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WELCOMING THE OTHER: EMOTION AND EMPATHY IN GERMANY'S 2015 REFUGEE CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

In response to the 2015 refugee crisis, Germany welcomed more than one million refugees and became the country with the fifth highest population of refugees in the world.

This article seeks to unpack how Germany, under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, used strategic communications to gain support for such a bold and unusual approach. Building on the work of Claire Yorke, Naomi Head, and other scholars, it argues that emotion

and empathy played a transformative role in the German government's strategic communications. The article reviews literature from a broad range of research on emotion and empathy and considers important contextual factors for Germany in the years leading up to 2015. Through discourse analysis of key texts concerning the 2015 refugee crisis, this article reveals how emotion and expressions of empathy were central to Germany's strategic communications. The article concludes by evaluating the legacy and impact of this approach.

INTRODUCTION

Major displacement and migration events are increasingly common in today's world. Such events, whether prompted by war, civil unrest, or insurgency, create millions of refugees.

UN Refugee Agency (UNHRC) statistics show that the number of refugees has steadily increased over the last decade, and in 2020 it was estimated at 26.4 million people.[1] With 24/7 international news coverage, the plight of these people is seen in real-time by audiences around the world. The refugee population, therefore, poses a pressing challenge to individual nation states, to international organisations, and to the established political order of a globalised world.[2]

Public opinion on how refugees should be treated and managed by nation states varies. In European states, views are often particularly polarised when there is a significant increase in people seeking asylum.[3] The refugee crisis of summer 2015 brought this issue dramatically to Europe's doorstep with millions of people who had fled civil war in Syria and its neighbouring states seeking refuge. Germany, the leading economy of the European Union (EU), went against the grain by adopting and communicating a welcoming approach to refugees at this

1 'Refugee statistics: global trends at a glance', UNHRC, (accessed 20 July 2021).
2 'World Migration Report 2020', International Organisation of Migration (IOM), 2020, (accessed 20 July 2021), p. 2.
3 Christian S. Czymara, 'Attitudes toward refugees in contemporary Europe: A Longitudinal Perspective on Cross-National Differences', *Social Force* Volume 9 Nº 3 (2021): 1324.

time. By contrast, many other European states were communicating to their domestic audiences about efforts to strengthen borders and to limit the numbers of refugees arriving.

Chancellor Angela Merkel and her government made three key decisions in response to the crisis. First, Germany committed to welcoming one million refugees in 2015. By following through on this commitment, Germany became the country with the fifth highest refugee population in the world.[4] Second, Merkel suspended the enforcement of the Dublin Agreement in Germany. This agreement enables EU countries to return asylum seekers to their first 'safe country of origin'.[5] And third, the interpretation of the German constitution was expanded to provide refuge to all those fleeing war, rather than just those fleeing persecution, effectively removing any upper cap on the number of refugees that Germany would accept from war-torn Syria.[6]

Merkel's handling of the crisis divided opinion both at home and abroad. While high numbers of citizens participated in welcoming refugees into Germany, others had mixed feelings about the government's approach.[7] In the months and years following summer 2015 many actively protested against the policies and far-right parties gained momentum. On the international stage Merkel received more emphatic praise. She was in the running to receive a Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 for her leadership in the crisis, and *Time Magazine* chose her as its 2015 'Person of the Year'.[8] Writing in 2019, Fritz Breithaupt described Germany's approach as 'perhaps the boldest political step in the cause of humanitarianism in the twenty-first century thus far'.[9]

4 Philip Oltermann, 'How Angela Merkel's great migrant gamble paid off', *The Observer*, 30 August 2020, (accessed 28 December 2021).
5 Manasi Gopalakrishnan, 'The Dublin Regulation explained', *Infomigrants*, last updated 24 January 2020, (accessed 20 August 2021).
6 Ludger Helms, Femke Van Esch and Beverly Crawford, 'Merkel III: From Committed Pragmatist to "Conviction Leader"?', *German Politics* Volume 28, Nº 3 (2019): 359.
7 Ulrike Hamann and Serhat Karakayali, 'Practicing Willkommenskultur: Migration and Solidarity in Germany', *Insections* Volume 2, Nº 4 (December 2016): 70.
8 Karl Vick, 'Time Person of the Year 2015: Angela Merkel', *Time Magazine*, 9 December 2015, (accessed 28 December 2021).
9 Fritz Breithaupt, *The Dark Sides of Empathy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 131.

How did the German government, led by Merkel, use strategic communications to achieve its objectives and persuade its target audiences to support such a bold and unusual approach? What were the contextual factors for Germany, and Merkel, that contributed to this?

This article argues that emotions and empathy played a central role in the strategic communications of Merkel and the German government. Its intention is not to assess Merkel's approach from a political or ethical standpoint, but to analyse the strategic communications approach and its impact. To what extent did Merkel influence her target audiences and shift long-term views on, and behaviours towards, refugees? How did she secure public support for the government's approach? This article endeavours to answer these questions.

After a short note on terminology, I review the extensive and multi-disciplinary literature related to the role of emotion and empathy in political life. The analysis highlights a growing consensus among scholars on the importance of emotion and empathy in geopolitics, international relations, and strategic communications. The article then considers the specific case of Germany and the 2015 refugee crisis. It sets out why it is illuminating to think about the role of emotion and empathy here and offers a brief overview of Germany's unique stance regarding refugees.

This is followed by discourse analysis of the Merkel government's strategic communications during that time. The role and impact of emotional appeals in Merkel's communications are traced, including through her words, actions, and inactions. Three emotions are analysed in particular: guilt, pride, and compassion. I highlight these three emotions because they were so effective in achieving the government's objectives in this case. The article then transitions into an analysis of how Merkel used empathy to achieve her objectives. Her role as an 'empathic entrepreneur'[10]—a term introduced in Naomi Head's work—is considered and discussed, as are the costs and limitations of this approach.

10 Naomi Head, 'Costly encounters of an empathic kind: a typology', *International Theory: A Journal of International Politics, Law and Philosophy* Volume 8, Nº 1 (March 2016): 172.

Reflecting on the years following 2015, the article concludes with a brief analysis of the legacy and longer-term outcomes of Merkel's strategic communications. I conclude by restating the importance of emotion and empathy in strategic communications in this case study. As Head writes, empathy and emotion are 'embodied, messy, personal, and political'.[11] But they are also fundamental to human life, politics, and strategic communications, and are therefore worthy of study.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

It is helpful to justify the choice of two terms used throughout this article: 'refugees' and 'refugee crisis'. Refugees are a subset of the migrant population with a particular international status. The UN '1951 Refugee Convention' defines a refugee as:

> …a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group of political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution. [12]

This definition seeks to create international consensus on what makes someone a refugee. It frames refugees as deserving of universal protection by the international community, though there are significant differences in the perception and treatment of refugees around the world.

