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Resisting 'leftist dictatorship'? Memory politics and collective action framing in populist far-right street protest

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to cultural approaches to populism, focusing on the uses of memory in far-right protest politics. Conceptually, it develops a novel approach to memory politics suitable to investigate the uses of memory in grassroots mobilization by integrating scholarship on 'the politics of memory' and the 'movement-memory nexus'. Also, it argues for the conceptualization of populism as a collective action frame to explain the emergence and persistence of populist street mobilization. Methodologically, the article draws from the critical case study of the Dresden-based 'Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident' (PEGIDA), one of contemporary Europe's most sustained instances of populist far-right protest. Based on the interpretive analysis of original ethnographic data generated in demonstrations in Dresden in 2019-20, it shows how PEGIDA deploys controversial reinterpretations of regional, national, and European history to sustain the populist master frame of 'resistance against dictatorship', articulating the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elites' as a long-standing struggle of democracy against leftist totalitarianism. Uncovering the many ways in which PEGIDA strategically mobilizes the past, the analysis emphasizes the constitutive relationship between culture and populist protest, and demonstrates the dovetailing of populist and far-right ideational elements in grassroots mobilization.

KEYWORDS

ethnography; far right; Germany; memory politics; mobilization; populism

1. Introduction

As the populist far right rises globally (Mudde, 2019), scholarship struggles to explain the reasons and modes of its increasing success both inside and outside of national parliaments. Recent instances suggest that memory is a core tenet of populist far-right politics – the controversial display of the so-called Confederate flag in the United States or the historical Empire flag (*Reichsflagge*) in the German 'anti-lockdown' protests at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic are but two pertinent examples. Acknowledging the need for trustworthy interpretations of the phenomenon in Europe and beyond, this

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article contributes to cultural approaches to the populist far right (Aslanidis, 2020; Rensmann, 2017). Its focus on memory politics asserts that 'by concentrating on the symbols and figural language that refer to cultural memory as it is seen by the radical right, we may understand better the hidden logic behind its ideology, as well as the emotional and aesthetic appeal that it obviously has for many people' (Korhonen, 2020, p. 309).

In this article, I therefore analyse an instance of populist far-right mobilization, focusing on the memory politics by the eastern German protest group 'Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident' (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*, PEGIDA) (Druxes & Simpson, 2016; Vorländer et al., 2018). PEGIDA is certainly not a typical far-right memory agent pushing for ending the 'German cult of guild' (Eckersley, 2020; Volk, 2020a; Wüstenberg, 2019), however, previous studies found allusions to the 1989 East German Peaceful Revolution to be a major cultural tenet of its activism (Richardson-Little & Merrill, 2020; 2022).

Drawing from original ethnographic data generated in demonstrations and online in 2019-20, this article shows more specifically how and why memory narratives inform PEGIDA's protest culture. The frame-analytical approach to populism (Aslanidis, 2017) sheds light on how PEGIDA mobilizes historical symbolism related to the twentieth-century dictatorships in Germany to spell out the populist master frame of 'democratic resistance against leftist dictatorship', while the perspective of critical discourse analysis (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) aids to uncover how such references inspire the discursive construction of populist far-right activism as 'democratic', and the political establishment, counter-demonstrators, and Islam as 'leftist-totalitarian'. Unexpectedly for some, my ethnographic observations unveil PEGIDA's cultural repertoire beyond '1989': In addition to the Peaceful Revolution, activists strategically allude to the German resistance against Nazism to claim the (trans-)national heritage of anti-fascism, thereby also reinterpreting National-Socialism as a left-wing rather than right-wing dictatorship. They moreover evoke church reformer Martin Luther to associate their activism with both regional and transnational myths of rebellion against overpowering authorities, tying into universal ideals of freedom of conscience and protest (Knape, 2017).

Conceptually, I aim to contribute to the nascent field of research at the intersection of the politics of memory (Kaasik-Krogerus et al., 2020; Kubik & Bernhard, 2014), movement-memory nexus (Daphi & Zamponi, 2019; della Porta et al., 2018; Kubal & Becerra, 2014), and populist far-right political culture (Couperus & Tortola, 2019; Korhonen, 2020; Kotwas & Kubik, 2019; Rensmann, 2017). Drawing from all three strands of thought, I develop a novel theoretical approach to explore memory politics in contexts other than government institutions and party politics: The actor-centred lens of 'strategic uses of memory' allows for the study of memory politics in relation to protest politics and social movements. It reveals how strategic uses of the past play into the dynamics of mobilization as such, namely movement emergence and persistence over an extended period of time despite scarce resources. Second, I contribute to recent definitions of what populist far-right memory politics entail, emphasizing the explanatory power of the conceptualization of populism as a collective action frame (Aslanidis, 2020). My interpretive approach promises to reach a more fine-grained understanding of how ideology shapes memory politics, contributing to proposals of how to categorize populist far-right mnemonic strategies between the 'positive reassessment of dark history', the

'recourse to fake history', and the 'evocation and subsequent denial of links with the dark past' (Couperus & Tortola, 2019).

