

Intervention Symposium

**“Worldbuilding and Worldbreaking:
New Spatialities of the Far-Right”**

“Far-right, that’s the others”:

Remembrance of Far-Right and Racist Violence in an East German City

Daniel Kubiak

Berlin Institute of Migration Research (BIM), Humboldt University of Berlin

Berlin, Germany

daniel.kubiak@hu-berlin.de

Introduction¹

There is a strange division in the German research landscape. Research on the former “East Germany”² rarely deals with the region as a post-migrant society, while migration research typically neglects the experience of the former East. This mutual disinterest shows its blind spots particularly when considering the memory of far-right violence in German cities since the country’s reunification. In contemporary urban studies, major “East German” cities are already considered to be arrival cities (El-Kayed et al. 2020) or “post-migrant” spaces and societies (Everts et al. 2020), and various scholars point out that the GDR and “East Germany” have a tradition of international immigration (Glorius 2020a, 2020b; Goel 2013; Müller and Poutrus 2005; Piesche 2006). Yet a powerful public discourse also sees “East Germany” as a region without significant experience of migration. In 1990, approximately 1% of the “East German” population had a migration background, though the number of international immigrants arriving in the cities of the former GDR has been increasing rapidly over the last decade. In many “East German” cities, more than 10% of residents do not have a German passport. In one neighbourhood of Magdeburg examined in this study, migrant youth aged 17 and under now form the majority.³

Migrants’ efforts to conform to the administration, language, social networks, and labour market of their respective cities of arrival in “East Germany” occur in a social and cultural space and discursive context that exhibits a specific far-right and racist past and present, one embedded in a broader framing of post-reunification Germany that maintains a

strong sense of difference between the former East and West (Kollmorgen 2022; Schwenzer 2021). Using Magdeburg as a case study, this contribution examines how the continuities of far-right violence and organising in Germany lead to ambivalences between and struggles over repression and recognition in public memory and discourse and in urban spatial practices of memorialisation. These struggles over discourse about the far-right and memorialisation of victims of far-right violence in turn shape strategies against the far-right. In what follows, I ask, who in the specific “East German” case city of Magdeburg remembers far-right violence and who does not, and where do these fault lines lie? I consider the specifics of the “East German” experience before and especially after 1990, as shaped by the stigmatisation of “the East” as a homogeneous far-right space. I argue that the “East German” practice of remembrance is challenged by othering discourses about “East Germany” and the real threat posed by far-right violence and networks.

Continuities and Manifestations of Far-Right Violence and Attitudes

The amalgamation of the cities of Hoyerswerda (East 1991), Lichtenhagen (East 1992), Mölln (West 1992), and Solingen (West 1993), sometimes known by the abbreviations Halle in the “East” and Hanau in the “West” (Oster and Henningsen 2022), has become a symbol of far-right violence. Racist arson attacks and pogroms⁴ occurred frequently during the post-reunification era, especially between 1991 and 1993, in Halle as well as many other German cities, in both the former East and West. Yet Magdeburg, capital of the “new” Bundesland Saxony-Anhalt, does not appear on this list. Despite experiencing three murders motivated by far-right ideologies since 1990 and the *Himmelfahrtskrawalle* (“Ascension Riots”) in 1994, Magdeburg has not garnered the same reputation as a “far-right” city in the public’s perception as seen in Hoyerswerda in 1991 or Rostock-Lichtenhagen in 1992, when there were similar riots and threats. The reasons for this can be found in the perception of the city by residents and others.

