

A Threat from Within: Comparing and Contrasting the AfD and NPD in 2024

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Introduction and Definitions

Germany inhabits a unique place in the world of the far right. On the one hand, it was the implementer of the most extreme and totalitarian realization of the same fundamental fascist ideology that most radical right-wing organizations still share today, with the Third Reich continuing to play a significant role in the fantasies and ideologies of many extremist right organizations. On the other hand, since 1945, the country has made it a national priority to take ownership constructively and publicly of what happened in those 12 years, starting in 1933, to prevent such things from ever occurring again.

It was remarkably successful – while far-right politics were always present in much of (Western) Europe also throughout the post-war era, Germany remained predominantly centrist and developed to be one of the most solidly democratic countries in the world (the Economist Intelligence Unit 2023). More recently, however, the German “firewall” against the far right has been tested like never before. Around the time of the “refugee crisis,” the influx to Europe of people fleeing from the gruesome civil war of Syria, post-war Germany saw its first mainstream political party that can be confidently identified as radical right, with some branches even leaning into the extreme right: The Alternative für Deutschland, AfD.

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Of course, far-right parties are not entirely novel, even in modern Germany. In the immediate aftermath of the war, several parties that maintained significant parts of the NSDAP's völkisch mindset sought to win the public's favor. Some have stuck around for decades. Among these, the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands, NPD, is one of the most prominent². It is, for all intents and purposes, a minor party, counting only 3,000 members (Bundesministerium des Inneren und für Heimat 2022, 94). Despite this, it has had an outsized influence on German politics due to its extreme positions, several (failed) attempts at outlawing it, and the perception that the NPD is the direct, anti-democratic successor of the NSDAP.

In this paper, I will seek to compare and contrast the AfD and the NPD as two significant parties on the German far right. I will present their history, current presence, activity, ideology, and recruitment methods. I will conclude with an estimate of their threat levels to liberal democracy in modern Germany in the coming years.

Definitions

While both the AfD and the NPD are on the German far right, there are nonetheless clear qualitative differences between their public appearances. To accurately describe these, I will borrow from existing scholarly literature on the far right.

Cas Mudde offers a compelling distinction between what he calls the radical right and the extreme right, which I will rely on heavily for the analysis in the present paper.

In his 2019 book "The Far Right Today," he identifies the **radical right** as accepting the essence of democracy, though its specific idea of what that means might differ greatly from the mainstream understanding in a liberal democracy such as Germany (Mudde 2019). In his definition, the radical right sees itself as the legitimate voice of the people and so roots its legitimacy in a fundamentally

² In 2023, the NPD renamed itself to "Die Heimat," roughly equivalent to "the homeland" (Schneider and AFP 2023). For the sake of this paper, I will continue to refer to the party as NPD as this is what it is still commonly known as in Germany, most research and news articles refer to it as such and it is simply shorter.

democratic understanding of politics. It may, however, oppose the current scope of who is allowed to vote in the liberal democratic order (e.g., democracy, but only for white men) and other tenets of liberal democracy, such as the separation of church and state.

The **extreme right**, in contrast, rejects democracy altogether (Mudde 2019). This does not necessarily mean that these organizations will not run candidates in democratic elections. However, it does mean that they seek to seize power even if they knowingly are in the minority. This distinction makes the extreme right more revolutionary, while the radical right falls more on the reformist side.

For instance, the Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ, which contributed significantly to the resurgence of a new, more family-friendly version of the far right in Europe since the 90s, would be classified as radical right. Fringe groups such as the German III. Weg ("Third Way"), surveilled by the German equivalent of the FBI, are extreme right. They seek to overthrow the existing system with or without a democratic (even in their definition of the word) mandate.

Applied to the cases we will discuss here, the AfD seems to fit the definition of a radical right group, much like its Austrian counterpart in the FPÖ. The NPD, meanwhile, falls more on the extreme side. The German Bureau for Protection of the Constitution, the country's rough equivalent to the American FBI, describes the party as "agitating ... against the existing political order and openly striving for a fundamental 'system change' in Germany." (Bundesministerium des Inneren und für Heimat 2022, 94)

In this paper, I will use the term **far right** (as a noun and, hyphenated, as an adjective) as a catch-all for political phenomena beyond the mainstream on the right of the political spectrum. For the sake of this paper, I will include both radical and extreme right parties, groupings, individuals, etc., in this term.

