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on the Interpretation of Democracy in the Light of Specific
German History

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In Search of the ‘Real Democrats’

Right-Wing Extremist Patterns of Argumentation with a Focus on the Interpretation of Democracy in the Light of Specific German History

Alice Blum

ABSTRACT:

This article uses the example of the far-right blog *Sezession* to examine the particular significance of German history for the authors and the way in which it is used for right-wing political argumentation. With the help of a content analysis approach, 111 articles were examined and it was worked out how the authors use National Socialism and the GDR dictatorship as arguments for themselves. It is shown that all argumentation patterns are aimed at questioning the existing democracy and positioning themselves as better democrats. With regard to National Socialism, these are dismissive or relativizing narratives, while the history of the GDR is drawn upon to substantiate one's own resistance and the correctness of one's own position.

KEYWORDS:

Far-right, democracy, narratives, victimization, GDR, National Socialism, Sezession

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Prof. Dr. Alice Blum ist Professorin für Soziale Arbeit an der IU Internationale Hochschule. Der Schwerpunkt ihrer Arbeit liegt dabei auf der demokratischen Weiterbildung sowie dem Verstehen von antidemokratischen Strömungen. Aktuell forscht sie zu der Frage, welche Identitätsangebote die extreme Rechte unterbreitet und in wie eine aktive Zivilgesellschaft dagegenhalten kann.

In Search of the ‘Real Democrats’ – Right-Wing Extremist Patterns of Argumentation with a Focus on the Interpretation of Democracy in the Light of Specific German History

Germany, like so many other countries, has had to face a variety of crises in recent times. Economic crises, migration, the Covid-19 pandemic and, most recently, the Russia-Ukraine war and the associated energy and food crises are challenging us and our interpretations of democracy. Ideologues of the extreme right, of course, do not leave these events uncommented upon but try to use them profitably for themselves and to shift social discourses to the right. At demonstrations, in public debates or in their own media contributions, they formulate their criticisms and mobilize their supporters with the aim of overthrowing “the system”. The extreme right in Germany is differentiated, with a spectrum ranging from neo-Nazis to *völkisch* ideologues and “Neue Rechte” (otherwise known as neo-Right or *new Right*) groupings. These groups share ideological characteristics, such as racism or assumptions about what constitutes the family, or they espouse the prejudices of an outdated social Darwinism, but they differ in their historical referencing and the conditions under which their own grouping came into being.

Whereas neo-Nazis refer positively to German fascism and present classic anti-semitic views, New Right ideologues tend to refer instead to Weimar Republic figures like Ernst Jünger, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck or Carl Schmitt and try to distance themselves from “old right” tropes with the aim of making their ideas more acceptable to a putatively mainstream society. To this end, they also engage in actions and narratives that are arguably more familiar when used in apparently more left-wing discourses. This seems particularly important in the German context, as these kinds of agit-prop cannot be viewed in isolation from their historical contexts in Germany. Germany is not only responsible for two world wars and was the birthplace of an ideology that ultimately led to the Holocaust, it also saw the establishing of East Germany (the DDR): a totalitarian dictatorship, in terms of which some holders of extreme right-wing views often position themselves.

This article will not focus on traditional neo-Nazis with generally positive views of National Socialism, but rather on those who are trying to recast the term “right-wing” and to accord it an image or set of values far removed from “Hitlerism”. Specifically, I focus on the publication *Sezession* and examine which particular kinds of articulation find expression in its pages and whether specific patterns of interpretation can be identified when it comes to its contributors’ perspectives on German history. I first give a brief introduction to the context, the publication’s contributors, and the magazine itself, in order to then tease out, on the basis of articles from the online edition of *Sezession* over a six-month period (from September 1 2021 to February 28 2022), what specific *patterns of argumentation* can be discerned on its pages, before summarizing its significance when it comes to dealing with arguments from the New Right.ⁱ

The Institut für Staatspolitik (Institute for State Policy), Antaios and *Sezession*

