
POST CATEGORIES +

THE TRUTH LIES IN CHEMNITZ?

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German President Joachim Gauck and Premier of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Erwin Sellering at the 2012 event commemorating the pogrom against immigrants that took place in Rostock in 1992. © Jens Büttner/Press Association.

Germany to the Germans! Foreigners out” was the central slogan of the racist riots in the city of Rostock in 1992. For around three days, neo-Nazis controlled the streets in the *plattenbau* district of Lichtenhagen where the central registration for asylum-seekers (as well as a housing block of Vietnamese contract workers) were situated.

With stones and Molotov cocktails they attacked the accommodation and hunted down those they marked out as foreigners. Local residents joined in the violent excesses and cheered when the house – with dozens of Vietnamese people inside – was set ablaze. It was serendipitous that there were no deaths recorded.

The violent images and testimonies of politicians, perpetrators and victims were captured in the outstanding documentary, *The truth lies in Rostock* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mkop8UF1zs>). It reconstructs the normalization of neo-Nazism in the post-unification era in east Germany – but also in the west – and the absence of any strategy to push back against radical right influences. On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the riots in 2017, the documentary received renewed attention and opened up discussion: could similar events happen today?

The answer seemed to come one year later when the most infamous slogans of Rostock were again shouted by a radical right mob in the east German city of Chemnitz after the fatal stabbing of a local citizen. In just a few hours, radical-right hooligans and militants were able to mobilize hundreds of people in the attempt of making the centre of Chemnitz a 'no-go' area for people with different coloured skin and a different shade of political opinion. They were joined by the anti-migrant initiative *Pro Chemnitz*, the PEGIDA movement, and the frontrunners of the völkisch wing of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) – in a dress rehearsal for a **closing of ranks of the various currents of the radical right movement in Germany** (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cynthia-miller-idriss-daniel-k-hler/united-german-extreme-right>).

The beacon of Rostock was hovering over Chemnitz among radical-right groups. As in the early 90's, the happenings in this east German city again had ramifications at the top, political level and in public discourse and debates. But even though we might see parallels, the impact and the political context today are fundamentally different – which does not make it less dangerous.

FROM HOYERSWERDA TO CHEMNITZ

Growing up in east German cities in 1990s, the prospect of radical-right violence was the **norm rather than the exception** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAVrEgzXaVM>). Neo-Nazis dominated various districts, took over youth clubs, opened their own meeting points and were constantly seeking confrontation with supposed 'foreigners' and political opponents. What propelled their confidence were the "successes" of Lichtenhagen and above all **the events of the Hoyerswerda in 1991** (<https://www.hoyerswerda-1991.de/>), considered the starting point for racist mass rioting in the 1990s. In the small town of Brandenburg, radical-right extremists over several days physically attacked the accommodations of contract workers and asylum-seekers, leaving 32 people wounded. As the German police could not secure the safety of the migrants, they organized the evacuation of all the inhabitants with migrant background, making Hoyerswerda – in the jargon of the neo-Nazis – "foreigner-free" (*ausländerfrei*), a reference to the Nazi practice of "cleansing" the cities from Jews (*judenfrei*).

According to **Heike Kleffner and Anna Spangenberg** (<https://www.bebraverlag.de/vzgesamt/titel/703-generation-hoyerswerda.html>), a whole 'Generation Hoyerswerda' of radical-right militants emerged from these events and pursued the same spirit in their daily activism and the underground movement. The state of exception achieved and the mobilisation of local inhabitants joining their cause served them as a blueprint – and was repeatedly re-invoked.

In the context of Chemnitz, radical-right groups were consciously referring to the potential of 'the good old days' – reminiscent of the shows of force that coined the history of whole communities after unification. Already in 2015/16, attempts at a remake of racist riots by radical-right grassroots groups were directed against refugee shelters – catalysed by social media mobilisation. The small towns of **Heidenau** (<https://www.dw.com/en/taking-a-stand-against-neo-nazis/av-18681802>), **Freital** (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/neo-nazis-lay-siege-to-asylum-seekers-hostel-in-freital-as-race-hate-rears-its-ugly-head-once-again-10383943.html>), **Claußnitz** (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/05/clausnitz-mob-awaited-refugees-german-town-170530133408437.html>) and **Bautzen** (<https://www.thelocal.de/20161103/refugees-hunted-through>

notorious-east-german-town) are cases in point and are often forgotten in discussion of Chemnitz. Yet, we see a new dynamic in Chemnitz characterized by the AfD deliberately losing its distance from the militant neo-Nazis who have co-opted the 'rage' of these protest events.

