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Representation and Global Power in a Multicultural Germany: A Discourse Analysis of the German Response(s) to the Presence of Syrian Refugees

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Representation and Global Power in a Multicultural Germany

A Discourse Analysis of the German Response(s) to the Presence of Syrian Refugees

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

- I. Thesis Statement and Research Questions2
- II. [Muslim] Refugees: A Great Challenge [for Germany and Europe]3
- III. The EU and Syria: Framing the German Approach to Refugees5
- IV. Cultural Politics and the Stigmatization of European Muslims8
- V. Implications for Syrian Refugees10
- VI. Relevant Theory: Discourse(s), Knowledge and Global Power11

3. Syrian Refugees in the Mainstream German Media

- I. UNHCR Content Analysis of German Media Coverage14
- II. Dissecting Internal/External Humanitarianism in German Press Coverage19
- III. Eurocentrism and EU Humanitarian Rhetoric21

4. The Right Wing Political Approach to Syrian Refugees

- I. Culture and Security in the Political Right Wing24
- II. Social Intolerance: the AfD Approach to Refugees25
- III. Material Intolerance: Grassroots Movements and Reactionary Violence30

5. The Centrist Political Approach to Refugees and Syria

- I. Linking the Far-Right and the Center: Obfuscation of Geopolitics and History32
- II. ‘Culture Talk’34
- III. Merkel’s Humanitarian Approach (2015)36
- IV. Cultural Politics and a Rhetorical-Political Shift (2016-2017)40

6. Conclusion(s)42

8. Works Cited46

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; the true mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

- Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 1980

Thesis Statement and Questions

The goal of this thesis is to determine the assumptions, limits and implications of German refugee discourse. Thus, the central question herein must be, What is the overriding representation of Syrian refugees in German media and political discourse and what are the implications of such discourse, both within and outside Europe? More specifically, I will attempt to locate the implications of refugee-rhetoric with regards to both the internal treatment of Syrians in Germany and the external policy of the EU in Syria. To accomplish this, I will first investigate media representations of the 2015 Syrian Refugee Crisis within the mainstream German press. This will show the overarching themes in representation within Germany and, further, will reflect how the mainstream political centre frames the issue. In turn, such a media critique must be followed by a critical reading of the dominant German political approaches and rhetoric with regards to Syrian refugees. In terms of relevance and influence, the two approaches within Germany are a neutral-humanitarian centrist discourse, advocated by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and an intolerant right wing discourse, advocated on the official level by the Alternative for Germany Party (AfD) and the grassroots PEGIDA movement. When relevant, I will also examine the historical political-economic relationship between the European Union and Syria, highlighting the material motives which underlie their present political approach.

What I hope to reveal from such an inquiry is the degree to which the representation of Syrian refugees is rooted in both concrete geopolitical realities and cultural politics which have little to do with humanitarianism or the refugees themselves. Such representation, rooted in European interests in the Middle East and a historically constructed perception of cultural difference, has serious effects on the way in which Syrians are treated in Germany. Furthermore, the implications of such discourse cannot be located solely within Europe. These implications transcend geography, and thus have negative implications on the lived experience of Syrians in their own nation by virtue of extending the conflict which drives displacement. I will argue, after this thorough investigation into German refugee discourse, that the suffering of Syrians, when pulled from its political context, can be exploited as a means of obscuring more dubious cultural and material interests. Thus the two competing variables affecting refugees and Syrians more generally are cultural-political representation and the material exercise of European power in the Middle East. Hopefully, this paper will arrive at an understanding of the ways in which these two elements reinforce each other and influence the treatment of Syrians in Germany and, more generally, Muslims in the West during the ongoing and increasingly expansive ‘War on Terror’.

Refugees- A Great Challenge [for Germany and Europe]

Last spring, I had the chance to spend a semester in Berlin, Germany to study History. One day, my German class went on a field trip to the German Foreign Office, to see a photo exhibition on display in the main lobby of the building. The exhibition, by German artist Herlinde Koelbl, titled *Refugees- A Great Challenge*, attempted to show what happened to refugees once they arrived in Europe. In addition, the installation featured exhibits describing the various humanitarian efforts Germany was undertaking with its refugee policy and policy on

Syria more generally. These aspects of the exhibition were elaborated in a pamphlet describing the art project. The pamphlet opens with a statement from German Federal Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who writes that,

In a world that has come out of joint with a great number of crises and conflicts, millions of people leave everything behind them and seek, often literally with their last ounce of strength, protection and security far from their homes . Helping people who have fled political persecution, war and violence, is and remains a humanitarian imperative.¹

His statement goes on to describe the various external humanitarian efforts which the German government has undertaken in conflict areas like Syria, including education programs for Syrian students and medical aid to the White Helmets.² In turn, he describes the photo project as “an impressive visual appeal to us all to keep up our efforts to help those seeking protection”.³

The pamphlet and photography project are interesting for several reasons. Most importantly, both Steinmeier’s statement and Koelbl’s art reinforce the dominant rhetorical approach which Germany has taken with regards to Syria and refugees. Namely, it is that of pure humanitarianism. In this discourse, the decision to admit Syrian refugees, fund democratizing institutions in Syria, and provide educational outreach to Syrians, are done not out of any particular interest, but out of a recognition of a common humanity. In turn, the actual images of the project de-contextualize and homogenize the refugees entering Europe, engaging them purely on the basis of human suffering and a desire for protection. In this discourse, Germany is

¹ Federal Foreign Office, *Refugees- A Great Challenge: Exposition with Photographies by Herlinde Koelbl and ‘The Engagement of the Federal Foreign Office’* ed. Auswärtiges Amt., 5.

² Ibid., 5.

³ Ibid., 5.

positioned as impartial and necessarily good. “Crises and conflicts” driving migration are stripped of their geopolitical contexts and presented as inevitable and distant. There is little connection between these events and the humanitarianism of nations like Germany. Attempting to explore the German or European interests which exist in these individual conflicts and crises is thereby impossible within such a framework.

The EU and Syria: Framing the German Approach to Refugees

The German approach to Syrian refugees, while shifting over time, has been linguistically premised on humanitarianism and reinforced by a similar pretension to neutrality in the EU policy on Syria. However, this disinterested approach should be called into question when considering the material interests of the EU in Syria. Before the 2011 Revolution, 95% of all Syrian oil exports went to the European Union, with the largest share (32%) going to Germany.⁴ Syria made up roughly 1% of total EU oil imports, with 40% of its total oil from other OPEC nations.⁵ Saudi Arabia provides 8% of total EU oil imports.⁶ However, beginning in 2007, the highly uneven trade relationship between the European Union and Syria began to shift, as Syria strengthened its trade with more traditional allies including Iran.⁷ In turn, this economic shift towards Iran, put Syria in direct conflict with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a large recipient of European weapons exports whose governments have contributed significantly to the financial development of Syria’s private Sunni religious institutions.

⁴ Almohamad, Hussein and Andrea Dittman, “Oil in Syria Between Terrorism and Dictatorship”, 2.

⁵ European Commission. *Supplier Countries* published by the European Commission under Energy section on ec.europa.eu. 2017.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Rafizadeh, Majid, “Iran’s Economic Stake in Syria” in *Foreign Policy*.

Further, Syria's partial embrace of neoliberalism in the early 2000's followed by a renewed secularist authoritarian crackdown on Sunni Islamic authorities made it a complicated partner for the European Union. This can be demonstrated in the EU's failed attempt at an economic treaty with the Syrian government, which would have forced the privatization of large sectors of Syria's large public economy.⁸ The deal would have also cemented the unbalanced trade relationship between the EU and Syria. Due to political pressure from the U.S., the deal was eventually abandoned by the EU in 2004.⁹ At the same time as this breakdown in the historically strong Syrian-EU relations, Russia began to emerge as a political and financial supporter of the Assad regime, with Syria hosting Russia's sole military base in the Middle East.¹⁰ The historical relationship between Syria and the USSR/Russian Federation had also been strongly established, but this political-economic pivot away from Europe provided the impetus for a further deepening of ties between Assad and Putin. While political relations began to turn after the breakdown of the EU-Syria trade agreement, the beneficial import of oil to the European Union continued however, showing a willingness in Europe to work with a government which, by then, had committed well-documented violations of human rights.

