

**Shadows of the Past: Exploring the Resurgence and Evolution of Far-Right Politics in
Germany: A Comparative Visual Analysis of the Election Propaganda of the AfD and the
Nazi Party**

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Introduction

Populism and nationalism have become buzzwords in international politics. With the success of Donald Trump and Brexit in 2016, a wave of populism and nationalism has seemingly swept across Europe and the world, posing new threats to democratic institutions everywhere. In Europe specifically, it seems as if new right-wing populist parties are springing up and gaining influence every week. The success of Le Pen in France, Vox in Spain, and “League”(Lega) in Italy are all worrying examples. Out of all these groups, however, the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany is the most unnerving. Germany’s increased importance in the European Union (as a result of Brexit) and the pressure for Germany to be more assertive and active militarily in the face of Russian hostility, makes the possibility of a right-wing populist group leading the country all the more concerning.

Until recently, a successful right-wing party in Germany seemed unthinkable. A country with the history of Nazism and atrocities of war and the Holocaust firmly etched into its history should be the most informed about the dangers populism and nationalism pose to democracy. Despite this, the AfD has been successful, not only in gaining seats in one national election but in the last two. Additionally, the AfD has managed to hold local office in Sonneberg, Germany, where the party won the district council election.¹ More worrying still, in recent election polls support for the AfD is at 21%, the second most out of all parties in Germany (at the time of writing).² The rapid rise and continued success of the AfD is only worsened by seemingly overt associations and linkages to Nazi party ideology rhetoric and propaganda strategies.³ This can be observed in the AfD’s word choice. The party's use of Nazi terms such as “Volk” and

¹ “Germany: Far-Right AfD Wins First Governing Post – DW – 06/25/2023,” accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-far-right-afd-wins-first-governing-post/a-66024256>.

² “German Election Polls 2024,” Statista, accessed March 6, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1257178/voting-intention-in-germany/>.

³ David Art, “The Afd and the End of Containment in Germany?,” *German Politics & Society* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 76–86, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2018.360205>.

“Überfremdung” point to the party's willingness to blur the lines between their rhetoric and a rhetoric that seems to echo the Nazi past.⁴ This language coupled with the AfD's divisive yet successful use of propaganda posters and media to mobilize its voter base suggests a stronger parallel between the two parties that needs to be investigated.

In this thesis, I will analyze the validity of these concerns and this possible linkage by examining the similarities in how the NSDAP and the AfD successfully appealed and today appeal to the German people through propaganda. Analyzing these similarities will lend valuable insight into the resurgence and evolution of populist and nationalistic rhetoric in Germany, as well as more insight into the risk the AfD poses to both German and international politics. The question of this thesis is thus: does the AfD political party use Nazi rhetoric?

To understand the linkages between the NSDAP's and the AfD's rhetoric I will conduct a comparative analysis of NSDAP and AfD propaganda posters from similar points in the parties' popularity and influence in the early 20th century and early 21st century respectively. This will ensure that the posters analyzed reflect a similar political context. The poster analysis is broken down into two chapters that focus on both parties' use of propaganda to appeal to the people and to target enemies within Germany. The first chapter argues that the NSDAP and the AfD portrayed similar notions of “volk” and family. It then shifts to argue how the parties similarly utilized and portrayed economic challenges and solutions. The second chapter argues the NSDAP and the AfD similarly depict Othered groups (Jews and Muslims). It then shifts to arguing the parties similarly drew on and promoted German nationalism. These two chapters will reveal and analyze similarities in multiple aspects of the AfD's and NSDAP's propaganda

⁴ Joyce Marie Mushaben, “A Spectre Haunting Europe: Angela Merkel and the Challenges of Far-Right Populism,” *German Politics & Society* 38, no. 1 (March 2020): 7–29, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2020.380102>.

posters in order to create a more concrete understanding of the similarities in the two parties' rhetoric.

My analysis of Nazi and AfD propaganda posters from 1929-1933 and 2017-2023 reveals disturbing similarities in rhetoric and strategy. Shared elements include an emphasis on natalism and the idealized nuclear family, which indicates a similar appeal to ethnic and racial ideology. Both parties employ similar populist economic strategies that leverage simple promises and scapegoat “othered” groups, which points to the dangerous efficacy of such rhetoric. More concerning is the parallels between the AfD’s anti-Muslim and the NSDAP’s anti-Semitic rhetoric, both relying on conspiracies and negative traits to demonize an out-group and spread hatred. Finally, the party's nearly identical strategies for promoting nationalism signal a resurgence in Euroskeptic and isolationist ideas in an already fragile European environment.

Despite a number of similarities, the AfD has transformed some of the NSDAP’s themes and strategies to cater to a modern audience. The AfD’s posters are more direct and less symbolic, for instance, which reveals a shift from visually eye-catching imagery utilized by the NSDAP to a different type of imagery that better appeals to modern audiences. These findings demonstrate striking similarities in the two parties' rhetoric, strategies, and ideologies. The similarities and differences between the AfD and the NSDAP help explain the ongoing effectiveness and evolution of divisive, populist, and nationalist propaganda in Germany.

Background: Nazis From Fringe to Forefront

To better understand the linkages between the NSDAP and the AfD, it is necessary to understand the two political parties' history from inception to their national success. While the AfD has not been as successful as the Nazi party, the similarities between the history of the two parties can not be ignored.

Anton Drexler, a German locksmith, and Karl Harrer, a local right-wing journalist, founded the Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (DAP), or German Workers Party, in January 1919. The Party met weekly at the Sterneckerbräu, a beer hall in Munich, and was composed of a small group of people who previously also met regularly to discuss politics.⁵ The party maintained several core beliefs and ideas: intense hatred for the Treaty of Versailles, intense nationalism, an overall fixation with the changing culture in Germany, and vehement anti-semitism and anti-marxism.⁶ Unlike the AfD (who started more moderate or even center right) the Nazis began as nationalists and firmly on the right of the political spectrum. Additionally, the NSDAP, unlike the AfD, had no funding and no members with previous political experience. Hitler joined the party in September 1919 and used his talent for public speaking and propaganda to help expand the party. On February 24, 1920, Hitler outlined the expanding party's new 25-point program (which was thereafter ignored). After this meeting, the party would change its name to the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei – NSDAP) or National Socialist German Workers Party. This addition helped the party stick out from other nationalist right-wing parties in Munich at the time. While many members of the party supported the “socialist” measures in the party program, Hitler viewed them as merely a recruitment tactic to help attract workers to the party. This is an early example of using populism to attract more members. Hitler’s influence over the party would steadily grow, and on the 29th of July 1921, Hitler gained dictatorial power over the party.⁷

With Hitler as a sole leader, the party became more radical and active, with more and more of Hitler's speeches attacking German democracy. A corresponding theme in his speeches

⁵ Frank McDonough, “The Early Growth Of The Nazi Party, 1918–1924,” in *Hitler and the Rise of the Nazi Party*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2012).

⁶ Thomas Childers, *The Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*, First Simon&Schuster hardcover edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

⁷ McDonough, “The Early Growth of Nazi Party”, 42.

declared the need for a “strong man” to lead Germany. Hitler of course saw this strong man as himself. However, this growing ambition would result in the Nazi parties facing one of its first significant hurdles, the failed Munich “Beer Hall Putsch.”⁸ On the evening of November 8, 1923, Hitler and a group of fellow Nazi conspirators planned to depose the Bavarian government and secure key administrative and military buildings. Once Hitler and his group of conspirators had control of Bavaria, they planned to march on Berlin. This plan, however, did not materialize due in part to broken promises and the conspirator's poor planning and organization. The Putsch was quickly put down, and the Nazi party was banned. Hitler was put on trial but was only sentenced to 5 years in a minimum security prison (and only served 9 months of it). In this minimum security prison with favorable conditions, Hitler wrote the first volume of his autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, and gained considerable national fame and attention. The failure of the “Beer Hall Putsch” marked a turning point in the Nazi Party's history as the party moved away from conquering Germany through brute force. Instead, the party turned its attention to subverting and using the Weimar Democracy itself.⁹

It would still take time for the Nazi party to find major political success. The German federal election of 1930 was the first example of a spike in Nazi party support. In this election, the Nazi party went from 12 seats to 107 seats and took 18.3% of the vote, making them the second-largest party in the German parliament. The success of the Nazis in 1930 was in part due to right-wing protest votes against center party Chancellor Brüning's economic policies. Uncertain conditions favor radical parties and Germany's economic depression, one of the key issues of this election, saw many radical parties gain votes.¹⁰ However, unlike other protest votes

⁸ McDonough, “The Early Growth of Nazi Party”, 43-45.

⁹ David King, *The Trial of Adolf Hitler: The Beer Hall Putsch and the Rise of Nazi Germany*, First edition (New York London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017).

¹⁰ James K. Pollock, “The German Reichstag Elections of 1930,” *The American Political Science Review* 24, no. 4 (1930): 989–95, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1946755>.

the Nazi's success was not short-lived. The party's political success continued into 1932 where the Nazi party became the largest party in the Reichstag with 37.3% of the vote.¹¹ By 1933 Hitler leveraged this popularity to demand the chancellorship and the Nazi party thereby took charge of the government.

The Nazi Party, founded in 1920, became the most powerful party in Germany in just 13 years, with Adolf Hitler becoming dictator of Germany shortly thereafter. The party survived being banned and having Hitler thrown in jail only to consolidate, grow, and become stronger. The legal takeover of the German government ushered in an era of ultra-nationalism, aggressive expansionism, and countless atrocities.

Background: The "Alternative für Deutschland"

The AfD in Germany, too, experienced a rapid rise in success from inception being the beneficiary of a protest vote, before becoming a key player in the German political system. This rapid rise and success of the AfD can be partially credited to its origin. The AfD was founded in September of 2012 when a group of disgruntled Christian Democratic Union (CDU) members (Konrad Adam, Alexander Gauland, and Bernd Lucke) founded the "Wahlalternative 2013".¹² The AfD in 2013 defined itself as a "liberal, conservative" protest party. The AfD was primarily seeking to offer an alternative to policies of the center-right and the CDU.¹³ Consequently, the "Alternative" in AfD has never been an alternative *for* something but more as an alternative *against* something.¹⁴ The name itself is a play on long-standing Prime Minister Angela Merkel's

¹¹ "Ergebnis der Reichstagswahl am 31. Juli 1932," LEMO Lebendiges Museum Online, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://www.dhm.de/lemo/bestand/objekt/reichstagswahl-31-juli-1932.html>.

¹² Kai Arzheimer, "The AfD: Finally a Successful Right-Wing Populist Eurosceptic Party for Germany?," accessed November 28, 2023, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/01402382.2015.1004230?needAccess=true>.

¹³ Lars Rensmann, "Radical Right-Wing Populists in Parliament: Examining the Alternative for Germany in European Context," *German Politics and Society* 36, no. 3 (September 1, 2018): 41–73, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2018.360303>.

¹⁴ Marcus Bensmann et al., "Germany's New Populist Party: The AfD," *German Politics and Society* 36, no. 4 (December 1, 2018): 78–97, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2018.360404>.

economic policy slogan; “There is no alternative” which is directly challenged by the name of the AfD.¹⁵ An animosity to and a strong disdain for Angel Merkel during her time in office has persisted throughout every iteration of the AfD.

Despite a negative outlook towards conventional parties, the AfD did not start as a nationalist right-wing party but rather a party that advocated soft Euroscepticism and socially-conservative policies. The party was formed out of protest against the economic policies of the Eurozone. As a result, the initial supporters of the AfD did not primarily contain members of the traditional radical right but rather members of Germany's elite (doctors, lawyers, businessmen) who were tired of the status quo.¹⁶ This anti-elite policy and origin as a protest party positioned the AfD as firmly populist. However, it would take time for the party's politics to transition into the openly anti-muslim and nationalistic ideas that define the party today.

The AfD experienced its first major success in 2017 when it amassed 12.6 % of the national vote, clearing the “5% hurdle,” the minimum required to hold seats in the German Parliament easily. This result marked the first time a radical right party was represented in parliament in post-war Germany.¹⁷ One of the causes of this newfound success of the AfD was radicalization and an increased shift to the right. Like the Nazi party, the AfD's platform and consolidation today have been shaped by party infighting. The “radicalization” of the AfD began with a disagreement over the Islamophobic and radical right-wing group “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West” (PEGIDA). The decisions on whether to associate with PEGIDA created factions within the AfD, with party spokesperson Frauke Petry and Bernd Lucke at the center of the argument. Petry saw PEGIDA as dangerous radicals and did not want

¹⁵ Astrid Séville, “From ‘One Right Way’ to ‘One Ruinous Way’? Discursive Shifts in ‘There Is No Alternative,’” *European Political Science Review* 9, no. 3 (August 2017): 449–70, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773916000035>.

¹⁶ Arzheimer, “How AfD veered to right”, 1

¹⁷ Art, “End of Containment”, 76.

to associate with their xenophobic viewpoint. Lucke, on the other hand, saw PEGIDA as a natural ally for the AfD. In 2014, the AfD elected Lucke as the new spokesperson, marking a shift to the right within the party.¹⁸ This shift in party ideology was reinforced by a thesis the AfD released in 2015 titled “Bringing the Asylum Chaos under Control with the Courage to Stand with Germany.” This thesis argued two major things: first, that Germany would be “overrun” if asylum was not limited and put “under control,” and second, that Germans would be openly patriotic and proud of Germany. This thesis utilized the AfD’s now popular slogan, “Mut zu Deutschland,” or courage for Germany.¹⁹

The AfD’s shift to the radical right in 2015 and cooperation with PEGIDA coincided with the European Union’s “Asylum Crisis.” In 2015, Germany took in 2.14 million immigrants, a substantial increase from the 1.46 million in 2014.²⁰ The AfD used this spike in immigration to once again bash traditional institutions, specifically the majority CDU. The AfD used Angela Merkel’s decision to suspend Dublin regulations (a set of policies that among other things prevents asylum seekers from applying to multiple EU countries) as a major campaigning point and blamed her solely for the immigration crisis.²¹ This shift from a primarily populist eurosceptic party to an openly anti-immigration and xenophobic party proved effective in the 2017 Federal Election. The 2021 German federal election saw further success with the AfD winning 10.1% of the vote (though losing 11 seats from 2017).²² This election proved the AfD’s “staying power” (continued success and spread) with the party winning 11 out of the 20 narrow first vote losses in 2017 and strengthening seven of their nine “previously vulnerable

¹⁸ Jason Sterphone, “‘Mut Zu Deutschland!’ On the Populist Nationalism of the Alternative Für Deutschland,” 2018.

¹⁹ Jason Sterphone, “The New Nationalism?: Antecedents of the Alternative for Germany’s Islamfeindlichkeit,” *German Politics & Society* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 28–50, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2020.380402>.

