

THE RISKS TO GERMANY'S PEACE AND SECURITY GENERATED BY THE REICHSBÜRGER MOVEMENT OR "CITIZENS OF THE REICH" BASED ON POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS

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In recent years, the extreme right in Germany has expanded, the phenomenon gaining momentum. The far-right groups and organisations in Germany were, are and will be dominated by an ideology that amalgamates religious or non-religious ideas but that defends German culture and spirituality according to its visions and objectives.

Adherents of far-right ideology combine these ideas with conspiracy theories, and on such a background, some of them change their attitude towards society and become violent. For example, right-wing extremists attacked the Parliament, the symbol of democracy, for the first time in Germany, namely on 29 August 2020, and later on 6 January 2021, protesters, including right-wing extremists, attacked the Congress of the United States of America.

One of the organisations, such as the Reichsbürger Movement, which means Citizens of the Reich, who reject the current borders of Germany and want the return to those established in 1871, set up cells and planned activities recently catalogued as terrorists by German prosecutors, in December 2022 and May 2023.

For the Citizens of the Reich, there is no Federal Republic of Germany because this country is part of a conspiracy and part of a satanic state system, and they recognise only Imperial Germany. According to the religious beliefs of some of them, the imperial constitution was received from God and must be respected, and they are in an apocalyptic battle between good and evil. The model invoked by some of them is that of Jesus Christ who changed society, erroneously invoking biblical precepts to bolster their claims.

Keywords: far-right extremism; Reichsbürger; conspiracies; Christianity; faith;

INTRODUCTION

The vision of society and its social order have always been the objectives of humans, and since humans are unique, those perspectives have been different, from small differences to opposed and antagonistic ones. Usually, beliefs in opposed political ideologies have generated violence from followers or sympathisers of groups, organisations or state or non-state political systems. One such case is that of the Citizens of the Reich or the Reichsbürger Movement, a far-right organisation without an established leadership of the entire movement.

Reichsbürger means "literally citizens of the empire" in German. In non-Germanic languages, they are known as "citizens of the Reich" (Campbell, 2023). The Citizens of the Reich Movement consists of "individuals who share common logic and belief that allows them to deny and disobey existing state authority and establish their own "ego-centred sovereignty" (Atamuradova & Zeiger, 2021, pp. 16-17). According to Niklas Herrberg, a researcher of the religious foundations of the Citizens of the Reich Movement, "belief in a conspiracy against Germany in the Reich Citizens' scene is linked to various religious motives" (Herrberg, 2021, p. 505).

"Sovereign Citizens, Freemen on the Land, Reichsbürger" are different ideological-political movements with different names but with the same conceptions, namely that people have "a distinctive kind of 'ego-centred' sovereignty that, in its logic, permits them to disobey social conventions as well as any kind of state authority" (Walkenhorst & Ruf, 2021, p. 223).

Therefore, the Reichsbürger Movement or Citizens of the Reich is an extreme right-wing movement that refuses the state authority of Germany. At the basis of its beliefs, there are also religious beliefs in addition to political ones.

THE POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE CITIZENS OF THE REICH

Adherents of the Reichsbürger Movement have a system of beliefs and values formed by the amalgamation of far-right political ideology with religious beliefs and perceptions of the superiority of the Germanic race. For most followers of the movement, Reichsbürger represents "the 19th century Kaiser Reich, the German empire led by the Kaiser (emperor) until Germany lost World War I and became a republic" (Campbell, 2023).

The followers of this movement don't recognise the borders of the Federal Republic of Germany, rejecting *"the current German state and its democratic structure"* (Fürstenau, 2023), instead recognising the borders of the German Empire from 1871. Although entitled Citizens of the Reich, the movement is not an organised one but consists of *"small groups and individuals scattered across the country who are united in that shared belief"* (Hill, 2022). Some Citizens of the Reich *"print their own currency and identity cards and dream of creating their autonomous state"* (Hill, 2022).

"Reichsbürger" (*"Citizens of the Reich"*) and *"Selbstverwalter"* (*"self-administrators"*), although they ideologically have different conceptions, are united by a central element consisting of the *"fundamental rejection of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and its legal system"*, according to a material published by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Germany (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2023, p. 6). The movement consists of people *"without structural connections, but also from small and very small groups, virtual networks and supra-regional associations of people"*, individuals who use social networks a lot (ib.).