The Syrian government under Bashar al-Assad had shown an ideological flexibility which made stable economic and political relations difficult for the European Union. In response to these unstable relations and wider insecurity in the Middle East, the EU strengthened its economic and security ties to Gulf States like Saudi Arabia and Qatar during the same time Syria

⁸ Dostal, Jörg and Anja Zorob, *Syria and the Euro-Mediterranean Relationship*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ Sweijjs, Tim et al. "Why are Pivot States so Pivotal?: The Role of Pivot States in Regional and Global Security" in *HCSS Strategic Monitor 2014*, published by The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2014, 34.

drifted politically towards Russia and Iran.¹¹ At the same time, the Syrian Sunni *ummah* and private Islamic charities in the Gulf also strengthened ties, as attempts by the Syrian government at the public institutionalization of religion failed amid ideological and sectarian differences and resulted in an increase in foreign funding of Sunni mosques, mostly from GCC nations.¹² These developments further complicated the relations between Syria and the EU. What resulted from this was a situation in 2011 in which the European Union was forced by pragmatic concerns to support a mostly religious uprising against a secular government.¹³ Almost immediately after the conflict became militarized and escalated into full scale civil war, European leaders, including Angela Merkel, immediately called for Assad's ouster. Their interests in making and, to this day, maintaining such a strong position are clear, yet hidden within a general discourse of humanitarian concern for the Syrian people. The imposition of a Gulf-aligned regime in Syria would sharply increase the influence of conservative Saudi Arabia in the region, relative to the radical Iranian government. As Gulf interests in the region mostly align with European ones, this would also increase the power of the EU, already a large presence in terms of economic and political influence.¹⁴ Syria's possible alignment with Gulf nations could also represent, in the eyes of EU policy makers, an easier partner for the imposition of the neoliberal economic reforms which Assad had partially rejected over a decade earlier. Embracing humanitarianism on

¹¹ Kostadinova, Valentina, "What is the status of the EU-GCC Relationship?" in *GRC Gulf Papers* published by the Gulf Research Center. 2013.

¹² Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* 161.

¹³ Kostadinova, "What is the status of the EU-GCC Relationship?"

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

an external paradigm reinforces this status quo while reducing the Syrian war to a simple narrative of dictatorship vs. democracy.

In turn, the degree to which European states are fueling the war in Syria is a subject of significant debate. Globally, they are perceived as a marginal diplomatic player in Syria with little leverage due to their early imposition of sanctions on the Assad regime. However, the EU's policy on Syria positions itself as impartial while obscuring some very real interests which are aided by European material support. When I limit this analysis to interests specific to Germany, the same basic logic is still applicable. Germany's arms industry is the third largest in the world and its largest arms importers includes Qatar, whose government purchased 790.5 million Euros worth of arms from Germany in 2016.¹⁵ Turkey is another large importer of German arms, purchasing nearly 100 million Euros worth from 2016-2017, though the number has decreased with tense diplomatic relations between Ankara and Berlin.¹⁶ These relationships are significant, due to the well documented financial and weapons support both Qatar and Turkey have offered to Islamic opposition groups in Syria, including Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate.¹⁷ In turn, the conflict in Syria has driven down oil prices globally, due to overproduction in the GCC aimed at limiting Iranian and Russian economic power, as both economies are dependent on oil exports.¹⁸ Such a dip in oil prices, fueled by the continuation of the conflict, is clearly advantageous for the European Union and other large consumers of fossil fuels.

¹⁵ Knight, Ben, "German arms exports dip, but still near record highs", *Deutsche Welle*.

¹⁶ Chase, Jefferson, "German arms exports - what you need to know", *Deutsche Welle*.

¹⁷ Byman, Daniel "Outside Support for Insurgent Movements" in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 981.

¹⁸ Elass, Jareer and Amy Myers Jaffe, "War and the Oil Price Cycle" in *Journal of International Affairs* , 130.

Cultural Politics and the Stigmatization of European Muslims

Aside from the connection between refugee policy and foreign policy, German approaches to Syrian refugees fit into its wider relationship with Islam and its place within society. The report published by the German Islam Conference (*Deutsches Islam Konferenz* or *DIK*) in 2009 found that employment rates for Muslims in Germany were consistently lower than those of non-Muslim Germans and that Muslims were much more likely to work in blue-collar fields.¹⁹ Tellingly, DIK was conducted through the Office of Migration and Refugees, showing that, even after gaining citizenship, German Muslims are permanently considered outsiders.²⁰ More reflective of this point is the fact that Germans who immigrated after 1949, and their descendants, are permanently classified by the government as having a “migration background” (*Migrationshintergrund*).²¹ Both DIK and this exclusionary German national identity reflect an overall approach which posits migration as something alien to Germany and Muslim immigrants as meant for low wage work, if they should be allowed in to begin with.

While restrictive ideas on citizenship and the economic marginalization of Muslims dates back into the mid 20th century, the political approach linking Islamic religion to security concerns, gained footing in Germany after 9/11. This has caused relations between Muslim immigrant populations and ‘ethnic Germans’ to shift from “peaceful mutual indifference” to a

¹⁹Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, *Muslim Life in Germany*, Sonja Haug, Stephanie Müssig & Anja Sichts. Federal Republic of Germany: German Conference on Islam, 2013.

²⁰ Peter, Frank, “Welcoming Muslims into the Nation: Tolerance Politics and Integration in Germany” in *Muslims in the West after 9/11: Religion, Politics and Law*, 123.

²¹ Federal Institute for Population Research, *Population with a Migration Background*, published in English, http://www.bib-demografie.de/EN/Facts_Figures/Migration_Background/migration_background_node.html

growing perception of Muslims as “not only different, but dangerous”.²² For example, the German state refuses to grant official recognition to any Islamic group, even though it affords such recognition to Christian and Jewish organizations.²³ In certain German provinces, some Islamic organizations are surveilled by the *Verfassungsschutz*, the security force tasked with protecting constitutional values and democracy in Germany.²⁴ Potential immigrants with ties to organizations which the *Verfassungsschutz* has determined to be illiberal are often denied citizenship altogether.²⁵ Turkish Sunni group Milli Görüs, vigorously disputes its own characterization as illiberal, claiming it has no intention of setting up a “parallel society” for Muslims as the security services have charged.²⁶ Nevertheless, the perspective of Mili Görüs is unimportant for the *Verfassungsschutz*, who premise their judgement solely on their own perceptions. This designation has proven extremely limiting for the thousands of German Turks who are members of the group and can no longer apply for citizenship in some regions. In positioning Islam as in conflict with democracy in its approach to the integration of Muslims, the German state has forced potential Muslim immigrants and refugees to choose between their faith and their society. Such an approach is aimed at the erasure of an Islamic identity as a precondition for citizenship. It also operates under the unspoken premise that Islam is explicitly at odds with democracy and not welcome in Germany or Europe.

²² Schiffauer, “Enemies within the Gate: The Debate about the Citizenship of Muslims in Germany” in *Multiculturalism, Muslims and Citizenship: A European Approach*, 111.

²³ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Implications for the Perception and Treatment of Syrian Refugees

The internal-external dynamics of Germany's humanitarian approach to refugees suggests a number of troubling implications for the future of Syrians in Germany. Their integration into an already stigmatized and impoverished minority aside, the cultural dynamics of refugee politics suggests that Germany does not want Syrians to remain in Europe permanently. This can be seen through the framework of securitization, as Muslims are increasingly perceived as a potential "fifth column" in the global war between the West and Islamist terrorism. It can also be seen through the complementary assertion, drawing from dominant European historiography, that Islam is incompatible with the secular-liberal value systems of Europe.

Representations of Muslims already in Europe is reflective of these assumptions, and invariably contributes to their socio-economic disenfranchisement. The failure of European media and political discourse to abandon the automatic association of Syrian refugees with cultural and security threats suggests that their integration into particular European societies will occur along similar lines and result in similar disenfranchisement. A depoliticized Muslim subject in the form of a Syrian refugee is thus integrated into a failing system. The depoliticization of refugees allows them to be viewed, in the short term, as needy victims of a violent culture, facilitating their entry into Europe. In the long term, they can be viewed with the same suspicion as Muslims already within Germany, and be incorporated into the low economic position as these same Muslims. Removing the Syrian refugee from their political context also avoids problematizing the geopolitical status quo in the Middle East, which the European Union obviously benefits from and plays an often hidden, material role in perpetuating.

The foundations of such stigmatizing approaches to integration can be seen in the concrete policies the German government has proposed. Social benefits for refugees are dependent on German language and culture classes and participation in low wage work. Such labor-dependent benefits are troubling, as the wages for refugees enrolled in such programs can be as low as 80 cents per hour, an approach advocated by the International Monetary Fund.²⁷ While German policy has also invested in education efforts for refugees, the existence of low wage ‘workfare’ integration schemes and the inaccessibility of language classes suggests an approach which places Syrians into the lower sectors of the economy and German society, just like the Muslim populations already in Germany.

