

# Did the German Democratic Republic (GDR) produce more "right-wing" attitudes than the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG)? No - quite the opposite.

by *Andreas Peglau*<sup>1</sup>

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In 1992, two years after the GDR's annexation to the FRG, a social science study came to the following conclusion: the "proportion of East Germans expressing anti-Semitic, right-wing extremist or xenophobic views" was "lower than the corresponding proportion of West Germans. German citizens in the East take the consequences of the Nazi past for the present more seriously."

Those with anti-Semitic views made up a total of 13% in Germany at that time. Among the approximately 64 million West Germans, 16% turned out to be anti-Semites; among the approximately 16 million East Germans, only 4%. The journal *Spiegel* commented that "most former GDR citizens [retained] an aversion to the Nazi regime." Werner Bergman and Rainer Erb of the Berlin Center for Research on Anti-Semitism added: "Anti-fascism was prescribed in the GDR, but for many it corresponded to their own conviction."<sup>2</sup>

If something becomes one's own conviction, it can continue to exist once the prescribing system has disappeared.

That this also had applied to the anti-fascist attitudes of GDR citizens was underscored by a forsa survey in 1994:

"This survey dispels a widespread cliché: namely, that the GDR's prescribed antifascism had turned into the opposite after East Germans were released into the wilds of free opinion. Respondents from the new federal states consistently show a clearer, more knowledgeable, and more rejecting attitude toward National Socialism."<sup>3</sup>

1998, a study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation found for the first time "that right-wing extremist attitudes were more prevalent in the East than in the West: a potential of 13% was measured for the Federal Republic as a whole, 12% for West Germany, and 17% for East Germany."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translated, abridged and slightly changed version of chapter 12 (FRG-GDR - a revealing comparison) of *Andreas Peglau: Rechtsruck im 21. Jahrhundert. Wilhelm Reichs „Massenpsychologie des Faschismus“ als Erklärungsansatz, (Shift tot he right in the 21st Century. Wilhelm Reich's "Massenpsychologie des Faschismus" as an Explanatory Approach)*, Nora-Verlag Berlin 2017.

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**Please note:** My English skills are not very good. Therefore, I first translated the text with [DeepL](#) and then corrected it. I expect that there are still translation errors - and ask those who discover such errors to send a message to [info@andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de](mailto:info@andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de).

<sup>2</sup> Stöss, Richard (2010): *Rechtsextremismus im Wandel*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2010, p. 62f.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63f.

In 2016, studies registered that there was little difference in the extent of far-right attitudes among East and West Germans. The purely percentage-based preponderance that residents of the eastern part had in this regard thus possibly existed for only 18 years, from 1998 to 2016.

How can the turnaround in the attitudes of new German citizens in the second half of the 1990s be explained? Political scientist Richard Stöss writes:

"East Germans had initially viewed the process of internal unification much more optimistically than West Germans. As late as 1994, just under half of the new Germans believed that economic conditions would improve in the coming years; in West Germany, only 33% held this view. Three years later, in 1997, the percentage of optimists in the east had melted down to 14%."<sup>5</sup>

Disillusionment at "arriving" in the increasingly antisocial market economy then exposed after 1995 what had previously been held down by "prescribed" and internalized antifascism - which had not been able to heal the potential for violence passed down through generations. The GDR leadership's claim to have completely eliminated fascist ideas at no point corresponded to reality.

But only when - a remarkable parallel to our present situation! - dissatisfaction with the GDR system grew in the second half of the 1980s, "right-wing" activities swelled as well, without, of course, assuming anywhere near the intensity that is part of our everyday life today.

Regarding "right-wing" attitudes in the GDR, the Leipzig Central Institute for Youth Research had to admit in 1988: "The statement, 'National Socialism also had its good sides,' was answered approvingly by every eighth 14- to 18-year-old GDR youth."<sup>6</sup> This analysis was kept secret, as was the state security's realization that the "right-wing" milieu at that time included more than 15,000, often violent, individuals - that is, about 0.09% of the GDR population.<sup>7</sup>

Let us note, however, that even "prescribed anti-fascism" was obviously a more effective means of combating right-wing extremism than the clandestine to semi-official harking back to Nazi traditions that was typical of the postwar FRG.<sup>8</sup>