In early 2022, the Citizens of the Reich group entitled *"The Königreich Deutschland (Kingdom Germany) bought two pieces of land in Saxony upon which they intended to create their own self-administered state"* (Hill, 2022). In addition to this group, entitled *"The Kingdom of Germany"*, there is another one called *"Confederation of the German Reich"*, both of which are part of the Reichsbürger Movement (Fiyaz Mughal OBE, 2022).

Ideologically, *"Reichsbürger"* appeared in 1985, when Wolfgang Günter Ebel established the *"Kommissarische Reichsregierung"* (KRR), translated as *"Government of the Reich Commissioner"*, and called himself *"Chancellor of the Reich"*, one of the objectives of which was to restore *"the German Reich"* (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2023, p. 7). Some of the Citizens of the Reich do not pay the taxes and duties due to the state, intentionally blocking the activity of the town halls by sending many letters (Hill, 2022).

In an article entitled *"The Religion of the Reich Citizens – Theocracy Germany"*, published on 12 July 2019, Christian Röther drew attention to the danger represented by the Citizens of the Reich against the background of the distorted appropriation of some religious concepts. They do not recognise the Federal Republic of Germany based on *"religious ideas far beyond the mainstream"*. For example, some Citizens of the Reich *"assume that they received their imperial constitution directly from God and imagine themselves in an apocalyptic final battle"* (Röther, 2019).

The fundamental ideological elements of the Reichsbürger Movement are *"the use of far-right historical and regional revisionism, ethnic beliefs and anti-Semitic narratives"* (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2023, p. 9). Racism is part of the ideology of the movement and in most situations, the intolerant attitude is adopted *"not against a certain ethnic or religious group, but against everything that is perceived as non-German"* (Juling, 2023).

According to a manifesto of the Deutsches Kolleg, a neo-Nazi organization close to the Reichsbürger Movement, the German Empire is an instrument of divinity: *"The Reich as the sword of God, as the catechist and protector of the cosmic order in Europe and on Earth. From the starry cloaks of the German emperors to the starry sky above Kant's Königsberg, the German faith has always been cosmocentric and therefore the object of hatred by all anthropocentric cults, including Christianity"* (Deutsches Kolleg, 2019 apud Herrberg, 2021, p. 515).

One of the leading exponents of the Reich Citizen movement, Peter Fitzek, stated in an interview with Christian Röther that he was *"a messenger of God"*. *"I have come so far in my awareness that I know exactly: who am I? What do I want here? Why was I sent here by the Creator? Where am I from? And I come from a world that has nothing to do with this. And I am fully aware of that"*, says Peter Fitzek (Röther, 2019).

Peter Fitzek established in 2012 in Wittenberg the *"Kingdom of Germany"* and called himself the king of this state, issuing *"Reich driving licenses, Reich trade permits and Reich passports"* without legal value (MDR SAXONIA-ANHALT, 2023). Eric Campbell says that *"Reichsbürger are the German equivalent but in a very German way"* of *"Sovereign Citizens in the US"* or Australia, the two movements being similar in that they refuse the authority of the state and do not recognise the governments of the countries they are from part (Campbell, 2023).

For the Reichsbürger, *"the old world is synonymous with law and order, strength and national pride, industriousness and tradition, a traditional role for women, the higher value placed on religion and community, and a more homogeneous society"* (Juling, 2023). At the same time, the followers of this movement refuse to accept society as it currently functions and want *"a simpler life, as opposed to the complexity of today's world"*, an attitude that *"is expressed in a vehement rejection of state bureaucracy or a left-leaning, more progressive image of a pluralistic society"* (Juling, 2023).

Peter Fitzek, the self-proclaimed King of Germany, states that the system of social order in Germany must be changed, considering that he has a divine mission

to fulfil and is like Jesus Christ: *"How can we get rid of this satanic system and basically do what was first initiated 2000 years ago? And that's why I say to myself I'm just someone doing the same thing now. I question the whole system. And this was done 2000 years ago by Jesus Christ. I'm not going to do anything else now"* (Röther, 2019).

Groups of adherents to the ideology of the Citizens of the Reich Movement have been studied by researchers of the phenomenon who have concluded that, in Germany, these groups *"seem to bear remarkable similarities to smaller cults and sects"* (Walkenhorst & Ruf, 2021, p. 233). In the same way, at world level, *"similarities between Sovereign Citizens and cults or cult-like groups"* could be observed (Walkenhorst & Ruf, 2021, p. 233).