Relevant Theory: Knowledge, Discourse(s) and Global Power

Before determining the effects of German refugee discourse on Syrians, I must determine what a “discourse” is and how it relates to the material exercise of power. As articulated by social theorist Stuart Hall, there exists a hidden relationship between discourse and concrete power relations. This relationship is difficult to imagine in the abstract, and is best viewed through the lens of the “The West and the Rest”, a paradigm also coined by Hall. He defines discourse as, “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about - i.e. a way of representing - a particular kind of knowledge about a topic”²⁸. This knowledge, produced here through a lens which places the West in a position of innate superiority, has material consequences for the “Rest” who are viewed as automatically inferior.²⁹ Knowledge purporting

²⁷ Barbière, Cécile, “IMF Recommends Paying Refugees Below the Minimum Wage” *Euractiv News*.

²⁸ Hall, Stuart, “Chapter 6: The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power”, in *The Formations of Modernity: Understanding Modern Societies*, ed. Bram Geiben and Stuart Hall.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

to be objective is in reality, heavily agenda-ed. Hall sums this up when referencing preceding arguments made by Michel Foucault:

Not only is discourse always implicated in power; discourse is one of the "systems" through which power circulates. The knowledge which a discourse produces constitutes a kind of power, exercised over those who are "known." When that knowledge is exercised in practice, those who are "known" in a particular way will be subject (i.e. subjected) to it. This is always a power-relation.³⁰

This quote allows one to imagine the links between particular ways of representing or discussing a social group and the exercise of power over said group by governments, for example. This theory also shows how power is embedded in discourses which proport to be impartial. When a subject is “known” through a means of representation which has little to do with the reality of their being, they will be addressed by power via these unfair images.

To make this relation more concrete, I will point to a relevant example of discourse-power relations in French political scientist Jocelyn Cesari’s securitization thesis, which posits that:

European states view Muslim groups as threats to their survival and take measures to reassure citizens that they will not allow the incubation of terrorism. However, the politicization of religion essentially impoverishes and threatens its survival, leading devout Muslims to feel resentful of the interference of non-religious actors. Thus, the measures intended to prevent radicalization actually engender feelings of discontent and

³⁰ Ibid., 205.

prompt a transformation of religious conservatism to fundamentalism. This is the process of securitization.³¹

If particular governments, drawing from historical representations, imagine European Muslims as dangerous religious fanatics, they will thus legislate Muslims based upon this perception. This form of politics does not account for French foreign policy or imperial history as a relevant cause of terrorism, blaming Islam alone for radicalization. Regardless of whether or not such an image is based in the reality of Muslim minorities in France, policies must be crafted in relation to this established “truth”, which addresses only part of the picture.

This “regime of truth” concerning Islam and the Middle East has been crafted over millennia, as Europeans justified their own power interests with stereotypical and false impressions of Arab culture. Edward Said’s landmark book *Orientalism* described this process in more detail, writing,

...for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or an American first, as an individual second. And to be a European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. **It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer.**³²

³¹ Cesari, Jocelyn “Securitization of Islam in Europe” in *Muslims in the West after 9/11: Religion Politics and Law*, 1.

³² Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, 11, emphasis added.

Following with Said's analysis of 19th century Orientalism, contemporary discourse on refugees and Syria is conducted without reference to the aforementioned material interests or the long history of involvement in the Middle East, colonial or otherwise. Although the politics and rights of Syrian refugees are heavily related to this history and current geopolitics, they are disconnected and replaced with a decontextualized refugee subject onto which European anxieties and prejudices can be projected onto. This Orientalist approach is clearly at work in German media, though I will demonstrate that it extends beyond this to the material political realm.

Syrian Refugees in the Mainstream German Media

Keeping in mind the importance of the media in shaping wider cultural and political debate, it is necessary to specifically define just how Syrians are discussed and portrayed in the German mainstream press. I will do this by examining initial responses to the presence of Syrian refugees in German media, throughout 2015, the year of the "Syrian refugee crisis". In doing so, I will use a quantitative media analysis, published by the UNHCR, titled, *Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries*. The report analyzes press coverage of refugees in Germany, Great Britain, Sweden, Spain, and Italy. In its analysis of German media, the report focuses on three German newspapers reflecting mainstream German political positions, *Bild* (right-wing populist), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (center-left), and *Die Welt* (center-right).³³ The report uses roughly 300 articles per country to assess major themes and actors in national press coverage of "immigration and asylum policy" and

³³ Berry, Mike et al. "Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries" published by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, December 2015. 113.

individual refugees from the Middle East or Africa who are moving to or are already in Europe.³⁴

I find the report useful when thinking specifically about Syrian refugees, as roughly 70% of the total German media coverage analyzed herein specifically focuses on refugees from Syria.³⁵

The report highlights several encouraging components of German media coverage of refugees, especially in relation to nations like the UK, whose coverage had been more generally negative. Perhaps interestingly, these three German newspapers, regardless of their ideological leaning, consistently used the terms “refugee” or “asylum seeker” , avoiding more negative terms like “illegal”, “migrant” or “foreigner”.³⁶ In turn, “there is almost no conflation [in the German press]... between asylum and immigration”.³⁷ Finally, a quarter of coverage specifically referenced a humanitarian need for Germany to take in its fair share of Syrian refugees, mirroring the centrist position on the crisis.³⁸ Out of all the nations referenced in the report, Germany was the most likely to appeal to the humanitarian dimension of the crisis.³⁹

Hereafter, the limits of the report’s analysis become more apparent. Characterizing German press coverage of refugees as positive ignores a plethora of evidence which could just as easily prove the opposite point. Perhaps the characterization of German coverage as “positive” is warranted in relation to more openly negative portrayals in the UK press, for example, but this

³⁴ Ibid., 25.

³⁵ Ibid., 113.

³⁶ Ibid., 113.

³⁷ Ibid., 114.

³⁸ Ibid., 114.

³⁹ Ibid., 113.

comparative empathy should not lead us to believe that the German media is accurately or fairly portraying refugees from Syria in their own right. The German press, during the time referenced by this study, had consistently failed to frame the issue of refugees as anything but a European problem located within Europe, ignoring the voices of refugees and refusing to explore the root causes of or solutions to mass, conflict driven migration. In turn, German media coverage *has* engaged in negative stereotyping of refugees, albeit in a more covert form. Due to the political history of Germany, such overt political racism would be unthinkable in the public sphere. However, the fact that racist opinions and unfair representation are cloaked in a veil of political correctness and liberal rationality does not mean they do not exist. In the case of Germany, appearances can be deceiving.

The large majority of testimonials used in the analyzed articles come from either “domestic politicians” or German citizens.⁴⁰ While roughly 8% of testimonials came from refugees themselves, it often focused on either the tragedy of their journey to Europe, or their successful economic or linguistic integration into German society.⁴¹ Though the former set of coverage is limited mostly to the center-left *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, with the other two papers were more willing to conversely frame integration as difficult or impossible and individual refugees as an economic, cultural, or security threat to Germany.⁴² While the right wing press avoided making the explicit connection between refugees and immigration, they do consistently utilize immigration figures or levels in their coverage of the refugee crisis, negating the report’s prior

⁴⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁴¹ Ibid., 108.

⁴² Ibid., 115.

claim that the German press avoided the conflation of refugees and immigration. 58% of articles in *Bild* and 82% of articles in *Die Welt* referenced immigration statistics in some form, implying a hidden connection between refugees and immigration and leading readers to draw these conclusions on their own, rather than stating them outright.⁴³ These two papers were also more likely to reference welfare benefits distribution, referencing the widespread belief within Europe that refugees represent a drain on the welfare state.⁴⁴

The framing of refugees as a cultural or security threat is significant in terms of representation of Muslim refugees in particular, as these two elements remain consistent when applied to Muslims within or outside of the West. In turn, the two are rarely applied on their own, as discussions of cultural assimilation are usually tied to security anxieties. This is due to the nature of the “terrorist threat” facing Europe, and the way this threat has been framed in media and academic discourse. In the wake of 9/11, Western politicians and journalists consistently framed such crimes as acts of hatred towards Western society and “Western values” of freedom and democracy. These sort of explanations were rarely accompanied by an explicit condemnation of Islam per se, but they certainly opened the space for such religious intolerance. This space has been readily occupied by far-right groups, who can ignore the role of the West in Arab instability and frame the issue of refugees as one of cultural deficiency and civilizational divergence. These arguments reflect past historical discourses on so-called “Muslim barbarism”, which reach back to Medieval Europe.

