Commemorative Populism in the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Strategic (Ab)use of Memory in Anti-Corona Protest Communication on Telegram

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, self-proclaimed resistance movements have organized protests against containment measures both in digital media and on the streets. References to the past and an invocation of collective memory have been important elements in the toolbox of their populist communication. We propose the notion of "commemorative populism" to describe the weaponization of history and memory for the proliferation of a political cause by populist activists. In a qualitative content analysis, we examined postings by the German "Querdenker," a movement against Corona containment policies. Findings show 6 types of the (ab)use of history and collective memory: (1) the recontextualization of quotations by historical personalities, (2) the creation of false historical analogies and flattering genealogies, (3) the claim of historical exceptionalism, (4) the denigration of elites by referring to failures of medical history, (5) the dissemination of disinformation about historical facts, and (6) the support of conspiracy myths by the myths' own history.

Keywords: populism, activism, history, conspiracy myths, Telegram, alternative social media

During the COVID-19 pandemic, self-proclaimed resistance movements have sparked protests across Europe and beyond. The goals of these politically diverse groups are to rebel against an alleged "Corona regime," provide counternarratives to the pandemic threat, and insurge against political containment restrictions. In doing so, activist groups employ populist strategies to attract and persuade citizens, disseminate (mis)information, and form an alliance against the political "mainstream." In addition, populist political fractions strive to get involved with these insurgents to co-opt the discontent of these groups for their own political gains. We propose the notion of "commemorative populism" to describe the allusion to history and collective memory for the proliferation of political cause by these populist activists. In Germany, the so-called Querdenker movement, which constitutes an ideological umbrella for people discrediting and doubting the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying political

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measures, has repeatedly and publicly been criticized for its (ab)use of historical commemoration (Grande, Hutter, Hunger, & Kanol, 2021).

In this article, we investigate how and to what ends the Querdenker movement uses references to history and memory as part of its activist communication, particularly on the messenger app Telegram. In a qualitative content analysis, we analyzed content posted in Telegram groups and channels related to the Querdenker movement between April 2020 and September 2021 to provide an in-depth analysis of the role and function of history and memory in the activists' social media communication.

Populist Activism in the COVID-19 Pandemic

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, political resistance against governmental politics sparked across the (Western) world. Protests against political containment strategies, such as face mask requirements and lockdowns, also abbreviated to "anti-Corona protests," are considered "a widespread side effect of the pandemic" (Plümper, Neumayer, & Pfaff, 2021, p. 12) taking place and being coordinated interconnectedly in online and offline spaces. These protests are often organized by populist actors and catalyzed through the means of populist communication, or what Boberg, Quandt, Schatto-Eckrodt, and Frischlich (2020) coined as "pandemic populism." With the goal to contain the pandemic, scientific experts, political authorities, and legacy media aligned to minimize risks and advocate protective behavior. This included support for temporary restrictions of fundamental rights. In this phase of alignment and, hence, a professed absence of critique, control, and legitimate counterpositions in the public, populist groups tried to take advantage of the situation. Therefore, critique against the measures was amalgamated with the typical populist communication strategy of juxtaposing an image of the suppressed people against the corrupt elites (in science, politics, and media), who would conspire against the common man. This included mobilizing the public against virus containment policies by claiming to protect freedom and democracy, and voicing the (alleged) population's concerns against the establishment of elites from politics, science, medicine, and media, as Vieten (2020) argued at the onset of the pandemic.

In Germany, the *Querdenker* movement (literally translated as "lateral thinkers") has become the largest organized protest movement against governmental Corona politics. While the popularity of the right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) decreased during the COVID-19 crisis (Katsampekis & Stavrakakis, 2020), organized populist protest outside of party politics was on the rise. Starting off as a protest by local activists in the city of Stuttgart, the Querdenker movement quickly spread nationwide. It used social media and especially messenger apps to bring attention to its cause and mobilize for on-the-ground political offline protests across the country. Stuttgart remained a stronghold, but events increasingly spread to other cities, most symbolically to the capital, of Berlin (Nachtwey, Frei, & Schäfer, 2020). The culmination point of the protests was the attempted storming of the German parliament (Reichstag building) on August 29, 2020. On this day, around 500 protesters, mostly members of extreme right-wing groups, broke through the barriers in front of the Reichstag, assaulted the police officers who protected the building, and occupied the stairs leading up to the entry. They were finally removed by police.

