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In the Land of the Setting Sun

Reflections on “Islamization” and “Patriotic Europeanism”

Nicholas De Genova

Abstract The rapid rise of Pegida (Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes) in late 2014/ early 2015 commands sober attention. Contempt for migrants and asylum-seekers, generally, and for Muslims in particular — accompanied by the obligatory panic-mongering over Europe’s purported “Islamization” — is the standard cant of far-right populism across Europe and in no sense unique to Germany. Nonetheless, the diminishing reticence about a more or less overt embrace of Nazism — especially in Germany — seems to signal an unprecedented level of toxicity in contemporary Europe. Alongside the more customary expressions of far-right German nationalism and neo-Nazism, moreover, what is particularly noteworthy and distinctive about Pegida is its explicit and emphatic “Europeanism.” As a new expression of the postcolonial racial politics of “European” identity, therefore, Pegida represents a political formation that commands urgent and serious critical scrutiny.

Türken ihr irrt euch
Deutschland wird euch nie gehören

I encountered this message, fittingly enough, as graffiti in a German toilet. Although I do not know German, I readily recognized the juxtaposition of “Turks” and “Deutschland,” and my instincts suggested that I ought to make a note of it. When I met my host a short while later, it caused him visible discomfort when I asked him to translate these words for me. “Where did you see this?” he asked immediately. He was evidently troubled to learn that I had seen this message scrawled on the wall of a restroom stall in his own place of employment, the University of Tübingen. Troubled, but not exactly surprised. This incident took place last year.

It was only a matter of months thereafter, on October 26, 2014, that Germany witnessed a demonstration of 4,800 in downtown Köln, shouting well-worn neo-Nazi chants, such as “Germany for the Germans! Foreigners out!” and “We are the national resistance!” The march was staged by the group Hooligans gegen Salafisten (Hooligans Against Salafists — Hogesa).¹ The demonstration eventually culminated in a riot, when at least 400 of these self-anointed “hooligans”-turned-right-wing thugs went on a rampage. Hogesa’s organizational name and rallying cry is so uncanny and absurd that one might imagine that this was a parody in the outlandish style of Monty Python’s Flying Circus. In the society of the spectacle in which we live, however, critical discourse “begins precisely where satire becomes speechless” (Agamben 1990[2000]: 76).

Just over two weeks earlier, on the other side of the country, in what was once derisively known as the “valley of the clueless” because its physical geography obstructed the reach of radio transmissions from West Germany, Dresden had already become the cradle of another new manifestation of specifically anti-Muslim hostility toward “foreigners.” Pegida (Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes) was born unceremoniously when a controversy was initiated on October 10 by one Lutz Bachmann, a butcher’s son who is the proprietor of a small photography studio and publicity agency in nearby Kesselsdorf. Bachmann rallied the outrage of his social media “friends” when he posted a video on YouTube of a Dresden rally in support of Kurds who were actually fighting *against* the salafists of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (IS, or ISIL, or ISIS).² Apparently, the mere fact of “Turks” asserting themselves politically in public space in Dresden was sufficient cause for alarm, and raised the phantom menace of imminent “Islamization.” “Turks,” “Kurds,” “Muslims,” “Islamists,” “Jihadists,” “Salafists,” — there is evidently no great need for too many fine distinctions or subtleties. “Türken ihr irrt euch . . .” as they say. The next day, Bachmann founded a Facebook group called “Peaceful Europeans Against the Islamization of the West,” which ultimately metamorphosed into Pegida. A few days later, on October 16, Siegfried Däbritz, a security guard, who also manages a guest house in the historic center of Meissen with his parents, posted a comment to Bachmann’s Facebook group: “We want to gather to oppose the advancing Islamization of our country. We don’t want

¹ Spiegel Online International, “Germany’s New Right: The Unholy Alliance of Neo-Nazis and Football Hooligans,” 4 November 2014; <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/new-right-wing-alliance-of-neo-nazis-and-hooligans-appears-in-germany-a-1000953-2.html>