Kilian Knop, a researcher of the Reichsbürger movement, learned from conducting interviews *"that various religious elements are important in the 'Kingdom of Germany'"* (Röther, 2019). *"Esotericism and theosophy, yoga and meditation, UFO belief and Christ worship, natural mysticism and communication with supernatural beings mix here"*, says Kilian Knop: *"On the one hand, nature spirits, but also angels. That plays a role. Contact with the deceased plays a role"*, quoting Peter Fitzek in the interview, in which he points out that *"a theocracy will be created"* (Röther, 2019).

On 20 March 2021, a demonstration of Citizens of the Reich took place in Berlin, carrying placards on which they wrote religious messages thus highlighting their religiosity: *"Jesus lives"*, *"Germany should return to God"*, *"Joshua, Light of the Nations"* (Pernot, 2021). Moreover, for the Citizens of the Reich, *"Empire"* means *"a return to a cosmic order – and in this ontological sense, a distinguished and original one – or that it could be defended against a possible apocalyptic fall"* (Herrberg, 2021, p. 515).

Such a return influenced by religious reasons is evidenced by the promoted concept, namely that of the *"Government in exile of the German Reich"*, which, in addition to the promoted imperial social architecture, also reveals the importance of the German language as a *"central point of reference"* (Herrberg, 2021, p. 515). According to Exil-Regierung Deutsches Reich, in translation Exile Government of the German Reich, *"the German language reflects a real and truly great spirit. In this, we find the structures of proximity to nature and the deep knowledge of justice and social coexistence. This language carries within itself the divinity, the divine, the original God. No other language in the world than that of the Germans has managed to preserve its original roots"* (Exil-Regierung Deutsches Reich, 2023).

Religious syncretism is a specific side of the Citizens of the Reich, the followers of the movement amalgamating a number of religious concepts that they take from the doctrines of various religions. For example, *"in some cases, there are fictitious ministries that are supposed to make contact with angels and divine beings"* (Juling, 2023). *"Traditional Christianity or Germanism and Nordic religions are in the foreground among the non-esoteric Reichsbürger"*, says Dominik Juling (Juling, 2023).

The deputy head of the Department for Public Relations and Protection of the Constitution through Education Ministry of the Interior in Germany's Brandenburg, Michael Hülsen, stated in an interview on 29 August 2017 that there is *"a mixture of esoteric content and right-wing extremism"*, and Reichsbürger is no exception (Kassel, 2017). When people are affected by stressors, they look to esotericism as a salutary solution (Kassel, 2017).

The *"social group structure"* of Citizens of the Reich and how the leaders proclaim themselves as leaders is specific to occult religious groups (Walkenhorst, Ruf, 2021, p. 233). The *"New Germany"* organisation also known as the *"Kingdom of Germany"*, led by Peter Fitzek, has a *"sect-like structure"* (Hüllen, Homburg, 2017, p. 42). The *"religious semantics"* used by Citizens of the Reich *"contains a legitimising attribution of one's own position, which, moreover, often sees religion as part of an ahistorically determined identity"* (Herrberg, 2021, p. 514).

Niklas Herrberg says in a study titled *"Legitimated by God to Free the Empire"*, namely *"the Reich"*, that *"religion is used in a non-specific sense"* by amalgamating religious concepts from Christianity with those of political ideology (Herrberg, 2021, p. 516).

"Deutschen Kolleg" writes about the political activist Rudi Dutschke: *"As with Jesus of Nazareth, with Rudi von Luckenwalde his community recognised only some time after his death that they had met an individual from the history of salvation... Hitler and Dutschke were the two charismatic leaders that the German people produced in the 20th century: Hitler – the leader of the great German labour and popular movement in 1933, Dutschke – the leader of the small German student movement in 1968... This resurrection of Dutschke revealed that Providence placed salvation – for the second time in the 20th century – on a saviour of the Germans"* (Deutsches Kolleg, 2019 apud Herrberg, 2021, p. 516).

Thus, the political ideology and religious beliefs of the Citizens of the Reich are a mixture of syncretistic religious beliefs and conspiracy theories and ideas about returning to an antebellum state form and social order with which such individuals agree.

THE DANGER TO SOCIETY REPRESENTED BY THE CITIZENS OF THE REICH

Followers of the Reichsbürger Movement have a system of beliefs and values that lead and motivate them to reject the current German state and the authority represented by it, which makes them a danger to society in general and to the people who stand in the way of their plans, in particular.

