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How the History of the GDR Shaped Pronounced Right-Wing Tendencies in Contemporary East Germany

GDR Tarihinin Çağdaş Doğu Almanya'sındaki Belirgin Sağcı Eğilimleri Nasıl Şekillendirdiği

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Abstarct
This essay investigates the pronounced prevalence of right-wing attitudes in East Germany, exploring their roots in the legacy of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Drawing on studies, such as the 2016 Mitte-Studien by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the 2020 Leipzig-based Else Frenkel-Brunswik Institute survey, the analysis reveals a significant disparity in right-wing populist and extremist tendencies between East and West Germany, exemplified by higher approval rates for xenophobia, authoritarianism, and antisemitism among East Germans. The electoral success of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in eastern states like Thuringia, Saxony, and Brandenburg further underscores this trend, with the party's regional branches classified as right-wing extremist by domestic intelligence agencies. Four key factors tied to the GDR's history are examined: (1) socialization within the GDR's isolated society, which fostered ethnocentrism and limited contact with foreigners, as evidenced by restrictive policies toward migrant workers; (2) an inadequate reckoning with the Nazi past, which downplayed local complicity and fueled anti-Western sentiment; (3) the state's ambivalence toward nascent neo-Nazi groups, suppressing open discourse and allowing prejudices to persist unchecked; and (4) an undemocratic political culture that left citizens inexperienced with democratic participation, breeding skepticism toward democratic institutions. While these factors collectively illuminate the multifaceted origins of right-wing attitudes, the essay acknowledges that they are neither exhaustive nor universally accepted, with individual experiences and broader European trends complicating the narrative. This analysis highlights the need for nuanced, regionally sensitive approaches to understanding and addressing right-wing extremism in East Germany.
Keywords: East Germany, Right-wing, Democracy, AfD, Immigration, GDR History, Memory Culture, Xenophobia

Öz
Bu deneme, Doğu Almanya'daki belirgin sağcı tutumların yaygınlığını araştırmakta ve bunların köklerini Alman Demokratik Cumhuriyeti'nin (DDR) mirasında aramaktadır. Friedrich Ebert Vakfı'nın 2016 Mitte-Studien ve Leipzig merkezli Else Frenkel-Brunswik Enstitüsü'nün 2020 tarihli anketi gibi çalışmalara dayanarak yapılan analiz, Doğu ve Batı Almanya arasında sağcı popülist ve aşırılık yanlısı eğilimlerde önemli bir eşitsizlik olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır; bu durum, Doğu Almanlar arasında yabancı düşmanlığı, otoriterlik ve antisemitizme yönelik daha yüksek onay oranlarıyla örneklendirilmektedir. Almanya için Alternatif (AfD) partisinin Thüringen, Saksonya ve Brandenburg gibi doğu eyaletlerindeki seçim başarısı bu eğilimi daha da vurgulamakta olup, partinin bölgesel teşkilatları iç istihbarat teşkilatları tarafından sağcı aşırılıkçı olarak sınıflandırılmaktadır. DDR'nin tarihiyle bağlantılı dört temel faktör incelenmektedir: (1) DDR'nin izole toplumunda sosyalleşme, bu durum etnosentrizmi beslemiş ve yabancılarla teması sınırlamıştır, bu durum misafir işçilere yönelik kısıtlayıcı politikalarla kanıtlanmaktadır; (2) Nazi geçmişiyle yetersiz hesaplaşma, bu durum yerel suç ortaklığını küçümsemiş ve Batı karşıtı duyguları körüklemiştir; (3) devletin yeni ortaya çıkan neo-Nazi gruplarına karşı ikircikli tutumu, açık tartışmayı bastırmış ve önyargıların kontrolsüz bir şekilde devam etmesine izin vermiştir; ve (4) vatandaşları demokratik katılım konusunda deneyimsiz bırakan, demokratik kurumlara karşı şüpheciliği besleyen antidemokratik bir siyasi kültür. Bu faktörler toplu olarak sağcı tutumların çok yönlü kökenlerini aydınlatırken, deneme bunların ne kapsamlı ne de evrensel olarak kabul gördüğünü, bireysel deneyimlerin ve daha geniş Avrupa eğilimlerinin anlatıyı karmaşıklaştırdığını kabul etmektedir. Bu analiz, Doğu Almanya'daki sağcı aşırılığı anlamak ve ele almak için nüanslı, bölgesel olarak duyarlı yaklaşımlara duyulan ihtiyacı vurgulamaktadır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Doğu Almanya, sağ eğilimler, demokrasi, göç, yabancı düşmanlığı, AfD, Doğu Almanya Tarihi, Hafıza Kültürü

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Introduction

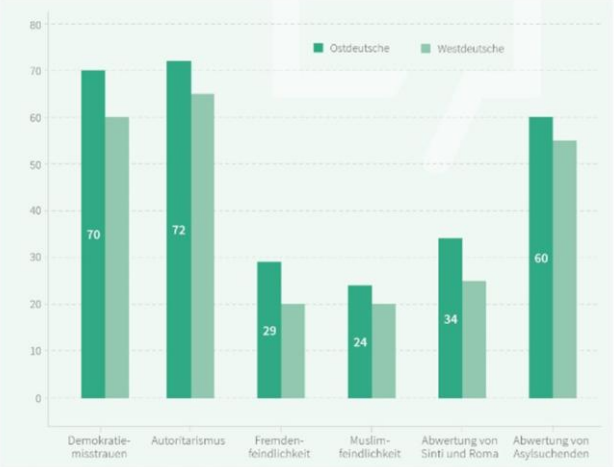
Methodology

This paper employs a literature-based historical-descriptive and analytical approach to examine how the legacy of the GDR relates to contemporary right-wing attitudes in East Germany. Instead of gathering new empirical data, the study synthesizes existing research findings (including surveys and historical analyses) to identify major contributing factors. The theoretical framework is comparative-historical, contextualizing current attitudinal patterns within GDR-era social and political conditions. The scope is focused on four key historical factors from the GDR period; however, this emphasis does not imply that the GDR legacy alone accounts for today's right-wing sentiments. On the contrary, the analysis acknowledges that multiple factors — including post-1990 reunification experiences — intersect to shape contemporary attitudes. By integrating perspectives from sociology, political science, and history, the essay provides a nuanced understanding of the regional dynamics at play.