² Maximilian Popp and Andreas Wassermann, “Prying into Pegida: Where Did Germany’s Islamophobes Come From?” Spiegel Online International, 12 January 2015; <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/origins-of-german-anti-muslim-group-pegida-a-1012522.html>

terrorist, Islamist powers to fight their religious war on our streets. We are against IS, PKK, al-Qaida and all the others.”³ Notably, “Islamization” here operates as a figure not necessarily construed to be in opposition to Christianity as such, but rather as a figure of the internecine “religious war” of “all the others” (including the secular ones!). In short, “religion” matters here not really as a matter of doctrinal difference, not as a rivalry of competing faiths, but rather as a simple markers of the difference that is more elementary and fundamental. The self-avowed “European”-ness of Pegida, in other words, is less about Christianity than a difference in kind between “Europeans” and “all the others.” Predictably, the Pegida Facebook group quickly provided a forum where committed German national chauvinists and unabashed neo-Nazi racists could reach a more diffuse audience of conservative nativists fed up with the mere presence of “foreigners.” Soon, the word “Peaceful” in the group’s name was discarded as, well, insufficiently combative, and so was born the new ideological figure of “Patriotic” Europeanism.

This distinctly and pronouncedly “*European*” identification is consistently articulated alongside an indisputably *German* nationalist populism, but in a manner that serves to conveniently dissimulate its own Nazi heritage. Of course, any excessively overt affection for Nazism remains a delicate matter in Germany. Indeed, more recently, Pegida’s founder Bachmann was forced to resign after he posted online a picture of himself emulating Hitler. The scandal led to a press conference — the organization’s first ever — in which Bachmann and his accomplice insisted that the movement is not in fact racist. Bernd Lucke, the head of the political party Alternative für Deutschland, which has publicly expressed its allegiance with Pegida’s aims, denounced Bachmann’s “sad utterings and disgusting jokes” as having “embarrassed” Pegida supporters’ “honest concerns.”⁴ Despite his Hitlerite delusions and fantasies, however, the virulence of Bachmann’s racism has become increasingly routine, and — for his followers and sympathizers — not particularly controversial or scandalous. In a private Facebook post from September (prior to the founding of Pegida), which was discovered and exposed at the same time as his Hitler charade, Bachmann referred to migrants and refugees as “animals” “cattle,” “trash,” “dirt,” and “scumbags.” And furthermore, he contended, “There is no such thing as real war refugees.”

Disparaging migrants and refugees has become the predictable cant of re-

³ Popp and Wassermann, 12 January 2015.

⁴ Kate Connolly, “Germany’s Pegida leader steps down over Adolf Hitler photo.” *The Guardian*, 21 January 2015; <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/21/germany-pegida-adolf-hitler-lutz-bachmann>

actionary (nativist) populism across Europe, of course, and is in no sense unique to Germany. Contempt for Muslims in particular, accompanied by the obligatory panic-mongering over Europe's purported "Islamization," is likewise quite widespread. Nonetheless, the diminishing reticence about an embrace of Nazism — especially in Germany — seems to signal an unprecedented level of toxicity in contemporary Europe. Apart from such flamboyant and frankly buffoonish displays as Bachmann's obscene gesture of closet Hitlerite fetishism, moreover, Pegida's rapid rise is especially troubling because of the degree to which this movement appears to have catalyzed a kind of dynamic synergy between the conservative siege mentality of a significant cross-section of the parochial but "respectable" middle class (for now, perhaps mainly in Saxony⁵) and the increasingly volatile belligerence of more declassé elements, such as those "football hooligans" who have become newly unified around a far-right political agenda in spite of any prior rivalries and disaffections that might have divided them. Notably, a week and a half after his contribution to Pegida's founding on Facebook, Däbritz traveled to take part in the Hogesa demonstration in Köln.⁶ Previously seen as a reputable member of the local middle class, but with a parallel life posting quotes from Hitler on the internet, Däbritz supplied a direct link between far-right football hooligan groups and motorcycle gangs and the ostensibly more mild-mannered "neo-Nazis in pin-stripes," as Pegida supporters have been designated.⁷ In Pegida's subsequent marches, there has been evident participation by members of "Fist of the East," a Dresden-based right-wing hooligan group, as well as members of "Hooligans Elbflorenz" (Florence on the Elbe, a nickname for Dresden), which the Dresden Regional Court has officially classified as "a criminal organization," in part for their associations with the banned far-right extremist formation "Skinheads Sächsische Schweiz." Local police estimate that the Pegida marches include approximately 300 active and recognizable supporters of SG Dynamo Dresden,

