Race, Islamophobia and the politics of citizenship

in post-unification Germany

ALEKSANDRA LEWICKI

University of Sussex

Abstract In the immediate aftermath of German re-unification, as in the wake of the recent humanitarian crisis, Germany experienced notable ‘peaks’ of racist agitation and violence. In the 1990s as today, the post-communist Eastern regions of Germany tend to be perceived as a hub of such racism. In this article, Lewicki revisits both ‘peaks’ via an examination of numerical evidence for verbal and physical racist violence in the former East and West of Germany. Rather than conceiving of racism as ‘cyclical’ or specific legacy of the socialist dictatorship, her analysis suggests that political projects in Germany’s past and present structurally retained distinct incarnations of race. Far-right activists could thus successfully channel animosities resulting from the terms of unification into nationalist and racist resentment - momentarily more so in the East, but increasingly also in the West. The politics of citizenship, Lewicki argues, provided key means of perpetuating, reaffirming and cementing racialized hierarchies in the two post-war German states, but also in re-unified Germany. The rules of citizenship stabilize a sense of superiority in the long term, while their sharpening enables a reassertion of established privileges.

Keywords: Citizenship – race – racism – Islamophobia – refugees – asylum – humanitarian crisis – Germany
Introduction

Reflecting on the contours of race in Europe, David Theo Goldberg observed that the Muslim figured as ‘death’s delivery man’. Viewed as inevitably hostile, aggressive, and engaged in Jihad against Europe, the Muslim represents the threat of cultural demise and, as the bearer of violent destruction, the ‘monster of our time’. His essay, published in 2006, concluded: ‘How much longer is it to go from cultural animalization to the burning down of mosques than it was to go from the bestialization of Jews to Kristallnacht?’ By drawing analogies between contemporary Islamophobia and pre-World War II Antisemitism, Goldberg warned of the potential of anti-Muslim racism to escalate further in Europe’s future.

In the period following re-unification in Germany, the country experienced a notable ‘peak’ in expressions of racist views, and a series of assaults against asylum shelters – mosques were not yet a regular target of such attacks in the 1990s. Today, Goldberg’s scenario seems worryingly prophetic: By 2016, about half of the German population supported anti-Muslim views, while an average of two attacks per week were directed at mosques, and assaults on refugee facilities rose to 18 per week. In the immediate post-unification period as today, the post-communist Eastern regions of Germany tended to be perceived as a hub of such racism.

2 Ibid., 346.
3 Ibid., 348.
Research has highlighted the legacy of the socialist republic which nurtured authoritarianism in its citizens, and pointed to the destabilising effects of the transition from a communist dictatorship to a democratic capitalist economy, which triggered status anxieties and a sense of relative collective deprivation. Migration scholars have emphasized the impact of the politics of asylum since unification. Historians argued that the East German government’s limited preparedness to critically engage with the population’s involvement in Nazi crimes enabled the continuation of a ‘racist mindset’.

Although these analyses mention that racism also thrives in former West Germany, their main attention is directed at explaining right-wing extremist attitudes or practices in the former East. They often either implicitly or explicitly conceive of racism as ‘cyclical’, thus appearing and disappearing, or ‘culturalize’ racism by relating it to a ‘backward’ mindset rooted in East German traditions of order and discipline. Many of these studies have little to

---


say about how and why racism persists in Germany’s Western regions. This is a serious lacuna as anti-Muslim racism has recently gained disproportionate virulence across the country.

Some of the scholarship on Islamophobia in Germany takes us beyond this reductive understanding of anti-Muslim racism as cyclically flowing individual ‘attitude’ or relational ‘prejudice’. Tracing the long-durée of Orientalism, this literature links anti-Muslim racist discourses to Germany’s Nazi legacy, the late emergence of the German nation state and Germany’s colonial aspirations. Relating race to wider political projects, such as nationalism, colonialism or the politics of memory, these perspectives also overcome a culturalist lens that roots racism in a broadly conceived ‘mindset’. Analyses of recent shifts in regulatory attention directed at Muslims have implicitly or explicitly identified the politics of citizenship as a current political project that advances the racialization of Muslims. However, what I think is

10 Yasemin Shooman, "...weil ihre Kultur so ist" Narrative des antimuslimischen Rassismus (Bielefeld: Transcript 2014).
12 Iman Attia, Die „Westliche Kultur“ und ihr Anderes. Zur Dekonstruktion von Orientalismus und antimuslimischem Rassismus (Bielefeld: Transcript 2009); Also Dietze, ‘Okzidentalismuskritik’.
missing from accounts that trace anti-Muslim racism in Germany’s past and present, is a more explicit consideration of the country’s division during the 20th Century and the effects of German re-unification.