²⁰ “Germany Immigration Statistics 1991-2022,” Statista, accessed November 28, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/894223/immigrant-numbers-germany/>.

²¹ Mushaben, “Spectre Haunting Europe”, 8.

²² “Bundestag Election 2021,” Die Bundeswahlleiterin, accessed November 28, 2023, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse/bund-99.html>.

constituencies” (political areas that they narrowly won in 2017).²³ Importantly, even with Immigration's loss of electoral influence in the 2021 election, the AfD was still able to strengthen some of its positions, proving that it was not a fad party or a mere “flash in the pan.”²⁴

With immigration politics being less successful than in 2017, the AfD turned its attention to the government's treatment of the Coronavirus pandemic, making it a central issue in its 2021 election campaign. The AfD promoted both soft and hard Corona skepticism, portraying Corona as the “common cold” and not something that needed attention, before later denying its existence, and framing it as a plot to restrict people's rights. The AfD’s promotion of distrust of the media with corona and immigration mirrors the Nazi rhetoric of “Lügenpresse” (Lying press). More historically charged than the American equivalent of “fake news” used by people like Donald Trump, “Lying press” is characterized by a systemic and recurring accusation that the media is lying or not real, questioning the legitimacy of journalism as an institution and thus undermining the press's very existence. The AfD has continuously promoted this term and it has been used to refer to media covering its joint marches with PEGIDA in the past.²⁵

The AfD’s Coronavirus campaign and “lying press” rhetoric in 2021 signaled a return to more populist ideas to expand and mobilize its voter base in the absence of a strong reaction to nativist and nationalist rhetoric. The promotion of Corona's skepticism and distrust in scientific research and media indicates a worrying trend amongst right-wing parties and the AfD in the “post-truth age.” As Lars Rensmman and Thijs de Zee explain in their paper, “the COVID-19 crisis indicates the lens through which the radical right views societal problems in a post-truth

²³ Hannah M. Alarian, “The Enduring Effect of Immigration Attitudes on Vote Choice: Evidence from the 2021 German Federal Election,” *German Politics and Society* 40, no. 4 (December 1, 2022): 37–68, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2022.400403>.

²⁴ Hartwig Pautz, “The German New Right and Its Think Tanks,” *German Politics and Society* 38, no. 4 (December 1, 2020): 51–71, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2020.380403>.

²⁵ Michael Koliska and Karin Assmann, “Lügenpresse: The Lying Press and German Journalists’ Responses to a Stigma,” *Journalism* 22, no. 11 (November 1, 2021): 2729–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919894088>.

age: factual and science-based policymaking is framed as a conspiracy against the “true people” by a “global elite” that includes media, politics, and scientific experts.”²⁶

The AfD has changed and radicalized significantly since its inception. Starting as a Eurosceptic and a Eurozone protest party, it has transformed into a right-wing nationalist and populist party. The AfD’s radicalization, its echoes of Nazi populism and use of terms like “lying press”, and its more general promotion of populist and nationalist rhetoric make its political success in modern-day Germany extremely worrying. The AfD’s willingness to expand its platform to include Islamophobic rhetoric draws some parallels to the Nazi party's addition of socialist elements in its early years to expand its platform and gain votes. This Islamophobic rhetoric also unnervingly echoes some of the Nazi’s racial ideology. The AfD’s eurosceptic ideology and vehement hatred of the eurozone also draw some parallels to the NSDAP’s similar opposition to the Treaty of Versailles. More disconcerting still, the AfD in many ways has had more favorable starting conditions than the Nazi party. Primarily due to the previous political experience of key figures within the AfD resulting in a more established and more organized party than the early Nazis. As a result, the AfD’s rise to political relevance (2013 to 2017) has surpassed the already rapid rise of the Nazi party (1919 to 1930).

²⁶ Lars Rensmann and Thijs de Zee, “The Pandemic Factor: The COVID-19 Crisis in the Alternative for Germany’s 2021 Federal Election Campaign,” *German Politics and Society* 40, no. 4 (December 1, 2022): 69–103, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2022.400404>.

Literature Review

Recent global politics have propelled a renewed scholarly focus on populism and nationalism. Scholars and organizations alike have turned to the analysis of politics, economics, and social changes to try and explain a worrying rise in both populism and nationalism. In this literature review, I will focus on scholarly work on nationalism and populism in a European context and then turn to a focus on Germany and the AfD as a case study.

Defining Nationalism and Populism

Populism was a driving force behind the AfD's success and its ability to appeal to German voters. Populism is a complex term that has consistently evolved and has been used to describe different ideologies and political movements. American scholars originally used populism to describe anti-elite movements in the Midwest and to describe President Andrew Jackson's political campaigns.²⁷ Other scholars use populism to define left-wing economic policies used by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela or Andres Manuel Lopez in Mexico.²⁸ Still, other scholars define Populist leaders as gaining power by polarizing society into a definitive "us" versus "them" and then using this division as the basis of support to position themselves as embodying the "will of the people."²⁹ This focus on the people is a sentiment that many scholars agree with. Some scholars, however, explain that the term "the people" can refer to different things: the common or ordinary people, the serving class or subjects of the ruler, or the people as a nationality or ethnic group.³⁰ In analyzing the AfD most relevant is the "right-wing" populist view of "the people" as a "nationality" or an ethnic group.

²⁷ Harry L. Watson, "Andrew Jackson's Populism," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2017): 218–39.

²⁸ Rachel Kleinfeld, "What Is Populism?," *How Does Business Fare Under Populism?* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep51359.4>.

²⁹ Kleinfeld, "What Is Populism?," 6.

³⁰ Rogers Brubaker, "Why Populism?," *Theory and Society* 46, no. 5 (2017): 357–85.

The literature on nationalism, like that on populism, is varied, with different schools of thought describing and defining nationalism quite differently. There is the primordial school of thought that emphasizes nationalism's connection to ethnicity. Meanwhile, there is the modernist school of thought that argues that economic and political shifts are more relevant in defining and describing nationalism.³¹ As a result, some scholars believe that nationalism is linked with neoliberalism and globalization's battle with localism.³² Other scholars are focused on the more classical approach that focuses on loyalty to the “nation-state” above all other groups or interests.³³ Most relevant for the AfD, is the “ethnic nationalism” described by Anthony Smith, “this more ‘folkish’ conception of the nation, presumed descent ties retained a certain importance. An assumption of common origins and descent mirrored in chronicles or genealogies.”³⁴ Smith's definition, centers on ethnicity to define a nation, and efforts to define who does not belong to the ethnic group. This definition explains the polarizing (and even destructive) use of ethnic nationalism that parties like the AfD have used in their rhetoric and campaigning.

Recently, political groups in Europe have drawn upon both the populist and nationalist political roots in Europe to great success. Indeed, many scholars have argued that a rise in populism and nationalism is partly due to the environment the European Union's economic failures have created. In *Europe Identity Crisis: The Future of the EU in the Age of Nationalism*, Carlo Almonte and Antonio Villafrance explain, “The still-not-properly-functioning Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), combined with the sluggish and unequal growth and the lack of

³¹ Stephen J. Larin, “Conceptual Debates in Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Migration,” in Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.128>.

³² Chiara Bonacchi, “Nationalism, Populism and the Past,” in *Heritage and Nationalism, Understanding Populism through Big Data* (UCL Press, 2022), 30–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1wdvx2p.9>.

³³ Salo W. Baron, review of *Review of The Idea of Nationalism. A Study in Its Origins and Background*, by Hans Kohn, *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 4 (1944): 408–11.

³⁴ Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, UK : New York, NY, USA: B. Blackwell, 1987).

assertiveness on the global scene, provides the best culture ground for the rise of populist, Eurosceptic and nationalist movements and parties.”³⁵ The economic failures and inadequacies of the EU are attacked and immediately jumped on by populist parties. This creates a great opportunity for them to blame the elites and challenge the status quo.³⁶ The visual presentation of populist strategies specifically otherization is something I will address in my research chapters.

The rapid rise of nationalist and populist movements in Europe has also been bolstered by anti-foreigner rhetoric. Causing some scholars to pessimistically claim, “In Europe, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and anti-immigration parties have remade the political map.”³⁷ As populism has gained more traction, many scholars have also observed and increased opposition to the EU and other international organizations. Populist parties often encourage and promote euroscepticism. This has caused the literature around populism in Europe to evolve from discrediting populism as a fad or an ideology that can only affect “poorer states” to acknowledging the threat and danger rising populism poses to Europe and the future of the European Union.

In discussing the impacts nationalism and populism have on immigration policy and public sentiments around immigration it is easy to use blanket terms like Xenophobia and Islamophobia. However, as Fatima el-Tayeb points out these terms are not always a hundred percent accurate and, in some cases, add to the problem of “colorblindness” that serves to cover up the function of race and racism in Europe.³⁸ Rita Chin also points out how the use of Xenophobia as a blanket term becomes even more complicated and incorrect when immigration

³⁵ Carlo Altomonte and Antonio Villafranca, “Europe in Identity Crisis: The Future of the EU in the Age of Nationalism - CIAO,” Columbia International Affairs Online, December 2019, <https://www-ciaonet-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/record/85876>.

³⁶ Najimdeen Bakare and Tatheer Zahra Sherazi, “Is the European Union Evolving or Failing?,” *Policy Perspectives* 16, no. 2 (2019): 5–25, <https://doi.org/10.13169/polipers.16.2.0005>.

³⁷ Sivamohan Valluvan and Leon Sealey-Huggins, “The Rise of Nationalism: Lessons from Europe - CIAO,” Columbia International Affairs Online, March 2022, <https://www-ciaonet-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/record/87950>.

³⁸ Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*, Difference Incorporated (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

is involved, “By employing the paradigm of immigration, the analytic category of “xenophobia” transforms German citizens into foreigners and refuses them the conceptual tools—such as “racism”—with which to fight this transformation.”³⁹ In calling the AfD’s anti-muslim propaganda posters Islamophobic or Xenophobic one risks further isolating Muslim immigrants and othering Muslim Germans framing them as not German. My research into the AfD’s use of “Islam” in its visual propaganda further reinforces the *othering* effect this terminology can have.

The surge of right-wing populist parties in European countries, such as the rise of Vox in Spain or the Alternative for Germany (AfD), raises specific concerns about the influence of nationalist and anti-immigrant ideologies in contemporary politics. The spread of nationalism and populism is intensified by “anti-foreignness” which in turn leads to nativism. However, the nativism present today in Europe does not take the shape of traditional nativism. As Barbara Donovan discusses in her paper, “today’s nativists often claim to be the defense of such liberal values such as free speech, gender equity, and LGBTQ rights against the encroachment of Islam. Many nativists today also speak out in favor of European identity (although not the EU), both in juxtaposition to and as an existential challenge to Islam.”⁴⁰ The positioning of some political populist parties as a defense and a shield from the danger of Islam and foreigners that threaten European values has been extremely successful. This new form of nativism, while defending European values, does not defend the European Union itself. This points to how the overlap of nationalistic and populist rhetoric can create contradiction. On the one hand, these nativist parties use populist rhetoric to create an us (European) vs them (non-European) emphasizing the importance of protecting the European group. On the other hand, these nativist political parties

³⁹ Rita Chin et al., *After the Nazi Racial State: Difference and Democracy in Germany and Europe*, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.354212>.

⁴⁰ Barbara Donovan, “Populist Rhetoric and Nativist Alarmism: The AfD in Comparative Perspective,” *German Politics and Society* 38, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 55–76, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2020.380104>.

are nationalistic preferring their own country to leave the European Union before they are “forced” to take on more foreign influences.

The spread of right-wing populism is particularly concerning due to its snowball effect. As populist parties secure victories in elections, they serve as catalysts for the formation of additional populist parties. In Najimudeen Bakare and Tatheer Zahra Sherazi's report, *Is the European Union Evolving or Failing?* they explain, “As populism gains more acceptability and legitimacy, its level of contagiousness is also increasing.”⁴¹ As legitimacy increases, people from both sides of the political spectrum are implementing core populist ideas into their campaigns. These populist ideas while not transforming parties into solely populist groups have a dangerous impact. As one scholar explains, “In both left and right variants of populism, economic, political, and cultural elites are represented as “outside” as well as “on top.”⁴² This otherization and creation of us vs them dynamics increases instability and creates larger rifts between individuals and institutions like the European Union.

The impact and isolating effect of populism and nationalism are especially worrying in Germany due to its precarious economic position and increased role in the European Union. This has led some scholars to question whether Germany will “move towards closer European integration as it claims, or will it continue with national policies that will inevitably have negative impacts on its partners by making them shoulder the burden of some of its past mistakes.”⁴³

⁴¹ Bakare and Sherazi, “European Union Failing?,” 10.

⁴² Brubaker, “Why Populism?,” 363.

⁴³ Jean-Dominique Giuliani and Pascale Joannin, “Europe in a Perfect Storm - CIAO,” Columbia International Affairs Online, May 2022, <https://www-ciaonet-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/record/90607>.

Nationalism and Populism in Germany

The economic and political instability of Germany, in some scholars' eyes, has fed the rise of the AfD, a right-wing populist party with nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric. The AfD's recurring success in both the 2017 and 2021 federal elections indicates an upward trend in the acceptability and legitimacy of both populist and nationalist rhetoric in Germany. However, finding an explanation for this upward trend has proved to be more challenging.

Some scholars argue that a particular aspect of Germany's history plays a role in the rise of the AfD. One historical explanation for the success of the party is the effects German Reunification and a proposed "east-west disconnect" have had on the rise of the AfD in East Germany. David Patton points to competing ideologies and a sense of displacement in the political system of East German voters. This disconnect creates an opportunity for the AfD to use populist rhetoric that is readily anti-establishment, something that resonates with some East German voters.⁴⁴ Other scholars have examined the history of "protest voting" in East Germany, in which East German citizens vote for more radical parties as a sign of protest and comment against the mainstream and traditional parties' perceived ignorance of East German problems.⁴⁵ These trends have led other scholars to investigate the demographic difference between AfD supporters in East and West Germany. In Michael A Hansen and Jonath Olsen's study of the 2021 federal election, they found that age was one of the "main drivers" of the AfD vote in East Germany; however, in West Germany, it was not. Unemployment was also a clear driver in East Germany, whereas it was not in West Germany. Their research shows that there is a distinct difference between the East German AfD supporters and the West German AfD supporters.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Christian Schweiger, "Deutschland Einig Vaterland?: East-West Cleavages in Germany Thirty Years After Reunification," *German Politics & Society* 37, no. 3 (2019): 18–31.

⁴⁵ David F. Patton, "Protest Voting in Eastern Germany: Continuity and Change Across Three Decades," *German Politics & Society* 37, no. 3 (2019): 72–88.

