

**The Alternative Memory of the Alternative for Germany: Remembering the East German
Revolution of 1989 on the Far Right**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the contemporary manifestation of far-right revisionism surrounding the East German Revolution of 1989. Thirty years after the revolution transfigured the divided landscape of East and West, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) mounted an electoral campaign under the banner of the re-fulfillment of the revolution – now in the hands of the far right. The primary objective of this thesis is to investigate how the AfD conceptualizes the memory of the revolution in its political discourse, with a particular focus on the federal state election campaigns in Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia in 2019. The invocation of the revolution can be traced back to the early months of the founding of the AfD. A close examination of the increasingly systematized mnemonic discourse surrounding the revolution during the election campaigns in the summer and fall of 2019 reveals that, on-and offline, the AfD employed the memory of the East German Revolution of 1989 by means of six overarching mnemonic claims: 1) the claim of analogous conditions; 2) the claim of dictatorial legacy; 3) the claim to the inheritance of the tradition of democratic resistance; 4) the claim of national unity; and 5) the claim of the value of East German identity; which culminates in 6) the claim of the necessity of a new revolution. The AfD thereby deploys memory as a flexible tool of mobilization, legitimization, and populist identity construction, with the revolution functioning as a master narrative that frames the party's manifold and multidirectional understanding(s) of the past, present, and future. The mnemonic usage of the revolution and the concept itself also provide insight into the party's heterogeneous nature as a far-right entity oscillating between radicalism and extremism. The thesis contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse concerning the legacies of the revolutions of 1989; it offers insights into the nature and discourse(s) of far-right actors shaping the German political landscape; and it sheds light on the significance of the concept of revolution in contemporary far-right politics.

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INTRODUCTION

As historical events become ever more distant with the passage of time, their potential to be reimagined grows. The year of 1989 saw tidal waves of revolutions (of sorts) across the Eastern bloc, from Poland to Romania. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), peaceful demonstrations throughout the autumn months precipitated the end of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) dictatorship, the opening of the Berlin Wall, and, ultimately, unification with the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) the following October. The revolution and subsequent reunification were heralded as the apotheosis of liberal democratic ideals, encompassing the desire for freedom, the embrace of open borders, and the steadfast protection of fundamental human rights. Ever since, the dominant political interpretation of the revolution on the official stage has largely situated the latter and subsequent reunification within a jubilant narrative of democratic and liberal triumph.

Thirty years after the East German Revolution of 1989 transfigured the divided landscape of East and West, the far-right populist party the Alternative for Germany (AfD) mounted an electoral campaign under the banner of its re-fulfillment – now in the hands of the far right. The present thesis concerns itself with this particular facet of revolutionary remembrance, that is, the recent manifestation of far-right revisionism surrounding the revolution. While memories of the revolution have never gone uncontested, the recent claims of revolutionary inheritance made among Germany's rising far-right populist movement, in defiance of the prevailing state-sanctioned narrative, represent a novel stage in the context of negotiated remembrance surrounding the revolution. The primary objective of the thesis, therefore, is to conduct a systematic investigation into how the far right in contemporary Germany conceptualizes the memory of the East German Revolution of 1989 by taking the political discourse of the AfD as the key object of analysis. In so doing, it questions the prospective insights afforded by such an investigation into the content and evolution of said mnemonic discourse; the ideological nature of German far-right populist actors; and their relation to

the concept of revolution. This thesis is thus situated at the crossroads of three distinct domains of inquiry: the study of memory politics, the study of the far right, and the study of revolution.

While the existing scholarship concerning the AfD's mnemonic discourse on the revolution by and large concentrates exclusively on the party's election campaigns in eastern Germany in 2019, the thesis presents a comprehensive investigation on the basis of a systematic analysis of relevant primary evidence, that is, a corpus of over two hundred primary sources encompassing party publications, campaign materials, online platforms, newspapers, and speeches dating from 2013 to 2023. It argues, first, that the election campaigns in Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia in the summer and fall of 2019 represent the culmination of a mnemonic discourse which had manifested itself in the early months of the founding of the AfD in 2013. These preliminary references imply that the party's self-conception is more fundamentally intertwined with the remembrance of the revolution than a focus exclusively on the election campaigns would suggest. In the campaigns themselves, both on- and offline, the AfD employed the memory of the East German Revolution of 1989 by means of six overarching mnemonic claims: 1) the claim of analogous conditions, that is, the claim that the hard-won freedoms of 1989 are disappearing or already gone in the face of a totalitarian regime; 2) the claim of dictatorial legacy, that is, the claim that the former leaders of the SED regime and its sympathizers continue to hold the political reins in Germany today; 3) the claim to the inheritance of the tradition of democratic resistance, that is, the claim that the AfD is the sole heir to the nonviolent and democratic legacy of the revolution; 4) the claim of national unity, that is, the claim that the AfD offers the sole path to true (ethno-)national unity; and 5) the claim of the value of East German identity, that is, a direct, identity-construing appeal to the East German people as a whole and/or the revolutionaries of 1989; which culminates in 6) the claim of the necessity of a new revolution, that is, a call to action in the form of (re)completing the

revolution. The discourse thus discloses a program of radical transformation which finds expression in the mnemonic reference to 1989.

Within the political discourse of the AfD, the thesis continues, memory is deployed to a) serve a mobilizing narrative of feasible resistance against the existing system in light of disenchantment; b) operate as a method of legitimization by positioning the party as a proponent of rightful resistance and democratic freedom; and c) function as a tool of identity construction by playing on memories of resistance, transformation, and crisis in order to construct, in the quintessential populist manner, “the people” and “the Other” – all in the spirit of 1989. The reference to the revolution embodies an interpretive flexibility, rendering it especially suitable for populist, anti-elitist political narratives; moreover, the multi-directionality of memory comes to the fore in the counter-image of a glorified far-right future. The mnemonic discourse surrounding the revolution encompasses the party’s stance on a range of issues through an interpretation of the revolution as a moment of popular transformation and thereby serves the function of a master narrative that frames the party’s manifold and multidirectional understanding(s) of the past, present, and future. While the AfD’s memory-political discourse is revealed to be both fluid and contradictory in nature, the thesis concludes by suggesting that we ought to approach the mnemonic invocation of *revolution* as a pivotal term capable of providing insight into the AfD’s ideological nature as a far-right political organization. The AfD’s discourse on revolution as concept and mnemonic reference can, as a microcosm, shed light on the party’s heterogeneous nature as a far-right entity oscillating between various shades of radicalism and extremism.

The investigation of the mnemonic usage of the East German Revolution of 1989 by the far right is designed to respond to a noticeable gap in the literature. In the immediate aftermath of the revolutionary upheaval in 1989, a number of leading scholars offered preliminary reflections on the

significance of the seemingly ground-breaking events.¹ In recent years, historical scholarship has begun to investigate the often-contested collective meaning(s) ascribed to the revolutions across central and eastern Europe, that is, how the events are remembered, recalled, and referred to in contemporary popular and academic discourse.² At the same time, the surge in far-right populism across the region has resulted in a proliferation of memory research into the (mis)use of various pasts by contemporary far-right actors, making it a topical subject across the region, particularly in Hungary and Poland, where right-wing revisionism of revolutionary phenomena and the socialist past has entered the political mainstream.³

Within the literature on far-right memory politics in contemporary Germany, however, much of the existing scholarship concerns the AfD's usage of the National Socialist past (discussed below).⁴ Fewer studies have explored how such actors (mis)remember the East German past, often

¹ See, for example, Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague* (New York: Random House, 1990); Jürgen Habermas, "What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left," *New Left Review* no. 183 (1990): 3-21; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992); Jacques Rupnik, "Le retour de l'histoire en Europe centrale," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 36 (1992): 53-60; Tony Judt, "Nineteen Eighty-Nine: The End of Which European Era?" *Daedalus* 123, no. 3 (1994): 1-19.

² See, for example, Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, eds., *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Susan C. Pearce, "1989 as Collective Memory 'Refolution': East-Central Europe Confronts Memorial Silence," in *Silence, Screen, and Spectacle: Rethinking Social Memory in the Age of Information*, eds. Lindsey A. Freeman, Benjamin Nienass, and Rachel Daniell (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 213-238; James Mark et al., "1989 After 1989: Remembering the End of State Socialism in East-Central Europe," in *Authoritarian Pasts, Liberal Democracy and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989*, eds. Michal Kopeček and Piotr Wciślik (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015), 463-503;

³ See, for example, András Mink, "The Revisions of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution," in *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe After 1989*, ed. Michal Kopeček (Budapest: CEU Press, 2008), 169-178; Zsolt K. Horváth, "The Redistribution of the Memory of Socialism? Identity Formations of the 'Survivors' in Hungary after 1989," in *Past for the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989*, eds. Oksana Sarkisova and Péter Apor (Budapest: CEU Press, 2008), 247-274; István Rév, "Liberty Square, Budapest: How Hungary Won the Second World War," *Journal of Genocide Research* 20, no. 4 (2018): 607-623; Daniel Logemann, "On 'Polish History': Disputes over the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk," *Cultures of History Forum* (2017).

⁴ See, for example, Werner Binder, "Memory Culture, Civil Sphere and Right-Wing Populism in Germany: The Resistible Rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)," in *Populism in the Civil Sphere*, eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Peter Kivisto, and Giuseppe Sciortino (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 178-204; Bhakti Deodhar, "Inside Contested Cultural Memory: The Alternative für Deutschland in Dresden," *German Politics and Society* 39 no. 3 (2021): 46-69; Susanne Vees-Gulani, "Symbol of Reconciliation and Far-Right Stronghold? PEGIDA, AfD, and Memory Culture in Dresden," *German Politics and Society* 39, no. 1 (2021): 56-78; Christiane Lemke, "Right-Wing Populism and International Issues: A Case Study of the AfD," *German Politics and Society* 38, no. 2 (2020): 90-108.

situating this tension within what they frequently view as a (formerly) unified public memory regime.⁵ While the demonstrations held by the far-right organization Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamification of the Occident (PEGIDA) have received increasing scholarly attention, less research has methodically examined the East German Revolution of 1989 as a battleground of mnemonic conflict.⁶ And while research has been done on PEGIDA's mnemonic appropriation of 1989 on social media as well as on the resonance of the revolution as a symbol of legitimacy for both the AfD and PEGIDA, no investigation of the AfD's memory-political discourse surrounding the revolution that is both comprehensive in terms of time frame and source base exists.⁷ Rather than limiting the study to one space of contestation at the expense of another, the thesis investigates the usage of the memory of 1989 both on- and offline, from fiery campaign speeches to hashtag-replete Facebook posts.

At the centre of the present analysis is the contention that investigating the politics of memory can yield valuable insights into the nature of party-political entities. Taking the politics of memory seriously means acknowledging that endeavours to shape historical memories are central to the contestation of power and that examining such endeavours with attention to their inherent ambiguities and historical layers may unveil further avenues for scholarly inquiry. The study of memory politics is integrated here with the study of the far right and the study of revolution. This integration illuminates the many ways in which memory politics, the far right and its many shades,

⁵ Some examples include Ned Richardson-Little, Samuel Merrill, and Leah Arlaud, "Far-Right Anniversary Politics and Social Media: The Alternative for Germany's Contestation of the East German Past on Twitter," *Memory Studies* 15, no. 6 (2022): 1360-1377; Julian Göpfart, "Activating the Socialist Past for a Nativist Future: Far-Right Intellectuals and the Prefigurative Power of Multidirectional Nostalgia in Dresden," *Social Movement Studies* 20, no. 1 (2021): 57-74.

⁶ See, for example, David F. Patton, "Monday, Monday: Eastern Protest Movements and German Party Politics since 1989," *German Politics* 26, no. 4 (2017): 480-497; Dieter Rink, "Die Montagsdemonstration als Protestparadigma: Ihre Entwicklung von 1991 bis 2016 untersucht am Beispiel der Leipziger Protestzyklen," *Leviathan* 45, no. 33 (2017): 284-307.

⁷ See Ned Richardson-Little and Samuel Merrill, "Who is the Volk? PEGIDA and the Contested Memory of 1989 on Twitter," in *Social Movements, Cultural Memory and Digital Media: Mobilising Mediated Remembrance*, eds. Samuel Merrill, Emily Keightley, and Priska Daphi (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 59-84; Greta Hartmann and Alexander Leistner, "Umkämpftes Erbe. Zur Aktualität von '1989' als Widerstandserzählung," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 69, no. 35-37 (2019): 18-24.

the revolutions of 1989 and their legacies, memory cultures, and historical divisions are inherently intertwined. While the study cannot hope to explain the upsurge of far-right populism in recent decades, it contributes to the ongoing scholarly dialogue concerning the historical legacies of the revolutions of 1989 while, at the same time, shedding light on the discourses developed by, and the nature of, far-right actors shaping German memory politics. It also offers insight into the significance of the concept of revolution in contemporary far-right politics. As no scholarly argument is ever conclusive, this thesis perhaps raises more questions than it answers – in so doing, it seeks to cultivate ground for further investigation.

THE LONG HISTORY OF THE WENDE

Revolution and Reunification: As It Happened

As the traditional narrative goes, the year of 1989 marked the collapse of Communist regimes across central and eastern Europe. With this collapse, the story continues, the Eastern Bloc transitioned from decades of repression to a future of freedom. The GDR embodied a rather distinct narrative, in that unification with the FRG in 1990 quelled the revolutionary fervour of the previous year. The so-called *Wende* of 1989 entailed, at the beginning, growing public dissatisfaction resulting in mass emigration as well as heightened agitation throughout the summer months – compounded by growing disillusionment among the state bureaucracy.⁸ In May, Hungary had begun to dismantle its border fortifications with Austria and increasing numbers of citizens used this opportunity to flee to the West. In Poland, the Polish United Workers' Party permitted and lost partially free elections on June 4, and, over the summer, thousands of refugees from the GDR fled

⁸ The term *Wende* is generally used to refer to the period encompassing both revolution and reunification and can be translated as “turn,” “turning point,” or “turnaround.” The term *friedliche Revolution* or “Peaceful Revolution” more explicitly refers to the popular and largely nonviolent movement in the autumn of 1989. While the former term is much more common, it was originally employed by then SED leader Egon Krenz to downplay the significance of the ongoing movement against the regime.

across the Hungarian border to Austria or sought asylum in the West German embassies in Prague and Warsaw. From September, demonstrations spread across the country and, on November 9, 1989, the border to the FRG was accidentally opened for free travel: the so-called fall of the Berlin Wall.⁹

The conventional account of national reunification presents this widely broadcast moment as the beginning of the end of the GDR.¹⁰ The Wall was open and the earlier slogan “we are the people” shifted to “we are one people,” alluding to the partition of Germany and demanding union in one state.¹¹ Four months later, the first free, democratic elections in the GDR were held on March 18, 1990. The Alliance for Germany, led by the East German branch of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), won forty-eight percent of the vote and emerged as the largest bloc in the 400-seat Volkskammer, having run on a platform of speedy reunification with West Germany.¹² On July 1, economic reunification went into effect, and, by the end of the following month, the two German governments had agreed on a plan for political union. In the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany (or the Two Plus Four Agreement), the Allies renounced all rights they held in Germany, allowing a reunited Germany to become fully sovereign the following year.¹³ On October 3, 1990, the GDR ceased to exist, and the two Germanys became one again.

⁹ Albert O. Hirschman, “Exit, Voice, and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic: An Essay in Conceptual History,” *World Politics* 45, no. 2 (1993): 173-202.

¹⁰ By contrast, the revolution in the GDR did not assume a straightforward trajectory nor was its outcome inevitable. According to Gareth Dale’s study of the revolution, 58% of respondents who participated in the autumn protests aspired to a “democratic socialism” and, as late as February 1990 “a reformed socialism was backed by a clear majority.” The so-called fall of the Wall was the beginning of a “new phase,” in which the “precise directions that would be taken” and the roles that would be played by various groups was not clear. It is also rarely acknowledged that the number of protestors in January 1990 exceeded those of October 1989. Gareth Dale, *The East German Revolution of 1989* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), see esp. 46, 113, 129, 130.

¹¹ Roland Freudenstein, “After the Wall: Competing Narratives of Germany’s Unification 20 Years After the Wende,” *European View* 8, no. 2 (2009): 264.

¹² Manfred Görtemaker, “Volkskammerwahl 1990,” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, March 19, 2009, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/deutsche-einheit/deutsche-teilung-deutsche-einheit/43770/volkskammerwahl-1990/>.

¹³ Craig R. Whitney, “Upheaval in the East: Soviet Union; Kohl Says Moscow Agrees Unity Issue,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1990; “Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany and Its Related Agreed Minute,” signed in Moscow on September 12, 1990, *United Nations Treaty Series* 1696, no. 29226 (1990).

A Failed Founding Myth?

At a glance, the political remembrance of the East German Revolution of 1989 would appear more or less straightforward in the case of the reunified German state, thirty years on. The dominant state-sanctioned interpretation offered by the FRG situates the revolution within a triumphant narrative of democratic victory with the reunification of the two German states marking the culmination of the mass movement. Both the revolutionary break of autumn and subsequent reunification are commemorated each year through speeches, festivals, exhibitions, and the like. That being said, while some scholars have suggested that there exists a consensual and unifying tradition of remembering 1989 in Germany, the revolution remains a site of contested remembrance.¹⁴ The dispute over its memory began early – initially above all within the various factions of former civil rights and opposition activists who considered themselves its legitimate heirs or disputed this status with each other.¹⁵ Such actors necessarily came into conflict with the conflation of revolution and reunification in official remembrance; moreover, since unification has yet to erase economic differences between East and West, it has been difficult to celebrate 1989 as an unambiguously positive moment for the nation. The contested memory of the SED regime and the East German past as a whole have also made it difficult to construct anything approaching a common interpretation.¹⁶ In the words of Stefanie Eisenhuth, however, the threat to the integrity of

¹⁴ For the suggestion that such a tradition exists, see Ferenc Laczó and Joanna Wawrzyniak, “Memories of 1989 in Europe between Hope, Dismay, and Neglect,” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 31, no. 3 (2017): 433.

¹⁵ Hartmann and Leistner, “Umkämpftes Erbe. Zur Aktualität von ‘1989’ als Widerstandserzählung,” 4.

¹⁶ The linear yet contested narrative is also evident in the current state-funded memorial and museological landscape. As part of my research in August 2023, I visited twenty-four official, publicly funded sites relevant to the memory of the revolution in Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden. Here, I observed two major strands of a) memory of triumph and b) memory under construction, both figuratively and literally. On one hand, the dominant political interpretation of the revolution which emphasizes democratic triumph and reunification is clear, for example, in an open-air exhibition in front of the Stasi Museum titled “Revolution and the Fall of the Wall.” On the other hand, memory is also under construction, most evident in Berlin where the city is debating how best to represent the memory of 1989 and the GDR. This negotiation manifests in lengthy processes relating to the actual construction of physical remembrance sites like Checkpoint Charlie and the Monument to Freedom and Unity). See also David Art, “Making Room for November 9, 1989?” in *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, eds. Michael and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 195, 198; Martin Sabrow, “Die DDR Erinnern,” in *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*, ed. Martin Sabrow (München: Beck,

the narrative of 1989 lies not in multi-perspective explanations, but rather in its susceptibility to exploitation by the far right.¹⁷ The already disputed nature of the revolution lends itself to further disagreement, particularly as we glance rightward along the political spectrum. Identified by Ralph Jessen as a thread of populist “people’s memory” evident since the mid-1990s, this thread has been used increasingly in the context of right-wing radical mobilization.¹⁸

THEORIZING MEMORY AND ITS POLITICS

This study is situated within the theoretical context of memory studies broadly and, more specifically, the politics of memory. Memory is understood as societal, collective, and relational; the notion of collective memory as a set of representations of a society’s past sheds light on the ways in which institutions and governments create identities through a deliberate, top-down, and explicit process of selection while serving as an umbrella term comprising various subcategories of social, political, and cultural.¹⁹ The notion of memory culture, moreover, is employed in the sense of a broad cultural system of collective representations and social practices organized around the collective memory of certain formative historical events and epochs.²⁰ Memory, then, refers also to various manifestations of the political.

The notion of the politics of memory is used here to describe a deliberately narrow perspective of investigation. Inherent is a focus not simply on collective representations but on the

2009), 11-27. For further discussion of the memory of the revolution in the German case see Martin Sabrow, “Mythos 1989: Rückblick auf ein historisches Jahr. Wem gehört die Friedliche Revolution?” *Deutschland Archiv*, November 28, 2019; Stefanie Eisenhuth, “Talking About a Revolution. Die öffentliche Erinnerung an ‘1989’ im Wandel,” in *Public Historians: Zeitgeschichtliche Interventionen nach 1945*, eds. Frank Bösch, Stefanie Eisenhuth, Hanno Hochmuth, and Irmgard Zündorf (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2021), 384-400; James Krapfl and Andrew Kloiber, “The Revolution Continues: Memories of 1989 and the Defence of Democracy in Germany, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia,” *Cultures of History Forum* (May 2020).

¹⁷ Eisenhuth, “Talking about a Revolution. Die öffentliche Erinnerung an »1989« im Wandel,” 392.

¹⁸ Ralph Jessen, “Immer wieder montags. Warum wir über eine populistische ‘Volks’-Erinnerung reden müssen,” *INDE.S. Zeitschrift für Politik und Gesellschaft* 8, no. 1 (2019): 56.

¹⁹ Aleida Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory,” *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008): 49–72; Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995): 125–133.

²⁰ Binder, “Memory Culture, Civil Sphere and Right-Wing Populism in Germany,” 180-181.

contemporary power struggles over such.²¹ Historical narrativization is understood as a battlefield between political actors who seek to cultivate views of the past conducive to the attainment of their political ends and therefore emphasizes the element of selection: not just what is remembered, but what is omitted, distorted, falsified, or forgotten in the service of the present and the process by which certain narratives of the past come to prominence over others.²² Memory politics is thus guided by the assumption that the thematization of history is the medium in which disputes about current questions of power are fought out.²³ It is a top-down process and, methodologically, requires a focus on “mnemonic actors,” political forces interested in a specific interpretation of the past within the context of a “mnemonic regime,” the dominant pattern of memory politics that exists in a given society at a given moment in reference to a specific past event or process.²⁴

This thesis aims to problematize the conception of memory-political discourse as a homogeneous set of representations propagated in unison by mnemonic actors in service of a unified political agenda. Instead, it hopes to shed light on the ways in which political actors, even within the same movement or organization, often fail to form one homogeneous voice; rather, political entities are shown to comprise a multitude of actors with several, sometimes contradictory, voices and possessing varying degrees of agency in the dissemination and moulding of historical narratives. Beyond memory studies, this thesis is informed by both cultural and intellectual approaches to history, that is, it focuses on the role that concepts and ideas and their dissemination play in the thinking and action of human beings while, on the side of culture, operates with the

²¹ Dan Stone, “Memory Wars in the ‘New Europe’,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History*, ed. Dan Stone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 715.

²² Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, “A Theory of the Politics of Memory,” in *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, eds. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9-10; Stone, “Memory Wars in the ‘New Europe’,” 715-716.

²³ Michael Kohlstruck, “Erinnerungspolitik: Kollektive Identität, Neue Ordnung, Diskurshegemonie,” in *Politikwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft: Theorien, Methoden, Problemstellungen*, ed. Birgit Schwellling (Wiesbaden: VS, 2004), 181.

²⁴ Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, “Introduction,” in *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, eds. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4; Bernhard and Kubik, “A Theory of the Politics of Memory,” 9.

understanding that perceptions, beliefs, and methods of producing meaning are directly related to decision making and historical action.

MEMORY POLITICS: THE GERMAN CASE

The nature of memory politics in (eastern) Germany is in many ways comparable with other central and eastern European countries that underwent varying degrees of transformative change in 1989 and have since been forced to grapple with the Communist past. This grappling has ignited debates among a multitude of actors whose perspectives are shaped by diverse and conflicting life trajectories, historical affiliations, cultural perspectives, and political orientations.²⁵ Across the region, the process of remembering Communism has largely been framed by a confrontation between the understanding of Communism as an everyday “lived experience” and Communism as a totalitarian, occupational regime.²⁶ In the German case, the first major paradigm of GDR remembrance, that of dictatorship, emerged out of the Bundestag whose inquiry commissions into the GDR in the 1990s underscored its totalitarian nature by emphasizing, among other themes, dictatorial power structures, the SED and the Stasi, legal injustice, and the double dictatorship of the German past. The commissions’ final reports present the GDR as an illegitimate, totalitarian state with an eye to legitimizing the FRG.²⁷ In the eyes of many former East Germans, however, their past was nowhere to be found in the museums and memorials of repression dedicated to the former state.²⁸ The latter years of the 1990s thus witnessed a heightened expression of memories of everyday life and fueled a certain “nostalgia” or *Ostalgie* for the past. The growing importance of the everyday was

²⁵ Constantin Iordachi, “‘Remembering’ versus ‘Condemning’ Communism: Politics of History and ‘Wars on Memory’ in East European Museums,” in *Occupation and Communism in Eastern European Museums: Re-Visualizing the Recent Past*, eds. Constantin Iordachi and Péter Apor (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 16.

²⁶ Iordachi, “‘Remembering’ versus ‘Condemning’ Communism,” 16.

²⁷ For the 1994 and 1998 reports of the Bundestag inquiry commissions into the GDR, see Bundestag Drucksache 12/7820 and Bundestag Drucksache 13/11000, respectively.

²⁸ Anna Saunders and Debbie Pinfold, “Introduction: ‘Wissen wie es war?’” in *Remembering and Rethinking the GDR: Multiple Perspectives and Plural Authenticities*, eds. Anna Saunders and Debbie Pinfold (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

consequently addressed in an expert committee from 2005 to 2006, which confirmed that the memory of political and institutional aspects had failed to connect to the “everyday memories” of ordinary East Germans.²⁹ Through the lens of museological institutions, the same confrontation between memories of the dictatorial and the everyday can be seen across central and eastern Europe.³⁰

At the same time, the German case is highly distinct. Political remembrance in Germany has been both shaped by and forced to confront a past of double dictatorship. The ascendance of Holocaust remembrance required several decades to achieve cultural hegemony in the FRG with incomplete processes of denazification following the war leaving lingering questions about complicity and responsibility. Meanwhile, the GDR constructed its own exonerating narrative of antifascist resistance. With the collapse of the SED regime, former East Germans were forced to grapple with their own past while reconciling with the increasingly Holocaust-centred historical memory of the FRG. In addition, memories of German suffering centred around flight, expulsion, bombing, and internment at the end of and in the aftermath of World War II never fully disappeared. Collective memory processes in Germany have thus witnessed three, at times, intersecting threads since reunification in 1990: the continuation and institutionalization of Holocaust memory, the memory of German suffering, and memories from the period of postwar

²⁹ See Martin Sabrow et al., *Wohin treibt die DDR-Erinnerung? Dokumentation einer Debatte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007) and Andrew H. Beattie, *Playing Politics with History: The Bundestag Inquiries into East Germany* (New York: Berghahn, 2008).

³⁰ Iordachi, “‘Remembering’ versus ‘Condemning’ Communism,” 15-47. For related discussions on the German case see Irmgard Zündorf, “The ‘Display’ of Communism in Germany,” in *Occupation and Communism in Eastern European Museums: Re-Visualizing the Recent Past*, eds. Constantin Iordachi and Péter Apor (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Andreas Ludwig, “Representations of the Everyday and the Making of Memory: GDR History and Museums,” in *Remembering the German Democratic Republic: Divided Memory in a United Germany*, eds. David Clarke and Ute Wölfel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 37–53; Saunders and Pinfold, “Introduction,” 1-14.

division concerning both the divided memory of the Holocaust and the GDR.³¹ Memories (or the lack thereof) of 1989 belong to the latter.

To complicate the picture further, the collapse of the far left in 1989 saw a rising far-right movement lay claim to various precepts of the traditional left. The AfD has gained significant success among the working-class electorate through a mixture of nationalism, ethnocentrism, and social policy built around the claim that German workers need protection against the undermining of the welfare state by migrants.³² Indeed, the AfD has largely benefitted from the votes of former supporters of Die Linke, with some even arguing that the AfD is becoming the new workers' party in Germany.³³ At the same time, the concept of revolution, once considered a purview of the political left, has gained increasing traction among the right. At first glance, the present focus on the concept of revolution at the expense of other far-right political priorities such as immigration, nationalism, Euroscepticism, Islam, or gender, among others, may seem counterintuitive. The thesis contends, however, that the revolution provides a master narrative in which the AfD asserts these various political and ideological stances through an interpretation of the revolution as a moment of bottom-up popular transformation rather than top-down political reunification.

THEORIZING THE FAR RIGHT

This study is also situated within the theoretical context of far-right studies. The mis(use) of the past by far-right actors has resulted in a recent proliferation of research, raising questions regarding the various shades of the far right from populist radical-right parties to fringe neofascist

³¹ Eric Langenbacher, "The Mastered Past? Collective Memory Trends in Germany since Unification," in *From the Bonn to the Berlin Republic: Germany at the Twentieth Anniversary of Unification*, eds. Jeffrey J. Anderson and Eric Langenbacher (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 63-89.

³² Stefan Berger, "The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and its Appeal to Workers – With Special Reference to the Ruhr Region of Germany," *Totalitarianism and Democracy* 19, no. 1 (2022): 47-70.

³³ See Jonathan Olsen, "The Left Party and the AfD," *German Politics & Society* 36, no. 1 (2018): 70-83; Ralf Havertz, *Radical Right Populism in Germany: AfD, Pegida, and the Identitarian Movement* (London: Routledge, 2021), 142; Klaus Dörre, *In der Warteschlange. Arbeiter*innen und die radikale Rechte* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2020); Berger, "The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and its Appeal to Workers," 47-70.

organizations, with the AfD traditionally classified as the former. The populist radical right is generally understood as sharing a core ideology that combines (at least) three features: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.³⁴ Nativism entails a combination of nationalism and xenophobia, holding that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group and that non-native elements pose a threat to the homogeneous nation-state.³⁵ The basis of the nativist distinction can be multifold – including ethnic, racial, and religious prejudices, which are often combined in one form or another. Authoritarianism, moreover, refers to the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely.³⁶ Populism, for its part, is generally defined as an ideology that considers society to be separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.³⁷ Populist radical-right politicians claim to be the *vox populi* (voice of the people), accusing established parties and politicians of being a “political class” that feigns opposition to distract the people from the fact that they are essentially alike and in collaboration.³⁸ In addition, such parties tend to instrumentalize some kind of minority as a scapegoat for most if not all current woes and subsequently construe the respective group as a threat “to us,” to “our” nation.³⁹

In contrast to the extreme right, the radical right is generally understood to be democratic, in that it accepts popular sovereignty and majority rule.⁴⁰ The traditional distinction lies in the view that, within the far right, the radical right denotes the acceptance of some majoritarian democratic

³⁴ Cas Mudde, “Introduction to the Populist Radical Right,” in *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader*, ed. Cas Mudde (London: Routledge, 2017), 4; see also Jens Rydgren, “The Radical Right: An Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, ed. Jens Rydgren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1-13.

³⁵ Mudde, “Introduction to the Populist Radical Right,” 4.

³⁶ Mudde, “Introduction to the Populist Radical Right,” 4.

³⁷ Mudde, “Introduction to the Populist Radical Right,” 4.

³⁸ Mudde, “Introduction to the Populist Radical Right,” 4.

³⁹ Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: SAGE, 2015), 2.

⁴⁰ Mudde, “Introduction to the Populist Radical Right,” 5.

features, whilst rejecting its liberal elements (e.g., minority rights, separation of power, rule of law).⁴¹ The extreme right, however, rejects the basic tenets of democracy altogether, that is, popular sovereignty and majority rule, frequently through the use of physical violence.⁴² These distinctions are quite broad and, as we will see, the boundaries between the radical and the extreme right are often blurred in a context where nonviolent forms of action and the support for the idea of democracy have become dominant features across the political spectrum.⁴³ On a similar note, the recent “mainstreaming” of the far right in terms of ideology, politics, and organization has also made boundaries difficult to establish.⁴⁴ This thesis posits that examining such actors’ relationship to the concept of revolution can offer insight into their position along the far-right spectrum; it likewise emphasizes that blanket classifications may obscure more than they reveal.

THE AFD AND ITS ALTERNATIVE MEMORY CULTURE

*“We have the right to take back not only our country, but also our past.”*⁴⁵
– Alexander Gauland

An increasingly salient characteristic of the far right is its construction of a revisionist politics of the past, that is, a broad discursive repertoire of an imagined, mythologized, or idealized past in the public sphere.⁴⁶ Specifically, such groups create or rewrite their own concepts of history, charging them with nationalist ideas of homogeneity, and are able to fuel political conflicts by using

⁴¹ Stefan Couperus, Pier Domenico Tortola, and Lars Rensmann, “Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe,” *European Politics and Society* 24, no. 4 (2022): 437.

⁴² Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann, “Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe,” 437; Volk and Weisskircher, “Far-Right PEGIDA,” 322-323.

⁴³ Sabine Volk and Manès Weisskircher, “Far-Right PEGIDA: Non-Violent Protest and the Blurred Lines Between the Radical and Extreme Right,” in *Routledge Handbook of Non-Violent Extremism Groups, Perspectives and New Debates*, eds. Elisa Orofino and William Allchorn (New York: Routledge, 2023), 322-323.

⁴⁴ Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 21; Rydgren, “The Radical Right,” 6.

⁴⁵ “AfD-Vize zu Wehrmacht: Gauland fordert ‘Stolz’ auf deutsche Soldaten,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/bundestagswahl/afd-alexander-gauland-relativiert-verbrechen-der-wehrmacht-15199412.html>.

⁴⁶ Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann, “Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe,” 435.

arguments which appeal to past collective experiences.⁴⁷ A typical illustration can be found in the rhetoric of the AfD. The AfD emerged on the German political landscape in 2013 as an ordoliberal Euroskeptic party founded by a former CDU politician and economics professor, Bernd Lucke. Internal disputes within the party led to the ascendancy of increasingly nationalist, xenophobic, and anti-immigration factions who, uneasily tolerated by the party leadership, called for a defense of the nation against immigrants while stoking fears about demographic decline and population transfer.⁴⁸ Lucke resigned in 2015, claiming that that party had “fallen irretrievably into the wrong hands” and was succeeded by Frauke Petry.⁴⁹ The AfD entered the Bundestag in 2017 with 12.6 percent of the vote and continued to reinvent itself as an Islamophobic, anti-immigration party propelled by the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. Petry likewise struggled to keep the far-right wing of her party in line. She was succeeded by a dual leadership of Jörg Meuthen and Alexander Gauland (with the former resigning in 2022). At the time of writing, the party is co-led by Tino Chrupalla and Alice Weidel. Far-right elements thus gradually gained the upper hand within the party leadership, while more moderate voices either found themselves marginalized or chose to leave.⁵⁰

Simultaneous with the party’s shift to the right was the construction of a scandalous and well-publicized revisionist politics of the past, one that must be understood in the context of a dominant culture of remembrance centered largely around guilt for the perpetration of the crimes of the Holocaust rather than pride for past achievements. As mentioned above, within the literature on German far-right memory politics, much of the existing scholarship concerns itself with the AfD’s

⁴⁷ Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, 39.

⁴⁸ Binder, “Memory Culture, Civil Sphere and Right-Wing Populism in Germany,” 193.

⁴⁹ Binder, “Memory Culture, Civil Sphere and Right-Wing Populism in Germany,” 193.

⁵⁰ Scholars have come to various conclusions regarding demographic support for the party. While some have found that voting for the AfD correlates with characteristics such as being male, middle-aged, and having higher education levels, others contend that socio-demographic factors offer limited predictive power and suggest that attitudinal variables (e.g., anti-immigrant ideology) are much stronger predictors of the AfD vote. See Michael A. Hansen and Jonathan Olsen, “The Alternative for Germany (AfD) as Populist Issue Entrepreneur: Explaining the Party and Its Voters in the 2021 German Federal Election,” *German Politics* (2022): 1–25.

usage of the National Socialist past, revealing the various ways in which the AfD has challenged the Holocaust-centered memory culture of Germany by relativizing Nazism in favour of a broader, more “positive” view of German history. This challenge has often taken the form of a) downplaying the National Socialist regime (e.g., Gauland’s oft-cited statement that “Hitler and the Nazis are just bird shit in more than 1,000 years of successful German history”);⁵¹ b) emphasizing German victimhood and suffering (e.g., through a victimhood narrative of the 1945 bombing of Dresden);⁵² and c) emphasizing historical achievement to create positive self-identification with the German nation (e.g., Gauland’s claim that Germans have the right to be proud of what their soldiers achieved in the two world wars).⁵³ The AfD thus offers an alternative memory of an imaginary pre-postwar nation characterized by a primordial identity with the goal of turning Germany into a “normal country.”⁵⁴ The case in point demonstrates that historical myth-making and idealized constructions of the national past play an integral role in the ideology production, post-factual horizons, and nationalist and racist discourses advanced by the far right.⁵⁵ Similar to the usage of the National Socialist past, we can conceptualize the far-right usage of East German history as a challenge to predominant understandings of the “correct” way to interpret the past.

BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

The discussion of memory politics in a German context likewise faces the issue of regional divide, that is, the cleavage between East and West rooted in historical – and resulting in mnemonic – division. The discourse of the AfD surrounding the revolution builds upon an existing mnemonic divide rooted in lived experience. For many in the East, the revolution symbolized liberation from a

⁵¹ Binder, “Memory Culture, Civil Sphere and Right-Wing Populism in Germany,” 196.

⁵² See, for example, Deodhar, “Inside Contested Cultural Memory: The Alternative für Deutschland in Dresden,” 46–69; Vees-Gulani, “Symbol of Reconciliation and Far-Right Stronghold?” 56–78.

⁵³ Samuel Salzborn, “Antisemitism in the ‘Alternative for Germany’ Party,” *German Politics and Society* 36, no. 6 (2018): 84.

⁵⁴ Binder, “Memory Culture, Civil Sphere and Right-Wing Populism in Germany,” 199.

⁵⁵ Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann, “Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe,” 441.

repressive regime; in the West, the memory of the revolution has often been viewed through the lens of reunification and overcoming division. The AfD capitalizes on this divide with a discourse explicitly targeted toward residents of the eastern federal states who have ties, in some way or another, to the revolution of thirty years ago and the experience of socialism. Its politicians also build upon existing tangible divisions in terms of a failure on the part of the (western) political establishment to “close the gap” between East and West. In this way, the AfD presents itself as the champion of Eastern interests and grievances, emphasizing economic disparities, cultural differences, and perceived injustices.

Indeed, in the eastern federal states formerly constituting the GDR, the AfD has achieved electoral results well above the national average.⁵⁶ The postulation that the electoral success of the AfD in the former East is rooted in the divided history of the country has found frequent expression. For some, it is a question of the unification process. The crisis of unification saw mass unemployment and the loss of secure prospects, the import of the Federal Republic’s institutional order, the abrupt change of elites, and the sometimes highly ambiguous processes of the privatization of the East German economy.⁵⁷ Others see the root of the support for the AfD in the mass media portrayal of former East Germans as “backward” and the exoticized “Other” in the 1990s which resulted in a sense of marginalization as “second-class citizens.” These processes, some have argued, contributed to increasing skepticism toward state institutions and political actors, perhaps motivating some to vote for populist parties.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Jonas Rädel, “Two Paradigmatic Views on Right-Wing Populism in East Germany,” *German Politics and Society* 37, no. 4 (2019): 30.

⁵⁷ Jessen, “Immer wieder montags,” 58.

⁵⁸ According to the postcolonial perspective, once individuals have been devalued, they often respond with a lack of understanding and defiance towards this stigma, which can paradoxically reproduce and even reinforce the dominant narrative. See Rädel, “Two Paradigmatic Views on Right-Wing Populism in East Germany,” 35, 37-38; Jessen, “Immer wieder montags,” 59.

For others, it is a question of historically divided memory. By 1990, the antifascist memory regime of the GDR, which celebrated the victory of the Allies as a liberation from fascism and symbolically excluded its citizens from the class of perpetrators of the Holocaust, stood in contrast to the Holocaust identity of the FRG, central to the incorporation of refugees and asylum seekers.⁵⁹ For Werner Binder, the eastern success of the AfD is attributable to such differences in memory culture.⁶⁰ There is also the question of the memory of the East German past itself, with some studies suggesting that far-right actors have garnered support from certain segments of the former East German population by tapping into a desire for a memory culture that predominantly portrays the GDR as an unjust totalitarian regime.⁶¹ And while the AfD's discourse in the East may appear to be quite distinct from that in the West in the present thesis through its regional and thematic focus, the observation that the revolutionary discourse encompasses the party's stance on a wide range of issues, including immigration, nationalism, multiculturalism, political correctness, and so forth, suggests that, despite intentional variations in regional discourses, the essence beneath remains consistent.

A NOTE ON METHOD

The investigation to follow is made on the basis of a systematic analysis of relevant primary evidence. The objective was to conduct a comprehensive investigation accounting for the manifold manifestations of the AfD's mnemonic discourse. That is, while previous research on the subject has focused exclusively on, for example, X (formerly Twitter) posts, the thesis considers evidence from

⁵⁹ See Binder, "Memory Culture, Civil Sphere and Right-Wing Populism in Germany," 183-184; Art, "Making Room for November 9, 1989?" 199; Ronald Gebauer, "The Peaceful Revolution and Its Aftermath: Collective Memory and the Victims of Communism in East Germany / Die friedliche Revolution und ihre Folgen: Die Opfer der SED-Diktatur in der kollektiven Erinnerung der Ostdeutschen," *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 35, no. 3 (2010): 163.

⁶⁰ Binder, "Memory Culture, Civil Sphere and Right-Wing Populism in Germany," 199.

⁶¹ Jenny Wüstenberg, for example, studies victims of repression in East Germany who have recently affiliated themselves with the AfD and other far-right groups, suggesting that this phenomenon is the result of a lack of pluralism when it comes to the rules of "how memory is done" in reunified Germany. Jenny Wüstenberg, "Pluralism, Governance, and the New Right in German Memory Politics," *German Politics and Society* 37, no. 3 (2019): 89-110.

multiple spheres, both on- and offline. That being said, using such evidence to glean insights into the happenings of the recent past requires selection, as the material at one's disposal has proliferated to unprecedented amounts. From the outset, two overarching criteria for the selection of sources included a) their presence in the public sphere, and b) their potential to shed light on what Ruth Wodak refers to as the “micropolitics” of right-wing populism: how such parties actually produce and reproduce their ideologies and agenda in everyday politics, in the media, in campaigning, in posters, slogans and speeches.⁶²

The first criterion, the public nature of the evidence, was based on the premise that the present thesis is a work of history in the public sphere. Rather than prioritizing backstage, internal communications among politicians, the approach aimed to identify materials with the potential to reach a broader spectrum of viewers including but not limited to the party's following, for example, recordings of speeches delivered in public forums and accessible online publications. This methodological choice offers insight into how the AfD seeks to present itself and be perceived by external audiences. The second criterion, the ability to shed light on the “micropolitics” of right-wing populism, was likewise a decisive factor. The intent was to identify those sources which demonstrate firsthand the manner in which the party produces its mnemonic discourse – elucidating the terminology used, the assertions posited, and the strategies employed.⁶³

This thesis is based on a corpus of 223 pieces of primary evidence available online at present or digitally archived within a timeframe ranging from April 14, 2013, to December 8, 2023.⁶⁴ Based on the outlined criteria, the initial step toward building a corpus of relevant sources was identification, that is, pinpointing various fora where the AfD's claim to the revolution of 1989 is

⁶² Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, 2.

⁶³ While publications from popular news outlets do constitute a portion of the sources consulted, their use is generally contextual or due to the provision of interview material.

⁶⁴ The majority are relatively short in length. The argumentation of the present thesis is substantiated through selected examples deemed emblematic of the broader sample.

present and identifying the relevant primary evidence within these fora. The following source types were identified as spaces in which such a claim has emerged: Facebook content, official magazine publications, party programs, posters, press releases, X (formerly Twitter) content, YouTube videos, speeches, and interviews. Given the scope of a master's thesis, however, it would be impossible to fully survey the content of these databases. The survey was therefore limited to national rather than regional profiles (or those of a specific politician) with the exception of Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia. The survey of regional platforms was limited to a) the respective Facebook accounts across the 2013-2023 period given the brevity and accessibility of social media content and b) the official websites of the 2019 election campaigns in each state which included campaign material and electoral programs.