The Particular Spread of Right-Wing Attitudes in Eastern Germany

Numerous studies have demonstrated that right-wing attitudes are widespread in Eastern Germany. For example, in 2016, the Mitte-Studien conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung] revealed a clear disparity in the prevalence of right-wing attitudes between Eastern and Western Germany. It is particularly important to note that Germany received a record-breaking number of asylum applications a year before. As part of these Mitte-Studien, a survey was conducted in 2016. According to this survey, in 2016, about 75% of West Germans and only 60% of East Germans were proud of Germany's democracy. At the same time, respondents who had primarily grown up in the East more frequently displayed right-wing populist attitudes (2016: 30%; 2014: 26%) than those from the West (2016: 19%; 2014: 18%). In all six areas of right-wing populist attitudes measured, they had higher approval ratings, with the difference in the rejection of asylum seekers being particularly large (Küpper, 2017, p. 96) (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Right-wing populist attitudes among East and West Germans (approval in percent, FES-Mitte study 2016)



In addition, a recent study from the Leipzig-based Else Frenkel-Brunswik Institute [Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut] on "Authoritarian dynamics: old resentments – new radicalism" from 2020 provides further insights into the prevalence of right-wing tendencies in Eastern Germany. For this study, authors Elmar Brähler and Oliver Decker surveyed 2,503 people in Germany (Decker & Brähler, 2023, p. 27). The Right-Wing Extremism Questionnaire within the study captures six dimensions: support for a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship, antisemitism, social Darwinism, and trivialization of National Socialism (elements of a neo-Nazi ideology), as well as chauvinism and xenophobia (elements of ethnocentrism) (Decker & Brähler, 2023, p. 34). The values on questions about migration are the clearest. For example, 43.9% of respondents in Eastern Germany explicitly approved the following statement: "Foreigners only come here to exploit our welfare state," and 38.3% explicitly agreed with the statement that the Federal Republic is "dangerously overstrained by the many foreigners." Only 22.5% of West German respondents agreed with that statement explicitly (Decker & Brähler, 2023, p. 35). In this study, "explicit approval" means "agreeing mostly or completely" whereas "partial approval" means "agreeing partially and partially disagree" (Decker & Brähler, 2023, p. 35). There are also high approval ratings for authoritarian views. 36.6% of respondents in Eastern Germany explicitly or partially agreed with the statement: "In the national interest, under certain circumstances, a dictatorship is the better form of government." In addition to that, 51.6% partially or fully concurred with the following statement: "What Germany needs now is a single strong party, which embodies the national spirit"^7 (Decker & Brähler, 2023, p. 37). Besides that, 34.6% of East Germans fully or partially endorsed the view that "Jews have something peculiar about them and don't fit in with us" (Decker & Brähler, 2023, p. 39). A summary look at the socio-structural distribution shows that East Germans, particularly those aged 14 to 30, more frequently favor

a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship. Since these are the post-reunification generations, this conviction is therefore not a result of their own experiences in the GDR, as is often assumed.

Furthermore, the remarkable success of the Alternative for Germany [Alternative für Deutschland] party in recent state elections in the new federal states (Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg) can also be seen as evidence that right-wing tendencies enjoy strong support among East Germans. For example, the AfD became the strongest force in the Thuringian state election with 32.8% of the vote, while the CDU came in second with 23.6%. In the Saxon state election, the AfD achieved 30.6% of the vote, making it the second strongest force, just behind the CDU, which achieved 31.9% (Stolz and Kiefer, 2019). A similar situation was seen in the Brandenburg state election, where the AfD, with 29.2% of the vote, also became the second strongest force, just behind the SPD, which achieved 30.9% (Pfeifer, 2024). The main reason why a connection between the spread of right-wing tendencies in Eastern Germany and the success of the AfD in the recent state elections in the aforementioned federal states can be drawn is that since March 2021, the Thuringian Office for the Protection of the Constitution has classified the AfD state association in Thuringia as a "proven right-wing extremist endeavor" because it represents anti-constitutional positions. According to the 2023 Verfassungsschutz report, these positions are directed against the free democratic basic order [Demokratische Grundordnung] (Wirzioch, 2023). Thuringia is not the only federal state in this regard; the State Office for the Protection of the Constitution [Verfassungsschutz] in Saxony has also classified the AfD in the Free State as clearly right-wing extremist (Bärsch, 2023). The examples cited above reveal a pattern: The fact that some state associations of the AfD, particularly in eastern German regions, have been classified as right-wing extremist by the domestic intelligence agency could be further evidence of the pronounced right-wing tendencies in Eastern Germany. These classifications were made during the tenure of Jörg Urban, who is still the chairman of the AfD state associations in Thuringia and Saxony. He was born and raised in the GDR. The researchers Decker, Kiess, and Brähler mentioned above share the same view regarding the rise of the AfD in the new federal states: "The relative success of the AfD is also based on the support of a coherent right-wing extremist milieu and on the support of voters who share elements of the right-wing extremist worldview. This is not a diffuse protest, but a conscious act of voting based on corresponding attitudes" (Brähler et al., 2023, p. 39). In this regard, too, a clear rift between East and West Germany is emerging. For example, 19.1% of all votes in the 2021 federal election in the East went to the AfD, whereas it only received 8.2% of all votes in the West (Janson, 2021). There are several theories about what has led to or contributed to this pronounced right-wing attitude among East Germans. For example, a three-person research team from the Göttingen Institute for Democracy Research (Danny Michelsen, Marika Przybilla-Voß, and Michael Lühmann) comes to the conclusion in their study that right-wing tendencies in the context of xenophobia and authoritarian structures can be traced back to socialization within the closed society of the GDR (Michelsen et al., 2017, p. 8-9), whereas the political scientist Martin Jander sees the reasons for this in the inadequate coming to terms with the Nazi past in the GDR (Jander, 2020, p. 198). Similarly, German historian Dieter H. Kollmer links the GDR's ambiguous stance towards neo-Nazi groups within its borders to the contemporary surge in strong right-wing sentiments in the same region (Kollmer, 2002, p. 229). In addition, the sociologist Steffen Mau concludes that the support for right-wing attitudes in Eastern Germany can be attributed to the undemocratic political culture of the GDR (Mau, 2024, p. 39-52). In what follows, I will discuss the factors in isolation while it is assumed that the confluence of multiple factors …

