

It's the Kultur, Stupid

Timothy Garton Ash
DECEMBER 7, 2017 ISSUE

Angst für Deutschland: Die Wahrheit über die AfD: wo sie herkommt, wer sie führt, wohin sie steuert [Angst for Germany: The Truth about the AfD: Where It Comes from, Who Leads It, Where It Is Headed]

by Melanie Amann

Munich: Droemer, 317 pp., €16.99 (paper)

Finis Germania [The End of Germany]

by Rolf Peter Sieferle

Steigra: Antaios, 104 pp., €8.50

“The reason we are inundated by culturally alien [*kulturfremden*] peoples such as Arabs, Sinti and Roma etc. is the systematic destruction of civil society as a possible counterweight to the enemies-of-the-constitution by whom we are ruled. These pigs are nothing other than puppets of the victor powers of the Second World War....” Thus begins a 2013 personal e-mail from Alice Weidel, who in this autumn’s pivotal German election was one of two designated “leading candidates” of the Alternative für Deutschland (hereafter AfD or the Alternative). The chief “pig” and “puppet” was, of course, Angela Merkel. Despite the publication of this leaked e-mail two weeks before election day, adding to other widely publicized evidence of AfD leaders’ xenophobic, right-wing nationalist views, one in eight German voters gave the Alternative their support. It is now the second-largest opposition party in the Bundestag, with ninety-two MPs.

Wilfried Kahrs/qpress.de

*Alexander Gauland, a leader of the Alternative für Deutschland;
illustration by Wilfried Kahrs from qpress.de, a German left-wing satirical blog run by Kahrs*

Xenophobic right-wing nationalism—in Germany of all places? The very fact that observers express surprise indicates how much Germany has changed since 1945. These days, we expect more of Germany than of ourselves. For, seen from one point of view, this is just Germany partaking in the populist normality of our time, as manifested in the Brexit vote in Britain, Marine le Pen’s Front National in France, Geert Wilders’s blond

beastliness in the Netherlands, the right-wing nationalist-populist government in Poland, and Trumpery in the US.

Like all contemporary populisms, the German version exhibits both generic and specific features. In common with other populisms, it denounces the current elites (*Alteliten* in AfD-speak) and established parties (*Altparteien*) while speaking in the name of the *Volk*, a word that, with its double meaning of people and ethno-culturally defined nation, actually best captures what Trump and Le Pen mean when they say “the people.” In *Angst für Deutschland*, her vividly reported book about the party, Melanie Amann, a journalist at the weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel*, notes how some of its activists have appropriated the slogan of the East German protests against Communist rule in 1989: *Wir sind das Volk*—We are the people. Like other populists, Germany’s attack the mainstream media (*Lügenpresse*, the “lying press”) while making effective use of social media. On the eve of the election, the Alternative had some 362,000 Facebook followers, compared with the Social Democrats’ 169,000 and just 154,000 for Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

ADVERTISING

Its criticism of globalization is familiar, as is its angry and self-congratulatory denunciation of political correctness. Typical of all European populisms is a negative attitude toward the EU in general and the euro in particular. The Alternative started life in 2013 as an anti-euro party. Although overall German support for the EU is still very strong, a poll conducted for the Bertelsmann foundation in the summer of 2017 found that 50 percent of those respondents who identified themselves as on the “right” (carefully distinguished from the “center-right”) would vote for Germany to leave the

EU, if Germans were offered a Brexit-style in-or-out referendum. This is a remarkable finding. Unlike Brexit, Germexit would be the end of the European Union.

Tiresomely familiar to any observer of Trump, Brexit, or Wilders is the demagogic appeal to emotions while playing fast and loose with facts. In Amann's account, the predominant emotion here is *Angst*. Her book cover picks out the AfD's initials in her title, *Angst für Deutschland*. She quotes the *Angstindex* of an insurance company reporting in mid-2016 that “never before have ‘fears grown so drastically within one year’”—the leading fears now being terrorist attacks, political extremism, and “tensions resulting from the arrival of foreigners.”

