

How Alternative für Deutschland is trying to resurrect German nationalism

The far-right party is focused on culture, rather than the economically left behind.

Once a year in September, the towering, 19th century Kyffhäuser memorial in central Germany attracts a large crowd of people. Equipped with German flags, they climb up to a restaurant at the foot of the memorial for the so-called Kyffhäuser meeting. Organised by Der Flügel (The Wing), an ultra-nationalist sub-organisation inside the Alternative für Deutschland (the Alternative for Germany), the gathering embodies the way what is now the third strongest political force in the German national parliament understands and makes politics.

There are four dimensions central to this political mindset: memory, myth, metaphysics and the media. The Kyffhäuser meeting is a good starting point to make sense of this peculiar but successful cocktail.

1. "Taking back the past"

The inaugural Kyffhäuser meeting was held in 2015. Back then, the gathering attracted only the followers of Der Flügel and maybe some observers of the German New Right. This year's meeting, however, was the subject of ferocious national debate. The reason: a speech by Dr Alexander Gauland, a former member of Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union party. He left to found the AfD, and four years later, has led the party into the German parliament. In the speech, Gauland called for Germans to be proud of the soldiers that fought for Germany in the First and Second World War and not to build German identity on the 12 years of Nazism. "These years don't concern our identity anymore," he said. "Which is why we have the right not only to take back our country, but also our past."

The party knows that it is prodding a taboo. After all, one of its core slogans reads: "Dare it, Germany". Gauland's speech means nothing less than a fundamental questioning of the German post-68 consensus on how to remember its past. Only a couple of years ago, it would have been unthinkable for a relevant party to say something alike and to continue to play a serious role in German

politics. Today, it has helped the AfD to make it into the German Bundestag and to become its third strongest political force.

2. Forging a national myth

This significant shift in German politics does not only represent a general weariness of being confronted with the horrors of the Third Reich. The success of the AfD is also closely linked to its distorted, but coherent narrative of German identity - something that most of the other parties lack.

At the core of this political storytelling are national myths that link the AfD to an idea of a millennial national history. The Kyffhäuser meeting is a great example of this. The place of the meeting, the Kyffhäuser memorial, was built between 1892 and 1897, a period of surging nationalism. It commemorates the first emperor of the so-called second German empire as well as the legend of Barbarossa, or Kaiser Frederick, a medieval emperor of the first German empire. As the legend goes, Barbarossa lies asleep in the mountain under the memorial until the German empire is reborn. By holding one of its central meetings at this symbolic place in the middle of nowhere, the AfD embeds itself in a national mythology.

Der Flügel, and a large part of the AfD, see themselves as defenders of what they see as a lost legendary German greatness. In his opening speech of this year's meeting, Björn Höcke, the AfD leader in Thuringia, where the memorial is located, and a core figure of Der Flügel, argues that the German identity is not characterised by the horrors of Nazi Germany but rather by three myths. These are the Nibelungs (made world famous by Wagner's operas), the legend of Faust (equally well-known through Goethe's seminal books), and the very Kyffhäuser legend that provides the background scenery for the meeting. Embedding the party and its politics into these well-known national myths has allowed the AfD to sell the idea of a new German cultural memory and identity. And as the election has shown, this has appeal.

3. A populist party of PhDs

Recent research on the AfD's electorate suggests this focus on culture, myth and emotions may have been a decisive factor in the party's success. Studies have shown that the main supporters are not, as many observers initially argued, left behind economically but rather well-off and well-educated. This is reflected by the party's leaders, almost all of whom have a PhD and some even are professors.

Many of the party's ideological masterminds have a background in philosophy and history. At AfD events, reference is often made to the group of Conservative German intellectuals who opposed the ill-fated Weimar Republic, such as the nationalist Ernst Jünger, and the Nazi supporters Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger.

Why do these circles put so much emphasis on culture and philosophy? Core to the strategy of the AfD and the New Right is to focus on what they call "metapolitics" - a term developed by French New Right thinker Alain de Benoist in the 1970s and based on the Gramscian idea of cultural hegemony, the manipulation of cultural norms to suit your own ends. In the eyes of many New Right intellectuals, cultural hegemony is to be reached in the pre-political, cultural sphere through engagement in civil society. Hence the importance of think tanks and cultural magazines.

Given the dominance of the German post-68 consensus, the efforts by the New Right are focused on the long term. The final goal: make the German past great again in order face the challenges of the future. This aim is based on the conviction that a German identity based on negative historical experiences will in the longterm lead to the perishing of German culture - a fear that today has grown in a time of rapid change.

This conviction is endowed with legitimacy among conservative elites by drawing on Heideggerian metaphysics and ideas of national spirit. Echoing Heidegger, Höcke himself says in a promotional video for the Kyffhäuser meeting: "I think we have founded a great tradition that is forward-looking. (...) We have all pointed at the fact that we as a Volk need a spiritual return to our great history, our great culture, to shape the future and to win back the future". This culturalist approach is appealing to many well-educated voters who see German culture threatened by nihilism, commercialisation and the increasing influence of migrant communities.

The unlikely alliance of philosophy and populism contradicts the dominant idea that far-right populism and philosophical reasoning are antagonistic. The AfD has a rich New Right literature at its disposal.

4. Social media mythmaking

The German New Right has been trying to spread its ideas in Germany for a long time, mainly without success. One of the main reasons for its success today is not

only the growing importance of emotions and storytelling in politics, but its capability to reach a larger audience through social media. The University of Oxford has shown that the AfD dominated social media during the election campaign. With almost 380,000 likes on Facebook the party has more than twice as many likes as the CDU.

The party knows how to use this network effectively. It has, for example, learnt to produce professional videos full of pathos to reinforce its main campaign slogan "Take back your country". The clips often show shots of major German cultural sites such as the Kyffhäuser memorial or typical German landscapes. The party also uses social media to trigger scandals, such as Gauland's speech, bending the borders of what is legitimate in the German political debate. These messages are first spread via social media and later picked up by established German media, drawing even more attention to the party. The party and many of its supportive organisations have created a network of echo chambers.

By merging the power of mythical storytelling, philosophical ideas and outreach via social media, the AfD has fundamentally shaken up German politics and the country's post-68 historical and cultural consensus. Its success reflects a long-smouldering Kulturkampf on what it means to be German in the 21st century.

The AfD is sending more than 90 MPs to the Bundestag. It remains to be seen if the party can survive the pitfalls of realpolitik or, as many observers hope, whether it will fall prey to divisions and a lack of political professionalism. What is clear is that the party has already succeeded in laying the ground work for a new, more assertive German nationalism.

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