⁵ Since German unification, Saxony has repeatedly been the setting of strikingly high voter support for far-right parties, including the exceptional 9.2% vote for the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD) in state parliament elections in 2004. (Timohty Garton Ash, "Germany's anti-Islamic movement Pegida is a vampire we must slay" *The Guardian*, 18 January 2015; <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/18/germany-xenophobic-anti-islamic-pegida-france>)

⁶ Popp and Wassermann, 12 January 2015.

⁷ The phrase is attributed to Ralf Jäger, Interior Minister for North Rhine-Westphalia, and current chairman of the conference of interior ministers. *Spiegel Online International*, "The End of Tolerance? Anti-Muslim Movement Rattles Germany" 21 December 2014; <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/anti-muslim-pegida-movement-rattles-germany-a-1009245.html>

the city's football club, and describe about 250 of them as "problem fans."⁸ Supplying this bridge between the "respectable" middle class and this more unsavory thuggish element, Däbritz is also believed to be affiliated with the anti-Muslim German Defence League, an offshoot of another political formation with distinctly "hooligan" characteristics, the English Defence League (EDL).⁹ Indeed, the synergies between these two organizations have had an energizing effect in both directions. On February 28, Pegida UK held its first event in the northern English city of Newcastle, with some 375 supporters (for now, at least, far outnumbered by approximately 3,000 counter-demonstrators).¹⁰ Notably, alongside various other nationally inflected offshoot organizations, this same incipient transnational anti-Muslim movement has been advancing its cause under an umbrella formation, tellingly named the *European* Defence League (from which Hogesa is also reported to have originated). This is not to exaggerate the importance at present of the transnational momentum of the Pegida movement, which has indeed remained numerically insignificant until now outside of Germany. But neither can we allow these transnational pan-European resonances to go overlooked or unremarked.

Notably, it was also Däbritz who, in his original Facebook post, introduced into Pegida's emergent ideological repertoire the famous phrase of popular resistance to the East German regime during the historic "Monday demonstrations" on the eve of the demise of the Berlin Wall — "Wir sind das Volk" ("We Are the People"). He wrote: "Let us take to the streets and show our region that WE ARE THE PEOPLE and that we are tired of paternalism, political correctness, Islamization and the constant insulting of us as Nazis just because we stand up for our country and for Europe!" Subsequently, Pegida has repurposed the chant "We Are the People" as one of the movement's main rallying cries at its own weekly Monday evening "strolls." Assembling at Dresden's Schlossplatz, near the state government's headquarters, Pegida marched every Monday for months without interference, under police guard. A record high turn-out of 25,000 people supported their silent march there on January 12, in an explicit attempt to capitalize on the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings in Paris. Now refashioned, this ambiguously populist slogan of East German dissidence is promoted alongside such lurid crypto-fascist millenarian mantras as "Germany is awakening. For

⁸ Spiegel Online International, "The End of Tolerance? Anti-Muslim Movement Rattles Germany" 21 December 2014; <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/anti-muslim-pegida-movement-rattles-germany-a-1009245.html>

⁹ Popp and Wassermann, 12 January 2015.