Far-right and racist violence in Magdeburg did not begin with the reunification of 1989/1990, although I will focus on it in this argument. Magdeburg was and is a city that has a history of more than 1,200 years, and had great importance in the Middle Ages. Like all German cities, it has since its founding in 805 CE several times witnessed anti-Semitic (a continuity since the Middle Ages), colonialist (Germany had colonies from the 1880s until 1919), and racist violence (from the late 19th century when Richard and Cosima Wagner

established Gobineau's race theory in Germany and through the period of extreme racist ideology and violence of the Nazi period between 1933 and 1945). There are a few documented far-right and racist assaults from the GDR period, which can be attributed to the way the SED leadership handled far-right violence. Bernd Wagner and Harry Waibel have undertaken a reappraisal of the GDR and provide evidence of the attempted cover-ups by the SED, secret service, and police (Wagner 2014; Waibel 1996). Accordingly, everything that followed after 1989/1990 had a prehistory and is part of a longer continuity of far-right and racist violence within the city. At the same time, far-right violence in the 1990s became even more of a major and, in its manifestation, new grounding for the everyday experience of many people in Magdeburg.

The history of far-right assaults, networks, organising, murders, and symbolic and spatial struggles since 1990 is both long and well-documented, not least thanks to local civil-society actors and organisations for remembrance culture (Miteinander e.V. / Arbeitsstelle Rechtsextremismus 2015).⁵ Yet it must also be emphasised that the clustering and sheer number of instances of far-right violence is quite striking. In Magdeburg, three people were murdered in far-right attacks: Torsten Lamprecht in 1992, Frank Böttcher in 1997, and Rico Langenstein in 2008 (ibid.).⁶ Based on the number of people killed alone, the city is therefore a significant location for far-right⁷ violence in "East Germany". In addition, there are relevant far-right riots that are very strongly associated with a far-right everyday culture. Many assaults on youth clubs, parties, alternative centres, and concerts that did not involve fatalities are often not documented, because most of these incidents are tracked by civil society or anti-fascist groups, and their ability to archive every case is limited. In the 1990s, police and city administration in "East Germany" was, very often, not helpful in reporting far-right violence. None of the four specific cases outlined above are visible on the official city website.

Commemoration work in Magdeburg, as described above, is mainly carried out by civil-society organisations. In the city chronicle on the municipal government's homepage, there are no references to far-right acts of violence and riots since 1990. The association Miteinander e.V., which established the concept of mobile counselling against far-right ideology in Saxony-Anhalt, is a prominent civil-society actor. It is apparent that Magdeburg has a far-right past and present. This is important when discussing the suppression and recognition of this in the context of renewed far-right mobilisation and violence today.

Stigmatisation and Othering of the “Brown East”?

“East German” cities and “East Germany” have experienced a discursive devaluation since 1990 associated with stigmatisation and othering (Ahbe et al. 2009). The othering concept is taken from postcolonial theories (Castro Varela and Dhawan 2005; Said 1978). I draw on the othering concept to apply the hegemonic power asymmetry between “East” and “West” to German–German negotiation processes. According to this concept, knowledge about the “other” is produced and constructed through culturalising attributions that refer, among other things, to origins, gender, or class, and which results in a stereotypical and homogeneous representation of the “other” that has a stigmatising and exclusionary effect. Originally, the othering concept was developed by Edward Said in order to critically question and deconstruct the attributions made by scholars in the “Occident” (e.g. France, the United Kingdom) to the “Orient”.

The transferability of the concept to the German East–West relationship has already been discussed many times (Cooke 2005; Heft 2020; Matthäus 2021; Roth 2008). According to this, “the East” is undergoing a culturalising “othering” in the German East–West relationship. This includes the fact that “the East” is often described as backward, a place that has not yet arrived in the modern democratic era and therefore has many problems that are considered to have been overcome in West German “normal society”. This is often explained with a “catching up modernisation” framework (Geißler 2014). This description of “the East” serves as a demarcation in order to be able to talk about “the West”. In other words, the description of “the other” serves to construct “one’s own”. One consequence of this is that “East Germany” is, for example, constructed in media discourses (Ahbe et al. 2009) as a homogeneous space that becomes a kind of negative comparative foil. This pattern is also found in depictions of the far-right in Germany. The far-right, as described above, is a relevant social phenomenon in “East Germany”, but discursively located as seemingly only existing there (Heft 2018; Lessenich 2012; Quent 2015; Scholz 2021). In this context, “East Germany” is described as a homogeneous space in which even the very different reasons for far-right violence or far-right electoral behaviour are not regionally differentiated. Yet it is also quite possible to discuss urban–rural differences rather than locate this on a simple East–West axis. The majority of people in Germany live in urban areas. We can see differences in voting decisions between rural and urban areas. More of “East Germany” remains rural. Also, there is a north–south divide in both election results and wealth. In the northern Länder, like

