

CEASEVAL BLOGS: Part 3 The “Chemnitz incident” and the specifics of a post-socialist reception environment

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Introduction

Today is the 9th of November 2018. In Germany the 9th November is the anniversary of several important historical events. Today it marks the 100th anniversary of the German revolution of 1918/1919 that replaced the constitutional monarchy with a democratic parliamentary democracy, later known as the Weimar Republic. Today is also the 95th anniversary of the Hitler-Ludendorff-Putsch, in English known as the Munich Putsch, a failed coup d'état by Adolf Hitler. Further it is the 80th anniversary of the Kristallnacht, a pogrom carried out against Jews in Nazi-Germany in 1938. With democratic institutions under pressure in Germany, with anti-Semitism on the rise including a recent attack on the Jewish restaurant Schalom in Chemnitz we ought to take a minute to remember and reflect. Last but not least, however, today marks the 29th anniversary of the Fall of the German wall which paved the way for German unification. For today's entry we use the latter event to reflect upon the specifics of Chemnitz' location in the East of Germany and how this may explain the lacking distance between „concerned citizens“ and violent right-wing extremists.

As already mentioned at the start of our blog series, East Germany, just as all other post-socialist European states, was hit by a severe economic crisis in the years following the revolution of 1989/90, resulting in economic downturn, mass unemployment and a huge and (in terms of age and education) selective internal migration wave from East to West. Economic differences between both parts of the country are still visible, starting with the slightly higher unemployment rate (over 6.4 percent in the East, 4.5 percent in the West, Agentur fuer Arbeit 2018), the lower incomes in the East (monthly average gross salary is 2600 € in the East, 3339 € in the West, Tagesschau 2018a) to the slightly higher risk of poverty in the East (17.8% of the people in the East, 15.3% in the West, Statistisches Bundesamt 2018). The dismantling of economic and public infrastructure produced a sense of loss and frustration. For many, the observable disfunction of the former structures was connected to an individual sense of failure, as the personal biography, which was strongly connected to one's position in work life and the societal and political micro-structures which were embedded in the working environment, was not valued any more. Due to the harmonization of East German administrative structures and regulations to the West German system, many leading positions of the multilevel governance system were initially taken by West Germans, as well as political positions in the East German Federal States. This created the impression of being controlled by external forces, and facilitated a fundamental distrust of elites. Although German unification is almost 30 years in the past now, the underrepresentation of East Germans in elite positions is still present. While with Angela Merkel, an East German holds the most powerful political position in the country and 4 out of 5 Eastern *Länder* are led by an East German as their State Prime Minister, if one looks beyond that we find that Easterners are still underrepresented in leadership positions. For instance, in the current cabinet only one more out of the 16 cabinet members is from the East. Even though the size of the population of in the 5 Eastern *Länder* (excluding Berlin) is fairly similar that of Bavaria, they hold only 1 further ministry post (Franziska Giffey, Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, SPD), while Bavaria sends 3 ministers to the cabinet. Further, previous studies found that when it comes to leadership recruitment in the political sector beyond just holding a Bundestag mandate, East Germans are disadvantaged (see Kintz, 2011). Specifically, when looking at first-time recruitment into political leadership positions, it seems as if

the feature “East German” is a disadvantage in the selection process (Kintz, 2014). Outside the political sector the situation is even worse. As Raj Kollmorgen from the Zittau/Görlitz University of Applied Sciences points out, outside of politics (for instance judiciary, business, or the military), their representation in leadership positions is about as low as 1 or 2 percent in some elite sectors, even though East Germans make up about 17 percent of the population (see Kollmorgen cited in Nehring 2018). Even in the East, where they make up 80 to 85 percent of the population, they only hold about a quarter of leadership positions, ranging from 5 percent in the judicial and administrative sector to 80 percent in the fairly open political sector). This in turn not only strengthens the feeling of being a second class citizen, but also hurts the trust in Elites and increases alienation and receptibility to populist arguments. Such feelings and resentments are then reflected in collective action on the street as the following quotes from a public debate, initiated by the local newspaper “Freie Presse” as a reaction to the “Chemnitz incident” show:

I was surprised by the mass that joined the right wing demonstration. I think the politicians forgot to talk to the citizen. People joined because they have the impression they are not seen nor heard. So they thought, now we will show it to those up there. I, for example, I wrote several letters to Stanislaw Tillich (the former president of the Federal State of Saxony, B.G.), but I never received an answer. It would have been his job to at least answer me. (Chemnitz resident, male, 67 years)