The dramatic influx of nearly 1.2 million refugees in 2015–2016 is the single most direct cause of the Alternative's electoral success. Its leaders denounce Merkel for opening Germany's frontiers in September 2015 to the massed refugees then being made thoroughly unwelcome in Viktor Orbán's xenophobic populist Hungary. Following last year's Islamist terror attack on a Christmas market in Berlin, in which twelve were killed, one AfD leader tweeted: “these are Merkel's dead.”

Besides the refugee influx, there are other features peculiar to German populism. For eight of the last twelve years, Germany has been governed by a so-called Grand Coalition of Christian Democrats—Merkel's CDU in a loveless parliamentary marriage with the more conservative Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU)—and Social Democrats. This has impelled disgruntled voters toward the smaller parties and the extremes. The effect has been reinforced by Merkel's woolly centrist version of Margaret Thatcher's TINA (There Is No Alternative), perfectly captured in the German word *alternativlos* (without alternatives). It's no accident that this protest party is called the Alternative.

The Alternative scores best in what we still loosely call East Germany, that is, the territory of the former German Democratic Republic. There is a striking inverse correlation between the number of immigrants (or people of migrant origin) in an area and the populist vote: East Germany has the fewest immigrants and the most AfD voters. As one participant in a demonstration organized by the far right, xenophobic movement Pegida (the initials stand for Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) told a reporter: “In Saxony today there are hardly any immigrants, but there is a danger of the Islamization of Germany in fifty or a hundred years.” An urgent matter, then.

It would require a longer essay to explore the collective psychology of this East German vote, but its ingredients certainly include the poisonous legacy of a society behind the

Berlin Wall that was anything but open and multicultural. There is also a resentful feeling among East Germans that they have been treated as second-class citizens in united Germany: not given enough attention, not paid due respect. When a street protest in a small town in Saxony was totally ignored by the visiting Chancellor Merkel, a protester complained, “She doesn’t look at us even with her ass!” One can imagine a Trump voter saying something similar about Hillary Clinton. In explaining the populist vote in many countries, the inequality of attention is at least as important as economic inequality.

And then, to add insult to injury, these bloody foreigners—Muslims to boot!—are welcomed in Germany with open arms and “get everything for nothing.” As in other European welfare states, the knowledge that “everything” includes generous welfare provisions only sharpens the resentment.

Unlike in Britain and America, economic factors play only a small part here. It’s not just that Germany as a whole is doing well economically. In a 2016 poll, four out of five AfD voters described their personal economic situation as “good” or “very good.” This is not a party of the economically “left behind.” It gathers the discontented from every walk of life, but those who predominate in its ranks are educated, middle-class men. A leading CDU politician told me that the angry protest letters he gets from defectors to the Alternative will typically be from a doctor, businessman, lawyer, or professor. This strong presence of the educated upper middle class distinguishes German populism from many other populisms.

Among the leaders of the party, they are visibly represented by its other designated “leading candidate,” Alexander Gauland, a seventy-six-year-old former CDU functionary who almost invariably wears a check-patterned tweedy jacket and dark green tie. He is one of those elderly conservative gents who look so English that you know they must be German. Then there is Beatrix von Storch, a shrill and tiresome minor aristocrat with neoliberal, Hayekian intellectual pretensions. (Her maternal grandfather was Hitler’s finance minister—but we are not responsible for our grandfathers.) As for Alice Weidel: this former Goldman Sachs and Allianz asset manager, white, blonde, always neatly turned out in business attire, lives just across the border in Switzerland, in a same-sex relationship with a Swiss filmmaker of Sinhalese heritage and two adopted sons. These are not the German equivalent of the American rust belt manual worker, or of what is known in England, with liberal condescension, as “white van man.” (The van is white as well as the man.)