⁴³ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 116.

In turn, such explanations rarely engage the issues of geopolitics or history, ignoring more rational reasons why individual Muslims may feel compelled to commit such horrific crimes. Even today, to suggest that “Islamic terror” is related to the massive historical violence perpetrated by the West in Muslim countries is almost taboo; and opens one who makes these arguments to accusations of terrorist sympathies or a kind of expansive, post-colonial white guilt.

These cultural arguments, raised in the German press, allow refugees very little agency in terms of the way society views them. In turn, they imply a troubling approach to “assimilation” which stresses the erasure of Islamic identity and more overt religious expression. While these issues are vital to the discussion on media representation, I will return to them when discussing German politics, an area where the language is much more overt, and the material effect of such discourse on individual Muslim or Arab refugees is more clear.

In turn, the mainstream German press coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis focused on the internal response within Germany rather than the causes of migration in the first place. “three quarters of *Bild* articles and nearly two thirds of *Süddeutsche Zeitung* stories don’t provide any explanations for refugee flows” compared with one third of the more analytical coverage in *Die Welt*.⁴⁵ However, the reasons given for the migration in *Die Welt* often remain in the realm of surface level analysis: attributing migration to conflict and civil war yet failing to analyze the dimensions and actors in particular conflicts and the degrees of their complicity in such violence. Merely attributing the migration to “the Syrian Civil War” avoids the question of foreign actors which have been pouring weapons, money, and soldiers into the conflict, actions which clearly extend the war and drive displacement as a result. It also reflects a European tendency to avoid

⁴⁵ Ibid., 117.

inward reflection on culpability in foreign conflicts, and a specific reluctance to critique the European Union's policy of regime change in Syria.

Reflective of this point, the solutions provided in the German media to the apparent crisis of Syrian migration are Eurocentric in their focus; privileging internal solutions to limit or increase the number of refugees coming to Germany rather than addressing the externalized nature of the conflict in Syria. Conflict resolution is posited as a possible solution in only 0.7% of total press coverage, while no solution is posed in 65% of the articles.⁴⁶ The most popular solution raised by the German press, aside from none at all, is to reduce levels of migration and to reject or deport more refugees. This position is taken in 11% of the articles analyzed, while 9% of coverage takes the opposite and second most popular position, advocating more refugee intake.⁴⁷

Dissecting Internal/External Rhetorical Humanitarianism in Media Coverage

German press coverage is similarly unwilling to engage the foreign policy of Western governments or any other outside actor as a cause of Syrian migration. The report notes that the closest thing to such an engagement is a statement from a Green Party politician in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* who asks if groups fighting the Islamic State should receive weapons from Western governments.⁴⁸ This decontextualization and refusal to critically assess the roles of outside governments in the escalation and prolongment of this war reflects the EU policy on Syria, as articulated in their official position, adopted by the European Council on April 3, 2017. The

⁴⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 121.

document continuously calls for a diplomatic solution to the war in Syria, and does reference outside intervention in the conflict.⁴⁹ However, this attention to outside actors is specifically limited to Turkey, Russia and Iran, focusing more on the latter two allies of the Assad regime which it condemns as primarily responsible for the displacement of the Syrian people.⁵⁰ Notably absent from this condemnation are any members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the United States, and any EU countries involved in some form in the crisis. This omission is deliberate, and signifies the ultimate positioning of the European Union on Syria. The document states that the European Union stands firmly on the side of the Syrian opposition and will support ongoing attempts by the fractured groups to solidify their messaging and opposition to Assad.⁵¹ No reference is made to particular groups on the ground, aside from negative critiques of the Assad regime and, to a lesser degree, ISIS.

Why, in this document, is the EU attempting to position itself as an arbitrator when it simultaneously condemns the Assad regime and supports ongoing opposition efforts? In reality, the European Union and its Western ally the United States, are highly involved in the conflict, albeit in more covert means. The United States has specifically bombed both Syrian military and ISIS targets, while providing weapons aid and financial support to opposition groups even before the 2011 protests erupted into civil war. Painting the EU position as humanitarian in nature is perhaps partially true (the EU is the single largest provider of humanitarian aid in Syria), yet it

⁴⁹ Council of the European Union, Press Office: General Secretariat of the Council, *Council Adopts EU Strategy on Syria*, 2017, 1.

⁵⁰Ibid., 1.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2.

obscures their very real interest in toppling Assad or at least creating a new political system in Syria with or without his collaboration.⁵²

This neutral rhetorical positioning also serves a number of alternate social functions with regards to both refugees and the internal political dynamics of Syria. Firstly, it avoids the problematic line of thought which casts Western actions in Syria as extending the suffering of the Syrian people. In turn, it avoids a critical assessment of the groups which the West supports in Syria, aka the “Good Muslims”, in the words of Mahmood Mamdani, whose ideas I will engage later on.⁵³ Secondly, and more pertinent to the topic at hand, it allows domestic European politicians to position EU member states accepting refugees as a purely humanitarian exercise, rather than taking responsibility for a war which they and their allies in the region have clearly helped to extend. Calling for an end to violence, while not admitting their role in it and refusing to attribute it to anyone but their geopolitical enemies allows the EU to claim a position of moral superiority over other foreign actors more overtly involved in Syria. This agenda-ed positioning recalls more general theories of Eurocentrism and the way it functions in media and political discourse.

Eurocentrism and EU Humanitarian Rhetoric

In the introduction to their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, film scholars Robert Stam and Ella Shohat detail the various ways in which Eurocentrism functions in cultural discourse, though the points can generally be extrapolated to apply to

⁵² Ibid., 3.

⁵³ Mamdani, Mahmood. *Good Muslims, Bad Muslims*.

political discourse as well. Two of the points are directly applicable to the German media coverage of Syrian refugees and the EU position on the civil war:

1. Eurocentric discourse projects a linear historical trajectory leading from Classical Greece to Imperial Rome and then to the metropolitan capitals of Europe and the US...In all cases, Europe, alone and unaided, is seen as the “motor” for progressive historical change; it invents democracy, class society, feudalism, capitalism, the industrial revolution....4. Eurocentrism minimizes the West’s oppressive practices by regarding them as contingent, accidental, exceptional. Colonialism, slave-trading, and imperialism are not seen as fundamental catalysts of the West’s disproportionate power.⁵⁴

The first point is useful when viewed in relation to the European Union’s projected image as a neutral humanitarian actor seeking the most humane solution to the plight facing the Syrian people. The assumption of Europe’s exceptional moral standing sets a large rhetorical barrier in the way of meaningful engagement with the historical and political role Europe has played in the continued destabilization of the Middle East. Superficial engagement is perhaps possible, yet even the actions which by some standards can be seen as immoral can be justified through the fourth point, which explains away Western oppression as benevolent or necessary. This second function is directly applicable to Syrian refugees within Europe, as it covertly justifies prejudice against them. If the West is benevolent in its aims and always justified in its means, why should the position of the European Union be viewed as anything but benevolent? In turn, through the

⁵⁴Shoat, Ella and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Routledge, 1994. 2-3.

lens of Eurocentrism, such claims of Western, disinterested benevolence cast a shadow of suspicion onto individual Arab refugees.

As the European Union and other Western governments have identified two main drivers of the migration to Europe, it is important to assess the implications of this specificity on Syrian refugees in the West. The two main actors at fault, according to the EU, are 1. Bashar al-Assad and his allies (Russia, Iran, Hezbollah), and 2. ISIS and (some) comparable Sunni terrorist organizations. Yet the characterization of such groups as a primary driver of migration along with the Syrian government is problematic as they fight on opposite sides of the Syrian conflict. Where do ordinary Syrian citizens fit into this picture? If the EU is positioning ISIS as bad and the Syrian government as also and perhaps more bad, this simultaneously problematizes the Syrian opposition and government, while apparently advocating for a vague conglomerate of supposedly moderate rebels with whom the average European is not at all familiar. Syrians on all sides of the conflict can be problematized within such a discourse. Refugees fleeing the conflict can never be viewed as trustworthy, because of their relation to these problematic modes of violence.