The article refers to the events of the summer of 2015 as 'the refugee crisis'. This terminology evokes the notion of a vast and unmanageable problem.[13] A crisis is commonly understood as something rare that challenges the established order, collapses the legitimacy of existing

11 Naomi Head, 'A politics of empathy: Encounters with empathy in Israel and Palestine', *Review of International Studies* Volume 42 (June 2015): 99.
12 'The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol', UNHRC, (accessed 21 July 2021).
13 Helen Dempster and Karen Hargrave, *Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants,* (London: Chatham House Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2017), 20.

ways of working, and therefore points to new ways of seeing problems.[14] The term 'refugee crisis' draws attention away from the systemic causes which led to their arrival in Europe, and de-emphasises the consistent occurrence of refugee flows throughout history.[15] It is important to be mindful of these connotations, especially in a discussion about strategic communications. However, the arrival of 1.25 million refugees to Europe in 2015 was extraordinary.[16] These numbers were the highest seen since the aftermath of the Second World War,[17] and posed a dramatic challenge to Europe.

Both terms – refugee [Flüchtling] and refugee crisis [Flüchtlingskrise] – were frequently used by Merkel, the German government, German media, and other contemporary commentators. They are also helpful shorthand expressions in this discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The definition of strategic communications is debated by academics and practitioners. Yet there is broad agreement that it is a holistic endeavour covering a range of communications activity that political actors use to achieve their objectives in a contested environment.[18] Everything an actor says and does, how it is communicated, and the context in which it is perceived and understood, all impact the ability to achieve objectives.[19] Audience and contextual insight are crucial, and strategic communicators must also understand the emotions of their target audiences if they are to succeed.[20]

14 Simon Goodman, Ala Sirriyeh, Simon McMahon, 'The evolving (re)categorisation of refugees throughout the "refugee/migrant crisis"', *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* Volume 27, Nº 2 (February 2017): 105.
15 Lilie Chouliaraki and Rafal Zaborowski, 'Voice and community in the 2015 refugee crisis: A content analysis of news coverage in eight European countries', *The International Communication Gazette* Volume 79, Nº 6-7 (September 2017): 632.
16 Esther Gruessing and Hajo G. Boomgaarden, 'Shifting the refugee narrative? An automated frame analysis of Europe's 2015 refugee crisis', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* Volume 43, Nº 11 (September 2017): 1749.
17 'Global Trends: forced displacement in 2015', (Geneva: UNHRC, 20 June 2016), (accessed 20 July 2021), p. 5.
18 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019), p. 29.
19 Claire Yorke, 'The significance and limitations of empathy in strategic communications', *Defence Strategic Communications*, Volume 2 (Spring 2017): 140.
20 Claire Yorke, 'Empathy and emotions in strategy, strategic communications and international relations' lecture, *Strategic Communications: Theory and Concepts* module, King's College London, November 2019.

Empathy is another critical tool for the strategic communicator. It offers a lens to identify, understand, and interpret another person—their emotional state, perspective, and world view.[21] For a political leader, empathy can be both a performative and communicative act which must be expressed to be understood by target audiences.[22] As Claire Yorke summarises, 'the act of listening and seeking to understand another itself communicates the value you attribute to them'.[23] The following review considers the broad-ranging literature on the role of emotion and empathy in politics, society, and strategic communications.

Debates about emotion

What is meant by emotion and its significance in politics and society has been debated by scholars from a wide range of disciplines, from biology to philosophy.

Darwin is often considered the first to have studied emotion systematically from a biological perspective, but there are many who preceded him in seeking to understand it.[24] Looking back to antiquity, Aristotle and Hippocrates wrote about the somatic aspect of emotion and its powerful physiological symptoms in the human body,[25] while Thucydides recognised its power to persuade, motivate, and prompt people to war. Thucydides famously believed fear was one of the causes of the Peloponnesian War, while also recognising the importance of courage, love, and honour in shaping people's attitudes and behaviours.[26]

Philosophers of the early modern period, often characterised by their focus on reason and science, also highlighted the pre-eminence of emotion in human and political behaviour. In *Leviathan* (1651) Thomas

21 Yorke, 'Empathy and emotions' lecture.
22 Claire Yorke, 'Making the connection: the role of empathy in communicating policy', *Global Relations Forum Young Academics Program*, Volume 10 (August 2020): 4.
23 Yorke, 'The significance', p. 139.
24 Neta Crawford, 'The passion of world politics: propositions on emotion and emotional relationships', *International Security* Volume 24, N°4 (Spring 2000): 123.
25 See Douglas Cairns, 'A Short History of Shudders', in *Unveiling Emotions II: Emotions in Greece and Rome: Texts, Images, Material Culture, Heidelberger althistorische Beiträge und epigraphische Studien (HABES), Volume 55,* ed. by Angelos Chaniotis and Pierre Ducrey
(Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013), p. 78.
26 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War,* trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 49.

Hobbes unpacked the critical role that fear, compassion, desire, honour, and love play in political life.[27] David Hume (1711-1776) wrote extensively about the importance of emotion in his philosophical works. He commented that 'the feelings of our heart, the agitation of our passions, the vehemence of our affections, dissipate all (philosophy's) conclusions, and reduce the profound philosopher to a mere plebeian'.[28] It is striking to see Hume, a philosopher, subjugate his own discipline to the force of emotions. This demonstrates that he considered emotions to be ubiquitous and fundamental to understanding human attitudes and behaviour. Their significance has continued to be debated in philosophy and the social sciences.[29]

Emotions are central to strategic communications because they pervade all human relationships, attitudes, decisions, and behaviours. Yorke highlights how emotions influence an audience's wants, beliefs, and actions.[30] People are motivated by fear, pride, guilt, and compassion just as much as they are influenced by facts and rational arguments. Indeed, emotions such as fear, pride, guilt, and compassion have become a particular focus in academic literature.[31] Collective emotions like these help to build common values and interests, and shape long-term views and behaviours. Therefore, influencing the collective and individual emotions of audiences is the business of strategic communications.

The plight of refugees is one of the most emotive issues in contemporary politics, but economic and political analyses have sometimes overlooked the emotional dynamics which shape public attitudes towards refugees.[32] Research from a range of social science disciplines has suggested that attitudes and behaviours towards refugees are influenced by a spectrum of emotions, rather than by logic or rational argument.[33] Despite this, refugees test the limits of the state's capacity for

27 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 118.
28 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 4.
29 Paolo Boccagni and Loretta Baldassar. 'Emotions on the move: mapping the emergent field of emotion and migration', *Emotion, Space and Society* Volume 16 (2015): 73.
30 Yorke, 'Empathy and emotions' lecture.
31 See Crawford, 'The passion of world politics'.
32 Boccagni and Baldassar, 'Emotions on the move', p. 73.
33 Dempster and Hargrave, *Understanding public attitudes*, p. 21.

compassion.[34] Acknowledging these limits, realist scholars have pointed to states' common prioritisation of national security, international order, and economic stability[35] over a politics of compassion for refugees. More broadly, the figure of the refugee tests dichotomies of 'here and there' and 'us and them' on the geopolitical stage.