The most influential New Right thinktank at the moment is the Institut für Staatspolitik (IfS), set up by Götz Kubitschek and Karlheinz Weißmann in 2000, legally recognized as an association and based at Schnellroda in eastern Germany. According to Weißmann, the IfS was to become a “Reemtsma Institute of the Right” (Weißmann, cited in Stein 1999). As director of the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (Hamburg Institute for Social Research), Jan Philipp Reemtsma caused a public stir with two controversial Wehrmacht exhibitions. Kubitschek and Weißmann saw a shining example in how political narratives could be influenced in the pre-political sphere and wanted to follow up on this from a right-wing perspective (cf. Speit 2020: 10). Both founders, as well as the editor-in-chief of the right-wing conservative newspaper *Junge Freiheit*, Dieter Stein, were members of the “Deutsche Gildenschaft”, a student fraternity, which is a typical pathway for some from the New Right, as it was for former Nazis. The institute is represented by Erik Lehnert. The task of the IfS was primarily to work with young scholars and to further develop research and scholarship within the New Right movement (Kellershohn 2010: 16f.). In this context, the institute’s research fields are divided into five themes: “State and Society”, “Politics and Identity”, “Immigration and Integration”, “Education”, and “War and Crisis”. In addition to lectures, so-called ‘academies’ are held twice a year, at which authors well-known in new-right circles, such as Martin Lichtmesz (actually a pseudonym of the Austrian Martin Semlitsch), Erik Lehnert or Benedikt Kaiser, as well as invited guests from other European countries and the US, are invited to speak. In addition, the IfS is closely associated with the publishing house Antaios – owned incidentally by Kubitschek – which distributes New Right (or neo-Right) literature from other publishers. It also publishes studies relating to the five themes mentioned above, as well as the bi-monthly magazine *Sezession*, examined in more detail here.

The name of the journal hints at its program. ‘Sezession’ comes from the Latin *secessio*, meaning a seceding or separation from a particular entity, and “refers to the detaching of individual territories from a state. The goal of secessionists (or separatists) is to form a new sovereign state or to join another, already existing state after secession” (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung glossary, 2022). On the homepage of the Antaios publishing house, the magazine is described as a step for achieving this goal: “*Sezession* is a political-cultural magazine; we consider it to be unruly, intellectual, and courageous. Anyone who lives in Germany with an alert eye and mind will be ashamed of his [*sic*] left-liberal boyhood [*sic*] dreams and look to the right, consequently to us, consequently to our magazine. *Sezession* combines thoughts, arguments, and solutions six times a year over 70 pages” (Antaios 2022). The magazine was founded in 2003, the year in which one of the founders of the neo-Right movement, Armin Mohler, died, with the idea of continuing his intellectual legacy (see for example Laskowski 2018). Women also contribute to the publication, including Ellen Kositzka (Kubitschek’s wife) and Caroline Sommerfeld. A look at the other authors quickly reveals the close interweaving between the IfS, Antaios, and *Sezession*, where the names Lichtmesz, Kaiser, and Lehnert also appear. In addition, there are other regular authors, such as Sellner and Fiß, both active in the neo-Nazi milieu and later leaders of the “Identitarian Movement” in Austria and Germany, as well as Jonas Schick and Nils Wegner, who contribute on youth-related topics, and Heino Bosselmann, who publishes on many blogs. There are also regular guest contributions from external authors. *Sezession*, which Kellershohn calls a

“bridgehead of conservative journalism” (Kellershohn 2009: 266), is approached in this study as a “right-wing intellectual magazine” which does not try to appeal to a mass audience but instead purports to focus on the “intellectual development” of its readership. The editors put it this way:

“*Sezession* does not work on a broad scale, but on the cutting edge. This means that the goal of our magazine is not to reach as many readers as possible. What is important to us are the right readers, and these are those to whom the complexity of the world and the differentiated nature of right-wing, conservative thinking in particular do not want to remain hidden” (Verein für Staatspolitik e.V. 2022).