In this vein, the issue of representation cannot be reduced to images of refugees already in Europe, as the European media has repeatedly attempted to frame the issue. Discussing Syrian refugees as an internal, European problem says more about the foreign policy of the European Union than it does about their approach to migration. The internal focus of German media discourse fits into a wider European projection of their own policy as purely humanitarian thus

making the EU a credible partner in crafting, in the words of the European Council, a “genuine, inclusive political transition”.⁵⁵

Can such claims to neutrality be taken at face value from a power which has taken a clear side? Moreover, how does the policy of the European Union on Syria affect the way member states treat individual Syrian refugees in their territory? Do these images of humanitarianism have any precedent in recent history?

Keeping these questions in mind, this humanitarian language must be critically assessed in relation to internal treatment of refugees, and to external foreign policy. In studying both of these relationships, it is quite clear that the European Union’s self-image of a humanitarian power is problematic and not completely accurate. When reading between the lines of such language, it becomes clear that internal charity comes with strings attached and is, contrary to the caring language of German *Willkommenspolitik*⁵⁶ not guaranteed on the basis of common humanity or experiences of extreme violence or political repression.

Culture and Security in the Political Right Wing

The mainstream centrist political approach within Germany carries with it many cultural assumptions about Syrian refugees and the violence they have experienced. Assimilatory politics concerning Muslim immigrants or refugees throughout Europe are similarly premised on these assumptions, frequently implying the erasure of Islamic culture as the prerequisite for proper integration into European society. Mandatory language courses, classes on European “cultural

⁵⁵ Council of the European Union, Press Office: General Secretariat of the Council, *Council Adopts EU Strategy on Syria*, 2017. 2.

⁵⁶ *Willkommenspolitik* roughly translates to “welcome politics”. This is how some refer to Merkel’s policies with regards to Syrian refugees in 2015.

values”, and state restrictions on the practice of Islam prove this point more clearly. This approach, however culturally based, never veers into the realm of overt racist language.

Politicians like Angela Merkel are often careful to avoid such language and let the policies speak for themselves. However, this politically correct language does not negate the underlying premise of such politics which posits that cultural erasure, be it linguistic or religious, is the only way for Muslims to live peacefully in Europe. In turn, it leaves space open for a misguided critique from the right, which mirrors these assumptions, amplifies the intensity of discriminatory politics, and utilizes overtly racialized language to reinforce feelings of mistrust which some white Europeans feel towards their brown neighbors. Such politics also embrace a revisionist historical narrative affirming the presence of a pure, dynamic, “Judeo-Christian” European identity in relation to a static, deficient, Muslim identity.

This form of political discourse is being utilized by many parties within Europe’s resurgent far-right. Replacing past overt Anti-Semitism from the far right is a relatively new, racialized Islamophobia. I have identified several key features of far-right populist parties like the AfD in Germany, with regards to refugee policy and Islam, including:

- i. Fears that Europe is being culturally “Islamized” by large scale acceptance of mostly Muslim refugees, destroying its “Christian” identity and cultural values.
- ii. Fears that influxes of refugees will bring with them increases in terror: that such violence is endemic to the Muslim faith and culture and thus unavoidable when welcoming refugees from Muslim countries.
- iii. Fears that refugees will use more than their fair share of government benefits, or a belief that refugees are undeserving of any government assistance.

- iv. A linguistic insistence that their intolerance is culturally, economically or historically-based, ergo, not racist.

Social Intolerance: The AfD Approach to Refugees

The Alternative for Germany Party (AfD) provides a perfect demonstration of the preceding points, which can be applied to most far-right parties within Europe more generally. However, the mere existence of such a party within Germany makes it a special case. Far-right parties, while newly resurgent, have been consistently present within mainstream political discourse in most of Western Europe. However, no party to the right of the centrist CDU has ever breached the 5% threshold for parliamentary representation in Germany's Federal Bundestag. This is due to the unique historical memory of German politics, and the events of the Nazi era. Germans have always been uniquely aware of the dangers of overt political racism, and past right wing parties that seemed to flirt with racist or neo-nazi language, like the National Democratic Party, remained marginalized by most Germans. However, the evolving and flexible political message of the AfD, combined with perceptions of an out of control refugee "crisis" has allowed them to gain a significant foothold in German politics, and mainstream legitimization of their intolerant message.

The Alternative for Germany party was founded in April 2013 as an economically liberal, Eurosceptic conservative party. The main impetus for the founding of the AfD was the 2011 Eurozone crisis and the bailout measures for Southern European nations advocated by Germany, the wealthiest nation in the European Union. Many Germans were resentful of the perceived financial burden such bailouts entailed, and thought it unfair that Germans would have to bail out the Southern Europeans. This crisis provided what German political scientist Frank Decker

described as the AfD's "populist moment".⁵⁷ Decker then elaborates, claiming that the Euro crisis:

...opened the window of opportunity for a new eurosceptic party whose primary policy demands—a controlled dissolution of the monetary union and the rejection of a further deepening of the European integration process—lent themselves to the attachment of a broader right-wing populist platform to it.⁵⁸

In other terms, the economic nationalism implied by an exit from the Euro opened the door for less mainstream right wing discourse to enter the political scene on the back of a seemingly mainstream political movement. Even the name of the party implies a respect for democratic norms of debate unparalleled in comparable European right wing parties. They are presented as a simple "alternative"; one opinion among many- equal in value by virtue of their wide support.

If the Eurozone Crisis provided the impetus for the AfD's creation, the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015 provided it with the opportunity for significant legitimization and growth. Before Syrian refugees began migrating to Europe in large numbers, "AfD members had to contend with was the simple fact that its primary mobilization tool...had disappeared from the headlines"⁵⁹. Simply put, the lessening intensity of the currency crisis had brought about a decline in public interest in the AfD. The arrival of Syrian refugees on Europe's shores provided the party with its second "populist moment", in addition to a means for the party to shift further to the right.

⁵⁷ Decker, "The 'Alternative for Germany': Factors Behind its Emergence and Profile of a New Far-Right Populist Party" in *German Politics and Society*, 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 2

During the refugee crisis, the AfD effectively expanded its membership by adopting cultural and historical arguments which would have been untenable for a movement seeking electoral success at any other point in post-war German history. A reading of their current manifesto, the platform which enabled their movement into the federal Bundestag as the third largest party, combined with a look at more grassroots Islamophobic and racist movements shows the degree to which their simultaneous legitimization and electoral success was aided by German discomfort with Muslim refugees.

Under a section titled “Culture, Language and Identity” the AfD advocates for the promotion and preservation of a German “predominant culture instead of multiculturalism”, using the German term *leitkultur* (guiding culture), echoing past arguments against immigration made by less mainstream right wing groups.⁶⁰ The term is controversial within Germany, as it brings up unpleasant parallels to Nazi arguments concerning the superiority of German culture within Europe. However, the AfD demonstrates that it is not uncomfortable with this parallel, claiming later in the “Culture” section that, “The current narrowing of the German culture of remembrance to the time of National Socialism should be opened in favour of a broader understanding of history, which also encompasses the positive, identity-establishing aspects of German history”.⁶¹ Cloaked in benign language, this historical revisionism targets feelings of national pride and implies that a culture which looks upon racist genocide with shame is denying its people patriotism which other peoples enjoy without guilt. More subtly, it opens up the space

⁶⁰Alternative für Deutschland Party, *Manifesto for Germany: The Political Programme of the Alternative for Germany Party*, English version, 46.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

for a reassertion of German nationalism based upon a homogenous, Christian identity. Echoing Shoat's definition of Eurocentrism, this is made clear in their assertion that German culture is comprised of, "firstly, the religious traditions of Christianity; secondly, the scientific and humanistic heritage, whose ancient roots were renewed during the period of Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment; and thirdly, Roman law, upon which our state is founded".⁶²

Partially reflecting the first characteristic of European far-right politics, a construction of unified "Christian Europe", the manifesto then shifts its focus to Muslims to reflect the point in its whole. The document flatly states that "Islam does not belong to Germany" and claims to oppose "Islamic practice which is directed against our liberal-democratic constitutional order, our laws, and the Judeo-Christian and humanist foundations of our culture".⁶³ It goes on to advocate for the denial of official recognition of Islamic groups, banning mosques with minarets, which it sees as a "symbol of Islamic supremacy", and a ban on headscarves for public servants and students in line with French secularism (*laïcité*).⁶⁴

These Islamophobic cultural arguments are further reflected in the section on "Immigration Integration and Asylum". The section begins with the assertion that the debate on asylum in Germany is "characterized by an ideologically-biased climate of political correctness, accompanied by banned terms and newspeak"⁶⁵. This claim is reflective of my own, namely that centrist discourse on refugees which feeds into cultural stereotypes, cloaked in political

⁶² Ibid., 47.

