

# Is xenophobia a legacy of Stalinist-ruled East Germany?

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Widespread hostility and violent attacks on foreigners in the east of Germany have given new impetus to discussions concerning whether this phenomenon is exclusively a consequence of German reunification in 1990 or whether its roots go back to Stalinist-ruled East Germany (the German Democratic Republic—GDR).

A recent paper entitled “The historical causes of xenophobia in the former East Germany” (<http://www.zzf-pdm.de/papers/thesp.html>), published by the Centre for Contemporary Historical Research in Potsdam, comes down clearly in favour of the second view. The authors—Jan C Behrends, Dennis Kuck and Patrice G. Poutrus—attribute the causes of xenophobia to two facts: the treatment and perception of “strangers” in the GDR and the SED (Socialist Unity Party—the Stalinist state party) regime's adherence to a nationalist world outlook.

One of their central theses reads: “in contrast to the Federal Republic (West Germany) there was no public depreciation of nationalist world views in the GDR—the German nation remained a central mental point of reference for the regime and the population. The socialist nation is thereby imagined tendentially as a closed society, to whose resources 'strangers' ('class enemies' or foreigners) should have no access.”

The paper has unleashed virulent protests, particularly in the periphery of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS - the successor organisation to the SED). A typical contribution is that of Thomas Ahbe in the weekly paper *Freitag*, who writes, “Sufficient reasons for right-wing extremism in the East can be found in the last ten years”. Ahbe equates the Potsdam theses, according to which the causes for today's right-wing extremism lie in the GDR, with SED propaganda, according to which the workers' rebellion of June 17, 1953 was a “fascist putsch”. In both cases the message reads: “these are not 'our' errors, it is not 'our proven system' from which the momentary difficulties arise, but the evil forces of the past.”

This contrasting of historical and current causes obviously does not take things any further. It is unmistakable—and the Potsdam historians do not deny this—that the social decline and disorientation of broad social layers created fruitful ground for right-wing extremism after reunification. The government's official hostility towards foreigners was undoubtedly a contributing factor—one need only consider the treatment of Vietnamese contract workers after unification or restrictions on the right to asylum in reaction to the Rostock pogrom in 1992. It is also beyond doubt that there are similar tendencies in western Germany, although to a smaller extent.

But all this does not answer the question, why anti-foreigner and nationalist slogans find such a resonance in relatively broad sections of the eastern German population. This question arises all the more urgently when one considers that “anti-fascism” and “proletarian internationalism” formed the basic pillars of official GDR ideology for forty years, were taught in all its schools and provided the grounds for numerous public celebrations. If it has left so few traces, then the evident conclusion is that there was something fundamentally rotten about this official “anti-fascism” and “internationalism”.

One cannot evade clarifying this question with the statement that the search for the causes of xenophobia in the old society diverts attention from the causes in today's, as asserted by Ahbe. Especially if one advocates a socialist alternative to today's society, it is essential to critically assess the experiences of the GDR and draw lessons from it.

The authors of the Potsdam theses touch on a sore point when they state, “a devaluation of nationalist ideas did not take place in the GDR “. They write, “the propaganda that served to legitimise the rule of the SED in the 1950s continued the older pattern of national legitimisation without the slightest misgivings. Judged by its rhetoric, the GDR understood itself as the true representative of the German nation: socialist content in national form.”

Like a red thread, an unconcealed nationalism runs through the history of the GDR, and is particularly glaring in the years surrounding the country's foundation in 1949.

The “National Committee for Free Germany”, created in 1943 under the leadership of Walter Ulbricht, which was responsible for Soviet propaganda in Germany, did not appeal to the internationalism of the workers' movement, but, as the name implies, to German nationalism. This went so far that its banner did not employ the republican colours of black, red and gold, but rather the old imperial colours of black, red and white.

As long as Stalin entertained the hope of a neutralized Germany, outside the direct control of the Western powers, the German Stalinists were the dedicated advocates of a united German nation. The more the Cold War developed, the more hysterical their nationalism became. It was not limited to political questions; in the cultural arena the SED sang the praises of the nation in a way that embarrassingly brought to mind the cultural policy of the Nazis.

As an example we quote from a speech given by the GDR's first prime minister in 1950 at the founding of the German Academy of the Arts. “If a really great and exalted national art is to unfold,” announced Otto Grotewohl, “the unity of our nation must be restored. That is not in contrast to the world. Quite the opposite, the greater value a work of art has for the entire world, for the whole of mankind, the deeper its roots are buried in the soil of the nation; the more international its significance, the more national are its characteristics, its origin and its form.”

