

The Mothers' Land

Women are increasingly joining the ranks of the xenophobic far-right movement in Germany

By URSULA SAUTTER BONN

LET OUR MOTHERS RISE IN ARMS/ AND then even the last fool will see/ That we mothers are a power," chants Annett, 33, a singer-songwriter whose work is popular among Germany's young neo-Nazis. The lyrics are part of a ballad against Muslim immigrants on her debut album, *A Mother's Accusation*. The self-styled "rebel" from Brandenburg, who appears in a traditional, bosom-enhancing dirndl dress, sings of the "patriotic dream" in which Germans no longer "count less than refugees."

Annett is not the only woman devoted to what she calls the "German cause." Although most people associate far-right radicalism with skinheads wearing swastika tattoos and shouting "Sieg Heil!" an increasing number of girls and women are showing up on the German far-right scene. There are an estimated 51,000 far-right sympathizers in Germany today, and as many as 1,000 of them could be female. "The cliché that the men go out to fight in the streets and the women passively stay at home no longer applies," says Rüdiger Hesse from Lower Saxony's Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Like other groups before them, "the right wing is emancipating itself," he says.

In a survey carried out last year, the agency found that about 20% of the membership of nationalist "comrade bands" registered in the northern German state was female. "An astounding result," says Hesse, and a trend that seems to hold across the entire country.

The women and girls among the ranks of Germany's skinheads, who are responsible for most xenophobic crimes, do more than organize concerts. A growing number take part in violent activities against foreigners and others whom they consider enemies. Almost 10% of the membership of

violent right-wing groups in Lower Saxony and Bavaria are skingirls, twice the number a decade ago. One of the youngsters charged with the attempted murder of a Greek immigrant in Munich in January was a young woman, as was one of the two



Equal right: A young woman joins in a NPD march in Dresden

neo-Nazis who attacked and severely injured a punk rocker in Erfurt in March.

The move to the right is not confined to young women. Older women, who often feel averse to club-wielding skinheads, are joining Germany's nationalist parties—the Republicans (REP), the German People's Union (DVU), and the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), which woos women with the slogan "Nationalism is girls' business, too." With women making up an average of 20% of their membership,

"these right-wing parties are not doing much worse than the democratic parties with respect to the number of female members," says sociologist Renate Bitzan of Göttingen University.

One reason for women's increased interest in far-right organizations is the structural change the scene has undergone in recent years. Except for the nationalist parties, the right wing consisted almost exclusively of violent thugs and was therefore not interesting for most women. With the advent of the so-called comrade groups—small, informal unions of far-right sympathizers—the scene has become more diverse and caters to a much greater variety of women.

Traditionally, the German right has confined women to Kinder, Kirche und Küche—and many still do. Doris Zutt, a NPD board member who runs the "Patriot's Meeting Place" in the Hessian town of Ehringshausen sits in her shop full of neo-Nazi paraphernalia such as "My boyfriend's German" T shirts and perfumes called Valkyrie and Nationalist. The 45-year-old mother of two describes women as "those who secure the future of the German people. More of them should return to the home." But more and more rightists consider such views obsolete. "Everyone should define the role they want to play in society themselves," says Uschi Winkelsett, 39, the REP's chairwoman in North Rhine-Westphalia. "And if a woman decides to work, that's O.K."

Although the vast majority of far-right activists are male, experts believe that the growing influx of women is dangerous. Robert Bihler, from Bavaria's Office for the Protection of the Constitution, fears that the strong membership fluctuation among the hitherto predominantly male skinhead groups will decrease now that the young men no longer have to look for partners outside the group. Instead of leaving the gang after a couple of years to settle down, they will stay in the group. Thus, "the scene will solidify," says Bihler. Moreover, since women don't fit the popular neo-Nazi stereotype, "the more [who] enter the scene, the less negative its image will become," warns Bitzan. Girl power, it seems, isn't necessarily a good thing. ■

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