A predetermined structure is dispensed with; rather, the authors’ perspectives determine the content and patterns of argumentation in the context of a roughly overarching theme. While Sellner frequently publishes on the topic of migration and national identity, Kaiser is concerned with addressing social issues from a right-wing perspective. Complementing the print editions of *Sezession* has been an internet blog of the same name, in existence now for more than a decade, on which additional articles are posted and where individual articles from the print edition can be found in downloadable pdf format, with the articles sorted by date of publication. What the texts have in common is that they do not contain any verifiable evidence. The online offerings sometimes link to other website, presumably with the intention of supporting the authors’ arguments. In contrast to the printed version, which must be planned and produced over a longer term, generators of the blog articles can respond to current events and react to each other’s contributions to the debate. In addition, the blog offers its readers the opportunity to discuss content in the ‘below the line’ comments section and to enter into an exchange with the authors. The content of the articles covers a broad spectrum, ranging from political opinion to columns on current events, theoretical and philosophical essays, and book reviews. The articles often approach or attempt to stretch the boundaries of what is “permissible”, being provocative and flirting with illegality, and thus, in keeping with the strategies of the New Right, they push the boundaries of what can be said further and further in order to shift “the discourse” to the right. The quality of the articles varies widely, from apparently sophisticated to polemical. With the help of a critical discourse analysis based on 46 issues of the print version of *Sezession*, Bigge already worked out the significance of the categories “ethnicity, thinking in terms of inequality, political authoritarianism, and identitarian conception of society”. Here he notes “that the ‘New Right,’ despite its preserving ‘distance’ from National Socialism, tends toward strategies of relativization and trivialization” (Bigge 2022: 77) and, with regard to German history, the roles of perpetrator and victim are reversed (cf. Bigge 2022: 77). Before going into more detail about further aspects of thematization, however, I will first set out my research procedure.

Methodological approach

A total of 234 articles were put up on the blog version of *Sezession* in the period from September 1 2021 to February 28 2022. The selection of the period was based on specific events during this time, which both enable a comparison with actors in other countries and also refer to specific events in the German context. These include the (still ongoing) debates about the Covid-19 pandemic and the political and societal handling of it, as well as the mandatory vaccination of special groups of people, such as medical personnel, which was the subject of much controversy in Germany and Austria. The fall months were

marked by the Bundestag elections at the end of September, negotiations between parties, and the resulting formation of a coalition government. By the beginning of February, tensions between Russia and Ukraine were already becoming apparent prior to Russia's February 24 invasion, which called for positions to be taken by many on Germany's extreme right.

In order to reduce the material and analyse only thematically relevant contributions, I used a qualitative content analysis method by searching all 234 contributions for the following keywords: National Socialism, fascism, GDR, freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, democracy, independence, equality, dictatorship, and language. The selection of the terms already implies the assumption that they are interdependent and could be interwoven in the contributions' respective lines of argument. The keyword search referred exclusively to the blog posts; readers' comments were not analyzed. This could, however, be a promising avenue for further evaluation to investigate how the content of posts influences discussions about the topics they cover. After this initial whittling down of the material, 111 posts remained, of which 43 were from guest authors. In a next step, the contributions were thematically clustered and coded in order to examine in more detail which topics play a role and how the ways they are presented relate to the contributors' interpretations of freedom and democratic values, particularly within the context of German history. This is based on the assumption that, due to specific historical contexts such as the singularity of German fascism and the SED dictatorship in the last century, the extreme right in Germany must articulate itself in a special form in order to project a positive image of its own nation and to promote their politics for Germany.

Many narratives in the far right around themes of freedom and equality are reproduced in the same way around the globe: starting with the great Jewish world conspiracy, the "Great Reset" or the "great replacement", the notions of a left-wing sovereignty of opinion, or even the interpretations of a coronavirus dictatorship that lead to a wide variety of conspiracy narratives. Underlying all these narratives is the idea of a superior power, which the extreme right opposes as resistant and oppositional – always, however, with the interpretation that they themselves are victims of these same supposedly greater powers, and thus become activists for their own supposedly marginalized position. Kfir argues:

“The contemporary extreme far-Right has taken on a pseudo-intellectual, victimization master frame that uses liberal, democratic themes to call for the establishment of a racist, neo-reactionary, macho, and illiberal society. On the one hand, these victimization narratives serve the extreme right to generate simplified explanations for complex conditions, and on the other hand, they offer legitimization for violent action, as this is the only way to free oneself from the ‘victim role’” (Kfir 2021).

