

German interior minister proposes anti-immigrant and racist “defining German culture”

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The German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière recently published a statement in the *Bild am Sonntag* newspaper on the issue of a “defining German culture,” which unashamedly promoted bigotry and German exceptionalism. Ten theses were presented under the provocative title “We are not the Burka.” The statement has been widely ridiculed in a number of media reports and comments as “Ten commandments of how to be German.”

There is no doubt that de Maizière’s Teutonic catechism does contain an element of absurdity. He began in point one with the form of greeting: we say our names. As a greeting, we offer our hand. Point 2 states: we see education as a value in itself; point 3: we promote achievement. Then comes: we are a cultural nation. Our country is characterised by Christianity. We are enlightened patriots etc. All of this recalls the political jargon of the early 1950s, when the old Nazi circles were still active, providing a lot of material for comedians.

But it would be false merely to make fun of this. De Maizière’s declaration in favour of a “defining German culture” in the *Bild* newspaper is extremely reactionary and undemocratic. His theses signify a sharp political shift to the right by the federal government and complement the revival of German militarism and the attacks on democratic rights bound up with this.

De Maizière’s piece follows his “Guidelines for a strong state in difficult times,” which appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* earlier this year. In it, he demanded the centralisation and strengthening of the state apparatus. Then as now the minister published his theses in a newspaper without consulting any political committees, so as to make clear his opposition to democratic structures.

When a debate on a “defining German culture” was initiated more than a decade and a half ago by CDU politicians Friedrich Merz and Laurenz Meyer, they were unable to enforce their views. The fact that the interior minister, who according to his office, is obliged to obey the constitution, now initiates a right-wing, nationalist campaign in a tabloid newspaper and agitates against refugees must be taken seriously.

The title in the *Bild* newspaper, “We are not the Burka,” sums up the central issue according to de Maizière: people from other countries and cultures who live here should abide by “German values.”

The mere idea that immigrants must—however it is described—conform to a “defining culture” contradicts the most basic democratic principles. In a comment on the first round of the defining culture debate, we wrote on this web site, “In this regard, even Prussia’s Frederick the Great (1712-1786) was more progressive,

when he announced that in Prussia everyone could find their own salvation—although practice in the Prussian state rarely measured up to this ideal. In any case, it is part of the elementary principles of any civilised society that no one should be forced to adopt a specific culture, religion or anything of a similar nature.”

A further examination of the theses is very revealing. Already in the introductory remarks, de Maizière takes a swipe at democratic principles. The question for him in relation to a “dominant culture” is not one of legal regulations, he noted, but “unwritten rules for us to live together,” for “the legal bond of living together in Germany.” This means more than “constitutional patriotism.”

“Democracy, respect for the constitution and human dignity apply in all western societies,” the Interior Minister wrote, before asking, “But is that all?” He answers, “I think: there is something more ... beyond language, respect for the constitution and respect for basic rights, there is something which holds us together internally, which distinguishes us and which differentiates us from others.”

In other words: it is not the law which determines how society lives together, but there is something else which goes beyond this and is more important—tradition, religion, loyalty to one’s home and cultural German-ness.

Such a view is not only anti-democratic, but draws on the national-conservative ideology developed at the end of the 19th century by the likes of Werner Sombart and which culminated in the brown swamp of Nazism. As early as 1886, Sombart demanded the correspondence of “spirit and society,” developed anthropological and sociological arguments against the Jews, who could never belong to a settled, Nordic “forest people,” and expanded his racism to the English “trading people,” whose mercantilism could not be reconciled with German “heroism.”

In France and the United States, the concept of the nation emerged out of revolutions and the war of independence against feudalism, absolutism and slavery. State citizenship was not determined by language or the colour of one’s skin, nor according to the place of one’s birth, but the location of one’s residency and work.

This was not so in Germany, where the bourgeoisie betrayed the 1848 revolution and subordinated itself to the land-owning *junkers* and Bismarck’s authoritarian state. The German national idea became increasingly tinged with ethnic and racist (*volkish*) ideas in the late 19th century. State citizenship was based on one’s origin, and even children and grandchildren born in Germany retain the citizenship of their parents (when their parents are of foreign origin) unless they choose to become citizens by means of a lengthy bureaucratic process.

This repulsive *volkish* stench pervades de Maizière's paper. "Who is 'we'? Who belongs?" he asked in his preamble. For him, the answer is clear: "The citizens of our country" and not "anyone who lives in our country for a certain period of time," and is thus not "settled." He also does not want to include those people as "we" who have lived in Germany for a long time "without becoming a citizen." This is a reference to the large number of Turkish workers in Germany, whose dual citizenship the Interior Minister would prefer to reject.

