Towards a normalization of Antisemitism: Germany's Alternative für Deutschland on Facebook

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1. Antisemitism on social media

Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has used Facebook extensively to advance its political agenda and was therefore called Germany's first Facebook party. And while the AfD has made headlines for ignoring antisemitism within their party, Facebook, the platform they have used extensively, was found to enable the genocidal violence against the Rohingyas in Myanmar, by neglecting hate speech against the minority on the platform for years.[1] Every minute, 510,000 comments are posted on Facebook, and 136,000 photos are uploaded. Contrary to this, Facebook worldwide currently only employs around 15,000 people to moderator the content. In contrast to the number of moderators hired to evaluate hate posts, Vigo social intelligence, an online monitoring and analysis company commissioned by the World Jewish Congress, shows that more than 382,000 antisemitic contributions in 2016 were published on social media platforms - an average of more than 43.6 antisemitic posts per hour or one antisemitic post every 83 seconds. The Vigo social intelligence study is based on search results for antisemitic keywords. Thus, it can be assumed that the number of unreported cases is much higher because innuendo, irony, and coded forms of antisemitism are not recorded here. If you stick to Facebook as an example, it is aggravating that antisemitism appears on social media in all languages and in different ideological backgrounds. The social networks themselves leave the moderation of the reported content to outsourced service providers, especially in the Philippines, but also in Europe and the USA. Often, the moderators have neither the language skills nor the historical knowledge to decipher antisemitism. Besides, the moderators are confronted with content such as animal cruelty, child pornography, rape, murders, suicides, and stonings. Having to deal with such extreme contributions, it seems difficult to give due attention to antisemitic messages. Social media play an essential role in the spread of hatred in general and the dissemination of

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[1] Parts of this paper are taken from the author's forthcoming article "Likes for antisemitism: The AfD on Facebook."

antisemitism in particular. Social media is also the place where Jewish people confronted the most with antisemitism. In 2018, more than 10,000 Jewish people in 13 countries, including Germany, were interviewed for the EU study "Experiences and perceptions of antisemitism. Second survey on discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the EU". The research deals with experiences and perceptions of antisemitism and shows that 89% of the Jewish people surveyed rated antisemitism as the most problematic on social media, even before experiences with antisemitism in public places, in the media, and politics.

The UK Community Security Trust report documents anti-Jewish attacks from 2019 and not only records an increase in antisemitic incidents in general but also shows that antisemitism is most commonly communicated on social media. Due to the long tradition of anti-Jewish thought patterns in Germany and Europe and the widespread use of social media, antisemitism has an important place in the debate about hate speech. Antisemitism as a form of hate speech on social media is content such as posts, memes, videos, vlogs, and comments, in which people and/or institutions are attacked because of their actual or supposed affiliation with Judaism or because of their proximity to them. These attacks are made possible and reinforced by social media tools such as liking, sharing, and commenting or social media technology such as algorithmic behavior modification. Antisemitism often intertwines with disinformation but also with other forms of prejudice, such as misogyny and racism. With the help of social bots and troll farms, social media platforms can be used to target Jewish people and institutions on a large scale. During the 2016 US election campaign, 800 Jewish journalists were followed and harassed on Twitter in an organized troll attack with antisemitic content. The majority of the hate messages that were signed with pro-Trump slogans were aimed at ten Jewish journalists daily, who were posted by around 1,600 trolls. The indicated exemplifies how antisemitism on social media can be weaponized in the course of political campaigns, with the aim to polarize and intimidate.

Source: A tweet dtargeting US Journalist Hadas Gold during the US election campaigns 2016.

The following introductory paper explores the issue of the dissemination of antisemitism on social media, by the example of the AfD. It briefly gives insight into the history of radicalization within the AfD with a focus on antisemitic incidents. Further, it shows how the AfD is extensively using digital media to advance their agenda and to connect with radical right-wing forces worldwide. Examples of antisemitic content posted by senior AfD politicians, members, and followers will underline the issues discussed in this paper.