The Isolated Society of the GDR

The Göttingen Institute for Democracy Research (Michelsen, Przybilla-Voß, Lühmann) has conducted a study examining the influence of the GDR dictatorship on current right-wing tendencies. The researchers see a strong correlation between socialization within the isolated society of the GDR and the current widespread prevalence of right-wing tendencies such as xenophobia and authoritarian attitudes in eastern German states. The researchers emphasize that the strict control of migration in the closed GDR society contributed to the promotion of an ethnocentric worldview (Michelsen et al., 2017, p. 8-9). For example, towards the end of 1989, there were 191,190 foreigners in the GDR, not including tourists and business travelers, as well as members of the Soviet Army and diplomats. The proportion of foreigners in the population was 1.1 percent. That wasn't much, considering that at the same time, West Germany had a foreign resident quota of 7.7 percent (Eva-Maria & Elsner, 1994, p. 13). The following examples can illustrate the ethnocentric image in the context of the closed nature of GDR society. The SED's strong distrust of those from other countries, coupled with the joint effort of the GDR and Vietnam to prevent independent relationships between their people, resulted in foreign laborers being caught within a detailed framework of observation and security checks. While overseas laborers could technically use their free time as they chose, rules governing entry to their housing and travel beyond East Germany severely limited their ability to move freely and build meaningful connections with local residents. Violations of these housing rules could lead to immediate expulsion back to Vietnam, with no chance to challenge the decision (Dennis, 2007, p. 344). Covert observation by the Stasi of personal relationships between East Germans and foreign individuals, combined with instances of racist and sexist bias against East German women who associated with foreign men, reveals a deeply problematic side of the GDR's contract labor history. Not only were marriages between Vietnamese contract workers within the GDR prohibited, but they were also rare between East Germans and the majority of foreign nationals. Workers who formed close relationships faced the threat of being sent back to their home country by Vietnamese authorities. If couples wished to marry, they had to navigate a drawn-out and burdensome approval procedure involving both the GDR government and the Vietnamese embassy (Dennis, 2007, p. 349).

Before the 1987 and 1989 revisions to the rules, pregnancy for a female worker meant either deportation or a mandatory abortion. In desperation, some women injured themselves to trigger miscarriages. A Vietnamese woman who had a child outside of wedlock could expect significant personal challenges upon her return, due to the stigma it brought to her and her family in their culturally conservative environment. They also faced severe monetary penalties, including fines and having to pay back the costs of their stay in the GDR (Dennis, 2007, p. 350). It is important to recognize that the monitoring of Vietnamese laborers was a collaborative endeavor, not just a GDR initiative, but also one pursued by Vietnam. Specifically, the Vietnamese embassy deployed Regional Commissioners, intended to supervise 2,000 workers each (a figure often exceeded), who, alongside group leaders and East German factory managers, enforced political and ideological conformity (Dennis, 2007, p. 345). Moreover, racist attitudes towards migrant workers weren't investigated sufficiently. An interviewee, who at the time of the interview had been involved for years in a local African association in the West German province against everyday racist practices, re-evaluates his GDR experiences in the course of the conversation. Against the background of his anti-racist commitment, he reflects on the extent to which racist motives were systematically ignored or not addressed by those affected and by authority figures such as the Mozambican group leaders in the communal accommodations:

"[B]ack then in the GDR, it was the case that the people who experienced something, yes, and everyone […] was a loner who did something outside somewhere, and was beaten by a group. Yes, but we didn't directly associate it with racism. I know cases of my colleagues who were in the home, that they came back, but only because they were in a bar. And then why we didn't see it as racism, because we thought it was things from the bar, yes […] they came to our home swollen up, we asked what was wrong: 'Ah, a fight', and then what our caretaker said back then 'A fight, yes, you were drunk' […]. Then there was no investigation, not by the police, no, there wasn't, no compensation, no" (Grau, 2022).