⁴⁶ Michael A. Hansen and Jonathan Olsen, "Flesh of the Same Flesh: A Study of Voters for the Alternative for Germany," *German Politics* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 1–19.

In West German states, one discussion centers around mainstream German parties and their refusal to engage with immigration politics meaningfully. Some scholars have dismissed a “representation gap,” explaining that other mainstream parties like the CDU referred to the “issue of Islam” before the AfD. While these scholars do not believe in a representation gap, they still argue that the “demands uttered by the AfD concerning the issue have been considerably more radical content-wise and rhetorically harsher.”⁴⁷ The tone around immigration politics has changed; however, more recently, in Hannah M. Alarian's *The Enduring Effect of Immigration Attitudes on Vote Choice*, Alarian explains the problematic nature of mainstream parties' treatment of immigration explaining, “Avoiding the political discourse on immigration will not erase immigration from voters’ minds. It will, however, provide the far right the opportunity to spread its xenophobic message freely without constraint.”⁴⁸ This refusal to deal with immigration politics opens a door for populist movements like the AfD who thrive on the “us versus them” approach and can weaponize immigration for political gain.

From analyzing the current literature, it is clear that substantial work has been done in multiple fields that aims to explain the rise of the AfD. The main arguments and studies have followed East vs West German demographics and beliefs, economic factors, political and public attitudes toward immigration, and Germany's specific history. These arguments and studies all present valid reasoning and examples, as well as quantitative and qualitative evidence to support their findings and theories. It is evident with a question as complicated and nuanced as the rise of the AfD in Germany, it is impossible to definitively point to one cause or effect. However, the history of Nazism is particularly salient.

⁴⁷ Matthias Kortmann, Christian Stecker, and Tobias Weiß, “Filling a Representation Gap? How Populist and Mainstream Parties Address Muslim Immigration and the Role of Islam,” *Representation* 55, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 435–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2019.1667419>.

⁴⁸ Alarian, “The Enduring Effect of Immigration Attitudes on Vote Choice.”

NSDAP and its Legacy in German Politics Today

As the AfD has gained momentum in German politics and continued to spread more radical messages, some scholars have begun to draw direct comparisons between the AfD and NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei/Nazis). One scholar points out that the AfD's initial ability to steer clear of Nazi connotations has expired.⁴⁹ Other scholars have pointed out similar word choices and terms used by the AfD and Nazis. For example, the AfD use of the Nazi term "Überfremdung" when describing the "threat" of foreign cultures.⁵⁰ The comparison is even more apparent in the AfD's gender and family politics. In *Volk and Family: National Socialist Legacies and Gender Concepts in the Rhetoric of the Alternative for Germany*, Isabelle Heinemann examines the AfD's "family politics" and its use of terms like "volk" and natalist politics that combat a supposed "Islamist birth Jihad."⁵¹ My research into visual electoral propaganda supports this linkage.

As we will see below, the rise of the AfD illustrates how Germany is still haunted by its Nazi past. The AfD's use of Nazi terms and engagement in revisionist history and overall anti-muslim and ethnonationalist platform is dangerously similar to the rhetoric and platform of the Nazi party. In Peter Fritzsche's *Germans into Nazis*, he explains "the Nazi phenomenon was not a hyper-expression of German values, even as it pronounced the alleged superior quality of the German people. Nor was it the pathological result of economic hard times. National Socialism comprised a program of cultural and social regeneration premised on the superordination of the nation and the Volk."⁵²

⁴⁹ Art, "The AfD and the End of Containment in Germany?"

⁵⁰ Mushaben, "A Spectre Haunting Europe."

⁵¹ Isabel Heinemann, "Volk and Family: National Socialist Legacies and Gender Concepts in the Rhetoric of the Alternative for Germany," *Journal of Modern European History* 20, no. 3 (August 2022): 371–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/16118944221110713>.

⁵² Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard university press, 1998).

Why Propaganda Posters?

One of the Nazi Party's most successful and infamous tools was its propaganda. In Steven Luckert and Susan Bachrach's *State of Deception*, they explain, "The Nazi propaganda machine was a highly sophisticated organization deploying tactics carefully crafted to reach diverse segments of the population and extending the party's appeal to the broad German public."⁵³ The word choice of the NSDAP was carefully curated and used intentionally. For example, the use of specific calls to action "Deutschland Erwacht" and "the" to refer to Jews and other out-groups added to the Nazi visual propaganda. Propaganda, Hitler wrote in 1924, "is a truly terrible weapon in the hands of an expert." The Nazis were experts in using propaganda to shape the will of the people and promote their ideology and policy goals. While it is hard to prove a direct correlation between propaganda and policy outcomes, propaganda is indicative of ideas and prominent messages that a party wants to relay.⁵⁴

This thesis analyzes the AfD's election posters from 2017-2023 in relation to NSDAP propaganda posters from 1929-1933. This thesis will compare the poster materials' imagery, wording, and historical context to better understand the rhetoric and methods that the AfD uses to convey its message to voters and better understand the AfD's visual, ideological, and strategic connections to the Nazi party. Most of the AfD poster material is gathered from the AfD's local and national websites as well as its social media and newsletters. Using the AfD's newsletter, national website, and social media ensures that the posters are the most relevant, up-to-date, and most importantly not forged. The Nazi poster material is gathered from *Geklebte*

NS-Propaganda: Verführung und Manipulation durch das Plakat by Birgat Witmas, *State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda* by Bachrach et al., and various online databases and

⁵³ Susan D. Bachrach et al., eds., *State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda* (Washington, D.C. : New York: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum ; Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2009).

⁵⁴ Susan Bachrach et al., "State of Deception"

museum resources like Calvin University, the Imperial War Museum, the Library of Congress, the Lebendiges Museum online collection and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This wide array of sources ensures that the poster material is accurate and more comprehensive. These posters are sorted into four thematic subsections: Volk and Family politics, Anti-Muslim rhetoric, Economic, and Nationalistic posters. The sorted images will be directly compared with one another specifically focusing on themes imagery, use of color, and wording.

“Das Volk”: Appeal to the German People

A vital part of both the NSDAP’s success in 1930 and the AfD’s success in the 2000s is the ability to appeal to the apathetic and disillusioned segment of people in Germany in a way that mobilizes them. In the early 1930s, the NSDAP promoted natalist values and an ideal German society through the idealized depiction of the “Nordic race,” Nuclear families, motherhood, and traditional gender roles. Coupled with their populist economic rhetoric, which appealed to the working class, farmers, and the middle class, the party created a powerful association between an NSDAP future and a better future. This rhetoric allowed them to attract a large/varied base of supporters of different social classes, genders, and backgrounds, who trusted them to help “fix” the problems other parties could not. Eighty years later, the AfD has also successfully employed natalist ideology and populist economic rhetoric to advance its political aspirations and appeal to a large and varied group of Germans of different social classes, genders, and backgrounds.

Volk and Family

One of the most evident similarities between NSDAP propaganda and AfD propaganda is the use of natalism. Natalism is an ideology that promotes childbearing/the bearing of children to individuals in a nation, group, or community as a means by which to strengthen that nation, group, or community as a whole.⁵⁵ For the National Socialists, this group was the (German) race. The NSDAP promoted not just prejudice against “foreigners” (Jews, and other perceived non-Germans) but also, as the flip side of discrimination, promoted eugenics and natalism for those of “German” stock.⁵⁶ As a result, in the National Socialist context, natalism was strongly tied to “racial” propaganda, specifically the promotion of “pure” Germans. Witamwas explains

⁵⁵ Tyler Biscontini, “Natalism. - EBSCO,” Natalism, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://research.ebsco.com/c/3czfwv/viewer/html/ept5mnx3xr>.

⁵⁶ Chin et al., *After the Nazi Racial State*.

this in her book *Geklebt NS-Propaganda Verführung und Manipulation Durch das Plakat*: “According to Nazi ideology, the German woman as the bearer of the “volkisch” future should possibly bear as many children as possible in order thus to promote the purity and spread of the Aryan race.”⁵⁷ As a result of this racialized natalism, the National Socialists placed a strong focus on women as mothers and caregivers as well as other traditional gender roles in their volk and family propaganda. The NS also intentionally depicted stereotypical “Nordic” and “Aryan” looking people and families in their propaganda posters. These “German” features, according to Hans F. K. Gunther, a founder and promoter of the Nazi racial ideology, were “Tall, long-haired, narrow-faced with a pronounced chin, which has a narrow nose with a high nose root, soft light hair, bright eyes, and rosy-white skin...discernment, truthfulness and drive.”⁵⁸ The appearance of (and promotion of) these features in their poster made it clear to voters and other German citizens who *did* and, more importantly, who *did not* belong to the Nazi’s “ideal” German society.

Natalism was the backbone of the NSDAP’s “Volk and “Famlie” policy. As a result, the National Socialists often paired natalism with values that helped facilitate it. **NS-1** exemplifies this by promoting natalism and marrying it with “traditional” gender roles. Paul Helwig Strehl’s “Rettet die Deutsch Famile” (Save the German Family) was made for the 1932 Elections and depicts an ideal “Nordic” family. The poster’s imagery shows a stereotypical-looking “Nordic” family: despite the darker hair, the mother and father have high cheekbones, narrow faces, a pronounced chin, and rosy white skin. The father, wearing work clothing, looks like a laborer or farmer, reinforcing the NS ideology of “real Germans” being hard-working salt-of-the-earth

⁵⁷ Birgit Witamwas, *Geklebte NS-Propaganda: Verführung Und Manipulation Durch Das Plakat* (Berlin ; Boston: De Gruyter, 2016).

⁵⁸ Hans F.K. Günther, “Rassenkunde Des Deutschen Volkes,” HathiTrust, accessed March 20, 2024, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89097734669?urlappend=%3Bseq=5>.

people. The depiction of a mother, a father, and a baby reinforces the National Socialist ideology of a family being complete only if it has a child. The placement of the baby in the mother's arm held tight, and grabbing the mother's hand symbolizes the nurturing and close relationship mothers ought to have with their children, and the mother's central position in the image illustrates the mother's central position in raising the baby. The mother and father have also had a look of concern and seriousness on their faces. The baby's face, in contrast, is softer and innocent. It is evident that having children is an important responsibility to the *Volk*.

The colors in this poster also contribute to the Nazi's message. The simple white background and a black-and-white image of a family are neutral tones, allowing the words of the poster "Save the German family," painted in bright red, to stand out. The red print evokes both caution and alarm, reinforcing the idea that the German family is in danger and needs to be saved immediately. The poster thereby creates a call to action, "Save the German family!" a common trait of Nazi propaganda at the time.⁵⁹

The National Socialist "Nordic family Ideal" was not just about promoting "Nordic" features and the "Nordic race"; it was also about the "perfect" nuclear family with multiple kids, healthy parents, healthy children, and a happy life. The "Nordic family Ideal", therefore was about selling the superiority and happiness that resulted in modeling one's family after the NSDAP's natalist vision. **NS-2** is another example of the NSDAP's ideal "Nordic" family, made in 1933 at the culmination of the Nazi Party's rise to power. The poster reads "Gesunde Eltern, Gesunde Kinder!" (Healthy Parents, Healthy Kids). The family members depicted again look stereotypically "Nordic," with figures drawn with blonde hair, high cheekbones, prominent chins, narrow faces, and, of course, white skin.

⁵⁹ Susan D. Bachrach et al., eds., *State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda* (Washington, D.C. : New York: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum ; Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2009).

Unlike the previous alarmist one, the family in this poster is visibly happy, showing smiles and overall softer features. This poster also draws in more children, associating happiness and health with having children, further underscoring National Socialist nationalism. Indeed, The contrast in emotion between **NS-1** and **NS-2** illustrates the difference in health and happiness between a family that “needs saving” and a family that has been “saved” by the NSDAP. As a result, **NS-2** is an even more stereotypical-looking idealized picture. The family all has bright blonde hair (instead of brown hair.) The image depicts four children instead of just one. The direct message is the desirability of an “ideal” family. Yet there is an indirect message of, namely, the undesirability of families that might not fall into this National Socialist “ideal” mold. If the happy “ideal” German family needs to look like the poster, other family units, without children, with darker complexion, single parents, etc. are not to be strived for or maybe should not even exist.⁶⁰

Another fundamental part of the NSDAP's natalist “Volk and Familia” propaganda campaign was the relentless positioning of German women as mothers. The National Socialists saw motherhood as a vital part of the fight for a “racially pure” Germany. As a result, NS propaganda that depicted women usually did so as mothers with a child nearby or in their arms. Witamwas explains a prominent example of this when discussing the NS's September-November “Reichstag Wahl” campaign: “In her function as a mother, the woman was thus already in the focus of the Enlightenment campaign from September to November 1933, which aimed at convincing the entire German people of the overwhelming importance of population policy and racial care and targeted discrimination and systematic persecution at German Jews and other

⁶⁰ Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2003).

unwelcome groups.”⁶¹ This campaign promoted the morality and nobility of motherhood and used the protection of German children as a motivator.

The September to November Enlightenment campaign used powerful visual propaganda that depicted children in distress to elicit women’s maternal instincts. **NS-3** is an example from this campaign. The poster made by Franz Wurbel reads “Mutter Kampf für Eure Kinder!” (Mothers Fight for Your Kids). The poster shows a mother with four children. The mother holds the smallest child as the other three children stand before her. Like in the previous poster, the mother and her children look stereotypically “Nordic” with light hair, high cheekbones, pronounced chins, and white skin. Yet the blurred lines and streakiness of the picture suggest they are on the run, in a hurry, creating a sense of urgency. Mother and daughter are clearly distressed, with twisted and fearful expressions. The mother's smallest child clings to her shoulder. The mother, mouth agape, appears to be yelling the central message of the photo: “Mothers fight for their kids!” This, as Witamwas explains, aims to evoke emotion, especially in mothers calling on their maternal instinct and “natural” drive to protect their children.⁶²

The bright red font and black and gray faces that show pain make this poster look harsh. The mother and the children in the foreground have a lighter shade, as if illuminated with light, whereas the background is black. This creates a contrast between what they seem to be running away from and where they are now. This symbolizes escaping Germany's darkness or despair and the mother protecting her family by charging into the future. Like the previous poster, the central claim, in red, stands out from the dark background. The use of red once again creates urgency and alarm, strengthening the call to action.

⁶¹ Witamwas, “Geklebte NS-Propaganda,” 140.

⁶² Witamwas, “Geklebte NS-propaganda,” 140.

In a time of economic instability, the national socialists also used the unemployment that many men, more specifically husbands, were experiencing to mobilize women. In demonstrating the challenges that their husbands and children were experiencing, the NSDAP positioned voting for Hitler as a way for women to take an active role in helping their families. **NS-4** is an example of this, made by Felix Albrecht to convince women to vote for Adolf Hitler on the April 10th, 1932, national Presidential Election (where Hitler ran against the conservative incumbent Hindenburg), the poster reads “Women,” “Millions of Men Without Work,” and “Millions of Children Without Future.” Here, “Nordic-looking” individuals feature with a woman cradling a baby. The baby is again drawn with softer lines, reinforcing the innocence and purity of children, and the family member's position again emphasizes the mother’s central and essential role.