The Querdenker lack ideological and political coherence. Instead, protest gatherings have been attended by a broad conglomerate of people with manifold discontents, unified by their objection to the

legal restrictions and curtailment of fundamental rights resulting from pandemic containment measures. In an unclear mix, people enduring personal hardships because of financial losses or unemployment following preventive shutdown measures intermingle with hardened system-critics and ideologized groups that had rejected the state and its authority well before COVID-19 (Frei, Schäfer, & Nachtwey, 2021; Grande et al., 2021; Nachtwey et al., 2020). Further, esoterics and spiritualists who believe in the healing power of nature or divine energies, and therefore reject orthodox medicine against the pandemic—which they would often negate altogether—have frequented the gatherings (Frei & Nachtwey, 2021; Nachtwey et al., 2020). Over time, the group was the target of subversion and co-option efforts, particularly by far-right activists and populist political fractions (including the AfD party; Heinze & Weisskircher, 2022). They tried to use the spark of discontentment with the authorities to ignite smoldering disapprobation to further antisystem and antiestablishment sentiments. Despite the efforts of co-option by political fractions, the Querdenker movement is still a heterogeneous mix of people and ideologies, and cannot be simply considered a branch of the far-right. With the Querdenker remaining a puzzle for empirical research and societal observation, early research on the phenomenon should be read with caution. Still, the activist movement has been described as radicalized in parts and as characterized by an "anti-elite anger and willingness to share platforms with neo-Nazis, anti-Semites, and Reichsbürger" (Vieten, 2020, p. 175), with "the political extremes (especially on the right) . . . strongly represented" (Heinze & Weisskircher, 2022, p. 10).

The term *lateral thinking*, which the group has chosen for itself, is full of flattering connotations in the German language; it indicates criticality, the ability to read between the lines, think outside the box, and question political façades. Research has shown that people susceptible to populist politics and conspiratorial thinking are prone to considering themselves to be highly critical thinkers, more competent than others to navigate a world of information (typically retrieved in the digital realm) and to separate truth from deception (Schwarzenegger, 2020). Indeed, Frei and Nachtwey (2021) found in their interview study that Querdenker consider themselves to be "insiders, even chosen ones, who even in the face of social condemnation, stigmatization and repression, hold on to their expertise" (p. 18; translated by the authors). In this vein, the Querdenker movement supported traits of "felicitous self-aggrandizement" (Buts, 2020), that is, considering oneself as part of a dedicated few who are able to see behind the establishment's ill intent.

The Importance of (Alternative) Social Media for Populist and Activist Communication

Populism is based on and aims at emotionalization (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017) to propagate and disseminate (often radical) political stances. One goal of populist communication is to instrumentalize sentiments, heat debates, stir up enemy images, and consequently create and incite so-called *affective publics*. Affective publics are defined as "networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expression of sentiment" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 125), frequently in and through social media. One of the means to create such affective publics commonly employed by far-right populists is historic references. Referring to the past and framing it in a certain way evokes emotions, increases the persuasiveness of the populist communication (Menke & Wulf, 2021), and can impact collective memory in the ideological sense of the populist.

Scholars have argued that (emotionalization through) populism in its contemporary form is inextricably linked to social media (Gerbaudo, 2018) and that "populism functions and spreads with the help of social media networks in order to mobilize political emotions" (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020, p. 17). Both mainstream social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, and the so-called alternative social media platforms (e.g., Gab, Telegram) are important vehicles for activists' populist communication. Alternative social media are characterized by a largely unmoderated communication compared with so-called mainstream social media, and a partially covert exchange within and outside preformed groups (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). Not only do social media characteristics and logics perfectly fit the content and style of populism (Krämer, 2017; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018) but they also enable the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, which has repeatedly been shown in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Freiling, Krause, Scheufele, & Brossard, 2021; Frischlich, 2022).

This nexus of populism, activism, and social media is also relevant to the case of the Querdenker movement. The movement has relied heavily on social media to organize its events and activities, such as street and digital protests (i.e., political protest practices in digital networks; Karatzogianni, 2015), and to disseminate its political agenda. The alternative social media platform Telegram in particular emerged as a central hub for the movement's digital and physical activism (Holzer, 2021).

