



# TARGETING EXTREMISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

## Relevant Conspiracy Theories in Germany National Report



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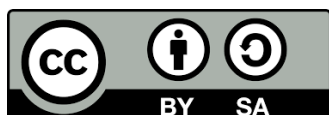
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## 1. Definition and discourse on conspiracy theories in Germany

The approaches to conspiracy theories and the discussions about their definitions and relations to other concepts in Germany have been ongoing and have intensified in the last years due to their growing prominence in the sociopolitical discourse (Butter 2018). An increasing correlation between the German, English and American discourses facilitated by international research projects have also been observed. Hence, a number of current definitions of conspiracy theories reference English definitions or adapt them for the German context.

A common way to define conspiracy theories is by describing the way they construct their arguments. Conspiracy theories claim that a secretive group, the conspirators, seeks to control or destroy an institution, a country, or even the entire world for one reason or another. According to conspiracy theorists, a conspiracy, whether real or imagined, is thus never the work of the individual, but always that of a smaller or larger group of people (Butter 2018). Definitions like these are often connected to Karl Popper, who popularized the term in 1945 in his book titled “The Open Society & Its Enemies”. In it, he coined the term ‘conspiracy theory of society’:

“It is the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed), and who have planned and conspired to bring it about (Popper 2013 [1945], S. 306).”

This view, according to Popper, arises from the viewpoint that every societal event is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups. This, according to Popper, widespread theory is not founded on a modern phenomenon, but can be traced back to ancient theistic interpretation on the influence of Gods in the fate of men:

“The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups—sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from—such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists (Popper 2013 [1945], S. 306).”



This assumption is based on the historical theory that has been radically questioned by modern social sciences. It postulates that humans can guide the course of history according to their intentions. These deliberations of Popper are used in a number of studies regarding conspiracy theories in Germany (Citation needed).

Other studies regarding conspiracy theories also refer to concepts from the American discourse, for example, Barku's typology (2013). He describes three core elements of modern conspiracy theories: **Nothing happens by accident. Nothing is as it seems. Everything is connected.** These points illustrate the intentionality of a conspiratorial world view, the deceptive nature of conspiracy theories, and the pattern of hidden connections at the core of every so-called conspiracy (Barku 2013, p. 3-4). Barku further states that:

"This view is both frightening and reassuring. It is frightening because it magnifies the power of evil, leading some cases to an outright dualism in which light and darkness struggle for cosmic supremacy. At the same time, however, it is reassuring, for it promises a world that is meaningful rather than arbitrary. Not only are events nonrandom, but the clear identification of evil gives conspiracists a definable enemy against which to struggle, endowing life with purpose (Brakun 2013, S. 4)"

Based on this definition, Barku divides conspiracy theories into three groups: Event conspiracies, systemic conspiracies and superconspiracies (Barku 2013, p. 6). The first case describes conspiracies regarding discrete events or a set of events. An example for this is the Kennedy assassination conspiracy literature. Systemic conspiracies describe events that have broader goals, for example securing the control over a region, country or similar entities. Even though the goal is much larger, the executive organ behind it is usually described as a simple but evil organization. Certain types of Jewish conspiracy theories can be used as examples for this type of conspiracies. The third and last type, the superconspiracy, links multiple conspiracies together in a hierarchical order. Event and systemic conspiracies are joined in complex ways, so that conspiracies can be linked and intertwined one another. The groups behind it are often a distant, but all-powerful but in absolute secrecy operating force.

Another differentiation regarding conspiracy theories was introduced by Butter (2018) who argued that conspiracy theories attribute the attacks from the conspirators either to foreigners (outside) or fellow countrymen (inside), either people of higher (above) or lower status (below). The most popular conspiracy theories that circulated in Germany between the late eighteenth century and the mid-twentieth century were all centred on conspiracies from below, and often from the inside. Socialists, liberals as well as Jews were regarded as enemies who conspired against the then conservative state order and had to be fought accordingly (von Bieberstein 1992). Modern conspiracy theories in the German

context however more often see the conspirators as people from the outside and from above who may have corrupted the national elites or are cooperating closely with them but are working against the common man. These arguments show a connection to concepts of populism.

Another famous concept is the paranoia concept by Hofstadter (2008 [1964]) which remains a controversial topic in sociological and psychological literature (Citation needed). However, this concept is not as widespread in the German discourse. Hofstadter's approach compares conspiracy theorists to clinically paranoid individuals, stating that although both are over-hyped, over-mistrustful, over-aggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic, the clinically ill paranoiac merely views the hostile world as something conspiring against himself. The representative of the paranoid political style, however, claims that the enemy and conspiratorial forces are directed against a nation, a culture or a lifestyle, not only against him, but against a great number of others.