The role of emotion in shaping attitudes, opinions, and behaviours

Bleiker and Hutchison see emotions as central to the decision-making process, pointing to evidence from brain scans.[36] Neuroscientist Antoine Bechara has also traced how emotion drives decision-making in patients, and that people often rely on an emotional or 'gut' level instinct.[37] Bleiker and Hutchison conclude that given the central role of emotions in forming decisions and beliefs, they are critical to how politics is 'conducted, perceived, and evaluated'.[38]

It is helpful here to signpost the body of literature which has highlighted the interconnectedness of emotion and cognition. Mercer writes about how cognition and emotion should not be separated: '…by now it has been amply demonstrated that cognition and emotion are largely inseparable'.[39] Cognitive psychologists also demonstrate the relationship between emotion and cognition: emotions can be revised through cognitive means, and vice versa.[40]

As well as being fundamental to the attitudes, opinions, and behaviours of target audiences, emotions play a critical role in shaping behaviours and decisions of political actors. While theorists of political science have traditionally relied on the rational actor model to analyse state decision-making, there is increasing recognition that emotions should also be

34 *Ibid*, p. 73.
35 Elisabeth Porter, 'Can Politics Practice Compassion?', *Hypatia* Volume 21, Nº 4 (2006): 103.
36 Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions in world politics', *International Theory: A journal of international politics, law and philosophy* Volume 6, Nº 3 (November 2014): 496.
37 Antoine Bechara, 'The role of emotion in decision-making: evidence from neurological patients with orbitofrontal damage', *Brain and Cognition* Volume 55, Nº 1 (June 2004): 31.
38 Hutchison and Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotion', p. 496.
39 Ibid., p. 521.
40 Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 128.

scrutinised as part of this.[41] Scholars have highlighted how the rational actor model for state decision-making falls short in analysing the motives, decisions, and behaviours of states. Fearon, for example, questions how war could even occur if one believes that states are genuinely rational and unitary actors.[42]

Emotion on a state-level

Scholars have also grappled with the question of how individual emotions, manifest and traceable in the human body, become collective. Crawford defines emotion as 'the inner states that individuals describe to others as feelings…those feelings may be associated with biological, cognitive, and behavioural states and changes'.[43] This definition highlights the all-encompassing nature of emotion; that it can be prompted by one's biological, cognitive, or behavioural state. But while Crawford refers to the integral role of *communicating* emotions ('states that individuals *describe to others*'), she puts the focus on the individual's experience rather than on the group's experience.

By contrast, social constructivists place the emphasis on the role of the group in shaping emotions. They believe that emotions are characterised by cultural beliefs, values, and morals in specific communities, and emerge from the interaction between individuals, and between the individual and the collective.[44] This understanding of emotions is particularly relevant to strategic communications, which seeks to shift views and values of groups on the political and geopolitical stage.

Scholars have also debated whether and to what extent categories of emotion are universal, or whether they are contingent on specific cultures and contexts.[45] Hutchison and Bleiker write about the constructed nature of emotions and their relevance to political and social life. For them, emotions are formed within particular social and cultural environments,

41 Hutchison and Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions', p. 496.
42 Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 117.
43 Ibid., 125.
44 James Mercer, 'Feeling like a state: social emotions and identity, *International Theory: A journal of international politics, law and philosophy* Volume 6, Nº 3 (November 2014): 520.
45 Ibid.

and the nation state is identified as a group of individuals who cultivate, share, and identify with one another *emotionally*. [46] Mercer also writes about the importance of collective emotion in international politics, arguing that it is possible to 'feel like a state'. Countering those who state that emotions can only be experienced in the individual body and cannot be felt by a group, he argues that emotion cannot be reduced to the body or to mere 'atoms of feelings'.[47] For him, group emotion is in fact real and observable in political life.

Mercer links collective emotion with collective identity, arguing that identity is shaped by group emotion: 'identification requires a *feeling* of attachment'.[48] Emotion gives meaning to group identity: 'Whereas indifference makes identities meaningless (and powerless), emotion makes them important. Pride in one's group or hate of one's enemy presupposes identities that one cares about'.[49] A group emotion such as pride is particularly motivating and persuasive because it is experienced as externally-driven; it is not just *my* feeling but *our* feeling.[50]

Empathy in Strategic Communications

Empathy is the 'faculty which enables us to feel with another human being, to cognitively and affectively put ourselves into his or her place, and therefore to become aware of the other's feelings, needs, and wants'.[51] Empathy plays an important role in both social and political life. It is typically viewed by societies as something positive that should be encouraged.[52] Building on this, Head suggests empathy can expand the boundaries of the moral universe and enable reconciliation, social cohesion, and 'humanising' processes.

Political actors have also recognised empathy's constructive role in international relations, with US President Barack Obama, for example,

46 Hutchison and Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions', p. 504.
47 Mercer, 'Feeling like a state', p. 519.
48 Ibid., p. 517.
49 Ibid., p. 522.
50 Eliot R. Smith, Charles R. Seger and Diane M. Mackie, 'Can Emotions be Truly Group Level? Evidence Regarding Four Conceptual Criteria', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Volume 93, Nº 3 (2007): 438.
51 Rafael Moses, 'Empathy and dis-empathy in political conflict', *Political Psychology* Volume 6, Nº 1 (March 1985): 135.
52 Head, 'A politics of empathy', p. 95.

placing it at the heart of his administration. He believed in its power to connect people and galvanise positive action, as expressed in his commencement address to students at Northwestern University.[53]

Empathy is closely related to emotion. But it holds a distinct place in the literature because it is characterised by a complex relationship between both emotion and cognition.[54] Batson and Ahmad distinguish four different 'states of empathy' to reflect this relationship; two are cognitive, two are emotional. The first two states are the cognitive capacity to imagine another's perspective, and to imagine oneself in that perspective. The second two states are the emotional capacity to feel *as* another, and then the capacity to feel *for* another. Batson and Ahmad argue that none of these states is dominant, and that each should be identified when analysing case studies of empathy.[55]

Other scholars interrogate the hardwired dimension of empathy; empathy that humans feel automatically. Biologist Franz de Waal argues that this has evolved over millennia and can be observed in animals as well as humans. He concludes that, 'there is now increasing evidence that the brain is hardwired for social connection, and that the same empathy mechanism underlying human altruism may underline the directed altruism of other animals'.[56] This evidence base for the intrinsic nature of empathy makes it even more important for strategic communicators to consider in seeking to achieve their objectives.

Scholars have also studied more deliberate demonstrations of empathy, such as the conscious effort of active perspective-taking; the attempt to view the world through another's eyes.[57] Head writes about how this effort to recognise the stories of the other can be an act of non-violent resistance. The empathic process enables responsibility, vulnerability, and

53 See Barack Obama, 'Obama to graduates: cultivate empathy', Northwestern University, filmed 19 June 2006, (accessed 14 July 2021).
54 Head, 'Costly encounters', 174.
55 C. Daniel Batson and Nadia Ahmad, 'Using Empathy to Improve Intergroup Attitudes and Relations', *Social Issues and Policy Review* Volume 3, Nº 1 (November 2009): 144.
56 Frans de Waal, 'Putting the Altruism Back into Altruism: The Evolution of Empathy', *Annual Review of Psychology* Volume 59 (July 2007): 292.
57 Yorke, 'Empathy and emotions' lecture.

reciprocal recognition and acknowledgement of collective trauma and patterns of violence.[58] As such it can open new ways of viewing the world from another's perspective.