¹⁰ Dominic Smith, "Far-right Pegida eclipsed by its opponents at first UK demo." *The Guardian*, 28 February 2015; <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/28/newcastle-pegida-unites-far-right-march-islam-protest>

our fatherland, for Germany, it is our country, the country of our ancestors, descendants and children!”¹¹ However, at least by implication, with the assertion “We Are the People,” not only do Pegida authorize themselves as the authentic and organic expression of “the German nation” but also as the voice of “the people” of Europe.

This is clearly not to suggest that the social base of Pegida is somehow “*not* nationalist,” but it is to insist upon a recognition of the important fact that, as a new political formation, Pegida is capitalizing upon something that exceeds German nationalism as such. Indeed, they could not be any more explicit and emphatic about this commitment: they aspire to be more than parochial Germans; they are “Patriotic *Europeans*,” and their enemy is *Muslim*. Both figures — pan-Europeanism and anti-Muslim nativism — signal and underscore what is unmistakably a *racial* commitment. The coalescence of these right-wing nationalist populisms under an incipient formation of *Europeanism* — specifically formulated as a species of *supra*-national patriotism, and posited always against Muslims — is therefore a revealing signal of the rise of a reanimated politics of “European” identity, as a racial formation of *whiteness* (De Genova 2015; cf. 2010).

Of course, German racism — including in its specifically anti-Turkish variety — is nothing new. As reported by BBC News, Sirin Manolya Sak, a 29-year-old Turkish German woman from Berlin, who now makes her life partly in Istanbul, remarked: “This newly emerged Pegida movement had always existed in German society, and foreigners — as they call us — from various cultures and ethnicities, especially from Muslim backgrounds, have always faced this type of discrimination and racism.”¹² According to a 2013 poll conducted by the Turkish-European Foundation for Education and Scientific Studies (Tavak), the re-orientation of Turkish Germans’ life aspirations and career ambitions toward Turkey is a significant trend: those who are “returning” to Turkey, like Sak, are usually not “foreigners” in any sense: they are disproportionately the grandchildren (and even great-grandchildren) of the actual migrants, and tend to be in the prime of their lives (between 18 and 40 years of age).¹³ Racialized as permanent and irreducible “foreigners,” however, these Turkish Germans, born and raised in Germany, apparently feel increasingly that they have no prospects in Germany. This sense of deepening alienation from the presumptive “mainstream” of German life should not come as any great surprise. This is, after

¹¹ Spiegel Online International, 4 November 2014.

¹² Lamiya Adilgizi, “Pegida’s anti-Islam rallies stir fears of German Turks” BBC News, 12 January 2015; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-30742898>

¹³ BBC News, 12 January 2015; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-30742898>

all, a country where Udo Ulfkotte — formerly a journalist with the respected national daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, now a renegade against the “lying press” and bestselling author of a book of right-wing conspiracy theories on the subject of “bought journalists” — promotes a particularly grotesque variant of the well-worn Islamophobic theme of imminent “holy war.” Ulfkotte has propagated on the internet the outlandish notion that Muslims may be conspiring to deliberately contaminate European food with their excrement. “Even the intelligence services have been warning us for years about fecal matter jihad,” he writes.¹⁴ Thus, the relatively conventional and, by now, banal ideological specter of Muslim “fanaticism” and “terrorism” conjures for the presumptively genuine “Europeans” in their own “homeland” the threat of death, both literal and figurative (Goldberg 2006: 346; 2009: 166). But worse still, Ulfkotte alleges, those devious Muslim “foreigners” seek to make Europeans literally “eat shit and die.” Not only does contemporary German racism recapitulate the archaic notions of racial purity, pollution, and sanitation, however; it performs a transmutation of these raciological obsessions through the distinctive lens of antiterrorist securitarianism — whereby the menace is always secretive and unpredictable, and therefore commands speculative risk management and preemption (De Genova 2007; 2011).