The final selection of source databases consisted of the following: the *AfD Kompakt* (the party's official magazine); the AfD Presse (the party's official press releases); AfD TV (the party's official YouTube channel); the Facebook pages of the national AfD, its representation in the federal parliament, and the federal states of Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia; the archived campaign websites of the Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia regional associations; campaign posters; and the archived website of the party's far-right faction Der Flügel. Specific source material was identified within these databases on the basis of keyword searches consisting of various permutations of the terms *1989*, *(friedliche) revolution*, and *Wende*. A preliminary collection of relevant material was made by means of downloading and archiving each source on the author's personal software through the input of relevant metadata which would allow for classification based on creator, date, source type, and provenance. These sources were supplemented with newspapers from well-known media outlets, a limited number of recorded speeches uploaded from other accounts, as well as reports from the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Questions of explicit and

implicit meaning(s) were central to their consultation – beyond the overt reference within the text, the focus was on the discursive strategies embedded within.

The attempt to conduct a comprehensive overview of a discourse on the basis of a heterogeneous collection of sources, however, comes with its own challenges. In the endeavour to explore the manifestation(s) of such a discourse across different spheres we are presented with a diverse array of source types ranging from lengthy speeches by prolific politicians to brief social media posts whose authorship is often unclear. The aim is not to conduct a straightforward comparison of incongruent sources but to examine the ways in which a discourse may be produced in various arenas within the public sphere, each essential to the party's self-presentation and ideological promulgation. That being said, the integration of such varied sources requires navigation of methodological, epistemological, and practical obstacles. Each type of source comes with its own format, context, audience, rhetorical techniques, biases, and limitations. The challenge extends beyond the sheer diversity of the sources at hand; it is also compounded by their predominantly digital nature. The digital landscape offers a vast repository of information and facilitates unprecedented access; unlike traditional archival materials, however, digital content can be both unstable and volatile – easily modified, deleted, or rendered inaccessible. Integrating these sources with more static forms of documentation like party programs and press releases requires attention to temporal shifts, evolving narratives, and spatial variations in political discourse. Furthermore, online anonymity presents obstacles to grasping the agency and intentions behind digital content. The fluidity of online spaces thus complicates efforts to trace the origins and trajectories of ideological narratives. The thesis nevertheless considers the diverse array of both dynamic and static content at its disposal as an advantage in constructing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between mnemonic narratives and contemporary far-right politics.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The thesis proceeds as follows. The first section is dedicated to uncovering the early traces of the AfD's mnemonic usage of the East German Revolution of 1989. It argues that assessing the invocation of the revolution necessitates a broader temporal lens, including but not limited to the federal state election campaigns in Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia in 2019. Preliminary indications of this discourse emerge in the realm of social media and party publications, predating the campaigns and thus suggesting that the AfD's self-conception as a proponent of democratic resistance against the prevailing system is fundamentally intertwined with the mnemonic discourse of the revolution. The chapter also briefly discusses the overlap between far-right and far-left historical discourses on 1989. The second section focuses exclusively on the aforementioned federal state election campaigns of 2019. It contextualizes the elections and their results within a brief discussion of regional voting behaviour. It then argues that the campaigns represent the culmination and systematization of a mnemonic discourse comprising six overarching discursive claims employing the memory of the East German Revolution of 1989. In this way, a program of radical transformation comes to the fore. The third section moves beyond description, arguing that, through said mnemonic argumentation, memory is deployed as a strategic and multifunctional tool of mobilization, legitimization, and populist identity construction. The reference to the revolution encompasses an interpretive flexibility, rendering it especially suitable for populist political narratives; moreover, the multi-directionality of memory comes to the fore through a master narrative of the revolution that frames the party's manifold understanding(s) of the past, present, and future. The chapter also offers brief reflections on references to the revolution made by other political parties as well the regional nature of the discourse in question. The fourth and final section reflects, by way of conclusion, on the question of revolution on the right. It considers conceptual debates surrounding the far right and revolution; the party's explicit revolutionary commentary; and

the diverse conceptualization(s) inherent in its mnemonic discourse to suggest that the latter can shed light on the party's heterogeneous nature as a far-right entity oscillating between radicalism and extremism.

I. COMPETING OVER 1989: THE FAR RIGHT ENTERS THE SCENE

This chapter is dedicated to uncovering the early traces of the AfD's mnemonic usage of the East German Revolution of 1989. Existing scholarship predominantly treats the party's instrumentalization of the revolution exclusively in the context of the federal state election campaigns in Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia in 2019 and, in so doing, implies that the memory-political discourse emerged abruptly, without precedent. This chapter argues, however, that assessing the invocation of the revolution necessitates a broader temporal lens. From the party's inception in 2013 through 2018, the mnemonic usage of 1989 can be discerned predominantly in the realm of social media and party publications, foreshadowing the discourse that would garner significant media coverage in 2019. The findings suggest that the AfD's self-conception is more fundamentally intertwined with the mnemonic reference to the revolution than a focus exclusively on electoral campaigns would suggest. Despite the ideological evolution of the party from ordoliberal Euroskepticism to far-right populism, there exists a longstanding attempt to portray itself as a proponent of democratic resistance against the prevailing so-called totalitarian system by referring to the revolutionary tradition. The development of said discourse, moreover, reflects the broader evolution of the party itself and its means of communication on the German political stage.

Before we begin, it should be acknowledged that the AfD did not pioneer the instrumentalization of the memory of the revolution within German political discourse, nor were they ever its exclusive proponents. The discourse surrounding this event, particularly its perceived "stolen" or "unfulfilled" nature, was never an exclusively far-right one. As discussed above, the institutionalized, state-sanctioned interpretation of 1989 delineates a hegemonic memory framework positing German reunification as the culmination of the historical narrative in an attempt to foster

collective national identity while legitimizing the establishment of the reunified state.⁶⁵ Across central and eastern Europe, dissenting voices have emerged from both ends of the political spectrum. These dissenters perceive the so-called peaceful revolutions (which took varied forms across the region, from popular protest to negotiated transition) as instances of “betrayal,” a “moment of great lost opportunities,” or, alternatively, as constructs of historical mythology used to reinforce unwelcome manifestations of Western political and economic colonization.⁶⁶ Not only in eastern Germany, then, are the mnemonic discourses of the left and the right partially overlapping – but here the overlap is quite explicit. Die Linke, the political successor to the SED, has played on notions of Western colonization and, rather than outrightly repudiating the commemoration of 1989, has argued against conflating the widespread demonstrations of that year with the event of political reunification (echoing sentiments shared by other former civil rights activists).⁶⁷ The party’s program describes how numerous citizens of the GDR advocated during the autumn of 1989 for a peaceful, democratic, socially conscious, and environmentally sustainable awakening: in other words, “a better socialism.”⁶⁸ This endeavour, however, failed in 1990 and “the democratic awakening in the East became a mere accession.”⁶⁹ The AfD, as will be shown, employs a similar historical narrative of revolutionary unfulfillment and western occupation with the aim of delineating a far-right, rather than far-left, future. It can be assumed that the burgeoning discourse of the AfD, to which we now

⁶⁵ Greta Hartmann, “‘Wir 89er’ – geschichtspolitische Aneignungen der Erinnerung und alltagsweltliche Resonanzen,” in *Das umstrittene Erbe von 1989. Zur Gegenwart eines Gesellschaftszusammenbruchs*, eds. Alexander Leistner and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (Köln: Böhlau, 2021), 149.

⁶⁶ The notion of a “stolen” revolution was particularly strong in Romania, where the violent transition of 1989 saw little meaningful elite change and led to many Romanians referring instead to a “so-called” or “stolen” revolution. See Craig Young and Duncan Light, “Multiple and Contested Geographies of Memory: Remembering the 1989 Romanian ‘Revolution,’” in *Memories, Place and Identity: Commemoration and Remembrance of War and Conflict*, eds. Danielle Drozdowski, Sarah De Nardi, and Emma Waterton (London: Routledge, 2016), 56-73; Mark et al., “1989 After 1989,” 463-503.

⁶⁷ Mark et al., “1989 After 1989,” 474-475.

⁶⁸ Die Linke, *Programm der Partei DIE LINKE* (Berlin: DIE LINKE, 2020), 12-13.

⁶⁹ Die Linke, *Programm der Partei DIE LINKE*, 13.

turn, is informed by and built upon such pre-existing mnemonic narrativization surrounding the revolutionary tradition on the German political stage.

FROM THE BEGINNING: 1989 AS A DISCURSIVE TOOL

Early Traces: 1989 on Facebook

Far-right parties are generally perceived to be early adopters and skillful operators of social media, the latter considered to be an influential way for such parties to gain political influence and to normalize and trans-nationalize their associated discourses.⁷⁰ Indeed, some of the earliest mentions of the East German Revolution of 1989 by the AfD in any official capacity are to be found on Facebook. The AfD was officially constituted on February 6, 2013, but held its founding party conference on April 14, 2013. Not long after, on May 3, 2013, a post appeared on the AfD's main Facebook page consisting of an image of Dresden-born Frauke Petry with the text of a quote attributed to her overlaid on the image: "If you experienced the Wende of 1989, you are particularly sensitized to democracy."⁷¹ The curious phrase suggests that however one experienced the "turnaround" – whether through passive observation or active involvement – then one (in this case, *you*) possess a unique sensitivity to what democracy is or is not like, unlike your counterparts. This initial example echoes later assertions that those citizens who experienced the revolution and the GDR more broadly are particularly attuned to notice any curtailment of democratic freedom. On June 12, 2013, the Facebook account of the AfD Brandenburg posted about alleged spying by American and Canadian intelligence services with a quote again attributed to Frauke Petry: "We must now ask ourselves whether we dared to have a peaceful revolution in 1989, only to see the

⁷⁰ Richardson-Little, Merrill, and Arlaud, "Far-Right Anniversary Politics and Social Media," 1363.

⁷¹ Alternative for Germany, "Wenn man die Wende 1989 miterlebt hat, ist man für die Demokratie besonders sensibilisiert," Facebook, May 3, 2013, https://www.facebook.com/alternativefuerde/photos/a.542889462408064/568462309850779/?locale=de_DE; Joachim Jahn, "Aufstand gegen Merkels 'alternativlose Politik'," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 14, 2013, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/wirtschaftspolitik/gruendungsparteitag-der-afd-aufstand-gegen-merkels-alternativlose-politik-12148549.html>.

Stasi being recreated electronically in 2013?”⁷² A similar post appeared a day later on the national Facebook account of the AfD.⁷³ The assertion is noteworthy not only for its sensationalism (the claim that the Stasi, the omnipresent East German secret police organization, is being recreated) but also the AfD’s self-positioning in the category of those who made the revolution possible: “*we* dared.” In the summer of 2013, it was not yet clear that the AfD’s greatest support base would be in the east, yet the party already aligned itself with the tradition of the East German revolutionaries.⁷⁴ The suggestion that the rights that were fought for in 1989 are being curtailed today, moreover, would become one of the most frequently repeated elements of the party’s mnemonic discourse and a central line of its electoral argumentation in 2019.

Later that month, the Facebook page of the AfD Saxony posted an assemblage of photographs from a party demonstration in Leipzig accompanied by a description written by a party coordinator and Leipzig resident: “Leipzig is the city of the peaceful revolution. But after more than 20 years of reunification, resentment is growing: we didn’t take to the streets for this...as a convinced Leipzig resident with heart and blood, I probably speak from the soul of many when I say: WE CAN DO IT AGAIN!”⁷⁵ The description again situates the party in the tradition of the revolutionaries of 1989, this time more explicitly by describing the AfD as the “moral accomplices of the ’89 Movement” who must “return to the streets and fight for our freedom piece by piece.”⁷⁶ The suggestion is made that the contemporary politicians of the AfD somehow directly participated

⁷² AfD Brandenburg, “Lauschprogramm betrifft Deutschland in vielerlei Hinsicht / AfD fordert Aufklärung von der Bundesregierung,” Facebook, June 12, 2013, https://www.facebook.com/profile/100051975035118/search/?q=lauschprogramm&locale=de_DE.

⁷³ Alternative for Germany, “Die USA und Kanada spionieren systematisch Nutzerdaten aus dem Internet und leiten sie einer geheimdienstlichen Verwertung zu,” Facebook, June 13, 2013, https://www.facebook.com/alternativefuerde/photos/a.542889462408064.1073741828.540404695989874/586177941412549/?type=3&locale=de_DE&paipv=0&eav=AYAmV7xyIIRfErL98_rZOygdKyps_lvrkA30Tqe22x6TvsAd8H7eI3ute5rk7OKMIQ&_rdr.

⁷⁴ After narrowly failing to enter the federal parliament in September 2013, the party won a few seats in the European elections in 2014. It turned out to be more successful in eastern Germany, where it campaigned on an anti-immigration ticket. Binder, “Memory Culture, Civil Sphere and Right-Wing Populism in Germany,” 193.

⁷⁵ AfD Saxony, “Rechtsstaat statt Überwachungsstaat: Bericht über die Demo in Leipzig,” Facebook, July 28, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/AfD.Sachsen/photos/a.322068014589056/372068649588992/>.

⁷⁶ AfD Saxony, “Rechtsstaat statt Überwachungsstaat.”

in the revolutionary movement, which had failed, and that there is, therefore, the need for another revolution. The same photographs appeared on the national AfD Facebook page two days later with a shorter caption: “THIS is not why we took to the streets!”⁷⁷ What exactly is meant by “THIS” remains ambiguous.

Early Traces: Dispersion and a Note on PEGIDA

While references to the East German Revolution of 1989 become sparse in the years 2014 and 2015, they resurface with increased frequency and diffusion from 2016 onward. This trend reflects the evolution and expansion of the AfD as a whole, which had recently begun to make use of an increasing number of online platforms beyond social media to disseminate its communications. It is necessary, however, to momentarily divert our discussion to note the emergence of PEGIDA. A shift in public perception toward the German far right occurred with the onset of the PEGIDA anti-immigration demonstrations in October 2014. This movement explicitly referred to the protests of the revolutionary autumn of 1989 and symbolically appropriated the protest form of the Monday demonstration, which had originally grown out of peace vigils at the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig in the 1980s.⁷⁸ PEGIDA was not the first movement to adopt the Monday demonstration paradigm in order to claim historical continuity with the crowds that brought down the SED regime;⁷⁹ however, it also adopted the primary slogan of the movement “we are the people” as part of its effort to legitimize itself and deflect criticism.⁸⁰ With the rise of PEGIDA, the populist far right’s appropriation of 1989 garnered significant media coverage. The evolving discourse of the AfD, then, did not emerge from nowhere, and can be assumed to be informed by

⁷⁷ Alternative for Germany, “Rechtsstaat statt Überwachungsstaat: Demo in Leipzig am 27.07.2013,” Facebook, July 30, 2013, https://www.facebook.com/alternativefuerde/photos/a.542889462408064/608979332465743/?locale=de_DE.

⁷⁸ Hartmann, “Wir 89er’ – geschichtspolitische Aneignungen der Erinnerung und alltagsweltliche Resonanzen,” 150.

⁷⁹ For discussion of previous uses of the Monday demonstration paradigm, see Patton, “Monday, Monday: Eastern Protest Movements,” 480-497; Rink, “Die Montagsdemonstration als Protestparadigma,” 282-305.

⁸⁰ Richardson-Little and Merrill, “Who is the Volk?” 60.

existing practices of both right-wing and left-wing symbolic and discursive usage of the revolutionary tradition.⁸¹

On February 2, 2016, the AfD Brandenburg Facebook page called for the resignation of a CDU member of parliament for his remarks in which he compared the AfD's refugee policy with the border policy of the GDR.⁸² The post quotes an AfD politician and former member of the 1989 opposition group New Forum who denounced the CDU's "party-political propaganda" as "Stalinist." "Real freedom of opinion, which I once fought for in New Forum in the fall of 1989, is being perverted."⁸³ Here, personal participation in the revolution is leveraged as a source of authority while 1989 and the socialist past are employed as shortcuts for the denouncement of political opponents. Another Facebook post from the AfD Saxony condemns the Social Democratic Party (SPD) Secretary General for "presumptuousness" which "borders on the behaviour of the GDR government in 1989."⁸⁴ In this assertion, another discursive strand emerges that would become a major line of argumentation: the claim that the so-called old parties have much in common with the dictatorial SED regime.⁸⁵

The increasing usage of various platforms for official party communication in 2016 saw the emerging mnemonic discourse permeate spaces no longer limited to Facebook, notably the AfD Presse, the platform for the press releases of the party. For example, one press release quotes then national spokesperson Albrecht Glaser reproaching alleged "hatred and vilification" of the AfD and

⁸¹ The relationship between PEGIDA and the AfD has been important, albeit not consistently amicable. Their dynamic has been characterized by a mixture of support, rivalry, and rejection. Some factions within both PEGIDA and the AfD have envisioned PEGIDA as representing the street version and the AfD the parliamentary arm of Germany's far right. See Lars Erik Berntzen and Manès Weisskircher, "Anti-Islamic PEGIDA Beyond Germany: Explaining Differences in Mobilisation," *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 37 no. 6 (2016): 556-573.

⁸² AfD Brandenburg, "AfD-Abgeordneter fordert Rücktritt: Dombrowski vermerkt die Opfer des DDR-Regimes!" Facebook, February 2, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/afd.brandenburg/photos/a.115652885288989/478832355637705/?locale=de_DE.

⁸³ AfD Brandenburg, "AfD-Abgeordneter fordert Rücktritt."

⁸⁴ AfD Saxony, "AfD Sachsen: SPD will Grundrechte willkürlich einschränken!" Facebook, October 12, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/AfD.Sachsen/photos/a.322068014589056/980656618730189/?locale=de_DE.

⁸⁵ The term "old party" or *Altpartei* is a pejorative term generally used to refer to the CDU/CSU, the SPD, and the FDP.

their supporters, stating that “the people must take matters into their own hands as they did in 1989” against “the euro chaos and the migration chaos.”⁸⁶ Another press release later that year criticizes the President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz for having reportedly insulted demonstrators in Leipzig as “perverting” the 1989 movement. Alexander Gauland, the party leader for the state of Brandenburg at the time, is quoted as saying that “today’s demonstrators are taking to the streets against a chancellor dictatorship; the demonstrators of 1989 were driven to the squares of Leipzig and Dresden by the same love of freedom against the SED dictatorship.”⁸⁷ Similar claims emerged in the *AfD Kompakt*, the party’s official member magazine, the following year.⁸⁸ Together, these varied references illustrate, firstly, the portrayal of a renewed revolution as the singular remedy for a range of issues, spanning from perceived infringements on freedom to matters such as the Euro and immigration. Secondly, a direct parallel is drawn between the present-day government, labeled as a “dictatorship,” and the former SED regime, with demonstrations today explicitly linked to those of 1989. Additionally, an emphasis on the value of “freedom” emerges, positioning the AfD as a purported champion of liberal democracy. In these diverse manifestations, the mnemonic discourse of the revolution begins to extend into various media, transitioning from social media platforms to more formal party publications, and loosely evolving into distinctive discursive memory-political arguments.

Early Traces: Intensification

In 2018, a notable surge in mnemonic references to the revolution materialized across various spheres, including magazine publications, social media accounts, press releases, speeches,

⁸⁶ AfD Presse, “Glaser: Wer sind die Hassprediger und warum so viele?” press release, February 11, 2016, <https://www.afd.de/glaser-wer-sind-die-hassprediger-und-warum-so-viele/>.

⁸⁷ AfD Presse, “Gauland: Bitte nehmt Schulz als SPD-Spitzenkandidaten!” press release, October 10, 2016, <https://www.afd.de/gauland-bitte-nehmt-schulz-als-spd-spitzenkandidaten/>.

⁸⁸ “Fast 125 Millionen Euro für VEB Straßenklo sind ein Schlag ins Gesicht der Steuerzahler,” *AfD Kompakt*, August 28, 2017, <https://afdKompakt.de/2017/08/28/fast-125-millionen-euro-fuer-veb-strassenklo-sind-ein-schlag-ins-gesicht-der-steuerzahler/>.

and interviews. The *AfD Kompakt* featured an article in spring 2018, providing insight into several emerging discursive trends that would gain momentum in the subsequent election year. The article, which broadcasts an upcoming demonstration in Berlin organized by the AfD, quotes the former East German Steffen König reacting to what he sees as unfair treatment in the media: “In 1989 in the GDR, I was a troublemaker and was fought because of my convictions. Now I am once again an enemy of the government, just because I don’t agree with politics and this government and stand by that in public.”⁸⁹ König also denounces a politician of Die Linke for former ties to the SED. The article concludes by calling the current regime a “dictatorship of the mind.”⁹⁰ In another publication, the same politician states that the political heirs of the East German dictatorship “sit in the state government today as successors to the SED.”⁹¹ Again, a direct parallel is drawn between the lack of democratic conditions in the GDR and a purported lack thereof in today’s Germany with politicians simultaneously criticized for past affiliations with the SED.

The discourse assumed a more official, formalized stance, materializing in the ninth federal party conference in Augsburg in the summer of 2018. In a video uploaded on the party’s official YouTube channel, AfD TV, Gauland is shown giving a speech in which he draws further parallels with the late phase of the GDR, comparing Angela Merkel with the East German head of state Erich Honecker to great applause.

I often feel reminded of the last months of the GDR.... Once again, a country is faced with the threat of a destructive ideology followed by its leadership, just like back then. The regime consists of a small group of party functionaries, a kind of politburo, and once again, there is a broad social coalition of party functionaries, journalists, TV moderators, church officials, artists, teachers, professors, comedians, and other activists supporting the government and fighting the opposition. Just like back then, dear friends, disobedient citizens take to the streets today to demand their rights. Once again, these civil rights activists are pursued by

⁸⁹ “Am 27. Mai ist Demo-Tag in Berlin: AfD-Pressekonferenz ‘Zukunft Deutschland,’” *AfD Kompakt*, May 23, 2018, <https://afdKompakt.de/2018/05/23/am-27-mai-ist-demo-tag-in-berlin-afd-pressekonzferenz-zukunft-deutschland/>.

⁹⁰ The same day, the AfD Presse published a call for people to “take their peaceful protest to the streets.” AfD Presse, “AfD ruft zu Großdemonstration in Berlin auf,” press release, May 23, 2018, <https://www.afd.de/alexander-gauland-afd-ruft-zu-grossdemonstration-in-berlin-auf/>; “Am 27. Mai ist Demo-Tag in Berlin.”