2. The advancement of radical forces in the short existence of the AfD

Next to being the first party taking advantage of new technology on a large scale, the AfD's entry into the German Bundestag in 2017 marks not only a break of the political tradition since 1945 but also testifies to a social change in the acceptance of a political party to the right of the CDU/CSU. Since 1948 the German Right has been divided. There have been several attempts to unify the Right into one party to gain political success, for example with the founding of the *National Demokratische Partei* (NPD) in 1964, or again with the *Deutsche Volksunion* (DVU) in 1971, as a melting pot for right-wing interest. However, due to a high degree of competition among the coexisting right-wing parties and strong political infighting, they have never succeeded. It seems that for the first time after WWII, the AfD has managed to offer a political party that not only unifies various political agendas between the CDU/CSU and the NPD (e.g., from Eurosceptical to anti-immigration and nationalistic ideas) but has also managed to carve out space in the political mainstream. On 6 February 2013 the "*Alternative für Deutschland*" was founded as a response to the Euro-crisis. The party was located to the right of the CDU/CSU on the political spectrum with a clear economic agenda. However, already at the

beginning of the AfD, the different ideologies of the founders surfaced: While Bernd Lucke (speaker of the AfD from 2013-2015, left the party 2015) followed a neo-liberal, Eurosceptical agenda, one of his co-founders, Beatrix von Storch (Member of the German Parliament for the AfD), was a socially conservative and Christian activist against the legal equality of gay people and religious freedom for Muslims.With a short manifesto of policies relating to the Euro-crisis, the AfD gained 4,7% of the votes in the German federal elections in September 2013 and thus narrowly missed the 5% threshold for entrance to the German parliament. Despite this surprising success, the various political backgrounds of the AfD members proved a challenge and eventually divided the party into an ethnonationalist and a national-liberal wing. Also in the European Parliament election in July 2014, the AfD presented an election manifesto with a focus on fiscal and economic issues, despite its inner struggle about the ideological direction of the party. Due to this struggle within the party, most of the national-liberal members left, and the extreme-right party members succeeded in gaining more power.

To underline the advancement of the radical-right in the AfD, its members founded several sub-organizations, which are not only associated with the party itself but which also openly have connections to organizations such as PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West), the Identitarian movement and the New Right. For example, Hans-Thomas Tillschneider from the AfD in the state parliament of Saxony-Anhalt, founded the *Patriotische Plattform* in December 2014 which works in close cooperation with the PEGIDA movement and seeks to enforce right-wing radical ideas within the AfD.

On 9 November 2019, on Yom Kippur, Stephen B. attempted to break into the synagogue of the city of Halle with the goal to murder as many Jewish people as possible. After publishing his manifesto with a link to a video platform, he live-streamed the attack. In the course of the terror attack, two people were murdered and many more injured.

On the same day, Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, member of the state parliament Saxony-Anhalt, posted that the attack was "an act of insanity and not a political act." With his post, he is opposing the statement of the Jewish community of Düsseldorf which said, that the AfD is the breeding ground for antisemitic attacks.

Further, he is ignoring the Stephan B.'s explicit extreme right and antisemitic motivation, as laid out in his manifesto and live stream.

Following the rising voices for a more patriotic approach within the party and for disempowering the national-liberal fraction of the founder Bernd Lucke, the "Erfurter Resolution" was passed in March 2015 by members of the ethnonationalist wing of the AfD. The resolution calls to "resist the destruction of the sovereignty and national identity of Germany" and was written and signed by members of the federal states Thuringia (Björn Höcke, chairman of the state parliament of Thuringia), Saxony-Anhalt (André Poggenburg, chairman of the state parliament of Saxony-Anhalt) and Brandenburg (Alexander Gauland, federal spokesman of the AfD and state chairman of Brandenburg). The call was one of the first signs that the AfD sees itself as a resistance movement against the current government. It soon received recognition among party members and can be seen as one of the milestones of the AfD's advancement towards the radical right. The publication of the "Erfurter Resolution" resulted in the founding of another sub-organization, namely *Der Flügel*. While only few members of the AfD have openly supported the "Erfurter Resolution", *Der Flügel* or the *Patriotische Plattform*, the strong influence of the radical fractions soon became evident. When in July 2015 Bernd Lucke called for a unification of the national-liberals within the party, he lost re-election as the AfD's chairman to Frauke Petry (former speaker of the AfD; left the party September 2017; founder of *Die Blaue Partei*, [The Blue Party]) instead. In mainly the federations in which the members are participants of the right-wing sub-organizations mentioned above, the AfD gained success in the German state elections on the 13 March 2016: Baden-Württemberg reached 15,1%, Rhineland-Palatinate 12,6% and Saxony-Anhalt even reached 24,2% of the votes. For political scientists, the surprisingly high outcome results from a lack of alternatives for radical right-wing voters, which showed that the AfD was without any serious competitors at the far right of the CDU/CSU for the coming elections. Under the new chairwoman, Frauke Petry, and her co-speaker Jörg Meuthen (Parliamentary Leader of the AfD in the state parliament of Baden-Württemberg), the AfD's ideological direction shifted officially with the resolutions that were passed at the AfD's party convention in April and May 2016 in Stuttgart. In the new manifesto, the AfD proclaimed the absolute rejection of Islam in Germany, national-conservative family policies, such as the need for higher birth rates for ethnic German women and the rejection of abortion. Further, the AfD called to prohibit the religious practices of halal slaughter and the circumcision of males. Although the party manifesto does not mention Jews, the prohibition of kosher slaughter and circumcision of males would consequently affect the Jewish community in Germany, too. The new manifesto shows anti-democratic and authoritarian tendencies, based on the rejection of religious freedom for Muslims. The rejection was further extended in speeches and interviews to the effect that the AfD wants to legally force Muslims to swear allegiance to the Basic Law. In the struggles between the national-conservative and the ethnonationalist wings of the party,