Schleswig-Holstein or Niedersachsen, both in the former West, people are wealthier than in Bayern or Baden-Württemberg in the south; and in the north the far-right AfD has achieved fewer electoral gains. In discourses about Dortmund's "Nordstadt", Heilbronn, and parts of Hessen, where the AfD became the second strongest party in the last regional elections, these facts are not homogeneously described as a "West German" phenomenon, but explained individually, locally, and regionally. So, the "West" is analysed individually, but the "East" is explained homogeneously.

These simplistic representations imply a form of othering that also leads to stigmatisation (Goffman 1963). Accordingly, the normalisation of the "West" and the othering of the "East" are always associated with devaluations. If we take the example of the far-right, this discursive shift leads to a situation in which "East Germany" is also devalued as a homogeneous "far-right space". In this way, very real problems become seemingly insurmountable fixed facts. As a result, city politicians and marketing offices in "East Germany" worry that the (inter)national image of their respective cities could be damaged by far-right activities, and this could have a negative impact on the relocating of companies and tourism, as recently seen. The major transnational company Intel, for example, decided to construct a large computer-chip factory in Magdeburg. In my research, however, asylum seekers and refugees described, for example, the city Immigration Office as being ineffective and racist. In this context, the victims of violence are often forgotten or not addressed. Thus, in addition to actual far-right and racist violence, the discursive stigmatisation of "East German" cities also results in specific contexts of action for their respective urban societies.

In looking more specifically at Magdeburg, I want to present the difficulties that othering and stigmatisation present for the city's residents and urban social fabric. The fact that city administrations react very ponderously to far-right violence and choose not to remember it well or at all is not a uniquely "East German" phenomenon.⁸ However, various actors in "East German" cities are exposed to the effects of the othering described above, which greatly curtails their options for action and for countering further far-right mobilisation and violence.

Analysis and Hypotheses on "Mutual Othering"

From my observations, I identify a circular argument for dealing with far-right violence in Magdeburg, which, formulated as a hypothesis, can also be applied to other "East German"

cities. It assumes that “Magdeburg” is subject to “mutual othering”. *On the one hand*, especially in German media discourse, “East German” cities are subject to an external attribution that is linked to a stigmatisation as far-right spaces. *On the other hand*, the problem of the far-right’s past and present, as experienced within the city itself, is shifted to others. These others are far-right youth from the countryside or from “the West”, based on interviews I have conducted in Magdeburg. The problem is shifted in both spatial and generational terms. People in the city centre told me that far-right citizens live in suburban housing blocks. People there told me that it’s not in our neighbourhood, they come from the countryside. A common “East German” narrative also states that far-right leaders came from “West Germany” and established structures in the “East”.

There are some empirical facts in all of that, but they also show that far-right violence is thus reciprocally attributed as a problem always attributable to “others”. This attribution of the “other” to the entire “East” and to individual “East German” states or cities as homogeneous far-right spaces, is powerful. This is supported by election results, documented acts of violence, and everyday experiences of racism. Emblematic places emerge from factually justified and documented acts and circumstances. City names become synonymous with far-right violence. Terms such as the “brown East”, and the media and discursive portrayal of this “spatial construct”, lead to a persistent stigma (Goffman 1963) with which administrations, institutions, politicians, civil-society actors, and residents of “East German” cities must find an appropriate way to confront. This places them in a discursive dilemma: if they commemorate the victims of far-right violence or problematise the heightened far-right attitudes of urban society, there is a fear of stigmatisation. But if they do not, there is a danger that far-right violence will not be sufficiently recognised and thus no effective strategies against the right can be developed.