In this article, I examine the dynamics of recent racist ‘peaks’ in post-unification Germany. I revisit previous research and numerical evidence of a spectrum of racist practices, including views expressed in surveys, electoral choices, participation in marches, and physical violence. Rather than reflecting on the varied drivers of this diverse set of behaviours, I explore how these actions were directed at specific targets in the 1990s and today.

As immigration numbers were rising in the 1990s, racist discourses mainly focused on refugees and migrant workers whose markers of difference were mainly ethno-cultural. Racist violence was more frequent in the East, while opinion polls reflected a more complex picture. In light of the recent increase in immigration from conflict-ridden areas such as Syria, Libya and Afghanistan, anti-Muslim racist practices gained comparable virulence across Germany.

These developments, I suggest, show that the logics of race continue to structure social relations in Germany. In the post-war era, the politics of labour migration in East and West Germany racialized economic and political hierarchies and conveyed a sense of superior entitlement to the population. The dynamics of re-unification added another layer of stratification to German society. In times of rising immigration, right-wing extremist activists successfully appealed to post-unification animosities and mobilized narratives of a ‘loss of control’ – momentarily more so in the East, but increasingly also in the West. However, rather than addressing the underlying social inequalities, or taking decisive measures against racist agitation and violence, the government directed regulative attention to the movement and conduct of the ‘other’. In the 1990s, a notable sharpening of the boundaries of citizenship tamed the outburst of racism. The current government similarly attempts to contain the racist ‘peak’ by tightening immigration laws. The politics of citizenship, I thus argue, provides key means
of perpetuating, reaffirming and cementing racialized hierarchies. The rules of citizenship serve to stabilize a sense of supremacy in the long term, while their sharpening enables a reassertion of established privileges. Although I specifically focus on Germany, the observations I make about the politics of citizenship and the instrumentalization of social disparities can also help us understand the logics of race and Islamophobia elsewhere in Europe.

*Race and the Politics of Citizenship in East and West Germany*

The history of racism shows that race is a shape shifter, and that racial subjects were made through the prism of diverse categorizations. The racialization of bodies, as Salman Sayyid reminds us, was never exclusively focused on visual markers: Biology was ‘marked at the same time as religion, culture, history and territories were marked and used to group socially fabricated distinctions between Europeanness and non-Europeanness.’\(^{14}\) Racism’s varied conjunctures have been related to processes of political contention as well as to the dynamics of capitalism.\(^{15}\) In Germany’s past and present, race materialized in various forms, including as the inferiorization of people of colour which helped to legitimate German colonial expansion in e.g. Africa and China, as Orientalism that assisted in justifying Germany’s colonial aspirations in Turkey and the Middle East, or as Antisemitism and Antizyganism which served as pillars of the building of the Third Reich.\(^{16}\)

---


\(^{16}\) Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama (eds), *German Colonialism. Race, the Holocaust and Postwar Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press 2011).
After World War II, the politics of immigration constituted one of the main arenas in which the East and West German governments gave regulative attention to race. Bridget Anderson argues that laws governing the movement of subjects play a role in creating, hardening and legitimating social hierarchies – and contribute to the manufacturing of racialized ethnic, national and religious categories.\(^\text{17}\) The law and practice of citizenship, she elaborates, do not just give immigration flows a particular character, but actively produce social relations. Citizenship, so Anderson, is not only about legal status, but about status in the sense of worth and honour, and about membership in the ‘community of value’. The politics of citizenship, Nandita Sharma adds, positively racializes the members of the nation, and negatively racializes ‘others’.\(^\text{18}\) Relevant policy areas are thus the conditions of entry, naturalization or integration, as well as the public contestation of racism. Although the two German states’ adopted diverging regulatory approaches in these fields, their politics of citizenship structurally sustained the logics of race.

