

Settling In: The resurgence of nationalism in Germany, and a wave of unsolved attacks on refugees

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Beginning in May 2016, I set out for a month of reporting in Germany as a McCloy Fellow to learn how the arrival of more than a million refugees has led to a rise in nationalism there—and to a wave of attacks on refugees, the vast majority of which go unsolved. I traveled to nearly a dozen towns and cities to interview refugees, politicians, police, attorneys, researchers and journalists. For this report, I've organized my conclusions around four central questions.

How has the debate over refugees invigorated conservative political and social movements, and nationalism?

Much has been written about the rising popularity of the conservative, anti-Eurozone, anti-refugee party Alternative for Germany (AfD), which has become the foremost critic of Chancellor Angela Merkel's "welcome politics" toward refugees. What remained unclear, however, was whether the AfD represents a new discontent among everyday German citizens as to the direction of the country—as the party claims—or whether its base is comprised of the same conservative Germans who in the past have supported unscrupulous Neo-Nazi and other right wing groups. It's an important question: Does the AfD represent a new nationalism in Germany, or merely the repackaging of an old nationalism that has long existed outside the mainstream political conversation?

To answer this question, I scheduled a meeting with a high-level AfD representative in Berlin; but first, I decided to travel to Dresden to attend one of the protests held each Monday night in the city for more than a year now, organized by the new right-wing platform PEGIDA.

Contrary to claims by AfD's leaders, who have tried to distance themselves from popular right-wing movements like PEGIDA, I found that many PEGIDA supporters themselves see the AfD as a long-awaited outlet for their grievances. On a Monday afternoon in Dresden's large, central plaza, I interviewed Michael Stürzenberger, a tall man with a warm face and glasses. Due perhaps to his skepticism of the press, he insisted that my interview with him be videotaped. He complained about a surge of radical Islam in Germany via the masses of Muslim refugees—mostly men—arriving here. He quickly put forth various claims including that the Muslims want to build 100 mosques in Munich and that they want to eliminate Christianity. When I asked him about the AfD, he seemed enthused: "We want (our) arguments to be taken up in politics. Now, finally, with the party AfD, we have a strong voice that represents us."

Within an hour, Stürzenberger was speaking before a crowd of some 2,500 Germans who had assembled to take their weekly march around Dresden's city center. They waved flags of Germany, and flags of a Christian cross in German colors. They carried signs:

No Islam in Germany

Today we are tolerant. Tomorrow we are foreigners in our own country.

Though many of the protestors wore shirts or bore signs advocating some specific cause or another, their common cause was to decry Islam, Muslim refugees, and the decline of Germany. It seemed to me from the PEGIDA rally—and according to the demonstrators themselves—that the AfD provides an outlet of dissent for people who disagree with Germany's welcoming policy toward refugees, or Muslim refugees in particular.

After attending the protest, I wanted to hear from the AfD itself, so I met the Chairman of the party's Berlin branch, Georg Pazderski. He didn't disagree that some PEGIDA demonstrators support the AfD. He argued that the AfD attracts all manner of people who feel they don't have a voice in mainstream politics, or in the press. Throughout my conversations with conservative Germans, the term "lying press" came up frequently—the notion that the liberal media censures right-wing views and are biased against them. I've come to believe that, at least in small ways, this is true. I interviewed an editor of the largest newspaper in Rostock, who admitted that she routinely censors right-wing comments that could be construed as hate speech. She also said she doesn't seek out a right-wing viewpoint on everyday stories. She sees her publication as an arbiter of opinions, not as a blank slate upon which any person can express any opinion they wish.

But back to the AfD. Mr. Pazderski made it clear that his is a party of patriots—a term he says has been vilified since the 1960s, when young people began asking their parents about their involvement in the Third Reich and patriotism became overshadowed by a national guilt or shame. Today patriotism is expressed through nationalism, including the need to maintain Germany's values and culture. Mr. Pazderski argued that the AfD welcomes refugees who want to uphold those values, but that Germany has no place for refugees who, for instance, hold Sharia or Islamic law in higher regard than they would the German constitution.

