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Dear Friends,

With this year's quick secession of European elections, among others in the Netherlands, Bulgaria, and France, many observers wonder whether the global trend towards right-wing populism will continue or come to a standstill. A key question in this respect is Germany's future political landscape. We had therefore decided to dedicate two successive editions of *German Briefs* to the background of the emerging right-wing populist movement. While the last edition focused on West Germany, in this edition the Berlin-based historian and activist Jörg Depta introduces us to the intense debate about the reasons for the success of right-wing movements in the East. Drawing on his archival research, he comes to the conclusion that AfD, PEGIDA and related organizations find followers not simply because of the erosion of social orientation after the end of socialist rule, as many claim. According to Depta, the German Democratic Republic's inherent propensity towards nationalism and racial discrimination and its legacy must be taken into account.

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The German Democratic Republic's post-Nazi legacy

Jörg Depta

(translated and annotated by Benedict Bechtel)

In the last edition of *German Briefs*, Malte Fuhrmann discussed which effects the Nazi era had and continues to have on the governmental system of the Federal Republic of Germany. This autumn, when Germany holds federal elections, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD)¹ in all probability will gain seats in the parliament. For the first time since 1957, a party will be represented in parliament which is to the political right of the CDU/CSU. Whether this will be a singular occasion or a permanent one depends upon the abilities of CDU/CSU as well as FDP to regain the trust of

¹ The *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) (German for: Alternative for Germany) was founded in April 2013 as a Eurosceptic party which campaigned for Germany to leave the currency union. In 2015, the party leadership under Frauke Petry took a shift to the far-right, adopting a right-wing populist stance which was possible due to the large number of German nationalists within the party. It is represented in 10 of the 16 German state parliaments. The party is known for its opposing policies towards migration, Europe and Islam.

former voters who feel alienated from these parties. However, it appears to be clear that a large number of Eastern Germans will continue to vote for parties which campaign for similar policies as AfD does.

Is democracy in Eastern Germany endangered?

The *Sachsen-Monitor* regularly conducts a poll which deals with the question whether democracy is endangered in the Free State of Saxony. The poll from November 2016 shows that 58 per cent of Saxons agreed upon the statement: Germany is subject to a dangerous dimension of foreign infiltration (“*Überfremdung*”²) through migration. In comparison, only 18 per cent of those polled agreed to this in a nation-wide survey. The same observation can be made for the question whether Muslims should be banned from migrating to Germany. While only 16 per cent of the Germans agreed on this statement, the figure for Saxony was nearly 40 per cent. The findings also apply for the field of National Socialism. “Germans are superior to others by nature” – 18 per cent of Saxons agreed upon the statement, whereas nation-wide only 8 per cent did. The sentence “Germany needs a strong party which represents the entire national community” is twice as much agreed on in Saxony (62 per cent) as in the rest of Germany. Eleven per cent of the Saxons think a “dictatorial regime which acts according to national interests may be in some circumstances a better form of government”. That figure is again twice as high in Saxony as in the rest of the country. Concerning the asylum policies of the German government, 53 per cent of the Saxons favoured a “determined enforcement of German interests towards foreign countries”. In contrast, just 20 per cent of the Federal Germans agreed to this statement.³ If there were elections in the states of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) today, every fourth voter would vote for AfD. Besides the fact that the poll only covers the state of Saxony, one has to assume that the findings would be similar for the other federate states of Eastern Germany: Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.

Many observers ask themselves: Why is it that a part of society within the states of the former GDR is willing to join forces with neo-Nazis, in order to demonstrate against the governmental approach towards refugees, claiming the ongoing “Islamisation of Germany” must come to an end. In parts of the former GDR social groups such as: far-right wing comradeships, racist self-defence militias, islamophobic confederations like Pegida⁴ or Legida⁵, the Identitarian Movement⁶, intellectual circles centred around the right-wing think tank “Institute for National Policies (IfS)”

² *Überfremdung* is a German term which describes the feeling or fictive threat of being overwhelmed by immigrants. This is often related to the fear the native culture would be in danger or the feeling to be a foreigner in one’s own country.

³ Result Report of *Sachsen-Monitor*
https://www.staatsregierung.sachsen.de/download/staatsregierung/Ergebnisbericht_Sachsen-Monitor_2016.pdf

⁴ PEGIDA (A German abbreviation for “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident”) is a political movement which was founded in 2014 in Dresden, Eastern Germany. The movement gained wide public attention by holding weekly demonstrations opposing Islam, Islam-extremism and migration. Largest in Dresden, the movement expanded to other German cities, such as Leipzig where it adopted the name LEGIDA.

⁵ see above.

