

REVIEW

Open Access

Germany's AfD – members, leaders and ideologies



Thomas Klikauer^{1,2}

Correspondence: t.klikauer@westernsydney.edu.au;
<https://klikauer.wordpress.com/>

¹School of Business Reception,
Western Sydney University,
Parramatta City Campus, Level 8,
169 Macquarie Street, Parramatta,
NSW 2150, Australia

²Sydney Graduate School of
Management, Western Sydney
University, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

In the year 2018, Germany's new radical right-wing party, the AfD, completed its electoral success by entering the two remaining state parliament in which the AfD wasn't represented – Bavaria and Hessen. Hessen is also the state where Hubert Kleinert's (*The AfD and its members* [Die AfD und ihre Mitglieder], 2018) excellent investigation into AfD members takes place. His empirical work represents a unique insight into ideology and thinking of AfD members. One of the key members of the AfD is Björn Höcke. Björn Höcke is more than just a member. He is the leader of the AfD in his home state of Thuringia and his is the leader of the highly influential radical right wing, *Der Flügel*. The wing, as it is known, represents the most extremist section of the AfD. It is partly because of the wing that CDU hard man, Friedrich Merz, recently called the AfD, 'openly Nazi [with] antisemitic undertones' (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/afd-are-nazis-angela-merkel-rival-friedrich-merz-g0dvwvdlg>). In Sebastian Hennig's (*Never twice in the same river* [Nie zweimal in denselben Fluss], 2018) interview with Björn Höcke, the völkisch boss talks freely about this political ideas. Finally, the rise of the AfD marks a distinctive move to the right changing Germany's political culture. What all this means is shown in Andreas Peglau's (*Shifting Right in the twenty-first Century* [Rechtsruck im 21. Jahrhundert], 2018) exquisite book 'Shifting Right in the 21st Century'. The review concludes by arguing that the AfD is not an outright Nazi party. The AfD is a fascistoid party – it carries elements of fascism inside.

Keywords: Germany, Alternative for Germany, Political party, Right-wing populism

Introduction – the rise of the AfD

Three recent German language books examine Germany's new political party called *Alternative for Germany* (AfD). Hubert Kleinert's book explains attitudes and ideologies of AfD members based on interviews and a survey taken in the regional state of Hessen where the AfD accomplished its latest electoral success. Sebastian Hennig's interview with Thuringia's state leader Björn Höcke provides interesting insights delivered by one of most powerful men in the AfD (Klikauer 2019). Andreas Peglau's book uses the well-known book by Wilhelm Reich, published in 1933, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* to examine recent shifts towards the radical right (Reich 1933). Peglau highlights the many similarities and differences between 1933 and today. Using three different angles – voters' attitudes, an interview with an AfD leader, and mass psychology – the combined strength of the three books presents a wide-ranging picture of Germany's youngest and most successful political party.

With the 2017 federal election, the AfD – some say –*Alternative for the Dumb or A F*** Disgrace*– entered politics as the third strongest party in Germany’s federal parliament. Barely 1 year later, the AfD entered the final two state parliaments (Bavaria and Hesse) (Kim 2018). Today, the AfD is represented in all regional parliaments, Germany’s federal parliament, and in the European parliament. This manifests an unseen success story in German politics. A recent public poll even positioned the AfD (17%) ahead of the once mighty SPD (16%). Many see the AfD as just another right-wing populist party (Klikauer 2018a). They argue that Germany was just catching up with other European countries where right-wing parties had already entered parliaments. Others prefer to call a spade a spade rather than an agricultural implement. One of those is Germany’s former foreign minister ‘Joschka Fischer [who] sees the AfD in the tradition of the NSDAP’ (p. 5). In Kleinert’s book, one chapter is tasked with the question, “how right is the AfD?” It closes with a warning not to use the ‘Nazi etiquette’ (p. 15).

The AfD and its members

After examining the AfD’s brief history, Kleinert argues that its party programme is not a good indicator on where the party stands. The programme is largely a whitewash. His brief section on “the AfD and the new right” outlines the links between the AfD and Neo-Nazis but does not mention, for example, the large number of connections between the AfD and the völkisch-fascistic *Identity Movement*, the *Reichsbürger*, Neo-Nazis, the supporters of the murderous *National Socialist Underground* that killed ten people, and the fact that the AfD’s semi-leader Björn Höcke attended Neo-Nazi rallies (in Chemnitz most recently) and wrote opinion pieces for Neo-Nazi outfits under the cover of Landolf Ladig.

