

Owen Morrison

Professor Marcuse

HIST 133C

22 November 2024

Echoes of the Past: Analyzing Björn Höcke's Rise in Modern German Politics

Source: Björn Höcke

Wikipedia pages:

English Wikipedia

“Björn Höcke.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 25 Oct. 2024,

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bj%C3%B6rn_H%C3%B6cke.

German Wikipedia

“Björn Höcke.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 22 Oct. 2024,

de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bj%C3%B6rn_H%C3%B6cke.



Photo: Ralf Hirschberger / DPA

Björn Höcke was born on April 1, 1972 and immediately thrust into the western part of a physically and politically divided Germany. Today, he is now one of the main conservative

culprits of modern Germany's political polarization as he has attempted to systematically change the way that Germany's past in World War II and the Holocaust is viewed. In the Thuringian state election on October 27, 2019, the AfD, headed by Höcke, almost doubled its share of votes and placed second. He recently led the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) to a first place finish in the Thuringia state election on September 1, 2024, marking the first time that a far-right organization has won such an election since the time of the Nazis.¹ The question that remains is who is this German politician that many refer to as a neo-Nazi, and how was he able to gain momentum by embracing facets of Nazism in a country that has been built on rebuking it?

Many experts believe ancestry plays a key role in his identity. Höcke was raised in West Germany, but he has always embraced the fact that his grandparents had to flee their home in East Germany after the Soviets entered the territory in 1944. This piece of family history has always made him resentful of the left and was a large contributor to both his family and his own right-leaning viewpoints on a variety of issues. Additionally, his parents instilled in him conservative values and ideas of German nationalism that he exhibits to extreme degrees in politics today.² These can be seen in how he repeatedly uses banned Nazi slogans that have caused him to incur court convictions and fines. His actions have caused reporters to draw comparisons with him and Adolf Hitler, and they cite his use of Nazi phrases such as "racial suicide" and "temperate brutality" as evidence.³ He is also the current chair of the Thuringian sector of the AfD, a party that is known to have ties to neo-Nazi groups to which he also has ties himself. Additionally, he promotes xenophobic and ultra-nationalist sentiments and pushes the idea that the Holocaust memorial in Berlin is a "monument of shame."⁴

Despite this, the AfD and Björn Höcke have found success among a substantial percentage of voters in the eastern part of Germany. Their victories are not necessarily a result of neo-Nazi ties,

¹ "Björn Höcke." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 25 Oct. 2024, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bj%C3%B6rn_H%C3%B6cke.

² Polke-Majewski, Karsten. "Björn Höcke: Mein Mitschüler, Der Rechte Agitator." *ZEIT ONLINE*, 18 Feb. 2016, www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2016-02/bjoern-hoecke-afd-rechtspopulismus-portraet.

³ Schuetze, Christopher F. "German Court Fines Far-Right Leader for Using Nazi Phrase." *The New York Times*, 14 May 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/05/14/world/europe/germany-afd-nazi-hoecke.html.

⁴ Bennhold, Katrin, and Melissa Eddy. "'Hitler or Höcke?' Germany's Far-Right Party Radicalizes." *The New York Times*, 26 Oct. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/10/26/world/europe/afd-election-east-germany-hoecke.htm

but mostly from the failure of the post-unification state to address social and economic inequalities between the West and East in the years since the Wall has fallen.⁵ Höcke has embraced the idea that the German government is in a state of disrepair, and that his ideologies and extremely conservative policies are the tool that is needed to fix it. Höcke and the AfD have targeted a significant portion of society in the East that still feels the negative lingering effects of a divided nation, and that part of society is willing to forget the sins of Germany's past to address their concerns.

Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

Polke-Majewski, Karsten. "Björn Höcke: Mein Mitschüler, Der Rechte Agitator." *ZEIT ONLINE*, 18 Feb. 2016, www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2016-02/bjoern-hoecke-afd-rechtspopulismus-portraet.

This biographical article is written from a firsthand perspective of a man who grew up in the same town as Björn Höcke. It explores his life and background, focusing on his family history and its influence on his political trajectory. His family's experience as East Prussian refugees after World War II, including his grandparents' focus on their lost homeland, is presented as a crucial element in shaping his worldview. The text then reveals connections between Höcke's family and various right-wing conservative groups and individuals, suggesting a link between his upbringing and his current political affiliations. Finally, the article contrasts Höcke's public image with his family history, emphasizing the disparity between his presented persona of a misunderstood victim and the evidence suggesting a deeper engagement with right-wing ideologies from a young age.

Taub, Amanda, and Max Fisher. "Germany's Extreme Right Challenges Guilt Over Nazi Past." *The New York Times*, 18 Jan. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/world/europe/germany-afd-alternative-bjorn-hoecke.html.

