

## Book Review: *Reichsrock: The International Web of White-Power and Neo-Nazi Hate Music*

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## **Book Review: *Reichsrock: The International Web of White-Power and Neo-Nazi Hate Music***

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*Reichsrock: The International Web of White-Power and Neo-Nazi Hate Music*

Kirsten Dyck

New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2017

198 Pages; Price: \$25.95

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In mid-July 2017, six thousand people gathered at the white-power music festival *Rock gegen Überfremdung* (Rock against Foreign Domination) in Themar, a small town in Thuringia, Germany. At the event, the police recorded forty-six crimes, including assault, threatening behavior, contravention of German weapons law and displaying illegal (i.e. Nazi) symbols. Six people were arrested and the authorities recorded the identities of 440 festival-goers. An undisclosed sum was raised for the far-right political cause.<sup>1</sup> Music festivals of this kind and the violence that accompanies them are part of today's German political reality and, increasingly, of other countries around the world. This makes the white-power music scene worth the attention of any scholar studying extremist political movements, racism, or genocide.

The ethnomusicologist and genocide historian Kirsten Dyck is one of them. Unlike other scholars in the field of white-power music, she looks beyond the country-specific variations of such music scenes, and, in her book *Reichsrock*, makes a convincing case that festivals like the one in Thuringia are anything but fringe phenomena. On the contrary, as she reveals, the white-power music scene has become a diffuse ideological network with interconnected outposts in countries around the world.

Dyck begins by explaining why she applies the term white-power—as opposed to white-supremacist or white-nationalist—to the music scene she investigates. Because its promoters are convinced that the existence of the white race is threatened, their music must express a sense of power and of their empowerment. The umbrella term white-power music encompasses many local scenes, each with its own type of pro-white racist music; its musicians and fans may or may not interact or agree with their counterparts in other regions. She defines white-power music as “any music produced and distributed by individuals who are actively trying to advance what they view as a white-power or pro-white racist agenda.”<sup>2</sup> In general, these individuals believe in a so-called international Jewish conspiracy and stand in opposition to national governments and international power structures like the United Nations or the World Bank while displaying hostility toward racial, ethnic and sexual minorities.<sup>3</sup> White-power music allows the far right to generate money for its cause, to disseminate its ideology, to offer opportunities for social bonding, and to provide a way in to white-power beliefs and activism for those who haven't yet had interest in or contact with such ideological beliefs and communities.

Dyck sets two ambitious goals for herself. The first is to present an in-depth study of white-power music as a transnational rather than merely a local phenomenon; the second is to explore the connections between seemingly non-racist elements of mainstream ideology and the blatantly racist aspects of white-power philosophy. Although issues of gender and religion are central themes of white-power ideology and music, they remain excluded from this study; the author plans to focus on them in her future work.

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<sup>1</sup> “6,000-strong neo-Nazi music festival sparks call for ban on far-right gigs.” DPA/The Local, July 17, 2017, accessed September 22, 2017, <https://www.thelocal.de/20170717/6000-strong-neo-nazi-music-festival-sparks-call-for-ban-on-far-right-gigs>

<sup>2</sup> Kristin Dyck, *Reichsrock: The International Web of White-Power and Neo-Nazi Hate Music* (Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Dyck, *Reichsrock*, 3.

Other scholarly works on the subject have mainly used ethnographic methods, but Dyck's work stands out for her analysis of the primary and secondary texts the white-power music web produces. White-power songs and albums, music magazines and Internet fora serve as sources; she also analyzes sales figures, market demographics, and other key statistics—to the degree that they are available in this murky arena.

In the following four chapters, the author first describes the history of the white-power music scene in Great Britain, where the genre was founded in the early 1970s. It was British musicians who drove its early development, in particular Ian Stuart Donaldson and his band "Skrewdriver." The following chapter then moves to continental Europe where white-power music soon appeared in Germany, and then in Sweden, Norway, and other western Mediterranean countries. Dyck follows the phenomenon through its rise in Eastern European countries like Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, and Greece, and finally into countries outside Europe, in particular the United States and Canada, Latin America, and finally Australia. The chapters link the regions' histories to their white-power ideology and their white-power music scenes, showing how they differ from country to country while retaining a common core ideology. These elaborations demonstrate the connections between particular lyrics and acts of violence by their fans, documenting cases of criminals who sang or shouted phrases from the lyrics as they committed acts of racist violence. She also argues convincingly that even the most forceful governmental interventions do not extinguish—indeed, they often hardly disturb—the white-power music scenes for longer periods of time. This is particularly evident in Germany, the spiritual home of most white-power neo-Nazi musicians today, and the physical home of the world's numerically largest white-power music scene. Although the German constitution allows the government to ban materials it sees as threats to democracy or to young people, and despite continued police monitoring, raids and law-suits, the German white-power music scene is still growing. In only one country—Great Britain—have anti-racist protests succeeded in making it more difficult for the white-power music scene to organize concerts and to attract large numbers of attendees. Dyck's study also shows the lasting influence of the Nazi-version of white-power ideology, which is glaringly evident in the names of bands, and songs, and of white-power ideological fan groups. There is, for example, a British organization called "Blood & Honour,"<sup>4</sup> from the German *Blut und Ehre*, a slogan that was etched onto Hitler Youth knife-blades; a German band is called "Endstufe," a reference to the Nazi's so-called Final Solution to the Jewish Question (a Nazi plan for the extermination of the Jews during the Second World War); the Greek band name "Der Stürmer" (the stormer) takes its name from the Third Reich's main propaganda newspaper, while a Russian song is titled "Holocaust Erotica."