For those who still had not understood, he added: “The despairing flight of German artists into cosmopolitan trains of thought, into a falsely understood world citizenship, into the abandonment of national peculiarities is not a way out, but only weakens the will to live of one's own people and makes it unable to fulfil its national tasks.”

The opening up of the SED to former NSDAP (Nazi party) members went hand in hand with this nationalist propaganda. In 1949 the National Front was created, uniting members of all parties and mass organizations under the control of the SED. It declared American imperialism, which had “taken up the inheritance of Hitler fascism in the fight for world domination”, to be the exclusive enemy and on this basis invited

collaboration from “former officials, soldier, officers and generals of the *Wehrmacht* (the German armed forces) as well as former Nazis...What is decisive is the point of view of each German in the great national liberation struggle of the German people and not their earlier organizational affiliations.”

The National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD) was created by the SED expressly to accommodate former Nazis. But the NDPD soon complained that the SED was enticing away too many “former ones” (ex-Nazis). At the start of the 1950s the SED counted over 100,000 former NSDAP members in its ranks, the substantially smaller NDPD had only some 4,000. Ex-members of the NSDAP made up almost 9 per cent of the SED membership. If former members of other Nazi organisations and the Hitler Youth are included, the figure rises to 25 percent. On the other hand, the proportion of old Social Democrats and Communist Party members was only 16 percent, due to the constant purges.

One can easily grasp the effect this regrouping of the membership must have had on the public climate in connection with direct nationalist propaganda.

It was only in the 1960s and ‘70s that “proletarian internationalism” took a more prominent place in the SED’s propaganda. But this remained, as the Potsdam paper correctly points out, always indissolubly linked to the likewise officially publicised doctrine of “socialist patriotism”. Official “internationalism” was limited to staged rituals, with whose assistance support was mobilized for the state’s foreign policy, while “journeys and actual contact with foreign countries and their culture remained the privilege of a small elite of party faithful”.

The history of the GDR continued to be interpreted in national terms. The only difference was that now, in line with the policy of detente, in place of one German nation there were two: one socialist and one capitalist. In an article on the anniversary of the establishment of the GDR, which was published in the paper *Einheit* in 1979 under the title “The Birth and Flourishing of the Socialist German Nation”, one could read that the GDR was increasingly developing into a “genuine national community” in which “socialist German national consciousness” was consolidated and “the term ‘German’ gained a “richer content” by the fusion of the *Ethnos* (people) with socialism.

In the last decade of its existence, the GDR experienced a renaissance of those Prussian traditions and virtues that in its early years the German workers’ movement had bitterly fought. The religious reformer Martin Luther, Prussia’s King Friedrich the Great and the “Iron Chancellor” Otto von Bismarck were discovered as national symbols. The reactionary philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger were given a new reputation.

It was almost automatic that in such an ideological climate prejudices flowered against “strangers”—both foreigners and dissenters. The Potsdam authors point out that there was no such thing as “normal” foreigners in the GDR. One could not enter the country without an invitation and a visa. The population had almost no contact with people of other countries or cultures.

Altogether the number of foreigners living in the GDR was extremely small, just 190,000 in a population of about 17 million. These were predominantly Soviet soldiers, who lived in barracks where they were subject to strict discipline and therefore had only limited contact with the German population, and contract workers who existed under almost slave-like conditions. If, for example, a female Vietnamese contract worker became pregnant, she had to return immediately to Vietnam.

The Potsdam theses add: “Their legal position was always precarious. There was no legally enforceable right of residency; rather the authorities could behave towards foreigners like ‘lords of the manor’. Political emigrants did not have any legal claim to asylum; their stay in the GDR depended on political loyalty to the SED. To keep things quiet politically, they were scattered all over the GDR and thereby isolated to a large

extent.”

Additional prejudices were fuelled, according to the Potsdam paper, when “the population, particularly in the 1950s, but also later, were constantly called upon to display ‘watchfulness’ towards ‘strangers’. In the lexicon of SED propaganda, ‘strangers’ might be ‘hostile agents, troublemakers and saboteurs’, whom one could not trust.”

When workers’ protests shook the regime in Poland at the beginning of the 1980s, the SED started an anti-Polish campaign. It was at this time that the state-controlled *Neues Deutschland* newspaper used the insulting term “Pollack” to depict the Polish people. In 1988 a hit pop song passed the all-pervasive censorship, in which could be heard: “I’ve just come from East Berlin’s big department store, and have to tell you the shelves are bare. Everywhere on the steps and benches sit Poles with their relatives.”