⁵ Pietromarchi, Virginia. "'Stark Rejection': How Germany's Far-Right AfD Won Key Election in the East." *Al Jazeera*, 3 Sept. 2024, www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/9/3/stark-rejection-how-germanys-far-right-afd-won-key-election-in-the-east.

This article by Amanda Taub examines the rise of the AfD and the increasingly vocal challenge it poses to Germany's long-standing national atonement for its Nazi past. Björn Höcke's views, embraced by a growing number of the AfD's supporters, particularly among young, educated individuals, challenge the established political norms in Germany, which have historically avoided overt displays of nationalism. The article suggests that the AfD and Höcke's success stems from its ability to tap into a sense of frustration and a desire for national pride among certain segments of the German population, who feel excluded from mainstream politics and see the AfD as a genuine voice for their concerns. The article also warns of the potential for extremist voices to gain influence in a political system where mainstream parties have struggled to address anxieties about national identity and cultural change.

Troianovski, Anton. "The German Right Believes It's Time to Discard the Country's Historical Guilt" *The Wall Street Journal. Eastern Edition*, 2 Mar. 2017.

This article discusses the rise of the AfD party. It details Björn Höcke's argument that Germany's focus on guilt and atonement for the Holocaust has overshadowed national pride and hampered the country's ability to assert its interests. The article highlights the AfD's efforts to promote a more "balanced" view of history, emphasizing German achievements alongside its dark past, and the controversy this has caused within the German political establishment. The article explores the AfD's appeal to voters who feel Germany has become too focused on its past and who want to see a stronger national identity. It also discusses the AfD's challenges, including accusations of historical revisionism and its struggle to maintain a balance between its nationalist and more mainstream supporters. It includes reference to a motion made by the AfD to use money that was intended for educational trips to Nazi injustice memorials and instead use it for trips to "significant German historical sites."

ZDF "Björn Höcke bricht ZDF-Interview ab und droht" *YouTube*, YouTube, 15 Sept. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfTo4jgPveE&t=179s.

This source is an interview conducted in German by ZDF on Björn Höcke. They begin by asking AfD members/supporters whether Höcke evoked language from “Mein Kampf” in his own book, to which they are incapable of discerning the two. Höcke refused to accept that this was true, and proceeded to say “I don't think there is a generally valid definition of what Nazi diction is, what Nazi language is.” He eventually ended the interview early as he felt threatened by the questions from the ZDF, and said they would suffer “massive consequences” if they refused to reshoot the interview. ZDF refused to reshoot the interview, and broadcast the original clip. This interview is indicative of Höcke’s hostility toward his critics and his inability to acknowledge or recognize the ways in which he evokes speech and slogans from the time of the Nazis.

Bennhold, Katrin, and Melissa Eddy. “‘Hitler or Höcke?’ Germany’s Far-Right Party Radicalizes.” *The New York Times*, 26 Oct. 2019,

www.nytimes.com/2019/10/26/world/europe/afd-election-east-germany-hoecke.htm

This article draws a strong parallel between Björn Höcke and Adolf Hitler, highlighting the similarities in their rhetoric and ideology. Bennhold and Eddy write that Höcke's language evokes that of the Nazis, and they state his views closely mirror those of Hitler. She argues that AfD lawmakers’ inability to distinguish between quotes from Höcke's book and Hitler's writings further underscores this resemblance. Höcke rejects many of Germany's faults in World War II and the Holocaust, criticizing the Holocaust memorial as a “monument of shame.” He has used Nazi terminology like “racial suicide,” “decaying state,” and “cultural Bolshevism” to promote his agenda. Furthermore, Bennhold and Eddy state that Höcke's vision for Germany involves dismantling the postwar liberal order and establishing a system where violence, or what he calls “temperate brutality,” is deemed necessary. This is similar to Hitler's ambition of overthrowing the Weimar Republic and creating a totalitarian state. Experts classify Höcke's ideology as “pre-fascist,” comparing his book to a modern-day “Mein Kampf.” This source suggest that Höcke's rise within the AfD signifies a broader radicalization within the party, potentially leading to the normalization of extremist views and an escalation of violence in Germany.

Schuetze, Christopher F. "Far-Right Faction of German Populist Party Vows to Dissolve." *The New York Times*, 25 Mar. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/world/europe/germany-populist-party.html.

In this article, Schuetze reports on the dissolution of Der Flügel or The Wing, a far-right faction within the AfD of which Björn Höcke is a part of. Following warnings from German intelligence and internal scandals involving links to neo-Nazi groups, The Wing announced it would cease to exist. However, experts like Professor Hajo Funke believe this was a tactical maneuver within the AfD's internal power struggles, not a genuine dismantling of its influence. The article highlights the ongoing tension between the AfD's more moderate and extremist wings, suggesting that The Wing's ideology and network may persist despite the announced dissolution. The key players, Björn Höcke and Andreas Kalbitz, remain in powerful positions within the party, and the article emphasizes their extreme views and potential continued impact.