According to Kfir (2021), the use of these narratives arises “...from the far-right's increasing nativism, patriotism and romanticized notions of the past”. This may certainly be true for parts of the far right, but for the New Right in Germany in particular it was and is a special concern to distinguish itself from the old right-wing structures and to generate a new image far removed from ‘Hitlerei’ [Hitlerism]” (cf. Blum 2022: 82 ff.). If the New Right in Germany presents the internationally common tropes of a dictatorship of opinion, vaccination dictatorship and the like, this will, I assume, be articulated in a special form against the background of German history with two dictatorships in the last century. Because of the distancing from the traditional right, this can hardly be accompanied by romanticizing

ideas, as is common in Italy, for example, when veterans of fascism refer to self-images based on a romanticized “myth of self-sacrifice for the honor of Italy” (Faust 2021: 51). In my investigation, however, I was able to draw out some surprising conclusions: whereas with regard to National Socialism it is always a matter of rejecting or relativizing narratives, the history of the GDR is drawn upon to substantiate one’s own resistance and the correctness of one’s own position.

Overall, three rough patterns of argumentation with regard to Germany’s National Socialist past could be discerned from the material with a view to my research question:

1. the NS and its structures continue to exist and we are the ones rebelling against it;
2. the NS with its race-based ideal types was wrong in the “post-democracy” way these ideas are repeated – we, however, are the good right-wingers;
3. we’re right – not in spite of but because of Auschwitz.

At the same time, these seem to contradict each other in part, which does not stop the authors from picking up several of these narratives in a single article. The arguments remain quite vague and in terms partly undefined to the end, which leaves scope for readers to insert their own viewpoints, experiences, and opinions into the texts and so to be able to engage with one or the other argument.

As far as the history of the GDR is concerned, this is referred to in a less contradictory manner. These tend to feature two interwoven lines of argument, which are drawn upon to substantiate political actions from the right-wing milieu against the background of West German-East German history in the struggle for (freedom of) opinion and supposed democratic values:

1. critical thinking and a true understanding of democracy must have evolved, as it did in the GDR;
2. the experience of growing up and being socialized in the GDR dictatorship leads to more sensitivity towards dictatorial rule and thus resistance.

In the following, the core results will be presented on the basis of passages from some *Sezession* articles.

National Socialism as a Tool for Legitimizing Right-Wing Ideology, Action and Practice

The Right in Resistance to the Continuing Dictatorship

One line of argument is to use National Socialism, its traditions and the rejection of these for one’s own positioning and feelings of victimhood.

It is assumed that there is currently no democracy. This is justified by linking to a rather left-wing argumentation. In particular, the old left-wing student movement in West Germany and the groups and political organizations that emerged from it criticized the lack of a true reckoning with Nazi crimes in

1960s Germany. They accused the still-young Federal Republic of having enabled former National Socialist elites to remain in positions of power instead of condemning the perpetrators and imposing appropriate punishments. Since there were hardly any “unencumbered” judges, for example, and following on from the transfer of judicial power by the Allies to the western German states (or *Länder*) in 1949, perpetrators were quickly appointed to the judiciary in the FRG and thus became “judges in their own cause”, which led to relatively lenient sentences. On the whole, it was easy for the perpetrators in West Germany to continue their old careers. In the GDR, on the other hand, such a return to normalcy was not possible for offenders. Taking up this circumstance, plus the interpretation that the Allies had imposed democracy on the FRG and that it had not come into being through the population itself prompts, for example, the author Bosselmann to put forward the following argument in the right-wing blog *Sezession*:

“Because the country had to be built up, because society had to catch its breath, it was of no interest at all that the middle class, not only of the judiciary, consisted of Nazis, followers, hangers-on and dupes.

Followers, fellow travelers and Duckmäusern [Yes-person] also make up the bulk of the well-behaved civil service today. The self-image of the civil servant consists virtually in loyalty, at least in indolent conformity, which is generously rewarded with state money. Those who want to move up should also exemplify the gratuitousness of the ‘upright democrat’, as phrased in [current president Frank-Walter] Steinmeier’s speeches.

Those who do not speak out loudly against the right and at least against the AfD should at least be clearly affected by the fact that they exist. At least be concerned! And a nod of the head for the fact that the state organs put these probably under suspicion and still better under observation. Courageous is, who stands up for the state and its ideological main doctrine, which demands: if possible, no room for articulation for the remaining opposition, if possible, no employment of critical thinkers in the public service” (Bosselmann 2021).