In the 1980s, the first press reports appeared about right-wing skinhead gangs in the GDR, who were officially called *Rowdys* (hooligans). The *Junge Welt* newspaper reported in 1987 on a criminal trial: “During the commotion the *Rowdys* again and again shouted slogans from the Nazi period, which is a punishable offence in the GDR, where fascism has been exterminated with all its roots.”

The skinheads’ activities were directed against Jewish memorials and cemeteries, and in October 1987 were also directed against a meeting of oppositionists and Punks in East Berlin’s Zion Church. Because of this attack, André Riechert, the son of a Stasi (State Security Service) major responsible for the department dealing with “right-wing extremism”, was arrested and sentenced. In 1990, Riechert was joint founder and press spokesman of the neo-fascist National Alternative (NA), which has since been banned. Riechert personifies the fact that nationalism in East Germany comes from the loins of the ruling bureaucracy—and he is not the only one.

The authors of the Potsdam theses correctly see a cause for today’s xenophobic tendencies in the nationalism that was official doctrine in the GDR. However, they misjudge the political motives that induced the GDR leadership to follow this course, and consequently arrive at completely false conclusions.

They claim that after the defeat of the Nazi regime “racist, nationalist and anti-Bolshevik stereotypes spread by Nazi propaganda” were very common in the German population, and accuse the SED of insufficiently considering this in its propaganda: “Instead of openly speaking about the period of National Socialism, for forty years they tried to imbue the population of the GDR with the minority perspective of the communist resistance fighters, who radically opposed National Socialism. The majority of Germans had experienced the Nazi dictatorship either as supporters or fellow travellers, so that already at this early period a gap developed between the experiences and views of the people and the propaganda of the SED.”

In this way, either consciously or unconsciously, they adopt the central thesis with which the Soviet authorities and the SED justified their own politics: the thesis of the “collective guilt” of the German people, according to which the vast majority of the German population supported Hitler and his politics. This thesis served two purposes: on the one hand it diverted attention from the Stalinists’ own responsibility for Hitler’s ascent and stifled any criticism of Stalinism, while on the other hand it justified the Soviet policy of occupation and disassembly of machines and factories in the East, which were then shipped back to the USSR as reparations.

Historically, the theory of collective guilt does not hold water. As long as they were able to express their will more or less freely in elections, the “majority of the Germans” rejected National Socialism. Millions of workers not only gave the KPD (Communist Party) and the SPD (Social Democratic Party) their votes, they were ready to combat the fascist danger with arms in hand. In the long run, Hitler owed his victory to the failure of the two great workers’ parties—the SPD, which entrenched itself behind the bourgeois state and its institutions, and the KPD, which under

Stalin's influence sabotaged the formation of a united front against the Nazis.

After 1933, the failure of the workers' parties and the immediate use of widespread terror by the Nazis, nipping all opposition in the bud, made it almost impossible to offer any systematic resistance. Therefore many workers behaved passively or were active only in small circles. To conclude from this, however, that in the twelve years of their rule the Nazis had won over the majority of the population to their side is absurd. Following the capitulation of Nazi Germany, anti-fascist committees spontaneously sprang up everywhere, and were usually led by ordinary members of the KPD or the SPD who took the business of reconstruction in hand.

The nationalist course of the SED was directed against this spontaneous anti-fascism. Numerous historical records and personal memoirs show how they systematically dissolved these spontaneous committees and factory councils and replaced them with bodies in which bourgeois politicians were strongly represented.

One of the most vivid descriptions of this can be found in Wolfgang Leonhard's book *Child of the Revolution*. As a member of the Ulbricht group, Leonhard was directly involved in the dissolution of the workers' committees. Leonhard does not leave the slightest doubt about the meaning of these measures: "Stalinism cannot permit anti-fascist, socialist and communist movements or organizations to develop through independent initiative from below, because this would always run the risk of escaping its control and being turned against directives from above. The dissolution of the anti-fascist committees was therefore nothing other than the destruction of the first beginnings of a powerful, independent anti-fascist and socialist movement. It was the first victory of the apparatus over the independent anti-fascist movement of left-leaning layers in Germany."

In order to understand the full significance of the nationalist course of the SED one must go back to the origins of Stalinism in the Soviet Union of the 1920s. At that time, the international character of the socialist revolution was the focal point of the dispute between the Stalin faction and the Trotskyist Left Opposition. Stalin's view that socialism could be constructed in a single country meant a complete break with the previous internationalist outlook of Marxism.