But he sees no link between these sentiments and criminal violence against them. He began by downplaying any reports of attacks on refugees, saying "No no, there have not been any attacks. This is nonsense. There have been some arsons as far as refugee shelters are concerned, but as far as I know nobody was injured." In contrast, he described the New Year's Eve attack in Cologne as an organized wave of sexual assaults and rape by "nearly a thousand" refugee men on German women, a phenomenon he says is brand new for Germany.

Though he did not discriminate against Muslim refugees in the way that people at the PEGIDA rally did, his main concern was economic: That the vast majority of refugees

are uneducated and unskilled, and that they'll never be able to catch up and find a job in the German workforce. These refugees, he argues, should leave.

In this way, the AfD seems to make an economic argument as well as a nationalistic argument for the restriction of refugees in Germany. The AfD was founded in 2013 on an anti-euro platform, but gained supporters when it offered a way forward on the subject of refugees, Pazderski says. He says the AfD welcomes people who are outwardly patriotic, and defines Germany in part by what it is not—a nation of Islam, or of terrorists. It is a nation of family values, not of uncontrollable foreign-looking men. To him, AfD members “are looking to the future. They say, how will Germany be in 20, 30, 40 years? Will it be as good as today?” The problem is that these refugees will depend on Germany’s welfare system, but will fail to find work and therefore will never contribute to funding that system.

I think it would be appropriate to view the AfD as a product of Germany’s refugee politics. In Pazderski’s words, “In the past we didn’t have a discussion about refugees, the euro, the European union. Since the AfD exists, we’re having these discussions.” If he is correct, it would lend credence to one of the hypothesis of my research that the arrival of so many refugees to Germany is unearthing long-buried sentiments over race and identity more so than shaping new ones.

How are Germany’s cities and towns reacting to the resettlement of large numbers of refugees?

On the whole, Germany’s reputation for its welcome culture seems well-deserved. In nearly every town and city I visited, Germans were volunteering to support refugees and ease their transition here, as well as helping them navigate everyday life.

In the small town of Clausnitz in Saxony, each Saturday, volunteers deliver donated clothes, toys, kitchen items, furniture and more to the local school, where refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere come to collect items that they lack. A couple hours away in the large city of Dresden, there are near-daily “International Cafes” where refugees mingle with Germans to chat, practice their language skills, sip tea and juice and discuss their asylum applications. In Berlin, a web-based housing initiative has become famous as it grew into a network of thousands of Germans offering spare rooms in their apartments to refugees. Most refugees I spoke with felt welcomed here. Their primary concern is whether they will be allowed to stay.

But beneath the welcome culture there exists a much smaller counter culture that views refugees with suspicion, antagonizes them in speech—and every now and then, through violence. Nowhere has tension between ordinary, small-town Germans and refugees manifested more prominently than in Clausnitz, that quiet community of a less than one thousand residents. The town’s mayor explained to me how, last year, residents became worried upon learning that they would be required to settle dozens of refugees here, in a place with few jobs and limited housing. They weren’t concerned about families of refugees—they were worried about young, single men.

And so, when a bus full of refugees arrived one night unexpectedly in Clausnitz, community residents, joined by anti-refugee protestors from beyond the town, literally stopped the bus in its tracks. They gathered around it, demanding to know the makeup of the people inside. A video captured the climax of the confrontation: Germans outside the bus chanting in unison to “go home.” A woman on the bus apparently spit at the crowd, and then, a federal police officer entered the bus and dragged out a young boy in order to begin forcefully delivering the frightened immigrants to their new home.