Finally, an important distinction present in the German discourse is the differentiation between conspiracies and conspiracy theories, which is mostly based on Poppers initial definition. In his concept, he stated that he did not wish to imply that conspiracies never happen.

On the contrary, they are typical social phenomena. They become important, for example, whenever people who believe in the conspiracy theory get into power. And people who sincerely believe that they know how to make heaven on earth are most likely to adopt the conspiracy theory, and to get involved in a counter-conspiracy against non-existing conspirators (...). But the striking fact which, inspite of their occurrence, disproves the conspiracy theory is that few of these conspiracies are ultimately successful. Conspirators rarely consummate their conspiracy. Why is this so? Why do achievements differ so widely from aspirations? Because this is usually the case in social life, conspiracy or no conspiracy. Social life is not only a trial of strength between opposing groups: it is action within a more or less resilient or brittle framework of institutions and traditions, and it creates—apart from any conscious counter-action— many unforeseen reactions in this framework, some of them perhaps even unforeseeable (Popper 2013 [1945], S. 307).

Hence, the main differentiation between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories is the scope of the conspiracy and the ability to actualize one's intention without unintended consequences. Real life conspiracies are often conducted by a small number of people who try to achieve a specific goal; the achievement of which cannot be ensured beforehand (Butter 2018). An example for this is the Watergate scandal. Furthermore, as Grimes (2016) stated, conspiracies are prone to unravel, and the larger they are, the less likely they are to stand the test of time and remain secret.

## 2 (Social) Media

### 2.1 Regular media

While the media today is regarded as the 'fourth power' alongside the legislature, the executive and the judiciary, in Germany state media is not completely free to publish any content. Even if the fifth amendment of the constitution ensures the freedom of a free opinion and the freedom of press (Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland: 1949), each journalist is obliged to follow the press laws of the federal state as well as (in particular for print media) the set of standards regarding journalistic duty of care and respectability. These regulations ensure a certain quality of the press and prevent possible misinformation by the state media.

### 2.2 Internet and social media

The picture is different when it comes to the Internet. The Internet, which goes hand in hand with social media, plays an increasingly important role in today's society, as people no longer just inform themselves about the previously common media. Everyone can take the role of a commentator and describe events from his point of view. Walter (2014: 193) identifies social media as a primary communication space of conspiracy theorists and highlights that the Internet and its missing selection and gatekeeper mechanisms are responsible for the genesis and distribution of conspiracy theories. In the present paper, the most common conspiracy theories that gained importance on Google as well as on social media will be highlighted.

### 2.3 Google trends

According to google trends, the most common keywords that were googled in combination with "conspiracy theory" in Germany (timeframe: 30.09.2014 - 30.09.2014) were: 9/11, Chemtrails, different theories connected to Jews, Refugees, Charlie Hebdo and conspiracy theories related to "Reichsbürger" (Citizens of the Reich).

### 2.4 Conspiracy theories on social media

A similar picture on the prevalent conspiracy theories emerges when trending public figures in Germany, who use their prominence to promote conspiracy theories on Social Media like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, are considered.

Despite the fact that currently there are no statistics on which conspiracy theory or which conspiracy theorists are the most prevalent on social media, the presented report cannot proceed without the discussion of key conspiracy theorists in Germany.

Many of the "prominent" conspiracy theorists who have gained public interest in the last few years have come from the right-wing sector. Many of them identify themselves with the Identitarian Movement, which is a far-right political ideology that claims the rights of

living in Europe exclusively to those who have a European heritage (Lazaridis & Konsta 2015: 184). One famous proponent of this ideology is Daniel Fiß, who has gained a lot of attention this year when he commenced to work for the AfD member and member of the German Bundestag Siegbert Droese. The employment of Daniel Fiß, the chairperson of the German Identitarian movement, which is currently under observation by the German intelligence service was perceived by the German media very critically, especially considering the fact that officially the AfD is trying to distance themselves from the ultra-right wing sector. Fiß frequently takes to Twitter to promote the right-wing populist agenda and criticism against the state media. The anti-immigration movement is also usually related to white supremacy mindsets and racist worldviews in which anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli stereotypes are dominant core concepts (Virchow, 2017:153f.).

Another example of political ideology that leads to the distribution of conspiracy theories online are the so-called "Reichsbürger" (Citizens of the Reich), a movement which is widely known for its rejection of the German legal system and the legitimacy of the government. By claiming that Germany is not a legitimate state and that Germany has an illegitimate constitution, the "Reichsbürger" assume that the German Reich still exists. A well-known name within the "Reichsbürger" movement is the one of the singer and songwriter Xavier Naidoo, who emphasizes that Germany is still an occupied country. His song "Puppets" produced in 2017 generalized and criticised all German politicians claiming that the politicians were not the legitimate leaders of Germany. Another key conspiracy figure, that has emerged in the last years is Nikolai Nerling, also known as the "Volkslehrer". Nerling, a primary school teacher and a right-wing movement sympathizer, has started his "career" on YouTube. He was blocked from the platform a couple of months ago after being repeatedly reprimanded for the dissemination of antidemocratic thoughts and various conspiracy theories against the democratic structures of Germany, the Jewish and Muslim population and other minorities (e.g. he allowed Holocaust deniers and "Reichsbürger" to promote their thoughts on his channel) (Fröhlich, 2019). However, Nerling does not remain quiet. His YouTube fans, numbering around 70,000, have now found a new forum for sharing the extremist ideas on his new blog (ibid).

