

Tamir Bar-On and Bàrbara Molas (Eds.)

**Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic
by the Radical Right**

Scapegoating, Conspiracy Theories and New Narratives

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COVID-19 and the Pause of Far-Right Demonstrations in Germany

Michael Zeller

In most European countries, protective measures against COVID-19 have dramatically reduced activities in public space. While these measures have a wide-ranging and diverse impact, a particular effect on far-right social movements is noteworthy. Large public gatherings are widely prohibited because of the pandemic. This deprives the far right of one of its core activities: demonstrations. Far-right movements in Germany are particularly wedded to this tactic—to the extent that Fabian Virchow refers to the central importance of *Demonstrationspolitik* (demonstration politics) for the German far right. Considering the many uses and advantages of demonstrations, this emphasis is unsurprising.⁹³



A far-right demonstration in 2018. The banner reads 'I regret nothing,' quoting the epitaph of Rudolf Hess. Berlin, Germany, 8/16/2018 © Theo Schneider/MBR Berlin.

93 Andreas Klärner and Michael Kohlstruck, "Gefälligkeitsübersetzung: Modern right-wing extremism in Germany," in *Moderner Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland*, ed. Andreas Klärner. (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2006); Fabian Virchow, "Die, Demonstrationspolitik" der extremen Rechten—eine Zwischenbilanz," „Dagegen!“ Und dann ...?! Rechtsextreme Straßenpolitik und zivilgesellschaftliche Gegenstrategien in NRW, 14 (2011): 17–23.

The importance of demonstrations

Demonstrations are, as King and Soule assert, the “quintessential tactic” of social movements.⁹⁴ Evidently, demonstrations serve several important purposes for movement organizations: raising awareness, attracting new members and keeping existing members connected, promoting group solidarity, and facilitating networking. Furthermore, demonstration participants bond over the experience, typically reinforcing movement solidarity.⁹⁵ Individually or in some permutation, these potential benefits have long recommended demonstration as an appealing tactic. Notwithstanding the expanding interest in movements within digital media, the physical presence they can muster with demonstrations remains essential (the cases of youth radicalization in Belgium and of Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson exemplify this).⁹⁶ Beyond such instrumental ends, demonstrations provide meaningful references to past events, preceding mobilizations within social movements, and can fulfil other symbolic objectives. Given these myriad purposes and benefits, mobilizing a large group to demonstrate is often a primary concern of movement organizers.⁹⁷ They are exhibitions of strength and are the centerpiece of the contentious repertoire in modern society.

Demonstrations are particularly common and especially important within the far-right movement field. Undoubtedly, demonstrations serve all or most of the instrumental purposes listed above, but for the far right symbolic motivations are perhaps even more significant. Processing down the main thoroughfare of a city or town, or convening a large rally harks back to the far right’s ‘glorious past’: the fascist regimes of the inter-war years and their mass displays of martial pomp. Nazima Kadir argues that nostalgia is an especially native element of radical social movements.

94 Brayden G. King and Sarah A. Soule, “Social Movements as Extra-Institutional Entrepreneurs: The Effect of Protests on Stock Price Returns,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 52, no.3 (2007): 413–442.

95 Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes. Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996).

96 Nele Schils and Antoinette Verhage, “Understanding How and Why Young People Enter Radical or Violent Extremist Groups,” *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 11, no.2 (2017): 1–17; Cristina Mislán, “The struggle for ‘our streets’: the digital and physical spatial politics of the Ferguson Movement,” *Social Movement Studies*, 17, no.6 (2018): 676–696.

97 Marije Boekkooi, Bert Klandermans and Jacqueliën van Stekelenburg, “Quarrelling and Protesting: How Organizers Shape a Demonstration,” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 16, no.2 (2011): 221–239.

She refers to the radical left, but the notion also holds for the far right.⁹⁸ By demonstrating, far-right movements boldly claim their space in the public sphere, unwilling to accept—as most far-right movements had to after the Second World War—a more furtive existence. As a result, there is typically not much internal pressure to abandon demonstration campaigns. Far-right demonstration campaigns have a common property of inertia: not tending to stop or change unless acted on by an outside force. COVID-19 undoubtedly qualifies as such an outside force; it's an exogenous shock, a critical event, and a unique demobilizing pressure.