⁹¹ “Die Angst vor der Regierungsübernahme durch die AfD,” *AfD Kompakt*, August 15, 2018, <https://afdKompakt.de/2018/08/15/die-angst-vor-der-regierungsuernahme-durch-die-afd/>.

thugs, defamed by the media, and denounced in their workplaces. Once again, Saxony is the heart of the resistance.⁹²

Gauland's statements at the party conference explicitly invoke the memory of the GDR through terms such as "party functionaries," "politburo," and "civil rights activists," while ardently appealing to Saxony as the epicenter of resistance, as in 1989. Present-day politicians are criticized not only for past affiliations with the SED but also for exhibiting similar behaviour. Furthermore, today's "civil rights activists," referring to the opposition groups of 1989, are said to face repression akin to that experienced in the GDR. Gauland explicitly equates his party with New Forum, a movement for democratic reform, while denouncing the other parties as "bloc parties."⁹³ "Here we are in the year 1989 again," he says (he was serving as head of the Hessian State Chancellery in West Germany at the time).⁹⁴ The AfD can also be seen distorting the objectives of the 1989 movement in favour of its own contemporary political priorities: in a speech at the same conference, then federal spokesperson Jörg Meuthen denounced multiculturalism as a "false narrative" equal to the "lying narrative of actually existing socialism" swept away in 1989.⁹⁵ The above speeches indicate a degree of maturation in the AfD's discourse of the memory of 1989, with the embellishment of specific lines of argumentation that would be further established in the 2019 election campaigns.

These findings indicate that the AfD has employed the events of 1989 as a discursive mnemonic device since the early days of the party's inception in 2013. The diachronic analysis of diverse sources sheds light on the evolution of this discourse from its nascent stages, evidenced by brief Facebook posts, to its development in the form of lengthier speeches and interviews. This pattern reflects the broader evolution of the party itself on the German political stage as it expanded

⁹² Alexander Gauland, "Alexander Gauland: 'Merkel ist wie Honecker'," AfD TV, July 3, 2018, YouTube video, 23:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfwtxUcGLE>.

⁹³ Gauland, "Alexander Gauland: 'Merkel ist wie Honecker'."

⁹⁴ Gauland, "Alexander Gauland: 'Merkel ist wie Honecker'."

⁹⁵ "Politik muss verantwortungsethisch handeln, nicht gesinnungsethisch," *AFD Kompakt*, June 30, 2018, <https://afd-kompakt.de/2018/06/30/politik-muss-verantwortungsethisch-handeln-nicht-gesinnungsethisch/>.

not only its membership but also the various platforms it utilized to communicate with its audiences. These diverse discursive maneuvers, from anecdotes to allusions, would culminate in a more cohesive electoral discourse in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia the following year. The preliminary indications of this discourse show that it did not emerge spontaneously as a product of the electoral campaigns nor was it confined to a particular domain, as the existing scholarship seems to suggest. Its significance extends beyond mere electoral strategy; it is original to the AfD's self-conception, serving as a key component of the party's attempt to portray itself as a champion of genuine democracy and an advocate of peaceful resistance against the prevailing system. Tracing the evolution of such a discourse can thus shed light on the ideological self-perception of the AfD. The brief discussions of Die Linke and PEGIDA also suggest that said discourse grew out of an existing practice of far-right and far-left symbolic and discursive adoption of the revolutionary tradition. This chapter underscores the notion that memory-political discourses evolve over time across various domains, with the discourse in question coalescing into an increasingly cohesive – if contradictory – mnemonic narrative.

II. THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN OF 2019: WENDE 2.0

This chapter is dedicated to a close examination of the AfD's mnemonic discourse on the East German Revolution of 1989 in the federal state election campaigns in Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia in 2019. Thirty years after the revolution transfigured the divided landscape of East and West, the AfD mounted an electoral campaign under the banner of its re-fulfillment. Indeed, the central message of the eastern elections was that to support the AfD would be to participate in the tradition of the movement of 1989, either fulfilling ("complete the Wende") or re-enacting ("Wende 2.0") the revolution. The claim to 1989 was by no means implicit, particularly noticeable in the posters tacked up across the region displaying slogans such as: "we are the people," "Wende for Leipzig," "The Peaceful Revolution at the ballot box," and "write history 1989/2019."⁹⁶ Each poster boasted a black-and-white header proclaiming "Wende_2.0", coupled with a footer marking the passage of thirty years: "1989 | 2019. Complete the Wende!" (the latter slogan rhymes in the original German).⁹⁷ Beyond the slogans, however, what sort of discursive argumentation did the AfD use to substantiate a campaign centered around the memory of 1989?

This chapter argues that, in the three election campaigns, the AfD employed the memory of the East German Revolution of 1989 on- and offline by means of six overarching mnemonic claims: 1) the claim of analogous conditions; 2) the claim of dictatorial legacy; 3) the claim to the inheritance of the tradition of democratic resistance; 4) the claim of national unity; 5) the claim of the value of East German identity; ultimately leading to 6) the claim of the necessity of a new revolution. The discourse discloses a program of radical transformation which finds expression in the reference to 1989 through an interpretation of the revolution as a moment of bottom-up popular transformation

⁹⁶ For a sample of the original campaign posters, see the now-archived website of the AfD Brandenburg's campaign: Alternative for Germany Brandenburg, "Material," Wende 2019, archived August 9, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190809003341/https://wende2019.de/material/>.

⁹⁷ *Vollende die Wende*.

rather than top-down political reunification. Such claims had been present in the pre-2019 discourse but resurfaced with heightened intensity as the AfD launched its campaign in Saxony and Brandenburg, followed by Thuringia.

The discourse of a political campaign necessarily offers an ephemeral snapshot curated to appeal to specific demographics and advance electoral objectives. With this in mind, the previous chapter attempted to lay the groundwork for argument that the AfD's usage of the memory of the revolution in the summer and fall of 2019 should not be dismissed as a simple product of the federal state elections nor as merely opportunistic maneuvering, although such motivations undoubtedly were present. Instead, what emerges is the systematization of a discourse that had evolved since the early days of the party. Across the multiplicity of voices promoting various messages concerning 1989, certain discursive threads became more pronounced within these campaigns, materialized in speeches, election materials, and other media. At the same time, this chapter also reveals the party's selective and ahistorical use of the past. Before we begin, however, a brief contextual discussion of regional voting behaviour is necessary.

ELECTIONS IN THE EAST

The eastern federal states of Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia, the former constituents of the GDR, have exhibited electoral dynamics divergent from their western counterparts in a political system into which they were incorporated in 1990. While the political landscape in western Germany has traditionally been dominated by the CDU and the SPD with smaller parties like the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens also playing significant roles, eastern German voters have exhibited greater volatility in their voting patterns with notable support for both Die Linke and, more recently, the AfD, in addition to the CDU and SPD. Such allegiances underscore an interplay of historical experiences, socioeconomic realities, and ideological orientations that influence the political dynamics of the

region. Rooted deeply in historical division, each of these federal states has been forced to grapple with the multifaceted challenges stemming from the socialist past and the subsequent consequences of reunification, including economic restructuring, demographic transitions, and the enduring processes of confronting the legacy of dictatorship (in particular, involvement with the Stasi).

The 2019 elections in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia – each significant locations of revolutionary upheaval in 1989 – further exemplified said divergence. In each case, the competition was between the incumbent and the AfD, with the latter securing approximately a quarter of the total votes. In the Saxony state election held on September 1, despite the CDU maintaining its position in power with 32.1 percent, the AfD experienced a substantial surge, securing 27.5 percent of the vote and solidifying its position as the second-largest party. Similarly, in Brandenburg, the SPD retained their lead with 26.2 percent of the vote, while the AfD made substantial gains, securing 23.5 percent and second place. The Thuringian state election on October 27 witnessed a similar trajectory. Die Linke emerged as the largest party with 31 percent of the vote, a significant milestone in the political landscape of any German state. The AfD again witnessed a substantial increase, obtaining 23.4 percent. The election resulted in a government crisis, triggered when an FDP candidate was elected as state premier with the backing of the CDU and the AfD and thereby violating a political taboo in the country against cooperating with the far right.⁹⁸ These electoral outcomes underscore the fragmented nature of political competition within the former GDR as well as the role of the past in shaping contemporary political realities.⁹⁹ While the AfD was not the only party to refer to the East German Revolution of 1989 (see the following chapter), the discourse

⁹⁸ “Troubled Thuringia Gets Fresh Election Dates,” *Deutsche Welle*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/troubled-thuringia-gets-fresh-election-dates/a-52472029>.

⁹⁹ They also bring attention to the difficult task of forming coalition governments given the non-cooperation policy adopted by the other parties.

surrounding the movement was the central pillar of its campaigns and can be categorized into the following six overarching mnemonic claims.

ANALOGOUS CONDITIONS

*“We are exactly where we were in 1989: in a broken state where freedom of speech is suppressed.”*¹⁰⁰
– Rolf Weigand

The first overarching mnemonic thread employed by the AfD is the claim of analogous conditions, that is, the claim that the hard-won freedoms of 1989 are disappearing or already gone in the face of a totalitarian regime. The association between the (lack of) democratic conditions in the former GDR and today’s reunified FRG comprises a central tenet of the AfD’s appeal to the movement of 1989. During the Brandenburg campaign’s mid-July kick-off in Cottbus, the chairman of the AfD’s parliamentary group in Thuringia Björn Höcke told his audience about a “concerned citizen” who had recently shared his fear that he was “afraid to speak openly at the dinner table with my children at lunchtime, fearing that the little ones might inadvertently say something at school.”¹⁰¹ “It feels like it’s happening again,” the former West German said, “just like in the GDR.” “Dear friends, that’s not why we made the Peaceful Revolution.”¹⁰² In Höcke’s anecdote, the most salient features of the claim of analogous conditions are present: a purported loss of freedom of opinion and expression in contemporary Germany mirroring the authoritarian regime of the GDR.

The discursive articulation of the alleged loss of freedom gained in the revolution ranged from general lamentations to concrete comparisons with occurrences and behaviours witnessed during the East German dictatorship. Such lamentations are evident in several party publications.

¹⁰⁰ Björn Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB - Björn Höcke, Andreas Kalbitz, Christoph Berndt, Dennis Hohloch,” AfD Brandenburg, YouTube video, August 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLTnJN8z9kk>.

¹⁰¹ Höcke is a highly prominent figure within the AfD and has sparked controversy for his statements on immigration, multiculturalism, and historical revisionism, among other things. Björn Höcke, “Wahltag wird zum Zahhtag! | Björn Höcke,” AfD TV, July 14, 2019, YouTube video, 27:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25AIQxetqsw>.

¹⁰² Höcke, “Wahltag wird zum Zahhtag!”

The ninety-six-page electoral program for Thuringia states that “the liberal democracy that people fought for during the Peaceful Revolution has increasingly been transformed into a spectator democracy with the characteristics of a regime of opinion,” threatening that this process will culminate in a “GDR 2.0.”¹⁰³ Other election material, including the official website for the Brandenburg election, state that “there is neither equality of living conditions in West and East nor real freedom of opinion. Anyone who thinks ‘differently’ today is oppressed just as the Stasi once did... It is time to complete what was started in 89.”¹⁰⁴ The claim is also evident in ten stickers created for the campaign in Brandenburg, featuring quotations such as: “Is it actually still allowed to say that?” and “Dissidents are being spied on again!” followed by the text at the bottom: “High time for a Wende 2.0.”¹⁰⁵ Similar warnings can be found in the *AfD Kompakt* member magazine. In an article published for the anniversary of the construction of the Berlin Wall, the state chairman of the AfD Brandenburg Andreas Kalbitz asserts that the “freedom of expression, the freedom of the rule of law, the freedom that gives us property” are disappearing.¹⁰⁶ “What did they take to the streets for in 1989? What did they bring down the Wall for? To be told again today what they are allowed to say, think and read? To be called Nazis today just because they criticize mass immigration and its disastrous consequences? No!”¹⁰⁷

Indeed, concrete parallels are frequently drawn with the behaviour of the SED regime in its curtailment of democratic rights. At the Brandenburg campaign launch, the chairman of the AfD’s regional association in Saxony Jörg Urban reprimanded the state electoral committee’s refusal to approve the majority of AfD list candidates earlier that spring by referring to the fabrication of

¹⁰³ Alternative for Germany Thuringia, *Meine Heimat, mein Thüringen: Wahlprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Landtagswahl in Thüringen 2019* (Erfurt: AfD-Landesverband Thuringia, 2019), 7.

¹⁰⁴ Alternative for Germany Brandenburg, “Werde Bürgerrechtler!” Wende 2019, archived August 3, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190803225345/https://wende2019.de/>.

¹⁰⁵ Alternative for Germany Brandenburg, “Material.”

¹⁰⁶ “Der Geist der Freiheit bringt jede Mauer zum Einsturz,” *AfD Kompakt*, August 12, 2019, <https://afdkompakt.de/2019/08/12/der-geist-der-freiheit-bringt-jede-mauer-zum-einsturz-zum-mauerbau-am-13-8-61/>.

¹⁰⁷ “Der Geist der Freiheit bringt jede Mauer zum Einsturz.”

election results in the spring of 1989 in the GDR: “Whereas in the GDR they brazenly falsified the election results, now they are ensuring in advance that the will of the voters cannot be implemented... We are already living in a party-state.”¹⁰⁸ In a speech during a campaign event in Peitz, the leader of the AfD parliamentary group Alice Weidel described the current governing coalition as “a reincarnation of the National Front of the GDR.”¹⁰⁹ This claim also played out on social media. A Facebook post by the AfD Saxony featured an image of the GDR flag and the caption: “Conditions like in the GDR? Old parties build All-Party-Front against the AfD.”¹¹⁰ The same post quotes the general secretary of the AfD Saxony as saying that “this behaviour reminds me strongly of the GDR.”¹¹¹

The claim of analogous conditions demonstrates, moreover, the manner in which the AfD recontextualizes the historical narrative of the revolution to suit the party’s anti-immigration agenda. This recontextualization is exemplified in a speech given at a campaign rally for the AfD youth organization, the Young Alternative for Germany (JA), in which the speaker Dennis Hocloch manipulates concerns for personal safety reminiscent of the past regime into fear-inducing rhetoric, suggesting an imminent threat of physical violence posed by immigrants to “our wives and children” since the onset of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015: “And who today, thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, would have thought that we would have to fear for our wives and children when we let them out at the station and send them on the train?”¹¹² In this way, the AfD constructs a mnemonic narrative of disappearing freedoms and dictatorial parallels through both abstract

¹⁰⁸ Jörg Urban, “‘Adenauer wäre heute AfD!’ | Jörg Urban,” AfD TV, July 14, 2019, YouTube video, 17:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPML6RT18IA>.

¹⁰⁹ Alice Weidel, “A. Weidel | Die Grünen sind technisch stehen geblieben!” AfD TV, August 25, 2019, YouTube video, 43:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e1PqCRkohl>.

¹¹⁰ AfD Saxony, “Wie in der DDR,” Facebook, August 29, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/AfD.Sachsen/photos/a.322068014589056/2203468893115616/?locale=de_DE.

¹¹¹ AfD Saxony, “Wie in der DDR.”

¹¹² During an earlier speech on the same day, Höcke enumerated a series of reported incidents involving immigrants committing acts of violence, primarily instances of individuals being pushed onto train tracks. Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

warnings and specific comparisons which are, in turn, discursively connected to the party's nativist and xenophobic political agenda – despite the divergence of this agenda from the celebrated original meaning(s) of 1989.

DICTATORIAL LEGACY

*“The citizens who took to the streets against the Honecker regime in 1989 will not forget the CDU’s total capitulation to the SED disciples.”*¹¹³

– Leif-Erik Holm

The second overarching mnemonic thread is the claim of dictatorial legacy, that is, the claim that the former leaders of the SED regime and its sympathizers continue to hold the political reins in Germany today. Largely present in campaign speeches published on the AfD TV channel, various party actors present the (at times implicit, often explicit) argument that those with former affiliations with the SED regime are not only implicated in but continue to dictate the actions of the German government on the federal and state level. Höcke denounced “the former SED to today’s Left Party to the Merkel Union” as a “political elite” while Meuthen criticized the “neo-socialist agenda” of “the representatives of Die Linke, the successors of the wall shooters, the SED,” who “almost prefer to openly confess their maxims between communism and socialism.”¹¹⁴ The claim of dictatorial legacy is inextricably linked with the claim of analogous conditions: in a speech in Dresden’s Neumarkt, Urban claimed that “anyone who does not espouse leftist opinions is quickly marginalized, branded, and ostracized. We know this dehumanizing methodology from communist regimes, and it is not surprising to see that many representatives of the political left have their roots

¹¹³ “Nach erneuter Borchardt-Unterstützung ist die CDU für Konservative unwählbar!” *AfD Kompakt*, June 14, 2020, <https://afdkompakt.de/2020/06/14/nach-erneuter-borchardt-unterstuetzung-ist-die-cdu-fuer-konservative-unwaelhbar/>.

¹¹⁴ Björn Höcke, “Brillante Rede zum Tag der Deutschen Einheit in Mödlareuth von Björn Höcke, AfD 03.10.2019,” *Für Gerechtigkeit*, October 6, 2019, YouTube video, 37:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHaLVrceT-c/>.

in communist and Maoist groups.”¹¹⁵ Likewise, during a speech in the Bundestag, Meuthen remarked that, despite the revolutionary objectives of 1989, “socialists and communists sit in the German Bundestag.”¹¹⁶

The denunciation of the CDU for capitulating to and reflecting the qualities of the alleged socialists of Die Linke is a common occurrence. At the JA campaign rally in Cottbus, Hohloch referred to the federal government as a “politburo” while another politician claimed that there are CDU politicians “who think one should be open to coalitions with the former East German communist party, the SED... by voting for the CDU right now, they’re trying to put a rebranded SED into government.”¹¹⁷ At a separate event, Gauland criticized the “Eastern bloc format” of the CDU, who “indeed show qualities of the SED.”¹¹⁸ In one *AfD Kompakt* article, a politician asserts that “by confirming a person close to left-wing extremists as a constitutional judge... the CDU has betrayed the legacy of the Wende... the citizens who took to the streets against the Honecker regime in 1989 will not forget the CDU’s total capitulation to the SED disciples.”¹¹⁹ This claim also takes the form of the characterization of 1989 as a turning point since which leftist extremism has been able to flourish across the country, often with official support.¹²⁰ In this manner, the AfD constructs a mnemonic narrative asserting that supporters of the former SED regime still wield political influence, a narrative closely tied to the claim of analogous conditions. By stoking fear about politicians who purportedly hope to reinstate socialism in Germany, as well as criticizing the CDU’s

¹¹⁵ Jörg Urban, “Jörg Urban | Zeit für einen Machtwechsel in Sachsen!” AfD TV, August 27, 2019, YouTube video, 28:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIKHyKVTZU8>.

¹¹⁶ Jörg Meuthen, “Jörg Meuthen | Willen zur Freiheit nicht unterschätzen!” AfD TV, November 14, 2019, YouTube video, 3:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTFJqoYhaj4/>.

¹¹⁷ Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

¹¹⁸ Alexander Gauland, “A. Gauland | Afrika wächst in 12 Tagen um 1 Million!” AfD TV, August 19, 2019, YouTube video, 35:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5K_uVYq2OQ.

¹¹⁹ “Nach erneuter Borchardt-Unterstützung ist die CDU für Konservative unwählbar!”

¹²⁰ See, for example, “Die Gewalt während des Hamburger G20-Gipfels hat viele Väter – und eine Vorgeschichte!” *AfD Kompakt*, July 10, 2017, <https://afdkompakt.de/2017/07/10/die-gewalt-waehrend-des-hamburger-g20-gipfels-hat-viele-vaeter-und-eine-vorgeschichte/>.

perceived submission to such figures, the AfD suggests that voting for them is the one (and the revolutionary) alternative to avert an imminent socialist dictatorship.

DEMOCRATIC INHERITANCE

“The resisters of that time are the resisters of today, and that is the uncomfortable truth you do not want to hear.”¹²¹

– Tino Chrupalla

The third overarching mnemonic thread is the claim to the inheritance of the tradition of democratic resistance, that is, the claim that the AfD is the sole heir to the nonviolent and democratic legacy of the revolution. The AfD consistently presents itself as a defender of democracy and uses the revolution to do so, asserting that the demands of the revolution are reflected in the party’s self-image and political program (encompassed in Rolf Weigand’s declaration in front of an enthusiastic crowd that “we are, together, completing the Wende”).¹²² During the campaigns, various AfD politicians declared that their party is following in the footsteps of the revolutionaries of thirty years ago, a claim to inheritance evidenced in the repeated use of the subject “we” and particularly manifest during the JA rally in Cottbus. At the event, Munich-born Kalbitz claimed that “we did not enter this process in 1989 and people did not take to the streets to be delivered what we now have to endure here,” while Hans-Christoph Berndt, one of the Brandenburg electoral candidates, concluded his speech by declaring that “by holding onto the people as sovereign, we stand here continuing the tradition of the autumn of 1989. We are the people, and we want to remain the people.”¹²³ Weigand emphasized that “history repeats itself...today is the day we all step into those footsteps from the past and reclaim our country and our freedom that was once won for our

¹²¹ Tino Chrupalla, “Bundestag zu ‘30 Jahre Friedliche Revolution’, Rede Tino Chrupalla am 06.06.19,” phoenix, June 6, 2019, YouTube video, 4:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pOUyUYnpIA&t=3s>.

¹²² Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

¹²³ Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

generation in 1989.”¹²⁴ Even in the Bundestag, Tino Chrupalla asserted that “the resisters of that time are the resisters of today... they are actually the same people.”¹²⁵ The Brandenburg official campaign website, moreover, urged the viewer to “become a civil rights activist,” the term used to describe the revolutionaries of 1989.¹²⁶

Of central importance in this claim is the weight attributed to the values of freedom and democracy. In the *AfD Kompakt*, one article commemorating thirty years of reunification states that “the democratic values promised in 1989 are falling into the pincer grip of political correctness and political Islam... These freedoms must continue to exist – that is what we are fighting for together in East and West!”¹²⁷ Another article for the anniversary claims that such freedom “is an incentive for our AfD to consolidate the liberal values of the Peaceful Revolution again and to fight for the recovery of a healthy national consciousness!”¹²⁸ Likewise, Höcke is quoted in the magazine as stating that “in the fight against the red terror, which is again evident today in a brutal series of attacks, the AfD is the only party that stands in the tradition of the courageous people who took to the streets in 1989.”¹²⁹ During the JA rally, he framed the AfD as a bearer of democracy in the tradition of 1989: “anyone who is for the rule of law, for democracy, for freedom of opinion, for freedom of assembly today is already considered a demagogue again – that’s how times repeat themselves.”¹³⁰ Similarly quoted in the *AfD Kompakt* is the assertion by Kalbitz that “it was the spirit

¹²⁴ Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

¹²⁵ Chrupalla, “Bundestag zu ‘30 Jahre Friedliche Revolution’.”