Unlike the previous poster, this poster focuses on the plight of the fathers and positions the mother as the one who can save their husband. The father’s clasped hands and down-turned face reinforce the helplessness and despair caused by the high levels of unemployment in Germany. The claims “Millions of Men Out of Work” and “Millions of Kids Without a Future” aim to evoke a reaction in women and a desire to help their families. National Socialists' gender ideology is evident in this poster as they refer only to men's unemployment figures and only *children's* hunger to appeal to women. This subtly demonstrates their belief that women are only important because of the role they play in the German family, supporting men and having and caring for children.

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In their 2017, 2021, and 2025 campaigns, the AfD has similarly adopted a concern for the family that certainly traces back to natalist ideas. Of course, Germany and many other European countries are experiencing an aging population with an increasingly low birth rate, so a concern

for child-supportive policies is understandable.⁶³ The AfD's family policy can be seen on their party website in the section titled "Family Bevölkerung" (Family and Population). The policy section of the AfD's website (my translation into English) starts with a quote, "The dramatic increase in marriages and childlessness and the disappearance of normal medium-sized families - long accepted by the established parties as having no alternative - are causing our ancestral population to shrink by more than 250,000 people per year, with a rapidly increasing trend. The AfD is resisting this trend towards self-abolition and wants to make Germany's society fundamentally more family and child-friendly."⁶⁴ While this policy quote may look harmless at first glance, it draws some parallels to the National Socialist "racial" natalist ideology. A closer inspection shows that the AfD's use of words like "ancestral population" "normal medium-sized families" refers to the "traditional" white nuclear family with multiple children and the terminology "Selbst Abschaffung" or "self-abolition" alludes to the AfD's unease with the demographic shifts in Germany; the phrase frames demographic trends as the destruction of their "ideal" Germany.⁶⁵ This wording, framed with the AfD's Islamophobic policy positions and rhetoric (see below), indicates that the AfD is promoting natalism as a way to keep Germany white or "Nordic."

Interestingly, one of the AfD's most widely seen images focuses on its "German" natalist message. **AfD-1** from 2017 reads, "Neue Deutsche? Machen wir selber" ('New Germans? We Will Make Them Ourselves). This poster was made available on their website in high resolution so that it could and would be printed by individuals, and thereby, the image found a much wider,

⁶³ "Ageing Europe - Statistics on Population Developments," accessed February 5, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Ageing_Europe_-_statistics_on_population_developments.

⁶⁴ AfD, "Familie | Bevölkerung," Alternative für Deutschland (blog), June 25, 2017, <https://www.afd.de/familie-bevoelkerung/>.

⁶⁵ Demography Report," Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, accessed March 19, 2024, https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/EN/themen/demography/demografiebericht_kurz_en.pdf;jsessionid=CCDF807B281C61BAB7142FEE1B87753B.live892?__blob=publicationFile&v

even enormous circulation. This poster was also featured in many news articles and on social media and created international discussions around issues such as misogyny and the rise of the new right in Germany.⁶⁶

A closer look at the image reveals its anchoring in natalist ideology. In **AfD-1** the AfD provocatively challenges the term “Neue Deutsche,” a term which has increasingly been used to refer to the terminology of “New Germans” from a more progressive perspective to describe immigrants and refugees as being a real part of Germany. Notably, the AfD uses the term “New German” in quotes to mock it, the quotes imply that the term is ridiculous and not natural. The text underneath “Machen wir Selber” further implies that true Germans can only be made by *Germans*, emphasizing the AfD’s German natalism. This is reinforced by the “we” in “Machen wir selber.” We, the white *actual Germans*, the people the AfD wants to have more children, can do it ourselves. The “we” is a way to others the “New Germans,” implying they do not fit into this group (real Germans). The words on the poster are thus combative. They directly challenge left-progressive ideas on immigration and promote a more conservative idea of what is required to be German that emphasizes background and heritage (and ethnicity/race).

The poster’s imagery reinforces this ideology. The poster depicts a smiling, pregnant white woman. Notably, you cannot see the woman's eyes. Eyes are individuality and the lack of eyes makes the woman into an abstract type or generic image. The woman represents the type of woman that the AfD wants to become pregnant. The woman suggestively lies on a blanket in a park, with the focal point being her pregnant stomach. By showing smiling white women, the AfD is signaling who should have more children and who fits into their “ideal” Germany.

⁶⁶ Dominic Waghorn, “Germany’s AfD near Historic Success with Controversial Ad Campaign,” Sky News, accessed February 4, 2024, <https://news.sky.com/story/germanys-afd-near-historic-success-with-controversial-ad-campaign-11043846>.

The color scheme juxtaposes the aggressive and combative wording of the poster and makes the overall message seem more inviting and less direct. The colors are welcoming and “natural” with a green background. The scene takes place in nature because it is natural for “us” Germans to have “our own babies”(rather than importing them). Blue, one of the colors associated with the AfD and conservatism in Europe in general, also implies calmness or serenity and makes the viewer relax. The blue of conservatism/AfD also supports the woman, holding her up like a park bench, Symbolizing how the AfD supports families. The white creates a sense of cleanliness and purity, underscoring the cleanliness and purity of German natalism as opposed to the “New Germans.”⁶⁷ This intentional use of color and shapes allows the AfD to push the boundaries in the German political system that values campaign posters more than TV ads.⁶⁸

The promotion of the nuclear family as the Ideal family is also something the AfD and the Nationalist socialists have in common. In the Familie and Bevölkerung section of its website, the AfD claims it wants to help single parents. However, is against any financial support for organizations that *promote* “single-parent families” as a normal, or even as a “desirable way of life.”⁶⁹ While the AfD may not be entirely against the existence of single families, the party makes it clear that they do not believe that it is “desirable” (Wunsch).

The AfD, like the NSDAP, strongly prefers the nuclear family. This is an extension of their natalist policies as the traditional nuclear family is ideal to “make new Germans.” **AfD-2** created for the 2018 Hessen “Landtagswahl,” is an example of the AfD’s promotion and idealization of nuclear families. The poster reads “Zukunft Braucht Familien!” (The Future

⁶⁷ “Colour | EU System,” European Commission, accessed February 5, 2024, <https://ec.europa.eu/component-library/v1.15.0/eu/components/detail/eu-style-color/>.

⁶⁸ Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, “In German Election, Campaign Posters Are More Important Than TV Ads,” NPR, September 23, 2017, sec. Politics & Policy, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/09/23/552583400/in-german-election-campaign-posters-are-more-important-than-tv-ads>.

⁶⁹ AfD, “Familie | Bevölkerung,” Alternative für Deutschland (blog), June 25, 2017, <https://www.afd.de/familie-bevoelkerung/>.

Needs Families). Underneath, the words “Father, Mother, Kids” are the main focus. The imagery of this poster is inviting and calming, with blue as the background color and an image of a family walking through nature hand in hand. The family portrayed with two children exudes happiness, showcasing the AfD’s vision of an ideal nuclear family. Indeed the family itself (starting from left to right) alludes to the AfD’s swoop logo. The arrow beginning at the father and ending at the mother illustrates the AfD’s natalism and the criterion of “real Germans.” Notably, this poster shows distinct similarities to **NS-1** from 1932. The words “Zukunft Braucht Familien!” are in white text with a red box around, paralleling the call to action made by the National Socialists in **NS-1**. Both images also depict an analogous ideal family structure consisting of a father, a mother, and multiple children. In addition, both figures show “Nordic” white northern European individuals, implying non-white individuals do not belong in their ideal families.

The AfD demonizes anything that attacks the “normal” traditional nuclear family. Take for example, how the AfD attacks what they call “Gender Gaga”: “Gender ideology marginalizes natural differences between the sexes and questions gender identity. It wants to abolish the classic family as a model of life and a role model. It is therefore in clear contradiction to the Basic Law(German Constitution), which protects (classically understood) marriage and family as a state-supporting institution because only this can produce the people of the state as bearers of sovereignty.”⁷⁰ The AfD sees gender studies as an attack on their ideal nuclear family and has framed it as an attack on motherhood and Basic Law (The German Bill of Rights.)⁷¹

This strategy aims to demonize and present “non-traditional” family units as unnatural and harmful to the procreation of the “true German” population. This strategy is exemplified by **AfD-3**. This poster, from September 21, 2021, promotes the AfD’s election program and calls for

⁷⁰ AfD, “Familie | Bevölkerung.”

⁷¹ “Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany,” accessed February 23, 2024, https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html.

no money for “Gender studies” and no “Gender Quotas.” The figure reads, “I am Mother. Not a Birthgiving Parent.” Underneath, it shows a white woman cradling a baby and the phrase “Gender-Gaga stoppen” (Stop Gender-Gaga).

Notably, the imagery of a mother cradling a child in this figure is similar to that of the NS **NS-1, NS-4, and NS-3**, in that the mother and the child are also white, and despite the lack of blonde hair, on the AfD poster, all female figures look stereotypically “Nordic.” The mother, looking at the child intently, emphasizes her nurturing role. The baby's position is also essential. The baby is the focal point of the image, and the mutual holding and embrace emphasizes the connection between mother and child. Naturally, the imagery in the poster glorifies motherhood by framing it as the only logical option. Conversely, the party frames gender studies as not only an attack on female identity and traditional roles but an attack on motherhood and thus an attack on nature. The term “birth-giving parent” is quoted and used mockingly, while the use of the term “Gender Gaga” further aims to mock and delegitimize gender studies.

An extension of the AfD's Familie and Bevölkerung platform reveals intolerance and prejudice against the LGBTQ+ community, which is presented as an obstacle to natalist ideology. In the Mid-1930s when the Nazis came to power, they harassed and targeted gay men and lesbians, shutting down their organizations and press. In 1935 the Nazi regime revised Paragraph 175 (Nazi German Statute) making it harsher and more punitive arresting men on suspicion of having sexual relations with other men. This resulted in many men being sent to concentration camps for being Homosexuals.⁷² However, while the Nazi Regime prosecuted gay men and lesbians, their propaganda was less explicit about it. They preferred to reinforce what was considered an ideal German family and thus indirectly signaled their disagreement and prejudice.

⁷² Günter Grau, *Hidden Holocaust?: Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany 1933-45* (Routledge, 2013).

The AfD, on the other hand, has used its propaganda and posters to attack the LGBTQ+ community directly. **AfD-4** is a prominent example of this and was used frequently after discussions surrounding drag show performers reading children's books.⁷³ The poster reads, "Hands Away From Our Children, Stop Gender Propaganda." The poster shows an uncomfortable-looking child, being reached for by a bearded long-haired man wearing makeup with a dress on. The long hair is done in a feminine style alluding to how trans individuals break traditional gender roles around clothing. Interestingly, the bearded look of the trans figure is similar to the AfD's stereotypical depiction of Muslims. The bearded look is associated with being unclean, uncivilized, and sexually deviant (explained further below)

This AfD poster paints people in drag as barbaric and predatory, thus encouraging parents to be vigilant and protect their children, or else they will be "abused" by people in drag. The image demonstrates the flip side of the AfD natalist rhetoric. The man in drag is eating children, symbolically reducing the population instead of increasing it. Noticeably, while the AfD propaganda here targets people in drag, the theme of threatening children is often found in NS propaganda: The use of children's safety and the threat that something poses to children can be seen in **NS-3 and NS-4** from 1932. However, while both the Nazis and the AfD use the threat to children as a rhetorical tool, the threat itself is different. The threat, in NSDAP posters, comes from hunger and economic instability, whereas the AfD targets the LGBTQ+ community. Children going hungry is no longer a relevant threat in Germany so the AfD has adjusted the threat for a modern audience.

It is clear that NSDAP's Volk and Familia posters and AfD's Volk and Family posters both use similar rhetorical ideas and imagery to project a similar "ideal German family." The

⁷³ Oliver Moody Berlin, "Drag Queen Storytime Ignites German Culture War," February 24, 2024, sec. world, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/drag-queen-storytime-ignites-german-culture-war-6bgdkbkz>.

parties also show a similar ideal of women's role in German society, namely as mothers (of the ethnic/racial group). Where the posters differ is in the framing and the color schemes. The NSDAP's posters tend to be visually harsher, using dark colors to convey hopelessness and bright reds to convey alarm. In contrast, the AfD posters use calming colors like blue and green, to suggest purity, serenity, and nature. The imagery is also generally harsher and bleaker in the Nazi posters. The AfD poster's calming and clean look disguises the more aggressive, even sinister messaging of some of their posters and this contributes to the party's ability to "get away with" many Nazi themes and ideas.

Economic Populism

The Weimar Republic Government dealt with a period of hyperinflation in the 1920s by taking out loans from the US government. The US stock market crashed on October 24, 1929, causing a global depression and the effects in Germany were devastating. When American companies began demanding repayment of these loans, the fragile German economy crashed, banks failed, and there was large-scale unemployment. The Weimar Republic's government also decided to cut spending to spur economic growth, making the situation worse.⁷⁴ The social and political unrest caused by this economic instability opened the door for more extremist parties. The Nazi Party, in particular, quickly became experts in exploiting this economic unrest. Their propaganda during this period focused on "exploiting popular discontent with the older political parties for their failure to provide solutions to the nation's economic and social problems. The Nazi Party, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, was able far more effectively than its rivals to craft attractive messages that had broad appeal across diverse segments of the German population."⁷⁵ Support for the Nazi Party grew exponentially from September 1928 to July 1932

⁷⁴ Dietrich Orlow, *A History of Modern Germany: 1871 to Present*, 8th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351017992>.

⁷⁵ Susan D. Bachrach et al., "State of Deception," 13.

with some of this certainly coming out of the propaganda campaign effort. This populist strategy allowed the Nazis to focus on simple promises to appeal to the German people while also creating an us versus them narrative by blaming the elitest “old parties” and of course the Jews.

In order to push this narrative, the National Socialists often depicted the poor, depressed masses in their posters and promised factory work and bread, to position “Aryan workers” against the Jewish capitalists. **NS-5** is a prime example of this. The poster from 1932 reads “Arbeit und Brot durch den Nationalsozialismus” (Work and Bread Through National Socialism). The poster is mostly black and white and shows a factory with smoke coming from it.

