Neo-nazis no-show their annual march in Dresden. Is Pegida to blame?

by Rachel Stern

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(*The Christian Science Monitor*) Every year on February 13, locals link arms to form a human chain across the Elbe River and Dresden's old town. The gesture is part symbol of remembrance of the World War II bombings that left the city in ruins and part act of defiance against a coinciding neo-Nazi march.

This year there was still a chain—but no visible neo-Nazis, in their first no-show in the nearly 10-year-long marching tradition.

Instead, a mishmash of picketers protesting the extremists' possible presence spread across in front of Dresden's famous Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady), as prominent politicians spoke in solemn commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the British and American bombings.

Observers say that in fact, the neo-Nazis' absence may be due in part to the rise of a group that many accuse of harboring the same sort of hatreds that the neo-Nazis do: Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West, or Pegida. Whether by drawing support from the neo-Nazis or by raising the public's resistance to the messages, Pegida seems to have thrown the neo-Nazis' annual march off stride.

"Maybe it would be too stressful [for the neo-Nazis] to show up," said local Maria Rohr, who watched a smaller podium devoted to anti-Islamophobe speeches behind the official event. "They knew the opposition would be great this year and probably wanted to march on a calmer day, when their views wouldn't be drowned out."

Overlapping movements

Since the late 1990s, Dresden has earned a notorious reputation, courtesy of annual neo-Nazi marches on the February 13 anniversary of the city's firebombing by Allied forces in 1945. That notoriety was further enhanced in recent months as Pegida emerged in the city. The movement, nominally against radical Islam but accused of

harboring broad anti-immigrant sentiments, grew from a Facebook page created in October 2014 into a protest group that drew tens of thousands to weekly marches held as recently as last month.

Although the two groups are often cast in a similar light, their messages and constituencies overlap but differ.

Pegida draws support from people with a broad swathe of ideologies—including neo-Nazis—and taps into German frustrations about a range of issues, ranging from reforming Germany's immigration policy to relations between Russia and Germany, said Dresden city spokesperson Kai Schulz. "A lot of people within Pegida are just normal people."

A study published at the beginning of February by Hans Vorländer, a professor at Dresden's Technical University, described the average Pegida member as a man who is between the ages of 25 and 49; is undereducated; lives in Saxony; served in the Bundeswehr, Germany's Army; and is self-employed.

But there are neo-Nazis embedded within Pegida. About one-third of Pegida members sport right-wing ideologies, while the rest are simply "disenchanted with the current political situation," said Werner Patzelt, another Technical University professor, who sent students to survey members of Pegida as they marched through the city.

And many say Pegida are far from their claims of "Wir sind das Volk"—or "We are the people"—a slogan popularized in the Leipzig demonstrations of 1989 that peacefully led to the demise of communism. Over the past three months, the number of attacks on refugees in Germany has tripled—something that Andreas Zick, who researches violence, told *Der Spiegel* is sparked by the ideology put forth in part by Pegida members at their now dwindling weekly protests.

Patzelt said that neo-Nazis did indeed join Pegida, in hopes of making their positions publicly heard in a group that dwarfed their own numbers, and was viewed as more moderate. But as Pegida protests dwindled in size in recent weeks—the last march drew 2,000 as opposed to the 25,000 immediately after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris—the neo-Nazis no longer had a strong outlet to vent their frustrations.

Furthermore, the international media attention cast on the most extreme members of the Pegida sent a clear message that "Nazis are not welcome" in Dresden and

sapped their overall strength, said Richard Mauser, a local resident who toted a sign that said everyone has a place in his city.

'Foreigners aren't to be feared'

Dresden’s attempt to recast itself as an accepting city—dual defiance against neo-Nazis and Pegida—could be seen in the days leading up to today's events. For weeks, the city was coated with posters proclaiming “February 13, 2015: With Courage, Respect and Tolerance: Dresden avows itself to color.”

Large local non-profit Forum Dreizehnter Februar themed its February 13 programming around immigration and multiculturalism in Dresden, with an upcoming roster of exhibitions and plays casting the spotlight on Islam, as well as Judaism and other minority religions.

“Dresden is going through the same demographic transition that West Germany was in the '60s and '70s,” said Kai Viertel, forum spokesperson and Dresden native. “We need to educate ordinary citizens here that foreigners aren’t to be feared. Their acceptance still hasn’t caught up to that in the West.”

The human chain itself—as it has been since its creation in 2010—is a “sign of solidarity," Schulz said. "We think of the family we have lost, but also live further on in peace."

But there still could be work to do, warned local university student Nils Rübelmann, who carried one of many bright yellow “Refugee Welcome” signs seen in the crowd on Friday.

“We know how the people in Pegida think and we know how the counter-protesters think,” Rübelmann said. “It’s really the people who are doing nothing that we don’t know about. There could be a lot of opinions to change.”