In general, populist communication comprises five key strategies: an emphasis on the sovereignty of the people (over other actors and entities); an (alleged) advocacy for the people; the attack on various kinds of elites (e.g., political, economic, scientific, media); the ostracization of other groups, such as ethnic or sexual minorities; and an idealization of one's own community and belonging (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). Notwithstanding the heterogenous base of the Querdenker, these elements have been an important part of their public communication (Vieten, 2020): When criticizing the government's containment policies, the activist group emphasized the power and sovereignty of the (suppressed) people and advocated for the restoration of its freedom, which had purportedly been restricted by the imposed Corona measures. Proponents of the Querdenker who attracted public attention criticized the various elites in Germany and accused them of forming an impenetrable and sinister alliance. This criticism was targeted against the political elite, the "mainstream media elite," whom Querdenker members accused of allowing themselves to be instrumentalized, as well as the scientific elite (i.e., first and foremost, the publicly vocal virologists and epidemiologists). Moreover, the ostracization of and discrimination against other groups were partly visible in the Querdenker movement's public communication. The groups denigrated by certain parts of the heterogeneous activist movement ranged from Asian people (as allegedly responsible for the outbreak and spread of the virus, similar to the China-virus defamation popularized by Donald Trump, among others) to ignorantly "sleeping" (and later, dangerously vaccinated) German citizens, and to Jewish people, whom the activists conspired to be part of an international elite that had planned out the pandemic to control the general population (Lauß & Schestak-Haase, 2021). Conclusively, activists within the Querdenker community propagated their members as competent critics, experts, and "heroic resistance fighters" (Frei et al., 2021, p. 251; translated by the authors). The movement thereby profited from the infrastructure provided by (alternative) social media platforms, which enabled the seemingly unlimited and unredacted dissemination of activist content and, in many cases, disinformation on the pandemic and its containment. Despite its heterogeneous ideological background, the movement developed a rather consistent communication, with the emergence of opinion leaders, coordinators, and information hubs (Teune, 2021).

Public Spheres Below the Radar: The Social Realm of Telegram

In recent years, large digital platforms such as the services run by Meta (Facebook, Instagram, and partially WhatsApp), Alphabet (YouTube), and Twitter faced growing criticism regarding their role as a potential fertile ground for the growth of social polarization, the proliferation of populism and extremism, and the dissemination of disinformation (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). Criticism suggests that social media are vital for the diffusion and visibility of problematic content, and the incidental exposure to such content through algorithmic curation. Further, platforms would benefit financially from hatred and activist agitation spread on their platforms, and they would be responsible for financial revenues of disinformation hubs and extremist groups. Consequently, deplatformization finds growing relevance as a "governance strategy by major tech companies to detoxify the platform ecosystem of radical content while consolidating their power as designers, operators, and governors of that same ecosystem" (Van Dijck, de Winkel, & Schäfer, 2021, p. 1). Deplatformization has since been discussed about its effectiveness to significantly curb the financial gain of political agitators using social media services, as well as an effective way to minimize their reach and visibility. The permanent Twitter ban of former U.S. president Trump may still be the most prominent example of deplatforming to date, but is only one among many. Deplatformization, however, is also discussed in terms of how banning particular content or personalities might result in users following "extreme Internet celebrities" (Rogers, 2020) on alternative social media such as Telegram, Parler, or Gab. Doing so might eventually culminate in even more ruthless content being exchanged "in the shadows" (Urman & Katz, 2020) of the public's watchful eye and often also "below the radar" (Boccia Artieri, Brilli, & Zurovac, 2021) of critical research, creating fermentation basins for political radicalization (Munn, 2021; Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). Content creators and users alike may use the more clandestine public spaces found on such alternative social media to circumvent content moderation, flagging of falsehoods, or fact-checking, and purported censorship on more mainstream platforms. For far-right activism, an "explosive growth" (Urman & Katz, 2020) of networks on alternative social media coincides with the massive bans of far-right actors on mainstream social media. In the European context, it was Telegram in particular that found an enormous increase in users since the beginning of the pandemic, and it has become an alleged haven for self-promoted free thinkers, critics of anti-Corona politics, and free speech advocates. Especially, but not exclusively, in German media and public debate, Telegram was henceforth depicted as a stronghold of COVID-19 denialism, pandemic-related conspiracy myths, and the communicative refuge of several German celebrities-turned-COVID-deniers and conspiracy myth ringleaders. Although Telegram has been used for extremist causes in the past, this climaxing media notoriety propelled it to new prominence in the German public debate and likely helped activists of the Querdenker movement to lure users to their communication channels. This image of Telegram as a hub of populist agitation, disinformation, and hate speech is partly at odds with some earlier assessments of the platform, in which it has also been described as an important organ for counter-publics, particularly because of its role in political activism and against intrusive surveillance in nondemocratic countries (Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019; Alimardani & Milan, 2018). However, the idea of Telegram as an "emancipatory communication technology" (Alimardani & Milan, 2018) and tool for political insurgence helped activists of the Querdenker movement to brand themselves as part of a resistance against an allegedly nondemocratic Corona regime in Germany.