Here he argues in a leftist style too, alluding to occupational bans that were the consequence of the “Radikalenerlass” (or Anti-Radical Decree) that came into force in Germany in 1972. The aim of this legislation was to check job applicants to the civil service for their loyalty to the constitution and their commitment to democratic principles. Those who had attracted the authorities’ attention for their anti-constitutional activities or who were members of anti-constitutional organizations were not hired. What exactly counts as anti-constitutional was again not specified and was examined on a case-by-case basis and decided by the hiring authorities. Just as the 1950 Adenauer Decree was directed primarily against state employees who belonged to left-wing parties, such as members of the KPD, the Anti-Radical Decree also focused on left-wingers and communists, even though the law targeted right-wing extremists as well (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2022). Thus, activists critical of the status quo were particularly affected by the occupational bans. In 2021, Bosselmann himself had the experience of no longer being employed as a schoolteacher (presumably due to his contributions to right-wing magazines (cf. Bosselmann 2021b). Now he sees himself in opposition, facing a “ruling elite”. To characterize this elite, he again uses terms that were highly significant under National Socialism: he

insinuates that contemporary society, which insists on diversity, is neither capable of discourse nor tolerant. Diversity is “rather a uniformity” (Bosselmann 2021a). He further states:

“Salvation, redemption and salvation are near, if only good and right action would be taken, for the climate, for justice, for the inclusion of all. The fact that this allegedly urgently required unified action in turn forces into a kind of uniformity is not noticeable, since the uniform is now a motley one” (Bosselmann 2021a).

He thus assumes a society similar to that under National Socialism, or describes it as a continuation of it. As right-wingers, they would now be victims of “Gleichschaltung” (an enforced conformity of values), which again references a well-known victimization trope.

The NS as a template for classifying current social conditions from a far-right perspective

Using a text by Martin Sellner on the introduction of compulsory vaccination to tackle the spread of Covid-19 in Germany and Austria, a second line of argument will now be presented. This shares some assumptions of the narrative above, but should not be read as evidence of an adoption of some left-wing interpretations, as was the case in the previous example.

Again, his argument is based on the position that the current social system is not a democratic one. Rather, Sellner argues that: “The post-democratic pandemic prescription policy in conjunction with the global biopower of the pharmaceutical companies deprives us of any political room for maneuver on any political issue in extreme cases.” This is referring to the supposed curtailing of freedom of expression and the limited room for maneuver for right-wing actors. He justifies this with the fact that unvaccinated (right-wingers) would be de facto denied access to public spaces due to compulsory vaccination, and that this would result in them being prevented from taking part in demonstrations, limiting their right to protest and freely state their political views. In contrast to the neo-Right author Karlheinz Weißmann, Sellner does not see compulsory vaccination as a measure for safeguarding people through public-health measures. Instead, he argues:

“In fact, even in its imperial beginnings, compulsory vaccination was a tool for ‘optimization’ rather than ‘salvation’. Systematization, surveillance, and mobilization of biopolitical resources, in short, a national population control, was the driving force” (Sellner 2022).

Sellner goes on to make the case for the relationship between technology and humanity in the remainder of his treatise, inviting his readers to imagine

“... a Nazi state confronted with the possibilities of modern genetic engineering. Let us subtract all the regulations and restraints that exist today and assume that much of what is now in its infancy would be feasible.

What would one do in a breeding and race state as soon as methods such as [the gene-editing tool] CRISPR make possible an increasingly precise design of embryos? Does one perfect these

techniques to breed one's own racial ideal in a test-tube. Does one use the existing 'intermixed' people only more as a biological spare parts store?

Would it not thus become a mere larva for the generation of a new genetic breeding product? If the ideal is not the preservation of a specific folk existence in its unavailability, but the realization of a 'pure' singular race ideal, these technologies would come as called. This step would be justified, like the perfection of rocket technology, with the Darwinian struggle for survival and the arms race against the enemy" (Sellner 2022).

Ultimately, he sees this measure, if applied to Germans, as a

"... place of origin of the technological singularity. Its effective power would put its 'carrier nation' at the top of the world for a while. The price, however, would be its identity and its essence. Biotechnology, which was implemented with the pretext of strengthening and optimizing the people, would have become the destroyer of the people in this thought game" (Sellner 2022).