Apart from these right-wing political views and their impact on the social media discourse, other worldviews connected to conspiracies that gained importance in the German context are a variety of esoteric bended theories. Allegedly, the jet-generated contrails contain not only water vapour, but also chemicals "chemtrails" used to alter the climate or to manipulate the consciousness of the population. Another theory states that vaccinations cause autism or other serious illnesses. In several social media accounts and comments, the information that the primeval man was a pure fruit eater and not an omnivore has gained some attention. In other esoteric circles, the idea that sources of alternative, free



energy exist which the multinational corporations deprive us of to protect their financial interests is disseminated (Quattrociocchi, 2018:147).

### 3. Prevalent conspiracy theories in adult education

VHS Hannover conducted research on the prevalent conspiracy theories that adult educators meet in practice. The research was based on informal interviews with teachers and managers recorded in memory minutes. Here is a summary of findings:

#### a) Frequency and notoriety of conspiracy beliefs

Conspiracy theories are frequently met by teachers in “Second Chance” classes. These are by definition attended by people with missing school certificates. Classes are culturally very diverse. In Second Chance classes, the topic is more visible as they are fulltime, and their curriculum includes civic education. Teachers working in general adult education (languages, IT, health, etc.) face conspiracy theories less frequently.

Where conspiracy theories occur, a preferred technique of dealing with them is simply moving on to other topics. Some teachers integrate discussions about conspiracy beliefs into their courses, e.g. by letting students dismantle them by fact checking.

#### b) Conspiracy beliefs observed

Conspiracy theories mentioned by our respondents as occurring in everyday practice were:

- Reichsbürger theory, i.e. the claim that the Federal Republic of Germany was legally inexistent. This includes the idea of Germany being merely a limited company (GmbH). Some teachers report that counter such claims by starting into comparing the legal form of a GmbH with Germany as a state.
- Theories of Jews ruling the world are frequent and come in various flavors: a Jewish network dominates political decisions all over the world; Jews control capital worldwide; there is a Jewish conspiracy to achieve world domination, etc.
- ‘Holocaust has not happened’ theory: claims that the industrial killing of six million European Jews through Nazi Germany in WWII did not happen. Some proponents of such beliefs concede that “several hundred thousands” of Jews may have been killed.
- ‘Climate change not man-made’ theory: Proponents of this idea appear at public events such as lectures and exhibitions. There seems to be an organized group in Hannover to promote such “climate change skepticism”.

- 'No landing on the moon' theory is quite popular with people in "Second Chance" classes. Sources of these theories are, as in other cases, to be found in social media.
- 'Mass media is lying' theory. The German term "Lügenpresse" (lying media) is commonplace with people with a far-right mindset. The claim is that both German public media and big newspapers hold back the truth about topics such as immigrants, crime, etc.
- 'Feminist conspiracy against men' theory. There are groups of men who try to fight this alleged conspiracy by publicly "disclosing" it e.g. through speaking up as members of the auditory of civic education events.
- Alternative explanations for the destruction of the WTC: various beliefs about the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in New York 2001 are popular with students in Second Chance classes. A typical claim is that the attack was organized by "Jews" or "Israel", and that US government itself was involved.
- In the area of health and well-being (courses for Yoga, Q-Gong, etc.) management has to make sure that teachers do not drift off into the esoteric, as some try to popularize esoteric doctrines.
- Forms of unreflected nationalism related to the country of origin are found often with people coming from former parts the Soviet Union. It seems to be a popular idea that the social state in Western society is bad (retirement poverty, etc.), and that the social system in Russia etc. is better. This may be based on consumption of certain media outlets.

### 4. Summary

The discourse of conspiracy theories has gained more importance throughout the years in Germany and intensified in the past ten years.

Especially with the growing importance of the Internet, it has become harder to control the content shared by different individuals and groups.

On German social media platforms, particularly conspiracy theories with a connection to right-wing movements are on the rise:

- Anti-immigration and racially discriminating theories connected to anti-immigration, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic theories that are also related to the mindset of the “white-supremacy”.
- “Reichsbürger” theories related with the idea of an illegitimate state.
- Furthermore, esoteric bended theories seem to be becoming increasingly important to tackle.

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