¹²⁶ Alternative for Germany Brandenburg, “Werde Bürgerrechtler!” Wende 2019, archived August 3, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190803225345/https://wende2019.de/>.

¹²⁷ “Mauerbau: ‘Verdrehung der Geschichte’ ist ein Problem der SPD, nicht der AfD,” *AfD Kompakt*, August 14, 2019, <https://afdKompakt.de/2019/08/14/mauerbau-verdrehung-der-geschichte-ist-ein-problem-der-spd-nicht-der-afd/>; “30 Jahre Einheit: Ein starker Osten für unser Vaterland!” *AfD Kompakt*, September 28, 2020, <https://afdKompakt.de/2020/09/28/30-jahre-einheit-ein-starker-osten-fuer-unser-vaterland/>.

¹²⁸ “30 Jahre Einheit: Die Wiedervereinigung ist eine Erfolgsgeschichte!” *AfD Kompakt*, October 3, 2020, <https://afdKompakt.de/2020/10/03/30-jahre-einheit-die-wiedervereinigung-ist-eine-erfolgsgeschichte/>.

¹²⁹ “Bau der Berliner Mauer – AfD steht in unmittelbarer Tradition der Menschen, die 1989 gegen Sozialismus und deutsche Teilung auf die Straße gegangen sind!” *AfD Kompakt*, August 13, 2021, <https://afdKompakt.de/2021/08/13/bau-der-berliner-mauer-afd-steht-in-unmittelbarer-tradition-der-menschen-die-1989-gegen-sozialismus-und-deutsche-teilung-auf-die-strasse-gegangen-sind/>.

¹³⁰ Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

of freedom that brought down the wall of the SED regime 30 years ago. Today, we are fighting again for more freedom: more freedom of expression, the freedom of the rule of law, the freedom that gives us property...The spirit of freedom cannot be permanently suppressed. Sooner or later, it will bring down every wall...Our AfD is a free citizens' movement that stands in the tradition of November 9, 1989."¹³¹ The latter statement is reminiscent of the preamble of the party's program, which states that "in the tradition of the two revolutions of 1848 and 1989, we are articulating through our civic protest the will to complete national unity in freedom."¹³² Through such claims of inheritance, the AfD positions itself as the one and only defender of the democratic values which constitute the legacy of the revolution (a claim that would not go undisputed).

NATIONAL UNITY

*"The AfD's self-image includes the German nation-state more than that of any other party in Germany."*¹³³
 – Albrecht Glaser

The fourth overarching mnemonic thread is the claim of national unity, that is, the claim that the AfD offers the sole path to true (ethno-)national unity. As mentioned above, the preamble of the party's program underscores "the will to complete national unity in freedom" and, throughout the campaigns, the discourse of national unification was strategically employed to critique the government's performance since the Wende while simultaneously positioning the AfD as the sole advocate for genuine East-West unity.¹³⁴ First, the AfD denounces the established parties as responsible for the shortcomings of reunification. This sentiment is echoed in a speech by Denny Jankowski in his discussion of the disparity of wages and pensions across Germany: "it's particularly ironic that the SPD and the CDU have significantly influenced the course of the last thirty years at

¹³¹ "Der Geist der Freiheit bringt jede Mauer zum Einsturz."

¹³² Alternative for Germany, *Programm für Deutschland: Das Grundsatzprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland* (Berlin: Alternative for Germany, 2016), 6.

¹³³ "Mauerbau: 'Verdrehung der Geschichte' ist ein Problem der SPD, nicht der AfD."

¹³⁴ AfD, *Programm für Deutschland*, 6.

the federal and state levels. They bear this responsibility, and as such, one can rightly consider the election programs of the CDU and the SPD as a manifestation of their own failed policies,” he said, asserting that they have done “nothing” to “close the gap between East and West.”¹³⁵

The claim of national unity also takes the form of asserting that those same parties did not even desire unification in 1990, seen in Glaser’s comment published in the *AfD Kompakt* that the SPD wanted to remove the goal of unification from the constitution a few weeks before the opening of the Berlin Wall and only refrained from doing so “out of fear and sheer opportunism... The historical truth is that the people forced the reunification against the political elites.”¹³⁶ In the same vein, Höcke claimed in a speech for the Day of German Unity that “the Chancellor of Unity wanted to stabilize the dilapidated state of the GDR for many years and cement the division... unity was fought for by our compatriots in the former GDR... the betrayal of Die Linke to their citizens in the East began shortly after the fall of the Wall.”¹³⁷ This assertion suggests that the AfD stands alone in its genuine concern for the plight faced by former East Germans. The revolution is also linked to the AfD’s anti-EU agenda: Meuthen emphasized that the revolutionaries of 1989 demanded not a “United EU, Fatherland,” but a “United Germany, Fatherland. They fought... for Germany’s national sovereignty.”¹³⁸ Moreover, in his speech in Cottbus, Kalbitz highlighted not only economic disparities but also the importance of homeland as a German homeland (“the homeland of the German people, and no other population”) demonstrating a deeply nativist vision of national unity.¹³⁹ The notion that the AfD uniquely prioritizes the challenges faced by eastern Germans is intertwined with the subsequent mnemonic claim: the value of East German identity.

¹³⁵ Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

¹³⁶ AfD Presse, “Albrecht Glaser: Bundespräsident mischt sich in die Landtagswahlkämpfe in den östlichen Bundesländern ein,” press release, August 14, 2019, <https://www.afd.de/albrecht-glaser-bundespraesident-mischt-sich-in-die-landtagswahlkaempfe-in-den-oestlichen-bundeslaendern-ein/>.

¹³⁷ Höcke, “Brillante Rede zum Tag der Deutschen Einheit.”

¹³⁸ Meuthen, “Jörg Meuthen | Willen zur Freiheit nicht unterschätzen!”

¹³⁹ Kalbitz has since been removed from the party for concealing ties to far-right extremist groups. Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

EAST GERMAN IDENTITY

*“The people in the East have the experience of unfreedom, the experience of manipulation, and it’s still much fresher in their memory than in the West.”*¹⁴⁰

– Jörg Meuthen

The fifth overarching mnemonic thread is the claim of the value of East German identity, that is, a direct, identity-construing appeal to the eastern German people as a whole and/or the revolutionaries of 1989. One of the most salient features of this discourse is the AfD’s discursive construction of a courageous, critical, and independent-minded eastern German – construed as the true German – and discernable in a plethora of on- and offline spaces. At the campaign launch in Cottbus, Meuthen described the former GDR as a place “where people still have clear, independent thinking and don’t let themselves be driven by ideology because they know it all... state-sponsored thinking, it doesn’t work here.”¹⁴¹ Or even more explicitly: “These dirty tricks won’t get through, as the Saxons, like the Brandenburgers, are wide awake, and these people can’t be fooled,” implying that other parties are liable for such state-sponsored thinking and dirty tricks.¹⁴² In an interview the following month, Meuthen claimed that “the East is the pioneer” and, in a speech that autumn, he lauded former East Germans for “an unmistakable sense of the threat to freedom. They react allergically, so to speak, to any attempt from above – be it from politics or the media – to curtail their freedom.”¹⁴³

Numerous leading AfD politicians contributed to this identity-construing appeal. “As Saxons,” Urban said in a speech in Dresden, “we have a historically acquired instinct for foreign

¹⁴⁰ Jörg Meuthen, “Der Osten ist vorne!” | Jörg Meuthen,” AfD TV, August 31, 2019, YouTube video, 4:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nENzjFa_rNA; Jörg Meuthen, “Ansprache unseres Bundessprechers Prof. Dr. Jörg Meuthen zum heutigen Tag der Deutschen Einheit,” Alternative for Germany, October 3, 2019, Facebook video, 3:48, https://www.facebook.com/alternativefuerde/videos/432974884003844?locale=de_DE.

¹⁴¹ Jörg Meuthen, “Der Osten wählt blau!” | Jörg Meuthen,” AfD TV, July 14, 2019, YouTube video, 24:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ukUTBOFkxk>.

¹⁴² Meuthen, “Der Osten wählt blau!”

¹⁴³ Meuthen, “Der Osten ist vorne!”; Meuthen, “Ansprache unseres Bundessprechers Prof. Dr. Jörg Meuthen zum heutigen Tag der Deutschen Einheit.”

control, for dictating opinions, and for unfreedom.”¹⁴⁴ Gauland condemned former West Germans for occupying “almost all leading positions in your federal state, making you second-class citizens” and enforcing “German guilt,” “feminism,” and “multiculturalism.”¹⁴⁵ Later, he emphasized that “your origin is the advantage of insight: you know how a dictatorship feels.”¹⁴⁶ “Dear friends,” he continued, “you fought for the right to be free in 1989, which also includes the right to be German.”¹⁴⁷ Weidel likewise characterized eastern Germans as highly critical due to their historical experience of the GDR: “...here in Brandenburg, this should all sound very familiar to you. You still remember what it feels like when public discourse is controlled by the state. You still remember what it sounds like when you’re served state propaganda on TV every evening... you’ve had enough of being stamped as second-class Germans, as people who supposedly need to learn democracy.”¹⁴⁸ The established parties, she continues, “don’t care about the citizens, you, at all. You’re not indifferent to us; the AfD doesn’t mistrust the citizen. We recognize and appreciate your achievements, dear friends. You matter to us; we’re here for you, not for the whole world, not for Africa, not for the global climate, not for the European Union. For us, you are number one.”¹⁴⁹ This unsettling portrayal of the AfD as the sole advocate of the citizens in the East constitutes a response to unfavourable media narratives and implies that the AfD is uniquely perceptive in recognizing the inherent positivity among individuals who experienced – and resisted – the SED dictatorship.

¹⁴⁴ Urban, “Jörg Urban | Zeit für einen Machtwechsel in Sachsen!”

¹⁴⁵ There are multiple disparaging statements made toward western Germans in the effort to elevate eastern Germans. Meuthen speaks of a “politically sleepy West” (“Der Osten wählt blau!”) while Roland Hartwig says that those in the West are more easily “influenced by the media” (“Rechts ist die neue Mitte!,” AfD TV, August 26, 2019, YouTube video, 4:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=td2v9sMdA0k>). Höcke sarcastically refers to the East as “just an extended workshop of the West” (“Wahltag wird zum Zahltag!”); Gauland, “A. Gauland | Afrika wächst in 12 Tagen um 1 Million!”

¹⁴⁶ Gauland, “A. Gauland | Afrika wächst in 12 Tagen um 1 Million!”

¹⁴⁷ Gauland, “A. Gauland | Afrika wächst in 12 Tagen um 1 Million!”

¹⁴⁸ Weidel, “A. Weidel | Die Grünen sind technisch stehen geblieben!”

¹⁴⁹ Weidel, “A. Weidel | Die Grünen sind technisch stehen geblieben!”

The claim of the value of East German identity also involves politicians directly appealing to the original revolutionaries of 1989, on one hand, or attempting to claim a personal connection to the historical events, on the other. Höcke offered his “greetings to the former freedom fighters and to those who are still fighting for freedom today” in his speech on the Day of German Unity before the Thuringian election and praised “the fighting spirit” of those who “took to the streets for unity, justice, and freedom.”¹⁵⁰ “Before those heroes of unity,” he said, “we bow in humility.”¹⁵¹ Another aspect is the involvement of individuals with historical ties to the events of 1989 who are now affiliated with the AfD, positioning them as authoritative voices on the matter to suggest an authentic association between the revolution and the party. One Facebook post, for example, introduces a candidate for one of the constituencies in Thuringia and quotes her reflections on the GDR and the upheaval of 1989, which “showed me that resistance to this supposedly unshakeable, repressive system can work.”¹⁵² Even politicians who have no personal connection to the GDR and the revolution attempt similar claims: Meuthen reminisces that “even though I am a child of the West and have no relatives in the East of the country, I have very precise and extremely intense memories of that time... I, myself, was almost 30 years old then, and could barely contain my joy and inner excitement when the Wall actually fell.”¹⁵³ In sum, a direct, identity-construing appeal to the eastern German people including the revolutionaries is made, discursively creating a perceptive, skeptical, and courageous East German archetype. Closely connected is the purported need to reclaim long-withheld agency, to which we now turn with the final claim.

¹⁵⁰ Höcke, “Brillante Rede zum Tag der Deutschen Einheit.”

¹⁵¹ Höcke, “Brillante Rede zum Tag der Deutschen Einheit.”

¹⁵² AfD Thuringia, “Nadine Hoffmann: Ihre Kandidatin für den Wahlkreis 18 - Hildburghausen I / Schmalkalden-Meiningen III,” Facebook, September 20, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/AfD.Thueringen/photos/a.179598345526006/1382174641935031/?locale=de_DE.

¹⁵³ Jörg Meuthen, “Jörg Meuthen | Freiheit, das ist mein Lebensthema!” AfD TV, October 6, 2019, YouTube video, 21:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRncURTmFdM>.

A NEW REVOLUTION

*“A Wende is possible, and friends, this Wende can start with the upcoming state elections.”*¹⁵⁴

– Hans-Christoph Berndt

The previous five mnemonic claims culminate in the sixth and final assertion: the claim of the necessity of a new revolution, that is, a call to action in the form of (re)completing the revolution. In this way, a program of radical transformation comes to the fore. The necessity is spelled out in several statements that the revolution or an analogous movement must be enacted, seen in the calls to repeat the revolution (e.g., Urban’s assertion that the electoral support for the AfD in Saxony is a “Wende 2.0, and we as the AfD are working hard to drive it forward for the good of the people”) as well as posters claiming that “The East rises up!” and “Write history!” which deliberately frame the election as a “historic turning point.”¹⁵⁵ In a speech in Königs Wusterhausen a few days before the elections in Brandenburg and Saxony, Höcke argued that there is a “need” for a “Wende 2.0” and that the AfD has “a fundamental mandate for the renewal of our unfortunately dilapidated state system.”¹⁵⁶ The AfD is therefore characterized as the protagonist completing the work of the original revolution: in a later speech, Höcke decried the “spiritual and moral turnaround” which was “never delivered.”¹⁵⁷ Millions were “lied to... by this unfulfilled promise of a Wende... this joint new beginning that was possible in 1990 for us Germans, for our people, was deliberately prevented and undermined at the time.”¹⁵⁸ Voting for the AfD, then, is understood to constitute revolutionary behaviour, illustrated in a Facebook post by the AfD Brandenburg counting

¹⁵⁴ Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

¹⁵⁵ “30 Jahre Mauerfall: Wir kämpfen weiter für Meinungsfreiheit und Demokratie,” *AfD Kompakt*, November 8, 2019, <https://afdkompakt.de/2019/11/08/30-jahre-mauerfall-wir-kaempfen-weiter-fuer-meinungsfreiheit-und-demokratie/>; Höcke, “Brillante Rede zum Tag der Deutschen Einheit.”

¹⁵⁶ Björn Höcke, “Wir kämpfen für unsere Kinder! | Björn Höcke,” AfD TV, August 30, 2019, YouTube video, 42:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSpzMTN8XFQ>.

¹⁵⁷ Höcke, “Brillante Rede zum Tag der Deutschen Einheit.”

¹⁵⁸ Höcke, “Brillante Rede zum Tag der Deutschen Einheit.”

down the days until the election: “2 days to go until the Wende.”¹⁵⁹ The call to action in the form of (re)completing the revolution places great emphasis on the potential for change in the East: “it is possible to end destructive policies with a peaceful revolution even in Germany,” said Berndt in Cottbus.¹⁶⁰ “And we must end them, friends... A Wende is possible, and friends, this Wende can start with the upcoming state elections.”¹⁶¹ In this way, the revolution is interpreted as a grassroots popular transformation rather than a top-down, elite-driven political reunification, the latter having traditionally constituted the theme of official commemorative practices.

The claim is connected to the construction of East German identity discussed above, which implies that eastern Germans must reclaim their stolen agency after being treated as second-class citizens for so many decades by acting on their revolutionary potential (seen in slogans such as “Take your land back!” or “12. October - Erfurt Anger!” among others). Indeed, this claim embodies an affective element which attempts to revive a seemingly lost revolutionary romanticism in the East. By calling for a renewed revolution, the AfD not only capitalizes on the post-reunification resentment felt by many eastern Germans but, as an alternative, recalls the heightened emotional period of those active, fateful revolutionary days. Cottbus is exalted as “the capital of courageous citizens” and “the city of resistance,” while Dresden is also celebrated as “the capital of resistance.”¹⁶² “People still have good memories of the Peaceful Revolution,” Höcke said in an interview.¹⁶³ In this way, the AfD suggests that eastern Germans would be just as fearless now as they were then if they took control of their post-reunification destiny and supported the AfD.

¹⁵⁹ AfD Brandenburg, “Vollende die Wende,” Facebook, August 30, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/afd.brandenburg/videos/1406385156188446?locale=de_DE.

¹⁶⁰ Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

¹⁶¹ Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

¹⁶² The characterization of Dresden as “the capital of resistance” draws not only on the city’s active role in the revolution but also its longstanding protest culture, having historically served as a site of counter-memory to the official memory culture associated with World War II. See Deodhar, “Inside Contested Cultural Memory,” 46–69. Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

¹⁶³ Björn Höcke, “Wir wollen keine neue DDR!” | Björn Höcke,” AfD TV, August 31, 2019, YouTube video, 4:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGB5LtFT4c8>.

Höcke frames the party's success in the East as a starting point for something bigger: "Let the political sun rise again in the East with a peaceful revolution at the ballot box – first on September 1 in Brandenburg, then in Saxony, and on October 27 in Thuringia. Let it then shine over the whole of Germany."¹⁶⁴

The Fluidity of the Past

The claim of the necessity of a new revolution, however, is frequently employed devoid of historical context. The reference to the revolution is used to draw parallels with the AfD's current political agenda, irrespective of its alignment with the original demands of the revolution. Nowhere is this clearer than in an online campaign launched in September on the Facebook page of the AfD Thuringia leading up to the election at the end of October. The campaign took the form of several Facebook posts with variants of the statement "we wanted freedom... and got *x* instead." For example, a post from mid-September showcases a washroom sign featuring traditional male and female symbols alongside a mermaid, accompanied by the text: "We wanted freedom ... and got gender-gaga."¹⁶⁵ The caption claims that "No #89 demonstrator would have expected that a dogmatic social doctrine hatched at the universities would once again take its toll... We didn't take to the streets in '89 so that socio-political pseudo-sciences could be up to mischief again today."¹⁶⁶ The same pattern is repeated regarding so-called eco-dictatorship ("We didn't take to the streets against red socialism in #89 only to get green socialism 30 years later")¹⁶⁷ and Islam ("We want Germany to still be a free country and home to Germans in 100, 200 and 500 years' time. That's

¹⁶⁴ Höcke, "Wahlag wird zum Zahlag!"; Urban, "Jörg Urban | Zeit für einen Machtwechsel in Sachsen!"

¹⁶⁵ AfD Thuringia, "Wir wollten die Freiheit..." Facebook, September 15, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/AfD.Thueringen/photos/a.179598345526006/1394066394079189/?locale=de_DE.

¹⁶⁶ AfD Thuringia, "Wir wollten die Freiheit..." (post from September 15, 2019).

¹⁶⁷ AfD Thuringia, "Wir wollten die Freiheit..." Facebook, September 22, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/AfD.Thueringen/photos/a.179598345526006/1400741530078342/?locale=de_DE.

what we fought for in #89. Islam does not belong to Germany”).¹⁶⁸ In this way, the claim of the need for a new revolution is recontextualized in the framework of the AfD’s far-right agenda promoting Islamophobia, climate change skepticism, and patriarchal norms. The Facebook campaign of the AfD Thuringia offers a clear illustration of how the AfD uses a discourse on the past to engage with an electorate whose concerns lie in the present.

The ahistorical nature of this claim reflects a broader recurring pattern observed throughout the memory-political discourse in question: the fluid and contradictory nature of the AfD’s usage of the revolution, the discussion of which constitutes the remainder of this chapter. Many of the speeches, for example, primarily echo the core anti-immigration agenda of the AfD, rather than engaging in any comparative historical argumentation. The fluidity of the discourse becomes particularly apparent when observing the AfD’s tendency to employ disparate historical analogies to advance similar arguments. References to the Prussian past, the Revolutions of 1848, the Karlsbad Decrees of 1819, and the Enlightenment are all employed in various contexts to convey analogous assertions. Höcke, for instance, refers to the Karlsbad Decrees of 1819 to insinuate that “anyone advocating for the rule of law, democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly is once again seen as a demagogue” – an assertion echoed almost verbatim in his speech the following month when discussing the events of 1989 (mentioned above).¹⁶⁹ These various historical references point to the tendency of the AfD to tailor diverse references to local contexts while commenting on similar national themes (see the next chapter).

The revolution and the East German past more broadly are also invoked in a positive sense as a tool for critiquing the current system, serving a contradictory form of nostalgic nationalism. Weigand, for example, expresses a desire to “create strong schools again, restore our old strength”

¹⁶⁸ AfD Thuringia, “Wir wollten die Freiheit...” Facebook, October 6, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/AfD.Thueringen/photos/a.179598345526006/1410499022435926/?locale=de_DE.

¹⁶⁹ Höcke, “Wahltag wird zum Zahhtag!”

while Gauland acknowledges the ideological rigidity of the GDR's educational system but praises its effectiveness, asserting that graduates were equipped with essential skills in literacy, numeracy, sciences, ethics, and literature.¹⁷⁰ He pledges to reintroduce such standards "if we govern" despite his own departure from the GDR due to restrictions on his education.¹⁷¹ Weigand likewise laments the erosion of the traditional family model: "in 1989, families were handed down to us that still held value."¹⁷² In this way, a certain nostalgia for the GDR emerges within a rhetoric praising the moment of its destruction, a juxtaposition which sheds light on the contradictory presence of nostalgia and counter-nostalgia in the AfD's mnemonic discourse (also observable in that of Die Linke).¹⁷³ Moreover, as will be discussed later, it is frequently the same individuals who consistently integrate references to 1989 into their rhetoric, suggesting that only certain actors conceptualize the revolution as central to the party's character – not to mention the lack of biographical connection of the majority of these actors to the events in question. These observations point to the fluidities and contradictions inherent in far-right populist discourses as well as the capacity of the past to serve varied, selective, and at times paradoxical aims in the present.

