The 76th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

Blind in the right eye – *Prosecution* – and a documentary about German dramatist Einar Schleef

Stefan Steinberg
10 March 2026

***Prosecution* (*Staatsschutz*)**

Prosecution (*Staatsschutz*), by director Faraz Shariat with a screenplay by Claudia Schaefer, was the well-deserved winner of the Panorama Audience Award at this year's Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale).

The central figure in the film is the young Asian-German public prosecutor Seyo Kim, who is active charting the activities and crimes of neo-Nazis in a fictitious town in southeast Germany. The far-right forces she is investigating attempt to take revenge and toss Molotov cocktails at her from a bridge.

Surviving the attack and determined not to give into intimidation, Seyo takes her own case of attempted murder to court with the aid of a sympathetic lawyer.

In the course of her investigations Kim uncovers a host of previously dismissed "cold cases" involving a network of organised neo-Nazis. Over time she covers an entire wall of her apartment with photos of extreme right suspects.

According to her colleague senior prosecutor Quant, "We have the world's most objective legal system—we must absolutely hold onto it."

Inside and outside the courtroom Kim realises that such objectivity is a fiction. Inside the courtroom Kim confronts her smirking Nazi opponents confident of acquittal. Either they have personal relations with leading figures in the judiciary and public prosecution office, or are confident that the latter share at least in part the same right-wing ideology.

The final scene of the film shows prosecutor Kim taking down from her wall the array of photos of neo-Nazis and putting up instead photos of a host of figures within the judicial system and the police responsible for the fact that the "cold" cases of abuse remained cold. The most important opponent, Kim concludes, is the German judiciary and state themselves.

Screenwriter Claudia Schaefer conducted intensive research about the German legal system and uncovered a series of cases of police, judges and prosecutors either siding with ultra-right perpetrators or finding ways to ensure they avoided a guilty verdict.

Schaefer and her team cite some of the more well-known cases of state negligence, complicity and/or judicial prejudice with regard to neo-fascist extremism in Germany following the unification of the country in 1990. This includes the case of Oury Jalloh, a migrant worker burnt to death in a police cell in the eastern German city of Dessau in 2005. The police alleged he had committed suicide although at the time of his death he was strapped hand and foot to his bed. No police officer was held to account following his death.

The list of further crimes by the extreme right in Germany, cited by Schaeffer as the basis for her screenplay, is too long to list in this article. The most notorious case is that of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Underground (NSU), which carried out a series of murders throughout Germany under the eyes of—and, as it emerged, with the compliance of—sections of the German state apparatus.

In an interview, Faraz Shariat, the film's young director, quite correctly noted: "We can't really understand the German judicial system without taking its Nazi past into account. Many problems stem from the fact that total de-nazification of society has never taken place."

The phrase "the German state is blind in the right eye" first emerged following the persecution of political opponents of the Weimar Republic. Laws introduced following a wave of ultra-right violence and murders were used mainly to prosecute left-wing political activists.

According to statistics gathered between 1919–22, out of a total of 354 right-wing assassins, only 24 convictions were made. None of the convicted were executed and the average sentence served was four months.

On the other hand, only 22 leftists were identified as involved in murders. Yet 38 were convicted! Ten were executed and the average prison term served was 15 years.

Furthermore, in 1972, the Radikalenerlass ("Radicals

© World Socialist Web Site

Decree") to combat political extremism introduced by the Social Democratic government of Willy Brandt was largely used to prosecute and punish leftists.

In the form of a thriller, *Prosecution* makes the case that this bias on the part of the German state continues to this day. In the last federal election, the extreme right Alternative for Germany (AfD) won over 20 percent of the vote and emerged as the main opposition party in parliament. Tackling the growth of the far right is impossible without tackling its supporters inside the German state—and German capitalism as a whole.

***No Germany Did I Find* (*Einar Schleef–Ich habe kein Deutschland gefunden*)**

The painter, playwright and director Einar Schleef is often mentioned in the same breath as filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder as one of the outstanding artistic figures in postwar Germany. A new documentary with the clumsy English title *No Germany Did I Find* [the German is *Einar Schleef–Ich habe kein Deutschland gefunden*], directed by Sandra Prechtel, featured at the recent Berlinale. It contains fascinating material relating to the life and work of Schleef who was born in East Germany (GDR) at the end of World War II.

A gifted child burdened with a stutter, Schleef was drawn to the arts and as a young man made some of his initial experiences at the Berliner Ensemble, the theatre taken over by playwright Bertolt Brecht following his flight from America to East Germany at the end of the war. At one point in the film, the older Schleef was asked what he did when he finished work at the theatre. He replies, "I slept."

His workload was enormous, embracing every element of theatre: directing, producing, right down to sewing costumes and designing sets for the plays he wrote and directed. Little time was left for his own private interests, although he was an obsessive photographer and took pictures and also painted whenever he could.

In the notes for her documentary, director Prechtel writes: "Theatres should burn after every performance, says Schleef. This is not a call for violence, it is Schleef's seriousness with which he does everything he can to shake people out of their lethargy. Out of their insensitivity. [For him] Art must not be an escape from reality, it must be an escape into reality, in all its harshness."

Cultural life was suffocating in the Stalinist GDR where creative work was subject to the veto of bone-headed bureaucrats—and Schleef was not prepared to make compromises. Declaring his disenchantment with the stifling bureaucracy in the East, Schleef moved to Frankfurt in West Germany in the 1980s and began work on plays based on Greek classics.

In returning to Greek tragedy, Schleef revived in particular the role of the choir as a central story teller, a development pioneered by Brecht in his own attempt to provide an alternative to the prevailing role of the individual actor in Western theatre. In Frankfurt, Schleef came into contact with the array of immigrant workers employed in menial jobs in the German financial centre and employed many of them in his chorus. But his work in Frankfurt also evoked a hostile response from established critics and rival dramatists.

Having turned his back on the Stalinist East, Schleef also felt uneasy in the capitalist West. In 1989-90, he was one of the few artists to recognise the significance of the transformation of the universalist slogan used by East German workers in their demonstrations against the Stalinist system–"We are the People"–into "We are One People," i.e., the nationalist slogan introduced by leading Stalinist politicians to ease the integration of East Germany into West German capitalism.

For Schleef, the return of a united capitalist Germany represented a dangerous Pandora's box which, when opened, could once again unleash the horrors of the country's not-too-distant Nazi past.

These qualms and fears, which he explored in his plays. are what lie behind the title of the documentary, referring to a (peaceful, democratic) Germany he was searching for, but could never find.

On occasion in his work, Schleef—and in this sense he resembles Fassbinder—goes too far and adapts to prevailing intellectual tendencies such as the Frankfurt School. Its leading figures argued that Germany's descent into fascist barbarism could be traced back to the Enlightenment. Schleef makes the same profound error when he traces a lineage from the thoroughly progressive figure of Goethe to fascist reaction.

Nevertheless, with the necessary caveats in place, Schleef produced theatrical works that left an indelible impression on audiences.

Schleef died relatively young, at the age of 57. At the centre of this new documentary, his own commentaries are interspersed with observations from many of those who worked alongside him and who praise his sensitivity and insight.

Despite the immense difficulties he confronted in his life, there is not the slightest hint of self-pity on his part and, to her credit, Prechtel has avoided any attempt to reduce her film merely to a psychological portrait. Her documentary is a fitting tribute to a leading figure in postwar German theatre.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site