In addition, it is important to bring to light an aspect that scholarship has thus far overlooked: the prejudice against foreign workers in the GDR wasn't limited to their social and political experiences; it was also woven into the language used in official communication. The East German press, through its reporting on contract workers, systematically created a power dynamic, portraying East Germans as superior and foreign workers as inferior, which directly challenges the notion of their equal integration. This imbalance was first evident in the recurring theme of the "aid worker" and "aid recipient." The media clearly highlighted the reliance of African and Asian countries on the GDR's goodwill, presenting the state as a generous provider (Rabenschlag, 2016, p. 94-95). Particularly, the utilization of foreign workers in the GDR, which was initiated in the 1960s due to an acute labor shortage, was portrayed in the GDR press as a qualification program and as development aid for poorer socialist countries in the name of Völkerfreundschaft (Rabenschlag, 2016, p. 87). The concept of Völkerfreundschaft was omnipresent in the public life of the GDR. In 1961, the League for Friendship among Peoples was established as the umbrella organization for all international organizations and projects in the GDR. However, Völkerfreundschaft did not merely serve as a symbolically charged buzzword. Both in foreign and domestic policy, the ideal of Völkerfreundschaft played a key role in the GDR and functioned as a public display regarding the treatment of members of other nations and cultures. At this point, the question arises as to what extent the concept of Völkerfreundschaft was also aimed at a harmonious coexistence of Germans and non-Germans within the GDR. As has already become clear, there were no efforts on the part of the state towards effective integration policy. Likewise, intercultural training in schools and training centers, which could have aimed at better integration of foreigners in the GDR, was not a priority in the eyes of the political leadership. Against the background of collectivist thinking, contract workers were seen less as individual foreigners than as representatives of the respective socialist brotherly people. Thus, in domestic policy, the idea of Völkerfreundschaft primarily applied to respect for the representatives of the brotherly nations (Rabenschlag, 2016, p. 55-58). Related to the concept of Völkerfreundschaft, there was also a discursive upheaval, which was to be accomplished with the help of new terms and thought patterns, related not least to the shaping of national identity and a communal sense of "Volk" (people) as well as to the determination of the social outsider. The racial component of the concept of "Volk" (people), as it had long shaped the German understanding of nation and people and ultimately reached its climax in the ideology of National Socialism, was no longer to play a role in the thinking of the "workers' and peasants' state on German soil." What mattered was solely socialist conviction and the correct class consciousness, which could extend beyond national and ethnic borders. For the citizens of the GDR, the SED's attempts at linguistic-political upheaval meant that they were suddenly confronted with two contradictory views of foreigners. According to the old categorization, foreign workers, students, and political emigrants were people who were clearly different from "the Germans" because of their culture, skin color, or physiognomy. They could be guests, friends, or enemies, but always remained "the others" insofar as they were not German. Within the framework of the reorganized discursive field, as constructed and reproduced by the policies of the state party SED, this distinction suddenly became unimportant. Contract workers from Poland, Mozambique, or Vietnam belonged insofar as they also belonged to the working class and, as "friends from abroad," were also involved in the construction of socialism. The others were now, regardless of their ethnicity, those who stood in the way of or betrayed the idea of socialism (Rabenschlag, 2016, p. 44-45). Contrary to their official slogans of friendship between peoples and proletarian internationalism and their claims of eradicating the racial component of the "Volk" concept, the state party and its government apparatus were fundamentally suspicious of close private contacts between locals and foreigners (Rabenschlag, 2016, p. 16). In essence, the GDR government used Völkerfreundschaft as a powerful instrument of propaganda to project a positive image of itself, both domestically and internationally. However, the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality as discussed above reveals that it was often a façade intended to secure political objectives and moral superiority. At