“It’s the economy, stupid” simply does not apply to Germany’s populist voters. Rather,

it's the *Kultur*. (I say *Kultur*, rather than simply culture, because the German word implies both culture and ethno-cultural identity, and has traditionally been counterposed to liberal, cosmopolitan *Zivilisation*.) In a poll shown on German television on election night, 95 percent of AfD voters said they were very worried that “we are experiencing a loss of German culture and language,” 94 percent that “our life in Germany will change too much,” and 92 percent that “the influence of Islam in Germany will become too strong.” Feeding this politics of cultural despair—to recall a famous phrase of the historian Fritz Stern—is a milieu of writers, media, and books whose arguments and vocabulary connect back to themes of an earlier German right-wing culture in the first half of the twentieth century. This is a new German right with distinct echoes of the old.

Amann shows how a publisher and ideological activist of the new right, Götz Kubitschek, played a significant behind-the-scenes part in the development of the party. She quotes a blog post from the very first weeks of the then primarily anti-euro party's existence, in which Kubitschek describes hostility to the euro as “the door-opener theme” after which “our themes (identity, resistance, gender-, party- and ideology-criticism) will come rumbling through, so long as we quickly and consistently put our foot in the door.” And so it came to pass—thanks to the refugee crisis. Kubitschek was instrumental in promoting the party career of an East German history teacher called Björn Höcke, whose plangent rhetoric of cultural pessimism and *völkisch* nationalism would have been entirely at home in the 1920s—except that now the scapegoats are Muslims rather than Jews. Höcke told a gathering of the Alternative's youth wing that, because of Germany's low birthrate and mass immigration, “for the first time in a thousand years the question is posed of *Finis Germaniae* [the end of Germany].”

Interestingly, Amann begins the party's story not with the euro or the refugee crisis, but with a magazine interview given in 2009 by Thilo Sarrazin, then a director of the Bundesbank, and his subsequent book, *Germany Abolishes Itself*. As I noted in these pages at the time, bien pensant German opinion leaders first ignored and then deplored his sub-Spenglerian tract about the forthcoming Islamic swamping of Germany—but it sold 1.2 million copies in less than nine months.¹ In his cellar, Sarrazin keeps folders stuffed with thousands of letters of support: “I would like to express my unconditional respect for your unvarnished remarks about the Turks.” “When shall we at last kick out those who neither speak German nor want to, but only hold out their hands?” And “it's terrible that one can no longer tell the truth in Germany!”

Seven years later, in the run-up to this fall's election, controversy erupted around another angry and angst-ridden book. Like the Sarrazin affair, this latest storm is interesting not just for the ideas expressed by the author, but also for how democratic Germany

responds to hateful echoes of its pre-1945 past.

A strange thing happened on the afternoon of July 20, 2017, the seventy-third anniversary of the German resistance's attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. If you looked up the *Spiegel* nonfiction best-seller list on Amazon there was a hole in sixth place, between *Alexander von Humboldt and the Invention of Nature* in fifth place and *Penguin Bloom: The Little Bird That Saved Our Family* at number seven. Subsequently, *Penguin Bloom* was silently lifted up to sixth place, number eight became number seven, and so on. The previous number-six best seller, a book called *Finis Germania* by Rolf Peter Sieferle, had simply disappeared.

What was going on? Had there been an embarrassing mistake in tabulating the bookshop sales that form the basis of the *Spiegel* best-seller list? Not at all. *Finis Germania* (a weirdly ungrammatical version of *Finis Germaniae*) was selling away. But the top editors of *Der Spiegel* had decided that such a nasty piece of work should not appear on their list. They were embarrassed that it had shot to prominence because one of their own journalists, Johannes Saltzwedel, had earlier placed it on a widely noticed list of recommended books carried by North German Radio and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Germany's leading liberal daily. The controversy around that list seemed to have led people to buy *Finis Germania* in larger numbers.

Sieferle's book was, explained *Spiegel* deputy editor Susanne Beyer, "right-wing extremist, anti-Semitic, and historically revisionist," and since the news magazine sees itself as a "medium of Enlightenment," and the best-seller listing might be mistaken for a recommendation, they had removed it. So *Finis Germania* was consigned to an Orwellian memory hole, made an unbook. It was not a best seller. It had never been a best seller. *Weil nicht sein kann, was nicht sein darf*—for what may not be, cannot be—as the poet Christian Morgenstern once put it.