⁶ The Identitarian Movement is a far-right movement in Europe which has its roots in the early 2000s in France. In Germany the movement is a registered society since 2014. It supported the PEGIDA marches in 2014 and 2015 and is linked to the German New Right and Götz Kubitschek.

founded by Götz Kubitschek⁷, so-called “Reich citizens” (“*Reichsbürger*”⁸), conservative Christians as well as the *völkisch* wing of the AfD led by Björn Höcke, Alexander Gauland and André Poggenburg, altogether form a new *völkisch* far-right movement which is threatening social peace in Eastern Germany.

The discussion over the causes of racism and of the rise of nationalism in Eastern Germany has regained momentum. Some of the reasons were the above mentioned *Sachsen-Monitor*, and regular rallies of Pegida and Legida. Furthermore, countless assaults on refugees, refugee camps, additional surveys and the strengthening of AfD contributed to the vigorous debate. Another reason is the latest annual report *Deutsche Einheit* by the German government which was released in September 2016.⁹ The report says: “The protests against accepting refugees clearly showed that the line between civic protest and right-wing extremist types of agitation is becoming increasingly blurred.” Right-wing extremism, according to the commissary for the new federate states of the Federal Government, Iris Gleicke, “is a serious threat to both social and economic development in the new federate states”, because racism could result in economical locational disadvantages for the region. The emerging *völkisch* movement might have the potential to jeopardise social peace in Eastern Germany. This article will address these issues by answering the following questions: Why are racist and nationalistic phrases and patterns of action readily taken up by large parts of the population of Eastern Germany? Why did the *völkisch* movement first come into existence in the former GDR? Why is it so successful?

In order to answer these questions, a look into history is necessary, starting way before the unification in 1990. Since the GDR declared its accession to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), according to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, more than 300,000 racist acts of propaganda and violence occurred. In this period of time 182 people were killed and a great but undocumented number injured. When contrasted to the number of inhabitants, the ratio of perpetrators from the former GDR was disproportionally high (3:1). Until today it is claimed that this development took place due to the political and social turmoil of the unification process. This assumption disregards the fact that the current situation is also caused by a racist continuity in the region of Eastern Germany. Therefore, a historical perspective is needed in order to understand the racist and anti-Semitic assaults as well as the emergence of the *völkisch* movement on the territory of the former GDR.

The “Others” – students and the so-called contract labourers in the GDR

Starting from the 1950s an increasing number of foreign students came to the German Democratic Republic. These students were the only foreigners in these years along with soldiers of the Soviet armies, their families and a small number of refugees. Most of the foreign students came from

⁷ Götz Kubitschek is considered one of the leading figures of the New Right in Germany. He is a journalist, publisher and right-wing political activist. In 2015 he was the keynote speaker during several PEGIDA marches. He is founding member of the New Right think tank IfS and has ties with Eastern German branches of the AfD.

⁸ The so-called “Reich Citizens” are individuals who reject the legitimacy of the Federal Republic of Germany and claim that the state has no power over them. Therefore, they regularly reject law enforcement.

⁹ Annual Report of the Federal Government on the Status of German Unity in 2016: https://www.beauftragte-neue-laender.de/BNL/Redaktion/DE/Downloads/Publikationen/Berichte/jahresbericht_de_2016.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3

countries such as North-Korea, China and Vietnam. In the beginning of the 1960s, a growing number of students came from Africa and the Arab region. Changing directives and shifting political alliances regarding the foreign policy of the GDR were the reasons behind this development. Studying in the GDR was free of charge and students were granted a scholarship. Almost every foreign student and PhD candidate had to participate in a one-year preparatory German language course at the Herder Institute in Leipzig, the institution for preparatory studies for foreign students in the GDR, before they were sent to different universities all over the country. The education of young people from befriended states or liberation movements, as part of the propagated “international solidarity” and “fraternity of peoples”, was a crucial component of foreign cultural policy. The regime hoped this would help them to a breakthrough regarding the question of international recognition. The Western German Hallstein-Doctrine was an instrument which was designed to bare the GDR recognition. During the 1950s and 1960s the Hallstein-Doctrine was a foreign-policy maxim of the FRG in order to isolate the GDR internationally. The FRG would discontinue its foreign relations with each country which would recognise the GDR diplomatically. The policy was based in the Western German claim to sole representation, according to which the FRG is the only legitimate representative of the German people.