These two forms of othering, which have reciprocal effects on urban society and space from both the outside and the inside, also affect the strategies employed against the far-right in the cities. They are primarily enacted on the initiative of civil-society actors, whose goal is to commemorate events in the public urban space and make them visible in these public spaces. At the same time, they try not to let the topic or specific events become a label or emblem for the city. Thus, city administrations and official urban politics and institutions do not or only marginally participate in commemoration work, most clearly in evidence when well-known far-right violence is not documented in public city chronicles.

To date, Magdeburg has not yet become a symbolic place in this discourse, though it struggles with its effects nonetheless and the refusal to confront the city's far-right past and present for fear of stigmatisation and legitimating the discursive framing of the city as "East German" other makes further challenges likely. The risk is an emboldened far-right presence and the deepening of the othering discourse. The city's society, administration, and politics will then have to position themselves accordingly. Such a designation carries the risk of being stigmatised as a city along the familiar East–West framing, and this must obviously be avoided. It is also counterproductive for initiatives "against the right" if the city is marked as a homogeneous far-right space and positive work is rendered invisible and more difficult. Accordingly, it would be desirable for city administration and politics, together with civil-society actors and residents themselves, to have an open discourse about how engaging and presenting the memory of far-right violence can also effectively lead to change.

In a proactive approach against far-right and racist everyday life, and for the prevention of far-right and racist acts of violence in an "East German" city like Magdeburg, this interconnection must be considered in order to be able to design successful prevention and deradicalisation strategies. Thus, a question that must be answered is: how can far-right violence be remembered publicly, and by all actors, without stigmatising the entire city space and its social fabric? Currently, it seems to act rather as a hindrance and to impede just and progressive coexistence in a "post-migrant" urban society (Foroutan 2019), where the remembrance of far-right violence only occurs marginally and is organised by individual groups, but not reflected as an act of solidarity nor as a collective memory. Successful concepts from "West German" cities could, therefore, not be transferred one-to-one to "East German" cities because they are not subject to this form of "mutual othering". And because of their particular position in the East–West dynamic of othering and stigmatisation, "East German" cities such as Magdeburg must develop their own approach to tackling the problem of far-right history and mobilisation. This can also counter the stigmatising spatial discourse that has come to define post-reunification Germany.

References

- Ahbe T, Gries R and Schmale W (eds) (2009) *Die Ostdeutschen in den Medien: Das Bild von den Anderen nach 1990*. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag
- Castro Varela M and Dhawan N (2005) *Postkoloniale Theorie: Eine kritische Einführung*.