In sum, this chapter has suggested that while a multiplicity of voices promoting various messages concerning the memory of 1989 persisted in the three eastern elections, particular discursive threads became more pronounced, materializing in speeches, election materials, online platforms, and other media. The AfD employed the memory of the revolution on- and offline by means of six overarching discursive claims. Certain claims served as a comment on the apparent deterioration of conditions in contemporary Germany (the claim of analogous condition and the

¹⁷⁰ Höcke et al., "Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB,," Gauland, "A. Gauland | Afrika wächst in 12 Tagen um 1 Million!"

¹⁷¹ Gauland, "A. Gauland | Afrika wächst in 12 Tagen um 1 Million!"; Nadine Lindner, "Die AfD vor den Wahlen - Zwischen Umfragehoch und internem Machtkampf," *Deutschlandfunk*, August 26, 2019, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/die-afd-vor-den-wahlen-zwischen-umfragehoch-und-internem-100.html>.

¹⁷² Höcke et al., "Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB,," Gauland, "A. Gauland | Afrika wächst in 12 Tagen um 1 Million!"

¹⁷³ See, for example, Die Linke, *Programm der Partei DIE LINKE*, 12-13.

claim of dictatorial legacy); others a comment on the connection between the purported nature of the party, the people to whom it speaks, and the past (the claim to the inheritance of the tradition of democratic resistance and the claim of the value of East German identity); and still others a comment on what the AfD is capable of in the future (the claim of national unity and the claim of the necessity of a new revolution). The party's fluid and ahistorical use of the past, however, displays the tendency of far-right populist actors to manipulate history in a selective and contradictory manner for their own, often unrelated, ends.

III. ALTERNATIVE MEMORY: THE MULTIFUNCTIONALITY OF 1989

The third chapter delves into the strategic deployment of memory within the AfD's discourse on the East German Revolution of 1989. It argues that, despite the undoubtedly contradictory nature of the party's mnemonic usage of the revolution, memory is deployed to a) serve a mobilizing narrative of feasible resistance against the existing system in light of disenchantment; b) operate as a method of legitimization by positioning the AfD as a proponent of rightful resistance and democratic freedom; and c) function as a tool of identity construction by playing on memories of resistance, transformation, and crisis in order to construct, in the quintessential populist manner, "the people" and "the Other" – all in the spirit of 1989. The usage of the revolution also enables the AfD to pursue its broader objective of challenging Germany's guilt-centered culture of remembrance through an emphasis on the East, which underscores the regionality of the party's message. This chapter builds upon scholarship on far-right populist uses of memory that distinguishes between strategic (instrumental, critical) and non-strategic (consumerist) uses of memory in discourse and performance.¹⁷⁴ It refutes scholarly interpretations that dismiss such uses of memory as mere folklore, reflecting a lack of critical thought, or solely as a strategy for legitimization and instead highlights the multifunctional nature of the AfD's usage of memory.¹⁷⁵ For the AfD, memory's superficiality does not preclude its strategic utility.

The question remains, however: how is it possible for the memory of the revolution to be "hijacked," so to speak, in the first place? The party's ability to reinterpret the revolution may stem, this chapter suggests, from the country's incorporation – or lack thereof – of 1989 into its national

¹⁷⁴ Sabine Volk, "Contested Memories of the East German Peaceful Revolution: Appeals to 1989 by the Populist PEGIDA Movement," in *Contested Legacies of 1989: Geopolitics, Memories and Societies in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Nicolas Maslowski and Kinga Torbicka (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2022), 117-134.

¹⁷⁵ Volker Weiß, *Die autoritäre Revolte: Die Neue Rechte und der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2017), 153; Lars Geiges, Stine Marg, and Franz Walter, *Pegida: Die schmutzige Seite der Zivilgesellschaft?* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 117; Richardson-Little and Merrill, "Who is the Volk?" 65.

narrative. At the same time, the reference to the revolution lends itself to diverse interpretations depending on the claim made by the mnemonic actor involved, rendering it especially suitable for populist, anti-elitist political narratives. While far-right memory politics is most often tied to a backward-looking nostalgia, the chapter continues, the multi-directionality of memory comes to the fore in the counter-image of a glorified ethno-national future. The revolution thus serves the function of a master narrative that frames the party's (manifold) understanding(s) of the past, present, and future.

BEYOND THE AfD: A BRIEF NOTE

It is worth noting that the AfD was not the sole party to invoke the memory of the revolution in the course of the federal state election campaigns. Given that the election year coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of the revolution, this does not come as a surprise. The regional associations of the CDU, the SPD, and Die Linke all incorporated references to the revolution within their electoral programs, particularly those in Saxony. The CDU programs in Saxony and Thuringia both mention the revolution, with the former praising its origin in Saxony and the latter adopting the slogan *#Aufbruch2019* (a seemingly less explicit reference than the AfD's *#Wende2019*).¹⁷⁶ Notably, the CDU Thuringia program rebukes the AfD for exploiting the revolution's legacy.¹⁷⁷ The Saxony SPD condemns the escalation of "racist violence" and "fear-driven hatred" within the federal state, contrasting it with the region's historical role in advocating for freedom, peace, self-determination, and tolerance during the Peaceful Revolution.¹⁷⁸ Most party programs express pride in the achievements of the past three decades since reunification while

¹⁷⁶ CDU Saxony, *Von Sachsen. Für Sachsen. Regierungsprogramm 2019-2024* (Dresden: CDU-Landesverband Sachsen, 2019), 3; CDU Thuringia, *Thüringen: Heimat mit Zukunft #Aufbruch 2019: Regierungsprogramm der CDU Thüringen zur Landtagswahl am 27. Oktober 2019* (Erfurt: CDU-Landesverband Thüringen, 2019), 1.

¹⁷⁷ CDU Thuringia, *Thüringen: Heimat mit Zukunft #Aufbruch 2019*, 3.

¹⁷⁸ SPD Saxony, *Es ist dein Land. Regierungsprogramm der SPD Sachsen von 2019 bis 2024* (Dresden: SPD-Landesverband Sachsen), 25.

committing to address its shortcomings. Die Linke, for its part, echoes some of the discursive turns of the AfD in its assertion that the Saxons who experienced 1989 understand the significance of its peaceful nature and that “30 years after the historical upheaval in Europe, peace is once again under threat.”¹⁷⁹ They repeatedly advocate for rectifying post-reunification deficiencies and fulfilling the aspirations associated with reunification. While these parties did incorporate said references within their regional platforms, the revolution did not form the central pillar of their campaign strategies. None utilized its legacy as extensively or strategically for mobilization, legitimization, or identity formation as the AfD. Moreover, their references fall short of delivering the divisive commentary on historical events, contemporary circumstances, and future transformations present in the pronouncements of the AfD.

DISENCHANTMENT AND MOBILIZATION

First, the AfD deploys the revolution as a semiotic tool to serve a mobilizing narrative of feasible resistance against the existing, inadequate system. The discourse of 1989 embodied in the six claims outlined above builds upon genuine disenchantment and dashed hopes in the wake of political and economic unification among the eastern population. As discussed in the introduction, the crisis of unification saw mass unemployment and the loss of secure prospects, the import of the West German institutional order, the change of elites, and the ambiguous processes of economic privatization. As James Mark has argued, the velvet exit from communism across the region was followed by a growing conviction that the transformation remained incomplete.¹⁸⁰ From the perspective of the right, the post-communists still must be thoroughly defeated, an agenda that mandates confrontational politics (seen most clearly in the claims of analogous conditions and

¹⁷⁹ Die Linke, *Fortschritt & Zusammenhalt: Unser Programm für das solidarische Sachsen* (Dresden: DIE LINKE-Landesverband Sachsen, 2019), 64.

¹⁸⁰ James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

dictatorial legacy). The AfD exploits an existing sense of disenchantment to fuel a mobilizing narrative designed to inspire eastern Germans to take matters into their own hands and complete the revolution, seen in Höcke's declaration that "it is high time for the people to become the subject again" or Weidel's assertion that "for the first time since 1989, you have the opportunity to shape the future."¹⁸¹ The party thus taps into former East Germans' feelings of being treated unfairly and left behind in Germany after unification. The mobilizing narrative builds on both memories and post-memories of a failed turning point, intended to rally those who were dissatisfied with the results of the transformation process. The narrative suggests that revolution is indeed feasible: if the citizens of the East rose up once before, they can do it again. As seen elsewhere, the AfD presents itself not only as a victim of contemporary totalitarian forces but also as capable of heroically emulating those who have challenged and overcome such forces in the past.¹⁸² It positions itself within the lineage of those who resisted totalitarianism, denouncing its political adversaries for embodying the legacy of the SED dictatorship and implying that not only can the party be a model for emulation, but also that the individuals who resisted in 1989 and were robbed of what could have been possess the capacity to resist once more.

LEGITIMACY THROUGH HISTORY

Second, the revolution functions as a method of legitimization by positioning the AfD as a proponent of rightful resistance and democratic freedom. Theo Van Leeuwen distinguishes four categories of legitimization, one being mythopoesis, which is conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions; in other words, legitimization

¹⁸¹ Höcke, "Brillante Rede zum Tag der Deutschen Einheit,"; Weidel, "A. Weidel | Die Grünen sind technisch stehen geblieben!"

¹⁸² See Richardson-Little, Merrill, and Arlaud, "Far-Right Anniversary Politics and Social Media," 1368.

realized through the storytelling of value-loaded moral or cautionary narratives.¹⁸³ The AfD employs the historical narrative of 1989, which embodies the desire for freedom, nonviolence, democracy, and the end of oppressive rule, as a legitimizing symbol. The political establishment is denounced for neglecting perceived concerns about democracy, freedom, and the well-being of the eastern German population, which, in turn, constructs an image of the AfD as a much-needed alternative to the established centrist, elitist parties and as the ultimate and sole proponent of democratic freedom and legitimate resistance.

The emphasis on the Peaceful Revolution (the term refers to the absence of large-scale public, police, or military violence in the context of the mass protests) and the claim of requiring a revolutionary, systemic transformation is veiled beneath the guise of nonviolence: “we are the ones who respect the rule of law here, and we fight for our political goals solely through peaceful means,” says Meuthen.¹⁸⁴ Likewise, “at every opportunity,” says Kalbitz, “we peacefully, democratically, and non-violently show the establishment the blue card and shed light on their political missteps.”¹⁸⁵ As with PEGIDA, therefore, references to the memory of revolution sustain a discursive frame of peacefulness and nonviolence, not only pursuing nonviolent forms of action, but even propagating nonviolent resistance as an ideal.¹⁸⁶ The reference to the historic call for democratization serves a similar legitimizing function, framing the AfD as the authentic voice of the people. The party’s understanding of democracy, however, is founded upon the idea of the people or Volk rather than liberal pluralism.¹⁸⁷ The seemingly legitimizing demand for democratization is linked to the idea of

¹⁸³ Theo Van Leeuwen, “Legitimation in Discourse and Communication,” *Discourse & Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 105–106.

¹⁸⁴ Meuthen, “Der Osten wählt blau!”

¹⁸⁵ Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

¹⁸⁶ Sabine Volk, “Resisting Leftist Dictatorship? Memory Politics and Collective Action Framing in the Far-Right Populist PEGIDA Movement,” *European Politics and Society* (2022): 1–17.

¹⁸⁷ Volk and Weisskircher, “Far-Right PEGIDA,” 322–333.

one homogeneous people whose voice the party imagines itself to be – which brings us to the question of identity.

IDENTITY AND MEMORY: THE PEOPLE AND THE PAST

Third and above all, the reference to 1989 functions as a tool of identity construction by playing on memories of resistance, transformation, and crisis in order to construct, in the quintessential populist manner, “the people” and “the Other.” Since the memory of the past shapes conceptions of current collective identity, right-wing populist parties usually see their engagement in the politics of the past as an integral part of their overall identity politics.¹⁸⁸ As in the case of PEGIDA, society is divided into an in-group, that is, the self-declared “democratic” populist far-right scene, in opposition to several “non-democratic” out-groups, including the “leftist-totalitarian” establishment, the “green-fascist” counter-demonstrators, and “extremist” Islam.¹⁸⁹ As seen in the previous chapter, the claim of the value of East German identity creates an image of a courageous, critical, independent-minded eastern German, construed as the true German.¹⁹⁰ In this discourse, the party builds upon lived experience of the GDR, the revolution, and the unification process as identity-forming events, elevating the East as a pioneering democratic force in the tradition of 1989 and thus constructing an image of “the people.”¹⁹¹ In so doing, the AfD offers an alternative to the historically derogatory media portrayal of former East Germans.¹⁹² At the same time (and reminiscent of the party’s revision of National Socialist history) the East is also framed as victim:

¹⁸⁸ Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, 40.

¹⁸⁹ Volk, “Resisting Leftist Dictatorship?” 8.

¹⁹⁰ On one hand, the party relies here on its ability to reawaken (post-)memories and the notion that such memories have not been properly represented. This appeal, however, may also speak to those who have no recollection of the revolution: they are unable to refute claims made by the AfD with reference to their own lived experience.

¹⁹¹ Likewise observed in Hartmann, “‘Wir 89er’ – geschichtspolitische Aneignungen der Erinnerung und alltagsweltliche Resonanzen,” 151.

¹⁹² See Paul Cooke, *Representing East Germany Since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005).

victim of a stolen revolution, of an unjust unification process, and of the erosion of democratic freedom in contemporary Germany.

The mnemonic reference, in turn, allows the AfD to construct non-democratic Others to whom blame is ascribed for contemporary Germany's failings, in contrast to the democratic yet oppressed eastern German citizen. The Other is a fluctuating category, encompassing most frequently so-called elites, immigrants, the media, the political establishment, and Islam. The suggestion that the revolution did not come to completion encourages discontented individuals to place blame on the former categories and view the AfD as the genuine heir to the revolution and representative of the people. In this view, the West has failed to incorporate the East; the so-called Merkel system is to blame; and now Islam threatens the German nation. The challenges of unification are projected onto the political establishment to explain a highly complex transformation process, while the purported degradation of contemporary society is framed as the result of the same elites' intake of immigrants and refugees. The antagonism between "the people" and "the Other" is thus framed in terms of the democratic legacy of the nonviolent revolution: the political establishment remains socialist and dictatorial while Islam is eroding any existing democratic freedoms in Germany and threatens to impose "a political or religious system of coercion."¹⁹³

The Past Between East and West

Beyond these functions, it is also worth noting that the party has attempted to integrate the revolution into a longer, national counter-narrative centred on the East. In 2016, Höcke delivered a speech in Mödlareuth (once divided by the inner-German border) in which he constructed a continuous historical battle for liberation stretching from Arminius, commander of the alliance of Germanic tribes at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE, through the wars of liberation (1813-

¹⁹³ AfD Thuringia, "Wir wollten die Freiheit..." (post from October 6, 2019).

1815), to the East German Uprising on June 17, 1953, to the 1989 autumn demonstrations.¹⁹⁴ Here, the omission of the National Socialist past and the focus on the East German Uprising of 1953 and the East German Revolution of 1989 offer a novel reference point for German identity. German history is framed as an ongoing fight for freedom and, instead of shame for the past, national pride is more than justified. In this way, the revolution also enables the AfD to pursue its objective of challenging Germany's guilt-centered culture of remembrance. As discussed in the introduction, the AfD has challenged the Holocaust-centered memory culture of Germany by relativizing Nazism in favour of a broader, more "positive" view of German history. In practice, this has meant an effort by the party to reframe events already commemorated by the democratic mainstream.¹⁹⁵ The revolution is said to be a "positive component of our culture of remembrance" and, in a speech on the Day of German Unity, Meuthen lauded the revolution as a source of pride for the German nation: "A fatherland of which we can be justifiably proud, not least because of the freedom we fought for in the Peaceful Revolution."¹⁹⁶ The mnemonic discourse employed by the AfD thus aligns with the party's broader attempt to radically revise the country's memory regime(s).

The emphasis on the East, moreover, underscores the regionality of the party's message. While the AfD's extensive relativization of Nazism constitutes a counter to the Holocaust-centered remembrance originating in the West, the focus on the revolution of 1989 conveys the localized character of the mnemonic discourse in question. At the same time, the AfD situates it within a national context by connecting the revolution to broader themes related to the country as a whole.

¹⁹⁴ Björn Höcke, "Björn Höcke zum 17. Juni," July 2, 2016, Facebook video, 35:00, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1722383551336257>.

¹⁹⁵ Richardson-Little, Merill, and Arlaud, "Far-Right Anniversary Politics and Social Media," 1367.

¹⁹⁶ "30 Jahre Mauerfall: AfD-Fraktion schlägt Festakt von Bürgerschaft und Senat vor," *AfD Kompakt*, August 14, 2019, <https://afdkompakt.de/2019/08/14/30-jahre-mauerfall-afd-fraktion-schlaegt-festakt-von-buergerschaft-und-senat-vor/>; "Geschichte unseres Landes: Das historische Bewusstsein muss wachgehalten werden!" *AfD Kompakt*, November 8, 2022, <https://afdkompakt.de/2022/11/08/geschichte-unseres-landes-das-historische-bewusstsein-muss-wachgehalten-werden/>; Meuthen, "Ansprache unseres Bundessprechers Prof. Dr. Jörg Meuthen zum heutigen Tag der Deutschen Einheit."

As discussed below, the discourse encompasses the party's stance on an array of national issues beyond the historical event in question, which suggests that, despite intentional regional variations, the party's core messages remain broadly consistent across East and West. As we have seen, the AfD's use of the past is highly fluid. In the West, where the discourse of 1989 holds less resonance, the AfD employs other historical references to convey similar messages about immigration, the EU, law and order, and related themes. Its political programs include various references to local pasts and traditions and other historical eras.¹⁹⁷ However, discourses on the past seem to be more central to the party's discourse in the East than in the West, perhaps pointing to the "usability" of the East German revolutionary past for the AfD's political agenda – to which we now turn.¹⁹⁸

INTERPRETIVE FLEXIBILITY AND THE MULTI-DIRECTIONALITY OF MEMORY

The question remains, however: how is it possible for the memory of the revolution to be "hijacked," so to speak, in the first place? On one hand, the party's ability to reinterpret the revolution may stem from the country's incorporation – or lack thereof – of 1989 into its national narrative. The official political remembrance of the revolution as a narrative of liberalism triumphant is closely linked to the legitimization of the political system after the collapse of the GDR and thus only allows a limited view of the range of possible memories.¹⁹⁹ From a contingent, participatory process across the GDR beginning before the autumn of 1989, the collective memory of the West now reduces the revolution to "the fall of the Berlin Wall" – a misnomer that conceals more than it reveals. In the eyes of those in the West, external influences often overshadow any contributions

¹⁹⁷ See, for example, Alternative for Germany Bavaria, *Bayern. Aber Sicher! Wahlprogramm Landtagswahl Bayern 2018* (Nürnberg: AfD-Landesverband Bayern, 2018), 6, 47; Alternative for Germany Lower Saxony, *Niedersachsen. Unsere Heimat. Unsere Zukunft. Landeswahlprogramm des Landesverbandes Niedersachsen der Alternative für Deutschland* (Hannover: AfD-Landesverband Niedersachsen, 2022), 61-62; see also the several references to the Prussian past in Alternative for Germany Brandenburg, *Landtagswahlprogramm für Brandenburg 2019: Hol Dir dein Land zurück* (Potsdam: AfD-Landesverband Brandenburg, 2019), 4-5, 7, 21, 35-39, 56, 76.

¹⁹⁸ Göpfart, "Activating the Socialist Past for a Nativist Future," 59.

¹⁹⁹ Hartmann, "'Wir 89er' – geschichtspolitische Aneignungen der Erinnerung und alltagsweltliche Resonanzen," 163.

made by East Germans and, in commemorative events, former East Germans have faced challenges in having their agency in the revolution acknowledged.²⁰⁰ The tension is particularly evident in disputes over anniversary dates: the AfD has opposed the change of the Day of German Unity from June 17 (the East German Uprising) to October 3 (political unification), citing the former as “a national holiday from below,” as “lived life,” while the latter is “an order from above, “a staged formality.”²⁰¹ Yet to reframe German history in terms of East German action is a step that is unlikely to find resonance to the west of the former Iron Curtain. The unstable memory landscape thus presents an opening for the AfD to assert its own interpretation of the revolutionary tradition.

The reference to 1989, however, also lends itself to diverse interpretations depending on the claim made by the mnemonic actor involved, rendering it especially suitable for populist, anti-elitist political narratives. The revolution carried and continues to carry varied meanings for varied individuals, a multiplicity of understandings lending itself to what Greta Hartmann terms an “openness of interpretation.”²⁰² In other words, the reference to 1989 fosters an interpretive flexibility, allowing those with diverse ideological and political visions to find representation and resonance: both individuals seeking improved representation within the existing system as well as those aiming to challenge the system itself find a platform. As David Begrich observes, the AfD’s vision for the so-called completion of the Wende is nebulous and undefined, which allows for its broad interpretation.²⁰³ This ambiguity serves to speak to diverse audiences: some envision the downfall of Angela Merkel, some anticipate specific reforms such as a transformed pension system or intensified anti-immigration measures, some imagine an overhaul of the political system.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Krapfl and Kloiber, “The Revolution Continues,” 2.

²⁰¹ Höcke, “Björn Höcke zum 17. Juni.”

²⁰² Hartmann, “‘Wir 89er’ – geschichtspolitische Aneignungen der Erinnerung und alltagsweltliche Resonanzen,” 152.

²⁰³ David Begrich, interview by Sabine am Orde, *Die Wochenzeitung*, August 29, 2019, <https://www.woz.ch/1935/vor-den-landtagswahlen/fuer-den-rechten-fluegel-der-afd-ist-ostdeutschland-ein-sehnsuchtsort>.

²⁰⁴ Begrich, interview by Sabine am Orde.