this point, it is worth pointing out that the recruitment of labor from socialist countries at that time was not only motivated by ideological reasons, but also by economic ones. In the GDR, the shortage of labor intensified due to the flight and relocation of around three million people to the West. The number of GDR citizens leaving for West Germany was around 3.5 million in total between 1949 and 1989 (Bröskamp, 2007, p. 18). It is also worth mentioning that the GDR's legal system governing foreign worker recruitment clearly reflected its exclusionary stance. Foreign workers' residency was inextricably linked to their employment contracts, ending automatically upon contract termination. Employing companies could also dismiss and deport workers for any perceived lapse in "socialist labor discipline," with no external oversight. Beyer interprets this as evidence that GDR foreign national law was designed solely to regulate the temporary presence of foreigners, not to facilitate their integration (Beyer, p. 214). The rotation principle, which mandated the replacement and repatriation of workers after a five-year maximum stay (with limited, jointly approved extensions), further demonstrates this. Additionally, bilateral agreements explicitly precluded family immigration (Müggenburg, 1996, p. 18). All of this contributed to the fact that the share of foreigners in the GDR population remained among the lowest in Europe at just over 1 percent (Menning, 1993, p. 73-79). This carefully constructed system of exclusion, which resulted in the GDR's remarkably low foreign population, provides a crucial backdrop for understanding contemporary patterns of xenophobia in the region, as evidenced by a recent study from the Leibniz Center for European Economic Research and Goethe University. They argue in their study that the districts that have taken in a high number of refugees and previously had only a small proportion of foreigners in relation to their total population have seen a pronounced increase in the number of crimes related to xenophobia. If we break down the data by federal state, a clear picture emerges: Asylum seekers in the new federal states (Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Thuringia) are at a tenfold higher risk of being victims of hate crimes than their counterparts in West Germany (Entorf & Lange, 2019, p. 3). There is another important theory that can further support the aforementioned claim. This theory is contact theory. Intergroup contact theory has seen rapid advancements in recent years, building on the idea that interactions between different social groups can reduce prejudice. A notable development is the finding that indirect contact—having an ingroup friend (e.g., a fellow German) who has an outgroup friend (e.g., a foreigner or Muslim)—reduces prejudice at levels comparable to direct contact—having an outgroup friend yourself. This study, conducted with a large, probability-based survey of German adults, explores how these two types of contact relate to prejudice against foreigners and Muslims living in Germany, examining their interplay, influences, and mechanisms. The research finds that direct and indirect contact are highly interrelated—if one has a foreign or Muslim friend, one is also likely to know others who do—and both are negatively related to prejudice, meaning more contact leads to less bias. Together, they enhance the prediction of prejudice beyond what either could achieve alone. Both types of contact are shaped by similar factors: opportunity for contact (e.g., living in diverse areas) increases their likelihood, while individuals with authoritarian traits (rigid, fear-driven personalities) tend to avoid contact altogether. The effects of contact on prejudice are mediated by threat perceptions. Two types of threat are considered: individual threat (personal fears, like crime or job loss) and collective threat (group-level fears, like cultural erosion). Direct contact reduces both individual and collective threats significantly—knowing an outgroup member personally can dispel both personal and group-based fears. Indirect contact, however, primarily reduces collective threat and has only a slight effect on individual threat. This difference suggests that while hearing about an outgroup friend-of-a-friend reassures people about the group's broader intentions, it's less effective at easing personal anxieties. The researchers interpret these relationships through a normative perspective, arguing that contact doesn't just change individual attitudes—it reflects and reinforces social norms. If your social circle includes or accepts foreigners and Muslims (directly or indirectly), it signals that such acceptance is normal, further reducing prejudice. In summary, this study highlights that both direct and indirect contact are powerful tools against prejudice in Germany, driven by similar forces and mediated by threat, with direct contact having a broader impact on personal fears and indirect contact excelling at shifting group-level perceptions (Pettigrew et al., 2007, p. 2). Thus, all those discussed circumstances in a state that was largely closed to foreigners caused many East Germans to have limited contact with foreigners. These experiences could partly explain why isolation could provide fertile ground for right-wing ideologies in Eastern Germany, as the aforementioned study by the Göttingen Institute for Democracy Research has shown.

Inadequate Approach to Dealing with Nazi History During the GDR Era

There are other theories that seek to explain the right-wing tendencies in Eastern Germany. For example, Martin Jander, a PhD historian at the Free University of Berlin, holds the view that the particularly strong support for right-wing ideologies in Eastern Germany is deeply rooted in the inadequate approach to addressing the Nazi history in the GDR. He is of the opinion that an inadequately addressed Nazi past in the GDR allowed a populist movement in East Germany to emerge. Following numerous violent, racially motivated outbreaks in the former East German territories, this movement consolidated its presence in the political arena as Pegida.

Subsequently, fueled by the "New Right," Pegida effectively converted the Alternative for Germany (AfD), established in 2013, into its national parliamentary voice (Jander, 2020, p. 198). This argument regarding the unaddressed Nazi past has a certain plausibility, since the teaching in the GDR strictly followed the state ideology. The blame for the Holocaust was exclusively attributed to the monopoly capitalists of the West, and any co-responsibility of the East German population was concealed. Even historical facts such as the production of Zyklon B in Dessau were omitted (Rosbach, 2009). Even in cases when East Germany did address antisemitism in its history, they often downplayed it by attributing it primarily to Nazi propaganda, thus absolving the

general population (Wolfgram, 2025, p. 75). Furthermore, the GDR government under Hans Modrow only acknowledged its co-responsibility for the Holocaust in the run-up to German reunification, more precisely in February 1990, 41 years after the founding of the GDR (O'Doherty, 71). It is also important to emphasize that initially West Germany exhibited a similar degree of reluctance to confront the full extent of the Holocaust. But subsequently, West Germany's democratic framework, however imperfect, provided space for public discourse, debate, and criticism. This allowed for the gradual emergence of voices demanding accountability and remembrance (Wolfgram, 2025, p. 74-75). Since the persecution and murder of Jews was therefore not sufficiently addressed in GDR schools, this could be one reason why there is less awareness of anti-Semitism among East Germans. A study by the Pew Research Center has brought this to light: twelve percent of respondents in the new federal states had a negative attitude towards Jews, compared to five percent in the West (Wike et al., 2019, p. 87). Others like Felix Knappertsbusch also pointed to the knock-on effect of this approach by the GDR government to Nazi history. By linking the atrocities of the Nazis with West Germany, capitalism and its political system, it sowed the seeds of anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism among its citizens, which still resonate in eastern Germany today. For that reason, respondents in East Germany agree more strongly on the anti-imperialist dimension of an anti-Americanism survey than West Germans (Knappertsbusch, 2016, p. 215). At this point, it is important to explain the history of the emergence of anti-Americanism in radical right groups of Germany. Though German right-wing anti-American feelings existed for many years, World War I served as the key event that ignited them into a major political influence. The U.S.'s initial neutrality, while hinting at future intervention, became a central target for right-wing anger. After the capitulation of Germany, the Versailles agreement further intensified anti-Americanism within right-wing groups in Germany. This is where the German right-wing press launched their propaganda efforts at that point. They had consistently denounced Wilson's peace proposals as deceptive, claiming his promises of fair treatment for a reformed Germany were simply lies. They insisted that the German government shouldn't trust these false promises and surrender. When the armistice was signed in 1918, and the subsequent peace treaty proved to be far harsher than anticipated, the right wing felt vindicated. In subsequent years, the perception of America as an imperial financial superpower interfering in the internal affairs of impoverished Germany solidified among right-wing groups. What was new was the connection between anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism: America was now considered a "Jewish state," the leader of the "Yellow International," and Americanism itself as "congealed Jewish spirit." Their hostility towards America, specifically targeting Wilson, became a component of the widely circulated myth that Germany had been betrayed (Schwabe, 2016, p. 57-58). Anti-American sentiment remains more widespread in eastern Germany than in the West. According to a 2023 survey, only 25% of East Germans view the USA as a reliable partner, whereas 50% of West Germans do ("Umfrage: USA-Skepsis").