Kleinert continues by describing the AfD’s standard party structure leading to the core of his work, namely AfD members. He describes his research project and the difficulties to gain the AfD’s trust. The AfD has a semi-paranoid *friends-vs.-foe* mentality. Still, Kleinert found that 84% of AfD members are male (p. 57). 50% have completed high school or university (p. 58). The three largest occupational groups of AfD members are: self-employed, white collar, and retirees making up 74% of all AfD members. Kleinert’s data also show what is one of the most crucial facts: 77% of all AfD members receive news from the Internet (p. 62). Sixty percent believe German media are untrustworthy (p. 62). This explains not only the AfD’s “lying press” ideology – a remake of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels of the 1930s. It also explains why AfD members are cut off from the mainstream media (Klikauer 2018b). Many are securely asphyxiated in what is known as echo chambers. These are Internet places (Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, etc.) where already established worldviews are reinforced while challenging and contradictory news are eliminated.

Kleinert’s data makes clear that most AfD members used to vote the conservative CDU/CSU. Simultaneously, most AfD members strongly disagree with Germany’s environmental party, the Greens (p. 65). On the whole, the data supports what many studies have shown. 64% of AfD members believe that foreigners bring ‘drugs and crime’ (p. 73). Eighty-seven percent think that more crime comes from migrants than from Germans (p. 73). Ninety-six percent believe that they ‘feel strange in their own country because of Muslims’ (p. 76). Eighty-seven percent think that what the AfD calls

“gender madness” has to be stopped (p. 88). Roughly one third believe that homosexuality is against nature and disgusting (p. 90).

AfD members support AfD’s boss Alexander Gauland’s glorification of Nazi soldiers (Klimov 1985) and his demagogic deputy Björn Höcke who claims that Berlin’s Holocaust memorial is shameful. Overall, 78% agree with the statement, ‘more than 70 years after 1945, we should no longer apologise for our past’ (p. 100). Not surprisingly, Anti-semitism remains alive and well inside the AfD (Klikauer 2018c). 38% believe that ‘the international Jew has too much influence’ (p. 101). Unsurprisingly, 73% think that global warming is exaggerated (p. 109). Rather interesting is the fact that the socialist Sarah Wagenknecht of *The Left* party is the only non-AfD politician AfD members like a (p. 116). Kleinert concludes that the AfD ‘is a national-conservative party with many bridges to Germany’s right-wing extremism’ (p. 120).

The German language separates right wing from right-wing *extremism*. Extremism is often used as a code word for Neo-Nazis. Extremism also indicates violence. This is the sort of violence recently depicted by AfD supporters and Neo-Nazis in Chemnitz (August and September 2018) where AfD and Neo-Nazis marched in unison. The combined AfD and Neo-Nazi march featured AfD regional boss Björn Höcke marching in the front line with Neo-Nazis. Rally participants sang old Nazi songs. They marched while “raising the flag!” Their *ranks were tightly closed*. During the rally, non-German looking people were hunted down and a Jewish restaurant was attacked. The AfD-Nazi march with Björn Höcke leading the way featured core Nazi trimmings.

Björn Höcke – leader of the AfD’s völkische wing

Without a doubt, Björn Höcke is the most controversial and one of the most influential figures in the AfD. In Sebastian Hennig’s book *Never twice in the same river*, an interview with Björn Höcke is presented. Höcke is portrayed as a ‘right-wing extremist, a völkisch-nationalistic bio-racist and apocalyptic AfD leader’ (p. 9). Key to understand Höcke is his ideology-shaping heritage of East Prussia where Höcke’s forbearers originated. This shapes his reactionary longing for a ‘lost homeland’ (p. 23). A second ideology-shaping element is the idea that ‘battles create identities’ (p. 30). Höcke says, ‘to be Prussian is a lifestyle’ (p. 36). This means Prussian authoritarian militarism. It does not mean democracy.

Höcke’s illusionary *lifestyle* of Prussian militarism ended when the Red Army ‘invaded’ Höcke’s homeland (p. 63). Höcke doesn’t use the term *liberated*. He believes the liberation from Nazism (not Nazism itself) was ‘a terrible catastrophe’ (p. 63). In Höcke’s selective mind-set, it all started with the forced removal of Germans from Eastern Europe. That Nazi-Germany invaded Poland starting World War II, that Nazism killed millions of Jews and many others, that it created the Holocaust and Auschwitz, simply does not feature in Höcke’s perception. Instead, Björn Höcke fancies the military and the battle.