One could hardly imagine a worse welcome; the father of the boy who was dragged from the bus described to me how, upon seeing the reaction of the town’s residents that night, he had assumed that the bus would simply turn around and bring them elsewhere. He was shocked that he and his two sons would be forced to live in a place where they were so blatantly unwanted. And yet, months after the event, he harbors no animosity whatsoever toward the town’s residents. They’ve been nothing but helpful and pleasant to him ever since.

Clausnitz embodies both major contradictions in the way Germany has treated refugees. First, that refugees who are vilified by a minority of Germans can nonetheless feel at home among the majority. Second, and more important, despite the belief by a growing percentage of Germans that their country will be unable to handle them all, in fact, refugees are integrating rapidly into German life. The town that was a symbol for anti-refugee resistance has become a model for coexistence in a matter of months.

Not all locations, however, are equally peaceful. In Dresden, the center of the PEGIDA movement, allies warn refugees to stay away from the city center on Monday nights when anti-refugee activists gather. One refugee from Syria said he’s passed by the protests without any problem or fear. But another, from Ghana, said he is constantly aware that he stands out here. As we walk about the city, people stare at him, and he does not interpret their stares as nice ones. He says Germans routinely insult him, that they are racist, and that they do not want to change.

Ultimately, the extent to which refugees are able to integrate positively into German society will depend on the opportunities that German society offers to them. Refugees themselves will be the first to say that they want to work, and that without work they feel useless. Conservative Germans agree. The papers I’ve read about the economic impacts of immigration concur that in the short term, unemployment rises when large numbers of immigrants arrive, as does the financial burden on social welfare systems of all sorts. But most conclude that in the long term, immigrants will not only be good for German society, but necessary: Germany has one of the lowest birth rates in the world, and without a sufficient workforce its industries will become uncompetitive.

It seems to me that the arrival of large numbers of refugees to Germany will change the nation’s cities and towns far less dramatically than opponents of open borders would like to believe. Still, the possibility of immigrants forming their own, self-contained enclaves

is real, as evidenced by the apartheid-like state of neighboring Paris and its suburbs. Integration and assimilation are two very different things.

How does Germany's history of protecting refugees from xenophobic violence and investigating attacks against them bode for the task at hand today?

During my reporting in Germany, I spent much of my time trying to understand the historical precedents that might help explain how well German authorities are prepared to protect refugees today. My research led me to attend the ongoing trial of Germany's most notorious case of ethnic violence since the Holocaust: The NSU case, a string of murders of Turkish and Greek immigrants, at least one bombing of an immigrant neighborhood, and the murder of a police officer. The crimes took place over an entire decade.

How could German authorities have remained unaware for ten long years of the most sensational criminal plot in the nation's post-war history? The answer, I learned, is that they weren't. In 1998, after children discovered a bag of TNT placed outside the public theatre in the city of Jena, police raided a nearby garage used by the two suspects. They discovered weapons and bomb-making materials. But the pair managed to escape, along with the woman who had rented the garage.

One would expect that a national manhunt might have ensued. Indeed, Germany's intelligence service had kept numerous informants among the friends and co-conspirators of the duo even before they had gone into hiding. But instead of acting upon their intelligence, they sat on it, as Turkish men continued to be shot, one by one, in broad daylight in their places of employment—their locksmith shops, their flower stands. Instead of looking for suspects, police wrote off the attacks as simply Turks killing one another. (Media called the attacks “Döner killings”—a name fashioned after the popular Turkish-German shawarma dish that took on a crude, derogatory connotation.)

To prove their assumptions, police fabricated entire backstories to the crimes. I met the wife of the one Greek immigrant who was murdered (apparently the Uwes mistook him for a Turk). In an attempt to pressure her into revealing her husband's gang affiliations, police told her that her husband had been sleeping with prostitutes and even had children by one of them. The police spread word in the neighborhood that the man had been a gangster. Slowly, the rumors began to take hold. The wife was traumatized. Her daughters even more so. Following other murders, too, police fabricated entire narratives in an attempt to portray them as ethnic infighting.