German far-right demonstrations

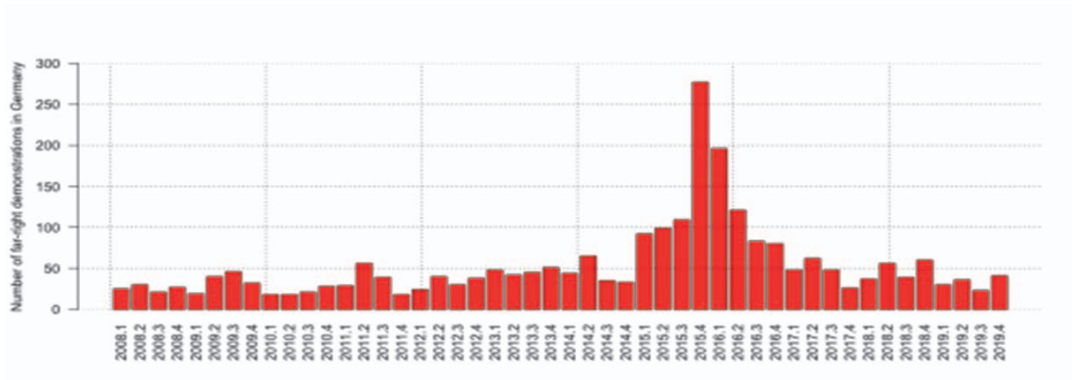
Proscriptions against large public gatherings have halted far-right demonstrations in Germany. Even PEGIDA, which has impressively sustained a campaign of weekly demonstrations in Dresden since late 2014, was forced to suspend its (offline) activity.⁹⁹ PEGIDA has attempted to continue its campaign and adapt to COVID-19 restrictions by holding digital demonstrations—though something is plainly lost in this shift to virtual collective action.¹⁰⁰ But the measures against COVID-19 will eventually abate. Looking at the past decade of the German far right's demonstration activity suggests that far-right organizations will regroup and renew their mobilization. The figure below shows a fairly steady rate of demonstrations across quarterly periods of the year; apart from the spike of demonstrations during the refugee crisis of 2015–2016, German far-right movement organizations typically mobilize between 30 and 40 demonstrations per three-month period. The newspaper *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* created a cartographic visualization of this demonstration data, available at <https://interaktiv.waz.de/rechte-demos/>.¹⁰¹

98 Nazima Kadir, *The autonomous life? Paradoxes of hierarchy and authority in the squatters movement in Amsterdam* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), p. 232.

99 Sabine Volk, "Germany: is the COVID-19 pandemic weakening the far right?," *open-Democracy* and *Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2020/04/07/germany-is-the-covid-19-pandemic-weakening-the-far-right>.

100 Simone Rafael, "Rechtsextreme Mobilisierung in COVID-19-Zeiten," *Bell Tower* April 21, 2015, <https://www.belltower.news/chemnitz-dresden-rechtsextreme-mobilisierung-in-COVID-19-zeiten-98543>.

101 Von Marie-Louise Timcke, André Pätzold, David Wendler, Christopher Möller und Simon Haas, "Wo Deutschlands Rechte aufmarschieren," *Waz*, last modified August 2018, <https://interaktiv.waz.de/rechte-demos/>.



Number of far-right demonstrations in Germany in annual quarters since 2008. Note that figures from 2015 onward include ‘anti-Islamification’ demonstrations by ‘GIDA’ groups. Source: Germany’s Federal Ministry of the Interior.

The level of mobilization, moreover, has endured through many shifts in opportunity structure. For instance, revelations in late 2011 about the terrorist activities of the so-called ‘National Socialist Underground’ spurred public outrage and state pressure against far-right entities. This plausibly explains a dip in the number of demonstrations in this period (i.e., 2011.4 and 2012.1 in the figure above). Yet Germany’s far right quickly regrouped and resumed its more typical frequency of demonstrations.

Though it may be consequential for those who attend, participation in far-right demonstrations is generally low, not often numbering more than a few hundred; however, a handful of regular events, whether for the scale and development of the mobilization (i.e., high and/or rising participant numbers) or for their long continuity, have acquired a noteworthy significance.¹⁰² Through the 2000s and 2010s, these include annual commemorations of the bombing of Dresden in the Second World War (mid-February), demonstrations on May Day, memorial marches to honor Rudolf Hess (mid-August), and processions to a Waffen-SS cemetery in Halbe (mid-November). These regular, major events stand out like mile-markers in the far-right activists’ calendar, moments to assemble, make or renew connections, and present the far-right movement in public.

Among the many novelties imposed by measures against COVID-19 in Germany (and around Europe), the cessation of far-right demonstration activity is conspicuous. The cacophony of marches and rallies by far-right skinheads, football hooligans, and neo-Nazis has been silenced. But this is

102 “Das BfDT fördert und stärkt zivilgesellschaftliches, demokratieförderndes Engagement und ermöglicht Partizipation,” Bündnis Für Demokratie Und Toleranz, last modified July 28, 2014, <https://www.buendnis-toleranz.de/service/publikationen/168437/sammelband-wunsiedel-ist-bunt-nicht-braun>.

certainly only temporary. The restoration of normal circumstances of public life and activity in public space will surely include renewed far-right demonstration activity. Though it may effect a pause, COVID-19 is not likely to deter the far right from their *Demonstrationspolitik*.