The only real element of surprise was that little had been seen or heard of the extremists since the REP’s dramatic rise on the West German political scene in 1989. With unification, history overtook the ultra-right parties momentarily, delivering them pounding defeats in most of the 1990 and 1991 elections. The theme that the Right alone had occupied for years—German unification—had overnight become official state policy, leaving the extreme Right temporarily disarmed.

In the late 1989 and 1990 West German elections for state legislatures, the REP’s support sank beneath the 5% hurdle necessary for parliamentary representation. In the East, “The Unification Chancellor” Helmut Kohl and his ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU) rode the wave of nationalist euphoria against the backdrop of billowing red, black and gold flags. In the first all-German federal elections in December 1990, the REP managed only around 2% of the total vote.

Until the 1980s, the majority of nationalist conservative and ultra-right elements in West Germany made their homes in the right wings of the conservative mainstream parties, the CDU and its Bavarian sister-party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). But the CDU/CSU’s early 1980s Ostpolitik with the GDR proved more than the conservatives’ right wing could stomach. The time was finally ripe, they decided, to strike out on their own.

The stated goal of West Germany’s early radical Right thinkers was to bring the German Right “out from the shadow of Auschwitz”, to distance the movement from the damning stigma of its Nazi past. The far-right intellectuals sought to influence postwar political culture in a way that would destigmatise their fascist ideas. They argued that an ultra-right political movement could be possible only when its language and assumptions had first become an accepted part of the FRG’s political discourse. US President Ronald Reagan’s 1985 visit to West Germany’s Bitburg military cemetery and the subsequent Historians’ Debate were exactly what the radical Right thinkers had in mind.

The far Right’s second front was the construction of a modern image for the movement. They replaced the brown shirts and swastikas of the past with a professional, youthful veneer. They dropped terminology such as “Aryan supremacy” and “Blut und Boden” society for their own no less reactionary versions of “European unity” and “environmental protection”.

The clear aim of their guarded critique of National Socialism was to excuse German fascism from the Nazi regime’s two most ignominious crimes: the Holocaust and the World War. In exchange for the overtly racial theories, the New Rightists embraced cosmetic theories of “national identity” and “ethnic specificity”, which distinguished a similar hierarchy of peoples. The product was slogans such as “Germans be proud to be Germans, Turks be proud to be Turks—United against Communism and Racial Mixing”.

The far Right offers the ethnic community, the Volksgemeinschaft, as an alternative to the sense of meaning that eludes people in post-industrial society. Not without justification, they argue that modernity has “uprooted” humankind, casting it as atomised individuals into an alienating, high-tech world. Yet, rather than confront the dilemma of modernisation with bonding forms of civil society and social community, the New Right retreats into the realm of tradition, family and nation.

The REP’s meteoric rise in the late 1980s formally announced the far Right’s arrival in the FRG. Founded in 1983, the new party rallied behind a 60-year-old radio journalist and former Waffen SS man Franz Schönhuber. Schönhuber manoeuvred around the category of the ‘old Nazi’, while making plain that
not only was he proud to have been in the Waffen SS, but that there was indeed something worthwhile that Germans could salvage from the Nazi era. His two favourite slogans: “I'm proud to be a German” and “We want to stay German”.

At first, to receptive crowds in Bavarian beer halls, and then across the federal Republic, Schönhuber peddled his message that the German petty bourgeoisie were the real losers of post-industrial society. The traditional German family’s sense of security and closeness had been lost, he argued. In virulent tirades against the Federal Republic’s ‘liberal’ immigration and political asylum statutes, the Republicans tapped a potent combination of nationalism, racism and social frustration. Only drastic curbs on foreigners in Germany would “prevent the misuse and injury of German citizens, their safety and their Gemeinwesen (communal essence)”.

The REP’s initial rise and fall occurred within the space of one year in January 1989, the party captured a startling 7.5% of votes in West Berlin municipal elections. Some working class districts delivered the extremists’ 20% of their support, and similar successes followed. In June, two million West Germans voted for the REP in the European Parliament elections, sending Schönhuber and five colleagues to the Strasbourg parliament.

Analyses of voting patterns revealed that racist demagoguery directed against foreign nationals living in west Germany was the main basis for the party’s victories. Yet, although the REP crassly linked the country’s economic and social problems with the presence of foreigners in Germany, those districts that voted heavily for the REP had only minimal numbers of foreign residents. In other words, REP voters were not anti-foreigner because their neighbours were Arabs. In fact, in city districts where high concentrations of foreigners resided, the REP turn-out sank below average.

Nor did the party rally large ranks of the unemployed or underprivileged. The average REP vote boasted a middle-income or higher standard of living. The small business people, bureaucrats and wage earners who backed the REP did so much more out of their fear of unemployment than because of their own actual unemployment. A disproportionately high percentage of REP voters were male (three times more than women), young (many between 18 and 23 years old) and with lower levels of education than other voters. The REP also scored exceptionally well among people living in the urban “social housing projects”.

The far Right’s success in charting a course between the old-school neofascists and the CDU/CSU failed to eliminate the array of openly radical factions from the rightwing scene. Unlike the National front in France, the republicans were unable to unite the spectrum of ultra-right forces around their campaign. Revamped neo-fascist parties such as the DVU also rely upon primarily electoral strategies, although not to the exclusion of courting skinheads or expediting violence.

With the arrival of the REP, the DVU dropped to second place among Germany’s ultra-right parties. The DVU sees itself as a “supra-party movement”, encompassing such groups as ‘The Popular Movement for a General Amnesty’ (for Nazi war criminals) and the ‘Initiative to Restrict Foreigners’. Behind the neo-fascists’ standard democratic lip service, the DVU promotes an aggressive xenophobia and caustic anti-Semitism, demanding strong-arm ‘law and order’ policies to halt ‘foreigner-inspired’ crime.

With the exception of the size of their recent triumphs, the ultra-right’s victories offered few new surprises. During the campaigns, the parties maintained next to no profile in the states, running with sketchy or non-existent programs. The DVU ran its multi-million Mark ‘cellar campaign’ with 20 to 30 people. Most of its propaganda was distributed through the mail from its Munich headquarters.

The vast majority of ultra-right voters were neither neo-Nazis (many came from the Social Democrats), nor were they largely the underprivileged. Most of the upstanding burghers who voted far Right did so to express their uncertainty and fear about the looming costs of the unification. Their vote constituted a clear protest against the major parties, whom they feel have left the ‘little people’ out on their own. Amid the raging debate around the asylum law, which the CDU, above all, has manipulated to account for Germany’s every plight, voters also pinned the source of their frustrations and fears on the presence of ‘too many’ foreigners in Germany.

But the major political parties have yet to get the real message, namely that the people know full well that someone, somehow is going to have to pay for German unification. The CDU and the Social Democrats have rushed to establish a ‘round-table’ to join forces in tackling the country’s problems. First on the agenda: the asylum policy.

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