From the mid-1960s onwards, the administration began to recruit so-called contract labourers from Poland, Hungary, Cuba, Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola and Nicaragua in order to thwart labour shortage. This policy was adopted especially after the treaty concerning the basis of relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic from 1972 and the following recognitions of GDR by the international community. The labour and living conditions of the so-called contract labourers were regulated by bilateral agreements between the governments and specific “outline directives”. The Aliens Act and the corresponding administrative order on foreigners of the GDR enabled the government to limit the residence permit in terms of region or time. The authorities could even strip the person of his or her permit without giving reasons. Furthermore, measures existed for immobilising and disciplining foreign labour. They were usually bound to one factory for the duration of their stay and their right of termination was strongly limited. The contract labourers had no say on policies on foreigners. The bilateral agreements contained clauses on if and how much money of the gross income should be directly transferred to the governments of the countries of origin (sometimes up to 10% of the income). Actually, this amount should have been paid to the contract labourers, once they return to their home countries. Especially former contract labourers from Mozambique and Vietnam still wait for their money to this day.

Public debate about the topic of foreigners living and working in the GDR and their problems were consequently suppressed by the government. Nor did the press report about these issues. The official documents, contracts and files about racist incidents were kept under wraps until the regime change in autumn 1989. On the one hand, foreign students and contract labourers were “looked after” by the party and the state. On the other hand, they were barely integrated into society because of the state-mandated social segregation. In most cases the foreign students and contract labourers were accommodated in communal housing. In these accommodations for foreigners, they were isolated from the rest of society and a social distance was put in place. Closer social contacts between foreigners and locals seemed suspicious to the GDR leadership. In some cases they were even subject to report or approval. State and party had its focus especially on foreign students. The

Ministry for State Security and the *Volkspolizei*¹⁰ kept detailed records about every single student. The records contained the political attitude, the contact with GDR citizens, sexual behaviour, consumption of alcohol and even more information was strictly documented. There was no area of life for foreign students where they weren't being controlled – in one way or another. “Undesired behaviour” could lead to criminal prosecution, de-registration as a student and / or deportation from the GDR.

Racism and nationalism within the “socialist paradise for workers”

After the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 racist assaults increased all over the GDR. Predominantly, the perpetrators were drunken male GDR citizens. The assaults usually took place in or in front of discotheques or restaurants as well as in public transportation. These were the few places where it was possible to encounter one another, apart from the factories. Besides the physical assaults, various forms of everyday racism occurred. The taxi drivers of Leipzig for example refused to carry students of colour, especially when they were accompanied by white women. Often, African students were not served in restaurants. Discotheques came up with flimsy excuses why they were not allowed to enter. Salesmen and salesladies, train guards, waiters or postal staff were at their worst behaviour – a racist one. The police rarely initiated criminal investigations against the perpetrators of racist assaults. Frequently, the victim was blamed instead. Many students, who regarded racism as an accompanying effect of their studies in the West, were shattered by the experienced racism within a socialist country.

In 1964, for example, when in a short period of time several African students were brutally beaten and in some cases critically hurt, there was a great upheaval amongst the foreign students. The UASA (Union of African workers and students in the GDR) drafted a memorandum which was sent to different party and state institutions. In the memorandum, UASA openly addressed the racial hatred in the GDR which foreign students would experience on a daily basis. In particular, UASA accused the German *Volkspolizei*, as they would not properly persecute the perpetrators, blaming the victims instead. The union issued a warning that a terrible conflict might erupt. Between the lines, the GDR leadership was threatened that, if the situation for the foreign students would not improve, the Western German press would be informed about it. The department for International Affairs within the Central Committee (*Zentralkomitee*) of the SED¹¹ and the State Secretariat for higher education were alarmed. They took the reproaches very seriously. Not under any circumstances should the Western German press report about these incidences. On the one hand, one tried to appease the students by hosting rounds of talks. On the other hand, the Ministry for State Security and the university put immense pressure upon the students not to speak out about the events. The authorities threatened them with de-registration. Finally, the pressure was successful. The memorandum was never published.

¹⁰ The *Deutsche Volkspolizei* or German People's Police was the national police force of the German Democratic Republic.

¹¹ The Socialist Unity Party of Germany (German: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands), established in 1946, was the ruling party of the German Democratic Republic until the revolution of 1989. Its ideological foundations can be described as Marxist-Leninist. In unified Germany the party renamed itself into Party of Democratic Socialism, adopting a socialist direction. In 2007 it merged with Labour and Social Justice (WASG) into The Left (Die Linke) which is represented in the national parliament.