The GDR Government's Ambivalence to Budding Right-Wing Extremist Tendencies and Groups Within Its Territory

Contemporaneously with the GDR government's insufficient engagement with its Nazi past as a contributing factor to contemporary right-wing extremism in Eastern Germany, the GDR's handling of nascent neo-Nazi groups and right-wing tendencies within its borders constitutes another salient factor warranting consideration, according to the German journalist and filmmaker Nadja Mitzkat. Officially, there were no neo-Nazis in the GDR (Mitzkat, 2021). Starting in 1988, criminologists and sociologists began exploring the Nazi scene in the GDR on state commission, in cities like Leipzig, Weimar, and Berlin. The impetus for this was a spectacular high-profile attack by neo-Nazis on around a thousand attendees of a punk concert in the Zion Church in East Berlin late on October 17, 1987, garnering coverage in Western media because, in addition to the East Berlin punk band "Die Firma," musicians from the West German band "Element of Crime" performed. The 30 drunken attackers stormed into the church with shouts like "Skinhead Power!", "Jews out of German churches!", "You red pigs!" and "Sieg Heil!", injuring participants. These reports also woke up the party leadership. Following this attack, numerous skinheads were "preventively detained" and interrogated, but initially, the police and Stasi could hardly distinguish between right-wing and left-wing skins. Afterwards, the Ministry of the Interior of the GDR initiated a secret research project, approved by the Security Department of the Central Committee of the SED, called the "AG Skinhead." Dr. Bernd Wagner was commissioned for this work as a Lieutenant Colonel of the criminal police, and sociologist Loni Niederländer from Humboldt University was involved. The AG consisted of four other criminal police officers. At Humboldt University, there was a small research group conducting scientific research. In the following weeks, criminal records and other documents from the police and justice department [Justiz] were evaluated according to modern social research standards, and numerous conversations were held with right-wing radicals. Observations in various cities and regions were also analyzed. However, Dr. Wagner's work was met with suspicion and noticeably obstructed by a faction of informed party officials and the Ministry for State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit). The results from criminologists and the involved scientists were sobering for the leadership of the SED and Stasi: investigators registered about 6,000 neo-Nazis across the GDR, of which they estimated around 1,000 to be persistently violent. Monthly in 1988, up to 500 crimes from this scene were recorded, including violent acts clearly motivated by xenophobia. In 1988, they noted in Berlin, for example, an attack on Mozambican citizens at Alexanderplatz, on Polish citizens in a campsite, and on Yemeni citizens in a cultural park. In Großenhain, Saxony, Mozambicans were also attacked, and Spanish citizens were assaulted in a Saxon holiday camp. Additionally, supposed "leftists" were targeted, like punks in their apartment in Schöneiche in the Frankfurt/Oder district or goths in a pub in Berlin (Wagner, 2018). A survey of 3,000 young people conducted by Leipzig researchers suggested that roughly 4% were likely to support skinhead ideology, while a much larger group (30%) felt some degree of empathy for them, viewing them as products of their environment. Only 2% of those surveyed identified as fully

committed to the skinhead movement. As previously observed, Berlin was a hotspot, with the proportion of potential sympathizers reaching 6% (Brück, 1992, p. 41-42). But those reporting these findings were ordered to remain silent; such findings were kept under wraps, and in Berlin, the "Neonazi Working Group" was dissolved in the fall of 1988 – and the employees were subsequently monitored by the Stasi, who evidently feared reputational damage for the GDR. At Humboldt University, the study completed on November 30, 1988, under the responsibility of Professor Loni Niederländer, titled "Plan Study on the Territorial Spread of Skinheads and Similar Groups in the GDR from 1986-1988 and the Effectiveness of State Measures to Combat the Phenomenon," was given a confidentiality notice.