Preemption is plainly the deep rationale of a movement dedicated to counteracting “Islamization” in a country where Muslims account for a mere 5% of the population. Yet if this is a dubious basis for such anxieties — and clearly is indicative of a deeper racial unease at work in the presence of all varieties of “non-European” migrant and refugee “foreigners” — then such contentions are utterly and indisputably preposterous in a place like Dresden, where only 2.5% of the population are foreign-born, and a meager 0.1% are Muslim.¹⁵ Pegida supporters are evidently not unaware of such objections, however. As one unnamed Pegida speaker at the Monday rally in Dresden on December 8 demanded, “Do we have to wait until the conditions we see in the Neukölln neighborhood of Berlin have come to Saxony?”¹⁶ This, indeed, is the rationale of the “ticking time bomb”: it is intolerable and impossible to wait while yet another Turkish neighborhood may be taking shape in the heart of Germany. These “Islamophobic” views cannot be trivialized and dismissed as merely the

¹⁴ Spiegel Online International, 21 December 2014

¹⁵ Lizzie Dearden, “Germany anti-Islam protests: Biggest Pegida march ever in Dresden as rest of Germany shows disgust with lights-out” *The Independent*, 5 January 2015; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/germany-antiislam-protests-biggest-pegida-march-ever-in-dresden-as-rest-of-germany-shows-disgust-9959301.html>

¹⁶ Spiegel Online International, 21 December 2014

paranoid ravings of provincial minds in the proverbial “valley of the clueless,” a remote place in eastern Germany that has long been simply out of step with the modern world. For the left in Germany to dismiss and disregard the significance of these developments would be to forfeit responsibility at precisely the moment when what is necessary are sober analyses and audacious acts of the utmost political courage. It is true that anti-Pegida protests drew tens of thousands in many important cities across the rest of Germany, including 19,000 in Hanover, 20,000 in Munich, 35,000 in Leipzig, and most importantly, 35,000 in Dresden itself.¹⁷ Nonetheless, according to a recent poll by *Der Spiegel*, roughly 34% of Germans — one in three — agreed with the Pegida protestors that Germany is becoming increasingly “Islamicized.”¹⁸ According to a more substantive study commissioned by the Bertelsmann Foundation, furthermore, an alarming 57% of non-Muslim Germans now consider Islam to be a threat.¹⁹ This specter of Germany’s (or Europe’s) impending “Islamization,” of course, has no plausible grounds in reality. The discourses of “Islamization” are merely a proxy for a more elementary *racist*/nativist resentment: “too many Muslims.” Again, this is not really about religious difference at all. Rather, the denunciation of “Islamization” concerns the ideological mobilization of the signs of “cultural” or religious difference as markers of a more fundamental *racial* difference — between “us” (Germans, “Europeans” — white folk) and (“non-European,” non-white) “Muslims.” Rather than “Islamophobia,” then, what this represents is in fact a specifically anti-Muslim racism.

Most importantly, the “Patriotic Europeans” are not simply creating a climate of heightened hostility for Muslims and other presumed “foreigners” in Germany; they are also turning their antagonism into action. On December 12, near Nuremberg, a newly refurbished hostel for ‘asylum seekers’ suffered major damage in an arson attack that left the walls graffiti’d with anti-foreigner slogans and swastikas. (The week before, Pegida already had 15,000 marching in Dresden). Immediately following a Pegida rally of 17,500 in Dresden on December 22, approximately 50 masked and armed Pegida supporters proceeded to the city’s Galeria shopping mall and attacked some 30 migrants. “The attack was applauded by normal bystanders,” reported Danilo Starosta, a spokesman

¹⁷ Justin Huggler and Richard Burgess, “Germany’s ‘Islamisation’ marches: how the pro- and anti-Pegida rallies measured up.” *The Telegraph*, 13 January 2015; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/11342953/Germanys-Islamisation-marches-how-the-pro-and-anti-Pegida-rallies-measured-up.html>