Both the AfD and the NPD are examples of right-wing **extremism**. This extremism is fundamentally based on an in vs. outgroup. It lies beyond what are typical behaviors and beliefs and challenges

the core values of a society (Berger 2018, chap. 2). In the case of both the AfD and the NPD, the ingroup is the German people, and the outgroup is perceived foreign forces trying to destroy the German ways of life. The most common manifestation of these foreign forces are immigrants and the European Union, commonly referred to simply as “Brussels.”

Another defining factor for right-wing extremism is a sense of nostalgia and longing for the restoration of a past state, the perceived “golden age” (Jackson 2019). This makes these groups inherently reactionary as opposed to progressive, as are most groups on the radical left.

In Germany, this reactionary aspect takes a unique flavor as most parties, even on the far right, will typically try to distance themselves from the atrocities of the Third Reich under the rule of the NSDAP. This is for a few reasons: For one, glorifying or relativizing this period in German history is illegal, and those laws are consistently enforced. It also tends not to be good politics: Few Germans desire to return to the ways of the Third Reich. Nonetheless, this adoration for a bygone era is still very much present in the German far right, including in the two parties analyzed in this paper; some glorify a non-descript past golden age, while some openly flirt with the Nazi era. For instance, the imperial German flag (black, white, and red) can often be seen flying at far-right rallies. This flag does not underly the same restrictions as Nazi iconography would, but particularly ingroup members of the German extreme right often understand it as a placeholder. A heavy emphasis on (what they declare to be) German traditions is also often present at the meetings of these groupings. Burschenschaften, German fraternities that typically have a distinctly far-right flavor to them, tend to dress up in traditional military dress style uniforms and hold their ceremonies in Wirtshäuser, German pubs or beer houses with hearty German cuisine, wood-paneled walls and Antlers on the walls. Of course, this is not inherently objectionable, but much like the imperial flag, these traditions are commonly used to signal the reverence of a bygone – undemocratic – era.

Finally, a term important to the German-speaking world of the far right is “völkisch.” This word is nearly impossible to accurately and concisely translate to English, so I will use it in its original form

throughout this text. Its closest approximation is “ethnic,” specifically in the context of ethnic nationalism, but it goes beyond this to include other aspects of the worldview typically espoused by national socialists.

Past and Present

NPD – Getting the Party Started

The NPD has its roots in the postwar era in Germany. It is the successor party of the Deutsche Reichspartei, the German Imperial Party, which was founded in 1950 on ideas of resurrecting a pan-German empire before it took an openly neo-Nazi turn in 1952 (Cheles, Ferguson, and Vaughan 1991). The NPD was formed in 1964, partly in reaction to the lack of far-right electoral successes under the moderate German government, as a combination of various ultra-nationalist splinter groups (Editors, n.d.).

Immediately after its formation, the NPD achieved considerable electoral success. In the 1966 elections, it gained seats in seven of ten West German state parliaments, scoring a remarkable 9.8% of the vote in Baden-Württemberg – which remains the NPD’s highest electoral success to date (BPB, n.d.). In the federal elections three years later, it missed the 5% limit for entry into the national parliament by just 0.7% (BPB, n.d.). Two decades of political infighting and decline followed. Though always extreme, the party opened its ranks to explicitly militant neo-Nazis in the mid-90s. By the end of that decade, it was starting to see increases in vote shares once again, driven primarily by the new states of the former GDR. The NPD would succeed in holding seats in the eastern state parliaments of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Saxony throughout the 2000s and into the 2010s. At present, the NPD holds no seats in any German parliament. It is too small of a party for inclusion in national opinion polls.

AfD – The Right Wing at the Right Time

In some ways, NPD walked so that AfD could run.

The AfD was founded in 2013, not as an explicitly radical right party. Instead, it was a consequence of the European financial crisis and sought the end of the Euro in Germany. The so-called refugee crisis of 2014-15, when millions of desperate people from the Middle East (primarily from Syria) sought refuge in Europe, coincided with a shift of the party markedly to the right. It also became noticeably more populist in its messaging. Most of the original founders of the party, many of whom were primarily concerned with economic issues relating to the monetary union, have since left the party (Nickschas 2023).