Commemorative Populism: Weaponizing the Past for Populist Activism

Commemorative populism—that is, instrumental references to the past and an invocation of collective memory—is an important element in the toolbox of populist and activist communication. History and remembrance of the past can be used to create a stark contrast between an idealized then and a dismal now (or the other way around). Collective memory bridges remembrance of the past to a prospective vision for the future (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013), drawing from experiences, fears, and hopes in the present. The past provides a rich repository of positive and negative events, personalities, and scenarios, and hence can offer templates for positive or negative identification, as well as illustrative examples for conditions that must be preserved or need be overcome. Memorizing the past in populist communication, however, is not a neutral recollection of past incidents. Instead, "selectively constructed narratives of the past" (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014, p. 232), or distorted pictures of past events, are actively weaponized for political gain. Menke and Wulf (2021) have shown how nostalgic memory is used by populist parties "as a communication tool to persuade citizens to support their political agendas" (p. 237) and as a means to trigger emotional response. The allusion to a better past in the form of nostalgia to make a political argument is but one instrument of commemorative populism. Commemorative populism, however, is not limited to rosy evocations of the past; it is also used in a deterrent way through picturing past atrocities. In populist communication, Wagner and Schwarzenegger (2020) have argued that "history is often used to project an idealized past that must be defended or restored" (p. 326), or as a dark scenario that must not reoccur. Communication practices for this end include online comments, memes, and picture sharing in the digital realm. Memes about historical events or personae and remediated, recontextualized, and commented historical pictures can become sharp tools for activist communication in digital media environments because they are capable of spreading a highly condensed message on a large scale (Makhortykh, 2015; Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020). Like popular culture references, allusions to a collective past and cultural knowledge about history can easily be activated in different contexts by these means, eliciting emotional reactions (Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020).

Following Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Baden (2016), the discursive construction, dissemination, and appropriation of collective memory are substantial in the formation of society. Keightley, Pickering, and Bisht (2019) have emphasized that "the interplay of collective memory, social institutions and cultural practices operates not only at macro-levels of remembrance but is also engaged, negotiated and interpreted at micro-levels in close-at-hand relational networks by both individuals and small groups" (p. 33). Consequently, the political (ab)use of historical happenings in activist and populist communication in digital media—even if relatively small in scale at first—can have an impact on how memory is constructed, negotiated, and collectively remembered. In the long term, this might even impact society as a whole.

Generally, the means and possibilities of doing memory work in a highly mediated world (Hajek, Lohmeier, & Pentzold, 2016; Lohmeier & Pentzold, 2014), and, in particular, with and through digital media, have transformed memory culture and the mediated construction of memory. As Schwarzenegger and Lohmeier (2020) have stated, digital means of expression allow for a new "polyphony of memory," including more and conflicting voices in the discursive construction of collective memory and, thus, the creation of collective identities as well. However, with a lower threshold for gaining voice and visibility in memory discourse, revisionist distortions and weaponized interpretations of history can also pierce into the public

debate more easily. A digital polyphony of memory, Schwarzenegger and Lohmeier (2020) elaborate, allows for a more nuanced, richer, and also critical understanding of the past because it can be more inclusive regarding counter-voices and alternate accounts of historical commemoration. Such openness of memory discourses, however, can also contribute to a collapse of accountability and result in a fragmentation and polarization of memory, ultimately causing memory to lose its cohesive and integrative functions for communities. Memory discourses in digital media hence meander between enriching nuance and the perils of revisionism and false memory.

Populist activists, as mentioned earlier, often aim at impacting and distorting collective memory inside and outside of digital media spaces, and they use references to and comparisons with history in their populist communication. This also holds true—at least in part—for the German Querdenker movement, which has repeatedly and publicly been criticized for its (ab)use of historical commemoration. In this article, we hence explore the types and mechanism of historical references in the Querdenker movement's digital communication. Specifically, we ask:

RQ1:   How and to what ends does the Querdenker movement make use of historical remembrance in its activist communication on Telegram?

Methods

To investigate the research question, we conducted a qualitative analysis of content shared in groups and channels associated with the Querdenker movement on Telegram. While Telegram channels are used to disseminate contents to an audience and are usually managed by only a few users, Telegram groups are characterized by the ability of all users to send and receive messages, and engage in discussion (Dargahi Nobari, Reshadatmand, & Neshati, 2017).

Sampling Strategy

Our sample included content with historical or commemorative references shared publicly on Telegram in 15 selected groups and channels associated with the Querdenker movement between April 2020 and September 2021. We decided to analyze groups and channels to cover both central pillars of Querdenker Telegram communication. The 15 groups and channels were selected because they self-identified with the Querdenker movement, self-described as Querdenker supporters, and shared links and content in support of the Querdenker anti-Corona ideology. We included groups and channels that prominently contained historical allusions and that, in some cases, were explicitly cross-referenced as doing so. Focusing on the historical references resulted in a sample that also comprised channels and groups not explicitly named after the Querdenker movement. In the initial eight cases, they included "Querdenker," "Querdenken," or a variation of this term in their names. The others were identified in an iterative sampling strategy because the explicit Querdenker groups shared their content and referenced these groups, which called themselves Corona-resistance or combined the name of a city with "unmasked" as a gesture of protest against protective face masks. Another important criterion of selecting the groups was their accessibility, in line with ethical considerations. Hence, groups that were private, hidden, or required active dedication (i.e., joining the group) were excluded from our sample.