The problematization of the Third Reich, specifically the systematic exclusion, prosecution, and genocide of the Jewish population, received considerable public attention in West Germany. The Allies worked with critical voices in the post-war Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) to confront society with its involvement in Nazi crimes, including through criminal prosecution, reparations, research, public commemoration, and education. Significant parts of the population, however, also perceived these measures as impositions by the winners of World War II. One of the results of this process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was the


FRG’s liberal post-war asylum regime. Despite their commitment to receiving politically persecuted refugees, post-war elites reiterated the FRG was ‘not a country of immigration’. They were, nevertheless, keen to fill shortages in industrial production and signed recruitment agreements with Greece, Italy, Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia in the 1960s. By employing so-called ‘guest workers’ in the lowest segment of the labour market, employers were able to retain relatively high wages for the German population.¹⁹ Labour migrants were to help boost the economy and then return to their home countries. They were barred from access to citizenship and voting rights. Although Muslims soon formed the second largest religious group in the FRG, they were not granted equivalent legal recognition to the Christian and Jewish denominations. Mosques were typically built in backyards of industrial sites, and if religious requirements were accommodated, this occurred with no material or symbolic support from the state. Although the ‘guest workers’ had a significant stake in West Germany’s post-war economic prosperity, their contribution received little recognition. Thus, while the FGR rhetorically distanced itself from Antisemitism and nationalism, ethno-centricity remained a prerogative of its politics of citizenship.

The German Democratic Republic (GDR), meanwhile, dissociated itself from the Nazi era by positioning itself as an anti-fascist state. Emphasizing the persecution of members of the Communist Party, the government refused to take responsibility for the atrocities of its predecessor regime.²⁰ Fascist continuities were, in line with the dynamics of the Cold War, ‘outsourced’ in that they were solely attributed to West Germany. While the latter strategy


²⁰ Behrends and Poutrus, ‘Xenophobia in the former GDR’, 158.
hardly challenged racist practices, it also entailed an element of distance in that fascism was projected onto the class-enemy. In this vein, West Germany’s immigration regime was condemned as Nazi-style slave labour. Yet, the ‘Worker’s State’ too was short of labour supply, and thus recruited, albeit in considerably lower numbers, so called ‘contract workers’ from fellow socialist countries such as Vietnam, Mozambique, Cuba, Angola and Algeria in the 1970s. These initiatives were dressed up as skill enhancement programmes for the benefit of the workers’ home countries. As in the FRG, all foreigners were meant to return home, and were not granted citizenship or voting rights. Relations between ‘natives’ and ‘foreigners’ were strictly regulated: social and especially intimate contacts were prohibited, and ‘contract-workers’ were segregated from the local population in housing and the workplace. The overall travel ban reinforced the exoticization of foreigners as ‘forbidden fruits’ that originated from an inaccessible outside world.21 There was little accommodation of the worker’s claims; for instance, Algerian workers, who requested the availability of pork-free meals in the canteen, time off for prayer, and questioned unacceptable housing arrangements, were labelled as ‘ungrateful’, ‘belligerent’ and ‘lazy’.22

Thus, despite the diverging framing of ‘labour migration’, both German states’ politics of citizenship ensured a hierarchical division of labour and systematic exclusion from political rights. Both societies treated immigration instrumentally – the foreigner was to come, do the dirty work, improve economic prosperity, not make any claims, not practise a foreign religion in public, and then return home. The politics of citizenship signalled a sense of superior


entitlement to the local population. It was suggestive of ‘ethnic Germans’ as sole legitimate occupants of their territory and privileged beneficiaries of the rights accorded to them. This political project added the figure of the migrant worker to the ranks of those who had been marked as Germany’s internal and external ‘others’ during colonialism and the Third Reich. By performing an explicit break with and ‘moving on from’ the Nazi State legacy, both states positioned the Third Reich as the paradigmatic example of racist practice. They ‘froze’ racism to a specific period in history and limited public contestation to one of race’s many incarnations.23

German unification

The discontinuation of the GDR, with its totalitarian features, such as its encompassing surveillance, violently enforced borders, travel bans, and biased property rights, initiated a process of economic transformation and democratization in East Germany. The initial euphoria on both sides was tainted by the power dynamics of the unification process. The passing of a jointly-negotiated constitution was barely seriously debated. The transition to a capitalist economy evolved on the terms of the FRG. The process disproportionately limited the economic and political agency of the population in the East over successive generations.