The Criminal Investigation Department (Kriminalpolizei) chief declared that science and strategy were not in demand, "but power." He elaborated: "There is such a thing as scientific rigor and partisanship. And we are partisan." The criticism that they and others voiced was sanctioned. Later, from their Stasi files, they learned that investigators, including Dr. Wagner, were even classified as a "carrier of political-ideological diversion" in 1989, leading to increased surveillance and ultimately their removal from office in early July 1989. These findings posed such a threat to the regime's self-image that discussion was forbidden. At that time, investigators like Dr. Wagner were primarily analyzing group activities and crimes emanating from right-wing extremist groups. The findings on the increasingly visible right-wing skinhead phenomenon were not seen as alarming by SED officials but were trivialized as a mere youth problem and not taken very seriously. The reason for that lies, as discussed in the previous chapter, in the proclaimed state doctrine of the GDR. In the antifascist state, there could officially be no Nazism. Acknowledging this would have shattered the ideological propaganda construct of the GDR. Accordingly, the GDR was founded as the "dictatorship of workers and peasants" to thoroughly deal with Nazism, with socialism as the true guarantor (Wagner, 2018). Their understanding of National Socialism was rooted in a purely economic, Marxist definition, following Georgi Dimitroff's Comintern analysis that it was the "open terroristic dictatorship" of capitalist elements. The SED believed that by establishing a communist economic structure, they eliminated the economic base for fascism, thus ensuring its impossibility (Brinks, 1997, p. 210). Conversely, the Federal Republic was accused of not having done so, because the "capitalist monopolies," the alleged causes of fascism, held power in the state and were said to protect and spread fascism (Wagner, 2018). However, in the '80s, the GDR increasingly faced a legitimacy crisis. The gap between ideology and real life was widening, and larger segments of the population, including many youths, were turning away from it (Mitzkat, 2021). This suggests that the GDR actively avoided addressing the issue for as long as possible, and only allowed limited discussion when the regime was already crumbling in the mid and late 1980s. Even then, the discussion was constrained by pre-existing ideological frameworks and a focus on external factors (like alleged influence from West Germany) rather than internal issues.

The GDR's tendency to blame the resurgence of right-wing extremism on "transfer" from West Germany (ideology, personnel, etc.) shows an unwillingness to take responsibility for internal problems. This externalization of the issue was a convenient way to avoid confronting the GDR's own potential contributions to the phenomenon. As a result of the lack of wide-scale public discourse on the neo-Nazi scene within GDR territory, the introduction of educative measures to sensitize the population about the internal causes of right-wing tendencies fell short. The GDR had anti-fascist education, but it was highly ideological and focused on the crimes of Nazi Germany and the evils of West Germany, as discussed above. They failed to critically analyze the potential for right-wing extremism within East German society itself. This often-propagandistic approach, as some studies indicate, may have even been counterproductive, inadvertently sparking interest in right-wing ideologies among some young people as a way to rebel against the state. Therefore, despite the existence of educational initiatives, they did not effectively address the specific problem of neo-Nazism within the GDR. Because internal roots of right-wing extremism were not openly discussed or critically analyzed in the GDR, any underlying prejudices or resentments within the population were left unchallenged. These feelings could fester and be passed down through families without ever being addressed. The absence of public discourse meant there was no counter-narrative, no opportunity to examine the roots of these prejudices, and no space for alternative perspectives. A survey by the University of Cologne on xenophobia in Eastern Germany about the theory of intergenerational transmission provides illuminating insights. 60 percent of all women over the age of 46 in the new federal regions display clear xenophobic attitudes. These are the mothers of the young men who are now notable for their right-wing extremist behavior. Consequently, it will only be the generation that is growing up now who can raise their children in the way that should be taken for granted in the pluralistic and democratic society of Germany (Kollmer,2002, p. 231).

The East German Population's Inexperience with Democracy

The particular prevalence of right-wing tendencies in eastern Germany can also be explained by other theories. One of these has been presented by the renowned German sociologist Steffen Mau. In his opinion, the undemocratic GDR undoubtedly had a formative influence on the political culture in eastern Germany (Mau, 2024, p. 39-52). Citizens grew up in a system where political participation was severely restricted and the SED exercised ubiquitous control. According to Mau, the current skepticism towards established institutions and the so-called elite in present-day eastern Germany can be traced back to the GDR. In the GDR, there was an understanding of the state and the elite that, on the one hand, was characterized by an expectation of provision and, on the other, by a skeptical and distant view of the authorities. This attitude was often ambivalent: The state was seen as a giver, while the citizens were seen as wards (Mau & Offe, 2020, p. 368). Another important thing to mention in this regard is the administrative reform of 1952. To be more specific, in July 1952, the five states of the GDR (Mecklenburg,

Brandenburg, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia) were replaced by 14 districts (Werner et al., 2017, p. 7). With this administrative reform, the GDR leadership under the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) eliminated all traces of federalism and regional self-government. Power was centralized, which essentially meant that the SED exercised sole control. The reason why this is worth highlighting is because of the important function of federalism in Germany, which is to protect against threats to democracy through the unilateral exercise of power and also because of the complementary relationship between democracy and federalism. According to the Canadian political science researcher Reg Whitaker, democracy and federalism have been linked since their emergence in the 18th century, both in theory and practice (Whitaker, 2008, p. 2). In federalism, there is mutual control between governments, parliaments, and an independent judiciary ("horizontal separation of powers") at both the federal and state levels. In addition, there is the special federal division of power, i.e. the limitation of the power of the federal government by the rights of the states ("vertical separation of powers"). In this regard, the history of federalism in Germany as a building block of democracy is worth mentioning, which has deep roots dating back to the Holy Roman Empire and its semi-autonomous territories (Sturm, 2013). In addition to that, a key characteristic of East German society was the lack of opposition and grassroots organizations in the GDR. The ruling party controlled all aspects of life, making it impossible for dissenting opinions or alternative ideas to be discussed, considered, or put into practice. Typically, successful transitions to democracy are preceded by robust social movements operating within the limited space allowed by oppressive regimes. However, the East German collapse in 1989 deviates sharply from this pattern, showing minimal signs of widespread, established resistance. Unlike other Eastern European nations, where influential opposition organizations like Solidarity and Charter 77 provided enduring symbols of dissent, East Germany lacked a significant, pre-existing opposition force. While smaller civic groups were present in the 1980s, their impact was limited. They fostered a nascent protest culture, evolving from religious circles to peace and environmental activism, and eventually to pro-democracy efforts. Nonetheless, these groups remained largely obscure and ineffective, especially when compared to the well-known opposition movements in Poland and Czechoslovakia. This lack of strong, organized opposition makes the East German transition a unique example of grassroots democratization, where established opposition leaders played a negligible role (Ritter, 2012, p. 5-6). Consequently, this absence of experience in organized dissent and independent action, coupled with the pervasive control of the state, fostered a political culture where skepticism towards democratic principles could easily take root. The suppression of independent thought and action created a psychological environment where citizens were less likely to trust or engage with new, unfamiliar political systems. Furthermore, the lack of opportunities to practice democratic skills, such as debate and negotiation, meant that citizens were ill-prepared for the challenges of a democratic transition. Therefore, it is understandable that Auerbach and Petrova contend that ingrained historical factors, such as political traditions and experiences under communism, predispose individuals to have high levels of skepticism towards democratic principles (Auerbach & Petrova 1960). This skepticism towards democracy or democratic institutions can be seen in a survey conducted by the Allensbach Institute for Demoscopy on behalf of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. According to the survey, only 27 percent of East Germans agreed with the statement that democracy could solve the problems in the Federal Republic. Allensbach researcher Thomas Peterson commented that these results could only be interpreted as a "sign of a weaker anchoring of democracy in the East" ("Mehrheit der Ostdeutschen…").