It was not only a theoretical question. Stalin's nationalist course corresponded to the needs of the emerging bureaucracy within the state and party, which was developing into a privileged caste and felt threatened by every new revolutionary tremor—both abroad and at home. Moreover, it found a response among backward elements, who were steeped in the traditions of Great Russian chauvinism, and which the bureaucracy needed as a social support in their fight against the Marxist opposition. In short, nationalism served the bureaucracy as an ideological and political weapon against the socialist strivings of the working class.

Stalin's ascent went hand in hand with the consolidation of power by the bureaucracy and culminated in 1937 in the physical destruction of a whole generation of revolutionary Marxists. On an international level as well, Stalinism played an increasingly open counter-revolutionary role. In the Spanish Civil War the Stalinist secret police carried out savage attacks behind the front against the most revolutionary elements, and thereby enabled Franco's victory.

After the Second World War, the Kremlin's foreign policy was determined by the social needs of the bureaucracy, which wanted two things above all: security and quiescence. The establishment of a belt of buffer states in Eastern Europe, whose governments were directly dependent on Moscow, served their security interests. Quiescence was achieved through the strangling of all initiatives from below that, in the manner of the revolutionary eruptions that followed the First World War, threatened to shake the new international status quo.

In Italy and France the mass Communist parties, in accordance with

Soviet foreign policy, entered governments and helped stabilize bourgeois rule. In Eastern Europe, where the Stalinists held power, every independent activity of the masses was suppressed by force. The more the contradictions between the population and the Stalinist rulers intensified, the more the latter relied directly upon nationalist elements. In the GDR the rehabilitation of former NSDAP members went hand in hand with the suppression of the workers' rebellion of June 1953.

Originally Stalin had not planned to extend the Soviet model to Eastern Europe and carry out large-scale expropriations. This took place only when the US-led Cold War placed the Stalinist regime under increasing pressure. Immediately after the war, in the Soviet-occupied part of Germany, expropriations were limited to property belonging to the big landowners—the Junkers—as well as to large-scale and heavy industry that was the property either of the German state, of National Socialist organizations or of war criminals. At a time when the direct role of German business in aiding Hitler's ascent was generally known, these measures enjoyed a large degree of popularity. In the eastern German state of Saxony, 77 percent of the population voted for the expropriation of all war criminals without compensation in a referendum held in 1946.

To a large extent the reputation of the GDR as an "anti-fascist state" rested on these expropriations. In contrast to the Federal Republic, where the property of Hitler's backers remained untouched, in the GDR the material basis was withdrawn from the most important social supports of the Nazi regime. The Junkers and officer caste, whose lands were predominantly in eastern Germany and present-day areas of Poland and Russia, had formed the backbone of extreme political reaction in Germany for over one hundred years—from the suppression of the 1848 democratic revolution, to the empires of Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm, to the Weimar Republic—and contributed substantially to Hitler's rise to power.

But if one poses the question today, what carried more weight historically—the expropriations and nationalisations or the suppression of every independent initiative of the working class—the answer is clear. A socialist society can only be constructed by utilising the creative initiative of the masses. The SED's systematic suppression of every independent political movement disarmed the working class politically and ideologically. This not only sealed the fate of the GDR and opened the way for the eventual return of capitalism to the east of Germany, but also left the working class without any mass organizational or ideological basis to effectively oppose the non-stop attack on jobs, wages and past social achievements that has accompanied capitalist reunification.

This history reveals the deeper causes for the rise of fascist currents today. Fascism, as historical experience shows, wins support among devastated layers of society when the working class proves incapable of showing them a way out of the social dead end. Because the workers' movement has as yet been unable to advance its own response to the social crisis, xenophobia and neo-fascism prosper on the socially and ideologically fertile soil that the GDR left behind.

The fight against fascism therefore coincides with the fight against a social development driving ever-broader layers into unemployment, poverty and fear for their existence. It requires a political re-orientation of the workers' movement. The socialist traditions that Stalinism trampled underfoot—international solidarity and social equality—must be revived.

The authors of the Potsdam theses arrive at a completely different conclusion. "We plead," they write, "for the state to clearly act to implement human rights for foreigners even in a conflict with the native population." The state is thus to defend "democracy" against the population! Doesn't this remind one suspiciously of the GDR? At the same time, they reject a struggle for social equality: "The attempt to achieve an all-round harmonisation takes away society's dynamic and leads to the dead end in which the GDR finished up."



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