2. Conceptualizing memory politics in populist far-right protest

Political approaches to memory posit that politics of memory serve as an instrument for political actors to achieve present needs (Kaasik-Krogerus et al., 2020; Kubik & Bernhard, 2014). Such a perspective focuses on the semiotic (or: cultural) 'strategies that political actors employ to make others remember in certain, specific ways and the effects of such mnemonic manipulations' (Kubik & Bernhard, 2014, p. 7). Semiotic strategies include the adoption of specific political-cultural identities or use of particular ideological themes which resonate with the available cultural repertoire in a given political context, and are devised against the backdrop of cultural constraints to political action.

Even though the literature explicitly states that all types of political actors use memory in strategic ways, authors have so far predominantly focused on institutional and party memory politics. To conceptualize memory politics by grassroots actors beyond governments, I draw from scholarship on the movement-memory nexus (Daphi & Zamponi, 2019; della Porta et al., 2018; Kubal & Becerra, 2014; Thompson, 2020). Distinguishing between movements 'about' memory (memory agents) and memory 'in' movements (Daphi & Zamponi, 2019), this literature theorizes how the past and memory narratives serve as 'a cultural resource out of which activists draw symbols and ideas' (Kubal & Becerra, 2014, p. 872). Specifically, movement actors manipulate certain readings of the past for the sake of mobilization, most importantly via the strategic framing of collective action, identities, and goals. Empirical research looks at how activists deploy instances of historical symbolism and semiotics such as meaningful slogans and flags, and figuratively re-perform past events in public, among other strategies (della Porta et al., 2018).

Inspired by both strands of thought, this study adopts an actor-centred approach to memory politics in the context of populist far-right protest. It proposes a broad conceptualization of memory politics as 'strategic uses of memory', emphasizing the semiotic strategies adopted by political actors as well as the collective action frames emerging from these strategies. Such a conceptualization allows to analyse memory politics associated with a broad variety of political actors, including non-elected and non-party actors such as social movements and populist far-right protest.

Against the backdrop of anti-establishment protest writ-large, I use the concept of 'far right' as an umbrella term for both radical right and extreme right actors whose ideologies assume and justify fundamental inequalities amongst human beings (Bobbio, 1996). Typically oscillating between populist, radical and extreme positions (Akel, 2021; Volk & Weisskircher, 2022), far-right actors constitute an 'illiberal' up to 'anti-democratic opposition to equality' (Jupskås, 2020; Jupskås & Segers, 2020). Apart from nativism and authoritarianism, populism is a core feature of far-right actors in contemporary Europe (Mudde, 2007), including eastern Germany (Rensmann, 2018; Weisskircher, 2020; Yoder, 2020). My understanding of populism integrates ideational and discursive-performative approaches to grasp both the logic and practices of empirical populism (Kotwas & Kubik, 2019). I refer to populism as an – at least allegedly – pro-democratic ideology which believes in the fundamental division of society into a 'good people' and a 'corrupted elite' (Mudde, 2007). The discursive-performative perspective then sheds light on how political actors articulate

populism's antagonistic logic in speech and action, typically focusing on the unequal power relations between the 'oppressive' elites and the people as 'suppressed underdog' (De Cleen, 2017; Moffitt, 2016). Such a perspective is particularly suited to the analysis of grassroots mobilization as it allows to shift the focus from outsider politicians hunting for votes to protest groups claiming to emancipate 'the people' on the streets (Aslanidis, 2017; Volk, 2020b).

My approach to populist far-right memory politics builds on an interpretive understanding of (political) culture which significantly differs from behavioralist models commonly adopted in political science – also in the context of Dresden and PEGIDA (Almond & Verba, 1963; Reuband, 2020). Based on a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology, I view culture as a set of meanings that serves as a 'toolkit' providing scripts, symbols, and rituals, from which political actors choose elements to engage in meaning-making practices (Bevir & Rhodes, 2016; Swidler, 1986; Wedeen, 2002). Accordingly, political cultures can be understood as 'meaning systems that are culturally available for talking, writing, and thinking about political objects: the myths and metaphors, the language and idea elements, the frames, ideologies, values, and condensing symbols' (Gamson, 1988, p. 220; as quoted in Aronoff & Kubik, 2013, p. 68). While recognizing that culture may also reduce actors' free choices, for instance when assuming political-cultural identities, this approach emphasizes the agency of political players such as PEGIDA.

3. Methods and material

In line with the interpretive theoretical framework, this article's research strategy is to conduct a case study of the uses of memory by the Dresden-based 'Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident'. Since 2014, this small-scale protest group around leader Lutz Bachmann has been organizing about fortnightly demonstrations in Dresden's historical centre where it mobilized a record number of 25,000 protestors in 2015 (Vorländer et al., 2018, p. 5), and up to 3,000 participants during my fieldwork stay in Dresden in 2019-20. Its average supporters are male, middle-aged, and non-religious members of the working population of Dresden and surroundings (Vorländer et al., 2018, pp. 73–98). On the streets, they typically confront smaller crowds of left-wing and pro-immigrant counter-demonstrators, some of them associated with organized anti-fascism ('Antifa'). While PEGIDA claims to be 'patriotic', the literature overwhelmingly defines its ideology and discourse as a combination of populist, radical, and extremist elements, and thus exemplary for populist far-right actors in contemporary Europe (Druxes & Simpson, 2016; Kocyba, 2020; Virchow, 2016; Volk, 2020b; Volk & Weisskircher, 2022; Vorländer et al., 2018).