¹⁸ *Spiegel Online International*, 21 December 2014

¹⁹ Timothy Garton Ash, “Germany’s anti-Islamic movement Pegida is a vampire we must slay” *The Guardian*, 18 January 2015; <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/18/germany-xenophobic-anti-islamic-pegida-france>

for Dresden's Cultural Affairs Office, in the newspaper *Taz*.²⁰ Then, on the night of January 12 in Dresden, following Pegida's largest demonstration to date earlier that evening, Khaled Idris Bahray, a 20-year-old Muslim man originally from Eritrea, was stabbed to death, with a swastika scrawled on the door of his apartment. Bahray lived in an apartment block with 20 other migrants and refugees. They told Dresden's *Morgenpost* newspaper that they live in fear of Pegida's weekly Monday night rallies. As one of Bahray's neighbors explained, "People treat us like enemies. There is hate in their eyes. We don't dare go out. We need protection."²¹ Although subsequently local police have come to believe that Bahray may have been killed by some of his own housemates, and they have apparently confessed to the crime, the social climate of racial hostility and violence remains indisputably palpable. Indeed, news of the murder coincided with an announcement by Dresden authorities that a local hotel owner was abandoning plans to open a hostel that would have accommodated 94 asylum-seekers, after being barraged with harassment (including 5,700 signatures on an internet petition). More recently still, on March 2, following the regular Monday march, in a concerted assault from several different directions, more than 300 Pegida supporters attacked the Refugee Struggle protest camp in Theaterplatz in the Dresden city center. Chanting "Germany for Germans!" and "Go back to your countries!" the Pegida fascists clearly sought to instigate a physical confrontation with the several hundred people supporting the refugees following a concert in solidarity with the camp.²² In short, even in spite of the apparent disarray suffered by Pegida in the aftermath of the debacle over its leadership following the Bachmann embarrassment, there can be no illusion that Pegida represents only an ephemeral and ultimately marginal phenomenon. Amidst the ghoulish clamor of "too many foreigners" and "too many Muslims," it is now imperative that we confront the burning question of the moment: How many swastikas is too many? How many physical attacks against migrants and refugees?

²⁰ Tony Paterson, "German protesters from anti-Islamic 'Pegida' movement attack migrant youths" *The Independent*, 4 January 2015; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/german-protesters-from-antiislamic-pegida-movement-attack-migrant-youths-9956837.html>

²¹ Tony Paterson, "Pegida movement's marches attract thousands as hatred of Islam and immigrants sweeps across Germany in the wake of Paris attacks." *The Independent*, 14 January 2015; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/pegida-movements-marches-attract-thousands-as-hatred-of-islam-and-immigrants-sweeps-across-germany-in-the-wake-of-paris-attacks-9978543.html>

²² Statement der Geflüchteten des Refugee Struggle Dresden nach den Angriffen von Pegida-Unterstützer_innen und Neonazis (Statement of the Refugees of the Refugee Struggle Dresden after the Attack of Pegida-Supporters and Neo-Nazis)

These are indeed dark times in Germany, and in Europe. Pegida's proper name — *Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* — is usually translated as Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West. But the word *Abendland* has a remarkably quaint ring to it, meaning literally “evening lands,” which is to say, the place where the sun goes down. Notably, this was the same term used by Oswald Spengler in his landmark work of German cultural pessimism, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, translated as *The Decline of the West*, in the aftermath of World War I. That was truly a watershed moment in the history of Germany and the world — the eve of the rise of fascism. Of course, the social and political conditions at present are in no sense the same as those that provided the incubator for the rise of fascism in the 1920s. Still, confronting the inglorious return of this harbinger of a reanimated racist politics of Europeanism, it is imperative to demand whether we are prepared for Germany to become, once again, the Land of the Setting Sun.

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