⁶³ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 57.

correctness, opens up space for a superficial critique of asylum on this basis. The section advocates for a “case by case” method for assessing asylum applications, limiting the number of refugees simply by way of logistics.⁶⁶ It then goes on to decry what it sees as an insufficient process of integration on the part of recent refugees, claiming that “the continuing influx of people with *extremely poor integration prospects* exacerbates existing problems, and is therefore irresponsible”.⁶⁷ It is not difficult to determine who they are referring to, even though the words “Muslim” or “Syrian” do not appear in this section.

Reflective of the fourth point of convergence for far-right European parties, the AfD then denounces low skilled migrants, who it claims are “abusively applying for asylum, and then have to rely on tax-funded social aid”.⁶⁸ Unsurprisingly, the AfD advocates that such social benefits should only be extended to those it believes have made an effort to fully integrate into German society and embrace German values. Wrapped in calls for “transparency”, the party also calls for the publication of the nationality of welfare recipients.⁶⁹ Hidden in these seemingly rational proposals are implications that refugees are incompatible with life in Germany, and that social spending should focus on “Germans”, but only the right ones, and definitely not refugees.

Mirroring my second common feature of the far-right, the AfD’s manifesto calls for transparency in the reporting of “immigrant crime”. It goes on to state that, “Immigration-related crime is extremely difficult to combat – embedded, as it is, in family, clan and cultural structures,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 62. Emphasis added.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 62.

and aided by language barriers”, explicitly tying violence to local cultures.⁷⁰ Finally, the protection of borders is raised in the document, as it calls for the creation of a German border police force, even though Germany is in the Schengen Zone and is surrounded by nations which are also entitled to border-free travel.⁷¹ This is an obvious allusion to the issue of immigration and is tied to the party’s call for a severe decrease in asylum cases and their desire for Germany to leave the European Union.

While all of these policies do mirror the centrist approach, they move significantly beyond it and abandon the language of humanitarianism. In turn, the platform, while advocating for the rights of German victims of “immigrant crime” makes no reference to crimes committed by Germans against immigrants and refugees. This is a vital omission, as attacks against asylum seekers have increased with the large number of refugees arriving in Germany after 2014.

Material Intolerance: Grassroots Movements and Reactionary Violence

Attacks against refugees have been a recurring tactic of East and West German right wing groups since before the fall of the Berlin Wall. More recently, the numbers have increased significantly. In 2016, there were 10 attacks on asylum seekers per day, with 3,533 total attacks on refugees and asylum centers.⁷² This number represents an increase from the roughly 1000 attacks against refugees in 2015, although the number of refugees entering Germany dropped

⁷⁰ Ibid., 47.

⁷¹ Ibid., 24.

⁷² BBC Journalists, “Germany Hate Crime: Nearly 10 Attacks a Day on Migrants in 2016”.

⁷³ Rosehagen, “From Stranger to Citizen? Germany’s Refugee Dilemma” in *Dissent*, 143.

from 500,000 to 280,000 over that same time.⁷³ This period of time also correlates closely with the rise of the AfD, and the fall of a more grassroots, more overtly racist right wing movement.

PEGIDA, a German acronym for “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West” (*Patriotische Europäer Gegen Die Islamisierung Des Abendlandes*) was founded in the East German city of Dresden in 2014. The group was specifically founded to intimidate Kurdish activists within Dresden, holding weekly marches through the streets every Monday; a tradition which continues to this day.⁷⁴ The groups seeks to defend what it calls the “Christian-Jewish culture of the Occident” against Islamization and the establishment of Muslim “parallel societies” in Germany.⁷⁵ This discourse closely mirrors the language of the AfD in its historical image of a Europe united by Christianity, and forms the bulk of Pegida's ideological platform. In turn, both Pegida and the AfD have not been afraid to flirt with the images and languages of fascism, with both groups using the nazi-era term *lügenpresse* or ‘lying press’ to refer to liberal publications who accuse the group of racism. Like the AfD, Pegida’s arguments against refugees is cloaked in language of history and culture. Such groups can fall back on the platitude “Islam is not a race” while presenting Orientalist images of refugees which are clearly aimed at Arab people. These arguments fall into a pattern of discourse labeled as “anti-Muslim racism” which

⁷⁴Dostal, Jörg Michael. “The Pegida Movement and German Political Culture: Is Right-Wing Populism Here to Stay?” in *The Political Quarterly*, 525 .

⁷⁵ Ibid., 525.

uses extremely racialized language targeted mostly at Arabs but utilizing the more general term “Islam”.⁷⁶

While many would assume the anti-Muslim racism of Pegida would propel the movement into the mainstream during the Syrian refugee crisis, the exact opposite occurred. Starting in late 2015, the height of the refugee crisis, “the tide started to turn against Pegida”.⁷⁷ Pegida-backed candidates in local elections in Hamburg and Dresden failed to gain a significant number of votes in 2016, and the group’s influence only expanded beyond Dresden during specific incidents of terror, such as the 2016 New Years Eve attacks in Cologne committed by a group of North African asylum seekers.⁷⁸ This decline does not represent the marginalization of anti-Muslim racist views however, as the period of decline for Pegida coincided with the meteoric rise of the AfD and their eventual ascension into both the European Parliament and the Bundestag. If anything, the anti-establishment tone and tactics of Pegida were made useless by the mainstreaming of their overall messaging. The decline of such local far-right groups paradoxically represents the normalization and widespread acceptance of their political racism.

Supporting this connection between the fall of Pegida and the rise of the AfD is the geographic distribution of those who supported the AfD in the 2017 elections. The party’s gains were strongest in former East Germany, the stronghold of the Pegida movement.⁷⁹ The eastern

⁷⁶ Knauer, “Anti-Muslim Racism in Germany – a Challenge for Educational Work” in *Czech and Slovak Social Work*.

⁷⁷ Dostal, “The Pegida Movement and German Political Culture”, 526.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 526.

⁷⁹ FT Journalists, “The German Election in Graphs and Charts” in *Financial Times*.

city of Dresden supported the AfD in significant numbers.⁸⁰ More tellingly, the majority of new AfD voters were not previously registered with any mainstream political parties, mirroring the anti-establishment mood of the Pegida movement and other far-right groups which had been marginalized by German political culture in the past.⁸¹

Linking the Center to the Right Wing: Obfuscation of Geopolitical Interests

How then, does the rise of the right wing in German political culture relate to more general discourse on the presence of Syrian refugees? This question is innately tied with the way that centrist media and politicians have been framing the issue. As I have previously shown, media coverage of the refugee crisis has consistently remained within the German and humanitarian contexts. Namely, this discourse posits that Germans *must* help refugees for humanitarian purposes and that the political dimensions behind the displacement of individual refugees is not a part of the discussion. Thus the actors remain firmly situated within Europe, focusing attention away from the actions of political actors in the Middle East. The question which is consistently asked is “how will these refugees affect Westerners?” not “how have the actions and interests of European governments *created* refugees in the first place?” When media discourse focuses exclusively on the effects of migration on Germans, Germans can be more easily framed as victims when more negative effects of migration arise. The inability for the German center to entertain the idea of a political solution to this crisis opens the space for such German victimization and demonization of refugees.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Moreover, what is clearly evident in both the centrist and right wing approaches to Islam and refugees is that their policies have little to do with Islam and migration and everything to do with concrete European interests in the Middle East and historically constructed ideals of a unified, Christian Europe. Reflective of this point is the fact that the provinces with the highest rates of AfD support were “parts of Eastern Germany where immigration has been lowest”.⁸² These provinces, which have also provided the popular base for Pegida, also have the lowest measures of religious diversity, with more diverse provinces supporting more pro-refugee parties and policies.⁸³

This right wing approach is a distinct reaction to mainstream liberal discourse on refugees and the policies of the Merkel government with regards to the 2015 influx of Syrians. Understanding the degree to which these two are linked can be seen with regards to the ways in which both the right and the center refuse to identify Western foreign policy and those of its regional allies as drivers of migration from Syria. Like the mainstream German media, these two approaches frame the issue of migration as a wholly European problem, locating the actors and policies solely within the framework of Europe, mirroring Shoat’s arguments on Eurocentrism. In turn, both extend such depoliticization to the refugees themselves, addressing them, through rhetoric or policy, in mostly cultural or economic terms. However, this depoliticization occurs within slightly differing frameworks. While the right wing approach stigmatizes all of Islam and Muslims, the liberal approach uses this stigmatization selectively, problematizing specific

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³ Körs, Anna, “The Plurality of Peter Berger's Two Pluralisms in Germany” in *Berger, Peter L., Steets, Silke, Weiße, Wolfram (Hrsg.) (2017); Zwei Pluralismen. Positionen aus Sozialwissenschaft und Theologie zu religiöser Vielfalt und Säkularität.*

practices and aspects of Islam or Muslims while acknowledging the existence of ‘good Muslims’ and a humanitarian need to help refugees despite their cultural differences.