MANUFACTURING RADICAL-RIGHT POLITICS BASED ON LIES

This rage is broadly manufactured and triggered through radical-right social media outlets. Before any evidence had been published by the authorities, these outlets presented the well-known narrative that Dennis H., the initial victim of the fatal stabbing, was allegedly defending German women from the sexual assaults of abusive foreigners. This 'fake news' catalysed the mobilisation in Chemnitz and resumed one central issue in the German radical-right campaigning in 2017/18: the protection of German women. This very same narrative was re-evoked in the city of Köthen a few days later when the death of an individual was again used **as a mobilisation opportunity for radical-right forces** (<https://www.dw.com/en/death-of-german-national-sparks-renewed-protests/av-45424389>).

In the same vein, the AfD took up this toxic narrative and attributed it to the failure of migration policy in Germany. The term "knife migration" (*Messermigration*) went viral, deliberately trying to portray all **migrant men as violent perpetrators** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45324804>). Standing demonstratively at the side of those who protested in Chemnitz, the AfD strategically polarised the debate to present itself as the only true alternative to the political establishment.

They received some unexpected support from **Hans-Georg Maaßen** (<https://www.politico.eu/article/german-domestic-intelligence-chief-hans-georg-maassen-removed-from-post/><https://www.politico.eu/article/german-domestic-intelligence-chief-hans-georg-maassen-removed-from-post/>), the President of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Germany's domestic security agency. He said that uploaded videos showing the attacks on migrants **were probably fake** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45546012>) and that, contrary to what the media had reported, there had been no manhunt.

This in turn again fed into the radical-right 'lying press' narrative – another reference to Nazi propaganda (*Lügenpresse*). Parallel media investigations revealed that Maaßen was in steady contact with AfD cadres, explaining to them how to avoid legal persecution. Maaßen's departure therefore duly caused a **political crisis** (<https://www.euronews.com/2018/09/23/german-coalition-hangs-in-balance-as-ex-spy-chief-saga-draws-on>) within the Grand Coalition, whose Minister of Interior had backed his expertise.

WHERE THE DEEP REASONS LIE...

Racist riots have the capacity to stage a crisis of the state. And indeed, both the pogrom in Rostock-Lichtenhagen and the riots of Chemnitz had significant political consequences. Like today, the riots of Hoyerswerda and Rostock-Lichtenhagen initiated a toxic debate on migration and citizenship in Germany that drew on generalizations, prejudice and resentment. And like today, we see that the increasingly polarized debate on migration changed the political trajectory of the German state.

One direct material consequence in the 1990s was the curtailing of the right to Asylum in 1993 through the so-called “**asylum compromise** (<http://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/kurzdoessiers/207671/asylum-law-refugee-policy-humanitarian-migration?p=all>)”. Today, we see that the radical-right interpretation of events in Chemnitz and beyond are being spread through public discourse. **The Declaration 2018** (<https://www.erklaerung2018.de/>) – a petition invoked by a coalition of public right-wing intellectuals to speak out against “uncontrolled migration” and the alleged “opening of the borders in 2015” – is a key to understanding how these racist mobilisations speak to widespread racist sentiments in the broader society.

Hence, as in the 1990s, the real reasons for a radical-right surge lie in the crumbling distinction between radical-right ideologies and key political figures. As long as state and mainstream politicians remain ambivalent about racist mobilisations, the radical-right has an easy time implanting their ideas at the very centre of society. While the riots of the 1990s were much more violent, today these demonstrations have parliamentary backing from the AfD, which makes their demands more legitimate and presentable. This coalition of party politics and street activism shows a long-existing potential of radical-right ideas in Germany that are far from being marginal. And, in this regard: the truth lies in Chemnitz.

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