Returning to the theory discussed above: this inexperience of GDR citizens with democracy and democratic structures/institutions as a factor in the current widespread skepticism towards democracy can be linked to the mere exposure effect or, in other words, substantiated. I apply the mere exposure effect specifically to the experience of democratic processes, institutions, and experiences, arguing that the lack of such exposure in the GDR contributed to the skepticism we see today. The mere exposure effect is a simple and well-researched psychological phenomenon: the more often you are exposed to something, the more likely you are to develop an affinity for it. And the mere exposure effect works and changes your preferences, even if you are not aware of the exposure. The effect influences your preferences for everything, from people to songs to colors. The influence of the mere exposure effect on politics should be obvious, but surprisingly little research has been done on it. For example, using extensive survey data from more than 110 countries and exploiting within-country variations across different cohorts and surveys, researchers Acemoglu et al. have demonstrated that individuals who are more exposed to democratic experience show stronger support for democratic institutions. They claim that across a variety of specifications, estimation methods, and samples, the results are robust, and the timing and nature of the effects are consistent with their interpretation (Acemoglu et al., 2025, p. 3).

Conclusion

Above, I have discussed the causes of pronounced right-wing attitudes in the context of the GDR legacy. On the one hand, the research team led by Michelsen points to socialization within the closed GDR society as a factor for right-wing attitudes such as the spread of xenophobia in eastern Germany. On the other hand, Jander emphasizes the importance of coming to terms with the Nazi past. An insufficient confrontation with this dark chapter of German history could have led to the repression and normalization of right-wing ideologies such as anti-Semitism and anti-Western sentiment among East Germans. In addition, Mau sees the undemocratic political culture of the GDR as another important reason for right-wing attitudes such as skepticism towards democracy. The lack of experience with democracy and the suppression of opposition could have led to democratic values being less internalized. This presents a complex picture of the causes of right-wing ideologies and attitudes in the new federal states and also testifies to the multifaceted nature of the causes. A simple explanation for the causes of right-wing

extremism and xenophobia in eastern Germany does not exist and probably never will. It is important to identify and uncover possible causes in order to understand what is happening in eastern Germany. In particular, the regional contexts have not yet been sufficiently researched ("Ursachen des Rechtsextremismus").

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that individual experiences play an important role. Not all people in eastern Germany have right-wing attitudes due to the aforementioned causes. Therefore, it should be noted that the causes mentioned above in connection with the GDR legacy are neither sufficient to explain the entire picture, nor are they unanimously recognized as causes. For example, one study finds another cause, namely the public failure to address right-wing fringe and hooligan groups in the GDR, which led to a certain normalization of right-wing tendencies (Kollmer, 2002, p. 229). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the aforementioned causes are by no means unanimously perceived as valid by everyone. For example, the Left Party described the study led by Michelsen, which highlighted the socialization of East Germans in the GDR as a cause of right-wing attitudes, as "completely exaggerated." Katja Kipping, the chairwoman of the Left Party, argued that countries such as Austria, France, Finland, Denmark, and the Netherlands do not have a similar recent past like East Germany, but nevertheless have significant problems with right-wing populist and xenophobic parties and movements. She argued that the focus on the legacy of the GDR obscures the actual causes ("Osten anfällig für…"). Many studies conclude that a combination of various causes is responsible for right-wing tendencies, which mutually condition and reinforce each other (Küpper, 2017, p. 98). This is why the search for a single fundamental cause for the spread of right-wing ideologies in eastern Germany is in vain. Additionally, scholars have pointed out that the nature of German reunification and the Federal Republic's attitude toward the former GDR also contributed to these outcomes. Many East Germans felt marginalized or treated as second-class citizens by West German institutions after 1990. Such post-reunification frustrations, including economic upheaval and a perceived Western condescension toward Eastern experiences, provided fertile ground for anti-establishment and radical sentiments. In sum, the legacy of the GDR is a crucial piece of the puzzle, but it interlocks with multiple other factors in explaining contemporary right-wing attitudes in East Germany.

All translations from German were made by me.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.
Çıkar Çatışması: Yazar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir.
Finansal Destek: Yazar, bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.
Yapay Zeka Kullanımı: Yazar çalışmada yapay zeka kullanmadığını beyan etmiştir.

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