His thought experiment leads him to the demand, as with many in today's New Right, to question our relationship with technology. Without specifically comparing current society, as he sees it, with the Third Reich, with his "Gedankenexperiment" he manages the rhetorical trick of justifying his position with historical awareness and a critical view of German fascism. By recourse to a somehow evolved and nationally conscious identity, he is thus able not only to distinguish himself from a liberal concept of freedom, but also to use the critique for a conservative positioning that does not align itself with the old right and yet still rebels against what he views as the current societal set-up, which he tacitly accuses of functioning just like the Nazi state. He also suggests that current policies (relating to measures to combat the pandemic) are driving the creation of a new "human type" – a concern shared by other extreme right-wingers. This idea is not only borrowed from National Socialist ideology but also shares features with the argument described above, whereby a "Gleichschaltung" is increasingly being promoted which makes individual and "free" thinking impossible. The argument could be summarized from a right-wing perspective as follows: the NS with its racial stereotyping was wrong. In a "post-democracy" world, these ideas are repeated because, as with National Socialism, "they" want to take away our freedom and push for the creation of a new type of human – we, on the other hand, are the good right-wingers who are trying to prevent this and who refer to our true, historically derived roots.

Unlike the first narrative, this one does not adopt leftist traditions of thought, nor does it assume that it represents a straightforward continuation of National Socialist ideology. Rather, the writer is arguing that the Nazi state can be described as a clearly defined period of time or as a closed ideological box. This can now be transferred to today's society like a template. As he sees it, contemporary society has left democratic principles and personal freedoms behind in its search for and attempted imposition of a conformity of values.

National Socialism as a Scourging of Freedom Against Which One Must Revolt

Two further patterns can be identified that relate to National Socialism and justify the political actions of the right today. The Israeli psychoanalyst Zvi Rix once said, “Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz.” Such positioning has been coined “secondary anti-semitism”: as an anti-semitism not despite, but because of, Auschwitz. However, the topic has not only been exploited by some on the extreme right to make their anti-semitism palatable. Kohlstruck argues that the category “the people” is central to right-wing extremism. In this context, “organic-holistic concepts of the people” are the connecting factor between historical völkisch movements and today’s extreme right. Since some of the more pacifist aspects of “völkisches Denken” were downplayed by the NS, the extreme right needs its own strategies in order to “question the delegitimization of the organic conception of the people and of history on its part and thus to promote the völkisch self-confidence of the Germans” (Kohlstruck 2011).

In order to accomplish this, on the one hand, the NS itself is condemned, as also described in the above example, and this is countered by a concept of the people that represents a historically evolved people instead of a “retort people” – that is, one not produced organically. Some right-wingers argue that Germany is not a free country, that its citizens are obliged to submit to re-education and to take on board a “Schuld kult” (cult of guilt) that would prohibit right-wing and oppositional thinking. In Bosselmann’s words (2021a):

“It is very irritating for the green-left united front when conservative and right-wing thinking asserts itself precisely in a state of hostility, even unabashedly revitalizing itself here and there. If, despite immense effort, state-desired educational and healing successes fail to materialize, this absolutely contradicts the neo-Enlightenment propaganda regime. Hence the growing hatred, which has become part of the state’s reason for being: soon everyone who does not explicitly profess the only recognized conviction is considered a case of observation or suspicion, because they allegedly disregard ‘human dignity’. In order to clarify what human dignity actually consists of beyond the mere dictum, one would have to argue about concepts of man and anthropology; however, exactly this is completely out of the question. In general, every government becomes a regime when it dismantles the separation of powers and restricts freedoms, for whatever purpose” (Bosselmann 2021a).

Here it becomes clear how he interprets political education, which aims at coming to terms with Nazi crimes, as an attack on one’s own ideas – in this case, the tabooing of völkisch thinking. From this, in turn, he deduces that he himself will become the victim of a regime. In our society, he no longer recognizes a democracy but a regime, which he also describes with National Socialist vocabulary. Thus, he believes “that with diversity recently rather a new uniformity is meant, with tolerance the stigmatization of the opposition, with pluralism Gleichschaltung and with cosmopolitanism the end of the nation” (Bosselmann 2021a).