Culture Talk

German political and cultural rhetoric surrounding refugees and integration reflect past discourses on Muslim immigrants more generally, and have implications reaching far beyond the treatment of these populations within Europe. They are more reflective of a larger picture; the strategy and aims of the West in the Middle East. This can be demonstrated in the way that foreign policy discourse and internal assimilatory arguments both take the form of what political scientist Mahmood Mamdani calls “Culture Talk”. He summarizes this discourse as such:

According to some [Muslim] culture seems to have no history, no politics, and no debates, so that *all* Muslims are just plain bad. According to others, there is a history, a politics, even debates, and there *are* good Muslims and bad Muslims. In both versions, history seems to be petrified into a lifeless custom of an antique people who inhabit antique lands...One thinks of pre modern people as those who are not yet modern...the other depicts the premodern as the anti modern.⁸⁴

These competing modes of representation seem to be the hegemonic means of discourse in the West in reference to the Middle East. Both paradigms can be easily reflected in European approaches to Muslim migration and the specific issue of Syrian refugees. With regards to the political discourse of the German center on the subject of Syrians, the means of representation is almost certainly that of “good Muslims vs. bad Muslims”, while the right wing discourse does not recognize the existence of “good muslims” at all. In turn, the “petrified history” which

⁸⁴ Mamdani, *Good Muslims, Bad Muslims*, 18.

Mamdani references perfectly reflects Edward Said's theory of Orientalism which represents Arabs as "static, almost ideal types, and neither as creatures with a potential in the process of being realized nor as history being made".⁸⁵ Thus, within such cultural discourse, Syrians cannot represent themselves, and are not active participants in history but passive actors defined solely in relation to their static culture and history, which are in turn intrinsically tied to violence and anti-modernism.

All of these complex theoretical implications are hidden within the German centrist approach to refugees, and migration from the Islamic world more generally, behind a veil of political correctness and perceived cultural relativism. In other words, non specific deferences to "good Muslims" while stigmatizing the "bad ones". As I have shown in my examination of the far-right approach to refugees and Islam, this simple discursive acknowledgment of the existence of "good Muslims" opens up space for a reactionary embrace of Mamdani's first iteration of culture talk- the insistence that all Muslims are "bad Muslims" and thus cannot be integrated into Europe.⁸⁶ In order to understand the ways these two modes of representation work together however, the shifting policies of the German center with regards to both Islam and refugees must be critically examined, paying particular attention to the ways in which such an approach reflects Mamdani's theory of culture talk. From such an investigation, the ways in which both approaches stigmatize refugees and Muslims will be made more clear.

Merkel's Humanitarian Approach (2015)

⁸⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 321.

⁸⁶ Mamdani, *Good Muslims Bad Muslims*, 18.

To critically examine the approach of Angela Merkel and her Christian Democratic Union Party (CDU) is not to diminish the comparative compassion shown by her embrace of a *Willkommenspolitik* with regards to refugees. As in our examination of media discourse, the German approach seems to more thoroughly humanize refugees than the politics of, for example, Britain and France, whose governments use more racialized language and embrace harsher denunciations of Islam and Muslims in crafting national policy. In the minds of many Syrian refugees, Merkel's political approach represents an unprecedented recognition of their humanity and the worth of their lives. This does not, however, erase the cultural stereotypes and hidden interests present in Merkel's political discourse and policies. *Willkommenspolitik* may represent the most humanistic recognition of refugees in Europe, but it is still a European approach, rife with historical constructions of the Muslim "other". The limits of such "welcoming" were shown in 2016, with the German-led EU deal with Turkey in which thousands of refugees in Europe were deported to Turkey in exchange for 3 billion Euros and visa-free travel for Turkish citizens. Moreover, the German approach to "Muslim integration", which refugee policies have reflected to a degree, engage even more obviously in the problematization and stigmatization of culture inherent in "culture talk".

Merkel's assertion that "we can do it" triggered an immense migration of Syrian refugees into a supposedly accepting society. As of today, 800,000 refugees have been resettled in Germany since 2015, the largest percentage of which are Syrian.⁸⁷ The number was initially much higher, though many have left for Scandinavia or have been deported to their countries of

⁸⁷ Funk, Nanette "A spectre in Germany: refugees, a 'welcome culture' and an 'integration politics'" in *Journal of Global Ethics*, 290.

origin.⁸⁸ The initial reactions within the German political scene were sympathetic to the policies of Merkel, and stressed a liberal responsibility to protect those fleeing tyranny. However, refugees arriving in Germany faced a more complex society than these statements would suggest. Many within Germany were openly hostile to the idea of large scale acceptance of Muslim refugees, and new arrivals faced a complicated nexus of integration policies closely reflective of the situation facing Muslims already in Germany. In this vein, German society more generally was less welcoming than Merkel's rhetoric would suggest, and the German approach to integration more reflective of past discourses on Islam.

The official German state response to the refugee crisis has shifted throughout the crisis and has been dependent on the prevailing domestic political situation. Before asylum claims are processed, prospective refugees live in large scale camps run by private organizations, not separated by language, culture, geography, religion, or any other social classification.⁸⁹ When their claims are processed and asylum is granted, refugees are placed geographically by the government to ensure their even distribution throughout Germany. If refugees move from their original location, this will negatively affect access to government benefits.⁹⁰

In addition to depending on geography, access to benefits is crucially dependent on cultural and economic assimilation. While language and job training courses are not necessarily mandatory for refugees, refusing to take such courses or failing them does result in a reduction of

⁸⁸Chase, Jefferson, "What to know about Deportations in Germany", *Deutsche Welle*.

⁸⁹Funk, "A spectre in Germany".

⁹⁰ Ibid.

benefits.⁹¹ For many, these language courses are inaccessible, as the demand is high and waiting periods for admission into a free class can be long.⁹² Private classes are, by contrast, much more expensive. These issues of accessibility have a material impact on the wellbeing of refugees. For example, American public health professionals in Berlin have reported that some refugees fear making appointments at clinics due to the language barrier, and thus cannot access preventative health care.⁹³ However, while language skills have been officially positioned as essential for German society's acceptance of refugees, a study by the German Institute for Economic Research found that refugees with stronger German language skills perceived more discrimination from 'ethnic Germans' than those who cannot speak German.⁹⁴

The aim of the relative importance of language acquisition in the liberal approach reflects a paradigm of integration premised on assimilation, "a process in which individuals give up their old culture, exchanging it for the culture of their new society".⁹⁵ The ultimate goal of the German approach, in conjunction with a cultural erasure, is labor force participation. In exchange for participation in language and 'German values' courses, refugees are eligible for subsidized living expenses like food and rent, along with the opportunity to qualify for low skill 'workfare' jobs

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Green, Molly, "Language Barriers and Health of Syrian Refugees in Germany" in *American Journal of Public Health*.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Brücker, Helmut et al., "Forced migration, arrival in Germany, and first steps toward integration" in *DIW Economic Bulletin*.

⁹⁵ McBrien qtd. in "Anti Muslim Racism in Germany".

paying 80 cents an hour.⁹⁶ In turn, the government has encouraged private employers to hire refugees, scrapping an old law which forced them to prove no German was qualified for the work before hiring foreigners.⁹⁷ However, this pressure is not legally binding, and is similarly impeded by a reluctance to hire refugees on the part of employers, and, on the part of the refugees, a lack of access to language courses and educational opportunities.

