

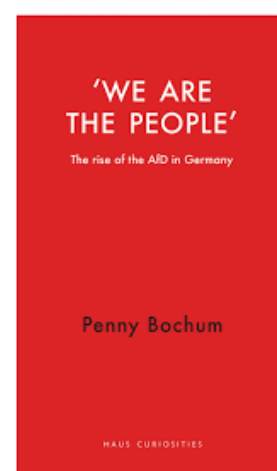
Book Review: 'We are the People': The Rise of the AfD in Germany by Penny Bochum

In 'We are the People': The Rise of the AfD in Germany, Penny Bochum examines the origins and radicalisation of the German political party, Alternative for Germany (AfD). With populist parties across Europe experiencing a surge in popularity, the AfD was established in 2013, but came to dominate German politics in 2017 when it won over 90 seats in the Bundestag. The AfD is the third largest party in the German parliament and positions itself as the voice of 'the people' against a 'corrupt elite'. Given its various successes, Bochum argues, it has now become impossible to write the AfD off as merely a blip on the political landscape. This short but accessible volume will prove useful to readers unfamiliar with the party and its core issues, writes Katherine Williams.

'We are the People': The Rise of the AfD in Germany. Penny Bochum. Haus Publishing. 2020.

Despite comprising less than 100 pages, ['We are the People'](#) by Penny Bochum, a political researcher and writer based in Berlin and London, offers readers an insightful and timely English-language analysis of the rise and radicalisation of the German political party, Alternative for Germany (AfD). Published as part of the [Haus Curiosities](#) series, this short volume has nine principal chapters that chart the AfD's eurosceptic beginnings, its populist evolution and its increasing association with right-wing extremism. The author does an effective job of teasing out the most pressing debates, and critically interrogates the AfD's 'cumulative radicalisation' and the alleged influence of the party's anti-Islam and anti-immigration rhetoric on right-wing extremists.

In the introduction, Bochum details [the murder of Walter Lübcke](#), a pro-refugee Christian Democrat (CDU) and President of the CDU in Kessel, at the hands of a right-wing extremist in June 2019. The author details the case of another right-wing extremist who livestreamed his [attack on congregants](#) observing Yom Kippur in Halle in October 2019. When the perpetrator could not blast through the door of the synagogue, he murdered two passers-by. In February 2020, after the publication of *'We are the People'*, a gunman [killed nine people at two shisha bars](#) in Hanau, and went on to kill his mother and then himself. In the aftermath of these attacks, debates have raged over the culpability of the AfD and the influence that their incendiary rhetoric may have had on the perpetrators. Following the Hanau attack, [Social Democrat \(SPD\) Boris Pistorius claimed](#) that 'a fatal disinhibition has been set in motion, and the AfD is complicit in this', and the AfD's opponents have blasted its practice of an 'exclusionary form of politics' and subsequent positioning of Muslims and immigrants as an existential 'threat' to the German state and its citizens.





The discussion in this slim volume becomes even more pertinent given the recent announcement that Der Flügel (The Wing), a nationalistic faction within the AfD, will be [placed under formal surveillance](#) by German security services (the book dedicates a chapter to the rise of Der Flügel prior to these developments). Bochum maintains that in order to counter the threat posed by the AfD and Der Flügel to liberal democracy, the centre parties must remain steadfast in their opposition to the AfD and its divisive agenda. However, despite a seemingly unequivocal agreement between parties that it would be unacceptable to cooperate with the AfD, centre-right politicians from the CDU and Free Democrats (FDP) [used AfD votes to oust the left-wing premier](#) of the eastern German state of Thuringia in February 2020. Withdrawing their own candidate, the AfD threw their support behind FDP candidate Thomas Kemmerich, securing his victory by one vote. Kemmerich resigned the next day following a national backlash.

The Thuringia branch of the AfD is considered particularly problematic given both its extremist associations and its divisive leader [Björn Höcke](#), who also serves as spokesperson for Der Flügel. In 2017, Höcke [provoked outrage](#) when he referred to the [Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe](#) in Berlin as 'a memorial of shame', posing provocative and uncomfortable questions about Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) and the extent of its post-war responsibilities. The idea that the centre-right parties in Thuringia were willing to cooperate with the AfD, and Höcke in particular, disrupts accepted political norms, and reinforces the AfD's core narrative that it holds a legitimate stake in the German political landscape despite its extremist associations and its alleged culpability in relation to recent attacks on minority groups by right-wing extremists. Following news that it would be monitored by German security services, Der Flügel [pledged to dissolve itself](#), but commentators have speculated that this may merely be a tactical move amid internal party power struggles.

The Thuringia debacle notwithstanding, the mainstream parties in Germany have generally been united in their opposition to the AfD and its desire to further consolidate its political legitimacy in order to effectively counter the rising tide of populism. The author describes how parties in the UK, conversely, have come to adopt tenets of populist rhetoric in their attempts to fend off the likes of UKIP and the Brexit Party, noting in particular, the case of the Conservative Party under the leadership of Boris Johnson. The subsequent adoption of a Brexit agenda determined to secure the UK's exit from the EU—seemingly at any cost—has sold voters the fantasy of 'taking back control' without adequately defining what that means in practice, or indeed, what 'the will of the people' actually represents, as Bochum wryly notes.

Additionally, the incendiary rhetoric deployed by UKIP and others prior to the 2016 EU referendum did little to assuage public misconceptions surrounding immigration or the UK's relationship to the EU. The same day that UKIP unveiled their now infamous '[Breaking Point](#)' poster, [Labour MP Jo Cox](#) was murdered outside of her constituency office by a far-right extremist heard to shout 'Britain first' and 'keep Britain independent' as he repeatedly attacked the MP. Consequently, the real-world implications of this divisive rhetoric are hard to dismiss as coincidental, particularly following the deaths of Jo Cox and Walter Lübcke, despite the protests of those prominent figures who have benefitted the most from this enduring political unrest.

Populist rhetoric, then, succeeds when the mainstream parties are fractured, as the cases of the UK and Germany both aptly demonstrate. As the author points out, simplistic solutions to complex problems only serve to exacerbate and reinforce existing divisions. Invariably, solving the populist 'problem' requires a committed effort on the part of mainstream parties to counter the rhetoric of parties like the AfD. This effort goes beyond national borders, and in the face of the global public health crisis we are all currently experiencing, the future remains somewhat unclear. However, in the German context, despite the AfD's constant media agitation and continued criticism of Angela Merkel's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it appears that what people really want is a steady hand to guide them through the crisis. A recent survey from broadcaster ZDF reports that [80 per cent of respondents](#) approve of the Merkel government's handling of the crisis. Additionally, the German government has called upon medically qualified migrants to help them tackle the pandemic; Germany has over [14,000 Syrian refugee doctors](#) waiting to qualify and their expertise will certainly prove invaluable to national efforts in the coming months.

Given the many political crises that have taken place following the publication of '*We are the People*', it would certainly be interesting to see a second edition that reflected these significant events, as well as an analysis of AfD responses to the pandemic. Nonetheless, the book offers readers a valuable insight into the development of the AfD and its various factions, providing a useful springboard from which readers can broaden their understandings of the contemporary German political landscape and its recent controversies.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Image Credit: Protest against the AfD and nationalism, Berlin, 2018 ([Vollformat Berlin CC BY SA 2.0](#)).