Looking specifically at empathy in the strategic communications of political actors, scholars have highlighted how it can be performed and used to communicate a particular message. For example, empathy was both communicated and performed when New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Arden visited Muslim communities following the terrorist attacks in Christchurch, helping to achieve desired political objectives and shape audience perceptions in a certain way.[59]

While empathetic engagement in political life can be transformative, it can also be difficult and costly. Moses points out how empathy stands in contradiction to 'the demonisation of the enemy, to scapegoating, to the polarisation of good and bad which creates a world … of heroes and villains and little else.'[60] As such it involves uncomfortable introspection for both political actors and their target audiences, and often disrupts established ways of viewing the world.

Building on this, Steven Pinker points to how engaging empathetically can disrupt societal norms: 'the (Civil) Rights Revolutions show that a moral way of life often requires a decisive rejection of instinct, culture, religion, and standard practice. In their place is an ethics that is inspired by empathy and reason and stated in the language of rights'.[61] For Pinker, empathy was a key driver in achieving the objectives of the civil rights movement, disrupting established norms, and helping to create a new path.

Asymmetries in power

Here it is important to question the assumption that empathic engagement by political actors is always positive. Empathy has been normalised and praised by politicians in recent years, particularly those in Western liberal

58 Head, 'A politics of empathy', p. 108.
59 Yorke, 'Significance and limitations', p. 139.
60 Moses, 'Empathy and dis-empathy', p. 135.
61 Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our nature: a history of violence and humanity,* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 573.

democracies. However, scholars have drawn attention to the power dynamics at play in empathy and how it can favour the privileged.

Questions such as—What does empathy do? Whom does it serve? What are the risks?—provide a more critical analytical frame for empathy, rather than assuming it is inherently good.[62] There is frequently an asymmetry of power at work. The act of empathising is often the choice of the privileged, and can itself be a way to assert power.[63] Such empathetic engagement can establish or reinforce unequal power relations to the benefit of 'the empathiser' over 'the sufferer'.[64] A normalising view of empathy in political action can also draw attention away from wider structural and socio-political issues. When it is not reflective of context or paired with action to end oppression, empathy may simply further serve the privileged.[65]

Empathy for refugees can also be costly for the 'empathiser', whether that is a political actor or a particular target audience. The denial of others' stories and perspectives might be the easier road to take.[66] When discourse and media coverage portray refugees in a dehumanising way, this is perhaps evidence that the costs and difficulties of empathy have been deemed too great. As Yorke explains, empathy is often situated in a non-linear and complex communications environment where it is shaped and mediated by many factors.[67] It therefore rarely leads to easy answers or quick wins.

This discussion of emotion and empathy in the literature has provided a basis for an analysis of the case study of Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel, and the state's response to the 2015 refugee crisis.

62 Carolyn Pedwell, 'Affect at the margins: alternative empathies in 'A Small Place', *Emotion, Space and Society*, Volume 8 (August 2013): 25.
63 Pedwell, 'Affect at the margins', p. 19.
64 Head, 'A politics of empathy', p. 101.
65 Ibid., 110.
66 Yorke, 'Empathy and emotions' lecture.
67 Yorke, 'Making the connection', p. 7.

A 'COUNTRY OF IMMIGRATION'

Polling reveals that refugees are a continuing concern for citizens in Western democracies. This is particularly true when there is an increase in the numbers of people seeking asylum in a country. And Germany is no exception to this rule. Pew Research shows a significant peak of concern in Germany in 2015, where immigration was a major concern for Germans and citizens of many European states.[68]

However, for many German citizens the plight of refugees also has personal significance. At the end of the Second World War, around one quarter of German territory was lost. Much of the land, home to Germans for centuries, was no longer theirs, and the Potsdam Agreement mandated that all citizens living beyond the post-1945 national borders must migrate 'back' to their designated homeland. As a result, between twelve and fourteen million Germans were forcibly removed from their homes in central and eastern Europe and sought refuge in present-day Germany.[69] The scale of this inward immigration was dramatic, and makes the refugee experience resonate in Germany today. It is part of almost every family's personal history.

Since the Second World War, in legal and constitutional terms, Germany has also had one of the world's most generous asylum systems. Article 16a of the Grundgesetz [Basic Law or constitution] of Germany proclaims the unqualified promise to harbour victims of persecution[70], setting into law the rights of refugees as declared by the UN.

Another significant factor in Germany's immigration history is unification. In 1989, citizens of East Germany were granted freedom of movement to migrate across the Iron Curtain and into a new, unified country. Angela Merkel was one such Easterner and describes herself as someone from 'a migration background'. She publicly identifies as an

68 Laura Silver, 'Immigration concerns fall in Western Europe', *Pew Research Centre*, 22 October 2018, (accessed 28 December 2021).
69 Neil MacGregor, *Germany: Memories of a Nation* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), p. 477.
70 Joyce Marie Mushaben, 'Wir schaffen das! Angela Merkel and the European Refugee Crisis', *German Politics* Volume 26, Nº 4 (2017): 517.

outsider; an immigrant who integrated into the newly unified Germany. Her political career, background, and approach to refugees in the lead up to the 2015 crisis is the subject of the following section.

Why Merkel matters

From the beginning of her chancellorship in 2005, Merkel focused on strengthening the integration of immigrants in German society. She was looking to build Germany as a 'a land of immigration and integration'.[71] In 2007 Merkel introduced a National Integration Plan that laid the foundations for the 'Willkommenskultur' [welcoming culture] which would become such a central symbol of Germany's response to the refugee crisis.

By 2015, Merkel had been in power for a decade and was not preoccupied with re-election or the need to establish her legitimacy or power.[72] She was an established leader with economic and political successes and had built a reputation as 'a decidedly pragmatic leader'.[73] In the months before the 2015 refugee crisis Merkel had also successfully kept the EU together through the Greek Eurozone crisis.[74] As such, she had some rare political capital to make brave—even unpopular—policy decisions.

Merkel's personal convictions, particularly those that may have influenced her leadership during the refugee crisis, also invite consideration. She was a pioneering political leader: she was the first woman and first East German to be Chancellor.[75] Her personal experience of restrictive East German policies, many of which violated international human rights accords, positioned her as a leader uniquely placed to empathise with refugees.[76]

71 Mushaben, 'Wir schaffen das!', p. 526.
72 Helms et al, 'Merkel III', p. 353.
73 Ibid., p. 351.
74 Ibid., p. 355.
75 Joyce Marie Mushaben, *Becoming Madam Chancellor: Angela Merkel and the German Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 2.
76 Mushaben, 'Wir schaffen das!', p. 530.

Analysis of contemporary reporting of European national media outlets shows that the words and actions of politicians like Merkel also dominated coverage at the time.[77] Despite the rise of social media and democratising effect of online communications, research shows that the words and actions of political leaders were still leading mainstream media coverage in 2015. Merkel was able to capitalise on this to achieve her objectives.