This interpretive flexibility is also evident in the use of the slogan “we are the people.” The “wir sind das Volk” slogan has its own history that predates the protests of 1989 and, due to its use of the word *Volk*, has had different connotations at different points in history.²⁰⁵ As a tool of memory, the reference to the Volk along with the revolution as a whole is multidirectional in that it can signal positive or negative views towards nationalism, Nazism, state socialism, or liberal democracy, serving multiple purposes and referring to multiple contradictory historical narratives. In 1989, when demonstrators chanted the slogan, they portrayed themselves as a political sovereign challenging the legitimacy of the SED dictatorship. The AfD’s claim to embody the popular tradition of the revolution may channel, for some, the egalitarian meaning of the term “Volk” that revolutionaries emphasized in 1989: the people against an unjust, corrupt dictatorial system. The reference strengthens the party’s critique of the state, portraying it as unresponsive to the demands of the population and underscoring a professed yearning for direct democracy for all.²⁰⁶

The interpretive flexibility embodied within the slogan and the reference as a whole thus stems from the understanding of 1989 as a popular, sovereign movement against a dictatorial ruling elite. As Jessen explains, when the sovereign people were positioned against the SED dictatorship, this almost necessarily had an anti-elitist connotation.²⁰⁷ The revolution thus offers space for an anti-elitist, populist understanding of politics.²⁰⁸ On the other hand, as Ned Richardson-Little and Samuel Merrill point to in the case of PEGIDA, the use of the slogan also embodies an exclusionary, racialized, and ethno-nationalist agenda: the reference to the “Volk” situates the AfD as the representative of the true German nation at war with elites attempting to dilute its inherent (racial) purity.²⁰⁹ In this way, while the “people” can denote ordinary citizens who oppose the economic,

²⁰⁵ Richardson-Little and Merrill, “Who is the Volk?” 68.

²⁰⁶ Richardson-Little and Merrill, “Who is the Volk?” 70.

²⁰⁷ Jessen, “Immer wieder montags,” 57.

²⁰⁸ Jessen, “Immer wieder montags,” 57.

²⁰⁹ Richardson-Little and Merrill, “Who is the Volk?” 70.

political, or cultural elites, it can also be defined primarily by cultural, ethnic, religious, or racist criteria founded upon claims of superiority. The pro-democratic reference to the revolution is therefore doubly useful for the AfD insofar as it can also be charged with authoritarian, xenophobic, anti-pluralist, and ethno-nationalist content.

Finally, while far-right historical revisionism is most often tied to a backward-looking nostalgia consisting of idealizing, instrumentalizing, and white-washing national histories, the present inquiry consists of a case where the image of a concrete negative past *and* an imagined negative future is used to construct a counter-image of a glorified ethno-national future which must be achieved through revolutionary action. In other words, while the populist far right is traditionally seen as propagating a “backward-looking reactionary ideology, reflecting a deep sense of nostalgia for the good old days,” the AfD’s mnemonic discourse reveals the potential multi-directionality of memory: the past serves as a warning as well as an inspiration in order to construct a forward-looking hopeful if deeply xenophobic vision of what is to come.²¹⁰ Such observations reveal the fluidities characteristic of far-right populist rhetoric, one that can swiftly adapt to changing circumstances and leverage varied narratives to suit its immediate goals. Indeed, the multi-directionality of the mnemonic reference suggests that, for the AfD, the revolution serves as a master narrative that frames the party’s manifold and multidirectional understanding(s) of the past, present, and future.²¹¹ The concept of revolution, particularly as it pertains to the events of 1989, is important for the party insofar as it provides an overarching framework within which the AfD

²¹⁰ Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann, “Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe,” 436; Hans-Georg Betz and Carol Johnson, “Against the Current - Stemming the Tide: The Nostalgic Ideology of the Contemporary Radical Populist Right,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 3 (2004): 324.

²¹¹ Master narratives are understood here as overarching stories that generate and encompass other stories, endowing claims with meaning and emotional significance by embedding them within a larger coherent narrative structure. See Matthew Levinger, “Master Narratives of Disinformation Campaigns,” *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1.5 (2018): 125–126. As explained by Michele M. Mason, the strength of master narratives commonly lies in their ability to contain potential destabilizing signifiers of resistance and critique. Quoted in *Dominant Narratives of Colonial Hokkaido and Imperial Japan: Envisioning the Periphery and the Modern Nation-State* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 150. Special thanks to Lea Pflüger for the reference.

interprets not only historical events but also contemporary issues and future trajectories, a framework that encompasses the party's stance on a wide range of topics, including immigration, state reform, national history, systemic change, regional identities, and the role of elites through an emphasis on the revolution as a moment of bottom-up popular transformation.

In sum, the memory of the revolution in the AfD's political discourse serves a range of strategic functions: it offers a mobilizing narrative of resistance against the political system; it legitimizes the AfD by portraying it as a defender of rightful resistance and democratic freedom; and it plays on memories of resistance, transformation, and crisis to construct in- and out-groups. And while the party's capacity to reinterpret the revolution may be aided by the country's struggle to incorporate it into an official politics of remembrance, the reference to 1989 also fosters an open, interpretive flexibility embodied in the reference to the "Volk." The discourse is thus both contradictory and highly fluid, manifested in the party's ability to co-opt various issues in order to construct a mnemonic narrative that resonates with a broad anti-elitist base. As a multidirectional master narrative encompassing the party's fundamental political priorities, the reference to the East German Revolution of 1989 allows the AfD to outline its perspectives on the past, the present, and the future.

IV. REVOLUTION ON THE RIGHT

*“We need a total revolution. This whole policy should be set on fire.”*²¹²

– Alois Ostermair

The fourth and final chapter reflects on the question of revolution on the right. It suggests that we ought to approach the mnemonic invocation of revolution as a pivotal political term capable of providing insight into the AfD’s nature as a far-right entity and its engagement with the concept itself. The debates surrounding the position of the AfD along the far-right spectrum are extensive, often centered around the labels of “radical” or “extreme”—a subtle yet significant distinction. The chapter considers the conceptualization(s) of revolution within its historic and contemporary contexts in the attempt to shed light on the AfD’s far-right ideological nature. It considers conceptual debates surrounding the far right and revolution; the party’s explicit revolutionary commentary; and the heterogeneous visions inherent in its mnemonic discourse. The evolution of the discourse can be said to reflect the overall radicalization of the party; its internal differentiation, moreover, appears to be largely a product of the mnemonic actor in question. The chapter therefore suggests that the AfD’s discourse on revolution as concept and mnemonic reference can, as a microcosm, shed light on the party’s heterogeneous nature as a far-right entity oscillating between various shades of radicalism and extremism.

REVOLUTION ON THE RIGHT?

The debates surrounding the position of the AfD along the far-right spectrum are extensive. Some argue that while the party’s rhetoric may be inflammatory and its policies divisive, it falls within the bounds of democratic debate and operates within the framework of the law. Others

²¹² Sonja Thomaser, “AfD-Parteimitglieder in Chats: Forderungen nach ‘Umsturz’, ‘Revolution’ und ‘Bürgerkrieg,’” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, December 2, 2021, <https://www.fr.de/politik/afd-bayern-chatgruppe-telegram-partei-mitglieder-nachrichten-umsturz-gewalt-news-91151774.html>.

contend that the AfD's flirtation with far-right ideologies, associations with extremist individuals and organizations, and promotion of anti-democratic sentiments warrant classification as an extremist entity. Both academics and politicians have voiced conflicting opinions regarding whether the party should be characterized as radical or extreme: the AfD "has nothing to do with a normal democratic party," says one CDU politician. "I do not believe that the conditions for monitoring the party as a whole exist," says another.²¹³ The state branches of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution have likewise arrived at various assessments.²¹⁴ As previously discussed, the traditional terminological distinction lies in the view that, within the far right, the "radical right" denotes the acceptance of some majoritarian democratic features, whilst rejecting its liberal elements.²¹⁵ The subgroup of the "extreme right," however, frequently through the use of physical violence, rejects the basic tenets of democracy altogether.²¹⁶ It has been suggested that the contemporary far right requires us to rethink and refine said categories in a political context where nonviolent forms of action and (alleged) support for the idea of democracy have become dominant features across the political spectrum.²¹⁷ The distinction is not merely a matter of semantics; it lies at the core of discussions surrounding German constitutional democracy. While democratic principles include dialogue, negotiation, and

²¹³ Tom Thieme, "Dialog oder Ausgrenzung – Ist die AfD eine rechtsextreme Partei?" Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, January 1, 2019, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/parteien/rechtspopulismus/284482/dialog-oder-ausgrenzung-ist-die-afd-eine-rechtsextreme-partei/>.

²¹⁴ While five of the AfD's regional associations are currently considered suspected cases of right-wing extremism, three have been classified as proven right-wing extremist, namely Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia. Following a legal dispute, a court ruling in 2022 granted the Federal Office the authority to designate and monitor the entire party as a suspected right-wing extremist entity.

²¹⁵ Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann, "Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe," 437; Volk and Weisskircher, "Far-Right PEGIDA," 322-323.

²¹⁶ Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann, "Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe," 437; Volk and Weisskircher, "Far-Right PEGIDA," 322-323.

²¹⁷ As Tom Thieme explains, the nature of such movements defies clear definition due to several factors. Parties in pursuit of broader public support consciously distance themselves from fascism, which results in growing internal diversity within these parties. Extremists employ legal tactics to mask their true intentions, aiming to broaden their appeal and evade state scrutiny. The ultimate vision of the future also often remains abstract, making it difficult to gauge their potential actions if in power. Thieme, "Dialog oder Ausgrenzung,"; Volk and Weisskircher, "Far-Right PEGIDA," 329.

coalition-building, such avenues have been considered unthinkable when dealing with proven extremists.

The concept of revolution, moreover, has been subject to the shifting tides of history. The term itself has been applied by actors to legitimize their own actions since at least the seventeenth century.²¹⁸ The meaning of the word has varied, but its narrative usage has always been motivated by a desire to legitimize accomplished or potential courses of action with historical actors embracing or rejecting the designation primarily because of its political implications in particular historical contexts.²¹⁹ The aim here is not to define revolution as such but to consider the way(s) in which the AfD conceptualizes itself in relation to it. Revolution was once considered a prerogative of the progressive left as opposed to the reactionary right. Hans Mommsen argues, for instance, that the term revolution is “incompatible with the ruinous and self-destructive features” of the National Socialist regime.²²⁰ His view of revolution is inextricably linked with his conception of modernity; he is wholly against the “myth of Nazi modernization.”²²¹ Other scholars, however, have moved the concept out of the normative sphere: Peter Osborne argues that socialism and fascism are both fundamentally futural in their orientation, while Roger Griffin sees the twentieth-century fascist regimes as having proposed their own variant of modernism in both a socio-political and aesthetic

²¹⁸ Ilan Rachum, “The Meaning of ‘Revolution’ in the English Revolution (1648–1660),” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 2 (1995): 195–215; William H. Sewell, Jr., “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” *Theory and Society* 25, no. 6 (1996): 841–881; James Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²¹⁹ James Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 34.

²²⁰ For him, the term “seems to me to invest this destructive course of the regime with a constructive component, even though it was abortive from the start and would not have resulted in any qualitative social change.” Hans Mommsen, “The Nazi Regime: Revolution or Counterrevolution?” in *The Problem of Revolution in Germany, 1789–1989*, ed. Reinhard Rürup (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 120, 121.

²²¹ Mommsen, “The Nazi Regime: Revolution or Counterrevolution?” 122.

sense.²²² For Osborne, from the standpoint of the temporal structure of its project, “fascism is a particularly radical form of conservative revolution.”²²³

The latter notion of conservative revolution, moreover, harkens back to the antidemocratic movement of the same name in the Weimar Republic, one whose ideologues have served as inspiration for the German New Right from the 1960s onward. The intellectuals of the Conservative Revolution movement sought to sever ties with the tradition of conservatism rooted in Wilhelmine Germany, repudiated parliamentary politics in the Weimar Republic as a Western import, and aimed to reconcile socialism by transforming it into a “German socialism” or a “socialism of the blood.”²²⁴ Their vision entailed supplanting Weimar democracy with a dictatorial order modeled on a military hierarchy and creating a national community which would enable Germany to attain strength.²²⁵ Today’s New Right network, although loosely organized, is united by the aspiration to intellectually surmount the democratic constitutional state and frequently invokes the thinkers of the interwar movement.²²⁶ The AfD, which has been referred to as “the political arm of the intellectual New Right,” consciously references this tradition, its influence manifest in the party’s discourse on Western liberalism and German nationalism.²²⁷ The principle that revolution can come from the right is important in examining the AfD’s conceptualization(s) of the former. If we consider the concept of revolution as tied to the extremes of the political spectrum (encompassing various shades

²²² Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), 163-165; Roger Griffin, “Fascism’s Modernist Revolution: A New Paradigm for the Study of Right-Wing Dictatorships,” *Fascism* 5 no. 2 (2016): 105.

²²³ Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 166.

²²⁴ Roger Woods, *The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 2.

²²⁵ Woods, *The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic*, 2.

²²⁶ Armin Pfahl-Traughber, “Was die ‘Neue Rechte’ ist – und was nicht: Definition und Erscheinungsformen einer rechtsextremistischen Intellektuellengruppe,” Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, January 21, 2019, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/rechtsextremismus/dossier-rechtsextremismus/284268/was-die-neue-rechte-ist-und-was-nicht/>

²²⁷ Ralf Havertz, “AfD, the Political Arm of the Intellectual New Right in Germany?” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 35, no. 2 (2017): 89-125.

of extremism and fascism) we may be able to glean insight into the ambiguous nature of the AfD as a political entity.²²⁸

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

While the present investigation narrowly centers on the discourse surrounding the events of 1989, it is worth briefly considering how such actors speak of revolution in general. The designation is sometimes used as an insult to describe the incompetency of other parties (e.g., by describing the SPD as “coffeehouse revolutionaries”) or to denounce what the AfD sees as harmful trends in Germany: immigration policy is a “multicultural revolution imposed from above.”²²⁹ Yet reports have also surfaced of internal communications among members of the party’s regional associations expressing explicit aspirations for revolutionary upheaval. In March 2019, a member of the AfD North-Rhine Westphalia was reported to have written that “I may be criticized for this now, but without a mass popular uprising, our Germany will go down the drain. We need and must prepare for a revolution.”²³⁰ In a more publicized case in December 2021, internal messaging between members of the AfD Bavaria also revealed antidemocratic, extremist views. According to the Bayerischer Rundfunk, an AfD district chairman wrote in a message that “we won’t achieve a change of course here without upheaval and revolution.” Elections “no longer help anyway.”²³¹ State parliament member Anne Cyron is said to have replied that “we won’t get out of this situation without civil war.”²³² The Upper Bavarian district chairman Alois Ostermair agreed: “We need a total

²²⁸ Specifically, fascism as an ideology is understood to encompass a revolutionary form of nationalism proposing an alternative totalitarian society. See Constantin Iordachi, “Comparative Fascist Studies: An Introduction,” in *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives*, ed. Constantin Iordachi (London: Routledge, 2009), 2.

²²⁹ “Am 27. Mai ist Demo-Tag in Berlin,” /; Höcke, “Wahltag wird zum Zahltag!”

²³⁰ Kristian Frigelj, “AfD-Richtungsstreit um Höcke: ‘Wir müssen uns auf eine Revolution vorbereiten,’” *Welt*, March 9, 2019, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article190001155/AfD-Richtungsstreit-um-Hoecke-Wir-muessen-uns-auf-eine-Revolution-vorbereiten.html>.

²³¹ Gareth Joswig, “Rechtsextreme Chatgruppen: AfD Bayern träumt vom Bürgerkrieg,” *taz*, December 1, 2021, <https://taz.de/Rechtsextreme-Chatgruppen/!5819500/>.

²³² Joswig, “Rechtsextreme Chatgruppen.”

revolution. This whole policy should be set on fire.”²³³ Fierce internal disputes within these chat groups also erupted. Particularly noteworthy is that both exposed communication channels belonged to Western branches of the AfD. It was suggested (see the previous chapter) that the AfD’s discourse on 1989 encompasses the party’s far-right positions on several policy issues, indicating generally consistent core messages across the country. Said internal communications, then, also indicate consistent extremism: while the revolutionary discourse in the East broadcasts a vision of radical transformation, the calls for revolution and civil war appearing in these messaging channels, even if disingenuous, suggest similar radical discourses among the party’s western counterparts (minus the specific reference to 1989). While these behind-the-scenes statements do not constitute debate in the public sphere per se as is the focus of the present inquiry, they suggest that certain politicians may merely be paying lip service to the democratic constitutional state in public discourse.

On this note, a certain faction within the AfD can more definitively be said to propagate what has been termed a “national-revolutionary ideology”: the Flügel.²³⁴ Founded in 2015, the Flügel (the Wing) describes itself as a “resistance movement against the further erosion of Germany’s sovereignty and identity.”²³⁵ An association of AfD members led foremost by Höcke, the Flügel was officially disbanded in 2020 after its classification by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution as a proven right-wing extremist organization but continued to exist without a formal structure.²³⁶ According to its repeated claim, the Flügel sees the AfD as the “last evolutionary chance

²³³ Joswig, “Rechtsextreme Chatgruppen.”

²³⁴ As Lars Rensmann explains, the various statements of Flügel members point to national-revolutionary ideological elements, goals and authoritarian practices that fundamentally break with liberal democracy and its universalist principles and hypothesize violence and cruelty. Lars Rensmann, “Die Mobilisierung des Ressentiments: Zur Analyse des Antisemitismus in der AfD,” in *Prekärer Zusammenhalt: Die Bedrohung des demokratischen Miteinanders in Deutschland*, eds. Ayline Heller, Oliver Decker, and Elmar Brähler (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2020), 314, 316.

²³⁵ Der Flügel, *Erfurter Resolution: Die Gründungsurkunde des Flügels*, March 2015. The website no longer exists but can be viewed in archived form at <https://web.archive.org/web/20190915113909/http://www.derfluegel.de/erfurter-resolution>.

²³⁶ Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, “Verfassungsschutzbericht 2020” (Berlin: Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, 2020), see esp. 93-96, 109.

for this country.”²³⁷ While this statement has been misquoted elsewhere as “revolutionary chance,” it has nonetheless been interpreted as the demand for a violent revolution, legitimized as an act of resistance.²³⁸ The Flügel understands wholesale transformation on a revolutionary scale as the ultimate aim of the AfD: “German unconditionality will be the guarantee that we will tackle the matter thoroughly and fundamentally. Once the time for change has come, we Germans will not do things by halves,” says Höcke.²³⁹ Similarly, in an interview during the election campaign in Thuringia, he expressed the view that “if there is no rapid and comprehensive change in mentality and politics, we will have to prepare for further, serious upheavals in the coming years.”²⁴⁰

REVOLUTION AND THE AfD: BETWEEN RADICAL AND EXTREME

*“Peaceful revolutions never worry me.”*²⁴¹

– Alexander Gauland

What is the connection between the AfD’s revolutionary rhetoric, its mnemonic usage of the East German Revolution of 1989, and its position as a far-right entity along the political spectrum? First, similar views to those outlined above have been expressed in the context of the discourse on the revolutionary autumn. Many of the politicians referenced in the previous chapters are or were members of the (formally dissolved) Flügel and, if not members, have shown support for and defended the faction. The Thuringian branch of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution has even described the reference to the revolution itself as an act of political extremism, reporting

²³⁷ Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, “Verfassungsschutzbericht 2019” (Berlin: Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, 2020), 85.

²³⁸ Thieme, “Dialog oder Ausgrenzung.” The erroneous quotation is present on page 83 of Salzborn, “Antisemitism in the ‘Alternative for Germany’ Party.”

²³⁹ Björn Höcke and Sebastian Hennig, *Nie zweimal in denselben Fluss. Björn Höcke im Gespräch mit Sebastian Hennig* (Lüdinghausen: Manuscriptum, 2018), 255-258, quoted in Albrecht von Lucke, “Der Osten steht auf: Die AfD als Führerpartei,” *Blätter*, no. 8 (2019): 5-8.

²⁴⁰ Björn Höcke, interview by Wolfgang Klinghammer, *Thüringen Post*, archived in 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20191222164144/https://www.afd-thueringen.de/landtagswahl-2019/>.

²⁴¹ Justus Bender, “AfD-Chef im Interview: Gauland für ‘friedliche Revolution’ gegen das ‘politische System,’” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/afd-chef-gauland-friedliche-revolution-gegen-das-politische-system-15771150.html>.

that the extremist position of the AfD is revealed in its style of language.²⁴² According to this position, hidden forces maintain a perpetual division among the German populace. Overcoming these forces, along with the entire system that fosters them, is perceived as the only viable course of action.²⁴³ Through the reference to 1989, Höcke is said to invoke the end of “the system” without formulating a concrete political alternative, making the mnemonic discourse “a rhetoric that systematically erodes trust with recourse to the former GDR, among other things, and with the aim of creating a climate of fear of supposed state despotism.”²⁴⁴ The discursive reference is thus said to reveal the “decidedly anti-constitutional goals” of the AfD Thuringia. In light of the party’s association with the antidemocratic ideologues of the New Right who draw inspiration from those of the Conservative Revolution, even a professed denunciation of violence or outward distancing from fascism scarcely conceal its underlying propensity to reject the foundations of modern democracy, manifest in its discourse on revolution both in concept and historical reference. At least for some, the envisioned potential for radical transformation through violence remains evident.

Above all, the various mnemonic claims outlined in the previous chapter (the claim of analogous conditions; the claim of dictatorial legacy; the claim to the inheritance of the tradition of democratic resistance; the claim of national unity; the claim of the value of East German identity; the claim of the necessity of the completion of a new revolution) suggest that various actors conceptualize the reference to the revolution in diverse, sometimes overlapping or contradictory ways. The reference appears to encompass for some the very notion of revolution as wholesale transformation, as expressed by various actors within the Flügel faction and state association members. The discourse on 1989, however, had not always been so extreme. Its earliest invocations

²⁴² Amt für Verfassungsschutz Thüringen, “Verfassungsschutzbericht 2021 Freistaat Thüringen: Pressefassung,” (Erfurt: Ministerium für Inneres und Kommunales, 2021), 31-32.

²⁴³ Amt für Verfassungsschutz Thüringen, “Verfassungsschutzbericht 2021 Freistaat Thüringen,” 31-32.

²⁴⁴ Amt für Verfassungsschutz Thüringen, “Verfassungsschutzbericht 2021 Freistaat Thüringen,” 31-32.

