

Former East German Stalinist leader and PDS head Gregor Gysi discovers the nation

Ulrich Rippert
18 October 2000

At the beginning of October, during a special parliamentary sitting marking the tenth anniversary of German unification, Gregor Gysi delivered his farewell speech as chairman of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) faction in the federal parliament. Gysi, a leading official at the end of the 1980s of the Stalinist ruling party of East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party (SED), became SED general secretary at the end of 1989, just as the East German state was collapsing. In advance of the 1990 elections that set the stage for German reunification, Gysi presided over the transformation of the SED into the PDS.

In his farewell speech, which was devoted to outlining his political legacy, Gysi said he had fought for the integration of the PDS into the reunited Germany. Now, he declared, this goal had been achieved as far as was realistically possible, “though not to the extent that would have satisfied everyone”. Gysi stressed that he considered this part of his life's work completed.

“I simply wish a normal state of affairs,” he said in a concluding remark to the speech, which was highly praised by the press. He pleaded for a “new form of political culture and dialogue” between all parties, “including between the left and the conservatives”. Both sides, he advised, should “regard their opponents as a challenge instead of just wishing them out of existence”.

According to the parliamentary minutes, these remarks brought “applause from all the party factions”. There was even clapping from former chancellor, Helmut Kohl (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), who was sitting in parliament again for the first time since the eruption of his political slush fund scandal.

In a two-page newspaper interview the following weekend, Gysi explained more precisely what he understood to be the basis for closer cooperation between left-wingers and conservatives: namely, the nation, which he identified with the whole of society. He lamented the negative attitude of the left towards the nation.

According to Gysi, “Many left-wingers in Germany never fought for the nation and so they were doomed to failure, because a political left that does not see itself as part of the nation cannot struggle for the nation. And such a left certainly cannot assume the central responsibility within a nation.”

The former PDS faction chairman gave historical reasons for this anti-nationalistic perspective on the part of the left. Gysi said that, unfortunately, Bismarck had connected the founding of the nation with the exclusion of the left. The Anti-Socialist Laws gave rise to “the first real emigrant community” in Germany.

“And so,” he continued, “the German conservatives have always conceived of the nation as one in which the political left had no place. Many from the left accommodated themselves to this view and

eventually accepted it. They defined themselves as being outside of and against the nation.”

From the point of view of historical fact, this is all—to put it mildly—arrant nonsense.

Since the time of Marx and Engels, the socialist movement has been based on an international perspective. This is because a socialist society cannot be realised within national boundaries. By the end of the nineteenth century the productive forces had already burst through the constraining borders of the national state, and capitalism had brought into existence a world economy and an international division of labour. Even then the development of a just and humane society necessitated an international coordination and control of the economy. This holds true even more decisively in today's world.

Armed with an international perspective, the socialist movement had an enormous influence on masses of people in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Nor is it true that Bismarck's Anti-Socialist Laws caused a left-wing emigration. During the 12-year persecution of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), from 1878 to 1890, the socialist faction was allowed to continue its presence in the national parliament uninterrupted. Not only did the SPD's share of the vote increase dramatically; all of its organisations, newspapers, associations and party branches experienced tremendous growth. Precisely in this period the social democratic movement developed into the most influential political party.

Contrary to the claim that the socialist left never had an attitude towards the nation, it was precisely its outlook on this question that determined its history. Its negative attitude towards the nation was the foundation of its strength, and its catastrophic decline began when it abandoned this perspective.

“We won't desert our own fatherland in its hour of danger!” cried Hugo Haase, spokesman for the social democratic faction in parliament in August 1914, as he justified his party's approval for the government's request for war credits. Four years later, when the Kaiser was forced to abdicate as a consequence of defeat in the war and the threat of revolution, it was once again a social democrat who declared the bourgeois Republic, and right up to the present countless monuments and street names commemorate the Republic's first president, Friedrich Ebert, a social democrat.

A second reference to history made by Gysi in the same interview is also instructive. According to the former PDS leader, during the Hitler era a section of the left made another fatal mistake in “accepting that Hitler had defined what it meant to be German”. The consequence, Gysi declares, was that “they were only able to define themselves in contrast to Hitler by defining themselves against everything German.

We are still encumbered with this malady today. This country is still suffering from it.”