Predictably, the effect was the opposite of that intended. There was another storm of controversy around this bizarre decision, and even more people bought the book. The publisher was laughing all the way to the bank—and to this autumn's Frankfurt book fair, where he invited the AfD pocket-Spengler Björn Höcke to speak at the Antaios publishing house stand, thus generating another round of indignation, protest, and even more publicity. The publisher was none other than that new-right string-puller Götz Kubitschek, who, from his base in a village in the East German state of Saxony-Anhalt, had played a significant part in the party's *völkisch* turn. To cap it all, the book has a postscript by a friend of Sieferle's that describes the refugee crisis of 2015 as "internationally long since planned, and...triggered by the German Chancellor in the

manner of a putsch.”

So the whole new-right packaging of Sieferle’s text stinks to high heaven. But why is the postscript written by a friend rather than the author? Because in the autumn of 2016 Sieferle committed suicide, hanging himself in the attic of his Heidelberg villa. He never sent *Finis Germania* to a publisher. That was done by his wife and friends, who found it on his computer, along with another book-length text, now published as *Das Migrationsproblem: Über die Unvereinbarkeit von Sozialstaat und Masseneinwanderung* (The Migration Problem: On the Incompatibility of the Welfare State and Mass Immigration). They interpreted the fact that Sieferle had carefully tidied up the electronic files as meaning he intended these texts for publication. But who knows? Perhaps he did not know himself.

The story of Rolf Peter Sieferle is a sad one. Generationally a ’68er, and briefly part of the 1968 student protest movement, he was a highly cultured loner and academic oddball, with a fine, provocative turn of phrase. He made a modest reputation with a book called *Der unterirdische Wald (The Underground Forest)*, published in 1982, which described the modern world’s plundering of millennia of carbon deposits to make coal and oil. Its title rather brilliantly blended the then-new West German Green concerns and the age-old German cultural fascination with the forest, the *Wald*. In 1994 he produced *Epochenwechsel: Die Deutschen an der Schwelle zum 21. Jahrhundert* (Turn of the Epochs: The Germans on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century). This already anticipated some of the themes of *Finis Germania*, including a provocative critique of the way in which Germany’s treatment of its Nazi past supposedly puts the subject beyond rational debate.

A year later came *Die Konservative Revolution* (The Conservative Revolution), an argument built around biographical sketches of five right-wing German thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century, including Oswald Spengler and Ernst Jünger. While Sieferle’s work at this time was still written in an academic style (and contemporary German academic style is no laughing matter), one senses his aesthetic fascination with his subjects’ stormy, sweeping, no-holds-barred manner of writing—one he would make his own in *Finis Germania* twenty years later.

All these books were published by respectable publishers, to mixed reviews. It is said that Sieferle was deeply hurt because *Epochenwechsel* was not received as the major work he believed it to be. Rather late in life he became a full professor, but he was rarely seen at conferences and never part of the academic mainstream. By 2015, his cultural pessimism seems to have deepened into a kind of existential despair, exacerbated by

serious health problems—reportedly he was suffering from cancer and losing his sight.

After the controversy erupted this year, some of his friends retrospectively told a writer for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) that in the last years of his life Sieferle had become isolated and embittered. But his widow wrote an angry letter to the FAZ, rejecting this tendentially apologetic (“he was a sick man”) explanation and insisting that already in the 1990s, in *Epochenwechsel*, he had taken a “national conservative position.” It seems plausible that both biographical strands, the ideological and the personal, combined to give *Finis Germania* its bitter and biting tone.

This is the background against which we must read Sieferle’s book, a mere one hundred small-format pages of loosely connected short essays. In sound, they echo Friedrich Nietzsche, and in fury, Ernst Jünger, who is the ostensible subject of one section. Several passages are beyond parody, like a Monty Python version of an early-twentieth-century cultural pessimist walking the streets of twenty-first-century Germany. There are “tragic” nations, he informs us, such as the Russians, Jews, and Germans, and “untragic” ones, above all the Anglo-Saxons. I must confess to laughing out loud at his lament about “the sensually perceptible presence of nihilistic relativity in every pedestrian zone.” Nietzsche prowls amid the weekend shoppers of Heidelberg.