Continuing his battle ideology, Höcke believes that ‘conscriptio into the army helps developing [a man’s] personal character’ (p. 52). It creates the ‘virtue of a soldier’ (p. 53) while strengthening Germany’s ‘national substance’ (p. 65). To achieve this, Höcke advocates that the ‘officially enforced remembrance [of the Holocaust has to be removed because it] negates the *Volkshafte*’ (p. 71). The semi-fascistic world of the *Volkshafte* means the *völkische* forces of the German people. The final goal of the

Volkshafte is the Aryan Volksgemeinschaft. Anything in the way towards the Volksgemeinschaft is to be removed. What Höcke wants to remove are 'gender madness, a hysterical energy policy, the failed integration of migrants, and Germany's disastrous EU policy' (p. 108). Instead, a 'natural manliness' (p. 118) should be reintroduced as a male guided 'Volk remains the central point of orientation' for Höcke (p. 133). His *friend-vs.-foe* idea also defines his enemies.

Höcke rejects today's 'anti-fascism because anti-fascism makes you ugly, bad, and stupid' (p. 140). Höcke thinks that 'fascism was only a limited phenomenon' (p. 141). On the whole, fascism created 'good streets...trains running on time [and] level headed clarity' (p. 142). Höcke's fascism would also end the hated 'Soros foundation [that is] the enemy of the people – *völkerfeindlich*' (p. 178). *Volksfeindlich* (being an enemy of the people) is virtually anything and anyone deemed to be outside of Höcke's Aryan and racially cleansed Volksgemeinschaft.

The same goes for 'the opening of our borders [to refugees] in autumn 2015' (p. 185). In reality, the EU's Schengen agreement had removed many inner-European borders long before 2015. Perhaps Björn Höcke works with the motto, *never let reality get in the way of a good demagogy*. Now, 'they [the refugees] enjoy a luxurious life paid for by German taxes' (p. 198). In the year 2015 when many refugees arrived, Höcke's so-called *luxuries* had to be financed by between €287 and €359 per month. A *luxurious life* financed by roughly eleven Euros per day! Still, Höcke thinks that migrants will cause the 'brutal removal of the Germans' (p. 205) resulting in an 'Islamisation of Germany' (p. 219). Against that, he wants to rejuvenate his hallucination of a 'unified will of the German Volk' (p. 235). This negates pluralism and democracy while again conjuring up images of a *Volksgemeinschaft*. According to Höcke, only this can re-establish the 'framework of order for the German Volk' (p. 269). This new order will allow Germany to 'fight against globalisation' (p. 270).

In Sebastian Hennig's book, Björn Höcke presents himself as a conservative nationalist. In this case, the most interesting thing about the book is what is not mentioned. For example, Höcke used to write for Neo-Nazis under the false name *Landolf Ladig*. He lives in a rural town. His neighbour – who Björn Höcke, depending on the interview, knows either *very well* or *not at all* – is a known Neo-Nazi with a criminal and violent past. Höcke calls the holocaust memorial in Berlin shameful. He marched in an AfD-Neo-Nazi rally in Chemnitz (2018) next to Pegida boss Lutz Bachmann who likes to dress up as Adolf Hitler. After the rally, non-Germans were hunted down. The list of Höcke's unmentioned secrets goes on. In the end, Sebastian Hennig's book is not much more than the proverbial *wolf in sheepskin* camouflaging Björn Höcke's *fascistoid* ideology. The German language offers a nuanced difference between outright *fascism* and *fascistoid*. The latter indicates that elements of fascism are prevalent but have not yet matured into full fascism. It is fascism in the becoming. Whether a new *fascistoid* movement is on the rise in Europe is examined in the final book.

The AfD's move to the extreme right

Andreas Peglau's *Shifting Right in the twenty-first Century* relies on the Wilhelm Reich's seminal work about the *Mass Psychology of Fascism* published in the year 1933 (p. 7) (Reich 1933). Dedicated to psychoanalysis, Wilhelm Reich was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud, also working in Vienna. Reich's book has entered the '100 classics of

social science' (p. 8). The police shooting of one hundred rebellious workers on 16th and 17th July 1927 in Vienna (p. 15) deeply impacted on the young doctor of medicine. Soon Reich moved to Berlin witnessing the rise of Nazism. Hitler's Nazi party became Germany's second strongest party in 1930 (p. 22). Seeking to understand the imminent Nazi threat, Reich studied Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Alfred Rosenberg's *The Myth of the twentieth Century* (Rosenberg 1930). He delved into the ideas of Joseph Goebbels (p. 24). Once in power, the Nazis burned the books of Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich and many others (p. 30).