For instance, the Treuhandanstalt, in charge of privatizing the GDR’s 8500 state-owned companies, sold 85% of the industry to buyers from the West and only 5% to former GDR citizens.24 Ownership regulations privileged Western citizens who had lost their property in the


post-war period over compensation claims from GDR citizens. The restructuring of the public and the private sector brought about high levels of unemployment, and comparably lower wage and pension rates in the Eastern regions. 25 years on, employment rates and salaries continue to differ. 25 Public institutions were restructured, involving a transfer of leadership responsibility to West Germans. A recent study found that 23% of leadership positions within the Eastern regions, including in federal and regional government, media, or educational institutions are held by people from the East of Germany, even though they constitute 87% of residents in the area. 26

Significant parts of the population, as Naika Foroutan noted, thus felt that their East German identity had been depreciated and their skills devalued. 27 Democracy had not lived up to their expectations, which fed into a sense of humiliation, estrangement and alienation from the new Germany. This was further reinforced through the acceleration of life and insecure working conditions in Germany’s increasingly deregulated neoliberal economy. Significant numbers of young people left the East to take up employment in the West. By the

late 1990s, two thirds of East Germans thought that West Germany had ‘conquered the East like a colonial power’, and 80% felt like ‘second class citizens’.28

The racist ‘peak’ in the 1990s

In the early 1990s, the number of asylum seekers increased significantly as a result of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the dismembering of the Soviet empire.29 The new arrivals received considerable media attention, and the government was criticized for its ‘lack of steering capacity’. German re-unification marked the end of post-war occupation, and far-right groups instrumentalized narratives of a ‘finally united people’ to revive German nationalism. They also effectively harnessed the animosities resulting from the terms of the unification process.

Right-wing extremist political parties such as the Deutsche Volksunion (DVU), Nationaldemokratische Partei (NPD) and Die Republikaner nurtured debates on ‘bogus’ and ‘fraud’ asylum applicants (Asylbetrüger/Scheinasylanten) whose main intention was to invade and exploit the German welfare state.30 Their rhetoric resonated in as much as the DVU managed to obtain a small number of seats in two regional parliaments in the former East and


30 Werner Schiffauer, Fremde in der Stadt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1997), 75.
two in the former West in this period. The Republikaner gained parliamentary representation in Baden-Württemberg and Berlin in the 1990s.

Neo-Nazi agitation became particularly virulent in the early 1990s, which culminated in a series of arson attacks on refugee shelters. Pogroms against asylum seekers occurred in the Eastern cities of Hoyerswerda and Rostock in 1991/92, followed by arson attacks against Turkish families in the Western cities of Mölln and Solingen in 1992/93. Neo-Nazi groups had been part of West and East Germany for decades – but they were kept out of the public limelight in the GDR. It was only after 1989, Nitzan Shoshan notes, that Neo-Nazi groups from the West added their financial resources, organisational skills and institutional networks to those of far-right groupings in the East and physical attacks became a publicly contested issue. In the 1990s, the frequency of racist assaults rose across the country, with higher numbers of such incidents occurring in Germany’s Eastern regions.

Surveys into mainstream attitudes complicate this picture. In 1991/92, the population in the Eastern regions could, more so than residents in the West, empathize with political refugees and expressed greater openness towards asylum seekers. The data indicates, however, that far-right tropes of ‘bogus asylum seekers’ resonated significantly in both East


32 Shoshan, The Management of Hate, 32.


and West: Over 70% of respondents across the country agreed that refugees ‘took advantage of German asylum law’, and a similar proportion supported changes to the constitutional provisions regulating asylum. Respondents in the West, however, showed higher levels of approval of ‘foreign workers’, and were not prepared ‘to send them back even if jobs were getting scarce’; in contrast, East Germans’ disapproval and preparedness to ‘send foreign workers back’ rose continuously throughout the 1990s. Bergman et al. suggested that across East and West, racist attitudes were correlated with support for far-right parties such as the Republikaner, as well as with the respondent’s overall pessimistic assessment of the economic situation – the population in the East thereby perceived ‘guest-workers’ as rivals in the labour market. 60% of residents in East and West, however, agreed that ‘the foreigners should adjust their lifestyle more to the German way of life’.