According to the Federal Center for Political Education, BPB, "AfD was considered part of the liberal-conservative spectrum during its founding phase. It now fits seamlessly into the right-wing populist and far-right party family" (BPB 2022a).

In the immediate aftermath of the influx of refugees, around 2017, a völkisch-nationalist branch of the party – referred to as "The Wing" – began to gain influence. Björn Höcke, the head of the party in Thuringia, emerged as its leader. He remains one of the leading forces in the party to this day (Nickschas 2023). Among his statements relativizing the darkest periods of German history is a 2017 demand to "reverse the German remembrance policy by 180 degrees" and calling the Holocaust memorial in Berlin a "shameful monument" (Nickschas 2023). A considerable subset of party members, estimated to be around 40% by some party functionaries, were adherents of the Flügel. The German authorities now consider this branch of the party officially extremist and in their 2020 counted 7,000 active members (Wehner 2020).

The party's emergence was meteoric. AfD has been elected to every state parliament in every election since 2014, except one (Schleswig-Holstein in 2021). In the 2017 federal elections, it was the strongest force in Saxony (27%) and came second in all other East German states (BPB 2022b). In the most recent 2021 federal elections, AfD scored 10.3% of the overall vote, a 2.3% decrease from the previous election. However, it has since experienced a surge in public opinion polling to its

highest values yet, peaking at 22% around the start of this year (own research³). It remains the second party in polls at the time of writing in mid-May 2024, at around 17% (POLITICO 2022).

Comparing Their Paths

While NPD has called itself the “only serious nationalist force” (NPD, n.d.), it is clear that AfD’s meteoric rise — which has far outpaced the leftist newcomers of the 1990s — was the sort of success that NPD hoped it could achieve shortly after its formation but ultimately failed to attain.

Comparing their histories is challenging, considering AfD has only been around for about ten years. However, we can already note a significant difference: while NPD was founded as an explicitly extremist right party, the AfD was not. Instead, it transformed in this direction with time (albeit rather soon). Notably, however, it only achieved electoral success after doing so. NPD is historically a West German party, where there are considerable conservative forces but proportionally fewer voters who lean explicitly far right; those are primarily found in the New States of the former East. Tapping these voters allowed the NPD to experience a brief resurgence around the turn of the millennium. AfD tapped into the same voters of the New States but has been considerably more successful in mobilizing for its cause, enabling it to become a well-established party and among the most consistently present political forces throughout the East. Nonetheless, two-thirds of its votes still come from the West, despite the much lower percentages it attains there (BPB 2022b). This may help explain why the party still appears torn between openly embracing its extreme positions and maintaining a front of moderation, which will be further explored in upcoming sections.

The Present

Ideology – the same but in blue?

In public perception, a gulf exists between the AfD and the NPD – the former is perceived as a socially acceptable, fundamentally democratic party with some provocative right-wing ideas, while

³ I maintain a database of all reputable public opinion polls in Germany on a spreadsheet.

the latter is seen as little short of a wannabe reincarnation of the Nazi party. De facto, however, research suggests that the AfD's radicalization has progressed so far that differences in political aims may not be as significant as is publicly perceived. At their core, both parties pursue the same goal: An ethnically homogenous Germany "for Germans."

The NPD has been surveilled by Germany's Bureau for the Protection of the Constitution for years, while segments of the AfD – specifically, several state-level branches, the Flügel, and the youth organization Junge Alternative, JA – have more recently been added to the surveillance lists (Bundesministerium des Inneren und für Heimat 2022). The party challenged this in the courts but lost all the challenges, meaning it can officially be considered a potential extremist party under German law.

A bombshell report by investigative journalists of "Correctiv" released in January 2024 revealed that the party was actively networking with other extreme right organizations to come up with a plan to "purify" Germany. The minutes of the meeting revealed that plans were being discussed that would make a distinction between "true" Germans and those with an immigrant background, with the aim of deporting the latter (Zick 2024). Although this particular instance of virulent xenophobia and disregard for the principles of the German state was discussed in a semi-private setting, the party's public appearances – in speeches, on social media, in its publications, etc. – has shifted remarkably far to the right, too.

