

Reichsbürger Movement

Name: Reichsbürger Movement

Type of Organization:

- Non-state actor

Ideologies and Affiliations:

- Racist
- antisemitic
- violent
- anti-democratic

Place of Origin:

Germany

Year of Origin:

1975 or 1985

Places of Operation:

Germany

Overview

Executive Summary

The Reichsbürger movement is a network of groups that rejects the Federal Republic of Germany and its legal system. Certain streams of the movement believe the German Empire still exists, but it is occupied by illegitimate powers.¹

Although the movement does not have a confirmed founding date, iterations have existed since the 1960s. In 1975, however, Manfred Roeder and other right-wing extremists established the Freiheitsbewegung Deutsches Reich (Freedom-Movement German Reich) in Flensburg. Roeder served as the spokesman for the group, which believed that since no peace treaty was ratified by Germany and its enemies after World War II, the Federal Republic of Germany is illegitimate. Roeder eventually assumed the title of “Reich President.”²

The movement continued to branch out, and in 1985, Wolfgang Gerhard Günther Ebel established the Kommissarische Reichsregierung” (KRR).

³ Ebel declared himself Reichschancellor of the “provisional government of the German Reich” and gained a following of ideologically aligned individuals.⁴ The KRR was the first official permanent organization subscribing to what is now considered the ideology of the Reichsbürger movement. Shortly after the KRR came into being, infighting led to the formation of splinter groups that called themselves “imperial governments.” As Ebel described himself as the Reichschancellor, subsequent faction leaders adopted this lexicon and referred to themselves as “Reich Chancellor” or “Reich Minister.”⁵

As the movement denies the sovereignty of modern Germany, members refuse to pay taxes, and have self-established “national territories.”⁶ By the 2010s, some members acquired land for their “national territories,” complete with their own governments, currencies, and even armies.⁷ Some movement members are zealous in their fealty to the German Reich and have gone so far as to shun national documents in favor of manufacturing their own IDs and passports.⁸ The movement does not have a central office. However, most groups are scattered throughout the south and east of the country.⁹

Primary opposition is directed at the modern German state and those who are considered representatives of the post-war government, such as politicians and bureaucrats. While their opposition is focused on those who uphold the German state, the movement also rejects and strongly objects to those they do not consider to be a part of the country.¹⁰ Although the movement is vocal in their denunciation of the German federal government, German authorities first dismissed the group as a legitimate threat and instead categorized them as eccentric and unusual. However, following a lethal altercation in November 2016, Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere announced that Reich citizens would be observed by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the federal states as a right-wing extremist movement due to the group’s defining

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characteristics of racism, antisemitism, violence, and the rejection of democracy.¹¹

Included among the movement are neo-Nazis, conspiracy theorists, gun enthusiasts, and former soldiers united by a “deep rejection” of German state institutions.¹² According to 2022 figures, Reichsbürger boasts a following of around 23,000 members throughout Germany. Of that figure, around 5 percent are considered right-wing extremists, and about 2,300 are considered violent.¹³ Those same figures suggest that 400 Reichsbürger and Selbstverwalter (sovereign citizens) movement members had gun permits, which could prove deadly if they are willing to use violence to achieve their goals.¹⁴

The movement has not been without violent activity. Most violence occurs after police raids, or when law enforcement confronts Reichsbürger supporters for evading the law. In previous instances, a police officer was shot and killed following a raid on a Reichsbürger member’s home and another police officer was injured after an inebriated Reichsbürger member ran him over to escape arrest.¹⁵ Members are also accused of harassing and threatening political representatives and civil servants, such as bailiffs, police officers, and judges, and have also sent hate letters to Muslim and Jewish institutions.¹⁶

Other streams of the movement have attempted nationwide plots. In one instance, in October 2022, German police arrested a former civil servant on charges of leading a terrorist organization and plotting an attack on the national power grid to create civil war-like conditions in Germany.¹⁷ Another scheme, and perhaps the most significant to date, occurred in December 2022 when members of the Reichsbürger affiliate Patriotic Union were arrested and charged with attempting to overthrow the German government.¹⁸ While only 25 people were detained, the Federal Prosecutor’s Office accused approximately 50 men and women of forming a terrorist organization with the intent of threatening the sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Germany.¹⁹