Soon both men parted ways as Freud favoured the individual while Reich analysed the mass in order to understand fascism (p. 39). For Reich, the success of Nazism cannot be explained without looking at authoritarianism. Helplessly exposed to a strong and, above all, authoritarian father figure for years, the individual will cling to a strong *Führer* (Miller 2002). Such individuals are often driven by wanting to be a 'little *Führer*' (p. 39), writes Reich (Klikauer 2018e). Authoritarianism is worsened by 'repressive sexuality' (p. 40) (Block 2018).

In 1939 Wilhelm Reich escaped to the USA (p. 46). Ten years later, his *Mass Psychology* became one of the most accessed books in US public libraries (p. 48). People read the book to understand fascism. Seventy years later, many elements creating fascism are still with us. In the twenty-first century, fascism's new European face appeared first in the Ukraine. Ukraine's Oleh Tjajnybok spoke of 'Jewish pigs, a Russian-Jewish mafia and that the Ukraine belongs to Ukrainians' (p. 55). Fascism always comes with aggression. This is most truthfully shown in the aforementioned *Come and See* movie (p. 63) – it is almost unbearable to watch (Klimov 1985). On a milder scale, such aggression is shown in facts like the three children dying every week in Germany because of abuse (p. 71), mass poverty impacting on thirteen million Germans (p. 77), etc.

Much of this is not unconnected to neoliberalism in which human beings are degraded to mere appendixes to markets (p. 78) (Kim 2018). The neoliberal free market ideology also means that neoliberalism's competition is eventually transported into every human being. It sets worker against worker and every small business owner against every other small business owner (p. 81). Instead of natural human solidarity, human life becomes governed by competition (de Waal 1996). Simultaneously, the middle class is constantly threatened with a fear towards a downward move into the *precariat* with high levels of insecurity, declining wages and working conditions (p. 82) (Standing 2011). These are the times when fascism rises and when it creates scapegoats like refugees and migrants (p. 85). By 2015, the AfD began to master this. It encouraged hate and aggression. But this hate and aggression didn't come out of nowhere.

Alone in the city of Berlin there were 3000 violent acts in its public transport system in the year 2013 (p. 86). Statistics like these are merely indicators of a widespread 'destructive frenzy' (p. 87). Right-wing politicians exploit this sort of aggression rather skilfully. Their ideologies fall on fruitful grounds when 4.2% of Germans in the west and 6.8% in the East prefer a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship (p. 92). The *authoritarian personality*, as Adorno once called it, remains prevalent in Germany and elsewhere (Adorno et al. 1964). 67.5% of Germans show authoritarian tendencies (p. 94). Unsurprisingly, such right wing and *fascistoid* attitudes are most common among AfD voters (p. 102). Just as in the AfD itself (stronger in East-Germany), there is also a difference between 'bright' and 'dark

Germany' – West vs. East Germany (p. 104). Crucially, Andreas Peglau argues (p. 109),

'Three hundred years of capitalist exploitation, of imperialism, of global plundering, of tormenting the working class, of racial hatred, etc. would have never been possible without an accompanying structure based on authoritarianism converting millions into willing supporters of such regimes. It is this structure that creates fascist parties – not the other way around'

This is certainly true for the creation of fascist parties. On the other hand, even German Nazism needed years of intensive propaganda –roughly between 1933 and 1936– to securely establish its regime, readying Germans for racial cleansing, the Holocaust, aggressive wars, etc. Of course, the Nazis installed a social and educational system for the authoritarian socialisation of Germans. What fascism does not need is a 'psychologically healthy baby' (p. 109) but a mechanism that converts children into what the German novelist Heinrich Mann once called the *Untertan* – the sub-ordinate, the underling (Mann 1918).

Eventually, these underlings became Goldhagen's *Willing Executors* – willing to execute the wishes of their authoritarian *Führer* even when this meant *Einsatzgruppen*, mass murder and Auschwitz (Goldhagen 1996). In the words of Peglau, these are elements of 'racists fanatics [readying people for mass murder and] destruction' (p. 109). Peglau writes that psychologically healthy individuals reject subordination and oppression especially when enforced with fascist brutality' (p. 110). But Germans lining the streets, raising their arm to salute the passing *Führer* were anything but psychologically healthy individuals.