Several observations are notable about the racist ‘peak’ in the 1990s: Variations along the East/West axis, notably, were not as straightforward as suggested. While far-right narratives that frame non-Germans as invaders into the social security system resonated to a degree, the population in the East also expressed comparatively higher levels of solidarity with political refugees. At the time, violent attacks against refugee shelters were more frequent in the East. Across Germany, however, there was a broad consensus that the liberal asylum regime was in

---

35 Ibid., 23.
37 Ibid., 213.
38 Ibid.
need of reform, and that immigrants should assimilate more. Neither public debates nor surveys were particularly concerned with refugees’ or migrant workers’ religion at the time – most salient markers of difference were ethnicity and culture. That does not mean that anti-Muslim racism was not already part of the package. Iman Attia’s qualitative research from the 1990s demonstrates that, if prompted, individual narratives of personal encounters and relationships notably resorted to anti-Muslim racist tropes.\(^{39}\) However, they did not yet play such a prominent role in mainstream political debates.

*The politics of citizenship in post-unification Germany*

In the years following unification, the politics of citizenship was significantly reconfigured. In an attempt to ‘re-establish social order’ and ‘preserve domestic peace’,\(^{40}\) various governments gave Germany’s immigration and integration rules an overhaul. The so-called ‘asylum compromise’ balanced a liberalization of naturalization requirements for long-term residents with constitutional changes that tightened the conditions of entry for political refugees. Far-right narratives of ‘self-segregated ghettos’ and ‘bogus asylum applicants’, which, as noted before, resonated with mainstream audiences at the time, gained further legitimacy by becoming the focus of political reform. Novel eligibility requirements diluted the constitutionally protected right to asylum: applicants could file an asylum claim if they did not originate from or had travelled through a third ‘safe country’. Legal amendments adopted in 1990, 1993 and 1999 offered long-term residents a right to naturalization and granted their children temporary dual citizenship. Evidence of cultural and constitutional allegiance replaced

\(^{39}\) Attia, *Die „Westliche Kultur“ und ihr Anderes.*

ethnicity as entry ticket into the ‘community of value’,\textsuperscript{41} in that naturalization was made conditional upon a declaration of loyalty to the Federal Republic, and the demonstration of German language proficiency.\textsuperscript{42} The legal changes were designed to prevent the production of an outsider population that harboured foreign attachments, and to direct political refugees to countries other than Germany. Despite their liberal impetus, the citizenship reforms perpetuated the logics of race. The new laws sharpened the boundaries between those who held or could obtain a right to the territory, and those who were no longer considered worthy of humanitarian concern. They were indicative of what the Government considered the pressing social problem and its adequate solution: the eruption of verbal and physical racist violence was addressed by directing regulatory attention to the movement and conduct of the ‘other’. The reforms indeed turned out to fulfil the desired pacifying effect, as the numbers of new arrivals declined. Observers noted at the time: ‘The wave of political violence could be contained once the political institutions had regained their capacity to regulate immigration, and the police and the criminal justice system were able to react more adequately to the violence. (…) Once these decisions had been made, the topic lost significance again for a majority of the population.’\textsuperscript{43} Thus, once the hierarchy between those positively racialized as Germans, and those negatively racialized as refugees had been reaffirmed, the mainstream population’s level of engagement with far-right activists’ arguments and mobilisation ceased, and racist violence declined.

\textsuperscript{41} Anderson, \textit{Us & Them}, 4.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 250.

\textsuperscript{43} Bergmann and Erb, ‘Fremdenfeindlichkeit und Antisemitismus in Deutschland’, 212.
It was a decade into the dissolution of the East/West binary that fundamentalist Islamism moved into the vacant position of projected main threat to the new West.\textsuperscript{44} Once Germany had been identified as harbour for the perpetrators of 9/11, the Government’s regulatory attention turned to Germany’s migrant populations’ religious profile. The politics of citizenship, yet again, was one of the key arenas of legislative activity and turned religion more prominently into a salient marker of racialized alterity. The conditions of entry to the ‘community of value’ were specified further in 2000nds. Participation in integration courses was made a mandatory requirement for citizenship acquisition, and naturalization exams were introduced. The national exam, supported by preparatory tools such as textbooks and mock-exams, assessed, among other things, knowledge of constitutional norms that regulate sexuality and gender. This test, as Schirin Amir-Moazami notes, thus only ultimately aims to disqualify ‘disloyal’ and ‘illiberal’ applicants, but actually is designed to educate what are framed as less ‘civilized’ populations.\textsuperscript{45} By pitting deviant outsiders against an in-group who allegedly holds up liberal sexual and gender norms by default, citizenship tests reflect and produce hierarchical binaries.\textsuperscript{46} This and a much wider array of integration policy initiatives thus further sharpened the racialized boundaries of the nation and added a specific focus onto Muslim religiosity to the regulatory framework.