Thesis No. 1, "We offer our hand in greeting," is ridiculous and recalls the stuffy 1950s when children were beaten if they did not want to extend their hand to strangers and unknown adults. How apt is Heinrich Heine's comment, made from his French exile, of the aloof, formal and bureaucratic manners of the Prussians, "as if they had swallowed the stick with which they were once beaten."

De Maizière's emphasis on the German way of greeting is directed above all at foreigners, who prefer a kiss on the cheek or an embrace, or who do not extend their hand to a woman due to their religious beliefs.

Thesis No. 6 is particularly reactionary, declaring religion to be the "glue of society." The year is characterised by "festive church days" and the landscape by "church spires," enthuses de Maizière. In Germany, there is a "special church-state relationship."

It speaks volumes that de Maizière accords religion a central place in his "dominant culture." After its defeat in the 1848 revolution, the German bourgeoisie, unlike its French counterpart, never completed the separation of church and state. Germany's state authorities still collect a church tax today.

De Maizière's clericalist position is not just directed against Muslims and other non-Christian religions, but also against the majority of the population which is atheist. In eastern Germany, the percentage of the population which is non-denominational is 73 percent, and in the capital, Berlin, it is 63 percent.

The aim of de Maizière's ten-point catalogue is especially clear in his remarks on history and culture.

"We are the cultural nation," (n.b. not "a cultural nation" among many!) is how thesis 5 begins. This is a concept that was shaped already under Kaiser Wilhelm and the colonial adventures in Africa and served as the justification for war crimes during the First World War in the invasion of Belgium. One recalls the shameful "Declaration to the cultural world" following the brutal destruction of the old library in Liege.

De Maizière only refers to the names of Bach and Goethe, who "belong" to the world but are Germans. He seems to have forgotten that Goethe was influenced by the French Revolution and saw himself as a representative not of a national, but of a world literature. Goethe's distance from Germanophilism is shown by his collection of poems entitled "West-Eastern Divan," where it is stated, "Who knows himself and others well, no longer may ignore, Orient and Occident, dwell separately no more."

The interior minister does not spare a word for the fact that the "cultural nation" of Germany initiated two world wars and committed the worst crimes in human history, and he does not mention the many literary figures, artists and musicians who were forced out of the country in 1933 or driven to their deaths.

It is no accident that the historical narrative upon which the "defining culture" is based is formulated in vague terms. "We are heirs of our history, with all of its ups and downs," (thesis 9). History is "a struggle for freedom and the recognition of the deepest depths of

our history." De Maizière seeks to do away with the memory of the German bourgeoisie's crimes in order to create the basis for a new patriotism.

This goal is to be served by a "joint collective memory for places and recollections" (thesis 10). But the words "Auschwitz" or "war of annihilation" do not appear anywhere. For the son of Ulrich de Maizière, first officer of the general staff in the Supreme Army Command (OKH) in the Wehrmacht, who stood alongside Adolf Hitler in the Führerbunker in February 1945, such memories are apparently too unpleasant.

Instead, de Maizière refers to the Brandenburg Gate and November 9—without mentioning the years. One is therefore free to choose: should the Brandenburg Gate recall the Wilhelmenian Reich which sent millions to their deaths in the trenches during World War I, or the torchlit procession of SA troops on the evening of January 30, 1933, which prompted the painter Max Lieberman, who lived close by, to remark, "I cannot eat as much as I want to spew!" Or perhaps the victory over Napoleon and the return of the Quadriga from France in 1814, or perhaps German reunification, or perhaps both?

And what about November 9—should it recall the pogroms against Jews in Kristallnacht 1938? The November revolution of 1918? Or the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent restoration of capitalism in the former GDR?

De Maizière leaves it open. Instead, he presents his two examples of recollection together with others such as "winning the football world cup, carnival, people's festivals ... connection to one's home, the marketplaces of our cities. The connection with places, smells and traditions. National team mentality ..." etc. In short: the yearning for the German homeland which characterised the filmmaking of the Nazis.

More than any other figure in German politics, Interior Minister de Maizière, formerly federal defence minister, stands for the return of German militarism, authoritarian state structures and racism. However, the ruling class is also conscious of the deep popular opposition to war and dictatorship.

Under these conditions, the "defining culture" debate is aimed at cooking up a reactionary ideological mixture to mobilise the most backward elements in the population, the state apparatus, the media and academic world against the opposition to reaction by workers and young people.



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