What stands out most in Dyck's study is the malleability and flexibility of the white-power ideology, which adapts to each country's historical situation and its music scenes' ambitions. Taken together, its hackneyed ideas do not represent an internally consistent or contradiction-free belief system. Although according to the Nazi and neo-Nazi systems of racial hierarchy, ethnic Slavs are considered *Untermenschen*, or sub-humans, white-power ideology and its music scene thrives in Russia and other Eastern European countries. In their ideology, Slavs are white and they reserve their hatred for targeting Jews and other non-Slavic ethnic minorities. Even more problematic for a German or Scandinavian neo-Nazi would be the way Spanish and South-American white supremacists claim membership in white power circles. Their standards of racial purity would not pass the Anglo or North American movement's standard concept of "one-drop of blood"—which automatically excludes individuals of mixed-race heritage—but instead involves a gradual hierarchy of racial value depending on the proportion of European ancestry in a given person's family.

*The music that comes out of these different national scenes is as dynamic and innovative as its ideologies are flexible, encompassing the traditional British oi!-style and varieties of National Socialist Black Metal (NSBM), neo-folk, industrial, and even hip-hop and dub. Dyck's work supports her*

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<sup>4</sup> The organization "Blood & Honour" started out to support struggling British white-power bands that were no longer under contract with mainstream music labels. It runs a glossy magazine and promotes activism and white-power violence. After various in-fights it allied itself with music labels in other countries. By 2009 the organization listed sixteen separate divisions within Britain and twenty-four non-British divisions around the world.

assertion that “one must understand white-power music as an international genre because one must understand contemporary white-power racism—along with the older forms of racism and white supremacy that have preceded it—as a global phenomenon.”<sup>5</sup>

The author also claims to show that mainstream western ideology is built on a form of unspoken and taboo racism that is ubiquitous but unacknowledged in the culture; and she claims to show that this mainstream ideology opens up the space for the extreme and outspoken forms of white-power music so present in contemporary societies around the globe. White-power musicians’ ideologies, she argues, descend directly from older types of racism which still persist and which mainstream, avowedly non-racist populations in European-descended societies continue to tolerate. Russia, for example, has long been profoundly xenophobic, an attitude that was sanctioned and even fostered by the state, especially in the Stalin years. This xenophobic paranoia expresses itself in hostility to actual foreigners but also to internal minority groups like the Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars, and Chechens. Russia’s post-Cold War oligarchy, its financial crisis in 1998 and other factors left large parts of the population in poverty and dissatisfaction, and it became fertile ground for racist ideologies. In Moscow alone there were 450 racist killings and more than 2,500 injuries from racist attacks between January 2004 and May 2010. The racism of Russian neo-Nazi groups finds support from mainstream organizations like the administration of Moscow State University and the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the United States offers many examples of mainstream support of racism, as evidenced by, among other things, “police brutality toward African Americans and deep-rooted systems of structural inequality that leave this group living in poverty at rates far higher than the national average.”<sup>7</sup>

Although Dyck’s arguments here have a degree of plausibility, her examples remain rather broad, making her assertion that mainstream music and mainstream ideology supply the scaffolding for the white power music web less convincing than it might otherwise be. This lack of clarity is partly due to murky terminology (what is mainstream music and mainstream ideology, and what is its’ structure? How does the author define race—a pseudoscientific term to begin with—or racism, terms that she does not include in the otherwise excellent index of her book?). It also stems in part from some issues that are integral to the subject: the bands and their products are taboo in many societies and illegal in some, making sales figures hard to come by and hiding many distribution channels deep in the recesses of the dark web. Adding to the challenge is the fact that for copyright reasons, lyrics cannot be quoted, so the reader is not always clear about what exactly the author is referring to. Mainly though, the lack of clarity is due to the fact that Dyck is not specific about the theoretical frameworks or the political theory that informs her inferences, or her conclusions about the ways mainstream ideology and music influence or give rise to white-power ideology and music. Without a theoretical foundation, it is hard for the reader to determine if Dyck’s conclusions are the result of her scientific investigation or rather of her own liberal political beliefs.

These unanswered questions do not detract from the fact that *Reichsrock* is a significant contribution to the exploration of white-power racism in its contemporary forms. Its historical accounts are detailed and resourceful and their wide range and focus on worldwide connections are highly valuable. Kirstin Dyck has delivered a much-needed contribution to the field, one that historians, political scientists, and genocide scholars alike (as well as activists against extremist political movements) will find to be an important resource for their work.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 107.