Emotion in Merkel's Strategic Communications

It is unsurprising that Merkel sought to shape and galvanise the collective emotions of her target audiences to communicate about the refugee crisis. As highlighted in the literature review, a wide range of academic study shows that emotion is a driving force in political and social life, particularly during times of crisis.[78]

The primary audience for Merkel's strategic communications was the domestic German public. However, from the outset, she also sought to influence audiences in other EU states, including their political leaders and voting publics. With her bold approach to refugee policy, Merkel needed to employ all the weapons in her communications arsenal to persuade audiences and win their support. The aim of her strategic communications was to persuade audiences that her approach was the right one and to gain their support and engagement in the welcoming effort.[79]

As a framework for analysis, the role of three specific emotions in Merkel's strategic communications will be evaluated in this article: guilt, pride, and compassion. These emotions were significant in the strategic communications of Merkel at this time, but they are also significant in world politics more generally. There are methodological difficulties in analysing emotion. They are not easily measured and evaluated. But methodological problems should not prohibit this analytical lens,

77 Chouliaraki and Zaborowski. 'Voice and community', p. 621.
78 Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 130.
79 Neville Bolt, 'What is strategic communications' lecture, *Strategic Communications: Theory and Concepts*, King's College London, October 2020.

especially given the central role of emotion in political life and strategic communications.[80]

Guilt

Collective guilt is experienced when one's social group is perceived as having perpetrated immoral acts. It motivates people to make amends for the harm done and take responsibility for action.[81] Today's German citizens are no strangers to this emotion. Reminders of the nation's moral failures and the horrific consequences of the Third Reich can be seen across the cities and towns of Germany, as well as in school curricula, political institutions, and other facets of public life.[82]

This sense of guilt and Germany's complex relationship with its past have a unique word in German: 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung'. It was first associated with Germany's process of coming to terms with the atrocities of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and can be translated as 'wrestling with the past'.[83] Building on this, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas stressed the importance of remembrance in political and social life, believing there was a moral dimension to how Germans related to their past in the present. For him, remembrance creates a necessary and beneficial emotion of collective guilt. Rather than repressing or stifling people, Habermas believed 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung' would move Germans to a greater sense of moral duty and responsibility.[84]

Feelings of guilt about the past and responsibility for the present are still powerful motivators for many Germans. In strategic communications they can be applied to persuade people to 'accept as their duty the welcoming of millions of "strangers"'.[85] Well aware of this emotional heritage, Merkel used it to appeal to her audiences and gain their support.

80 Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 118.
81 Mark Ferguson and Nya Branscombe, 'The social psychology of collective guilt', in *Collective Emotions*, ed. by Christian von Scheve and Mikko Salmela (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
82 Karl Vick, 'Time Person of the Year 2015', *Time Magazine,* 12 December 2015, (accessed 28 December 2021).
83 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung', *Deutsche Welle*, 12 September 2011, (accessed 28 December 2021).
84 Max Pensky, 'On the use and abuse of memory: Habermas, 'anamnestic solidarity,' and the Historikerstreit', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* Volume 15, Nº 4 (October 1989): 357.
85 Clemena Antonova, 'Everyone is responsible for everyone and everything': insights on the refugee crisis drawn from Russian religious thought', *Sobornost incorporating Eastern Churches Review* Volume 38, Nº 1 (January 2016): 22.

Guilt and responsibility were key themes of her famous 'Wir schaffen das' speech ['We can do this'] at the summer press conference on 31st August 2015.

The speech unpacked the government's approach to the crisis, sought to persuade domestic audiences of the inherent value of welcoming refugees, and to mobilise audiences to action. In the speech, Merkel addressed Germany's responsibility to refugees:

> Ladies and gentlemen, what is playing out in Europe at the moment is not one single disaster, but a multitude of disastrous situations. There are an infinite number of tragedies playing out, and there is also incomprehensible atrocity. Like a few days ago in Austria, when a truck was found with about 70 people found dead – lives ruined by unscrupulous smugglers. These are atrocities that one cannot believe and where one simply has to say: these are images that we cannot imagine. This happens all while we live here in very orderly circumstances.[86]

Merkel was referring to the tragic death of 71 refugees found suffocated in a lorry making the journey across Europe to reach Germany. Their bodies were discovered on 27th August, a few days prior to this press conference. This horrific event acted as a catalyst for Germany to act and avoid further tragedy. Merkel spoke of how the event had left leaders in Vienna 'all shaken by this terrible news'.[87] In her speech she contrasted their awful fate with the 'very orderly' circumstances of life for German citizens, bringing the average voter into the frame and highlighting the shared humanity of all.

Images of refugees in contemporary media coverage would have also evoked powerful memories for the German people, including the lived experience of millions who had moved back to the country after the

86 Angela Merkel, 'Sommerpressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel', Deutsche Bundesregierung website, 31 August 2015, (accessed 20 July 2021).
87 Bethany Bell and Nick Thorpe, 'Austria's migrant disaster: why did 71 die?', *BBC News*, 25 August 2016, (accessed 28 December 2021).

Second World War and fall of the Berlin Wall. Images and stories of refugees crossing borders served as reminders that seeking refuge is something close to home, not just something that happens to others.[88]

The focus on guilt in Merkel's strategic communications did not go unnoticed by her target audience, the German public. Research by the group *More in Common* in 2016 found that German audiences believed that a sense of collective guilt was a key factor in the strategic communications of the government at the time. In focus groups researching the attitudes towards national identity, immigration, and refugees in Germany, one participant commented: 'It's about the Third Reich. They want to claim that Germans are still collectively guilty and, because of that, have to conduct themselves towards the rest of the world in a certain way'.[89] Other participants expressed similar views on how the government was seeking to shape public opinion about the refugee crisis.

The following section looks at pride, another important emotion drawn out in Merkel's discourse and strategic communications.

Pride

Collective pride is a powerful emotion in the nation state. As outlined in the literature review, academics from a broad range of disciplines have recognised its influence in political life. Revisiting the 'Wir schaffen das' speech, it is clear that Merkel was tapping into a sense of national pride. The phrase itself speaks to confidence and pride in the ability of the nation and its people. Following the summer press conference, it went on to become the recognised slogan of the government's approach to the crisis.

In the speech, Merkel described the great benefits of living in contemporary Germany: its freedom, its rule of law, and its economic strength. She went on to say: 'The world sees Germany as a land of

88 Maja Zehfuss, "'We Can Do This": Merkel, Migration and the Fantasy of Control', *International Political Sociology* Volume 15, Nº 2 (June 2021): 178.
89 Mark Helbling et al., 'Attitudes toward national identity, immigration, and refugees in Germany', *More in Common*, July 2017, (accessed 19 July 2021), p. 59.

hope and opportunity, and it really wasn't always that way.'[90] In doing so, she acknowledged the country's difficult past, while setting out a new identity for Germany on the world stage. By participating in this bold and welcoming approach to refugees, Merkel said Germans now had a chance of redemption—'an opportunity to prove that they had learned from the past and show the world Germany's goodness.'[91] Merkel understood that her target audience wanted to feel good about themselves and win social approval.[92]

Merkel also listed the specific achievements of modern Germany in the speech, including the handling of the financial crisis and successful phasing out of nuclear energy. All this built up to her key pitch to the German people:

> I say very simply: Germany is a strong country. The motive with which we approach these things must be: we have achieved so much – we can do it! We can do it, and where there is something in the way, it must be overcome and must be worked through.