(discussed in the first chapter) emphasized in rather general terms the curtailment of democratic freedoms along the lines of the claims of analogous conditions and dictatorial legacy and, over time, became more radical. Frauke Petry, to whom the discourse is first attributed in this thesis, spoke in 2013 of an eastern sensibility toward democracy and an apparent recreation of the Stasi. These statements were not worlds away from those of Höcke and his associates in later years but became tinged with an increasingly nativist and xenophobic rhetoric calling for revolutionary transformation (see below). The evolution of the mnemonic discourse, then, can be said to reflect the overall radicalization of the AfD since its founding and showcases the varied meaning(s) attributed to the reference.

In the autumn of 2018, almost a year prior to the campaign kickoff, Gauland gave an interview to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) in which he developed his notion of the party's desired orchestration of a "peaceful revolution."²⁴⁵ In the interview, Gauland called for a reorganization of the entire political system through a peaceful revolution ("in this respect, more has to go than just the Chancellor").²⁴⁶ The politicians of other parties as well as media journalists must be driven "out of responsibility."²⁴⁷ "You can call this a peaceful revolution," he suggested.²⁴⁸ The interview offers a glimpse into Gauland's vision of revolution, characterized by an overhaul of the government inspired by the nonviolent ethos of the 1989 movement. As the FAZ pointed out the following day, this was not a term chosen at random as "there has only been one peaceful and successful revolution."²⁴⁹ In this way, the revolution in the GDR is connected to the then party

²⁴⁵ Bender, "AfD-Chef im Interview: Gauland für 'friedliche Revolution' gegen das 'politische System'."

²⁴⁶ Bender, "AfD-Chef im Interview: Gauland für 'friedliche Revolution' gegen das 'politische System'."

²⁴⁷ Bender, "AfD-Chef im Interview: Gauland für 'friedliche Revolution' gegen das 'politische System'."

²⁴⁸ Bender, "AfD-Chef im Interview: Gauland für 'friedliche Revolution' gegen das 'politische System'."

²⁴⁹ Berthold Kohler, "Phantasien der AfD: Früher nannte man das Säuberung," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/afd-phantasien-von-alexander-gauland-man-nannte-es-saeuberung-15773410.html>.

chairman's conception of revolution as a complete reorganization of the entire political system, drawing inspiration from historical retrospection while projecting into the future.

The far-right leading electoral candidates in Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg who principally disseminated the mnemonic discourse of 1989 (Urban, Höcke, and Kalbitz, respectively), along with other members such as Hocloch and Berndt, discursively elaborated the revolutionary reference to new lengths and connected it with an ethno-nationalist vision of the German nation: “we stand here continuing the tradition of the autumn of 1989... let's reclaim the land that belongs to us, as we owe it to the victims of the insane welcoming policy, to our descendants, and to ourselves.”²⁵⁰ As we have seen, Kalbitz (since removed from the party for concealing former ties to neo-Nazi associations) also infused this discourse with an extremist and exclusionary vision, as well as Urban, another member of the Flügel. Other seemingly more moderate members conceptualized the reference to 1989 in a somewhat less extreme manner. Meuthen, for instance, emphasized the claims of analogous conditions and dictatorial legacy, encapsulated in his assertion that “we must stand united to defend this freedom against all socialist currents trying to spread their influence again.”²⁵¹ Tensions have flared up between those with conflicting understandings of the meaning of the revolution for the party (or at least the public discourse around such understandings): at the Kyffhäuser meeting of the Flügel in 2019, Kalbitz called for a “paradigm shift for our country” while Gauland countered that “we are not planning to restructure society” and has previously called on party members to be careful when making public statements.²⁵²

The concluding suggestion of the thesis, then, is that the AfD's discourse on revolution as concept and mnemonic reference can, as a microcosm, shed light on the party's heterogeneous

²⁵⁰ Höcke et al., “Demo der Jungen Alternative in CB.”

²⁵¹ Meuthen, “Jörg Meuthen | Freiheit, das ist mein Lebensthema!”

²⁵² “‘Flügel’-Treffen in Thüringen: AfD-Rechtsaußen rufen zum ‘Widerstand’ auf,” *Der Spiegel*, July 6, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/kyffhaeuser-treffen-afd-rechtsaussen-um-den-fluegel-rufen-zum-widerstand-auf-a-1276124.html>.

nature as a far-right entity oscillating between various shades of radicalism and extremism. The discourse is not only divided between East and West – even within the East, it is far from uniform. The lack of uniformity witnessed in the three election campaigns, however, does not predominantly appear to be a product of location, but rather of speaker. Although the population of each federal state and their respective cities experienced the revolution of 1989 in distinct ways and while certain patterns emerge (e.g., a higher frequency of claims relating to analogous conditions in Brandenburg), the discourse in general does not appear to differ greatly from state to state or city to city. Even when addressing audiences in locations with a significant historic connection to the revolution, the politicians tend not to reference the city's specific revolutionary contributions, but rather employ a relatively similar discourse across the federal states. An exception can be found in Höcke's address in Mödlareuth, in which he actively referred to the revolutionary role of another city in Thuringia, Arnstadt:

Here in Thuringia, the first major demonstration took place on September 30, 1989, in Arnstadt... It was sparked by a leaflet that a young man... posted at the local cinema... Some of you who are from Arnstadt or the surrounding area may still remember this cinema... Two hundred people, dear friends, then gathered a few days later, on September 30, for a demonstration in Arnstadt's Kornmarkt, and then things took their course in the way we know... And at this point, I must mention with some pride that not only did the Peaceful Revolution of 1989 begin here in Thuringia in Arnstadt, but also, at the beginning of 2013, in Arnstadt, the oldest city in Thuringia, the nucleus of our AfD state association grew, and today it is one of the most successful constituencies for the AfD in Thuringia.²⁵³

Here, Höcke emphasizes the location as the birthplace of the revolution while drawing a parallel in significance between the beginning of the revolution and the founding of the party's state association. In general, however, the AfD's discourse seems to address a broad eastern audience rather than a specific city- or state-based one.²⁵⁴ Rather, the differentiation within the eastern

²⁵³ Höcke, "Brillante Rede zum Tag der Deutschen Einheit."

²⁵⁴ While the discourse is by and large addressed to the party's eastern German audience, some of the speeches referenced in previous chapters were also made in the Bundestag, suggesting an effort to communicate the AfD's position as the voice of the East to other political parties on a national level.

discourse appears to be a product of who is talking, rather than where they are talking.²⁵⁵ Different actors reveal varied and heterogeneous conceptualizations of the revolution, viewing it as a catalyst for systemic change, a form of peaceful protest, a disruptive force challenging the status quo, the answer to a specific policy issue, or merely a catchy slogan. In other words, the mnemonic discourse of revolution as described in the present thesis reflects the party's own inner heterogeneity.

The history of the AfD as a whole has been a tug-of-war between various shades of conservatism, radicalism, extremism, and fascism with the diverse conceptualizations of the East German Revolution of 1989 mirroring such divisions within the party. Through an examination of the AfD's memory-political discourse alongside its explicit revolutionary rhetoric, the heterogeneous and ambivalent character of the party and its discourses come to the fore, blurring formal ideological boundaries and showcasing a spectrum of tendencies ranging from radical to extreme – categories both overlapping and mutually constitutive. While mnemonic discourses may at first appear superficial, the implications of invoking revolution are profound. This heterogeneity underscores the elusive categorical distinctions inherent in discussions surrounding the AfD as a far-right entity, its relationship to revolution, and subsequent implications for political discourse and action. An examination of memory politics which is attentive to its inherent subtleties and ambiguities, therefore, can shed light on the nature of far-right entities shaping contemporary political landscapes.

²⁵⁵ It is important to acknowledge the constraints posed by certain sources for the identification of the speaker or author and their related discourse. Social media posts are often made on behalf of associations (in this case, national- or regional-level party associations), rather than particular actors. Within the sources consulted, however, specific quotations were typically attributed to a particular speaker, even when overall authorship was sometimes unclear.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has integrated three distinct strands of scholarly inquiry, namely, the study of the politics of memory, the study of the far right, and the study of revolution, to investigate the discourse(s) and nature of far-right actors shaping contemporary German politics. Said investigation has concentrated on the AfD's mnemonic discourse surrounding the East German Revolution of 1989. This discourse emerged in the early months of the party's inception in 2013, suggesting a longstanding attempt on its part to claim a stake in the revolutionary tradition. In the thirtieth anniversary year of the revolution, the AfD displayed an increasingly systematized and fluid mnemonic discourse on 1989 across three electoral campaigns in eastern Germany. The six mnemonic claims comprising this discourse constituted a multifaceted interpretation of contemporary conditions in Germany; the relationship between the party's purported nature, its audience, and the past; and the party's future ambitions. Flexible and open to interpretation, the memory of the East German Revolution of 1989 was employed as a strategic, multifunctional tool and served as a master narrative framing the AfD's perspective(s) on the past, present, and future. At the same time, the heterogeneity of the discourse in question has offered insight into the party's ambiguous nature as a far-right entity oscillating between radicalism and extremism.

Studying the memory politics of the far right in light of revolutionary discourse has therefore been shown to yield insights into the discursive maneuvering and ideological nature of far-right political organizations and their actors, but several questions arise. The first question pertains to the so-called demand side of memory politics, that is, reception – both in support and in contestation – of the AfD's mnemonic usage of 1989. At least some of the former civil rights activists have expressed sympathy with the AfD or hold similar views; however, the majority have reacted with

indignance in the face of the party's claim to revolutionary inheritance.²⁵⁶ The historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk denounced the AfD for purposefully using symbolic terms from the revolution “in order to undermine or, in the long term, to dismantle or destroy precisely what the revolution of 1989 and the civil rights activists of 1989 stood for and fought for: the establishment of an open society.”²⁵⁷ Even the Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier accused the AfD of instrumentalizing the revolution for election campaign purposes: “when political groups try to steal the legacy of '89 for their slogans of fear, it is a perfidious distortion of history.”²⁵⁸ The AfD retorted that the “perfidious distortion of history” lay in the Federal President's failure to acknowledge that his own party had not thought reunification possible – nor even wished for it – at the time.²⁵⁹ The revolution thus emerges as a site of open struggle between divergent and contradictory political visions vying for power and legitimacy. Beyond prolific reactions, however, further research is needed to explore the extent to which this discourse resonates among different segments of the population and its influence (or lack thereof) within and beyond the three federal states under study.²⁶⁰

Further questions pertaining to far-right memory-political discourses in western Germany far-left memory-political discourses in eastern Germany also arise. While these respective issues were

²⁵⁶ In an open letter, prominent former East German activists accused the AfD of misusing the revolution for electoral gain. Initiated by the Robert Havemann Society, the open letter's signatories vehemently opposed the notion of a “Revolution 2.0” for Germany and rejected the slogans used by the AfD. Over one hundred former GDR opposition figures accused the AfD of exploiting the memory of the revolution: “Germany does not need a revolution 2.0, we are not being oppressed as the state security practiced on behalf of the SED,” they state. “We didn't take to the streets in 1989 for the demagogues of the AfD.” Frank Ebert, Uwe Schwabe, and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, “Nicht mit uns: Gegen den Missbrauch der Friedlichen Revolution 1989 im Wahlkampf,” Archiv der DDR-Opposition, Robert Havemann Gesellschaft, updated September 9, 2019, <https://www.havemann-gesellschaft.de/beitraege/nicht-mit-uns-gegen-den-missbrauch-der-friedlichen-revolution-1989-im-wahlkampf/>.

²⁵⁷ Patrick Gensing and Konstantin Kumpfmüller, “Historische Vergleiche: Leben wir in einer ‘DDR 2.0?’” *Tagesschau*, August 2, 2019, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/ddr-vergleich-wende-101.html>.

²⁵⁸ “‘Perfide Verdrehung der Geschichte’: Steinmeier wirft AfD Instrumentalisierung der Wende vor,” *Tagesspiegel*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/steinmeier-wirft-afd-instrumentalisierung-der-wende-vor-5337436.html>.

²⁵⁹ “Mauerbau: ‘Verdrehung der Geschichte’ ist ein Problem der SPD, nicht der AfD.”

²⁶⁰ Hartmann has already suggested on the basis of a group discussion with a political initiative in Saxony that the memory of 1989 propagated by the AfD is highly resonant and identity-forming among this initiative. Hartmann, “‘Wir 89er’ – geschichtspolitische Aneignungen der Erinnerung und alltagsweltliche Resonanzen,” 145-165.

briefly discussed in relation to the AfD's discourse in western Germany and Die Linke's discourse on 1989, a systematic, comparative investigation of far-right memory politics in East and West, on one hand, or far-right and far-left memory politics in the East, on the other, could be a fruitful next step to discover what is exclusive to the AfD's discourse or political extremism in general while shedding light on broader ideological contestations within the realm of memory. It was previously discussed that a) the AfD employs different historical references in the West and b) the reference to 1989 is also not the only historical reference used by the AfD in the East. Further research, then, could consider the extent to which far-right memory politics play a role across the country as a whole, illuminating both national and regional memory dynamics. A systematic comparison of the AfD's discourse on the National Socialist past as compared to the East German past, for example, could shed light on the ways in which the AfD frames the country's official public memory discourse as fundamentally contradicting the memory of the "people." At the same time, the categorial distinctions between left and right may be interrogated with reference to the newly founded Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance – Reason and Justice (BSW) party, the namesake of which referred to the uprising of 1989 as a "counterrevolution" at the time.²⁶¹ In addition, an examination of the dimensions of memory beyond discursive such as visual, symbolic, monumental, and spatial could provide a more holistic understanding of far-right memory construction. Moreover, by narrowing the scope of analysis to the local level, a deeper understanding could be gained of how memory politics manifests and evolves within distinct sociopolitical contexts.

Yet another question relates to the nature of 1989 itself. As Paul Betts writes, the legacy of 1989 has largely been written as a bright story of liberalism triumphant, with comparatively less

²⁶¹ Oliver Nachtwey, "Sahra Wagenknechts Projekt: BRD Noir," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 18, 2023, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/kann-sahra-wagenknecht-die-partiegruendung-gelingen-19180382.html>.

attention towards some of the grey and even darker tones of its inheritance.²⁶² He discusses the strong presence of nationalism in 1989 and that amid the atmosphere of political possibilities the nation as an imagined community took on many shades, ranging from anti-Soviet patriotism to harder-edged versions of ethnic belonging.²⁶³ In this way, it has been suggested by some that the AfD is indeed part of the legacy of 1989.²⁶⁴ Further historical research ought to shed light on the manifestation(s) of nationalism during the revolution itself, expressions of which appear to have ranged from liberal to conservative, inclusive to exclusive, and reflect on the extent to which the AfD may or may not be considered a part of the revolution's inheritance.

Perhaps most pertinent, however, is the question of comparative analysis across post-communist Europe. A particularly relevant avenue for future research is the political remembrance of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. It also constitutes a warning. Scholars have shown how 1956 has become a source of extreme political polarization, with the far right laying claim to the upheaval as a struggle for freedom and a symbol of Hungarian martyrdom.²⁶⁵ Similar arguments are employed that seem to echo the discursive claims of the AfD, particularly in terms of analogous conditions, dictatorial legacy, and a new revolution: no fundamental change is said to have followed from the transition of 1989 (e.g., politicians are denounced for previous ties to the socialist state while the political establishment is characterized as a socialist dictatorship).²⁶⁶ Even a discourse of colonization emerges, this time from the EU.²⁶⁷ And after a landslide election victory in 2010, Fidesz framed its triumph as a genuine revolutionary break with the past: in the words of Anna Seleny, the mnemonic

²⁶² Paul Betts, "1989 At Thirty: A Recast Legacy," *Past & Present* 244, no. 1 (2019): 274.

²⁶³ Betts, "1989 At Thirty," 286.

²⁶⁴ Andreas Wassermann, "Rechtspopulismus in Ostdeutschland. Die AfD gehört zum Erbe von '89," *Der Spiegel*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/was-der-afd-erfolg-im-osten-mit-der-revolution-von-1989-zu-tun-hat-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000165454459>.

²⁶⁵ Anna Seleny, "Revolutionary Road: 1956 and the Fracturing of Hungarian Historical Memory," in *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, eds. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 37.

²⁶⁶ Seleny, "Revolutionary Road," 51-55.

²⁶⁷ Seleny, "Revolutionary Road," 55.

warriors had won the political battle.²⁶⁸ The far-right German discourse on 1989 and the far-right Hungarian discourse on 1956 seem to be worth comparing in order to situate the present study within a broader, regional framework. Comparisons could also be drawn with competing mnemonic stances of political actors toward 1989 in Slovakia or the contrast between the revolution's commemoration among the political class and civil societal groups in the Czech Republic.²⁶⁹ A comparative analysis would allow us to discern what is exclusive to the (eastern) German context – given the various specificities of German memory politics outlined in the introduction – and what is general to far-right memory politics in post-communist eastern and central Europe.

Finally, there is also the question of the extent to which such discourses are influenced by Russian-imported illiberal propaganda aiming to undermine the liberal-democratic consensus in the West. The rise of the AfD must be considered within the context of a transnational far-right movement featuring increasing connections between Russian actors and global far-right activists, ideologues, and politicians.²⁷⁰ Moscow has increasingly supported the European far right to gain leverage in European politics and undermine the liberal-democratic consensus in the West, a feat which involves promoting conspiratorial discourse and disinformation to pollute the information space, increase polarization, and undermine democratic debate.²⁷¹ The AfD has several documented links to Russian officials, constituting a mutually beneficial relationship in which the AfD receives

²⁶⁸ Seleny, “Revolutionary Road,” 55-56.

²⁶⁹ Carol Skalnik Leff, Kevin Deegan-Krause, and Sharon L. Wolchik, “I Ignored *Your* Revolution, but You Forgot *My* Anniversary: Party Competition in Slovakia and the Construction of Recollection,” in *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, eds. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 104-122; Conor O’Dwyer, “Remembering, Not Commemorating, 1989: The Twenty- Year Anniversary of the Velvet Revolution in the Czech Republic,” in *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, ed. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 170-192.

²⁷⁰ Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (London: Routledge, 2018), xvii; Jennifer M. Ramos and Nigel Raab, “Russia Abroad, Russia at Home: The Paradox of Russia’s Support for the Far Right,” *Russian Politics* 7, no. 1 (2022): 70.

²⁷¹ Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, xxi.

ideological and material support.²⁷² This relationship aligns with Russia's broader strategic goal of destabilizing the EU from within by supporting a party that undermines international institutions and promotes anti-liberal views, eroding faith in democratic institutions in what Mark Galeotti terms a "political war."²⁷³ He notes that Russia's initiatives in the West are mostly uncoordinated and opportunistic, driven by local conditions and concerns, but they fit within a broader strategy to undermine the EU and NATO.²⁷⁴ A further layer in this relationship involves Russia's historic ties to the GDR and a significant AfD-supporting Russian German community.²⁷⁵ Far-right illiberal movements worldwide share rhetoric on reclaiming national sovereignty, fighting globalist elites, and restoring traditional values, which can be served by repurposing revolutionary pasts for contemporary battles. Russia is certainly no stranger to the weaponization of history: scholars have shown how Putin recognizes the importance of controlling historical narratives to justify actions in the present.²⁷⁶ While the AfD, as has been shown, largely emphasizes the role of East German agency in reunification over that of the Soviet Union, questions are nevertheless raised regarding the authenticity of its mnemonic discourse: does it constitute a genuine local far-right discourse or an entangled product of global illiberal propaganda?²⁷⁷ As an additional piece of the puzzle that constitutes the present thesis, further research may perhaps shed light on the extent to which the

²⁷² See, for example, Maik Baumgärtner et al., "The Alternative Against Germany: How the AfD Became the Long Arm of Russia and China," *Der Spiegel*, May 1, 2024, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/afd-spionageaffaere-russland-und-china-im-fokus-neue-enthuellungen-belasten-die-partei-1714480876-a-a1c05e64-b6bc-4c6b-844e-a78a32ec4f91>; Marcus Bensmann, "Alternative for Russia: How the AfD is Systematically Turning Towards Russia," *Correctiv*, October 19, 2023, <https://correctiv.org/en/latest-stories/2023/10/19/alternative-for-russia-how-the-afd-is-systematically-turning-towards-russia/>.

²⁷³ "Political war" emphasizes the ways in which Russia uses covert, deniable and cyber means to tilt the balance of power in its favour. Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (London: Routledge, 2019), 1; Ramos and Raab, "Russia Abroad, Russia at Home," 83.

²⁷⁴ Galeotti, *Russian Political War*, 59.

²⁷⁵ Ramos and Raab, "Russia Abroad, Russia at Home," 80.

²⁷⁶ Izabella Tabarovsky and Katie Stallard, "Vladimir Putin and the 'Weaponization of History,'" Woodrow Wilson Center, March 16, 2022, YouTube video, 22:56. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgBmMSyIWbs>.

²⁷⁷ Steve Wood, "'Understanding' for Russia in Germany: International Triangle Meets Domestic Politics," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34, no. 6 (2021): 785.

far-right conceptualization of 1989 is a hybrid construct, difficult to disentangle from either authentic German radicalism or a transnational illiberal context.

To conclude, this research has illuminated the intricate ways in which memory politics, the far right and its many shades, the revolutions of 1989 and their legacies, memory cultures, and historical divisions are inherently intertwined. The thesis contributes to scholarly research concerning the historical legacies of the revolutions of 1989 by offering insights into the discursive deployment of memory by – and the nature of – far-right actors on the German political stage; at the same time, it sheds light on the significance of the concept of revolution in contemporary far-right politics in order to deepen our understanding of the intersections between memory, politics, and ideology. The present thesis cannot explain the upsurge of far-right populism in recent decades; however, it can shed light on the evolution, content, and strategic function(s) of mnemonic discourses as well as the connection between such discourses and the nature of the actors who construct them. Taking the politics of memory seriously means acknowledging that endeavours to shape historical memories are central to the contestation of power and that examining such endeavours may unveil novel insights into the political entities that shape them. This inquiry is built upon the belief that the study of memory goes to the heart of contemporary understandings of the past, and thus of attitudes toward the present and the future. The far right's memory politics and the alternative histories it constructs ought to be viewed in the context of an authoritarian-nationalist revolt challenging party systems, modes of democratic legitimization, and shared self-understandings.²⁷⁸ The present study therefore goes beyond a purely academic pursuit: as has been argued elsewhere, when all is said and done, the political remembrance of the far right is directed against contemporary liberal democracies and their future.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann, "Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe," 441.

²⁷⁹ Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann, "Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe," 442.

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