The groups and channels differed in their number of followers, ranging from a few dozen to 62,446 members or subscribers. Given that the content on Telegram and on other alternative social media can easily be shared, it is often widely circulated beyond the reach of the particular group and disseminated on other social media as well. The varying group sizes are just a weak indicator of the actual reach, which can be far wider. In addition, membership in a group or subscription to a channel was not required to view the respective content, so again, the actual use and range can only partially be discerned from these numbers. After we settled on the 15 groups and channels, we scanned all content posted on these channels from the very onset of the pandemic in April 2020 to September 2021. If a post shared in the groups or channels in some way alluded to historic events, figures, living conditions, or collective memory, it was included in our sample. The posts were manually saved on an encrypted server labeled with date, time, and group/channel name, and copied into the QDA software that was used for data analysis (discussed later). The final sample was cleared of numerous repetitions of the same motifs or slight variations of the same content. The majority of the content was in German, and some was in English. For this article, we translated German quotations from the material into English.

Ethical Considerations

Analyzing social media data, even if publicly and deliberately posted, is ethically challenging. Individuals posting on social media typically have not provided consent to contribute their content for scientific purposes (Taylor & Pagliari, 2018). Yet, Semenzin and Bainotti (2020) argue that when it is unlikely that consent would be obtained (given that political activists or sexual perpetrators, as in the mentioned study, often are unwilling to have their communication scrutinized), the serious public interest in the findings can still outweigh the ethical concerns and would justify analyzing even closed groups. Although, at least in the case of Telegram, users typically choose a pseudonym, we could not ensure they were not using their actual names on the platform. Hence, one major principle in our sampling strategy was to ensure anonymity at an early stage in the research process. Therefore, we only saved materials relevant to our research question and already used pseudonyms in the phase of data storage. Moreover, following Semenzin and Bainotti's (2020) suggestion about the observation of communication on Telegram, we refrain from reporting the actual names of the groups and channels in this article. Although this decreases methodological transparency, it also helps impede individual identification and prevent exposition of the movement's members.

Another ethical concern we had pertained to the inclusion of actual content from the groups in this article, because it contributes to replication and increased visibility of the populist material (Askanius, 2019). We hence decided to refrain from the use and reproduction of exemplifying pictures and instead describe the content in detail in the findings section.

Coding Procedure and Coding Scheme

Our analysis of the Querdenker communication followed a combination of deductive and inductive coding (Schreier, 2012). The deductive categories of our coding scheme were built on a typology we had developed in a previous article (Schwarzenegger, Wagner, Brantner, & Lobinger, 2022). In the coding process, we then applied these deductive categories to the material, and revised and extended the scheme

in the process of inductive coding. In this earlier study, we conducted an analysis on the use of historical references and collective memory in memes posted by four extreme left and extreme right populist social media groups that claimed to be satirical. Five ways of using and instrumentalizing memory and history had emerged during the analysis: a revisionism or (re)interpretation of historic events, a (re-)evaluation of historic figures, a trivialization of historic events by referring to recent events, a dramatization of recent events by referring to historic events, and the weaponization of history and memory for the articulation and legitimization of radical political arguments.

In the process of coding, which was carried out with the help of QDA software f4analyse, two coders separately coded the content in the beginning and compared and discussed their coding afterward. The coding procedure followed a four-step process. In the first step, each coder carefully read the material retrieved from Telegram and noted the general topic and general references to history. In the second step, the aforementioned deductive categories were applied to the material, subcategories were developed, and the existing categories were inductively refined and extended if new aspects emerged from the material. In the third step, following suggestions of intercoder reliability in qualitative research (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020), the two coders compared their coding schemes, discussed deviations and divergent interpretations of the material, and together developed the definitive coding scheme. In the fourth and final step, the material was recoded with this final coding scheme. This was carried out to revise codings that had been decided on differently in the intercoder discussion, and to ensure an identical interpretation of the material at hand.