By the beginning of the 2020s, PEGIDA is firmly embedded in a broader European populist far-right social movement (Botsch, 2016; Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019; Volk, 2021). The regular demonstrations, especially the ritualistic anniversary events, provide networking opportunities for other players in the scene, including representatives from the party Alternative for Germany (AfD), the youth organization Generation Identity, the so-called 'Institute for State Politics' think tank and its publishing house Antaios, or 'alternative' news outlets like Compact magazine and Politically Incorrect News (PI News). As a major reference point within the network, PEGIDA represents a pertinent

example for understanding the strategic uses of memory by further populist far-right actors from Germany and beyond. In fact, PEGIDA constitutes a 'critical' case (Snow, 2004a) to study populist far-right memory politics: While culture is a crucial element in PEGIDA's street and online activism (Coury, 2016; Richardson-Little & Merrill, 2020; Virchow, 2016; Volk, 2019), the organization is set within the 'unified' memory regime of reunited Germany, which provides little room for mnemonic manoeuvre by oppositional actors (Art, 2014; Kubik & Bernhard, 2014). Yet, PEGIDA drives and benefits from a dynamic discursive context in eastern Germany: In conjunction with AfD, it has contributed to the normalization of populist far-right semiotics, and thus co-constituted new discursive opportunity structures for anti-establishment actors on the right of the political spectrum (Rensmann, 2019; Welsh, 2019; Yoder, 2020).

Among the toolkit of interpretive methodologies (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), I adopt an ethnographic approach to data generation. As the 'prime method' to gain insight into political culture (Aronoff & Kubik, 2013), such an approach promises new insights into the production of meaning in action and the symbolic dimensions of protest (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014; Brodkin, 2017). Aiming to analyse strategic uses of memory from the 'native's point of view' (Geertz, 1973), I draw from ethnographic fieldwork in protest events and web-based research of online activism. Specifically, I conducted participant and non-participant observation in more than ten demonstrations, using both immediate and mediated techniques of recording such as filming, photographing, jotting, and detailed field notes. My physical fieldwork took place in Dresden in fall and winter 2019-20, and thus comprised a few outstanding internal events such as PEGIDA's five-year anniversary on 20 October 2019 and the two-hundredth demonstration on 17 February 2020, as well as impactful external events such as the Saxon state elections on 1 September 2019, the adoption of a motion on a so-called 'Nazi emergency' by the city council on 30 October 2019, the Thuringian government crisis in February 2020, and the declaration of an AfD party faction as 'extremist' (*rechtsextrem*) by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*) in March 2020. During and beyond this time frame, I systematically archived contents on PEGIDA's website, YouTube and Telegram channel(s) that informed about protest activities. Drawing from YouTube, I moreover archived videos of entire demonstrations that PEGIDA broadcast in real-time.

In the following, I operationalize semiotic strategies (Kubik & Bernhard, 2014) based on frame analysis and critical discourse analysis, some of the key methods of cultural approaches to social movements and populist far-right politics, respectively (Jasper, 1997; Lindekilde, 2014; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Snow, 2004b). Highlighting the agency of movements rather than structural conditions, cultural approaches explain mobilization beyond political opportunity structures and resource mobilization (Goodwin et al., 1999). The focus on collective action frames based on culture is particularly suited to study instances of populist grassroots mobilization (Aslanidis, 2020). Specifically, I explore the collective action frames which PEGIDA constructs via the strategic display of historical symbolism in public, namely so-called 'master', 'diagnostic' and 'prognostic' frames. Additionally, based on Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) discussion of discursive strategies to construct in-group and out-group(s), I acknowledge populism's antagonistic logic by examining how PEGIDA references certain instances and understandings of the past to

depict 'the people' as a 'democratic' in-group, and the political establishment, counter-demonstrators, and Islam and Muslims as 'totalitarian' out-groups.

4. PEGIDA's strategic uses of memory

At a PEGIDA rally taking place on Dresden's *Neumarkt* between the historically reconstructed *Frauenkirche* and the feet of the larger-than-life statue of church reformer Martin Luther on 20 January 2020, a demonstrator carried a somewhat makeshift placard displaying a quote ascribed to the resistance fighter, novelist, and French statesman André Malraux: 'Who wants to read in the future must browse the past.' Indeed, 'browsing the past' is at the core of PEGIDA's cultural strategies. My ethnographic observations of demonstrations and rallies reveal that PEGIDA prominently deploys historical symbolism: Linguistic, visual, and performative dimensions of protest allude to periods of local, regional, national, and European history

Within my corpus generated in the field and online in 2019-20, the most frequent citations include the following historical periods and actors: firstly, the so-called 'Peaceful Revolution' in East Germany in 1989-90, which contributed to the demise of the communist regime of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR); secondly, the centrist and Catholic conservative resistance circles around Hitler-attacker Claus von Stauffenberg; thirdly, the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation of the Roman Catholic Church, in particular in connection with the Catholic monk and church reformer Martin Luther; and fourthly, references to German and European intellectual history writ-large.