the latter became increasingly stronger. At the party convention in April 2017, Frauke Petry, from the national-conservative wing, proposed a vote to decide the political and ideological direction of her party. The proposal got rejected, and the participants of the convention decided that Alexander Gauland (Leader of the AfD, Member of the German Parliament), together with Alice Weidel (Leader of the AfD, Member of the German Parliament) would lead the party through the election campaign for the federal elections in Germany in September 2017.

3. The AfD and their use of digital media

During the election campaign the AfD made extensive use of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is advising political parties all over the world on how to use its tools to improve their campaigns. The AfD hired Harris Media, an online communication consulting firm to run its digital media campaign known for their work with nationalists candidates such as US president Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen's National Front party in France, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In meetings at Berlin's Facebook office, Facebook together with Harris executives advised the AfD to use certain online strategies, such as Facebook Live to live stream events and microtargeting advertisement, which targets certain groups. The AfD then paid Facebook to send tailored ads to those groups, which would highlight the AfD's positions. The dominant themes addressed by the AfD in the election campaign were their perceived incompatibility of Islam with German values, the refugee crisis, and their rejection of legal equality of queer people. A large part of the election campaign was based on the defamation of Angela Merkel as *Volksverräterin* (traitor to the people) because she gave refugees unlimited access to Germany. Further, the AfD rallied against the policy of the so-called *Altparteien,2* the established parties such as the CDU, SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* [Social Democratic Party Germany]) and *Die Grünen* (The Greens). When the media criticized the incitement campaigns of the AfD, they responded with allegations against the *Lügenpresse* (fake media). For its electoral success, the AfD also mobilized *PEGIDA,* the initiative *Ein Prozent* (one percent) initiated by Götz Kubitschek, the right-wing magazine *Compact*, and the *Identitäre Bewegung* (Identitarian Movement). The connection is visible when they share and like each other's content, for example when the Facebook profile of *Ein Prozent* shares content from the AfD Saxony-Anhalt. These entities not only advertised the AfD on Facebook but also helped campaign at AfD rallies and vice versa.

The AfD has a large digital network of its own party media, such as websites and blogs; *AfD Kompakt*, the party magazine; and *AfD Kompakt TV*, on which the AfD live streams

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2 traditional parties, meant in a negative sense

conferences and other events.   In addition to the AfD's widespread use of Facebook, party officials also have accounts on Twitter, Instagram and the English-language free speech social network Gab, which is used extensively by radical right-wing extremists, white supremacists, Neo-Nazis and the alt-right. Gab was made infamous following a mass shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania after which it was found that the shooter openly posted his violently antisemitic intentions. Although the AfD's Gab accounts have been largely inactive, the mere existence of these profiles paired with the party's recent meeting and collaboration with personalities associated with the alt-right, such as Milo Yiannopoulos and Steve Bannon, are further indications of the direction in which the party is headed.

4. The AfD and their ambiguous relationship with the Holocaust and National Socialism

The AfD's attitude towards the Holocaust, National Socialism, Antisemitism, and Germany's subsequent responsibility for the murder of six million Jewish people is frequently reflected in their social media content. The AfD is the only party in the German parliament that does not include subsequent responsibility for the Holocaust as part of their self-image. Unlike every other established party, the AfD is not positioning itself against racism and antisemitism in its manifesto. Since anti-Jewish positions lead to scandals, the AfD needs to be sensitive for strategic reasons due to public perception in order to succeed. Pro-Israeli and pro-Jewish positions are often used to legitimize anti-Islamic views. The solidarity with Jews is seen as proof that the AfD cannot be antisemitic and therefore not extreme right-wing. There have been many antisemitic incidents since the emergence of the AfD, which were all treated according to the same pattern: it is asked whether the incident falls under the freedom of expression, exclusion proceedings from the party are initiated which ultimately do not succeed, and eventually the antisemitic positioning is not withdrawn or meaningfully reprimanded. This pattern superficially leaves the impression that the AfD is doing something about antisemitism in its own party, but in fact antisemitic positions are accepted under the guise of freedom of expression.