Doctrine

Though it is a movement that is more of a network than a single group, the foundational belief of all divisions is the denial of the Federal Republic of Germany as a legal state. Specifically, groups generally agree that no official peace treaty was signed after 1945 and that there was never a referendum on the 1949 Basic Law of Germany. The movement perpetuates the idea that a German Reich still exists but is in a “slumber” as it is currently occupied by the Federal Republic of Germany.²⁰ As the movement has no central core or parameters for group classification, German authorities have classified Selbstverwalter (sovereign citizens)—another group that rejects the Federal Republic of Germany and seeks to claim territorial autonomy—as a partner of the Reichsbürger movement.²¹

Not all Reichsbürger are right-wing extremists. Figures released in 2022 figures suggest about 5 percent adhere to the ideology.²² However, consistent among the movement are conspiracy theory argumentation patterns.²³ Divisions of the movement believe the Federal Republic is not a government, but a corporation called the BRD GmbH (Federal Republic of Germany Limited Liability Company).²⁴ Although the movement rejects the state and denounces German state law as non-binding, the movement has not established a single central authority, be it an individual or an entity.²⁵

Conspiracy theories and historical revisionism have proved motivational for the movement. Conspiracy narratives perpetuated by the Reichsbürger include the fallacy of a Jewish “New World Order.” During the COVID-19 pandemic, elements of Reichsbürger supported other right-wing extremists and QAnon believers, like the Querdenker movement, protesting vaccinations and lockdowns.²⁶ One demonstration in Berlin in August 2020 involved 300-400 rioters out of 38,000 participants. They occupied the seat of the German Federal Parliament, which resulted in violent altercations that led to 316 arrests and injured 33 police officers.²⁷

Following the notorious December 2022 attempted coup of the German government, media sources claimed that “QAnon ideology”—a U.S.- based conspiracy movement that believes “a group of Satan-worshipping elites” running a child sex ring are trying to control politics and media²⁸—served as an important source of inspiration for the group. In particular, the attempted coup followers believed liberal elites of the “Deep State” ruled Germany, and a secret alliance between the United States and Russia would soon liberate the country. Following this alleged liberation, the group would then negotiate and ratify a “peace treaty”—a cornerstone of Reichsbürger ideology—with the conglomerate of Reichsbürger groups.²⁹

Organizational Structure

Reichsbürger Movement

Despite more than 23,000 members across Germany, it is unclear how the movement is organized or divided.³⁰ The movement does not have a central office, but most groups are scattered throughout the south and east of the country.³¹ Figures from 2016 estimated around 50 self-described “governments in exile” with leaders adopting monarchic titles. For example, there were about 30 Reichsbürger “chancellors.”³² Reportedly, the counts, dukes, chancellors and ministers, mayors, and special envoys of these self-proclaimed territories are often in conflict with one another, as they see their counterparts as “copycats.”³³

According to Armin Pfahl-Traughber, a researcher at Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, some well-known Reichsbürger organizations include the German Reich Government in Exile, the Principality of Germana, Germanitien, the Executive German Reich Government, the Interim Party Germany, the Kingdom of Germany, Neue Gemeinschaft von Philosophen, the Republic of Free Germany, the Self-governing German Reich, the People’s Federal Council, and the People’s Germany.³⁴ Given the ambiguous construct of the movement, it is uncertain if the groups regularly coordinate with one another. Regardless of their group affiliation, the movement primarily does its planning online through messenger services and social media.³⁵

The German federal government frequently affiliates Reichsbürger and Selbstverwalter (self-administrators) as partner groups and has stated that it is often difficult to differentiate between the two. However, one key difference is that Reichsbürger prioritizes the “German Reich” whereas Selbstverwalter is characterized by its “secession” from the state and serve as “self-administrators.” Both groups peddle conspiracy theories and are known for their interest in weaponry. The groups also employ similar strategies and tactics in spreading their views. Social media networks feature heavily in their recruitment, and they overwhelm the government with “busy work” in the form of nonsensical documents and phone calls to distract government officials from everyday operations.³⁶

Financing

According to media sources, the Reichsbürger movement is financially supported through a network of private donors, seminars, and fantasy documents. Examples of these money generating services vary, with one group boasting “spiritual healing seminars.”³⁷

Reichsbürger partner group, the Selbstverwalter movement, reportedly finances itself through selling fantasy documents to be used in their self-governed territories. Among those documents are driving licenses and license plates. Additional financing is achieved through staging expensive seminars, providing costly legal advice, and lectures. Groups also carry out large-scale campaigns to attract financial contributors for “village projects.” The financial sponsors are then encouraged to exchange euros into fantasy currency, sign capital transfer contracts or pay money directly to the sellers of properties.³⁸