- Bielefeld: transcript Verlag
- Cooke P (2005) *Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia*. New York: Bloomsbury
- El-Kayed N, Bernt M, Hamann U and Pilz M (2020) Peripheral estates as arrival spaces? Conceptualising research on arrival functions of new immigrant destinations. *Urban Planning* 5(3):103-114
- Everts J, Juraschek K A, Fleischmann L and Ringel F (2020) Ostdeutschland multikulturell und postmigrantisch. In S Becker and M Naumann (eds) *Regionalentwicklung in Ostdeutschland: Dynamiken, Perspektiven und der Beitrag der Humangeographie* (pp235-247). Cham: Springer
- European Commission (2021) “Working Definition for Violent Right-Wing Extremism (VRWE).” https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-02/VRWE%20working%20definition_en.pdf (last accessed 19 March 2024)
- Foroutan N (2019) *Die postmigrantische Gesellschaft: Ein Versprechen der pluralen Demokratie*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag
- Geißler R (2014) *Die Sozialstruktur Deutschlands*. Wiesbaden: Springer
- Glorius B (2020a) Migrationsgeschichte Ostdeutschlands I. Von der Zeit der DDR bis in die 1990er-Jahre. In S Becker and M Naumann (eds) *Regionalentwicklung in Ostdeutschland: Dynamiken, Perspektiven und der Beitrag der Humangeographie* (pp211-222). Cham: Springer
- Glorius B (2020b) Migrationsgeschichte Ostdeutschlands II. Internationale Migration in Ostdeutschland und ihre gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung seit der Jahrtausendwende. In S Becker and M Naumann (eds) *Regionalentwicklung in Ostdeutschland: Dynamiken, Perspektiven und der Beitrag der Humangeographie* (pp223-234). Cham: Springer
- Goel U (2013) Ungehörte Stimmen: Überlegungen zur Ausblendung von Migration in die DDR in der Migrationsforschung. In D Gürsel, Z Çetin and Allmende e.V. (eds) *Wer Macht Demokratie? Kritische Beiträge zu Migration und Machtverhältnissen* (pp138-150). Münster: edition assemblage
- Goffman E (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall
- Heft K (2018) Brauner Osten—Überlegungen zu einem populären Deutungsmuster

- ostdeutscher Andersheit. *Feministische Studien* 36(2):357-366
- Heft K (2020) *Kindsmord in den Medien: Eine Diskursanalyse ost-westdeutscher Dominanzverhältnisse*. Leverkusen: Verlag Barbara Budrich
- Kollmorgen R (2022) Radikale Rechte als ostdeutsches Problem? Zur langen Kultur- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte des Rechtspopulismus in Ostdeutschland. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte (APuZ)* 2 December
<https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/rechte-gewalt-in-den-1990er-jahren-2022/515774/radikale-rechte-als-ostdeutsches-problem/> (last accessed 8 December 2022)
- Kubiak D (2023) Rechts sind die Anderen. diskursives Verdrängen und Anerkennen von rechter Vergangenheit und Gegenwart in einer ostdeutschen Großstadt. *Berichte: Geographie und Landeskunde* 96(2):112-131
- Lessenich S (2012) Brauner Osten? *PROKLA: Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft* 166:107-112
- Matthäus S (2021) Zum Theorieproblem “des Ostens”: Potenziale relationaler Theorieperspektiven für eine Analyse “des Ostens”. In I S Kowalczyk, F Ebert and H Kulick (eds) *(Ost)Deutschlands Weg 1989-2021: 80 Studien zur Lage des Landes* (pp463-480). Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung
- Miteinander e.V. / Arbeitsstelle Rechtsextremismus (eds) (2015) “Rassismus und Neonazismus in Zeiten des Umbruchs.” <https://www.miteinander-ev.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ImSchattenderWende.pdf> (last accessed 6 December 2024)
- Müller C T and Poutrus P G (eds) (2005) *Ankunft – Alltag – Ausreise. Migration und interkulturelle Begegnung in der DDR-Gesellschaft*. Cologne: Böhlau Verlag
- Oster S and Henningsen J (2022) “The truth lies in Rostock”: Eine Dokumentation zum Pogrom in Lichtenhagen 1992. *Zeitgeschichte Online* 17 August <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/film/truth-lies-rostock> (last accessed 8 December 2022)
- Piesche P (2006) Schwarz und deutsch? Eine ostdeutsche Jugend vor 1989—Retrospektive auf ein “nicht existierendes” Thema in der DDR. *Heimatkunde—Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung* 1 May <https://heimatkunde.boell.de/2006/05/01/schwarz-und-deutsch-eine-ostdeutsche-jugend-vor-1989-retrospektive-auf-ein> (last accessed 4 January 2019)
- Quent M (2015) Sonderfall Ost-Normalfall West? In W Frindte, D Geschke, N Haußbecker