On 29 August 2020, the Reichstag, the German parliament, was stormed by a mob due to restrictions imposed by the authorities in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, among them anti-vaxxers, followers of QAnon conspiracy theories, neo-Nazis, right-wing extremists and *“a sovereign citizens movement known as Reichsbürger”* (Campbell, 2023). The action is similar to the assault on the United States Congress on 6 January 2021, because it inspired it, just as it inspired the assault on the Brazilian Congress (Campbell, 2023).

In addition to refusing to pay taxes and fees to the state and issuing documents in the name of a non-existent state entity, the worst thing is that these *“citizens”* are increasingly resorting to violence against those who do not share their beliefs, especially against representatives of state authorities such as the police and this trend will be increasing, according to Dennis Walkenhorst and Maximilian Ruf as early as 2019 (Walkenhorst, Ruf, 2021, p. 223).

“The conspiratorial semantics of the citizens of the Reich”, says Niklas Herrberg, *“absorb elements and motifs of various religious semantics, interpret them in their own sense and use them to legitimize their own actions”* (Herrberg, 2021, p. 506).

Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution warns that among the approximately 23,000 followers of the Citizens of the Reich Movement, there are also *“violent people and right-wing extremists”*, and some of them *“are in possession of weapons”* (MDR SAXONIA-ANHALT, 2023). It was estimated that, at the end of 2021, there were around 21,000 Citizens of Reich (Kirby, 2022) and in just one year the number of followers increased by approximately 10%, while at the end of 2016, the number of Citizens of the Reich was estimated at approximately 10,000 people (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2023, p. 17).

But in reality, according to the Global Network on Extremism & Technology, it appears that the number of supporters of the Citizens of the Reich Movement is much higher, as evidenced by the fact that *“content posted in openly marked ‘Reichsbürger’ channels on Telegram can reach up to 60,000 members”* (Kupper & Dittrich, 2023).

German government authorities have stated that the trend of crimes and violent actions committed by Citizens of the Reich, together with the like-minded

Selbstverwalter group, is increasing and at the same time worrying as *“they have committed more than 1,000 extremist criminal acts in 2021, double the number in 2020”* (Hill, 2022).

The head of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Thomas Haldenwang, stated that the Citizens of the Reich *“pose a high level of danger”* because a percentage of 10% of the estimated number of followers are prone to commit acts of violence (Kirby, 2022), i.e. an approximate number of 2,300 people according to estimates made on 31 December 2022 (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2023, p. 18).

The German Federal Prosecutor's Office has publicly stated that a group of 50 Citizens of the Reich, men and women, *“had been plotting a violent coup since November 2021”* with *“plans to rule Germany with departments covering health, justice and foreign affairs”* (Kirby, 2022). The Citizens of the Reich, who were part of that group, intended to seize political power through *“military means and violence against state representatives, which included carrying out killings”*, which is why the German prosecutor's office also considered it a terrorist threat (Kirby, 2022). German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser called those who planned the coup a *“terrorist group ... driven by fantasies of violent overthrow and conspiracy ideologies”* (Ib.).

German prosecutors described the coup plotting organization as *“a far-right terrorist group that was plotting to overthrow the government”* (Smith, 2023). According to allegations in a German Federal Court filing, three Citizens of the Reich photographed the interior of the German parliament in September 2022 to prepare *“a violent attack”* (Smith, 2023). They intended to create *“civil war conditions to bring about an end to Germany's democracy”* (Kirby, 2022). The 25 Citizens of the Reich, or followers of the Reichsbürger Movement were arrested *“after police discovered details of a planned armed coup in the advanced stages of planning, including a government structure to replace Germany's federal republic”* (Smith, 2023). Among the 25 members of the group arrested was a female judge named Birgit Malsack-Winkemann, who, however, was reinstated as a magistrate by a court (Kirby, 2022).

The plotters also established paramilitary groups made up of active or reservist German special forces whose specific aim was to *“eliminate democratic bodies at the local level”* (Ib.). *“Everyone involved in this operation knew that it could only be carried out by using deadly force of arms against the police and security forces of the German Bundestag”*, the indictment filed in the case pending in Germany's Federal Court states. (Smith, 2023). According to the plan, a number of 16 Citizens

of the Reich, members of the group planning the attack, were to force their way into the parliament building, in which they acquired weapons with lethal ammunition (Smith, 2023).