The assertion that 'we can do it' sought to stir up the confidence and pride of the German people. But this was an unusual sort of national pride. Not the pride of an in-group and corresponding fear of outsiders; rather a national pride built on welcoming the outsider.[93] As Zehfuss commented, Merkel was seeking to reframe views about inward migration and refugees crossing borders. It was not a loss of control but rather 'a sign of strength and occasion for pride'.[94]

90 Merkel, 'Sommerpressekonferenz'.
91 Matthew Karnitschnig, '5 years on from Angela Merkel's three little words: "Wir schaffen das!"', *Politico*, 31 August 2020, (accessed 28 December 2021).
92 Crawford, The passion of world politics', p. 150.
93 Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 149.
94 Zehfuss, '"We Can Do This"', p. 185.

Speaking months later at her party conference in December 2015, Merkel commented:

> I can say 'we can do this' because it is part of the identity of our country to do great [things], to build the country of the economic miracle out of the rubble [of the Second World War] and to become a highly regarded country of unity and freedom after the division [of East and West Germany].[95]

This story, and this sense of pride in Germany's ability and capacity of 'schaffen', was a golden thread running through the government's strategic communications at the time.

And there is evidence that Merkel had some success in instilling this feeling of collective pride among Germans and motivating them to action. Looking again to research carried out by *More in Common*, researchers found the approach to refugees did evoke feelings of pride. As one participant commented, 'you can be proud of the fact that they all want to come here.'[96] The large numbers of German citizens who volunteered their time to welcome refugees or donate goods as part of the 'Willkommenskultur' [welcoming culture] also points to Merkel's success. Surveys show that 10.9% of Germans over 14 years of age volunteered to support arriving refugees in autumn 2015,[97] and estimates that 88% of German citizens donated goods for the purpose of welcoming refugees,[98] highlight the scope and scale of participation. There was a genuine shift in attitudes and behaviours in response to Merkel's strategic communications and the call of 'Wir schaffen das'.

Compassion

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum defines compassion as 'a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved

95 Billy Holzberg, "'Wir schaffen das": Hope and hospitality beyond the humanitarian border', *Journal of Sociology* Volume 57,Nº 3 (September 2021): 4.
96 Helbling et al, *Attitudes toward national identity*, p. 69.
97 Hamann and Karakayali, 'Practicing Willkommenskultur', p. 70.
98 Helms et al., 'Merkel III', p. 359.

misfortune'.[99] With this awareness comes the belief that suffering is serious, and that the suffering person does not deserve the pain. It resembles empathy, which will be discussed later, but differs in that it infers a motivation to alleviate the suffering one sees. Empathy, by contrast, is the human faculty to put oneself in the shoes of another and does not necessitate any compulsion to alleviate suffering seen or experienced.[100]

Perhaps one of the most arresting and upsetting images of the European refugee crisis was the body of 3-year-old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean. The image was shared around the world in early September 2015, and vividly brought to life the tragedy of the 5,538 people known to have drowned attempting to reach Europe in 2015.[101] The image raised the plight of Syria's refugees to the top of the global agenda.[102] World leaders were united in acknowledging the tragedy of the boy's fate and expressing compassion for refugees like him who were making the perilous journey across the Mediterranean.

Merkel led the charge in responding to this outpouring of emotion. She spoke repeatedly about the humanitarian impetus to stop the suffering of refugees and respond proactively to the crisis.[103] Speaking to journalists in September she said, 'if we start to apologize for welcoming these desperate people, then this is no longer my country'.[104]

In the early autumn of 2015, the German media were largely amplifying Merkel's appeals to compassion and her call on the German public to step up and help. Contemporary content analysis in the late summer and early autumn shows that refugees were positioned as suffering people deserving of compassion in mainstream media outlets (the newspapers *Die Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*).[105]

99 Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 301.
100 Yorke, 'Emotions and empathy' lecture.
101 Zehfuss, '"We Can Do This"', p. 173.
102 Vick, 'Time Person'.
103 Holzberg, '"Wir schaffen das"', p. 13.
104 Helms et al., 'Merkel III', p. 139.
105 Hugrun Adalsteinsdottir, 'Coming to terms with the past? Constructions of refugees in three leading German newspapers', Masters Thesis (Reykjavik University of Iceland, 2016), p. 45.

However, there were many other frames used to present the refugee in the German media, including as an economic boon and labour force, and also as a security threat.

It is important to highlight the sometimes fragile and conditional nature of compassion. The image of Alan Kurdi was an unequivocal depiction of an innocent victim of the crisis, and therefore a compassionate response was near universal in the contemporary discourse. However, commentators highlighted the desire of audiences to separate refugees into deserving and undeserving categories throughout the crisis.[106] When the helplessness of the object of compassion is called into question, audiences are quick to withdraw their sympathy.[107] An example of this was the public's angry response to refugee selfies with Merkel, which were increasingly shared in the media coverage throughout the autumn and winter of 2015. As Holzberg notes, these selfies portrayed the 'wrong' behaviour from the refugee. The images complicated 'the imperative of suffering that needs to be conveyed in order for people to be read as deserving refugees'[108] and the audience reaction demonstrated the fragility of compassion.

Denying fear

Evolutionary biology has shown that threat perception is hardwired in humans regardless of circumstance. As Crawford notes, 'individuals are biased toward threat perception, whether or not a threat exists'.[109] Therefore perceptions of threat and the related emotion of fear are commonplace. There is a broad consensus that fear plays an important role in politics, influencing attitudes and behaviours and mobilising states and their peoples to action.[110]

106 Goodman et al., 'Evolving (re)categorisations', p. 106.
107 Pedwell, 'Affect at the margins', p. 19.
108 Holzberg, "'Wir schaffen das'", p. 9.
109 Crawford, 'The passion of world politics', p. 136.
110 See Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, 'Fear no more: emotions and world politics', *Review of International Studies* Volume 34 (2008): 119.

As Thucydides famously noted in the 5th century BC, men are motivated by 'honour, greed, and above all, fear'.[111]

Thinking about the theme of this article, the fear of the other who is ethnically and culturally different to oneself can be particularly pervasive. Broader fears about immigration and refugees can stem from concerns about the future of political and social life. As Zehfuss comments, '(immigration) concern is not simply about present state effectiveness, but about the future of…political community.'[112]

Research has also shown that German media coverage in late summer and early autumn was broadly in step with Merkel's agenda. It did not widely report on or represent the fears and concerns of the public who felt alarmed by the country's refugee policy.[113] It is also noteworthy that in the 'Wir schaffen das' speech, Merkel praised the media for their coverage of the refugee response:

> I want to expressly thank you for the many wonderful reports that you, the media, have reported on in recent days. I am taking the liberty of encouraging you to continue doing exactly this; because you give many good citizens the possibility, by seeing the coverage, to see role models and examples they can follow.[114]

This is further evidence that the media and government had some alignment in seeking to shape public perceptions and downplay concerns about the handling of the crisis.

Nevertheless, there were feelings of fear and anxiety among German audiences about refugees. The attempt to downplay these feelings led to a distrust in the media who were denounced as the 'Lügenpresse' [lying press] at anti-Merkel rallies. This impression also acted as a boon to right-

111 Thucydides, quoted in Robert G. Gilpin, 'The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism', in *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 305.
112 Zehfuss, '"We can do this"', p. 175.
113 Guy Chazan, 'German media accused of one-sided coverage of refugee crisis', *Financial Times*, 24 July 2017, (accessed 21 August 2021).
114 Merkel, 'Sommerpressekonferenz'.

wing parties and movements such as Pediga and Alternative for Germany (AfD). Lutz Bachmann, co-founder of Pediga, commented that what united those in the movement was 'the feeling that the politicians are no longer paying attention to us'.[115] So there were consequences to Merkel's choice to minimise fear in her strategic communications. Her denial of its power led to increased distrust in the government and media.