To make a völkisch perspective acceptable, one that is detached from the NS, is also the goal of another type of argument. This one also assumes an encroachment on the right's political freedom of action to deal primarily with National Socialism through the prism of contemporary discourse's supposed moral superiority. In 2018, the leader of the AfD party and parliamentary group, Alexander Gauland, caused a scandal by relativizing National Socialism in Germany at the national congress of the AfD's junior organization: "Hitler and the Nazis are just a drop of birdshit in over 1000 years of successful German history." Earlier, he had already sparked outrage at another meeting: "There is no need to hold these 12 years against us anymore. They no longer affect our identity today. And we say so. That is why we also have the right to take back not only our country, but also our past."

The same type of argument can also be found in *Sezession*, as is clear from the following example. Here, the author Erik Lehnert refers to a publication by Per Leo, in which he argues for a modern culture of remembrance with a wider historical perspective compared to a focus just on the 12 years of the Third Reich:

"One thing is clear: this part of history belongs to us, no matter where our ancestors stood. Every German is part of the German community of destiny that has existed for more than a thousand years. But it is certainly pathological to pick out twelve years because one thinks that one's own family history is something like the great history in miniature. This is vain and produces paragons of virtue like Per Leo, who want to dictate to us what memory culture should look like" (Lehnert 2021).

Here, the author takes a specific case, but ultimately also generalizes that they (the right-wingers) are against a hegemonic opinion and are resistant to being told what to think. They see themselves as militant and motivated to no longer submit to what they see as a status quo of opinion.

If one summarizes these patterns, perhaps the following statement could be made: We're right-wing – not despite but because of Auschwitz.

This is accompanied by a relativizing of Nazi criminality. On the one hand, this is asserted to be a temporary and short-lived phenomenon that should not be given special attention against the broader backdrop of German history. On the other, it is also suggested here that, as an oppressed minority, one should stand up for a freedom of opinion that would rebel under the burden of coming to terms with the Nazi regime alone. The reference to National Socialism is thus intended to have an exculpatory effect and at the same time to accusingly interpret new regimes that prevent or try to control their members' political opinions. This too betrays an assumption that contemporary society is not a democratic system. Instead, the writers examined here see themselves as oppositional forces, as genuine democrats who stand for an open and tolerant discourse, including when it comes to interpreting the past. In this context, Adorno's (1971) notion of the "singularity" of National Socialist crimes is seen as invalid and placed in a broader context in which genocidal criminality and other extremes of behavior limited to a particular timespan are no longer deemed significant.

Right-wing Patterns of Interpretation of West German-East German History as a Justification for the Defensibility of Right-Wing Thought in the Fight against the Existing Society

The references to the former GDR regime are quite different. Firstly, political education with a view to the East German past, in contrast to education about the National Socialist regime, has received less attention. It is hence less often used, unlike in the above examples of opinion with respect to education about the Third Reich, by the blog writers studied here to substantiate their purportedly suppressed position in society.

However, approval ratings for the far-right party, the AfD, are particularly high in the *Länder* of the former East Germany. Whereas across the whole of Germany it received around 15% of the vote (in September 2022, the time of the most recent national elections), this rose to an average of 27% in eastern Germany. The reasons for this are multifaceted and still being investigated. But one thing is clear: the AfD has succeeded in systematically building up its presence and party structures in eastern Germany, where its views challenging Covid-19 vaccination (and indeed vaccination more generally), immigration, gender diversity, and ecologically sustainable policies has met with approval among some sections of the populace. The idea of a kind of fascism of the left, a ban on freedom of speech, and the notion that people are living in a dictatorship – or are at least being dictated to – have gained wide currency. Members of supposedly mainstream society are seen by some right-wing commentators as “henchmen [*sic*] of the system” or as “followers, fellow travelers and cowards”, for example. The bloggers seem to view themselves as the only true defenders of democracy. And this is justified with recourse to the GDR’s history. The experience and recognition of dictatorship and the need to act critically within it spring from this, as is clear from this example:

“The heavier burdens [caused by current global crises] go hand in hand with an unprecedented ideologization of the entire society. The real socialist GDR was also characterized by this, but with the difference that there a majority of the country never fell for the propaganda of the rulers, but saw itself forced into line – by the ‘iron hand’ of the dictatorship. [...]