\textsuperscript{44} Dietze describes it as a shift from the East/West to the Orient/Okzident polarization; Dietze, ‘Okzidentalsmuskritik’, 24.


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
The politics of citizenship also resonated with the views held by the wider public.\textsuperscript{47} Wilhelm Heitmeyer and his team, who traced the popularity of racist and right-wing extremist attitudes within the mainstream population in a large-scale longitudinal study, added anti-Muslim items to their questionnaire in 2002. Their findings indicate that the salience of historic racist repertoires moved further to the fore when the Muslim presence in Germany became increasingly problematized. The East/West variation, their data suggests, is significant in that far-right activists successfully appealed to animosities resulting from the dynamics of unification. Between 2002 and 2008 anti-Muslim racist attitudes scored higher in the Eastern regions – an average of 21% of the population in the former West and 34% in the East wanted ‘to prohibit Muslim immigration to Germany’.\textsuperscript{48} Hüpping and Reinecke’s analysis of this data found that approval of anti-Muslim items correlated with the perception of relative collective disadvantage in comparison to other regions.\textsuperscript{49} Regardless of their actual social status, the more people felt \textit{collectively} and \textit{comparatively} marginalized, feared they could lose their job, and sensed they had less political weight, the more likely they were to express racist views. A regional breakdown of this data supports my overall point about the structural features of race; it showed that once the issue of ‘self-ascribed deprivation in relation to others’ was taken into


\textsuperscript{48} Klein and Heitmeyer, ‘Ost-westdeutsche Integrationsbilanz’, 20.

account, the difference between East and West became insignificant – respondents from more deprived West German regions approved of racist views on a similar scale to respondents from economically less well-off East German regions. Regardless of where they had been raised, those who felt comparably underprivileged displayed equal levels of resentment. Due to significantly higher levels of economic prosperity in the West, the number was significantly lower there.

_The current Anti-Muslim racist ‘peak’_

Germany’s response to the humanitarian crisis at the European border in 2015 further polarized this constellation. Chancellor Merkel’s government temporarily suspended the Dublin regulations, and subsequently agreed to receive 800,000 refugees fleeing the Syrian war. This initiative constituted an ad-hoc emergency response negotiated with the Hungarian and Austrian political leaderships. The following debate was highly contentious; while the new arrivals received unprecedented levels of hands-on assistance and support, they also faced rising levels of political protest. The atmosphere hardened after New Years’ 2016/2017 and Germany’s first experiences with Islamist terrorism in 2016. Far-right activists and various centrist political representatives linked the events to a failure to manage immigration, and attributed a particular proneness to violence to ‘Islamic culture’.50 The representative ‘Mitte’ (‘centre’) study recorded a modest increase in the overall set of right-wing extremist attitudes in 2016, but observed a strengthening of focus on Muslims and asylum seekers.51 A ban on immigration for Muslims, while still more popular in the East, found significantly higher


approval rates across the whole of Germany. In 2016, 38.15% of the people living in the former West and 53.82% of the population in the former East would ‘prohibit Muslim immigration to Germany’, while 50.3% in the East, and 49.92% in the West ‘feel like a stranger in their own country due to the high Muslim presence’.52 These trends point to, yet again, the structural anchoring of racism and its successful invocation during times of heightened immigration.