TRACING EMPATHY IN MERKEL'S APPROACH

One of the first questions to ask when analysing the empathy of a political actor is: with whom are they empathising? Merkel's empathic effort was directed towards refugees. This was an unusual choice for a political leader. Rather than empathising with German citizens—those whom she was serving and who had put her in power—Merkel prioritised refugees. Chris Hann took note of this choice and wrote about the need to develop empathy for both refugees *and* concerned German citizens: 'we may be able to develop empathy with both sides: with the refugees and other migrants, of course, but also with those in the receiving societies who feel trapped and vulnerable to different forms of dispossession'.[116]

Considering the case of Merkel and the refugee crisis, this section offers a discourse analysis to shed light on the impact of Merkel's empathy for refugees in her strategic communications.[117]

Like emotion, empathy is not easily quantified or measured. However, it is possible to identify the key criteria of empathy in the strategic communications and discourses of the time: evidence of interpersonal empathy, awareness of how others perceive one's words and actions, perspective-taking, and discussion of others' perspectives.[118]

115 Quoted in Vick, 'Time Person'.
116 Chris Hann, 'The fragility of Europe's Willkommenskultur', *Anthropology Today* Volume 31, Nº 1-2 (2015): 2.
117 Head, 'A politics of empathy', p. 98.
118 These are the criteria for measuring empathy in discourse analysis as set out by Claire Yorke in her article 'Significance and limitations', p. 146.

Interpersonal empathy relates to the direct relationship between two people. It can be prompted during an interaction with another person and can also emerge because of that interaction.[119] It is often seen as an inherent character trait. For some political leaders it seems to come naturally, while for others it proves more difficult. One much-cited example is the difference between Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush in the second presidential debate in 1992. Clinton demonstrated interpersonal empathy with a questioner in the audience, saying 'I feel your pain', whereas Bush failed to do so.[120] Merkel has often been seen as a leader in the Bush camp. She is known for her pragmatism and common-sense approach, rather than her natural charm or interpersonal skills.[121]

This reputation seemed to be reinforced during Merkel's personal encounter with 14-year-old Palestinian refugee Reem Sahwil in July 2015. The encounter happened during a question-and-answer session with a group of young people. Sahwil asked Merkel about what would happen to refugees like herself and her family who faced deportation. Responding to the girl, Merkel focused on the pragmatic realities of asylum management and the limited capacity of Germany to take in more people.[122] Replying to Sahwil, Merkel said that Germany could not take in everyone, using the phrase 'wir können das nicht schaffen' [we cannot do it].

When the girl became visibly upset by Merkel's response, the Chancellor attempted to comfort her (see image below). She seemingly mistook Sahwil's tears as being related to the stress of public speaking, rather than to her family's situation. Merkel appeared to fail to empathise with Sahwil or understand her perspective. But, as Yorke notes, 'to speak to people, it is important that they also feel heard.'[123]

119 Yorke, 'Significance and limitations', p. 142.
120 Yorke, 'Empathy and emotions' lecture.
121 Helms et al., 'Merkel III', p. 351.
122 'Merkel criticised over crying refugee', *BBC News*, 17 July 2015, (accessed 28 December 2021).
123 Yorke, 'Making the connection', p. 6.

Image 1. 'Merkel criticised over crying refugee'. BBC News. 17 July 2015. Via YouTube.

Following this interaction, media coverage focused on Merkel's lack of empathy. She was perceived as cold and unable to understand the plight of refugees. A popular hashtag on social media, #Merkelstreichelt ['Merkel caresses'], mocked Merkel's attempts to comfort the girl.

Perhaps no surprise then that Merkel would go on to use a more hopeful and empathetic tone by turning the negative phrase she used here ('wir können das nicht schaffen') into a positive one ('wir schaffen das'), that would go on to become the slogan of her approach.

To what extent the encounter in the Q&A session and Merkel's apparent failure to empathise with this girl on an interpersonal level acted as a catalyst for her shift in policy and strategic communications about refugees is difficult to assess. However, the phrase's positive reappearance in the 'Wir schaffen das' slogan suggests as much. As Breithaupt observes 'there is hardly a stronger catalyst for empathy than a (perceived) failure of empathy'.[124]

124 Breithaupt, *The Dark Sides of Empathy*, p. 154.

There was also evidence of Merkel taking the perspectives of others throughout 2015. In the 'Wir schaffen das' speech, Merkel said:

> The vast majority of us thankfully do not know the state of full exhaustion of flight combined with a fear for one's own life or the lives of children or partners. People who come… must have overcome situations and endure fears that we might simply collapse under.[125]

Merkel here described the experience and feelings of the refugee to her audience—evidence of her own cognitive and emotional empathy. Moreover, she was asking that her audience join her in empathising in this way.

Finally, the policy decisions of the German government demonstrated strategic empathy. As Yorke notes, strategic empathy involves 'a conscious effort to design policy approaches with the other in mind'.[126] The welcoming of one million refugees is a clear example of this.

The cost of being an 'empathy entrepreneur'

Head describes those who take on the costly process of empathy as 'empathy entrepreneurs'.[127] Empathy is costly because it is demanding as both a psychological and embodied experience, often disrupting one's identity in multiple ways.[128] As Atticus Finch famously says in the novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*, 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb into his skin and walk around in it'.[129] These lines neatly capture the embodied and imaginative aspects of empathy.

125 Merkel, 'Sommerpressekonferenz'.
126 Yorke, 'Empathy and emotions' lecture.
127 Head, 'Costly encounters', p. 170.
128 Ibid., p. 192.
129 Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (London: Arrow Books, 1997), p. 33.

Head sets out a framework to analyse the specific costs of empathy. The five costs she identifies are: epistemological, cognitive, emotional, material, and embodied. The epistemological cost for Merkel and the German people, in choosing to empathise with refugees, involved a disruption to their established forms of 'knowing'. By welcoming one million Syrian refugees, Merkel was asking German citizens to be open and vulnerable to foreign 'others'; people who were completely new to German society, culture, and language and were therefore disruptive to the state's established national identity.

There could be no doubt that the welcoming of one million refugees would disrupt established modes of thinking and feeling in German society. The fabric of the state, its intellectual and institutional hierarchies would be challenged.[130] In choosing to empathise with refugees, Merkel and Germany also paid the cost of this disruption to their national identity. Despite this, thousands of Germans chose to participate in the welcoming effort or 'Willkommenskultur'.

As discussed in the literature review, the cognitive and emotional aspects of empathy are closely intertwined, hence they are discussed together. One of the costs of empathy with both a cognitive and emotional dynamic is the sense of alienation from an in-group and its established collective narrative. A sense of alienation from the EU was experienced by Merkel and by the German nation in their handling of the crisis. While the choice of empathising with refugees was lauded by many internationally, as witnessed in her 'Time Person of the Year' accolade, the German state became an outlier in Europe.