Yes, people grumbled in the GDR, they behaved opportunistically, they withdrew into the niches that existed subculturally in even greater variety than today, they were afraid of persecution, at least spying, but they identified as little with the ‘Aktuellen Kamera [daily news broadcast in the GDR] as with the banners and political festivals. The majority went along with it, but was almost subversively keen on a second reading of the official pronouncements, and at that time found it in literature, among other things.

Today it’s different: the majority identifies with the slogans of the left-green establishment. Schools have long since re-evaluated the commitment to this in terms of civics rather than the qualified critical reflection on it. There is less talk than ever of an open society, but rather of an increasing unity that follows the uniformly left-green standards.

Never before in German history has there been a situation in which the only critical opposition came from the right. Now this is the case. There is no longer any other level of objection and opposition” (Bosselmann 2021c).

The writer seems to be saying that someone brought up in East Germany would be familiar with how dictatorships work, so it is experience that gives one knowledge. In addition, the writers advance the idea that criticism grew up independently in the GDR, which ultimately led to the regime’s fall. This trajectory is sometimes described as characteristic of an evolutionary democracy, because it was brought about by the citizens themselves, in contrast to the democratic structures imposed by the Allies in West Germany after the war:

“The West had forgotten that it had not grown evolutionarily into a democracy, which was its pride and joy, but owed this simply to the facts of the spring of 1945 and especially to the line at which the Soviet tanks had stopped by virtue of the Yalta Agreement. The rest was done by re-education” (Bosselmann 2021a).

This skepticism toward dictatorships and the experiences associated with it are also exploited by some right-wing writers to paint themselves as more resistant and determined. With the experience of having already rebelled once in the GDR, Bosselmann also pointed out that this is possible once again in order to gain comrades-in-arms:

“Our fallacy: we had no idea in 1989 that we were being taken over by a country exhausted of ideals. But apparently we are still less exhausted than the Steinmeier-Merkel nation. That is why, especially in Saxony and Thuringia and, in any case, more in the East, this strange reticence against the new ideologization of the old fatherland is stirring” (Bosselmann 2021c).

The narratives of the GDR thus offer some right-wingers a historical identification that legitimizes their political opinions and actions. In the context of distancing themselves from a National Socialist ideology that makes it difficult for figures on the extreme right to develop a positive narrative about its program and to construct a less freighted concept of “das Volk”, narratives around the GDR are ideally suited to their needs. These narratives could be summarized as: we are the true defenders of democracy because we have developed in an evolutionary manner, and we have become sensitized and therefore more resilient due to our experiences of the GDR dictatorship.

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined different patterns of argumentation, and to what extent two specific historical interpretations relevant to the German context are often used in a similar way to question the freedom of the individual, especially from a right-wing perspective. The idea that people are not really living in a democracy and that the writers quoted here are part of a persecuted and marginalized minority underlies much of their arguments. These ideas are by no means new in extreme-right circles. However, the recourse to German history in their writings evidences the extent to which members of the New Right may be willing and able to explain their viewpoints differently than may be the case in other nations, although this hypothesis merits further study. The patterns of argumentation range from

adopting tropes more common on the left (the anti-vaxxer movement, for example) to distancing, defensiveness, relativizing or self-assurance. But what the expressers of these opinion have in common is that they see themselves as defenders – and sincere interpreters – of democracy and freedom of opinion.

One limitation of this study is that the sample was rather small and so a more comprehensive analysis is called for. Based on these preliminary findings, however, it would also be intriguing to compare patterns of argumentation cross-nationally and to discuss these with other researchers and stakeholders.

It is of course crucial to address the risk that these types of argument pose. They can connect up and reinforce each other, especially on social media, and the unexamined assumptions behind them can lure the reader to become sensitized to extreme right-wing ideologies. People should be aware of the importance of defending their own positions and the importance of reclaiming the narratives and interpretations of terms like freedom, democracy, participation, and inclusion. It is still too easy to use these terms without defining them, leading to the risk of their co-option by others with more malign motivations. And finally, it is also a matter of recognizing that right-wingers can make “our” ideas of democracy disputable, because these allow for doubt. And that is why it remains imperative for us to argue for and defend them.

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