The particular integration method taking place in Germany challenges the humanitarian rhetoric of the German state with regards to refugees. While the actual policies governing the treatment of refugees are generous by some measure, they take place amidst a cultural-political context which greatly stigmatizes Muslims generally and refugees specifically. In turn, the policies on economic integration privilege low-wage labor and do little to promote upward mobility of refugees in Germany. This dynamic is increasingly relevant today, as the far-right advances into parliament, driving the governing CDU closer to the political right. Reflective of this political shift are Angela Merkel's promotion of a ban on burqas "wherever legally possible", saying such practices run counter to integration and hold "no place in Germany".⁹⁸ In 2016, the German government had also taken steps to limit and decrease the number of refugees in Germany, forcibly deporting 25,375 refugees and non forcibly expelling an additional 50,000.⁹⁹ Most of those who were deported came to Germany from Afghanistan or the Balkans

⁹⁶ Funk, "A spectre in Germany", 290.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Chase, Jefferson, "What to know about Deportations in Germany", *Deutsche Welle*.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

but the state also deported refugees from Syria and Iraq.¹⁰⁰ In 2016, the state also granted full asylum status to significantly less Syrians than they did in 2015.¹⁰¹

Cultural Politics and a Rhetorical-Political Shift (2016-17)

The increase in deportations of refugees in 2016 was reflective of an overall shift in Germany's refugee policy and policies on Islam in general. While Germany still hosts a large number of refugees, the days of open borders and social acceptance have become a thing of the recent past. With the ascendance of the political right, mainstream centrists in Berlin have shifted their rhetoric to appeal to the rising xenophobic sentiments in the country. This political and linguistic shift can be further demonstrated by two policies: the 2016 EU-Turkey deal, a recently announced maximum cap on asylum claims, in addition to the proposed burqa ban and increases in deportations to war torn nations.

This shift, along with the concurrent rise of the political right wing, can be traced to the 2016 New Year's Eve attacks in Cologne, in which 650 women were assaulted or robbed during a celebration in front of Cologne's iconic cathedral.¹⁰² Many of the victims reported sexual assaults, and the incident was blamed on North African immigrants and refugees.¹⁰³ Although the perpetrators of these crimes did not arrive with the 2015 wave of Syrian refugees, possible links

¹⁰⁰ Frank, "A spectre in Germany".

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Shuster, Simon. "Fear and Loathing: A Scandal over Sexual Assaults by Migrants Exposes the Challenge of Integrating Refugees in Europe." in *Time Magazine*.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

between migration and crime were vigorously debated throughout German society, and Merkel's approval ratings fell well below 50% for the first time since the crisis began in 2015.¹⁰⁴

Three months after the attacks in Cologne, on March 18 2016, the EU announced a deal with Turkey in which thousands of refugees in Greece, whose asylum claims have not been processed, would be deported to Turkey, in exchange for 3 billion Euros in aid and visa liberalisation for Turkish nationals traveling to the EU.¹⁰⁵ It also includes a vague provision stating that for each Syrian resettled in Turkey, one will be resettled from Turkey to the EU, though this number is capped at 72,000.¹⁰⁶ The deal was advantageous for Turkey, whose integration into the EU has been stalled over European concerns about the Erdogan government's political authoritarianism and growing theocratic tendencies. The deal called for new rounds of talks concerning Turkey's aspirations towards EU membership without posing preconditions as per the EU's previous stance on Turkish membership.¹⁰⁷ For the EU, it allowed them to sidestep international legal requirements for processing asylum claims. Culturally speaking, the deal reinforces the idea that such refugees are better off in the Muslim world and cannot be integrated in such large numbers into Europe. For their part, the refugees were punished for illegally crossing into the EU and sent back to a nation which already hosts the majority of refugees from Syria, and in which their socioeconomic status and access to public benefits remains precarious.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Council of the European Union, Press Office: General Secretariat of the Council. *EU-Turkey Statement*, 18 March 2016.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Amidst larger and larger numbers of rejected asylum applications and deportations of refugees to war zones, Angela Merkel shifted even further away from her initial embrace of refugees in 2017. On October 9 2017, Merkel's CDU party announced a 200,000 person limit on asylum claims, saying in a joint statement with the Christian Social Union Party that the events of 2015 "cannot be repeated".¹⁰⁸ This statement represents an unprecedented reversal of her position. From 2015 until now, Merkel had rejected any limits on refugee intake as a violation of human rights.¹⁰⁹ The reversal of the CDU's humanitarian position on refugees and the legitimization of the far-right represents the influence of a widespread cultural anxiety over Islam's place in German society which was present before the influx of Syrian refugees. A 2014 study done by the University of Leipzig found that 57% percent of German respondents agreed with the statements, "Muslims and their religion are so different to us that it would be illusory to claim equal access to all positions in society" and "The Islamic world is lagging behind and refuses new realities."¹¹⁰ However, these opinions mostly laid beneath the surface within German political discourse before 2015. Increasingly, these underlying fears have been projected onto Syrian refugees, though they have little to do with their presence in Germany. Their appearance in centrist German rhetoric in turn reflects Merkel's attempts to court far-right voters in the wake of her loss of a parliamentary majority in the September 2017 election.

Conclusion(s)

¹⁰⁸ CDU-CSU joint statement, *Regelwerk zur Migration* translation done in CNN article: Vonberg, Judith. "Merkel changes tune on refugee cap", *CNN*. October 9 2017.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Knauer, "Anti-Muslim Racism in Germany".

When examined within a wider political context, the German approach to Syrian refugees fits into a wider pattern of interactions between the West and the Middle East, complete with images verging on the classical Orientalism of the era of high imperialism. Humanitarian rhetoric, coupled with the existence of hidden material interests, is a characteristic of countless European imperial encounters using the ‘white man’s burden’ argument. With reference to the photo series I mentioned in my introduction, the role of this representation within such encounters is clear. The refugees photographed in Koelbl’s project are presented solely through her lens. The message of *their* suffering, is depicted and interpreted, by the artist, as a call for humanitarian aid by the West.¹¹¹ However, can we imagine how the project may have been different if the refugees were allowed to represent themselves? Would the message have been the same? Would the Foreign Office still permit the exhibition of the images in their lobby? Would the project lend itself so perfectly to the political messaging of the German government?

The external representation shown in this photo series is characteristic of all the forms of representation I have detailed in this paper. The German press mostly ignored the perspectives of refugees from their coverage. The AfD and Pegida find the most support for their anti-Muslim racist politics in areas of low religious diversity and immigration. The German political approach more generally cannot be challenged by Syrians, as they cannot vote and have very limited access to any form of political representation aside from Western humanitarian NGOs. Like the colonized of the past, Syrians in contemporary Germany are almost totally unable to represent themselves. Their experience in Germany is dependent on modes of representation which have very little relation to their lives and beliefs. They arrive in a society with preconceived notions

¹¹¹ Federal Foreign Office, *Refugees- A Great Challenge*, ed. Auswärtiges Amt.

about who they are and why they have migrated, and which judges them on these false grounds. They are placed in the care of a government which refuses to acknowledge the degree to which it benefits from their displacement and the destruction of their homes. They are positioned as victims of their own culture, which they must erase to be recognized as fully human. Their victimhood is depicted without reference to the multitude of actors driving their displacement, framing it as existing in a geopolitical vacuum and erasing any responsibility on the part of their host nations. They are thoroughly problematized in every step of their journey, facing social exclusion and racist violence. This socially and historically constructed “regime of truth” guiding the present and future of Syrians in Germany will not allow them to be integrated into German society. As long as they are represented by powers which do not recognize their full humanity, they will be disenfranchised and mistreated. As long as others are allowed to tell and exploit the stories of their suffering while claiming to have their best interest, they will not achieve justice or equality, as such a discourse does not owe them anything of the sort.

It is even more difficult to imagine a just future for Syrians when considering the trends of contemporary German and European politics. In the wake of the AfD’s ascendancy to the German Bundestag as the third largest party, Merkel’s CDU has backtracked from its initial humanistic refugee rhetoric, and has begun to shed pretensions of cultural relativism with regards to Islam in general. This scramble to please the far right is further compounded by the desire of Merkel’s to form a majority government with the aid of the conservative Free Democratic Party, who opposed the refugee policies of 2015. As German politics swing further to the right, towards a rejection of Merkel’s *Willkommenspolitik*, the politically disenfranchised Syrians in Germany will remain at the whim of policy crafted through an increasingly limited regime of truth. Being

seen and legislated through such a discriminatory means of representation will only amplify the concerns I have expressed in this paper. Such a German shift will allow for a further penetration of right wing cultural politics into Europe more generally, mainstreaming anti-Muslim racism which had been previously marginalized in European political discourse. In turn, the border policy of the European Union, and its very limited acceptance of refugees, will most likely suffer attacks from the political right wing, endangering the lives of the few refugees who have been resettled in the EU. Syrians have no just future in such a Europe, and no safe place to return home to any time soon.

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