The current AfD chairwoman Alice Weidel published a post about refugee shelters, which motivated several users to comment. Some of the commenters insinuate that instead of being provided with proper accommodations, refugees should be incarcerated into rebuilt Death camps. The words "shared showers" refer to gas chambers and "self-sufficient heating," refer to the crematoria that were used in the Death camps of the Nazis. The comments dehumanize refugees and deem the murderous tactics of the Nazis acceptable. Although those comments have been reported several times, neither Weidel nor Facebook removed them and thus, suggest that this posturing is acceptable within the AfD and on Facebook.

The most well-known antisemitic incident in the AfD arose from the attitudes of the AfD member of parliament in Baden-Württemberg, Wolfgang Gedeon, that became public in 2016. In various publications, Gedeon has stated that the Jews are partly to blame for the Holocaust and that the Jews' influence dominates the Western world. Gedeon understands the antisemitic "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" as real and says they are written by Zionists. In addition, Gedeon defended condemned Holocaust revisionists as dissidents.

Gedeon's antisemitic writings were not discovered by the AfD itself. Rather, his publications were exposed by the media, which only then forced his party to act. In the dispute over the handling of the Gedeon case the AfD fraction in Baden-Württemberg fell apart and he eventually left the fraction voluntarily but remained a member. The reunification of the fraction showed that the group had come to no consensus on the condemnation of antisemitism. The charter that was passed in October 2016 said that the disagreement in Gedeon's condemnation cannot be linked to antisemitism but is a protest against limited freedom of expression. The case of Gedeon, who is just one of many, shows that the AfD rejects antisemitism for strategic reasons but latently tolerates it. For example, a speech on the on the Day of German Unity on 3 October 2003 by then CDU *Bundestagsabgeordneter* Martin Hohmann was perceived as antisemitic and led to his expulsion from the party in July 2004.

In 2016 he joined the local elections in Hesse for the AfD and ultimately joined the *Bundestag* in September 2017 as a member of parliament. The example of Hohmann shows that the AfD not only ignores antisemitism in the party, but also openly accepts it. Additionally, the AfD shows no commitment against antisemitism because it sees Muslims and Islam as the sole cause of antisemitism.

On 27 January 2020, the International Holocaust Memorial Day, the official and verified AfD profile on Facebook posted a long text, followed by an image with a mosque in the background and the following text:

"The CDU now recognizes what we already knew: antisemitism is mostly Muslim."

The AfD rejects facts, statistics, and research that shows right-wing antisemitism and its consequences. By publishing a post on Holocaust Memorial Day that focusses on antisemitism within the Muslim community, the AfD belittles the vital role that the memory of the Holocaust and National Socialism plays in Germany and Germany's acceptance of responsibility for the Holocaust. Further, the AfD ignores how (specifically) the German right-wing never managed to convincingly distance themselves from Nazi ideology, which fueled the genocide.

There are several initiatives by the AfD to cut funding for organizations against the radical right and neo-Nazism, such as the *Amadeo Antonio Stiftung* and the *Jüdische Forum für Demokratie und gegen Antisemitismus* because the AfD does not evaluate the radical right as the cause of antisemitism.

The post by Petr Bystron, member of the German parliament for the AfD, targets chairwoman of the Amadeu Antonio Foundation and Jewish activist Anetta Kahane. The AfD strives to cut funding from organizations that fight against right-wing extremism, often by accusing them to be being left-wing extreme. On social media, Anetta Kahane has been repeatedly insulted with antisemitic and misogynistic content that was published on AfD profiles.

To sum up, it can be said that leadership has repeatedly rejected restrictive and consistent actions against antisemites in the party and relativized or encouraged antisemitic tendencies in the AfD. The most widespread antisemitism articulated in the AfD is by exonerating National Socialism.

In an interview with the newspaper *Welt* in September 2016, Frauke Petry declared that the word *völkisch* was the adjective for the word *Volk* and therefore should be used positively again. The term *völkisch* is ideologically associated with National Socialism and was coined by a political movement in the 19th century which, on a racist and antisemitic basis, strove for a society that would ward off foreigners in order to create an ethnically homogenous national culture. In National Socialism, this idea then became a murderous policy and law. The construct of *Volk* by the definition of National Socialists inherits the idea of a natural blood community to which the Jews and other unwanted groups are alien. By using the words