The simple imagery of the poster, with a basic outline of a factory and a Nazi swastika to the right of it, draws attention to the most central part of the image: the words “Arbeit und Brot” (Work and Bread). These two words in yellow stand out and are eye-catching. The German economy was terrible, and many struggled to earn a living and feed their families; consequently, malnutrition and diseases like rickets and tuberculosis ran rampant.⁷⁶ As a result, the NSDAP’s promise that they would be able to provide work and bread was very appealing to most Germans. The poster works in its simplicity. The factory symbolizes work. The swastika is like a rising sun, symbolizing a new era and hope. By not explaining their policy goals or how they would achieve these things, the National Socialists were able to draw on a more extensive voter base. A voter base that did not care/was not educated in the complexities of economics or public policy and a base that was educated but didn't have enough information to disagree with the NSDAP’s message.

⁷⁶ Richard J. Evans Geary Dick, ed., *The German Unemployed (Routledge Revivals): Experiences and Consequences of Mass Unemployment from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich* (London: Routledge, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315728148>.

Another common strategy implemented by the NSDAP was “calls to the people.” **NS-6** was created for the 1932 Presidential elections. The Poster reads, “Our Last Hope Hitler.” The word “unsere or “our” is crucial here as it highlights the point that the people's last hope collectively is Hitler. The word “Unser” is capitalized, creating emphasis. There are also women and retirees in the poster(as opposed to just workers).

Looking closer at the crowd, familiar NS propaganda tropes emerge. For example, woman in the front right with a baby in her arms. Some figures look “Nordic” with narrow faces, lighter hair, and white skin, notably; even when depicting and trying to reach out to the German people collectively/as a whole, the NS still depicted what they imagined the “ideal” German people to be. Despite different imagery, **NS-6** has a similar implied message to **NS-5**. The large crowd of people with worn-out clothing and faces covered in stress lines and dirt depicts the struggle the German “volk” are experiencing. The way the people are drawn with rough outlines and rough shading makes them look worn out and tired. They all have solemn faces, no smiles, and are staring forward at the viewer. This alludes to the general feeling of resentment and hopelessness that many Germans felt towards the government and other institutions like banks during the Depression.⁷⁷ The use of colors and outlines also helps further reinforce the NS’s message: the poster itself is yellow and looks worn out and hazy. The building and the crowd are rough and sketched. The wording, by contrast, is crisp and white with straight outlines, making the words stick out more and catch the viewer's eye.

The National Socialists also blamed established parties and the government to try and mobilize the people. **NS-7** from September 27, 1931, reads, “No Votes to the Emergency Decree Parties.” This referred to Heinrich Brüning's (German Chancellor 1930-32) overuse of President Hindenburg’s Article 48 powers to bypass the paralyzed and ineffective Reichstag governing

⁷⁷ Dieter Petzina, “Germany and the Great Depression,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 4, no. 4 (1969): 59–74.

instead through executive decree. The National Socialists framed this as a grave injustice that the German people should fight against. Ironically the Nazis, as the second largest (1930) and largest (1932) party, was essentially creating this dysfunction. Also, ironically, Adolf Hitler would later use these decrees to rise to power legally.⁷⁸

The imagery in this poster paints a compelling picture of poverty and hopelessness to appeal to the struggles of the German people. There is a younger boy next to his mother, again portrayed with a child in her arms and an older man who looks like the father, and all are noticeably skinny and gaunt. All the people in the poster are hunched over and looking down, reinforcing the idea that they are tired, worn out, and struggling. Once again, despite it being an appeal to the people, the people all look stereotypically “Nordic” with lighter hair, narrow faces (in turn hungry faces), and pronounced chins. Like in the previous poster, the image is sketched and shaded roughly, making the people look worn down and tired. Once again, the white background and red letters create a contrast that allows the wording to stick out.

Another key to mobilizing the masses was to lay blame and demonize the established parties, by claiming they were all tools for the Jews. The Nazis framed the solution to the economic instability in Germany as a fight between the “Aryan worker” and the Jewish capitalist and other old party elites. **NS-8** is an example of this. The poster made for the July 1932 Reichstag election. It reads, “We Workers Are Awake.” There is an illustration of a strong German worker on the right-hand side with a noticeably smaller Social Democrat “Marxist” (identifiable by the red hat) in the middle. To the Marxist’s left is a stereotypical Jewish figure, and on the far left is a Communist with a red tie and a dagger in his hand. In between the German worker’s legs is Heinrich Brüning with his glasses and a piece of paper referring to Article 48.

⁷⁸ Richard Bessel, “The Nazi Capture of Power,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (2004): 169–88.

The Marxist brings attention to a paper that reads, “Nazi Barons! Emergency Decrees. Lies and Slandering. The Big Wigs Are Living High On the Hog, the People Are Wretched.”

The imagery in this poster personifies the NSDAP's main political opposition as one of four types Marxist, Jews, Communist, and Elitist. It also helps further some of the conspiracies and hostile rhetoric the National Socialists have spread about these groups. The Marxist depicted in the center has stereotypical “Jewish” features: a round face, circular glasses, a round belly, and a suit, as does the figure to his left, whispering in his ear. The figures clustered together are a depiction of “Judeo-Bolshevism,” the myth that Socialism/Bolshevism was a Jewish plot to destroy the nations of Europe. This supposed conspiracy was a powerful rhetorical tool in the NSDAP's *Volkisch* movement.⁷⁹ The Communist figure of the far left is holding a dagger, insinuating that the party and its ideas will stab the worker in the back and leave him worse off. Finally, the depiction of Brüning includes a paper with 48 on it referencing his abuse of the article “48” powers. Significantly, all of these figures are dwarfed in size by the strong German worker who looks down on these figures, showing contempt for them. In the background, there are signs of construction with cranes and scaffolding, as well as a large Nazi swastika. The German (Aryan) workers are now “Awakened” and facilitate the construction of a modern concrete Swastika, which resembles a rising sun or a “better” Germany.

The colors and outlines in the poster contribute to its legibility and readability. The contrasting white and red background and the size of the words “Arbeit” and “Erwacht” allow them to stick out. “National Socialist” in red also sticks out at the bottom of the poster, drawing the reader's attention. The poster's use of color and size makes the German worker the call to

⁷⁹ Brian E. Crim, “‘Our Most Serious Enemy’: The Specter of Judeo-Bolshevism in the German Military Community, 1914–1923,” *Central European History* 44, no. 4 (2011): 624–41.

action and the voting information the most prominent and legible, allowing the reader to quickly grasp the critical points of the poster.

In analyzing the NSDAP's economic propaganda, it is clear that they successfully implemented populist strategies, more specifically, the promise of work and bread, factory work, industrialization, and the depiction of the depressed masses to appeal to the German people and set themselves apart from other parties. They did this by utilizing economic hardships to mobilize the German people, casting blame on others, and making simple policy promises to position themselves as the people's voice.

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The AfD party has also successfully implemented broad, populist economic policies to mobilize the German public. This is exemplified by their broad and double-dealing economic policy that mixes neoliberal and socialist populist ideas. To achieve this, the party has embraced a strategy of “ambivalence” that allows them to support many contradictory positions to attract a more extensive voter base.⁸⁰ Additionally, the AfD has also adopted a “welfare chauvinism” platform, the idea that welfare systems should be restricted to “actual “Germans, framing it as a way to advance working-class people's interests.⁸¹ Due to these stances, the economic propaganda posters of the AfD draw parallels to National Socialist strategies. Specifically, the AfD's use of simple policy promises and claims, the blaming of established parties in government, and the scapegoating of a different group (Muslims instead of Jews).

The AfD's utilization of straightforward claims and promises can be seen in **AfD-5** which was made to promote AfD's new economic policy. It reads, “Our Employment Concept: With the

⁸⁰ Ralf Havertz, “Strategy of Ambivalence: AfD Between Neoliberalism and Social Populism,” *TRAMES: A Journal of the Humanities & Social Sciences* 24, no. 4 (October 2020): 549–65, <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2020.4.05>.

⁸¹ Philipp Adorf, “A New Blue-Collar Force: The Alternative for Germany and the Working Class,” *German Politics and Society* 36, no. 4 (December 1, 2018): 29–49.

AfD, Work is Worth it Again!” This (in German) is a pun: “Lohn” means “wages,” and “Lohnt sich” means “worth it.” Underneath the family's image is the caption, “A Pension Contribution of 20,000 Euros Will Be Reimbursed For Each Child.” The AfD promises worthwhile employment and family subsidies that aim to address higher costs of living and child care in order to appeal to a broad base in an uncontroversial way. Notably, the presentation of these simple promises is reminiscent of the textual promise of work and bread made in the **NS-5** from 1932.

The poster's imagery further conveys the benefits the AfD's economic policy will create for families and the German people. The family holding hands together associate a happy family with the AfD's economic policy. The family is walking forward into a brighter future. Additionally, the image reinforces what the AfD sees as a family by depicting a father, a mother, and two children. The family is also white, particularly a pale shade of white, revealing the AfD's vision of an ideal German family.

Another recurring theme in the AfD's economic propaganda is blaming the established parties and government for economic instability and problems. **AfD-6** is an example and reads, “Altmaier plans fail miserably, no to selling off our medium-sized businesses!” The AfD uses the term “Mittelstand”, to describe medium-sized businesses, which can also mean middle class, demonstrating the AfD's populist appeal to the middle class. The AfD issued this poster in response to what they positioned as an empty promise from the government to protect computer chip manufacturers in Germany, referring to Peter Altmaier (a member of the CDU), who served as the acting Minister of Finance from 2017 to 2018.

The imagery, the placement of the text, and the emphasis on disagreement make the reader stop and focus on what is being disagreed with. The word “Nien” or “No” is the largest,

most significant, and central part of the image, drawing the viewer's attention. Above it, the claim “Altmaier Plans Fail Miserably” is in smaller text, also drawing the reader in. It is also in a font that evokes a tabloid headline (white in a red box). Underneath the “No” is the illustration of a factory at the center of Germany. The placement symbolizes that German production and factories are fundamental to German society. A price tag attached to this illustration reads, “We need German ingenuity!” Indicating that the cost of “selling out” these factories is German ingenuity. The emphasis on German ingenuity demonstrates some of AfD’s isolationist and eurosceptic beliefs, which champion German self-sufficiency and products. The AfD is positioning itself as defiant and angry and wants the viewer to feel the same. Notably, the prominent use of “Neine” and other defiant language is a characteristic of many NSDAP posters as well. The AfD also sets itself as the party, keeping the government accountable and fighting for the “little man.” which can also be observed in the “emergency decrees” poster **NS-7** from 1931. The use of this imagery in the AfD’s weekly newsletter demonstrates the AfD's desire to use the shortcomings of the current government to mobilize its voter base.

The AfD’s welfare chauvinism and the resulting implicit stigmatization of immigrants can be seen in **AfD-7** from May 12, 2019, reads “Protect the Social System” and “Money For Retirees Instead of for Illegal Migrants.” In posting welfare given to immigrants and refugees as something that directly affects elderly people, the AfD is framing welfare as a choice between supporting the natural-born elderly or “Illegal Migrants.” This serves to stigmatize immigrants (oftentimes Muslims) by claiming they negatively affect retirees. Notably, this poster strategy parallels the strategy implemented by the National Socialists in **NS-9** from 1930. Both posters use the abuse of financial aid to demonize immigrants and Jews, respectively, and frame both groups as undeserving of financial assistance. The AfD seeks to capitalize on this framing and

stigmatization with the slogan “Trust Yourself Bremen” at the bottom of the poster. Which is a call to vote with your gut and trust your prejudiced instincts.

The imagery and colors in **AfD-7** serve to further implicitly demonize immigrants in Germany by displaying the “purity” and innocence of white retirees. The image of an elderly couple embracing on a park bench, viewing nature, paints an idealistic picture of the elderly. This poster image is full of blues and greens, which makes the call to “protect the social system” in red stick out. The call for “Money for Retirees and Not Illegal migrants” is in white, not red, making it seem like a more reasonable and less aggressive claim. The overall layout of the poster makes the viewer associate the idealist image of the retired elderly couple as something that is at risk and needs protecting, with the simple solution being to vote for the AfD.

A comparative examination of the NSDAP and AfD's “Volk and Familie” and their economic propaganda posters reveals several unnerving parallels between the two parties. The shared emphasis on natalism, the depiction of an "ideal" nuclear family, and the promotion of traditional gender roles in their “Volk” and “Familia” propaganda, respectively, suggest a similar appeal to ethnic or racial ideology. Yet, the AfD's adept use of calming colors and images to veil potentially more sinister messaging is concerning, suggesting either a lack of scrutiny or, more troublingly, a pre-existing acceptance of such ideas among specific segments of the German population. Moreover, the parallel use and success of both parties with populist economic tactics highlight the worrying effectiveness of these strategies in contemporary German politics.

Feinde: Enemies in Our Midst

Comparing the NSDAP and the AfD's promotion of anti-Semitic/anti-Muslim propaganda and Nationalistic propaganda reveals unsettling similarities and enlightening differences that highlight how the threat of nationalism and hatred has stayed the same and

evolved in Germany. Both parties' dedication to creating out-groups that they can scapegoat and blame for problems demonstrates divisive rhetoric's effectiveness in modern politics. In contrast, the differences in the parties' presentations of outgroups point to how the political system has changed to make it more difficult.

Anti-Semitic rhetoric vis-à-vis Anti-Muslim rhetoric

The National Socialists, in their nationwide campaigns in the 1930-32, were notorious for their relentless attacks on an “enemy within” in their campaign literature, “the Jews.”

Anti-semitism was not only a core belief and motivation of the NSDAP, which impacted its political actions, goals, and messages; it was also a prominent populist strategy. As a result, anti-semitic ideas, stereotypes, and messages appear frequently in the National Socialist rhetoric and propaganda posters, these figures were stereotypes “The Jew is always represented as a type: small, corpulent, wearing large horn-rimmed glasses, often dressed in a top hat and tailcoat, but always the drawing of his race, the fleshy nose is particularly emphasized.”⁸² By over-exaggerating features, and trying to draw undesirable qualities and traits these became stereotypes, which reinforced the otherization of Jewish people and created a distinct line between Jewish people and the NSDAP’s “ideal Nordic” German. This visual differentiation made it easier for the NSDAP to scapegoat and demonize the Jewish community in their propaganda.

The visual otherization of “the Jew” was a popular and effective strategy that drew on historical anti-Semitism in Germany. **NS-10**, produced for the November 1932 Reichstag election, exemplifies the National Socialist’s use of stereotypes to demonize and scapegoat the Jewish people. The poster appeared in *Der Stürme* (a Nazi tabloid newspaper) and reads, “Away

⁸² Birgit Witamwas, *Geklebte NS-Propaganda: Verführung Und Manipulation Durch Das Plakat* (Berlin ; Boston: De Gruyter, 2016).

With Misery, Away With the Jews.” In the foreground of the poster is an injured war veteran, an unemployed worker, and a worker. In the background, a stereotypical Jewish face with a large round nose and eyes that are dark and invisible. The invisibility of the eyes serves to dehumanize the Jewish figure, making it seem disconnected and less related to the figures in the foreground, vilifying this looming face as an archetype: “the Jew.” The lack of eyes also casts the figure as a symbol of every Jew (rather than a specific Jewish person) signaling that all Jews are ominous and looming figures.

This poster's colors, contrast, and scale also serve to vilify “the Jew.” The characters in the foreground are smaller and made up of white and light gray colors, while the Jewish face mask is more prominent and darker, blending in with the background. The dark coloration of the Jewish face and its position in the background provides a visual representation of the National Socialist rhetoric that Jewish people are shadowy, ominous figures pulling the strings in the background and purposely sabotaging the “German” people. This contrast creates a distinct difference between the “German” figures in the foreground and the looming Jewish face in the background. The contrast between the dark background and the bold white lettering (Away With Misery, Away With the Jews) makes the wording more legible and eye-catching. The symbolic use of white vs. black also positions the German people, made up of veterans, beggars, and businessmen, as “pure” or good and “the Jew” as sinister or evil.

Another stereotype used to attack Jewish people was that they were inherently “greedy” or “money hungry.” This rhetoric was particularly relevant and practical during the late 1920s and early 1930s as Germany faced substantial economic hardship and inflation.⁸³ Poster **NS-9** is a prime example. The poster from NS-Propaganda was created for the 1930 Reichstagwahl or

⁸³ Luisa Latella, “Hyperinflation Weimar,” American German Institute, accessed March 19, 2024, <https://americangerman.institute/2023/12/hyperinflation-weimar/>.

German parliament elections. The poster reads, “Stop That Money Belongs to the Working People.”

The image depicts a stereotypical Jewish man with circular glasses, a suit, a round face, and a pronounced nose. The figure is also reminiscent of Vladimir Lenin, a symbol of socialism and communism. The Jewish man is carrying a bag with the words “2 Million Marks of Relief Money” on the side. By depicting the Jew as inherently greedy and selfish, the National Socialists are illustrating and reinforcing the “Jewish greed” stereotype. The Jewish man wearing a red suit with an SPD hat is stopped and grabbed by an arm with a Nazi armband. This particular hat was a common symbol for the ‘Marxist’ SPD in right-wing propaganda but was not common in real life. The SPD or Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland (Social Democratic Party of Germany) was the largest party during the Weimar Republic and, though fairly reformist in its policies, promoted Socialist values, which the NSDAP hated. By associating the Jewish figure with the SPD, the National Socialists are providing a visual amalgamation of “Judeo-Bolshevism,” the conspiracy that Marxism/Bolshevism was a Jewish plot to destroy the nations of Europe.⁸⁴ The promotion of this conspiracy was an effective way to attack the SPD and the Jews and tap into people's fear and distrust of both groups.

The NSDAP did not invent or start antisemitism in Germany of course.⁸⁵ “Judeo-Bolshevism” was a conspiracy that predated the NSDAP, and the “Jewish greed” stereotype was well-known and recognized by the German public. As a result, they were familiar with and popular rhetorical strategies employed by the NSDAP. Poster **NS-11 is** another example of the National Socialists promoting the “Judeo-Bolshevism” conspiracy and the “Jewish greed”

⁸⁴ Brian E. Crim, “‘Our Most Serious Enemy’: The Specter of Judeo-Bolshevism in the German Military Community, 1914–1923,” *Central European History* 44, no. 4 (2011): 624–41.

⁸⁵ Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town*, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

stereotype. The poster from November 1932 reads, “Marxism is the Guardian Angel of Capitalism.” It presents an image of a stereotypical Jewish banker with a full suit, prominent nose, and round body shape as the personification of capitalism. The banker holds a sack with 1,000,000 Reichsmarks. The banker looks content with an upturned head and smug expression which reinforces the “Jewish greed” stereotype. The “Guardian Angel” escorts the Jewish banker down a white pathway. Notably, the guardian angel is wearing the puffy red S.P.D. cap, alluding to the “Judeo-Bolshevism” conspiracy. The skinny “Marxist” and the fat “banker” are both Jews. This illustrates that Jews are the evils of both sides of the economic and political system, responsible for both marxism and ostensible anti-marxism (capitalism). Additionally, the Jewish “Marxist” carries a club symbolizing how Jews are violent and dangerous. The black and dark background is illuminated by swastika-shaped stars. These stars are the primary light source in the picture and symbolize the NSDAP, illuminating this alliance.

The “Judeo-Bolshevist conspiracy” was also used as a way to mobilize the working class and tap into their resentment towards the limits who owned the factories. Poster **NS-12** made for the 1932 Reichstag Elections, is an example. The imagery and rhetoric in this poster are notably more graphic and aggressive, reading, “Death to Marxism. Join us!” and depicts a snake with a caricature of a stereotypical Jewish head and body being smashed by a worker using a swastika inscribed hammer. The Jewish snake caricature has opulent clothing and a visibly shining ring and button. The caricature expression is one of disgust and anger as it tries to slither away. Presenting the Jewish capitalist as a snake-human hybrid dehumanizes the Jew symbolizing its snakelike behavior (backstabbing, cunning, etc.) By contrast, the (Aryan) working man is drawn more realistically and also as more powerful. The working man is in control. This imagery

depicts the National Socialist party as the working man's "tool" to "smash" the "Judeo-Bolshevist" elite breaking free from the "shackles" of Jewish/Marxist oppression.

The NSDAP's utilization of anti-semitism in their posters was consistent, with exaggerated portrayals of Jewish stereotypes, which tied the figures to greed, and to an alleged "Judeo-Bolshevist conspiracy", that lay behind all Germany's economic and social problems. Through a persistent application of these methods, the National Socialists aimed to create a conditioned association between societal issues and "the Jew" to shape voter perceptions and discredit political opposition.

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Eighty years later, the most heavily criticized aspects of the AfD's successes in contemporary German politics involves its "Islamophobic" rhetoric and messaging.⁸⁶ The AfD has (as scholars have shown), blamed and scapegoated, Muslim immigrants as 'others' and refugees for economic, political, and social issues in Germany has proven to be highly successful. The AfD's website explains: "Islam does not belong to Germany." This section lists the following policy objectives:

- "The AfD unreservedly recognizes freedom of belief, conscience, and confession. However, calls for restrictions to be placed on the practice of religion through laws."
- "The financing of the construction and operation of mosques by Islamic states or foreign donors or their intermediaries should be prevented."
- "The Islamic theology chairs at German universities should be abolished, and the positions in religiously neutral Islamic studies should be transferred."

⁸⁶ Lacin Idil Oztig, "Islamophobic Discourse of European Right-Wing Parties: A Narrative Policy Analysis," *Social Currents* 10, no. 3 (June 1, 2023): 225–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294965221139852>.

- “The AfD is calling for a general ban on full-face veils in public and in public services.”⁸⁷

These policy goals are not only seeking to curtail “Islamic” life in Germany but are arguably Islamophobic as the AfD is taking steps to discriminate against Muslims not only politically but legally.⁸⁸ These AfD positions have even led to physical violence. For example, the AfD faced backlash and calls to be banned after a joint march with Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) in 2018 in which “far-right supporters raised their arms in illegal Nazi salutes, and immigrants (or immigrant-looking people) were chased through the streets of Chemnitz.”⁸⁹ These policy objectives are further reinforced and backed by the AfD’s propaganda posters which utilize stereotypes, exaggerated facial features, and negative traits to other/blame Muslim immigrants for problems in Germany.

One of the most common stereotypes used by the AfD to stigmatize and “other” Muslims is portraying Islam and Muslim men as inherently barbaric, dangerous, and oppressive to women. The poster **AfD-8** from April 9, 2020, exemplifies this. The poster reads, “So that Europe Does Not Become ‘Euro-Arabia’” which presents Europe as something that can be tainted and transformed into something negative because of “Arabian influence.” This poster also emphasizes the difference between Europeans and “Arabians” with the line “Europeans Vote AfD,” underscoring the idea that Muslims are not European.

The main image is Jean-Léon Gérôme famous Orientalist painting “The Slave Market” from 1866, which depicts a naked, enslaved white woman having her teeth examined in a public slave market. The image objectifies and sexualizes the nude white woman capturing the viewer’s

⁸⁷ “Zuwanderung | Asyl,” Party Website, *Alternative Für Deutschland* (blog), June 26, 2017, <https://www.afd.de/zuwanderung-asyl/>.

⁸⁸ “What Is Islamophobia?,” Bridge Initiative (blog), accessed March 8, 2024, <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/about-us/what-is-islamophobia/>.

⁸⁹ Kate Connolly, “Chemnitz Riots Spark Calls for AfD to Be Put under Surveillance,” *The Guardian*, September 4, 2018, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/04/chemnitz-riots-spark-calls-for-afd-to-be-put-under-surveillance-neo-nazi>.

attention. It depicts the Arabian men as creating and enjoying the situation. This aims to appeal to European sensibility and civility, encouraging “European” men to come to the woman's defense. The painting is a provocative image that uses the exploitation of women to mobilize the viewer even as it claims to be *against* exploiting women (because only the “Arabs” do it).

The use of an Orientalist painting is also significant as the paintings aligned with French imperial propaganda depicting the “East” as a backward, lawless, and barbaric place that needed to be tamed by French rule.⁹⁰ In using this painting, the AfD is repurposing the message that “Eastern,” more specifically Muslim men, are inherently lawless, barbaric, backward, and: sexist, rapists, objectifying women. The selection of a painting that depicts a naked white woman is also significant as it graphically implies the “threat” Muslim men provide to “European” white women, visually reinforcing the stereotype that Muslim men are dangerous and barbaric.

Due to the more conscientious and socially responsible contemporary political environment, the AfD has to be more careful when spreading its negative messaging and rhetoric. A common excuse for and justification of the AfD’s anti-muslim rhetoric is Islam’s “inherent” oppression of women and women's rights. **AfD-9** is another example of the AfD's use of Women's rights to attack Muslims. The poster reads, “Islam Does Not Belong to Germany; Women's Freedom is Not Negotiable.” The AfD is reinforcing the otherness of “Islam” and continues to frame it as foreign and not belonging. The AfD also positions its attack on “Islam” as a defense of women’s freedom.

The poster features a woman's eyes in a burka, a religious garment that has been controversial for the last two decades. The eyes, the only visible feature of the women, look sinister and scary. A complaint that many people in Europe have is that the burka covers the face

⁹⁰ Jennifer Meagher, “Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century Art | Essay | The Metropolitan Museum of Art | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History,” The Met’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, accessed February 26, 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd_euor.htm.

completely, making the woman anonymous and unidentifiable and thus untrustworthy and dangerous. The AfD and other right-wing groups also utilize the burka as a symbol/evidence that Islam is inherently sexist and misogynist and “oppresses all women.”⁹¹ Of course, this portrayal ignores the divergent meaning and significance of the burka. As Human Rights Watch notes, “The argument that “the burqa oppresses all women” and therefore should be banned by the state implies that it is up to the state to regulate and limit a woman's choices about how she expresses her religious belief through her outward appearance. This is an outrageous interference that so far from protecting Muslim women, which is presumably the intention, actually further undermines their ability and their right to choose how to lead their lives and how to present themselves in public.”⁹²

Despite this, the AfD has made the burka a major talking point in their policies and as discussed earlier called for a “general ban on full-face veils in public and public services.”⁹³ The AfD’s politicization and demonization of the burka propagates the stereotype that “Islam” is misogynistic and oppressive, justifying the party's Islamophobic rhetoric. This parallels the National Socialist propagation of negative Jewish stereotypes to justify their antisemitism.

Another similarity between AfD's anti-Muslim and National Socialist’s anti-Semitic propaganda is their exploitation of economic instability to demonize and scapegoat out-groups through welfare chauvinism policies. Poster **AfD-10** from April 18th, 2020, reads, “Hate-Preacher Ahamd A. Swindles His Way Into 18,000 Euros in Corona Relief.” This demonstrates the AfD’s Welfare Chauvinism, the belief that welfare should only go to “real Germans.” The poster also calls Amhad A. a “Hassprediger” or “Hate-Preacher,” which once

⁹¹ Gökce Yurdakul, “Bikinis, Blondes, and Burkas: Gender and Islam in the German Far Right,” December 16, 2019, <https://epicenter.wcfia.harvard.edu/blog/bikinis-blondes-and-burkas-gender-and-islam-german-far-right>.

⁹² “Beyond the Burqa | Human Rights Watch,” July 2, 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/07/02/beyond-burqa>.

⁹³ AfD, ““Zuwanderung | Asyl.” | Asyl,”

again frames Islam as a hateful religion. The NSDAP often also used compound words to insult or attack.

The poster's imagery also serves to dehumanize and frame Islam as foreign and barbaric. The image of a stereotypical Muslim man with a large beard reinforces the stereotype that Muslim men are unkempt and barbaric. The beard also makes the man look more intimidating and aggressive, which the AfD also used to depict a sinister man in drag in the previously mentioned **AfD-4**. The depiction does not show the man's eyes or face above his lips. This dehumanizes the figure and makes him less relatable, hiding his humanity. This dehumanizing imagery mirrors the Jewish face depicted in National Socialist **NS-10** from 1932. Both are large looming faces with prominent lips and with the eyes hidden, one has fatty jowls, the other an unkempt beard.

The AfD often seeks to “mask” rhetoric with more inviting images and even humor as well as bright natural colors. Poster **AfD-11** created for the 2017 German Federal elections, reads, “Islam Does Not Fit in Our Cuisine” and depicts a piglet in a grass field. This poster marginalizes “Islam” by targeting the religious dietary practice of not consuming pork, a culinary staple in Germany. This difference in diet is used to present Islam as something incompatible with German culture.

The imagery in this poster is innocuous and even hilarious, depicting a cute piglet in a grass field, yet the messaging and rhetoric are both direct and aggressive. This contrast softens the poster's overall perception, making it seem less hateful and aggressive. This demonstrates a clear and purposeful divergence from the harsher and more aggressive National Socialist anti-semitic imagery. For example, the imagery in **AfD-11** is considerably more subtle and less bold than in National Socialist **NS-12** (the muscular man hammering the Jew-faced snake) from

1932. The imagery employed by the AfD effectively taps into the prevailing “it's just a prank bro” culture of the 21st century, characterized by a casual and often dismissive attitude towards serious issues often portrayed with funny images. In this culture actions or statements that may have harmful or offensive implications are typically brushed off as jokes or harmless pranks making it harder for voters/viewers to recognize the parallel between the AfD and the NSDAP.