In the five years since the ethnic serial murder finally came to light, a surprising revelation has emerged: That the German intelligence service may have helped enable the entire episode by funding, in the amount of hundreds of thousands of Deutschemarks, informants who were close to the Uwes. While in Germany I attended day 286 of the trial, one of the longest in German history, for the much-anticipated appearance of the state's main neo-Nazi informant, Tino Brandt.

Previously, Brandt had admitted to receiving 200,000 deutschmarks from the intelligence service for his information about the workings of the Neo-Nazi groups around Jena. I watched as Brandt, who is currently serving time for dozens of counts of child sex abuse, deflected the question of the day: Had *he* provided the money to the man who purchased the murder weapon and gave it to the Uwes? Could it be that the money that made the murders possible was in fact provided by the state?

The larger question this case raises is, Are Germany's police, its intelligence service, its prosecutors, refusing to acknowledge and learn from the mistakes of their past, preferring to downplay the racial nature of attacks on immigrants and failing to investigate the neo-Nazi networks behind them? If German authorities allowed this string of ethnically charged murders to continue because it made the mistake of writing them off as trivial infighting, the precedent will bode ill for the task at hand: putting a stop to the ever more frequent attacks on refugees *today*.

The arrival, since 2014, of more than a million refugees to Germany has unearthed long-buried sentiments over race and identity and led to hundreds of attacks on refugees and the shelters where they live. Meeting with German journalists who have combed over the data, I learned that last year there were 220 attacks on refugees in Germany, and only four convictions. There were nearly 300 more in the first quarter of this year alone.

Based on my study of the NSU case, it became clear that, at least in the 1990s and 2000s, German authorities were not taking crime against immigrants seriously. What remained was to test whether police and prosecutors had changed their tune in the years since and whether they are prepared to try and prevent, and appropriately investigate or prosecute, attacks against refugees today.

Based on attacks in the past two years, are there indications that German authorities have learned from mistakes of the past? Or do they continue to repeat them?

It's not an easy question to answer. First, the attacks are so recent that it is still natural, in a way, that so few have been solved, and therefore little can be discerned about how they were handled by authorities. Second, unlike the NSU case, most attacks against refugees today seem to be far less carefully orchestrated or plotted in advance.

I reported on one case in which a trio threw a Molotov cocktail through the window of a refugee shelter in the small town of Salzheimendorf. I visited the location of the attack along with a Pakistani man who was living there at the time. In this case, Police were able to quickly identify suspects because an eyewitness who lived nearby had heard and seen a car he recognized pass by as the explosion occurred. The three were quickly convicted, and the judge went so far as to describe their act as terrorism. The Pakistani man who I interviewed was quite pleased with the Police and judicial reaction. Compared to the death threats that he, his friends and his family used to receive in Pakistan—some of which were carried out—he feels safe here in Germany, despite the attack on his home here.

To truly test whether German authorities are prepared to investigate more complicated crimes, I needed a test case. Speaking with criminal investigators and journalists, I eventually came to focus on the Freital Group, a cohort of at least eight people charged with planning and carrying out a series of attacks on refugee shelters in Freital and neighboring Dresden, in Saxony between August 2015 and April 2016.

On at least two occasions conspirators in Freital lit explosives and on at least one they threw a Molotov cocktail at refugee shelters in the area. One Syrian refugee described to me his horror upon entering his kitchen one night and spotting a lit fuse just outside the window. He and his asylum-seeking housemates ran into another room and slammed the door behind them, but a triple explosion managed to lodge shreds of glass into one of the men's faces.

Tellingly, local police failed to see a connection between this and another, almost identical attack on the house of some Eritrean refugees, as well as numerous similar attacks that had taken place in the city since August. It wasn't until news outlets began pressuring the state to take action that Germany's federal prosecutor agreed to take over the case, arresting eight alleged conspirators in a dramatic SWAT raid that involved more than 200 federal and state police. The defendants now face charges of terrorism.