Then there are the sections about contemporary Germany’s attitude toward its Nazi past, which account for most of the controversy. Here Sieferle takes to an extreme his argument in *Epochenwechsel* that Germany has frozen its Nazi past,

and Auschwitz, into a kind of absolute negative myth, marked by ritualized, increasingly empty expressions of *Betroffenheit* (only weakly translatable as a sense of intense personal dismay), and thereby separated from everything else in contemporary German life. “National Socialism, more precisely Auschwitz, has become the last myth of a thoroughly rationalized world,” he writes, in one of many deliberately provocative formulations. “A myth is a truth that is beyond discussion.” This puts the Jews beyond criticism, and turns the German, or at least the “eternal Nazi,” into “the secularized devil of an enlightened present.” (AfD ideologues more crudely call this the *Schuldskult*, the guilt cult.)

Murat Tueremis/laiif/Redux

The opening session of the new Bundestag, Berlin, October 24, 2017. Alice Weidel and Alexander Gauland (with hands raised) are seated in the first row of the Alternative für Deutschland section.

Sieferle writes with a kind of wild determination to say exactly what he thinks, however publicly unacceptable (and remember, we don’t definitely know that he intended this for publication). He argues that *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—the familiar West German term

for “overcoming” a difficult past—has become a kind of state religion, in which the Germans are forever the negative chosen people and the Jews the positive chosen people. “The first commandment reads: thou shalt have no other holocaust besides me.” And again: “Adam Hitler is not transcended by any Jesus; and such a Jesus”—one involuntarily wonders: Does he mean himself?—“would surely be rapidly crucified. The guilt remains total, is compensated by no divine mercy.” This is hysterical stuff.

Sieferle reaches far too often for Nietzsche-like profundity and usually misses the mark, tripping over his own rhetorical shoelaces into a puddle of absurdity. But occasionally, when he pulls together his life’s work on modernity, ecology, and German history, a genuinely thought-provoking formulation emerges. Referring to the “project of the modern,” he writes that “the history of the projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth century is, then, one of a total failure, which became apparent in the twentieth century: morally, from World War to Auschwitz, technologically and economically, in the environmental crisis of the end of the century.” (Not, I think, the remark of an Auschwitz denier or routine anti-Semite.) And again: “The twentieth century can be seen as a period of vast profligacy...profligate with everything: with natural resources, but also with people, with ideas, with cultural reserves.”

Finis Germania raises in helpfully sharp form the question of how one should respond to such ideas, in a country where one in eight voters just chose a right-wing populist party, motivated mainly by concerns about culture and identity.

Der Spiegel’s extraordinary vaporizing of Sieferle’s book from its best-seller list is an extreme example of an approach characteristic of contemporary Germany. If you go beyond a certain point in expressing what may be seen as right-wing extremist or anti-Semitic views, you are banished from all respectable society, branded with a scarlet, or rather a brown, letter. Nazi insignia, Holocaust denial, and hate speech are banned by law (as Facebook is finding to its cost), but there is also this broader social, cultural, and political enforcement of the taboo.

Now many would argue that this has contributed significantly to the civilized, centrist quality of German politics and public debate—and they have a point. I find that many young Germans support this approach wholeheartedly. And would the rest of the world have been happier if Germany did not have this taboo on any hint of a revival of the worst that modern humanity has produced?

Yet this whole approach comes with a price, and the electoral success of the AfD shows that the price is going up. Sieferle’s *Finis Germania* is a late, slight product of a sad,

disordered, but undoubtedly fine mind. Simply to say “right-wing extremist, anti-Semitic, historically revisionist—therefore get thee behind me Satan and off the best-seller list you come” is a woefully inadequate response. Indeed, subjecting Sieferle to the taboo treatment actually supports his contention that this really is a taboo—that is, something put beyond the realm of rational debate.

For right-wing ideologues, such bans are wonderful free publicity, enabling them to pose as martyrs for free speech. Kubitschek, the publisher, gloated that the row at the Frankfurt book fair was “heathen fun.”