PEGIDA's selection of historical references is characterized by them already being part of state-sponsored politics of memory and by a certain degree of connection to the regional context. Indeed, the citations do not only evoke some of the most positively remembered moments in German twentieth-century history such as the antifascist resistance and the Peaceful Revolution. Also, they resonate with local political culture due to their connection with the regional context of the state of Saxony of which Dresden is the capital (Göpffahrt, 2021; Leser et al., 2019; Rensmann, 2017). For instance, the 1989 Peaceful Revolution took off from the Saxon city of Leipzig with the weekly 'Monday Demonstrations' and reached Dresden in October 1989. Church reformer Martin Luther lived in what is today eastern Germany, and Saxony was the first kingdom to officially adopt Protestantism. Both realms of memory are represented in the public space of Dresden, including a statue of Martin Luther on *Neumarkt*, the heart of the reconstructed city centre, and a 'revolutionary path' on *Pragerstraße* which connects the Central Station, where protests erupted in 1989, with the historical nucleus.

4.1 The master frame of 'democratic resistance against leftist dictatorship'

'We welcome all patriots here in Dresden, the capital of resistance!', proclaimed protest leader Wolfgang Taufkirch at the beginning of each PEGIDA demonstration in 2019-20. During the events, the crowd repeatedly chanted '*Widerstand, Widerstand*' ('resistance, resistance'), for instance in response to Lutz Bachmann's rejection of censuring his speech at the 2019 Christmas rally, taking place on *Theaterplatz* close to the reconstructed *Semperoper*. In line with these observations, PEGIDA's core semiotic strategy consists of deploying a populist collective action frame based on the notion of 'democratic resistance

against dictatorship'. This 'master frame', that is a generic, inclusive collective action frame which resonates with social movement activists and organizations more broadly (Jasper, 1997, p. 75), construes meaningful interpretations of German politicians and representative institutions and PEGIDA's activism itself. Notably, PEGIDA demonstrators understand the protest events as instances of democratic resistance against an allegedly dictatorial regime, rooted in the 'right to resist' as included in the Basic Law, Germany's constitution.

Historical references, displayed in language and image at demonstrations as well as online, are the main discursive tool to articulate this master frame. A 2017 website entry published on the anniversary of the so-called Fall of the Berlin Wall poignantly illustrates how activists mobilize East Germany's recent revolutionary history to give meaning to contemporary politics and actors:

> In 2014, a resistance movement grew again in East Germany – in Dresden. For already three years, critically of the government and Islam, it opposes a government that, like in GDR-times, continuously decides against the majority of the people. The Merkel-regime has appropriated the past socialist structures, the people has to function, submission to the authorities is desired, also gladly in the voting booth. This form of politics has worked for twelve years, the people has diligently financed two expensive and unnecessary financial crises as well as the exit from nuclear energy. Yet, we opt out of the 'refugee crisis', which threatens our economy, our culture, and our future! PEGIDA goes ahead in these times and, just like 28 years ago, it looks like a regime will be toppled for the second time within one generation. We are the people!

As exemplified in this excerpt, PEGIDA evokes the past to articulate a historically rooted narrative according to the antagonistic logic of populist discourse, featuring the resistance of a structurally disempowered but righteous social group against overpowering and totalitarian authorities. Apart from the many references to peaceful revolutionaries toppling the GDR regime, PEGIDA's discourse also alludes to antifascist martyrs vs. the Nazi regime of the Third *Reich*, a monk true to his own conscience and to God vs. an absolutist Roman Catholic Church, and a national hero vs. imperialist Frenchmen.

Specifically, the diagnostic frame purports that the contemporary Federal Republic (FRG) has ceased to be a liberal democracy, and resembles an authoritarian, even dictatorial regime lacking fundamental democratic rights such as freedom of conscience. Activists reach this conclusion based on historical comparisons of the current political system with regimes such as the Nazi Third *Reich* or the communist GDR. At the demonstration celebrating the two-hundredth protest event, taking place on Dresden's picturesque *Neumarkt* on 17 February 2020 and thus in the context of the Thuringian government crisis, during which the newly elected regional governor stepped down after it became clear that AfD votes had lifted him into office, leading activist Lutz Bachmann proclaimed that 'The GDR has come back indeed!' Bachmann argued that the domestic security service was a contemporary equivalent to the infamous secret police organizations of both GDR ('*Stasi*') and Nazi Germany:

> The best example [for the return of the GDR] is the contemporary observation of several democratically elected parliamentarians by this *Stasi* 2.0, called *Verfassungsschutz*. Again, so-called personal records are compiled. All of this happened already twice in German history, but obviously nobody has learned anything.