For party and state officials the term of “racial hatred” within the memorandum meant a great dilemma. It pointed out a problem which officially did not exist and should not exist either. The notion that racism and xenophobia were eradicated was essential to the political self-conception of the GDR. The anti-fascist founding myth served as a factor of identity for the GDR until the final stage of its existence. Besides “Marxism-Leninism”, anti-fascism was a crucial source of legitimacy for SED and its rule. The initial point was the adoption of Georgi Dimitrov’s assumptions about fascism. According to Dimitrov, fascism is an “open terroristic dictatorship of the most reactionary, the most chauvinistic, the most imperialistic elements of the financial capital”. Thus, in times of an economic crisis, capitalism, as an element of the “financial capital”, would inevitably result in fascism. However, in a communist state, fascism cannot emerge because there is no private ownership of means of production – therefore capitalism is non-existent. Probably, the SED and the GDR government truly believed they founded a state without any racism by nationalising the major industrial enterprises, large estates, banks and business groups. From the perspective of the official line of the regime, racism could not exist within a state which eradicated its causes by “exterminating fascism”. As described before, the reality presented itself somewhat different.

From the mid-1970s onwards, several pogrom-like attacks happened all over the GDR, leaving ten people dead and an uncounted number of people injured. Contrary to the widely spread view, the first racist pogrom in German post-war history was not Hoyerswerda in 1991. The first pogrom in post-war Germany took place in August 1975 in Erfurt. For several days, a group of contract labourers from Algeria was chased across the entire city. The first assault on a communal housing by East German racists, similar to the one in 1991 in Hoyerswerda, occurred in 1977 in Dessau when an accommodation of contract labourers from Algeria was attacked with stones. More than 30 racist attacks on communal houses are documented for the former GDR. In Merseburg in 1979 two Cubans were killed during a pogrom. Subsequently, the party and state leadership forbade any kind of criminal prosecution, neither by the *Volkspolizei* nor by the public prosecution department. Now, more than forty years later, the prosecution department of Halle examines the possibility to initiate criminal investigations, after the victim’s family took the initiative.

The socialist nation – fertile soil for Pegida & Co

Racism and xenophobia were elements of public life. For the period of time between 1949 and 1990 more than 8,500 racist and anti-Semitic acts of propaganda and violence are documented. Certainly, these were kept a secret by the SED, the Ministry for State Security and the *Volkspolizei*. The causes were suppressed and disclaimed with reference to the Dimitrov Thesis. If and when racism and xenophobia were subjects of conversation during internal party and government meetings, since these incidences could not be fully disclaimed, either the West or the victims themselves were blamed. Actual social contacts to foreigners were undesired. Certainly, these contacts existed nonetheless. Many people were curious about the “strangers”, about their lives. Some people provided support and friends were made. However, the party and the state prepared a fertile ground for racism and xenophobia. During the entire existence of the GDR there was no public debate on the causes of the existing racism and right-wing extremism in the country. Quite the opposite, every endeavour was made to suppress the topic. As a result, today many former East Germans still believe the myth that there was neither racism nor anti-Semitism during the times of the GDR.

Despite the proclaimed antifascist attitude and the propagated proletarian internationalism, first and foremost the concept of a nation was very important in the former GDR. This is another reason for the strengthening of racism and nationalism in the East of Germany. It led to the exclusion of foreigners. An overt nationalism runs like a golden thread through GDR history. There was no public depreciation of nationalist ideologies as in the FRG during the times of the '68 generation. In the GDR, the German nation continued to be a mental point of reference for SED and the population alike. The GDR developed itself into a "socialist German nation". The socialist nation of GDR was a closed society to which "strangers" (class enemies or foreigners) had no access. Over the years, Prussian virtues and traditions became more characteristic for the GDR. During the 1980th the Prussian king Frederick the Great as well as Martin Luther functioned as national symbols and added to the historical self-conception of the country. This East German nationalism provided links for neo-fascist and racist patterns of thinking among the population. Regularly, explanations for the emergence of the new *völkisch* movement point to the social and political consequences of the post-Wall period or to a lack of appreciation of democracy. However, these explanations do not answer the question why racist and national phrases and patterns of behavior are readily taken up in large parts of the society. This question is even more pressing if one considers that "anti-fascism" and the "proletarian internationalism" have been key pillars of the official GDR-ideology for forty years. They have been taught in schools and were the reasons for a range of public celebrations. If these pillars had such little influence, it stands to reason that there was something fundamentally wrong with the official "antifascism" and "internationalism".

The reasons for racist, xenophobe and anti-democratic attitudes in large parts of the population of East Germany date back longer than just the 26 post-Wall years. In consequence of the predefined "antifascism", there was no actual confrontation with National Socialism. Citizens of the German Democratic Republic had no chance to see the world due to the Berlin Wall and travel restrictions. Furthermore, a positive reference to the (East) German nation in the GDR and a racist continuity which exists to the present day were additional factors. Besides the social and political turmoil during the post-Wall period, this explains why racist and anti-democratic patterns of behavior are readily taken up. Last but not least, it could also help to understand why the *völkisch* authoritarian movement is so successful in the Eastern part of Germany.

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