I spoke with a victims' counselor who has repeatedly met with the victims of these attacks. She described to me how police failed to approach the immigrants delicately; how they failed to inform them afterward of any developments in the case, such as the arrest of the suspects. But I also met with Saxony's interior minister and a colleague of his who works for the state's intelligence service, both of whom pointed to the case as a model example of how police solved an ongoing plot by German citizens to attack refugees.

Combined with my interviews with attorneys and journalists familiar with this case, my sense is that the answer to the question of whether police are doing a better job of handling anti-immigrant crime today depends strongly upon the locality. The consensus is that in Saxony, and more broadly in former East Germany as a whole, authorities remain less scrupulous in their investigation of such attacks. Some sources say that's a reflection of their constituency: Indeed, the stronghold of PEGIDA and to some extent the AfD is in Saxony. By this logic, if authorities aren't investigating attacks on refugees as terrorism or pursuing similarly serious charges, it's because the population doesn't see these attacks—none of which have been fatal so far—as a serious problem. That would explain why it took significant media attention before federal prosecutors stepped in to take over the Freital case and apprehend the suspects.

This explanation seems logical to me. Speaking with the Kreuzberg Police in Berlin, I began to understand how radically a Police department's approach toward refugees could determine its ability to protect them. In Kreuzberg, police regularly attend services at mosques and reach out to religious leaders to form relationships and open channels of communication. On the rare occasion that some sort of attack occurs within an ethnic or

religious minority neighborhood, they have contacts whom they can reach out to for information. Often, those contacts are the ones who report the crimes in the first place.

But to paint Berlin as a wonderful haven for refugees and Saxony as hell is unfair. In Berlin too there remains an unsolved murder in which a young Turkish man was shot while sitting on a public park bench with his friends, in a neighborhood under the jurisdiction of the Kreuzberg Police, in fact. Police have yet to apprehend a suspect. I spoke with a lawyer for the victim's family who believes that authorities have declined to investigate all angles, most notably, a possible racist motive. He says police ought to look through their intelligence on Berlin Neo-Nazis, on people convicted of previous racially motivated crimes.

This indicates to me that, in a way, the Freital plot was an exception: More than 90 percent of attacks against refugees remain unsolved, and only two have been taken up by the federal prosecutor and charged as terrorism. And most attacks on refugees do not seem to be so heavily planned. What's more, one source informed me that in reality, the Freital police were on the verge of seeking an arrest warrant from a judge for the suspects when the federal prosecutor took the case out of their hands. If so, the federal prosecutor's action—he is seen as trying to set an example as to how seriously local authorities should take attacks on refugees—may actually be more of a counterexample. He would be taking credit for an investigation that was almost entirely taken on by local Police. And by the fact that this is only the second case of anti-immigrant crime he has investigated, logic would have it that it isn't some local police force like Saxony's that is to blame for the lack of action on migrant attacks, but federal authorities.

All told, clearly many of Germany's police, prosecutors and intelligence officers are better prepared, and more willing, to investigate crime against immigrants with vigor than they were during the NSU days. But it will take more time before we can evaluate whether Germany is really succeeding at its responsibility to protect the masses of refugees it has welcomed here.

Conclusion

I set out to find how the debate over immigration in Germany is unearthing long-buried sentiments about race, ethnicity—and above all, nationalism. I wrote in my proposal that, for obvious reasons, public displays of nationalism have long been taboo in Germany except when it comes to international football matches. Now, it seems the current influx of immigrants is forcing Germans to reckon with some of their most uncomfortable subjects as they react to the resettlement of a diverse array of refugees within their communities. My research has left me optimistic that Germany as a whole will experience more positive results of this immigration wave than negative ones. But I'm left with a deep concern that Germany's authorities are unprepared or uninterested in guaranteeing protection and safety to the people who have fled war, political violence and severe poverty to seek that safety here.