The comparison of the political systems of reunited Germany with GDR and Third *Reich* generates an alarming diagnostic frame of crisis recurrent in populist politics (Moffitt, 2015). In speeches and online, PEGIDA suggests that 'Germany is in decline' due to

political mismanagement, immigration, and social change. Activists refer to German intellectual history to flesh out the claims of their diagnosis, most importantly by mobilizing the notion of the declining 'Christian West' or 'Occident' (*Abendland*), for instance in the organization's name. Originating in Catholic, conservative circles, the *Abendland* as a cultural-political concept for Europe constitutes an important tenet of contemporary German-language far-right crisis narratives (Weiß, 2017). It is regarded to be in decline at least since Oswald Spengler's 1922 publication *The Decline of the Occident*.

Beyond the rhetoric of crisis, PEGIDA also constructs a hopeful prognostic frame based on historical citations. For instance, in the demonstrations in 2019–20 a large placard carried by regulars featured an anti-Napoleonic poem ascribed to Theodor Körner, a nineteenth-century poet and German national resistance hero originating in Dresden: 'Still you are sitting on top, you coward creatures, // paid by the enemy and mocked by the people. // One day justice will reign, // then the people will judge and may God be merciful on you.' In line with the idea of final justice in this poem, leading activists declare that 'PEGIDA came to stay. We stay in order to win. And we will win!' towards the closing of each demonstration. As exemplified in the website entry displayed at the beginning of this section, references to the Peaceful Revolution inform the prognosis of 'victory' (see also Göpffahrt, 2021), suggesting a reading of the 1989 demonstrations as the causal factor for the demise of the GDR regime. Due to their regular presence on the squares and streets of Dresden on Monday evenings, contemporary demonstrators believe to be initiating a major system change 'just like in 1989'.

4.2 A democratic in-group vs. totalitarian out-groups?

The perspective of critical discourse analysis provides further insight into how the articulation of antagonistic societal groups sustains PEGIDA's collective action framing (Lindekilde, 2014; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). Cultural strategies relate to the discursive division of society into an in-group, that is the self-declared 'democratic' populist far-right scene, in opposition to several 'non-democratic' out-group(s), including the 'leftist-totalitarian' establishment, the 'green-fascist' counter-demonstrators, and 'extremist' Islam. At each event, demonstrators performed PEGIDA's self-identification as heirs of historical freedom fighters by displaying historical symbolism evoking past resistance actors on placards, banners, and flags. At the same time, PEGIDA portrayed itself as a precursor of a European or even global movement rebelling against the political establishment. At anniversary events like the one in February 2020, guest speakers such as the Thuringian AfD leader Björn Höcke congratulated PEGIDA for its role within the populist far-right movement and German revolutionary history: 'You continue to write the German history of freedom, the good part of the German past!'

Again, allusions to 1989 serve to discursively construct the in-group as an heir of German and international democracy and peace movements as well as 'nonviolent resistance' forces (Volk & Weisskircher, 2022). PEGIDA ostentatiously cites 1989: Not only do demonstrators chant the famous revolutionary slogan '*Wir sind das Volk*' ('We are the people'), and display it on placards and German national flags which they wave in the air in response to the speeches on stage. Also, since 2014 most demonstrations have been taking place on Monday evenings, borrowing from the so-called Monday Demonstrations which were one of the carriers of the system change in East Germany. The

leading activists' depiction of PEGIDA and other populist far-right players as a 'civil' or 'civilian' movement (*Bürgerbewegung*) is similarly rooted in the discourse on civilian protest in Central Europe of the late 1980s (Garton Ash, 1999, p. 147).

Crucially, PEGIDA generates such political meaning in its protest performances on the streets and squares of Dresden. Before, during and after my fieldwork period, PEGIDA events most often took place at symbolic places in the city centre such as the site of the *Frauenkirche* and Dresden's central station, which symbolize the East German peace movement of the 1980s and the idea of 'peaceful revolution', respectively (Widera, 2020). In line with these strategic locations, demonstrators brought placards and flags which displayed peace symbolism such as white doves and the slogan 'Swords into plowshares'. Leading activists repeatedly emphasized the 'peaceful' character of the demonstrations in their speeches; in fact, initially they had named the group 'Peaceful Europeans' rather than 'Patriotic Europeans' (Vorländer et al., 2018, p. 4). By raising lighters and lit mobile phones into the evening sky towards the end of demonstrations, the crowd copied the use of candles in peace movements, and particularly ritual commemorations of the victims of the 1945 bombings of Dresden that take place at the site of the *Frauenkirche* since the early 1980s (Klose, 2020).