According to Gysi, instead of rejecting fascism by standing “against everything German”, and thereby standing against the nation, it was imperative to bind oneself with the nation through the medium of German culture. “In this respect,” he says, “Schiller and Goethe are of great significance to me. They are part of my culture.”

We need not dwell on the fact that Schiller and Goethe succeeded in producing great works of world literature precisely to the extent that they were able to break loose from the crude and narrow-minded cultural conditions in Germany and turn towards the great events of world history—particularly the French Revolution—and lapsed toward philistinism whenever they fell back into German parochialism. Nor need we recall other great proponents of German culture, such as Heinrich Heine, who poured forth scorn and invective by the bucketful over the Prussian state and had to spend his life as an exile in France.

This is not the first time that culture has been invoked to bolster a nationalistic point of view. Gysi relates how he holds to the motto of his father, who always used to say: “I am a despairing German.” Gysi’s father Klaus was minister for culture in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany) and later a state minister for matters concerning the Church. In these positions he was closely associated with the fostering of the nationalist outlook that runs through the entire history of the GDR. The *World Socialist Web Site* has published detailed analyses of this matter in previous articles.

What are the motives behind Gysi’s speech on the significance of the nation? How is it connected with current political developments?

There are a number of factors. The most important is the fact that, confronted with a rapid growth of social polarisation and a deepening foreboding of great social conflicts, the political establishment is seeking to close ranks. To put it another way, while it is becoming more and more obvious that most people are giving the cold shoulder to the traditional parties and no longer believe their interests are represented by any of them, these parties are coming closer together and forming a common front to impose their will on the population.

Not long ago, the PDS was shunned by all sides of the political establishment. Just two years ago, the CDU tried to revive fears of the great red menace and stir up anticommunist sentiment. The SPD leadership, for its part, largely rejected tolerance of the PDS and opposed its participation in government at the state level. This situation has now changed completely.

The PDS is being courted on all sides. The ugly toad has turned into a handsome prince. Chancellor Schröder (SPD) met with both Gysi and Lothar Bisky (until recently the PDS chairman) “to exchange ideas in a relaxed atmosphere”. Helmut Holter, the PDS state chairman and deputy state minister for Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, has been officially received at the chancellery. In addition, it is reported that Gysi maintains close contact with the CDU. He has met with former Chancellor Helmut Kohl several times in the past and Angela Merkel, Kohl’s successor, has already declared herself ready to hold talks with the PDS. This is—among other things—a way of saying “thank you” for the remarkably restrained criticism that came from the PDS during the CDU’s recent financial scandal.

In his interview, Gysi said that he was looking for a common bond, “something that would draw the parties together and not divide them.” He declared, “To me, such a common—if you like, national—bond would be the precondition for all of us feeling responsible for the whole.” In the name of society as a whole—the nation—the great

majority of the population will be forced to accept the economic and social consequences of policies pursued in the interests of the wealthy elite.

Considerations of electoral arithmetic are also playing a role in the goodwill newly accorded the PDS. In view of the fact that the Greens are not represented in a single parliament in the eastern German states and have had to bear great losses in all elections since the last federal parliamentary election, the PDS is seen as a potential coalition partner at both the federal and regional levels. It has always been the case that, prior to entering the club of bourgeois parties, the newcomer has had to sing the national anthem.

There is an additional factor. In the past the PDS was the political representative of the eastern German middle classes, who fared poorly in the reunification of Germany, felt themselves unfairly disadvantaged and complained bitterly. Today this problem is no longer confined to the eastern part of the country.

The consequences of economic globalisation and a process of European union dominated by the interests of major corporations and international financial institutions are dramatically altering the playing field for small and medium-sized businesses. The middle layers of society, whose security was based on the relative stability of the post-war period, are today coming under more and more pressure and losing their moorings in the class structure.

It is precisely in these layers that social polarisation is starkly evident, and the fear of sinking into the great mass of people who have to struggle for daily survival is feeding the growing opposition to European union—an opposition adopting a more and more nationalist tone.

This nationalism is merging with a diffused anti-American sentiment. The fear of a brutalisation of society along American lines is being used to push through German interests at a time of sharpening contradictions between European and American interests. The PDS sees itself well placed for this kind of polemic. Throughout the years of the Cold War, it was the only party in Germany to stand on the other side of the barricades. It long ago combined a rejection of American policy with the promotion of specifically German interests.

Gysi’s praise of nationalism is symptomatic of a continuing move to the right by official German politics as a whole.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact