

Germany Has a Nazi Problem. And a Refugee Problem.



Right-wing supporters shout abuse at nearby heckling leftists at a right-wing protest gathering the day after a man was stabbed and died of his injuries on August 27, 2018 in Chemnitz, Germany. Police have arrested a Syrian man and an Iraqi man as suspected perpetrators of the stabbing. Sean Gallup/Getty Images

Two things can be bad at the same time.

The German city of Chemnitz, in the state of Saxony, is seeing large protests by neo-Nazis, following a fatal stabbing of a German citizen by refugees. The men arrested in the case are a 22-year old Iraqi and a 23-year-old Syrian, who are now being charged with voluntary manslaughter.

Prosecutors were able to confirm late last week that the accused men did not act in self-defense, even if details surrounding the incident remain in the dark. A leaked report from inside the investigation publicly revealed the number of stab wounds, names of the accused men as well as their addresses, while concluding with the name of the judge in charge of the case. The intention of the leaker seems crystal clear: putting high pressure on the case, and the eyes of the country on the incident.

No need for that amount of attention: The protests by the far right have been far more successful than previous events. Regular Nazi protesters are usually outnumbered by counterprotesters, including the presence of far-left groups such as Antifa. Protests were organised by groups such as the far-right “Pro Chemnitz”, PEGIDA (which translates to “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West”) and the nationalist party AfD (Alternative for Germany), but it is likely to assume that citizens not wanting to be associated with far-right ideologies were also counted among those enraged by the incident. However, the presence of well-known Nazis was quickly confirmed, and caught Europe-wide media attention, and still the march gathered almost 3,000 attendees on Saturday.

According to local police, 10 people were arrested later last week for making a Hitler salute during the march, which remains a criminal offense in Germany. The

same police are now coming under fire for not handling the situation appropriately, as federal police were not present to keep both counter-protesters and journalists safe. Multiple news outlets are stating that their staff was pushed around or assaulted, as police forces were unable to keep far-right marchers in check.

In Berlin, where the performance of law enforcement is seen as a major blow to the confidence in the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, governing parties are waking up to the reality of extremism in the country. Christian-Democratic Union (Merkel's party) faction leader Volker Kauder now wants the far-right AfD party to be surveilled by the German "Verfassungsschutz" ("Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution", which is Germany's domestic security agency), following their involvement in the Chemnitz protests. The indication here is quite severe: If Merkel's party suggests an investigation, then it means that the chancellor could believe the party (which gathered 12.6 percent at the last federal election) is fascistic. If confirmed, authorities could move to disperse the party and ban it from participating in elections.

However, within Merkel's majority, other voices such as that of the more conservative Christian-Social Union Horst Seehofer, believe that there is no reason to believe that the AfD is dangerous, and are downplaying the significance of the marches in Chemnitz. This is either because they genuinely believe that, or because they think that a more moderate response, mixed with a conservative message, and bring some voters back to the mainstream.

It is certainly true that the AfD has made a worrying turn since its creation in 2012. What was initially a party of economists critiquing Germany's membership in the euro as Europe's common currency, turned into a politically weaponised, angry far-right movement.

In 2015, one of the AfD's most controversial high-ranking members, Björn Höcke, co-authored the *Erfurter Resolution* requesting a major policy shift in the party. According to this manifesto, the new focus of the AfD should be "a movement of the German people against the societal experiments of the past decades (like Gender-mainstreaming, multiculturalism)."

Höcke is no stranger to controversy: he has described Judaism and Christianity as being in opposition to one another and has wished Germany a prosperous "1,000-

year future,” a well-known Nazi reference.

So when you read that Germany has a Nazi problem, know that Germany’s Nazis are both real Nazis, and Nazis afraid to admit that they are. The existence of the far-right is not a new phenomenon, and believing that the influx of refugees into Germany caused people to do Hitler salutes would be ill-informed. But there is a necessities for authorities to address issues like the Chemnitz stabbing in order not to embolden these movements.

The origin of this problem lies in the sexual assaultss in Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2015, which saw at least 24 women raped and a total of 1,200 otherwise assaulted or harrassed.. Both German news media and local police were caught attempting to downplay the incident, and the mayor of the city even went to far as to blame the victims for not keeping “men at arms length.” In the end, social media backlash made the story flame up, and it ended up strengthening far-right movements such as PEGIDA and the AFD. Similar events, and terrorist attacks, since have further strengthened the far right.

Germany’s TV media indulges in lengthy talk shows about the importance of not generalizing the country’s large Muslim population, and while that is true, it certainly isn’t enough. The media should practice open debate, by actually having the controversial conversation about the migrants in Germany. Instead of talking about the far-right, journalists need to let those radicals speak, and correct their number where necessary. The responsibility of the government in the current situation is to a) enforce the law, no matter whether in refugee community or in a middle-class suburb, and b) to provide people as soon as possible with the right to acquire an job. Germany should use its prior experience with immigrants and let these immigrants integrate into the labor market. German criminologist Christian Pfeiffer confirms this: He links the reduction in overall crime by refugees between 2016 and 2017 to the considerable increase in those who got a job.

The rise of neo-Nazis in Germany is a worrisome trend, but it cannot be fought with bans and people being imprisoned for saying outrageous things. If liberal democracy wants to survive, it needs to use the tools that it purports to defend: free speech, open dialogue, and the rule of law.

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Source: <https://www.weeklystandard.com/bill-wirtz/germany-has-a-nazi-problem-and-a-refugee-problem>

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