Beyond the chiffre of 1989, PEGIDA sustains the image of a structurally inferior, yet valiant and impactful 'underdog' (De Cleen, 2017) by citing the German resistance during the Third *Reich* and the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation of the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, one of the key symbols related to the centrist and Catholic conservative resistance circles around Hitler-attacker Claus von Stauffenberg dominated demonstrations since the inception of protest: the so-called 'Wirmer Flag', a cross in 'German' colours, which was designed as a counter-symbol to the swastika by resistance fighter Josef Wirmer (Vorländer et al., 2018, p. 22). In addition, PEGIDA appeals to regional myths of resistance by citing the Protestant Reformation, particularly in connection with church reformer Martin Luther. In 2019-20, demonstrations frequently took place 'at the Luther-statue' on Dresden's *Neumarkt*, suggesting that the larger-than-life Luther watched like a patron over the demonstrating crowd. PEGIDA's 2015 manifesto, the so-called 'Theses of Dresden' (*Dresdner Thesen*) which were still regularly read out at demonstrations in 2019-20, moreover allude to Luther's reformatory '95 theses'. Leader Bachmann's 2015 Facebook video entitled 'Like Luther', showing him as he pins a printout of PEGIDA's 'Theses of Dresden' against a church door in Dresden, references the myth of Luther nailing 95 theses against a church door in the town of Wittenberg, then denouncing the practices of the Roman Catholic Church as non-Christian.

The depiction of the political establishment as an out-group, namely as 'leftist totalitarianism', is the second dimension of PEGIDA's collective action frame of 'democratic resistance against leftist dictatorship'. My ethnographic observations indicate that historical citations are again the key discursive tool to construct the political establishment as a totalitarian, 'neo-communist' or 'neo-socialist' system, namely based on the comparison of the state of democracy in reunited Germany, specifically its government, chancellor, party system, and institutions, with the past dictatorships in Germany. Expectedly, PEGIDA uses symbolism associated with the Peaceful Revolution to strike a direct parallel between the Federal Republic and the GDR. At the two-hundredth event, taking place in the context of the Thuringian government crisis, demonstrators visualized this comparison particularly clearly: Supported by hand-written placards, they claimed 'Never again

German Democratic Republic!' and 'No third dictatorship in Germany!', and critically conflated the respective state acronyms 'GDR-FRG [*DDR-BRD*]'. They blamed the 'democratic demise' on Germany's long-term chancellor Angela Merkel: At PEGIDA's five-year anniversary event on 20 October 2019, a printed placard delegitimized her as the 'biggest disrupter [*Spalterin*] in history', asking 'when will we finally dispose of her?' Similarly, in February 2020, a placard showed the politician with a fierce facial expression accompanied by texts such as 'I decide who will be elected' and 'A turning point in 1989? Error!'

Additionally, references to European intellectual and revolutionary history are crucial tenets of PEGIDA's discourse on the allegedly 'totalitarian' elites. In 2019-20, PEGIDA quoted a few German and European intellectuals. Apart from Theodor Körner's anti-establishment poem discussed in the previous section, such quotes included George Orwell's predication that 'The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those that speak it', suggesting that the German political establishment cut back the right to freedom of expression to silence the populist far-right 'civil movements'.

Understandings of the establishment as specifically *leftist*-totalitarian arise from the use of two discursive strategies. Firstly, activists conflated Germany's 'mainstream' parties with the GDR's communist state party, the 'Socialist Unity Party of Germany' (SED). In fact, in the aftermath of the regional elections in three eastern German federal states in 2019, the established parties from conservative Christian Democrats to 'The Left', the successor party of the GDR state party, took up historically unprecedented coalition talks to form majority governments excluding far-right AfD. PEGIDA speakers denounced these ideologically broad coalitions as the 'New Unity Party of Germany' or 'NED'. For instance, on 17 February 2020 leader Bachmann declared:

> Friends, I cannot believe that the self-declared liberators of the GDR, all the bigwigs of the West German parties, who promised us democracy and blooming landscapes … , now want to rebuild a dictatorship, and that they cooperate with those responsible for the wall, injustice, crimes against humanity, and hundredfold murder at the intra-German border and in GDR educational institutions and prisons … Here we are, nearly thirty years after the German reunification, and we have exactly the same national front, a sect of bigwigs, who squeeze money out of the people and are living in the lab of luxury, completely detached from reality.

Secondly, and somewhat unexpectedly in the context of populist far-right mobilization, PEGIDA evokes the German Nazi past to denounce the Merkel-government as *leftist*-totalitarian. Such meaning is based on a controversial re-interpretation of the Third *Reich* as a left-wing rather than right-wing dictatorship. Online, leading activist Lutz Bachmann repeatedly justified this re-interpretation by pointing to the notions of 'socialism' and 'worker' in the name of the National-Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). For instance, he propagated that ''socialists' have engulfed Germany in the abyss already twice' in a Telegram tweet on 27 February 2020, and compared Antifa to NSDAP: 'after all they are socialists!' Placards carried by demonstrators display similar meanings; for instance, at a demonstration on 20 January 2020, a placard rhymed 'Hitler was a leftist stinker [*linker Stinker*]'.