In 2016, a Citizen of the Reich killed a policeman (Kirby, 2022), but the problem is that many of the Citizens of the Reich *"have guns"*, owned legally or illegally, and the German police cancelled the permits to carry weapons for over a thousand followers of the movement in 2016, from the time of the shooting of the policeman, until 2021, but with all this more than 500 Citizens of the Reich still possessed lethal weapons legally (Hill, 2022).

Some of the Reichsbürger followers believe that *"the state has no authority over them, which is why police now take lots of backup when they have to visit Reichsbürger properties to enforce laws"* because of an unfortunate event that happened in 2016, when a Citizen of the Reich of Romanian origin, by the name of Adrian Ursache, shot a policeman from the law enforcement team that was trying to evacuate him from a property that *"he had declared to be a sovereign state"* (Campbell, 2023). Another case, also in 2016, is that of a follower of the movement who shot 4 policemen, one of whom died shortly from his injuries (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2023, p. 33), his name being Wolfgang Plan, a *"German far-right militant belonging to the shadowy Citizens of the Reich movement"* (AFP, 2017).

BBC Berlin Correspondent Jenny Hill said on 7 December 2022 in the article *"Reichsbürger: Germany's 'crackpot' movement turns radical and dangerous"* that although the Citizens of the Reich were long regarded as a collection of *"lunatics"*, *"they're becoming more radical and more dangerous"* (Hill, 2022). Heinrich XIII – Prince of Reuss, leader of the Citizens of the Reich group, stated that *"Jews are responsible for the end of European kingdoms and believes that the current German state is illegitimate and void because of agreements made with allied forces after World War II"* (Smith, 2023).

Peter Neumann, an extremism expert at King's College London, said the group was influenced by QAnon conspiracy theories and the 6 January 2021, the attack on the US Congress and the occupation of the Brazilian Congress, the three actions sharing *"an inspirational link"* and highlighting *"a very powerful image for how far-right people could take power"* (Smith, 2023).

Therefore, some of the followers of the Reichsbürger Movement generate risks to society as a result of their own beliefs, a conclusion based on the fact that the actions of some of the Citizens of the Reich in the last seven years have been violent, not limited to expressing personal opinions about the system of social order.

CONCLUSIONS

The Reichsbürger or Citizens of the Reich movement is categorised as one of the far-right, without clearly established leadership, whose ideology is based on an amalgam of political, conspiratorial, religious, racial or cultural beliefs, but all of them gravitating around Germany and the Germanic culture and spirituality.

The followers of the Reichsbürger do not recognise the Federal Republic of Germany or its current borders, reason for which they refuse to recognise the authority of the German state, an attitude that often makes them violent towards the representatives of the German state, especially with the police, since they are the ones who ensure public order and compliance with laws.

For Reichsbürger, the only state they recognise is the German Empire or Reich of 1871 and the borders it had at the time. It refuses to recognise the 21st century Germany, because it considers it to still be a country occupied by the allies from the Second World War. It does not accept identity documents legally issued by the German state or driving licenses or other types of documents. As a result, groups that are part of the Reich Citizens Movement issue their own documents.

For them, conspiracy theories are a standard to follow, and not only that, but they have also adapted them to their own visions of German society. These conspiracy theories have been mixed with Christian religious doctrine and political ideologies, generating strong convictions and consequently the adoption of an extremely firm attitude and conduct. These led to violent behaviour in some of the followers of the Reichsbürger Movement, who not only became aggressive towards those who did not share their views or towards the police but also killed people.

Different groups that are part of the Reichsbürger Movement have appeared in the last ten years. They take different names that clearly indicate the rejection of the current political system of Germany, namely by referring to the state of 150 years ago, ruled by an emperor. Exemplary in this sense is the group called *"Kingdom of Germany"* or *"Confederation of the German Reich"*.

This movement is all the more dangerous because some of the followers of the Reichsbürger ideology have the conviction that the said imperial constitution, from 1871, was given by God, who also gave the Tablets of the Law to Moses. Such beliefs make Reich Citizens reject anything that is not Germanic and thus become intolerant.

One of the leaders of a group of Citizens of the Reich, Peter Fitzek, sees himself as an emissary of divinity, and the Reich is a weapon and instrument by which God imposes his will in the midst of cosmic anarchy and disorder.

The existence of approximately 23,000 followers of the movement at the end of 2022 and a significantly larger number of sympathisers will automatically generate a large number of people in whom the violent trigger will occur. Because of the strong convictions of the Citizens of the Reich regarding the sacred mission that some of them have, in the times to come, such individuals will present a danger to those with whom they interact.

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