

Far right in Germany uses Luther's image on campaign posters

News in the [November 6, 2019](#) issue

Martin Luther's defiant declaration to Catholic Church leaders in 1521, "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise," is treasured in Germany as a motto of virtuous subversion. Now church officials and other political groups are taking a stand against attempts by the far right National Democratic Party, or NPD, to co-opt Luther's words as a campaign slogan.

For the second straight election in the central German state of Thuringia, the NPD has put up posters incorporating a famous portrait of Luther by Lucas Cranach. Luther is portrayed as saying, "I would vote NPD, I cannot do otherwise," alongside the party's slogan, "Defend the homeland."

The NPD, classified as a neo-Nazi party by the Counter Extremism Project, has used Luther's image in previous German state and national elections. In 2017, Christoph Meyns, the Lutheran bishop in Braunschweig, to the north of Thuringia, told the German news agency DPA that the posters were "intolerable" political distortions of Luther and his message.

The posters' appearance before the October 27 vote in Thuringia renewed the controversy in a place where Luther was ordained and lived as a monk. The dustup has also exposed the region as a home to nationalist sentiments, dredging up Luther's own muddied legacy in regard to xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

[In the eastern city of Halle on October 9, a gunman tried to storm a synagogue as congregants inside observed Yom Kippur, the holiest day in Judaism. He killed two people outside and wounded two others.

According to the *New York Times*, the assailant recorded himself in a video of the shooting. In the recording, he denied the Holocaust, denounced immigrants and feminists, and declared, "The root of all these problems is the Jew."]

A 2018 study from Friedrich-Schiller University of Jena found that 19 percent of respondents in Thuringia agreed with extreme right-wing statements such as "National Socialism also had its good sides." Ethnocentric statements such as "the

foreigners come here only to take advantage of our welfare state” or that Germany is oversaturated “by the many foreigners to a dangerous extent” found support from 39 percent of respondents.

Just 8 percent of respondents statewide agreed with explicitly neo-Nazi statements, but in some districts, such as Eisenach, another landmark in Luther country, neo-Nazi sentiments have found broader accord.

Eisenach is currently playing host to the Achava Festival of Jewish culture, and the Lutherhaus museum is featuring a special exhibit on the history of the Nazi-era Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life, which was founded in Eisenach by Protestants.

Alexandra Husemeyer of the Lutherhaus Eisenach Foundation said that the foundation’s efforts at addressing anti-Semitism have not met with specific resistance from far right groups or neo-Nazis in the area. “While there are four members of the NPD and four members of the AfD in the city council, there have been no reactions from them” thus far, she said.

She is, however, familiar with the controversial election posters, and she uses the foundation’s museum to teach visitors about the political co-option of Luther across time. —Religion News Service; *Christian Century* staff