The re-interpretation of National-Socialism also informs PEGIDA's construction of a second out-group, namely the counter-demonstrators. Speakers repeatedly vilified the mainly Antifa-related and pro-migrant activists as 'leftist-green fascists'. On 4 November

2019, a few days after Dresden's city council adopted the controversial 'Nazi emergency' motion, Bachmann referred to them as the 'storm detachment of the socialists', thus evoking the Nazi paramilitary organization *Sturmabteilung* (SA). A powerful visual tool is the re-erection of a symbolic 'anti-fascist protection barrier', the GDR's official designation of the intra-German border, and the ironic re-interpretation of its meaning: At special events such as anniversaries, when both PEGIDA and the counter-demonstrators mobilize larger crowds, PEGIDA 'shields' its supporters with a vast piece of cloth in the colours of the German flag. Appropriating GDR propaganda, organizers jokingly refer to the fabric as an 'anti-fascist barrier' and proclaim that the 'fascists' are outside of it, namely on the side of the counter-demonstrators.

Expectedly, PEGIDA's collective action framing excludes another group from the 'democratic people', namely Islam and Muslims. Also in this context, activists draw on the past, especially European intellectual history, to portray Muslims as extremist and non-democratic. For instance, at the five-year anniversary event on 20 October 2019, guest speaker Michael Stürzenberger, the editor of the online platform PI News, quoted Martin Luther's 1529 book *On War Against the Turk* to depict Muslims as violent: 'Islam did not get so far with sermons and marvels, but with the sword and murders'. As a well-respected intellectual source in the region and beyond, the reference to Lutheran writing served to increase the weight and credibility of the proposition. Unexpectedly, Stürzenberger went on quoting Karl Marx to denounce Muslims as inherently dissentious and quarrelsome: 'Islam creates a state of permanent enmity between Muslims and non-believers.' This quote points to the trend among the German-speaking populist far right to consume left-wing literature for strategic reasons (Kaiser, 2019). Also, based on my observations, Stürzenberger directed this specific quote at the counter-demonstrators, mocking them as uneducated: 'He knew more than you 160 years ago! Wake up, use your loaf – if existing – and fight the political state!'

5. Understanding populist far-right memory politics

My analysis of PEGIDA's strategic uses of memory contributes to a more fine-grained understanding of populist far-right memory politics and the construction of populist far-right ideology in public protest. The ethnographic lens emphasizes that political meanings such as PEGIDA being an heir of the 1989 Monday Demonstrations are not pre-existing and static notions, but arise from the rallies themselves, among other things due to their symbolic locations in the city of Dresden. At the same time, this perspective uncovers some of the ambivalences of populist far-right ideology in contemporary Germany. In fact, the conceptual lens of 'far right' creates some interpretive tensions in the case of PEGIDA: Apart from the occasionally employed slogans of 'lying press' and 'traitor of the people', in 2019–20 activists did not deploy historical symbolism typical for past far-right movements such as torches, the swastika, or Germanic tokens (Schuppener, 2016). Rather, historical references to the antifascist resistance against Nazism dominated protest. Ironically, however, some of the symbols aiming to express PEGIDA's rejection of Nazism and extremism have assumed the semiotic value of typical far-right repertoires in recent years: Both the Wirmer flag and the discursive frame of 'resistance' (or: 'counter-revolution') have been appropriated by other German populist far-right actors (Leser et al., 2019; Rensmann, 2017; Schlürmann, 2015; Weiß, 2017). Similarly,

actors such as AfD have mobilized some of the symbols of 1989 to appeal to the memory of anti-communist resistance (Simon, 2019).

In particular, my analysis sheds light on the relationship between different ideational elements in PEGIDA's discourse, emphasizing that both notions of 'populism' and 'far right' are necessary to understand grassroots uses of memory. The antagonistic logic of populism accounts for how PEGIDA arranges seemingly random historical references into the consistent master frame of 'resistance against dictatorship'. The inequality doctrine of far-right ideology, including the staunch rejection of what is (perceived as being) on the left of the political spectrum, explains the construction of in-group and out-groups. Crucially, far-right ideology informs PEGIDA's memory politics with regard to the symbolism deployed to suggest a questionable historical continuity of 'leftist fascism' from the supposedly left-wing dictator Adolf Hitler over GDR-style communism to the contemporary government as well as leftist counter-demonstrators. This mnemonic strategy can be classified as 'fake history' typical for grassroots actors (Couperus & Tortola, 2019). In this perspective, the re-interpretation of National-Socialism as a leftist dictatorship is an instance of fake history which seeks to integrate Germany's dark past into a coherent memory narrative of a constant societal struggle against 'the Left'.

Ethnographic data also allows for detailed insights into how 'far-right' and 'populist' ideational elements dovetail in PEGIDA's past-inspired collective action framing and exclusionary group constructions. For instance, the populist slogan of 'We are the people' takes a nativist turn as PEGIDA demonstrators wrote it on German national flags, thus reducing the social group of 'the people' to German nationals via aesthetic choice. Also, most of the time, in 2019–20 PEGIDA did not draw from the memory of *any* past resistance movement, but carefully avoided referring to left-wing resistance actors, for instance the German workers' movement, the student revolts of 1968, or the various waves of ecological mobilization. References to left-wing ideology, including GDR propaganda and Marxist writings, remained scarce and mostly ironic. For instance, PEGIDA reinterpreted GDR propagandistic speech of the 'anti-fascist protection barrier' to mock the establishment and counter-demonstrators.