The right-wing populist party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) specifically began to mobilize around anti-Muslim racist concerns in late 2015. Alexander Gauland, its co-founder, demanded an immediate ban of Muslim immigration to Germany.53 The AfD party manifesto advocated the permanent closure of the EU’s external borders, and called for a ban of ‘symbols of Islamic domination in public’, such as minarets, as well as a hijab ban in the public service.54 The AfD subsequently gained a profile as the anti-refugee party and parachuted into five regional parliaments with double-digit election results in 2016. In the 2017 national election, the party secured 12.7% of the vote and became the third-largest grouping in the Bundestag. The results indicate a more emphatic reception of the AfD in the former East, where scores were around and above 20%. Yet, with an average of 10% and above, the AfD also gained a higher proportion of votes than any other far-right party ever achieved in post-war West Germany. If we take diverging population sizes into account, the absolute number of AfD

52 This is particularly astonishing as 98% of Muslims live in the West of Germany. Unpublished data from Decker et al., Die enthemmte Mitte, 2016 presented by Alexander Yendell in his talk ‘Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment in East Germany’ at the University of Toronto, 18./19. November 2017, 9.


voters is higher in the West. Thus, individuals who in the past expressed racist opinions but did not vote for far-right parties now felt that their views were inadequately represented by centrist parties and supported a platform that explicitly articulated such concerns.55 The ‘Mitte’ study too confirms that approval of anti-Muslim racist sentiments directly accounts for support of the AfD.56

Another beneficiary of the polarized debate was PEGIDA, the ‘Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident’. Since 2014 the organisation re-enacts the Monday protests that preceded the fall of the Berlin Wall in Dresden. Chanting ‘We are the people’, the protesters racialize the line prominently used in the late GDR’s social movement. PEGIDA initially gathered up to 17,000 supporters but had become near insignificant before it re-emerged with new force in late 2015. The movement’s main concerns are the failure of the government’s politics of asylum, a critique of current elites, and anti-Muslim racist opposition to the public visibility of mosques or hijabs.57 An important additional theme is ‘West German arrogance’ and the discrimination of East Germans. While Dresden remained unique in assembling high numbers of participants, the movement also inspired local off-shoots across the country, including the MAGIDA in Magdeburg, LEGIDA in Leipzig, BÄRGIDA in Berlin, as well as the PEGIDA Munich, PEGIDA NRW in Duisburg, and KÖGIDA in Cologne, to

name just a few. In 2016, 200 such marches were registered by the authorities. Of these PEGIDA-inspired gatherings, 80 took place in the Western regions, 60 marches were organized in the East, and 60 were held in Berlin. Together with the PEGIDA demonstrations in Dresden, this adds up to an average of 5 marches per week across Germany. Notable about PEGIDA is that its participants are largely men, whose income and education is above the main average, and who are disproportionally likely to support right-wing extremist and anti-Muslim racist views. The ‘Mitte’ study, again, is helpful in disentangling the East-West comparison. The survey shows PEGIDA’s agenda is supported by about a quarter of the population across the country. The East-West variation is marginal: 25.4% of those who lived in the former East and 22% in the former West support PEGIDA’s political claims. Thus, while PEGIDA operates particularly successfully in Dresden, the movement also finds appeal across Germany.

As AfD’s and PEGIDA’s mobilization contributed to the legitimacy of racist agendas, violent assaults occurred at a deeply concerning frequency across the country. Racist violence has quadrupled to alarming peaks in 2015 and 2016. Authorities registered 970 assaults targeting refugee facilities, and 2400 attacks aimed at individual refugees in 2016. An additional 91 attacks directed at mosques were documented, although the number of unreported incidents is likely to be significantly higher. Of these officially recorded assaults on Islamic worship facilities, 21 occurred in the former East, two in Berlin, and 68 in the West of

58 Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksachen 18/8290, 18/9310, 18/10322, 18/11128.
59 Alexander Yendell, Oliver Decker and Elmar Brähler, ‘Wer unterstützt PEGIDA und was erklärt die Zustimmung zu den Zielen der Bewegung?’, in Decker et al. (eds.), Die enthemmte Mitte, 137-152 (145).
60 Decker et al., ‘Die ,Mitte‘ Studie 2016 ’, 64.
61 Ibid.
62 Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 18/111298.
Germany. Calculated against the size of the population, the frequency is relatively higher in the East. Thus, while Muslims are more likely to be subject to violence in Germany’s East, racist and Islamophobic violence currently systematically occurs across the whole of Germany.