Findings

In this section, we present the six prevalent types we identified regarding how activist communication content weaponized history and (ab)used memory. For the sake of clarity, we describe them as distinct, but in communicative practice, they sometimes intermingled (meaning that more than one type could be found in one post). Findings show that the Querdenker incorporated historical actors and symbolism from different political regimes and periods in their populist communication. Doing so, Querdenker primarily drew from a reservoir informed by national history. Contemporary German memory culture and collective memory are dominated by two dark chapters of the country's past and the conviction that events like these may "never again" occur: the responsibility for the Nazi atrocities—in particular, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust—on the one hand, and the past of the second dictatorship on German soil, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) regime, on the other. In the latter case, the absence of freedom of speech and the interference of the state in the most private details of daily life are emphasized with the large-scale covert spying on citizens by intelligence agents and citizen spies. The terror that neighbors, friends and family members are turned into potential threats through snitching is still alive as an abysmal memory.

Historical references are used to either dramatize present developments or downplay them. They comprise, among others, the appropriation of historical symbols and slogans for the present, as well as the identification with heroic figures of resistance against past unjust regimes. The various uses of historical references function as a vehicle for different populist strategies, as identified by Engesser et al. (2017), including self-victimization, and the proclamation of an antagonism between the people and the elites. The six types we identified are: (1) the recontextualization of quotations by historical personalities, (2) the creation of false historical analogies and flattering genealogies, (3) the claim of historical exceptionalism,

(4) the denigration of elites by referring to failures of medical history, (5) the dissemination of disinformation about historical facts, and (6) the support of conspiracy myths by the myths' own history. The first three types are mostly aimed at identity management and mobilization, the fourth at discrediting political and scientific elites as well as medical authorities, and the latter two at sowing doubt, disinforming, and bolstering conspiracy myths.

The Recontextualization of Quotations by Historical Personalities

One recurrent way of weaponizing the past for activist causes is to take quotations (alleged or real) by historical personalities and recontextualize them in the activist communication, as if it was supportive of their cause. A prime example of this can be found in a picture shared in Querdenker groups referencing the Austrian writer Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach (1830–1916) and her aphorism that "the comfortable slaves are the biggest enemies of freedom," combined with a comment that "currently we learn to appreciate what was taken for granted for a long time: FREEDOM." Sharing such quotes serves a double purpose. First, it aligns the Querdenker activists with the noble historical struggle for freedom and autonomy against oppressive forces. In the given example, it further contrasts the activist group with the silent majority of people, who would not protest and hence can be considered slaves—just too comfortable in their lives to realize that freedom is being taken away from them. This ostracization of others is a typical pattern of populist communication. Second, using classical quotes of distinguished historical precursors is also flattering in terms of indicating sophistication, and to prove that one does not belong to the mindless rabble but rather to the cultivated resistance. A similar communicative approach has been identified in the communication of the antivaccination movement, in which quotes attributed to Gandhi were used (Buts, 2020).

The Creation of False Historical Analogies and Flattering Genealogies

"Racial segregation . . . er . . . Antibody separation in Florida. The vaccinated may sit on the left and the subhumans on the right. This church in Florida is reminiscent of dark times . . . whether those responsible are aware of what they are doing?" Postings in this trajectory can be seen as a clear instrument of identity work for the activist groups and to create the image of a minority wrongfully suppressed because of the ill intent of those in power. The posting is mirroring derogatory and dehumanizing language, such as "'subhumans," from dire historical periods for the group they identify with, and it invokes memory of dark times as applying to how they are treated today. A very strong trope in this problematic comparison is that Querdenker depict themselves as outcasts of society, in particular comparing themselves to the Jewish population in early Nazi Germany. A post from May 7, 2021, showcases a metal plate from 1934 reading "Jews are not being served here" on the left and contrasts it with a doctored version of the same plate now stating "The unvaccinated are not served here" as the renewed 2021 version on the right. Perhaps the most repulsive version of this comparison is the appropriation of historical symbols (such as the Yellow Star for antivaxxers) and transmuting Nazi slogans to the present (e.g., "vaccination sets one free," a perversion of the Nazi slogan "Arbeit macht frei," work sets one free, which was posted on the gates to Nazi concentration camps). Self-marking with a Yellow unvaccinated star could be commonly observed during offline protests, but online especially, it was used as an analogy to the putative stigmatization of their own group along grim historical lines. Further, Sophie Scholl, a major symbolic figure of the German resistance against National

Socialism and the resistance organization White Rose, of which she was a cofounder, became a frequently used reference in Querdenker activism. One quote in particular, falsely attributed to Scholl, was prominently featured by the Querdenker movement: "The greatest damage is caused by the silent majority, which only wants to survive, complies and goes along with everything." Fact-checkers found that the quote has only been attributed to Scholl since July 2020 and cannot be found anywhere in the communication of the White Rose. In particular, the notion of the "silent majority" had not been an established term in Scholl's lifetime. However, the quote itself, typically combined with a portrait photo of Scholl and the description of her as a resistance fighter against the Nazi regime, was often seen at protests offline and online. The teenage Nazi victim Anne Frank was co-opted in similar ways—for example, when slogans like "Anne Frank would be one of us" are shared.