In East Germany, the hard core willing to enforce a fascistic regime numbers about 15,000 people (p. 114) – mostly men. This is a far cry from the 400,000 the SA could muster in 1933. Still, what Peglau argues is not quantity but quality. The rise of fascism may well lie in numbers. Fascism is a mass movement from Germany's SA to Italy's back shirts, Hungary's Arrow Cross, Romania's Iron Guard, etc. However, what remains significant for the understanding of fascism is psychology and mass psychology in particular. For that, Wilhelm Reich's book, as laid out by Andreas Peglau, still delivers valuable insights.

Conclusion – three perspectives on the AfD

The overall conclusion is that, given the three books, one might say that Reich's elements of *fascistoid* attitudes can be found in many right-wing fascistoid political parties, including the AfD. The same can be found in AfD members as Hubert Kleinert's book shows as well as in the thinking of Björn Höcke as Sebastian Hennig's book, that let's Björn Höcke talk relatively freely, shows. Finally, what might aid the rise of fascism in the twenty-first century is a symbiosis of authoritarianism found in AfD members (Kleinert) and its leader (Hennig). This is not to say that the AfD is a new Nazi party. But, given what Andreas Peglau has outlined, *fascistoid* elements are found inside the party from ordinary members to the very top (Klikauer 2018d).

Abbreviations

AfD: Alternative for Deutschland or alternative for Germany; CDU: The *Christian Democratic Union of Germany* is a Christian democratic and liberal-conservative political party in *Germany*; EU: European Union; NSDAP: The National Socialist German Workers' Party or *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* or Nazi Party was a political party that created and supported the ideology of Nazism; SPD: The Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or SPD) is Germany's main centre-left political party

Acknowledgements

N/A

Author's contributions

The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Authors' information

N/A

Funding

No funding – it is just a book review.

Availability of data and materials

N/A

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

Received: 12 March 2019 Accepted: 24 May 2019

Published online: 01 July 2019

References

- Adorno, Theodor W., Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford. 1964. *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Wiley.
- Block, Susan. 2018. "Incel therapy, bonobo-style." <https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/05/04/incel-therapy-bonobo-style/>. Accessed 5 Nov 2018.
- de Waal, Frans. 1996. *Good natured: the origins of right and wrong in humans and other animals*. Cambridge: Harvard University press cf. Frans de Waal, *Primates and philosophers: how morality evolved* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 2006).
- Goldhagen, Daniel J. 1996. *Hitler's willing executioners: ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Knopf & Random House Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).
- Klikauer, Thomas. 2019. Angst for Germany. *Critique* 47 (1): 160.
- Kim, Juho. 2018. The radical market-oriented policies of the alternative for Germany (AfD) and support from non-beneficiary groups—discrepancies between the party's policies and its supporters. *Asian Journal of German and European Studies* 3 (1): 19.
- Klikauer, Thomas. 2018a. Germany's new right-wing populist party—the alternative for Germany. *Czech Journal of Political Science* 25 (3): 250–269.
- Klikauer, Thomas. 2018b. Alternative for Germany: Germany's new right-wing extremists. *Journal of Labor and Society* 21 (4): 614.
- Klikauer, Thomas. 2018c. An Alternative for Deutschland: an essay. *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 17 (4): 505–509.
- Klikauer, Thomas. 2018d. "Inside Germany's new crypto-Nazi Party – An AfD Dissident's report," *Tikkun Magazine*, 28th September 2018.
- Klikauer, Thomas. 2018e. "The Rise of the Mini-Me Hitler." <https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1201/the-rise-of-a-mini-me-hitler/>. Accessed 12 Mar 2019.
- Klimov, Elem. 1985. *"Come and See", directed by Elem Klimov*. Moscow: Mosfilm/Belarusfilm DVD/VHS.
- Mann, Heinrich. 1918, 1984. *Der Untertan*. (London: Penguin Books).
- Miller, Alice. 2002. *For your own good: Hidden cruelty in child-rearing and the roots of violence*. 4th ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Reich, Wilhelm. 1933, 1970. *The mass-psychology of fascism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux).
- Rosenberg, Alfred. 1930, 1982. *The Myth of the 20th Century: An Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of our Age* (Newport Beach): Noontide Press.
- Standing, Guy. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. New York: Bloomsbury cf. Kim, Juho. "The radical market-oriented policies of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and support from non-beneficiary groups—discrepancies between the party's policies and its supporters." *Asian Journal of German and European Studies* 3, no. 1 (2018): 3.

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.