Several developments are notable about this recent racist ‘peak’. Far-right agitators successfully exploited the German government’s response to the humanitarian crisis with a diverse spectrum of activist interventions, including electoral mobilization, rallying and physical violence. Their rhetoric merges the post-war racialization of migrants with older historic spectres of racism, such as Orientalism. Political responses to physical verbal racist violence have so far deviated little from this well-trodden path. While there is little commitment to safeguarding refugee shelters and mosques which are likely to be subject to violence, recent German governments passed a series of measures that further tightened immigration rules. In 2015 and 2016, for instance, the asylum application process was accelerated, deportations were made easier, and integration courses were opened to refugees. In mid 2018, the Government pushed for a further fortification of the EU’s external borders and prepared the passing of novel tighter immigration legislation. Anne Koch characterized such steps as ‘well-rehearsed reflexes’, in that they re-enacted the rationalities of previous legal reforms. These choices contribute to the success of racist populism in that are suggestive of government ‘regaining of control’ of Germany’s borders – whose loss has been mourned by the far-right in the first place.


Conclusion

This paper revisited research-based evidence and brought together datasets that provide insight into the virulence of recent racist ‘peaks’ in Germany. German re-unification distinctly stratified German society and reduced the East German population’s sense of agency. In the 1990s, as today, far-right activists successfully channelled these animosities into nationalist and racist resentment. My systematic comparison of far-right activist repertoires, including electoral mobilization, protest marches, and violent assaults, revealed that racism, while momentarily resonating more in the East, is not a distinctly ‘Eastern’ phenomenon, but reverberates across the whole of Germany. The occurrence of racist ‘peaks’ in Germany’s recent history, I suggest, do not indicate racism’s cyclical appearance (and subsequent disappearance). They also do not imply that racist views constitute a ‘mindset’ that is passed on from generation to generation, across diverging institutional and political settings.

Rather, the regulative attention governments directed at race in pursuit of political projects such as colonialism or the building of the Third Reich structurally and institutionally reproduced and thus sustained the logics of race. In post-war Europe, the political management of immigration played a significant role in re-configuring racialized binaries in public life. Its politics of citizenship, I have argued, provided key means of perpetuating, reaffirming and cementing racialized hierarchies in past and present Germany. My analysis showed that both German states claimed to have overcome the legacy of racism, but projected and normalized a myth of ethnic homogeneity, and nurtured a sense of superior entitlement in their citizenry. In the Cold War through to the 1990s, the politics of citizenship operated with ethno-cultural makers of alterity, after which religion became the focal point of regulatory attention in the 21st Century. The regulatory efforts sketched in this article conveyed and normalized a sense of
entitlement among the German population, which could be successfully invoked during periods of increasing immigration – by far-right agitators but often enough also by the political mainstream. Violent eruptions of this sense of superiority were contained by directing further regulatory attention to the movement and conduct of the other. The tenor of political responses to both ‘peaks’ thus addressed racist arguments as if they articulated legitimate concerns.

As this article goes into print, statistics point to a continuation of the trends identified in 2016 throughout 2017 and the first half of 2018. While anti-Muslim racism currently most explicitly resonates with half of the mainstream population and is translated into multiple forms of action, other historically established incarnations of race, such as Antisemitism, Antizyganism, and racism against People of Colour have too notably gained traction. There is a concerning mismatch between the evidence for the virulence of racism, and the lack of recognition that it constitutes a major challenge to German democracy. Its reduction to a post-socialist problem of the Eastern regions thereby plays a role in masking everyday racism across the country. The limited resources German governments invested in prohibiting and persecuting physical, verbal and institutional racism, as well as the levels of attention they directed at tightening immigration rules too has contributed to its legitimacy.

Aleksandra Lewicki is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Sussex and a member of the Sussex Centre for Migration Research. She studied Politics at the Universities of Erlangen-Nuremberg and Potsdam and holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Bristol. Her work engages with discourses and practices that iterate, perpetuate or neutralize, and thus continuously reproduce structural inequalities and institutional racism. A particular concern lies the racist repertoires of Orientalism and Islamophobia, and their manifestation in public institutions. Her most recent research has investigated the Christian Churches’ contribution to the making of race in Germany. Lewicki is the author of the monographs
Souveränität im Wandel (2005, Lit Verlag), and Social Justice through Citizenship? The Politics of Muslim Integration in Germany and Great Britain (2014, Palgrave Macmillan) and an associate editor of the academic journals Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies (Brighton) and Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen (Berlin). Email:

Aleksandra.Lewicki@sussex.ac.uk