Another example of a false analogy is a posting warning that "history repeats itself," and calling for further diffusion of the picture that shares a photograph of the so-called *Gesundheitspass* (health passport) from the Nazi era: health documentation in which physical impairments, possible hereditary diseases, and a reduction of military fitness were documented. Although quite different in function, the historical analogy made is that again, citizens would have to document and attest their health status to the authorities to participate in society. As mentioned earlier, the Third Reich is not the only chapter of German history that was instrumentalized in the protests; references to the GDR also were common. This happened partially by hijacking the slogan of the protests which contributed to the collapse of the GDR and the German reunification ("We are the people," Wir sind das Volk). But mostly, the GDR was used as a reference to illustrate the current "Corona Dictatorship" as a "GDR 2.0" and referred to the absence of a free and critical press, and alleged total control of the citizens. In particular, when private contacts were restricted during the phase of partial lockdown, memory of the system of snitches in the GDR was invoked to warn of neighbors denouncing neighbors again.

The Claim of Historical Exceptionalism

A recurrent instrument is also to claim a historical exceptionalism of the current events and period. Rather than referring to the repeating of history, the idea that the elites have never dared to be as bold as in the present and that the stupidity of people who obey the rules would have never been more obvious, is emphasized: "For the first time in History, the ineffectiveness of a medical treatment is attributed to those who did not take it" (antivaccination post, July 2021). Historical exceptionalism of their struggle is also what the activists strove for when they disseminated a picture in the style of an announcement sheet displaying "95 Disputation Theses on the clarification of the legality of the Corona indulgences." This picture mimics Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses of Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* from 1517 in an attempt to share their theses against the pandemic as a challenge to the prevailing quasi-religious order of Corona politics.

The Denigration of Elites by Referring to Failures of Medical History

In this type, factual information about wrongdoings in medical history is put into the context of the current pandemic situation. For example, with reference to the Third Reich, it is noted that medical research and science have made themselves the stooges of sinister powers before. Moreover, scandalous medical

procedures and medications are presented as abhorrent examples. "If the world is currently under attack from a diabolical, malignant infiltrated medicine (and anyone thinks this is over the top), check out this info—there was also a Nobel Prize for this torture!" The info shared with this text is a historical picture of the inventor of the procedure of lobotomy and states that this "cruel torture" was a standard procedure in the 1940s and 1950s. Hence, it is claimed that when today, science tells us about proper ways of protection, one must make sure it is not this kind of errant they are promoting again. Similarly, the Contergan-Skandal, perhaps the biggest medication scandal in contemporary German memory, is referenced in texts and pictures to illustrate the wrongdoings of medical science and severe side effects of medical drugs in the past. Thalidomide was first marketed as Contergan in 1957 in West Germany and caused severe birth defects until it was removed from the European market in 1961. "Trust us, as harmless as candy," reads one post, combining historical pictures of Contergan pills, pharmaceutical scientists, and a mother with her disfigured child. During the pandemic, when trust in science and medical professionals is an emblematic requirement in public debate, sowing doubt and distrust can be an important activist feint against the authority of science.

The Dissemination of Disinformation About Historical Facts

Moreover, we observed the sharing of disinformation about historical facts to prove odd causalities as another type of activist communication. For instance, one post displayed a picture of Microsoft founder Bill Gates with the caption, "Bill Gates Grandfather, Dr. Frederick L. Gates was involved with Rockefeller Experiment Bacterial Meningitis JAB that killed 100 Million in 1918-1920. It wasn't Spanish Flu. . . it was a Bacterial Meningitis Experimental SHOT!" In this case, it is rather simple disinformation, since the person noted was not Bill Gates's grandfather, and there is no scientific evidence for any relation between the Spanish Flu and meningitis vaccination. This example also indicates that in German Querdenker groups, and through the sharing and forwarding structure of Telegram, transnational content is represented and shared. Not all disinformation can be as easily debunked as in this example, but rather—quite typical for disinformation—would hold a kernel of truth and still misrepresent facts. Historical disinformation has here blended into larger conspiracy theory narratives.