From the start, Merkel sought to lead an EU-wide approach to the refugee crisis. In the 'Wir schaffen das' speech she spoke repeatedly of the crisis as a joint responsibility: 'Europe must move as a whole. The member states must share the responsibility to refugees'.[131] This was crucial for Merkel, as she saw the handling of the crisis as an existential challenge for the whole EU.

130 Head, 'Costly encounters', p. 186.
131 Merkel, 'Sommerpressekonferenz'.

Speaking to the German parliament on 9th September 2015, she said:

> If we show courage and lead the way, a common European approach is more likely…If Europe fails on the refugee issue, we would lose one of the key reasons for founding a united Europe, namely universal human rights.

Despite this, the numbers of refugees accepted in Germany towered above its neighbours, making them an outlier in both policy and strategic communications.

Finally, there are the embodied costs of empathising with the refugee. Head lists the following expressions of bodily cost: sleeplessness, discomfort, vulnerability, and fatigue. Again, the cost on the body was experienced particularly by Merkel as political leader and 'empathy entrepreneur'.

For Merkel personally, there are two significant 'embodied' encounters which illustrate this. Merkel's physical response to the refugee Reem Sahwil in July clearly demonstrated her physical discomfort in seeing the crying child. Although Merkel's act to comfort Sahwil became a derisive social media hashtag, '#Merkelstreichelt', it was nevertheless a portrayal of Merkel connecting with the bodily experience of another.

Another instance of the embodied cost for Merkel was her visit to refugee centres throughout August and September 2015, often coming face-to-face with riots and protests. One event covered extensively by German media was her visit to a refugee centre in Heidenau in August.[132] Right-wing protests about the refugee policies had taken place in the city, and Merkel was booed and insulted during her visit. As a seasoned politician she was no doubt used to confronting an angry public, and in her press conference on 31st August she commented that insults and affronts '(don't) bother me'.[133] However, footage from the visit shows the uncomfortable nature of the encounter, and one contemporary

132 Daniel Tost, translated by Erika Körner, 'Merkel booed at site of refugee attacks', *Euroactiv Germany*, 27 August 2015, (accessed 21 July 2021).
133 Merkel, 'Sommerpressekonferenz'.

government source said that this physical experience did have an impact and was the moment when 'the political became the personal' for the Chancellor.[134]

The backlash and legacy

There is evidence of a significant backlash to Merkel's strategic communications about and approach to the refugee crisis, with many German citizens voicing concern about the numbers of refugees and right-wing political parties and movements being mobilised.[135] The Alternative for Germany party, pushing an anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim agenda, won votes and gained a 12.6% share in the German parliament in the 2017 federal elections, and the right-wing Pediga movement gained traction with the public.[136]

Public anxiety about the refugee population also increased following a number of terrorist attacks in the months following the crisis. There was a marked shift in public discourse and mood following the sexual assaults which took place in Cologne at the end of 2015.[137] This came on the heels of the terrorist attacks in Paris in November, which were claimed by Islamic State and in which 130 people died.[138] And in December 2016, the terrorist attack on the Berlin Christmas market by a Tunisian immigrant further shook public attitudes and support.[139] Such events increased the perception of threat and unease about the refugee population.

These events could not have been predicted by the government, but they affected the mood, attitudes, and beliefs of German citizens. In 2016, polling by the Pew Research Centre showed that public opinion about the handling of the refugee crisis was not

134 Joyce Marie Mushaben, 'Angela Merkel's Leadership in the Refugee Crisis', *Current History* Volume 116, Nº 788 (March 2017): 97.
135 Philip Oltermann, 'Angela Merkel's great migrant gamble paid off', *The Guardian,* 30 August 2020, (accessed 28 December 2021).
136 '2017 German federal election', *Wikipedia,* (accessed 23 August 2021).
137 Mushaben, 'Angela Merkel's leadership', p. 98.
138 'Paris attacks: what happened on the night', *BBC News*, 9 December 2015, (accessed 28 December 2021).
139 Ibid., p. 99.

favourable.[140] In response, Merkel adjusted some of her initial policy decisions, rolling back some aspects of the welcoming culture and refugee policy.[141]

But what has been the longer-term legacy of Merkel's approach and strategic communications regarding refugees? More than six years on from 2015, there is little consensus about the overall benefits and costs. Polling has shown consistently strong support for refugee protection in Germany since 2015, with in-country polling in 2021 finding that 71% of respondents believed that people should be able to seek refuge in countries such as Germany to escape war and persecution.[142]

Having retired from politics, Merkel's personal legacy is a hot topic of discussion. Her policy decisions and strategic communications about refugees will no doubt form a key part of that legacy. As Williams notes in a wider discussion about human rights, the language of human rights must be more than an assertion or fiction to secure social harmony.[143] Merkel sought to match her words and assertions about the worth and dignity of refugees with concrete actions and policies; she sought to close the 'say do' gap.

Unsurprisingly, the 2015 'Time Person of the Year' profile placed Merkel's legacy in a favourable light. Vick concluded that 'Merkel's legacy—her bold, fraught, immensely empathetic act of leadership—challenges more than the comfort of European life. It also challenges the comfort of assumptions about any group, including, if it works out, Germans'.[144] This passage shows that for Vick, Merkel did shift societal conversations, attitudes, and behaviours in Germany. Her bold policies to welcome the refugee and her strategic communications about the topic demonstrated her conviction to speak and act on what she believed mattered most.

140 Jacob Poushter, 'European opinions of the refugee crisis in 5 charts', *Pew Research Centre,* 16 September 2016, (accessed 28 December 2021).
141 Ibid., p. 98.
142 Kerrie Holloway et al., 'Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants', *Overseas Development Institute*, (accessed 8 January 2022), p. 7.
143 Rowan Williams, 'Religious Faith and Human Rights' lecture, 1 May 2008, London School of Economics, (accessed 24 July 2021).
144 Vick, 'Time Person'.

CONCLUSION

Merkel, the German government, and the German people did not have to take this course of action. Accepting one million Syrian refugees in 2015 was a bold move which shocked many other countries. Germany's response to the refugee crisis cannot be reduced to economic or materialistic imperatives, and an analysis of the emotional and empathetic drivers in the state's strategic communications moves the discussion beyond a zero-sum game of economic or political strategy.

This article has argued that emotions and empathy played a transformative role in the strategic communications of the German government at this time, and that they contributed significantly to the government achieving its objectives. The impact of this approach is seen perhaps most clearly in the very high numbers of Germans who participated in the 'Willkommenskultur' and the long-term legacy of Merkel as a respected political leader, despite her having adopted this unusual approach to refugees.

I have also highlighted the important contextual factors which affected Merkel and Germany's response to the crisis, including the country's political history and Merkel's unique set of convictions as a leader. As Helms et al. point out, 'even in the most complex and dispersed leadership environments, such as the Federal Republic of Germany or the European Union, leaders and their convictions can and do make a difference.'[145]

The shaping and shifting of views, attitudes, and behaviours about refugees through strategic communications continues to be highly relevant for nation states and all political actors. The example of Merkel and the German government stands as a fascinating paradigm of how this can be done.

145 Helms et al., 'Merkel III', p. 365.

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