The magazine "Der Spiegel" reported in late 2023, even before the Correctiv story on the deportation discussions was released, that rhetoric and political goals of the AfD and NPD had converged to such an extent that, in many cases, there was no substantive difference left. What remains is that the AfD manages to package its hate and vitriol more neatly – a thin veil to largely the same message, which is absent in much of the NPD's messaging (FOCUSonline 2023). German extremism researchers have pointed out the striking similarities in rhetoric between the two parties even before the "Spiegel" investigation (Rönspeiß 2023).

Because of the veil that the AfD tends to use to cloak its more extreme positions in public, it is somewhat difficult to draw accurate comparisons between the two parties as what is said by the AfD and what is meant may sometimes differ quite significantly. The NPD is more straightforward to analyze in that regard, as it tends to say what is meant openly. Additionally, the AfD hosts a broader range of political views and ideologies than the NPD, further complicating analysis as it is tough to determine the “true” opinion of the party vs. individuals within it.

The table below presents a concise comparison of the ideologies of both parties as they stand today. For the AfD, publicly espoused positions were used; members of the party and particularly the Flügel and the Junge Alternative (young alternative) sometimes have espoused more extreme positions, such as advocating to shoot immigrants on sight at the German-Austrian border (tagesschau.de 2016).

	Alternative für Deutschland	Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands
Nationalism	Encourages nationalist pride for the German present and history	Extreme nationalism and glorification of Germany’s past
Immigration	Opposes most immigration, encourages strict asylum policies. Opposition to the “great replacement.”	Cessation of immigration and repatriation of non-Germans. Opposition to the “great replacement.”
EU	Euroskeptic and will prioritize national sovereignty; EU used as a populist scapegoat	Anti-EU. Advocates to leave the Union.
Social	Traditional gender roles & view of the family; anti-LGBTQ; preservation of “heritage”	Traditional gender roles & view of the family; racial purity
Economy	Protectionism and economic nationalism	National socialism, heavy state intervention, autarky

Other ideological emphases	Anti-Islam, economy, against political correctness, rejects multiculturalism	Racial purity, anti-globalism (antisemitism), rejects multiculturalism
Public perception	Populist, underdog, newcomer, outside the system, radical but generally legitimate	Extremist, neo-Nazi, undesirable, skinheads, antidemocratic

Activity and Recruitment

Owing to their vastly different sizes, there is a major difference in the level of activity of the two parties. Additionally, the AfD benefits significantly from being a party operating within the democratic system: Its presence in the state and national parliaments provides a valuable platform. The NPD lacks this platform, though it, too, is an official party and, as such, has benefited from federal funding that is allocated proportionally to all parties to support their operations (this was only halted in January 2024 after a federal court ruled the party “hostile to the constitution.” (Deppe 2024)).

Beyond that, however, the parties share considerable similarities in their (non-parliamentary) operations. This is especially true following the (sluggish) reformation that the NPD has been pursuing in the 2020s, seeking to re-envision itself away from being the sole center of the nationalist right to being a facilitator in a network of radical and extreme right-wing actors. It relies heavily on grassroots organizing (Bundesministerium des Inneren und für Heimat 2022). This is where the main difference in day-to-day operations between the AfD and NPD lies: While the former focuses on electoral successes, the latter has largely come to terms with not being an electoral power to be reckoned with and instead focuses on activism to achieve its goals.

As a radical right party, the AfD’s primary focus appears to be its parliamentary activities. Nonetheless, it is heavily involved in the pan-European network of the far right, hosting and attending conferences with fellow parties from around the continent and networking with movements on the right fringe, including many that are surveilled by the German authorities for being anti-democratic. It is also involved with grassroots organizing, including infamously being closely tied to

the publicly xenophobic PEGIDA – Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (“patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident”) – movement in the mid-2010s (Nimz 2018).