In comparing the AfD's anti-Muslim propaganda and the Nazi's anti-semitic propaganda, it is clear that there are both some direct and indirect similarities. While the two parties similarly perpetuate negative stereotypes demonizing and scapegoating Muslims and Jews, what is more striking is their differences. Where the National Socialist images utilize symbolism and details in their posters, the AfD is more direct and to the point. This difference demonstrates the AfD's focus on catering to shorter modern attention spans and fast-paced marketing crucial to sticking out on social media. Where the National Socialists use bold reds to create a sense of urgency and a call to action, the AfD uses blue and white to promote calmness and professionalism. These differences create plausible deniability for the AfD and allow them to repurpose National Socialist ideas effectively in a modern context.

Nationalism

The NSDAP's promotion of nationalism was a critical part of their propaganda and success. Germans, reeling from the defeat in World War I and the substantial limitations put on them by the Treaty of Versailles, were looking for someone to help unify Germany and control the chaos. The Weimar Republic as a democratic institution was very unpopular to many conservative and right-wing Germans who wanted a return to traditional German law and order. This opportunity and circumstance was perfect for Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Dietrich Orlow, *A History of Modern Germany: 1871 to Present*, 8th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351017992>.

Waldemar Gurian, in 1945, described Hitler as the “simplifier of German nationalism” and explained that while Hitler’s form of nationalism began as a direct protest to the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles, it evolved into presenting Hitler as a strong leader capable of bringing a “return to true German conservatism and traditional order.”⁹⁵ As a result, Hitler and the NSDAP framed their form of nationalism itself as something that could “fix” the social, political and economic injustices of the people and in the process unify Germany. The National Socialists used a calculated and multifaceted approach to convince the German people of this message. They glorified German history, to advance conservative and traditional values, used slogans to serve as calls to action to mobilize the German people, and used conservative militaristic imagery to frame themselves as a party capable of bringing back law and order.

The National Socialist glorified German history to promote traditional and conservative German values, namely the importance of a strong, unified, and militaristic nation. **NS-13** is an example of the NS’s glorification of German history. The poster created for the 1933 election campaign in Lippin, Germany, reads “Free Herman's Land.” Arminius, also known as Hermann, was a German chieftain who led a coalition of German tribes to victory against the Romans in the Teutoburg forest in 9AD; he is known as one of Germany’s first “heroes” and some credit this battle as the birth of the “German” nation. The myth and cult of Herman were used throughout early German history as a symbol of unification and defiance against incredible odds.⁹⁶ The poster depicts Herman standing in the middle of the poster, triumphant, with a sword in the air and the Nazi swastika in the background. This figure references the

“Hermannsdenkmal” (Hermann Statue) in Lippin, Germany, which was created and used to

⁹⁵ Waldemar Gurian, “Hitler: The Simplifier of German Nationalism,” *The Review of Politics* 7, no. 3 (1945): 316–24.

⁹⁶ David Crossland, “Battle of the Teutoburg Forest: Germany Recalls Myth That Created the Nation,” *Der Spiegel*, August 28, 2009, sec. International, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/battle-of-the-teutoburg-forest-germany-recalls-myth-that-created-the-nation-a-644913.html>.

celebrate the German victory over the French in the Franco-Prussian War. The National Socialists used the mythology of Hermann to evoke feelings of nationalism, militarism, victory, patriotism, and unity. The call to “Free Hermann’s Land” was not just a call to vote but an example of the NSDAP’s much more calculated intent to promote militarism and nationalism.

Another crucial element of the National Socialist’s spread of nationalist ideas were slogans and calls to action. One of the most famous slogans they used was “Deutschland Erwacht.” The use of the slogan “Deutschland Erwacht” (Germany Awakens) can be seen in both **NS-14** and **NS-15**. Poster **NS-14**, from 1933, depicts a stereotypical “Nordic” looking German young man with a skinny face, light hair, light eyes, a prominent chin, and white skin. The man looking at the viewer with a determined look on his face personifies the call to action “Deutschland Erwacht.” The simple imagery allows the call to action to resonate and be the center focus of the image. The red coloration contrasting with the black letters evokes both urgency and alarm and makes the call to action more eye-catching. This poster’s simple layout and imagery reflect the NS’s confidence in the slogan, indeed it demonstrates a commitment to making the slogan memorable.

Poster **NS-15**, from 1932, is an example of the slogan “Deutschland Erwacht” accompanied by more symbolism. The poster depicts the German Eagle perched on a swastika, choosing National Socialism. Eagle and swastika are surrounded by the German “volk,” who stand close together and raise their arm in the “Hitler salute”. This represents the people’s support for the National Socialist as well as the unifying effect of the party. The people, looking at both the eagle and the swastika, symbolizes the German *Volk* looking to the NSDAP and Germany for guidance. The eagle stares at the slogan, *Germany Awakens*, which symbolizes a call to action that will answer the people’s problems.

Another element of the NSDAP's nationalistic propaganda was the promotion of conservative and traditional law and order. **NS-16** created by Hans Schweitzer, reads, "National Socialism: The Organized Will of the Nation." The National Socialists understood the appeal of organization and unity in a chaotic political, social, and economic environment. The poster depicts three members of the NSDAP Sturmabteilung (Stormtroopers) in profile, looking forward with a large Swastika in the background. The stormtroopers were the "muscle" and power of the National Socialist movement but also had a reputation for being brutes and thugs. This depiction, however, presents the SA members ranging in age as organized and well-kept, with neatly pressed and tidy uniforms. This romanticized portrayal of the Stormtrooper appealed to traditional German definitions of law and order and the importance of a well-drilled and organized military force. This depiction could also serve as good recruitment material by making the SA appear more glamorous and powerful.

The National Socialists used a multifaceted approach to promote and encourage German nationalism and unity. By mixing historical glorification, mobilizing slogans, and promoting traditional values, the NSDAP positioned itself as a unifying force capable of restoring law and order and revitalizing German identity.

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Eighty years later, the AfD has also been successful in fostering nationalist ideas in Germany. Namely by using, German history, nationalist slogans, and the "exploitation" of Germany by the EU. The AfD, an openly eurosceptic party, has called for a "Dexit," effectively the German version of a Brexit if they come to power.⁹⁷ The AfD also has a section on its website about "Euro finance and the EU," in which they explain:

⁹⁷ Selja Ahmatovic, "Far-Right Leader Wants Germany to Perform Its Own Brexit – POLITICO," accessed March 8, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/far-right-leader-wants-germany-to-vote-on-a-dexit/>.

- “Germany must terminate the transfer union and leave the Euro area.”
- “All ECB measures to manipulate the free capital market must be stopped.”
- “The AfD calls for the permanent preservation of unrestricted use of cash as an important civil liberty right.”
- “We oppose any attempts to mutualize liability risks across Europe, particularly from banking transactions.”
- “We want to make timely arrangements for the reintroduction of a new national currency (“Deutsche Mark”). The Bundesbank's gold stored abroad must be completely and immediately transferred to Germany as a temporary cover option.”⁹⁸

These statements call for radical changes and nationalist ideas that could have a long-term effect on Europe's and Germany's political landscape and organization. These fiscally conservative ideas coupled with a citizenship policy that wants “to remove the place of birth principle (acquisition of German citizenship solely through birth in Germany, even if neither parent is German) from the law and return to the descent principle, as it applied until the year 2000” add a worrying touch of ethnonationalism that is eerily similar to the National Socialist.

A large part of the AfD's nationalistic propaganda is framing the EU as something that harms German economic interests poster **AfD-15** is an example. The poster, a part of the AfD's Eurosceptic planning and campaigning leading to the federal elections, reads, “Our Land is the Milk Donkey for the EU.” This frames the EU as taking advantage of Germany, “milking it dry.” The imagery of this poster depicts a shadowy cartoon figure holding up a wallet: it refers to the “criminal” CDU government, and is reinforced by the caption in red that reads “Corona-Funds: Merkle Gifts 50 Million Euros in Tax Money.” This criticism demonstrates another wrinkle of

⁹⁸ “Euro | Finanzen | EU,” Party Website, *Alternative Für Deutschland* (blog), June 28, 2017, <https://www.afd.de/euro-finanzen-eu/>.

the AfD's propaganda as it frames the CDU-led government as one that does not have German national interest in mind and practices reckless spending.

The poster imagery further reflects the AfD's disapproval of the EU. The background consists of a crumpled-up and cracking EU flag, implying visually both that the Union is failing and starting to fracture. Using a cartoon criminal to represent the EU and the CDU-led government further emphasizes the untrustworthiness of the two institutions. The caption "Reduce the EU Budget by 70%" presents the EU as untrustworthy to justify participating less in the EU and reducing Germany's financial involvement. Notably, the AfD's distrust and depiction of the European Union mirrors the NSDAP's disgust with and depiction of the Treaty of Versailles. Both parties blame outside European interference for the economic issue in Germany and blame the attacking government for agreeing to the conditions presented.

The NSDAP used German history to promote both conservative and traditional German values. This has created a taboo for revisionists or altered history in Germany. Curiously, despite this, the AfD has largely gotten away with glorifying German history in its posters to promote nationalist ideology. Poster **AfD-13** reads "The Nightmare For Left-Wing Ideologies, Hands Off Bismarck! The Racist's Name is Karl Marx." Notably, the AfD shifted the blame onto Karl Marx, whose figure had been elevated in East Germany (for 45 years) the socialist communist regime. The framing of Karl Marx a symbol of Marxism and socialism as a racist draws parallels to the National Socialists' use of "Judeo-Bolshevism," which also aimed to demonize socialism/marxism and the left more generally. The AfD's aggressive response to the criticism of Bismarck is not surprising as he represents traditional, more conservative values and is a substantial part of Germany's nationalist and militaristic history. This history is something that the German right, in general, has identified with and is something the AfD continues to promote.

The AfD's promotion of and use of Bismark's historical image and statuary is similar to the use of the Hermann statue in National Socialist **NS-13** from 1933. Both parties use these men and their history to promote and glorify Germany's military success and nationalistic history.

The AfD's public criticism of remembrance culture further illustrates its willingness to defy taboo and glorify German history. In 2017, Bjoern Hoecke, the AfD's leader in the eastern state of Thuringia, referring to the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin declared, "This laughable policy of coming to terms with the past is crippling us. We need a 180-degree turnaround in our policy of memory" and "Germans are the only people in the world who plant a monument of shame in the heart of the capital."⁹⁹ The AfD aims to downplay the severity of the Holocaust to encourage more nationalistic and patriotic thinking in Germany. The use of the term "shame" in the speech also draws similarities to the NSDAP's similar use of shame when discussing the Treaty of Versailles. Both parties are angered by what they see as reminders of German failures and negative history. They both want to erase and move past this history in order to create a renewed sense of nationalism and German pride.

A key characteristic of both the AfD and the NSDAP propaganda was simple and effective nationalistic slogans to mobilize the people. Interlining despite modern taboos created by the NSDAP history, the AfD is oftentimes more direct in its wording and statements than the NSDAP. **AfD-14** features in many of its media and pages. The figure reads, "Unser land Zuerst!" (Our land *first*). This slogan leans into nationalistic tendencies, and echoes the National Socialist slogan "Deutschland Erwacht." The idea that German comes first is not *necessarily* problematic of course. However, given the large context of the AfD policies and ideas, this type of nationalist messaging is not harmless either.

⁹⁹ "German AfD Rightist Triggers Fury with Holocaust Memorial Comments | Reuters," accessed April 15, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1521HB/>.

The AfD is able to promote a more direct message than the National Socialist because of its use of calming and inviting imagery and colors. The claim, *Our land First* is surrounded by a blue heart and underlined in black, red, and gold (the colors of the German Flag). The imagery of the heart makes the message seem more welcoming, and less aggressive than it actually is. Using a blue background and white font is less alarming and confrontational than NSDAP's frequent use of the bold red and black font. Upon first inspection, the image looks relatively polished and professional and doesn't look out of place amongst other political slogans or party images. This illustrates the party's use of colors and imagery to successfully make a controversial message both appealing and digestible for a larger contemporary German audience.

Another interesting difference between the AfD's and the NSDAP's nationalistic rhetoric is how they present law and order. The NS, through their portrayal of their "stormtrooper" in **NS-16**, demonstrated how the party could create law and order. By contrast, the AfD prefers to focus on the government's inability to promote law and order. **AfD-12** is the first page of the AfD's 2021 "Infektionsschutzgesetz" pamphlet and reads, "Germany Closed? Berlin Not Really!" This is a subtle jab at the government's immigration policy. The claim that Berlin is not tight or this context secure is meant to isolate the German government and position them as a distant power controlling the people. This security also has a double meaning as it doesn't just mean secure from Corona but secure from *immigration*. Underneath this is the line, "The infection protection law endangers our Freedom, Federalism, and our prosperity." The AfD uses this to appeal to voters' fear and uncertainty surrounding the lockdown measures and frame it as threatening people's freedom, rights, and decision-making.

The poster's imagery helps further emphasize the disconnect between the people and Berlin/Government. The outline of Germany, with a prominent lock over Berlin and Chains

spreading out, represents the far-reaching effects of the lockdown instituted by the German Government. The lock over Berlin alludes to the fact that the government holds the keys and can decide when to unlock Germany and allow people to be free. This imagery in the poster tries to put the rest of Germany against Berlin and the government to create an us versus. them mentality and mobilize their voter base. The AfD's framing of the lockdown as an abuse of power and the actions of the overreaching government parallels the Nazi's attack on Article 48 powers in poster **NS-7 from 1931**. Both figures try to paint the government as evil, their party as the solution, and the German people as the ones being taken advantage of.

A comparison of the NSDAP and the AfD's nationalist propaganda reveals similarities and differences that provide a deeper insight into both the effectiveness and evolution of nationalism in contemporary German politics. The National Socialists and the AfD both demonize European interference, glorify German history, and appeal to conservative German values to promote nationalism. However, the two parties differ in how they use slogans and address law and order. The NSDAP used bold red font and imagery to help emphasize their slogans while the AfD used calming white and blue fonts to subvert attention from their nationalist messages. Where the NSDAP positioned itself as the party capable of supplying law and order, the AfD prefers to expose the lack of law and order created by the German government. These similarities and differences highlight the evolving methods and strategies for promoting nationalism in contemporary German politics and the historical strategies that are still effective.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of the AfD's and the NSDAP's propaganda posters reveals concerning parallels in rhetoric, strategy, and ideology as well as meaningful differences that demonstrate the continued success and evolution of divisive, populist, hateful, and nationalist propaganda in Germany. The parties' shared emphasis on natalism, the depiction of an "ideal" nuclear family, and the promotion of traditional gender roles in their "Volk" and "Familia" propaganda suggest a dangerously similar appeal to ethnic and racial ideology. Additionally, the parties' similar populist economic strategies, utilizing simple promises, blaming established parties in government, and scapegoating an othered group (Muslims and Jews) highlight the dangerous effectiveness of populist rhetoric in appealing to Germans of different social classes, genders, and backgrounds.