Drawing from the frame-analytical approach to the populist far right, I thus propose to understand memory politics as constitutive for mobilization, that is, for the emergence and persistence of populist far-right protest as such. PEGIDA's uses of memory clearly exceed practical matters of protest organization and the 'decoration' of demonstrations with flags: Rather, activists deploy memory narratives in strategic ways, namely as a powerful semiotic tool to give meaning to protest which is thus placed in an imagined tradition of anti-establishment and pro-democratic revolts in regional, national, and transnational history. Hence, while my results partially confirm previous scholarship which posits that 1989 plays a role in both individual and collective identity constructions (Geiges et al., 2015), they question that PEGIDA's uses of memory are either non-strategic political 'folklore' (Weiß, 2017, p. 153) and a little reflected choice (Geiges et al., 2015, p. 117), or that they come down to a mere legitimation strategy (Richardson-Little & Merrill, 2020).

In line with Thompson's assertion that 'When arranged in deliberate sequences and incorporated into broader mobilization frameworks, historical citations […] can prompt constituencies to assume responsibility for history itself' (Thompson, 2020, p. 545), my findings indicate that strategic historical references relate to movement emergence: Political actors may mobilize memory as a semiotic tool to generate meanings which make

public protest seem necessary. The case study of PEGIDA offers a pertinent example as it reveals that strategic uses of the past generate the impactful conviction that citizen-induced regime change is possible, and convince supporters to protest 'like Luther' or 'like in 1989'. This study thus also offers a new explanation for PEGIDA's emergence. Indeed, behavioral approaches to political culture (Almond & Verba, 1963) have only limited explanatory power in the context of populist far-right mobilization in Dresden: Surveys of political attitudes held by the local population and PEGIDA protestors cannot explain the emergence and persistence of the movement as neither group significantly diverts from the German population (Reuband 2015; 2020).

PEGIDA moreover proves to be a critical case to demonstrate the relationship between culture and movement persistence. As PEGIDA has been mobilizing for years despite highly unfavourable context conditions, the constitutive value of culture for populist far-right protest can barely be overstated. The strategic display and adaption of available cultural resources such as memory narratives are key to explain PEGIDA's 'strange survival'. Indeed, the group has long been suffering from rather scarce human, organizational and political resources: After the peak in 2014-15, only a handful of activists stemmed organizational tasks, and only around 1,500 participants took to the streets on a regular basis. By the early 2020s, PEGIDA also lacked powerful allies, as the local newspaper *Sächsische Zeitung* reported only occasionally and mostly negatively, and the established political parties and even the national elites of AfD aimed to keep a *cordon sanitaire* towards PEGIDA (Weisskircher & Berntzen, 2019). From March 2020 onwards, the context of the COVID-19 pandemic created another major challenge, forcing PEGIDA to adapt its protest ritual (Volk, 2021). It appears that culture remained PEGIDA's principal resource during these months and years, thus strongly shaping mobilization.

6. Concluding remarks

This article demonstrates the value of cultural approaches to generate novel and nuanced interpretations of the rising populist far right in Germany and beyond. Spelling out the approach to populism as a collective action frame at an empirical example, it confirms the analytic value of the populism-concept for the study of the contemporary European far right despite an alleged overuse and lack of precision: The antagonistic and supposedly pro-democratic ('populist') ideational elements complement the nativist and anti-left ('far-right') ones in PEGIDA's memory politics.

Beyond the empirical case, this article's results serve as a useful lens to understand the cultural tenets of far-right grassroots mobilization in Germany more broadly, particularly during the crisis-ridden year 2020, marked by the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and successive periods of 'lockdown'. My findings on PEGIDA's uses of memory foreshadow the political developments in the context of the ambiguous 'anti-lockdown' mobilization associated with the so-called *Querdenken* movement that appropriated the German term for creative 'lateral thinking' for its partially far-right protest (Grande et al., 2021). Indeed, *Querdenken* protests used memory in ways similar to PEGIDA: Speakers compared 'lockdown' politics with Germany's past dictatorships ('corona-dictatorship') and referred to anti-fascist resistance fighters such as Hans and Sophie Scholl as their idols. Dresden's local branch even appealed to the myth of Martin Luther's 95 theses at their first anniversary on 31 October 2021.

Finally, my study opens up avenues for further research. Future analyses should also focus on the constraining role of culture, yielding new insights into the structure-agency problem in social movement research. Also, my findings on PEGIDA's references to 1989 call for a comparative analysis of how political actors in post-communist Europe draw from the transformation period. In line with the notion of a delayed illiberal backlash against the so-called 'politics of imitation' of the 1990s (Krastev & Holmes, 2020), the populist master frame of 'resistance' might resonate with the politics of memory by further populist far-right actors in the region.

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