The Support of Conspiracy Myths by the Myths' Own History

A subsidiary way of weaponizing history in the populist communication was to use purported historical evidence for the alleged long-lasting impact of the elite's corruption and conspiracy against the people, in contrast to the long-lasting efforts of the resistance to call out the truth. This was instrumental to highlight that the pandemic, the countermeasures, and other current affairs were part of a broader conspiracy that the critical voices had warned about for years. For instance, typical well-established conspiracy myths include anti-Semitic narratives, the installation of a "New World Order," and a "Great Reset," or the vaccination as a depopulation plan set into motion. Referring to the historical persistence of conspiracy myths, some of the activist communication was used as a means of validation for the consistency of conspiracists' claims in general.

Discussion

In this article, we identified six ways the Querdenker movement instrumentalized references to history and memory, and to what ends. Based on a qualitative content analysis, we differentiated the recontextualization of quotations by historical personalities, the creation of false historical analogies and flattering genealogies, the claim of historical exceptionalism, the denigration of elites by referring to failures of medical history, the dissemination of disinformation about historical facts, and the support of conspiracy myths by the myths' own history. Commemorative populism weaponized the past for activist goals ranging from problematic equivalences to false analogies, and blatant lies. Together, these types help fulfill different functions typical of populist and activist communication, aiming at the in-group, the out-group, or both. These functions range from identity management of the activist group (this is us opposed to them; we stand in line with gallant ancestors and noble principles), to mobilization for the cause (this is why we must resist; this is the glory we will find), to dis-/information about their struggle (this is what they are up to and the extent of the danger we face; this is how they have lied to us before).

In this regard, commemorative populism as a concept is an intersecting, not an additional, key strategy of populist communication. In fact, commemorative populism can be used as a means to pursue any of the five key strategies identified by Engesser et al. (2017). Invoking the past in various forms can, for example, be used to emphasize the sovereignty of the people, to attack elites, or to ostracize others. Typically, it will not be exclusive, but one means among others (e.g., humor) that is employed in populist communication.

In this analysis, we had a particular focus on the (ab)use of memory and historical references within the Querdenker movement. What became apparent about the communication in the Querdenker groups was the high density of cross-references to channels and groups entertained by alternative media outlets or their protagonists, channels associated with the populist political right, far-right activists, and spiritual groups, as well as channels and groups committed to conspiracy myths. It remains for future research to also investigate those connected groups and topical realms to investigate whether these circles share a common distorted version of history and whether their ideologies are informed by and aimed at creating a false memory. It is also important to better understand how commemorative populism shared in clandestine publics like Telegram resonates with the broader public and can help to mainstream (Cammaerts, 2018) particular interpretations of social reality. In this context, transnational links become particularly relevant (McSwiney, Vaughan, Heft, & Hoffmann, 2021), because collective memory and history are often still linked to national experiences and traumas. Therefore, it remains open how strongly an internationally connectable counter-memory can be narrated.

Telegram and other alternative social media found notoriety in the (German) public debate as a stronghold of the Querdenker movement, populist agitation, and conspiracy thinking. Consequently, such platforms have since been discussed as a peril for democracy and civilized discourse. Zeng and Schäfer (2021) have proposed the heuristic of dark platforms for approaching these alternative social media. However, as the example of Telegram illustrates, which was previously discussed as an emancipatory tool rather than a disinformation hub, there is danger in considering observable practices characteristic features determined by a particular platform. Instead, platforms and applications can be used for prosocial or detrimental activism

(Quandt, 2018). In this respect, it is important to look critically and closely at what they are doing in the shadows, but neither to suspect every form of communication that takes place in clandestine public spheres, nor to generally discredit arenas of counter-publicity allowing legitimate criticism.

Limitations

Of course, this study has some limitations because of its approach and scope. The channels and groups selected are only a small segment of the Querdenker communication using one specific communication platform: Telegram. Because of its characterization as a clandestine and somewhat oppositional platform, Querdenker activism there could have a different style and appeal than its communication on mainstream platforms, partially because it might aim to appeal to "normies" there rather than preaching to the already converted. Similarly, all the content included in this analysis was posted on Telegram and hence gradually under the radar, but still publicly available. It is not unlikely that in locked and private groups, more explicit or extreme reinterpretations of history may be shared. Furthermore, the inclusion of postings and content in the sample was guided by a particular thematic interest, and the interplay between the invocation of the past in the activist communication with nonhistorical content has not yet been investigated.

Conclusion

Public debates about history and memory often lack nuance and can proceed along rather simplistic lines of good versus evil. This simplification converts well into activist and populist communication: The division between heroes and villains, justice and wrongdoing, is often already delineated and can be easily activated. We conclude that populist appropriation of the past may not only affect political discourse in the present but also have negative implications for collective memory at large by deforming, devaluating, and distorting it. It is thus paramount to understand how the past is exploited and how digital memory communication can be immunized against commemorative populism.

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