Schuetze, Christopher F. "German Court Fines Far-Right Leader for Using Nazi Phrase." *The New York Times*, 14 May 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/05/14/world/europe/germany-afd-nazi-hoecke.html.

This article details how a German court fined Björn Höcke for using the banned Nazi slogan "Everything for Germany" during a 2021 campaign speech. Despite Höcke's defense that he was unaware of the phrase's Nazi origins, the court ruled against him, citing his background as a history teacher and the AfD's history of using the same phrase. The court emphasized that the use of Nazi slogans is illegal in Germany and carries a potential prison sentence of up to three years. The verdict came at a critical time for the AfD, as they were poised for potential gains in upcoming state elections, with Höcke possibly becoming the equivalent of a state governor. The party was facing internal challenges, including revelations about members' involvement in extremist activities and an ongoing investigation into an aide to a top party candidate. Judge Jan Stengel expressed concern about the "overuse" of free speech arguments to justify extremist language from Björn Höcke.

Solomon, Erika. "The Man Softening the Ground for an Extremist Germany." *The New York Times*, 23 June 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/06/23/world/europe/germany-extremism-hocke-afd-nazi.html.

This article explores the political trajectory of Björn Höcke. It details how Höcke has normalized far-right rhetoric in Germany, pushing the boundaries of acceptable political discourse and attempting to rewrite German history. Despite facing legal challenges for his use of Nazi slogans and his alleged connection to neo-Nazi publications, Höcke has gained significant influence within the AfD and continues to challenge the country's post-World War II democratic order. The article raises concerns about the normalization of extremist views and the potential for resurgent ultra-nationalism within Germany.

Schuetze, Christopher F. "German Court Fines Far-Right Politician for Using Nazi Phrase, Again." *The New York Times*, 2 July 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/07/02/world/europe/germany-court-fine-nazi-phrase-afd.html.

The article is about the second conviction of Björn Höcke, for using Nazi slogans. This incident displays how Höcke has repeatedly used rhetoric and symbols associated with the Nazi regime. The court imposed a fine of 16,900 euros, rejecting Höcke's defense that he was unaware of the phrase's historical context. This conviction came amidst the AfD's rising popularity in Germany, particularly in the eastern state of Thuringia, where Höcke leads the party. The AfD's success has been fueled by anxieties over immigration and Islam, and Höcke's extremist views, including his questioning of Germany's faults in World War II and his use of Nazi terminology, have resonated with a segment of the population.

Benoit, Bertrand. "The Man Who Would Make Germany Far Right Again." *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 Aug. 2024, www.wsj.com/world/europe/the-man-who-would-make-germany-right-wing-again-fd2b97f4.

This article reports on the rise of Björn Höcke and his potential to lead the AfD party to victory in the 2024 state election in Thuringia that he ended up winning. It also examines his extreme right-wing background and how that is incorporated into his policy views.

Bertrand cites the comments of Jörg Meuthen, a former AfD party chairman, where he states “Fundamentally, I find the goals that Höcke and his people are pursuing clearly dangerous for democracy,” Despite a history of controversial statements and a court-ordered ban on certain Nazi slogans, Höcke gained significant support in the eastern German state, capitalizing on public anxieties about immigration and multiculturalism. The article examines the AfD's platform and analyzes the implications of a potential Höcke-led state government for Germany's political landscape, exploring the possibility of a coalition with other parties and the potential impact on national politics.

Pietromarchi, Virginia. “‘Stark Rejection’: How Germany’s Far-Right AfD Won Key Election in the East.” *Al Jazeera*, 3 Sept. 2024, www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/9/3/stark-rejection-how-germanys-far-right-afd-won-key-election-in-the-east.

This article reports on AfD’s win in the Thuringia state elections, where the party won 32.8% of the vote. It largely analyzes why German voters in this state voted for the far-right party, and points to Berlin’s failure to mend a lapse in social and economic conditions in the eastern part of the country that stems all the way back to its communist roots and reunification. As a result of Berlin’s failure to invest in industry and infrastructure in the east, as well as their failure to address “immigration, social justice, and crime,” many voters in the east feel left behind by the current status quo.

Additionally, Pietromarchi cited The German Economic Institute’s statistics that show that eastern German households have merely half as much wealth as those in the West, and immigrants are beginning to fill local workforces as a result of low birthrates. The feelings of Germans in the east are well summarized by a policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations who stated that the win for the AfD “for many eastern voters represents the starkest rejection of being considered second-class citizens.” This displays that part of the AfD and Björn Höcke’s appeal is that they are markedly different than the social-democratic and center-left parties that have thrived in the West since the end of World War II.