AfD would scare away international investors, even as Martin Blessing, the chancellor's investment counselor, told the *Handelsblatt* newspaper in June that the investors he speaks to are more uneasy about expropriation from the Left Party. This is due in part to the Left Party's backing of a plan to expropriate the property of large landlords in Berlin—a highly popular plan, by the way, which a majority of Berlin voters approved in a nonbinding referendum in 2021.

No AfD victory in Sachsen-Anhalt could be so large as to guarantee the smooth running of government there. The state is in desperate financial shape and budget debates will necessarily be strained. The old parties' control of the bureaucracy will throw up roadblocks to the AfD's plans. In the present political climate, petty violations of protocol are to be expected. Last winter in Berlin, the SPD received the blessing of the constitutional court when its delegation refused to vacate the second-largest Reichstag room, even though the AfD, the second-largest party, now outnumbers it by thirty-two seats.

But banning the AfD? It is getting late for that. They are too big, taking about two out of five votes in Sachsen-Anhalt. They have been around for too long without causing damage to the political system. The *Meinungskorridor*—the German term for the range of acceptable opinion—has grown too wide. And

the events that gave rise to these constrictions on freedom of speech and association, uniquely horrible though they are, are too far back in the past: For the past several months, in the course of the Sachsen-Anhalt election, accusations of fascism have been brandished against a candidate who not only wasn't born when Nazis held power but wasn't even born when the Berlin Wall came down almost half a century later.

Without a direct emotional link to its darkest days, Germany's version of democracy—in which certain political parties are constitutionally entitled to encourage a court to ban others—has become too bizarre to maintain. Harald Martenstein, a conservative columnist for *Welt* and hardly an AfD backer, took part in a debate in Hamburg last winter over whether to ban the AfD, and shocked the audience by contemptuously throwing the question back at his mostly progressive audience. "You know that you are not trying to prevent the Fourth Reich, but only to eliminate your political competition," Martenstein said. "It would be child's play to keep the AfD down. All you would have to do is tackle a few problems that are real problems."

Image by Michael Kappeler via AP