As for further similarities, both parties heavily emphasize targeting youth, particularly young men. This is a pattern seen throughout the radical right globally and reinforced by its traditional views on gender roles. Both parties have youth branches⁴ that conduct activism and are outspokenly radical; these organizations are designed to provide comradeship and a political outlet for the target demographic of young, disenfranchised, nationalist men while radicalizing them (Bundesministerium des Inneren und für Heimat 2022). The AfD, however, attracts a wider variety of people than the NPD does, which is a space for avowed Nazis. The AfD and its members go to great pains to disavow the term and attack those who label them as such; this also applies to the (even more radical) youth branch.⁵

Similarly, both parties use the media ecosystem to their advantage, to an extent proportional to their respective capacities. They both maintain a significant online presence, though again, owing to the larger size of the party, the AfD far outcompetes the NPD in this field. Both parties maintain their own media ecosystems, which encompass significant social media presences, online video/television channels and party-controlled print publications that serve to tout the party’s successes and spread its gospel (deutschlandfunk.de 2024) (Bundesministerium des Inneren und für Heimat 2022). Though considerable parts of the media ecosystems are directly under these parties’ control, they also benefit from a larger network of far-right publications and platforms, such as the extreme right

⁴ Junge Alternative for the AfD and Junge Nationalisten for the NPD.

⁵ Of note: The Junge Alternative uses a logo which has caused quite some controversy for its similarity with the forbidden Nationale Versammlung’s logo of the late 20th century. Additionally, I find that the top of the blue flame in the logo looks remarkably like the stylized S of the SS. I have not been able to find any reporting on this in the cursory searches I have conducted and therefore cannot rule out a coincidence. Considering the meticulously maintained iconography throughout the far right, however, it does not seem far-fetched that at least somewhere in the design process this symbol of horror was used as inspiration.

(according to the German domestic secret service) “Compact” magazine that is sold in many mainstream magazine stores throughout Germany (Sachse 2024).

A Real Threat

It is uncomfortable to have to make a threat assessment for parties that are both legal parties in a democratic system. However, this overview has shown that both parties are at the right fringe of the political spectrum and are radical or extreme-right. As such, and considering also the numerous statements by party functionaries in both AfD and NPD that are anti-democratic, in contradiction to the liberal democratic order of the German state, and sometimes denigrating the dignity of fellow human beings, at least entertaining the thought of a threat analysis seems warranted.

Additionally, the emergence of a powerful far-right political party in Germany has gone hand-in-hand with a significant rise in far-right political violence. Between 2013 and 2022 (the most recent numbers available), German authorities reported a 38% increase in right-wing politically-motivated crime, to 23,493 cases reported in 2022 (BKA 2023a). This marked a 7% increase from the prior year and led the agency to declare: “Right-wing extremism remains the most significant threat to our liberal democratic society” (BKA 2023b). These numbers predate the most recent surge in support for the German far right, which began in 2023, and a recent, very public, string of attacks.

Two main strands of threats emerge from these parties. On the one hand, the parties themselves can and should be treated as threats to the present liberal democratic order in Germany. All of the NPD and significant parts of the AfD openly disregard the present German state and, if given the chance, would like to change it in a manner incompatible with liberal democracy and so with the German constitution. The other threat emerges from individuals willing to act on behalf of extreme right-wing ideas, taking matters into their own hands but implicitly or explicitly encouraged by these parties or some of their functionaries, media or messaging.

In this latter category, an extremely worrying recent trend has been a chain of violent attacks on and threats against politicians and election workers throughout Germany but especially in the East, where the far right is particularly strong. Most (though not all) of the politicians attacked and threatened belonged to left-of-center political parties (Winkler 2024). With a European election in early June, broad dissatisfaction with the (liberal and left-of-center) federal government, and new national elections by the end of next year (2025), existing trends make further attacks seem almost inevitable.

In addition to attacks on politicians, Germany has, in recent years, experienced a series of terror attacks perpetrated by lone-wolf, radicalized right-wing extremists. These include the Hanau attack of 2020, when a gunman killed eleven people, including himself and his mother, in a murder spree that targeted people who had a “migratory background.” Just half a year earlier, in October 2019, a terrorist attack was conducted against a synagogue in Halle on Yom Kippur (Hille 2023). In December 2022, German authorities foiled an attempted coup by the Reichsbürger movement, a plot that included a former AfD member (Euronews 2022). Accelerationist terrorists, whose plan to incite a civil war was foiled in 2018, were later reported to have had connections with the AfD, with some of the terrorists appearing alongside high-ranking party functionaries (Göbel 2018).

The threat level will remain elevated for the foreseeable future. Radicalization, driven in significant parts by the resurgence of the German far right and the shifting of the acceptable realm of public discourse, will likely contribute to further plots and, unless security services can step in, further lethal attacks by supporters of the emboldened radical right network that NPD and AfD both play major roles in.

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