Recruitment

There is no dominant demographic that defines Reichsbürger members. However, the movement’s supporters tend to be older and prone to hold conspiratorial beliefs. Sections of the movement reportedly target financially insecure individuals and those on the brink of foreclosure to gain support in opposition to “illegitimate” governing forces.³⁹ In recent years, aristocrats and former—often retired or dismissed—civil servants have not only joined Reichsbürger, but have also been arrested for leading groups within the movement.⁴⁰ Additionally, the movement has gained extreme right wing followers through its endorsement of conspiracy theories, such as claiming the Jewish community is to blame for unemployment and denying the Holocaust.⁴¹

Additionally, the Reichsbürger’s partner group, the Selbstverwalter movement, distributes propaganda across social media, specifically Telegram, and holds regular events, including seminars, which are used to increase their recruitment prospects.⁴²

The violent potential of those aligning with the movement can be seen in one of the most notorious examples of the Reichsbürger movement—the Patriotic Union’s December 2022 attempted coup of the German government. Among those eventually detained was a senior citizen who intended to head the military wing of the Reichsbürger government. Included among the Reichsbürger involved in the attempted coup were a senior citizen tried to recruit police and ex-elite troops to run the post-coup military and even scouted barracks that would be used by the post-coup government.⁴³ Authorities have also claimed that the aristocrat Heinrich the 13th Prinz Reuss was the leader of the coup, and his Russian wife, Vitalia B. allegedly assisted in the putsch in “in establishing contacts with representatives of the Russian Federation.”⁴⁴

Training

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Details of Reichsbürger's training have never been released. However, there are activities carried out by the movement that clearly require coordination and planning. Although the Reichsbürger do not generally carry out coordinated acts of violence, their targets remain consistent. Civil servants and police officers remain vulnerable to those armed within the movement, with some past altercations resulting in fatalities.⁴⁵ Furthermore, groups within the movement are known for writing letters of complaint as part of their strategy to resist authorities and overwhelm civil servants and state services.⁴⁶ According to German intelligence services, the movement's followers have resorted to asking nonsensical questions couched in legalese meant to overwhelm government offices. Other correspondence includes denials of official activity, insults, and attempts at extortion. Letters are not only sent to the authorities, but also to Muslim and Jewish communities to advance xenophobic and right-wing extremist agenda. The "Reichsbewegung" are part of the contingent that have sent intimidating documents to those communities which reportedly led to their relatives leaving the country.⁴⁷

Also Known As

- Imperial Citizens' Movement⁴⁸
- Reich Citizens⁴⁹

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Reichsbürger Movement

Key Leaders



Manfred Roeder

Founder of Freiheitsbewegung
Deutsches Reich (Freedom-
Movement German Reich)



Norbert Schittke

"Chancellor of the German
government in exile"



Alexander Schlowak

Co-leader of Die Exilregierung
Deutsches Reich



Holger Knappe

Co-leader of Die Exilregierung
Deutsches Reich



Horst Mahler

Senior Reichsbürger official, leader
of Reichsbürgerbewegung ("Reich
Citizens' Movement")



Sylvia Stolz

Mahler's spouse and supporter of
Reich Citizens' Movement



**Wolfgang Gerhard Günter
Ebel**

Founder of Kommissarische
Reichsregierung (KRR)



Peter Fitzek

Head of Knigreich Deutschland

Reichsbürger Movement



**Heinrich the 13th Prinz
Reuss**

Leader of the Patriotic Union

Reichsbürger Movement

History:

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Violent history:

- **March 22, 2023:** German police carry out raids across eight German states and in Switzerland in search of Reichsbürger members who are allegedly planning a coup against the German government. In one of the raids in Baden-Württemberg, a police officer is shot and injured. The assailant is⁵⁰
- **February 2022 – March 24, 2023:** An inebriated 62-year-old Reichsbürger member deliberately runs over a police officer with a car during a traffic stop in Efringen-Kirchen (Baden-Württemberg) before fleeing. The police officer is left with serious head injuries. According to chat groups and letters, the attacker reportedly became radicalized over the years and believed the police were “combatants” he sought to eliminate. On March 24, 2023, the Stuttgart state court sentences the man to 10 years in prison for deliberately driving into a police officer while intoxicated.⁵¹
- **August 29, 2020:** Reichsbürger members join right-wing extremists and QAnon believers in Querdenker to protest vaccinations and lockdowns in Berlin.^[1] During the protest, a group of 300-400 rioters among an estimated 38,000 participants overwhelm police barriers and attempt to storm the seat of the German Federal Parliament, the Reichstag, but are unsuccessful. Thirty-three police officers are injured and 316 suspects are arrested in the protests.⁵²
- **October 21, 2016:** Two Reichsbürger members attack police in Saxony-Anhalt. The pair attacked the police after refusing to be escorted out of the town square. One police officer is injured during the attack.⁵³
- **October 20, 2016:** A Reichsbürger member throws punches at police officers at a town hall in Salzwedel, Saxony-Anhalt. The altercation occurred after the man refused to register his dog, claiming that he did not recognize the modern German state and its laws as legitimate.⁵⁴
- **October 19, 2016 – October 23, 2017:** In October 2016, a Reichsbürger member known as Wolfgang P. shoots four German police officers who attempt to seize his guns in Nuremberg. The shooting kills one police officer. Wolfgang P. possessed 30 guns and had a mailbox brandishing the words “Government territory of Wolfgang” and “Here my word is law!” On October 23, 2017, a Nuremberg court finds Wolfgang P. guilty of murder and sentences him to life imprisonment.⁵⁵
- **August 25, 2016:** A Reichsbürger member opens fire on police in Saxony-Anhalt who attempt to evict him due to unpaid bills. The assailant as well as a police officer are injured in the altercation.⁵⁶
- **November 23, 2012:** “Deutsches Polizei Hilfswerk” (German Police Assistance Association – DPHW) members attempt to “arrest” an official court bailiff to prevent the seizure of a premises used by the group.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ “Germany: Shots fired at police in Reichsbürger raids,” Deutsche Welle, March 22, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-shots-fired-at-police-in-reichsb%C3%BCrger-raids/a-65074904>.

⁵¹ “German extremist jailed for driving into police officer,” Associated Press, March 24, 2023, <https://news.yahoo.com/german-extremist-jailed-driving-police-163224420.html>.

⁵² Marcel Fürstenau, “Germany’s Querdenker COVID protest movement,” Deutsche Welle, April 3, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/meet-germanys-querdenker-covid-protest-movement/a-57049985>.

[2] Alexander Ritzmann, “The December 2022 German Reichsbürger Plot to Overthrow the German Government,” Countering Terrorism Center at Westpoint, March 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-december-2022-german-Reichsb%C3%BCrger-plot-to-overthrow-the-german-government/>.

⁵³ Elizabeth Schumacher, “Reichsbürger’ far-right couple attack police,” Deutsche Welle, October 21, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/reichsb%C3%BCrger-far-right-couple-attack-police-in-eastern-germany/a-36110310>.

⁵⁴ Philip Olterman, “Germany fears radicalisation of Reichsbürger movement after police attacks,” Guardian, October 21, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/21/germany-fears-radicalisation-of-Reichsb%C3%BCrger-group-after-attacks-on-police>.

⁵⁵ “German ‘far-right’ gunman jailed for life in Nuremberg,” BBC News, October 23, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41720824>; “Germany shooting: Policeman dies in raid on far-right gunman,” BBC News, October 20, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37713209>.

⁵⁶ Bojan Pancevski, “Rise of ‘new Reich army’ sparks alarm in Germany,” Times (London), October 29, 2016, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rise-of-new-reich-army-sparks-alarm-in-germany-xmd7jc9b7>.

⁵⁷ Daniel Koehler, “Anti-Immigration Militias and Vigilante Groups in Germany,” Vigilantism against Migrants and Minorities, October 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336858336_Anti-immigration_militias_and_vigilante_groups_in_Germany.

Reichsbürger Movement

Designations:

Designations by Foreign Governments:

Germany

- **March 19, 2020**

The German Ministry of the Interior banned the “United German Peoples and Tribes,” and its subgroup “Osnabrück Landmark,” on March 19, 2020.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ “Germany bans far-right ‘Reichsbürger’ group,” Deutsche Welle, March 19, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-bans-branch-of-far-right-reichsb%C3%BCrger-movement/a-52834240>.