völkisch and *Volk*, Petry and the AfD try to rehabilitate the terms, disconnect them from National Socialism and instrumentalize them to distinguish the AfD as the representatives of the *Volk* and the AfD supporter as the *Volk*. The claim that the word *völkisch* has an independent meaning disconnected from National Socialism distorts its conceptual history and erases its clear and abundant connections to National Socialism. The use of vocabulary which is ideologically coined by National Socialism is widespread in the AfD and finds expression in words such as *Volksgemeinschaft* (ethnic community), *Volksverräter* (traitor against the people), *Volkskörper* (racial corpus), *Lügenpresse* (fake media) and *Überfremdung* (foreign infiltration) just to name a few. Particularly clear references to the usage of the language of National Socialism can be found in the speeches and publications of the former history teacher Björn Höcke (chairman of the AfD in the state parliament of Thuringia). For example, Adolf Hitler called the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP) the *Partei der Bewegung* (party of the movement). Accordingly, Höcke called the AfD a *fundamentaloppositionelle Bewegungspartei* (fundamental oppositional movement party). In 2016, the sociologist Andreas Kemper conducted a language analysis of Höcke's speeches and publications and found strong similarities with those of Landolf Ladig. The report of Kemper showed that Björn Höcke has written extreme right-wing articles under the pseudonym Ludolf Ladig with ethnonationalist and antisemitic content. Höcke is a radical agitator in the AfD who repeatedly draws attention to himself through scandals. In the years 2016 and 2017, he tried to participate in the memorial service for the victims of the Holocaust in the memorial of the Buchenwald concentration camp, even though he had been officially banned before. In their party program, the AfD insinuates that except for commemorating National Socialism, no other historical event in Germany is commemorated. As in almost all the AfD's publications or speeches relating to National Socialism and where it would be appropriate or necessary to refer to the Holocaust, the Holocaust goes unmentioned here as well.

The attempt to put the agenda of a turn of the collective memory of National Socialism and the Holocaust in Germany into practice was particularly evident in 2017. Just ten days before the International Holocaust Memorial Day, on 17 January 2017, Höcke provoked a media outcry with a speech that he gave in Dresden. In his speech, he referred to the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" in Berlin as a memorial of shame. He continued by saying that Germany's culture of memory is a "stupid coping culture" that needs a 180-degree turnaround of its politics of memory of the Holocaust and National Socialism. He further called for a lively culture of memory, which above all focuses on the great achievements of German ancestors. With it, Höcke rejects the role that the Holocaust has in the cultural memory of the Germans and the collective acceptance of the identity as a nation of former perpetrators. Only shortly after the Höcke speech, the AfD in the *Landtag* Baden-Württemberg submitted an application to cancel subsidies for the memorial of the concentration camp Gurs. In addition, the AfD wanted to cancel student trips to the memorial and replace them with excursions to what they perceive as important sites of German history. The AfD justified their intention with budget consolidation and the wish to give migrants a positive image of Germany. One example for tactically naming the Holocaust was when in September 2017, shortly before the election, Alexander Gauland accused Sigmar Gabriel (SPD), Minister for Foreign Affairs, of "blatant trivialization of the cruel crimes of the Nazis and an insult to the millions of victims and their descendants" for comparing the AfD to Nazis.

That the teaching and remembrance of the Holocaust is important and necessary has always been the consensus among the parties represented in the *Bundestag*. The AfD now represents

the first party in the *Bundestag* to have anchored the rejection of the memory of the National Socialism in their party program. While National Socialism is mentioned in a critique about cultural memory in Germany in the program, the Holocaust is not referenced at all.

In several social media posts the AfD stated that their aim is to build national pride and patriotism and to counteract the migration of Muslims. The AfD claims that the memory of National Socialism and the Holocaust prevents the development of national pride and that the "cult of guilt" practiced in Germany has led to "flooding" of migrants and refugees in Germany. In order to rebuild the German identity, historical events of National Socialism and the Holocaust are tactically trivialized or instrumentalized if, for example, it is about the representation of the AfD as a victim.

A Facebook post from the profile of Petr Bystron, member of the German parliament.
The post is a protest against a grocery store that decided to discontinue products manufactured by an "AfD functionary".
Bystron compares the incident with the slogan "Don't buy from Jews", from the Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses from 1933.

The above examples show that the AfD latently tolerates antisemitism and considers it covered by freedom of expression. Taken out of the historical context of National Socialism, the AfD rehabilitates its vocabulary. At the same time, the AfD seeks the exclusion of the Holocaust and National Socialism from the collective memory of the Germans.

This paper aimed to give a brief insight into how the AfD's radicalization, its dealing with antisemitic incidents, and their attitude towards National Socialism and the Holocaust also manifests in their Facebook posts and thus, reach a broad audience.

My in-depth analysis of antisemitic content posted by members of the AfD on Facebook can be found in the upcoming spring issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism*.