- and F Schmidtke (eds) *Rechtsextremismus und "Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund": Interdisziplinäre Debatten, Befunde und Bilanzen* (pp99-117). Wiesbaden: Springer
- RBB and ZEIT (2020) "Baseballschlägerjahre."
<https://www.zeit.de/schwerpunkte/baseballschlaegerjahre> (last accessed 4 June 2022)
- Roth K S (2008) Der Westen als "Normal null": Zur Diskurssemantik von "ostdeutsch" und "westdeutsch". In K S Roth and M Wienen (eds) *Diskursmauern: Aktuelle Aspekte der sprachlichen Verhältnisse zwischen Ost und West* (pp69-89). Bremen: Hempen Verlag
- Said E (1978) *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon Books
- Scholz S (2021) The East German man: "Brown perpetrator of violence", "sensitive father"? An exploration of media discourses and scholarly studies. In K Bluhm, G Pickhan, J Stypinska and A Wierzcholska (eds) *Gender and Power in Eastern Europe: Changing Concepts of Femininity and Masculinity in Power Relations* (pp227-246). Cham: Springer
- Schwenzer F (2021) "#baseballschlägerjahre: Ostdeutschland erinnern." Unpublished Master's thesis, Universität Potsdam
- Stjepandić K (2022) Hanau ist überall—Der Aufbau von Solidaritätsnetzwerken nach den rassistischen Anschlägen in Hanau als postmigrantische Mobilisierung. In J Glathe and L Gorriahn (eds) *Demokratie und Migration: Konflikte um Migration und Grenzziehungen in der Demokratie* (pp259-284). Baden-Baden: Nomos
- Wagner B (2014) "Rechtsradikalismus in der Spät-DDR." Unpublished PhD thesis, Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder)
- Waibel H (1996) *Rechtsextremismus in der DDR bis 1989*. Cologne: PapyRossa Verlag

¹ The empirical material on which this article is based was collected as part of the research project "Renegotiation of Local Orders", a collaborative project between the universities in Bielefeld and Osnabrück, and at the Humboldt University in Berlin. The project was funded by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) as part of the DeZIM research community, and aims to investigate local interactions around conflict, integration, and migration in selected neighbourhoods. This article is a shortened and translated version of an article published in *Berichte: Geographie und Landeskunde* (Kubiak 2023).

² I have put "East German" and "East Germany" in quotation marks in this article to point out that these terms do not refer to a geographical or political unit, but rather to a discursively produced space that is related to the

borders of the former GDR, one filled with stereotyped attributions. In fact, the federal states and the respective cities and municipalities sometimes differ greatly, even if there are shared historical and political experiences.

³ Source: <https://www.demografie-portal.de/DE/Fakten/auslaender-regional.html> (last accessed 6 August 2022).

⁴ The term “pogrom” has become established for the attack on the Sonnenblumenhaus in Rostock, because so many people participated in or approved of acts of violence and mistakes made within state institutions; and, above all, to help the residents before and during the pogrom, events were so clear that the term is suitable to describe those in 1992.

⁵ Just recently, some standout events were featured in the RBB documentary *Baseballschlägerjahre* (“Baseball Bat Years”) made in conjunction with ZEIT. Magdeburg is one of the cities portrayed in the documentary, along with Rostock, Eberswalde, and Frankfurt (Oder) (RBB and ZEIT 2020).

⁶ Between 1990 and today, according to Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, approximately 219 victims were murdered in far-right and racist violence in Germany (see <https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/rassismus/todesopfer-rechter-gewalt/> [last accessed 6 December 2024]).

⁷ By far-right violence, I mean violence that stems from and is motivated by politically motivated attitudes based on forms of discrimination such as racism, antisemitism, anti-feminism, and ableism. They are fueled by ethnic and nationalist convictions (European Commission 2021). This violence can be perpetrated against people or symbolic objects.

⁸ So far, it seems that only in Hanau has there been a reaction to racist murders, by the city, progressively including the victims' perspective (Stjepandić 2022).