Reichsbürger Movement

Associations:

Ties to Extremist Entities:

- [Alternative for Germany \(AfD\)](#)

Given the loose structure of the movement, Reichsbürger members generally affiliate with and support those on the far right during organized events and protests. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Reichsbürger and various far-right elements, such as politicians from the anti-migrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) party and supporters of the Querdenker movement, were regularly seen together protesting vaccinations and lockdowns. AfD's opponents were quick to call for increased monitoring of the AfD and the listing of the party on a watch list due to its connections to Reichsbürger. However, AfD leaders later urged party members to leave chat groups that deviated from the discussion of peaceful protests and toward resorting to "other means" as a way to further distance the party from the negative exposure.⁵⁹

- **Querdenker Movement**

Since 2020, the Querdenker anti-vaccination movement has attracted followers across the entire right-wing spectrum. The movement was founded by Michael Ballweg, a reported Reichsbürger follower. Querdenker carried out some of the largest protests during the COVID-19 pandemic due to their large following acquired from social media and Telegram. The protests attracted the participation of groups and unaligned individuals across the far right, a prospect welcomed by those within the Reichsbürger movement who do not comfortably identify as part of the extreme right. Furthermore, the Querdenker movement disseminated a manifesto filled with disinformation and conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 as well as antisemitic language. Given the two movements' similar ideological backgrounds, the German domestic intelligence agency began to monitor Querdenker in April 2021 due to its connection to Reichsbürger as well as its agenda calling for the "delegitimization of the state."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Helen Whittle, "Germany's far-right AfD and the 'Reichsbürger' movement," Deutsche Welle, December 13, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-afd-and-the-reichsb%C3%BCrger-movement/a-64079836>.

⁶⁰ Daniel H. Heinke, "The Security Threat Posed by the Corona-skeptic Querdenken Movement in Germany," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, March 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-security-threat-posed-by-the-corona-skeptic-querdenken-movement-in-germany/>; Jakob Guhl and Dominik Hammer, "The Reichsbürger Movement," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, <https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-Reichsb%C3%BCrger-movement-explainer/>.

Reichsbürger Movement

Media Coverage:

Media Portrayal of Reichsbürger

Media portrayals of the movement indicate there is no consistent ideology endorsed by the Reichsbürger movement. However, the group is often described as running on a fantasy. The German publication Deutsche Welle labeled its members “crackpots.”⁶¹ The *Wall Street Journal* reiterated the narrative that the group was not taken seriously, as authorities claimed that members of the Reichsbürger were just “radical libertarians—a fringe yet unthreatening subculture.”⁶² BBC News did not dismiss the conspiracy-driven rhetoric of the group and also suggested the group is more of a cult than a genuine political or ideological movement.⁶³

⁶¹ Rina Goldenberg, “What is Germany’s ‘Reichsbürger’ movement?,” Deutsche Welle, May 17, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-germanys-reichsb%C3%BCrger-movement/a-36094740>.

⁶² Bojan Pancevski, “German Government Moves Against Fringe Far-Right Group,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/german-government-moves-against-fringe-far-right-group-11584635090>.

⁶³ Jenny Hill, “The self-proclaimed kingdom that doesn’t recognise Germany,” BBC News, December 9, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63916812>.

Reichsbürger Movement

Rhetoric:

Peter Fitzek, leader of Kingdom of Germany, June 21, 2023

In an interview with Sky News:

“We are perhaps a threat to the system, because we want to create the common good, because we want to create freedom...and we question the instruments of domination that we have today...we question this legal system of the Federal Republic because it is a system of domination and not a system of freedom.”⁶⁴

Norbert Schittke, head of Exilregierung Deutsches Reich, October 29, 2016

On Reichsbürger’s use of violence:

“Germany is today an American colony . . . occupied by allied forces . . . so what do you expect when you push people to the brink?..Merkel and her clique are traitors...“So is everyone who supports the so-called Federal Republic of Germany. They should be dealt with accordingly.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Siobhan Robbins and Dorothee Thiesing, “How the far-right has grown into the greatest extremist threat to Germany’s democracy,” Sky News, June 21, 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/how-the-far-right-has-grown-into-the-greatest-extremist-threat-to-germanys-democracy-12906136>.

⁶⁵ Bojan Pancevski, “Rise of ‘new Reich army’ sparks alarm in Germany,” *Times* (London), October 29, 2016, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rise-of-new-reich-army-sparks-alarm-in-germany-xmd7jc9b7>.