For the rank-and-file, it is yet more evidence that the liberal elites have so little time and respect for them that they “won’t look at us even with their asses.” Worse still: they won’t even let ordinary people say what they think. In a poll conducted in spring 2016 for the Freedom Index of the John Stuart Mill Institute in Heidelberg, only 57 percent of respondents said they felt that “one can freely express one’s political opinion in Germany today.”²

It’s therefore encouraging to see a growing number of German intellectuals advocating John Stuart Mill’s own response. Take on these arguments in free and open debate. Subject them to vigorous and rigorous scrutiny. Separate the wheat from the chaff. For as Mill famously argued, even a false argument can contain a sliver of truth, and the good sword of truth can only be kept sharp if constantly tested in open combat with falsehood. Otherwise the received opinion, even if it is correct, will only be held “in the manner of a prejudice.”

Sieferle’s two posthumously published texts, taken in the context of his life’s work, are eminently susceptible to the Mill treatment. While dismissing the hysterical, crypto-Nietzschean hyperbole of his last treatment of the “state religion” of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, we may yet take from it a useful challenge. More than seventy years after the end of World War II, how does one prevent German leaders’ statements about the Nazi past from being reduced to empty ritual? How does one truly bring home those horrors to a generation of Germans who have known nothing of the kind? If the first commandment is not Sieferle’s bitterly sarcastic “thou shalt have no other holocaust besides me,” then what is it? If the answer is, as I believe it should be, “thou shalt do everything thou canst to prevent any new crimes against humanity,” then what follows from that? It was on precisely these grounds that the then foreign minister Joschka Fischer eloquently made the case for German military participation in the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo, when faced with a possible Serbian genocide. And if you can’t prevent the crime against humanity, then don’t you at least have a special

responsibility to take in some of its victims? Refugees from Syria in 2015, for example.

Engaging in the battle of ideas is, of course, only one part of the indispensable fight against the new right and xenophobic nationalist populism. A lot will depend on the overall performance of the expected new “Jamaica” coalition government—so-called for the colors of the four disparate parties (black for CDU and CSU, yellow for Free Democrats, and green for Green) that will each make one leg of this improbable pantomime horse. Any more terrorist attacks perpetrated by violent Islamists will stoke the angst about immigration and Islam. Showing that immigration is now actually under control will be crucial. As important will be the success or failure of Germany’s attempts to integrate into schools, civic life, and the workplace the more than one million immigrants who have arrived in the last couple of years. Can they become what the scholars Herfried and Marina Münkler call “The New Germans”?²

The politics are such that the CSU certainly, and the CDU sooner or later, will move to the right on issues of immigration and identity, to try to win back the populist vote—as center-right leaders have done in neighboring Austria and the Netherlands. Even the centrist Merkel’s interior minister, Thomas de Maizière, wrote earlier this year in the mass circulation *Bild-Zeitung* that “we are not Burqa”—a ludicrous sentence that may be translated as “give us your votes rather than defecting to the Alternative.” But precisely if you are moving to the right, while at the same time trying to integrate all those mainly Muslim immigrants, it becomes all the more important to fight the battle of ideas and draw a bright line between positive civic patriotism and xenophobic, new-right nationalism.

Here is the cultural struggle for Germany’s future.

1 See my “Germans, More or Less,” *The New York Review*, February 24, 2011. ↵

2 This figure comes from an opinion poll by the highly respected Allensbach Institute. It should be noted that the alternative offered was “Is it better to be cautious?”—to which 28 percent agreed, the rest answering “with reservations” or “undecided.” Quoted in *Freiheitsindex Deutschland 2016 des John Stuart Mill Instituts für Freiheitsforschung*, edited by Ulrike Ackermann (Frankfurt: Humanities Online, 2016). ↵

3 Herfried and Marina Münkler, *Die neuen Deutschen: Ein Land vor seiner Zukunft* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2016). ↵

More than one instance of Sumo is attempting to start on this page. Please check that you are only loading Sumo once per page.