And: The cited comparative figures not only refute the legend, carefully cultivated today by various media, that the GDR system favored the emergence of "right-wing" potential to the same extent as the FRG system or even created this potential to an even greater extent.<sup>9</sup> They also counter the common trivialization that right-wing extremism is a "normal concomitant of modern industrial societies."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bpb.de/apuz/25910/ist-der-rechtsextremismus-im-osten-ein-produkt-der-autoritaeren-ddr?p=all#footnodeid15-15>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.zeit.de/2012/08/DDR-Nazis>

<sup>8</sup> See also: <http://www.geschichte-lernen.net/aera-adenauer-umgang-ns-vergangenheit/>

"Empirical social research," concludes sociologist Helmut Dahmer (Pseudonatur und Kritik. Freud, Marx und die Gegenwart, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1994, p. 236), "has registered a stable potential of (latent) anti-Semitism in postwar West Germany decade after decade." Surveys on right-wing extremist attitudes conducted in 1979 to 1980 identified in the FRG "a potential of 13% of respondents with a closed right-wing extremist worldview. About half of these [...] approved of right-wing extremist acts of violence and could be regarded at the time as having a potential for sympathy with right-wing terrorist groups of perpetrators." (Stöss 2010, S. 61).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.fr.de/politik/rechtsextremismus/nsu-neonazi/rechtsextremismus-im-osten-das-braune-erbe-der-ddr-a-876724>

<sup>10</sup> Stöss 2010 (as above), p. 49.

That the GDR was one of the modern industrial societies is a fact. Nevertheless, the GDR, starting in 1949 with the same historical and psychosocial legacy as the FRG, was able to significantly alleviate right-wing extremist attitudes compared to the latter. And this despite the fact that the GDR was politically more authoritarian in structure than the FRG during the same period. Other factors seem to have compensated for this. What these were can at least be guessed at.

On the one hand, while the crimes of Stalinism remained taboo until the end of the GDR, state-anchored anti-fascism was supported by the offensive communication of history. Nazi crimes, in which, however the victims among the Communists were disproportionately emphasized, were present in fiction, theater, cinema, television, radio and print media, and in school lessons anyway. Visits to former concentration camps were also part of the compulsory program. The much stronger basic material security in East Germany compared to capitalist societies, and to some extent also the - often forced - social integration, probably also counteracted "right-wing" attitudes. In addition, the income gap was almost negligible compared to today's Germany, women were more emancipated.

The far greater degree of state control and the actual outlawing and punishment of "right-wing" actions were also certainly relevant. As early as 1964, the statute of limitations for Nazi and war crimes had been lifted in the GDR.<sup>11</sup> In the FRG, it was not until 1979 that it was decided that murder was no longer subject to a statute of limitations - which meant that, among other things, Nazi murders could continue to be prosecuted.<sup>12</sup> The latter, however, happened only sparsely here, both before and after 1979.<sup>13</sup>

Even though it is not possible or useful to simply copy the GDR's handling of the problem of right-wing extremism: It is worthwhile to take a closer look at it.

The GDR-BRD comparison also provides evidence that the expression of right-wing extremist attitudes depends on the living conditions and norms that a society offers. This means that it is quite possible to reduce this manifestation and that it is by no means hopeless to try to make it disappear altogether.

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**Addition 2023:** The fact that since 2020 German politicians and media increasingly label everything that does not conform to the government line as "right-wing" or anti-Semitic, has of course nothing to do with a meaningful fight against fascistoid tendencies. On the contrary, this approach massively complicates the recognition of these tendencies.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.verfassungen.de/ddr/index.htm>. See first "Straf- und bürgerliches Recht", then: „Gesetz über die Nichtverjährung von Nazi- und Kriegsverbrechen vom 1. September 1964.“

<sup>12</sup> <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verj%C3%A4hrungsdebatte>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.michael-greve.de/strafen.htm>

Andreas Peglau

# RECHTS RUCK

IM 21. JAHRHUNDERT

WILHELM REICHS  
MASSENPSYCHOLOGIE  
DES FASCHISMUS  
ALS ERKLÄRUNGSANSATZ

Andreas Peglau: **Rechtsruck im 21. Jahrhundert. Wilhelm Reichs „Massenpsychologie des Faschismus“ als Erklärungsansatz**

*Bertolt Brecht already warned against a resurgence of fascism: "The womb is still fertile from which that crawled." But what is this "womb"?*

*The remarkable answers that Wilhelm Reich (1897 - 1957) gave to this question are almost consistently ignored to this day, even in politics or in research of fascism and right-wing extremism.*

*This is bitter, because Reich would have deserved otherwise. More importantly, however, without finally taking these answers into account as well, there should be neither a chance to understand the international "brown renaissance" nor to counter it effectively.*

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