More worrying still are the similarities between the AfD's anti-Muslim rhetoric and the NSDAP's anti-semitic rhetoric, with both parties using conspiracies and stereotypes, exaggerated facial features, and reinforcing "inherently" negative traits with the aim of othering, demonizing, and scapegoating. Equally alarming is the parties' strikingly similar promotion of Nationalism by demonizing European interference, glorifying German history, and appealing to conservative German values, demonstrating a dangerous return of nationalistic and Eurosceptic ideology in Germany and across Europe.

While there are significant similarities between the two parties, the differences demonstrate how the AfD has adapted to be successful in contemporary German politics. One example is the difference in the presentation and complexity of the parties' posters. The National Socialists create posters that appear more active and busy visually and generally have more things going on. The AfD, on the other hand, is more direct and to the point with its imagery,

using standard stock photos and outlines with one or two phrases and ideas. The AfD's images have less to decipher and understand visually, and the images are less symbolic and more direct. These differences point to modern vs historical differences in the effective spread of information. The NSDAP made their posters to be visually stimulating by creating lots of graphics and messages, but the AfD creates propaganda that is simple to understand, likely due to the effects that online usage has on the average person's attention span.

Another key difference between the parties' posters is the presentation of their more divisive and aggressive ideas. These differences are most evident when comparing AfD's nationalistic and anti-muslim posters to the NSDAP's nationalistic and antisemitic posters. The AfD uses less aggressive imagery and color schemes to downplay and hide some of their more directly anti-Muslim and nationalistic ideas. Where the National Socialists use bold reds to create a sense of urgency and a call to action, the AfD uses blue and white to promote calmness and professionalism. Where the NSDAP's nationalistic and antisemitic posters depicted smashing and breaking chains and violence against Jews, the AfD depicts cute piglets in a field and blue hearts. This, of course, does not take away from the sinister messages and rhetoric that the AfD promotes but aims to make it more digestible and acceptable for contemporary, more socially aware German audiences.

Despite the AfD's capacity to obscure some of these messages, the parallels between its rhetoric and that of the Nazis are evident and permeate many of its messages and policy objectives. It is beyond troubling that despite these clear similarities, the AfD (as of this writing) is the second-largest political party in Germany. Recent polls for the German 2025 Federal parliamentary elections show the AfD winning 19% of the vote, but have peaked as high as

22%.¹⁰⁰ The continued support for these messages suggests either a lack of judgment or, more troublingly, a pre-existing acceptance of such ideas among specific segments of the German population.

However, propaganda and spreading information is only one part of the discussion. Further research on the demographics and social, economic, and political conditions throughout Germany would be required for a deeper understanding of how and where the AfD is successful. Additional information on these demographics and outside factors would help understand where Germany's memory of history may be failing and what strategies may be effective in preventing the influence and further rise of the AfD.

The success of the AfD is worrying not only because of its present implications but what it means about the failures of Germany to reconcile with its Nazi past. Erinnerungskultur (remembrance culture) is already a prevalent part of Germany's culture and history. Children are taught about the Holocaust and the other crimes committed by the Nazis and constantly reminded by statues and memorials that what happened can *never* happen again.¹⁰¹ The success of the AfD indicates not only the decrease in efficacy of “Erinnerungskultur” but also the failure to recognize forms of racialization. This suggests a deeper problem in Germany that goes beyond how to make learning more interactive and how history is taught. If the AfD can succeed in persuading certain segments of the German population to ignore or openly express their previously held denial of the Holocaust, they can gradually push the boundaries further towards the extreme right.

¹⁰⁰ “German Election Polls 2024,” Statista, accessed March 6, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1257178/voting-intention-in-germany/>.

¹⁰¹ “World War II and Holocaust: Germany’s Culture of Remembrance,” April 29, 2019, <https://www.deutschland.de/en/germany-year-usa-20182019-germanys-culture-of-remembrance>.

Even if the AfD ultimately fails as a party it has already demonstrated that the rightwing in Germany can be successful even with Nazi linkages. This sets a dangerous precedent for what's acceptable in German politics and if not addressed could lead to a drastic overall political shift to the right. Right-wing populist and nationalist groups are not only an issue in Germany but globally. The success of the AfD sets a dangerous example for other parties in different countries like it. If a party like the AfD can be successful in Germany, any country is susceptible.

Image Appendix



NS-1 “Save the German Family” Source: Imperial War Museum Collection



NS-2 “Healthy Parents Healthy Kids” Source: Lebendiges Museum Online Collection



NS-3 “Mothers Fight for Your Children” Source: LAMCA online database



NS-4 “Women Save the German Family Vote Adolf Hitler” Source: Library of Congress



AfD-1 “New Germans?’ We will make ourselves” Source: AfD Federal Election Materials



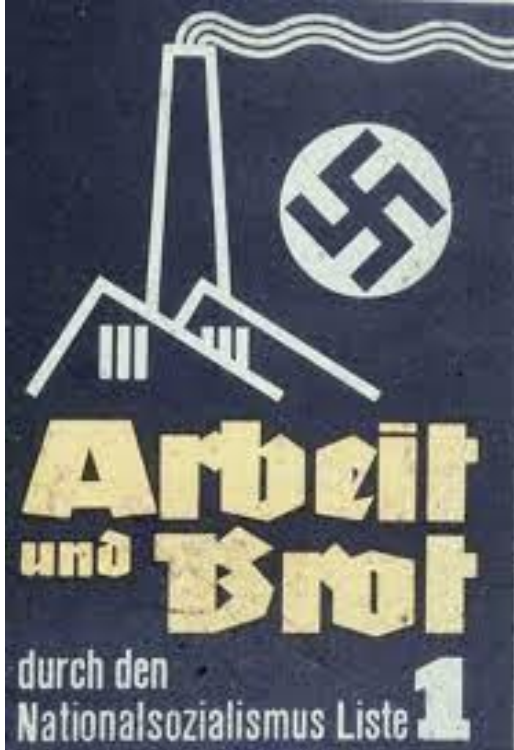
AfD-2 “Father, Mother, Children” Source: AfD Hessen Election Materials



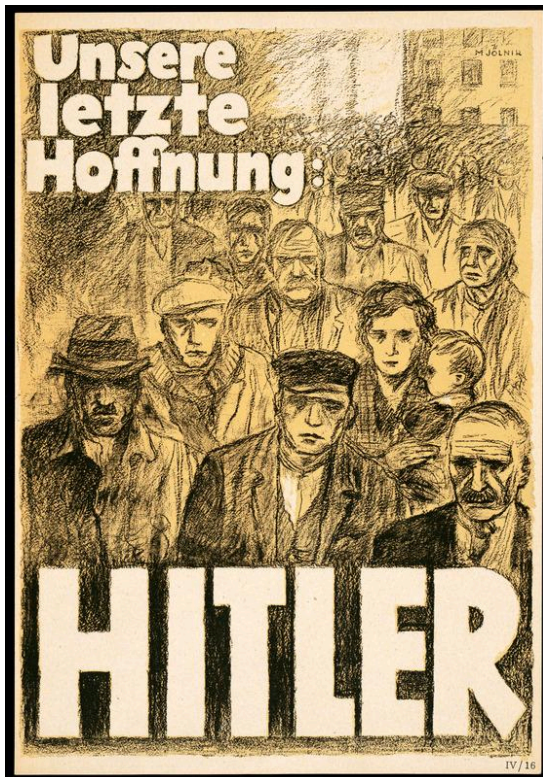
AFD-3 "I am Mother not 'Birth-Giving Parent'" Source: AfD Bayern Election Materials



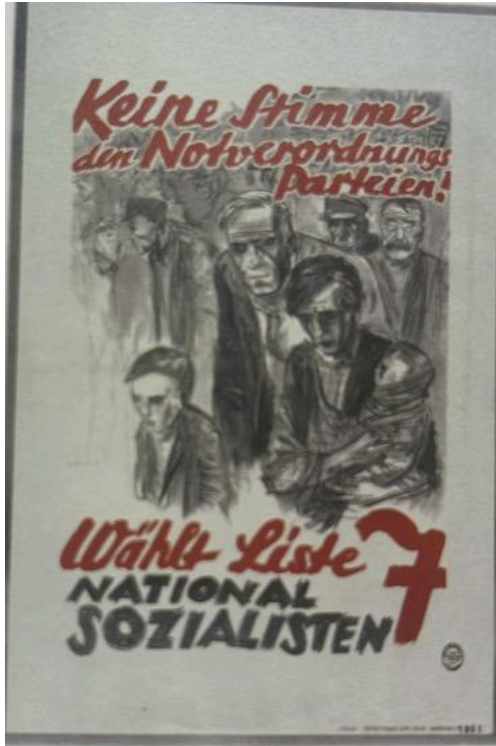
AFD-4 "Hands Away From Our Children" Source: AfD Bayern Election Materials



NS-5 “Work and Bread” Source: Calvin U. German Propaganda Archive



NS-6 “Our Last Hope Hitler” Source: Library Of Congress



NS-7 "No Voice in the Emergency Regulation Party" Source: *Geklebte NS-propaganda* (214)



NS-8 "We Workers are awake" Source: Calvin U. German Propaganda Archive



AfD-5 "With the AfD work is worth it again" Source: *AfD Kompakt*



AfD-6 "No, to selling out our medium-sized businesses" Source: *AfD Kompakt*



AFD-7 "Protect the Welfare System" Source: AfD Bremen Election Materials



NS-9 "Halt the money belongs to the working people." Source: *Geklebte NS-Propaganda* (208)



NS-10 "Free from Misery, Free from Jews." Source: Calvin U. German Propaganda Archive



NS-11 "Marxism is the Guardian Angel of Capitalism" Source: Calvin U. German Propaganda



NS-12 "Death to Marxism. Join us!" Source: Calvin U. German Propaganda Archive



AFD-8 "So Europe does not become 'Euro-Arabia.'" Source: AfD Berlin Election Materials



AFD-9 “Islam does not belong to Germany; Women's freedom is not negotiable.” Source: Gökce Yurdaku “Field study”



AFD-10 “Hate preacher Ahmad A. swindles his way into 18,000 Euros in Corona relief.” Source: *AfD Kompakt*



AFD-11 “Islam does not fit in our Cuisine.” Source: AfD Election Materials



NS-13 “Free Herman's land.” Source: Calvin U. German Propaganda Archive



NS-14 "Deutschland Erwacht." Source: *Geklebte NS-Propaganda* (213)



NS-15 "Deutschland Erwacht", (accompanied by more imagery) Source: *Geklebte NS-Propaganda* (213)



NS-16 “National Socialism: The Organized Will of the Nation.” Source: Calvin U. German Propaganda Archive



AfD-12 “Germany tight? Berlin not really!” Source: AfD Election Materials



AfD-13 "The nightmare for left-wing ideologies, Hands off Bismarck! The racist's name is Karl Marx." Source: *AfD Kompakt*



AfD-14 "Unser land Zuerst!" Source: AfD Election Materials



AfD-15 “Our land is the milk donkey for the EU.” *Source: AfD Kompakt*

Image Sources

NS-1 “Save the German Family”

Paul Helwig-Strehl, “Rettet Die Deutsche Familie [Save the German Family],” Image, Imperial War Museums, 1932, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/12488>.

NS-2 “Healthy Parents Healthy Kids”

Source: “Gesunde Eltern - gesunde Kinder!” Accessed March 19, 2024.

<https://www.dhm.de/lemo/bestand/objekt/gesunde-eltern-gesunde-kinder-um-1936.html>.

NS-3 “Mothers Fight for Your Children”

Source: Frantz Würbel, “Mothers Fight for Your Children!” Image. LACMA Collections, 1934, <https://collections.lacma.org/node/207876>.

NS-4 “Women Save the German Family Vote Adolf Hitler”

Source: Felix Albrecht. “Frauen! Rettet Die Deutsche Familie. Wählt Adolf Hitler!” Accessed March 20, 2024. <https://www.loc.gov/item/94515528/>.

NS-5 “Work and Bread”

Source: German Propaganda Archive Calvin University. “Work and Bread.” Accessed March 20, 2024. <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/posters/arbeits.jpg>.

NS-6 “Our Last Hope Hitler”

Source: Mjölfnir, “Unsere Letzte Hoffnung-Hitler.” Image. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. Accessed March 20, 2024. <https://www.loc.gov/item/92510229/>.

NS-7 “No Voice in the Emergency Regulation Party”

Source: Witamwas, Birgit. *Geklebte NS-Propaganda: Verführung Und Manipulation Durch Das Plakat*, 2016.

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NS-8 “We Workers are awake”

Source: German Propaganda Archive Calvin University. “We Workers Are Awake.” Accessed March 20, 2024.

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Source: Witamwas, Birgit. *Geklebte NS-Propaganda: Verführung Und Manipulation Durch Das Plakat*, 2016.

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NS-10 “Free from Misery, Free from Jews.”

Source: German Propaganda Archive Calvin University. “Free from Misery, Free from Jews.” Accessed March 20, 2024.

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NS-11 “Marxism is the Guardian Angle of Capitalism”

Source: German Propaganda Archive Calvin University. “Marxism Is the Guardian Angle of Capitalism.” Accessed March 20, 2024.

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NS-12 “Death to Marxism. Join us!”

Source: German Propaganda Archive Calvin University. “Death to Marxism. Join Us.” Accessed March 20, 2024.

<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/posters/marxism1932.jpg>.

NS-13 “Free Herman's land.”

Source: German Propaganda Archive Calvin University. “Free Herman’s Land.” Accessed March 20, 2024.

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Source: Witamwas, Birgit. *Geklebte NS-Propaganda: Verführung Und Manipulation Durch Das Plakat*, 2016.

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NS-15 “Deutschland Erwacht”, (accompanied by more imagery)

Source: Witamwas, Birgit. *Geklebte NS-Propaganda: Verführung Und Manipulation Durch Das Plakat*, 2016.

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NS-16 “National Socialism: The Organized Will of the Nation.”

Source: German Propaganda Archive Calvin University. “National Socialism: The Organized Will of the Nation.” Accessed March 20, 2024.

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Source: “BTW2017_Plakat_NeueDeutsche_Ansicht_H.Pdf.” Accessed March 20, 2024.

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Source: “I Am Mother Not ‘Birth-Giving Parent.’” Accessed March 20, 2024.

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Source: AfD Kompakt, “Altmaier guckt zu: Ausverkauf unserer Wirtschaft an Fernost! AfD

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Source: AfD Bremen [@AfD_Bremen]. “Sozialsysteme schützen: Geld für Renten statt für

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Source: AfD Berlin [@AfDBerlin]. “Definitiv ein Hingucker!” Tweet. *Twitter*, April 9, 2019.

<https://twitter.com/AfDBerlin/status/1115572899115675649>.

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Source: Gökce Yurdakul. “Bikinis, Blondes, and Burkas: Gender and Islam in the German Far Right.” Epicenter Harvard University, December 16, 2019.

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