People go out on the street because they are dissatisfied, whether left or right. Since the systems change (of 1989/90, B.G.), life has changed negatively: Lack of infrastructure in the countryside, different wages in East and West, better childcare in the West. We accepted it, we thought it would get better. But the politicians are only concerned about themselves. What happens now is a call for help from the population. People are dissatisfied already for a long time. In GDR times, there was more care for poor people, there was more neighborly help. (Chemnitz resident, female, 73 years)

I see some deeper causes in the present developments: Our society is divided into poor and rich. That makes people dissatisfied – and they make the minorities feel it. (Chemnitz resident, male, 31 years)

The distrust does not only extend to individual people, but trust into established institutions is lower in the East than in the West. As a recent opinion poll found out, only 50% of East Germans trust the courts, while 69 % of West Germans do. Further, only every other Easterner agrees that the rule of law is working well in Germany, while in the West 73% percent believe so (ARD-Deutschlandtrend September 2018). Support for Democracy, despite being very strong in both parts of Germany, has also been lower in the East - 82 percent of Easterners think democracy generally speaking is the best form of government, while 90 percent of Westerners do, and while 72 percent of Easterners think the German democratic system is the best form of government, even more Westerners think so (80 percent, Holtmann et. al 2015, p.189)

Social science approaches address these developments and the societal effects among others with the concept of relative deprivation, which is the subjective perception of a social group to be disadvantaged in comparison to other social groups. Empirical studies have shown that feelings of relative deprivation are linked to the emergence of destructive attitudes towards democratic principles and institutions. Social groups with deprivation experiences often feel attracted to authoritarian, chauvinist or right-wing extremist ideas. This is accompanied by the rejection of social groups that are perceived as "different" or that are felt as competitors for social status (Heitmeyer 1994; Endrikat et al 2002; Schmidt et al. 2003).

A series of longitudinal surveys examines those societal differences between East and West Germans, such as the so-called “Mitte”-studies, which – among other items – address the correlation between relative

deprivation and the development of extreme right attitudes (Heitmeyer 2010; Küpper and Zick 2010). They reveal some significant differences between West German and East German respondents (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1: Extremist Attitudes in East and West Germany. Results from the „Mitte“-Study 2016 (percentage of approval %)

	Total (n=2,420)	East	West
Advocacy of a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship: “From a national perspective, under certain circumstances a dictatorship is the favorable form of governance”.	6.7	13.8	4.1
Chauvinism: “Enforcing German interests abroad, that’s what our country needs today.”	26.2	27.3	25.9
Xenophobia: “Foreigners only come here to take advantage of our welfare state.”	32.1	38.5	30.4
Social Darwinism: “As in nature, also in society the survival of the fittest is a practicable concept.”	8.4	12.2	7.3
Trivialization of National Socialism: “Nazism also had some good aspects.”	8.4	7.3	8.7
	(n=2,420)	(N = 503)	(N = 1,917)

Source: Decker et al. 2016

The East German respondents showed a higher tendency towards chauvinist (27.3 percent support in the East vs. 25.3 percent in the West), anti-immigrant (38.5 percent in the East, 30.4 percent in the West) and social Darwinist positions (12.2 percent in the East and 7.3 percent in the West) and often advocated a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship (supported by 13.8 percent of respondents in the East and 4.1 percent in the West). It was also possible to establish a connection between party affiliation and voting behavior. In particular, chauvinist and xenophobic attitudes were more prevalent among non-voters and AfD voters (Decker et al., p. 35). An empirical study of the xenophobic PEGIDA movement, founded in the East German city of Dresden, also showed a strong above-average response to extreme right-wing, chauvinistic and xenophobic positions among the protestors. In addition, there was general skepticism or mistrust of public institutions and established social and political actors among the participants in the survey (Daphi et al. 2015, p. 27ff).

Research in neighboring post-socialist states has revealed that the increase in extremist attitudes is associated with an assumed or actually experienced social decline in transformation contexts (Heitmeyer 2010; Küpper and Zick 2010). Regarding the development of attitudes towards migration in cross-national analyses, Messing and Ságvári (2018, p. 28) concluded that specific macro-structural factors can explain differences of public attitudes: “People in countries with a large migrant population, with a high level of general and institutional trust, low level of corruption, a stable, well performing economy and high level of social cohesion and inclusion (including migrants) fear migration the least.” So it might be the specific combination of low contact with foreigners and low level of institutional trust that fuels the stronger dissatisfaction with German refugee policy and the fear of having your live once more disrupted by social changes that are as transformative as the fall of the German wall had been in 1989.

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