

Arthur F. Burns Fellowship Report
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Placement: Foreign affairs desk, Die Welt

I was standing under a leaking umbrella on the roof deck of the Saxony state parliament building when everyone around me broke out in raucous cheers. The clock had just struck 6 pm. Election results were in and the center-right Christian Democratic Union had managed to remain the most popular party in the eastern German state. As CDU supporters celebrated fending off the insurgent far-right, I snapped photos of a giant rainbow that had suddenly formed across the Elbe river.

But the election night jubilation in Dresden masked a pervasive feeling among the CDU that its strength was being undermined by the populist far-right. The Alternative for Germany did better in the former Communist East than polls had predicted, winning 28% of Saxony's vote as the CDU took 32%. I was later struck by the fact that more young voters cast their ballots for the far-right AfD than for any other party in Saxony.

No single narrative can encapsulate what's happening in German politics. Yes, the far-right's popularity is surging in the eastern states, but a youth-led environmental movement is simultaneously capturing the public's attention. In my talks with CDU voters, AfD supporters, and young climate change activists across the country, it quickly became clear to me that German politics are messy, and not unlike American politics in many ways.

My Burns experience was a constant exercise in comparing and contrasting life, politics, and culture in the US and Germany. I was struck by the similarities between the economic inequality and resentment dividing urban and rural communities in both Germany and the US. How fear and misinformation drive politics in both countries. But I also came to better appreciate how Germany's history of genocide and communism and America's history of slavery and legal discrimination color political debates in very different ways.

But first, some cultural immersion.

I loved the language classes in Berlin. Our teacher, Tom Speckmann, was extremely patient and unfailing energetic despite our slightly cramped, at times uncomfortably warm classroom. We learned most of the basics needed to get around and had a class on journalism terms, which was very helpful (I definitely recommend that for future fellows). The two weeks of classes and cultural activities were a nice way to get oriented and adjust to living in Berlin, although we probably could've done most of the activities independently. It was also nice to be able to ease into reporting during instead of jumping right into our placements.

My placement on the foreign affairs desk at Die Welt was really great. The team was very friendly and helpful with story ideas and sources. I worked out of their offices almost every day

that I was in Berlin and had a great time getting to know people there, going to drinks with the team, and getting lunch with various colleagues. And I was surrounded by Burnsies. Sonja Gillert on the foreign affairs desk and Christian Schweppe on the investigations team were super welcoming. And more senior former fellows, including Welt am Sonntag EIC Johannes Boie, were also very supportive.

It was fascinating to work at a company as large and influential as Axel Springer. On one of my first days, my editor brought me to a background briefing with the Latvian president. I suddenly found myself at a long table on the 19th floor of the Springer headquarters surrounded by German reporters grilling a foreign leader. Die Welt was also a strategic placement for me because Business Insider, where I work in New York, is also owned by Axel Springer, so I got a chance to learn more about our parent company and how our sister outlets operate. I also got to know colleagues at the BI Deutschland office (just a block away from Die Welt), which was fun and also useful for reporting purposes.

I spent most of my time writing for Business Insider, but I wrote one “ich form” perspective piece for Die Welt on Greta Thunberg (while she was en route to the US on a zero emissions sailboat) and the flight shame movement. For Business Insider, I wrote a series of big features focused on climate and environmental issues and far-right populism. My reporting took me from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp memorial, to the kitchen of a vegan butcher in Prenzlauer Berg, to a far-right campaign rally in rural Austria. I reported on the flight-shame movement, a proposal to raise taxes on meat in Germany, the far-right AfD party and state elections in eastern Germany, and political chaos in Austria. I also worked with a freelance filmmaker and the BI video team to produce a video segment on the German meat tax, veganism in Berlin, and the climate protests.

I got to dig into some major issues on both the left and right of the political spectrum. Far-right populism is a significant issue in Germany, Austria, and across Europe, and it was fascinating to investigate it in historical context. With the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall this year, Germans were hyper-aware of how persistent economic and social divides between the former East and West are playing into today’s politics. I interviewed a 30-year-old AfD candidate (now a state lawmaker) who ran on a call to “Vollende die Wende,” or “complete the revolution” with a new populist revolt. I chatted with a Syrian refugee who feels that Germans have become much less welcoming to immigrants in recent years. And I spoke with young people who chose to move back to their native eastern Germany to help reverse the brain drain.

My stories on progressive climate change activism made me feel as though I had time travelled into the future. I talked to teenagers who’ve given up animal products, flying, and buying new clothes. I interviewed a grandmother who marched through Berlin with a giant, handmade pinata of the globe hanging from a noose.

I had a deal with BI that I’d report some breaking politics news and other US stories for them (on NYC time) two days a week. Those days were a bit exhausting, but it was helpful in keeping me

in the loop on US political news. If I could do it over, I probably would have cut my hours to one day a week for BI (though they would've paid me even less, unfortunately).

Of course, I loved living in Berlin. I was lucky enough to rent a German fellow's apartment in Wedding, where I explored gems like Plötzensee and Volkspark Rehberge, both of which are magical places. The park has what must be hundreds of gardens with little houses people use to hang out in during the summer, but don't live in. I would sometimes encounter goats or other curiosities in the park. And Plötzensee has a beach with a DJ and a waterslide, so I think I've said enough. I also had fun doing routine things in Berlin, like going to yoga classes, biking to work, and frequenting my neighborhood bakery. I went to some incredible museums, learned a lot of history, ate a lot of delicious food (mostly bread and curry wurst), and swam in some very lovely lakes. I marveled constantly at Berlin's gemütlichkeit — how people just chill and drink beer for many hours outside and, it seems, really enjoy life. I'm trying to bring that attitude back to New York.

The experience was extremely enriching, both personally and professionally. I only wish I could've stayed longer. Herzliche Dank!

My work:

For Die Welt: [Die USA werden für Greta ein Kulturschock](#)

For BI: [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Greta Thunberg want everyone to fly less to fight climate change. Germany and Sweden are already embracing the 'flight shame' movement.](#)

[Germany's far-right populist party is poised to surge in the former Communist East 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall](#)

[A far-right party just made big gains in eastern Germany days after reports one of its leaders marched with neo-Nazis in 2007](#)

[Germany's far-right party has drawn controversial comparisons to Nazis and they're forcing the country to reconsider how it deals with the Holocaust](#)

[Germany's considering a new tax on meat — but it might not be a model for Democrats who want Americans to eat fewer hamburgers](#)

[Austria is about to re-empower a far-right party the US intelligence community doesn't trust. It's a sign that European ultra-nationalist movements are made of teflon.](#)

Business Insider Today video segment:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2536757829877738>