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# Integration or Exclusion: Former National Socialists in the GDR

*Dietmar Remy & Axel Salheiser\**

**Abstract:** »*Integration oder Ausgrenzung: Ehemalige Nationalsozialisten in der DDR*«. Not only West Germany saw the social rehabilitation of former National Socialists after 1945, former NSDAP members were also integrated into the GDR society and into the echelons of its functional elites. The share of former National Socialists among the elites varies between societal sectors. However, some of them even entered the ranks of the power elite. Due to the omnipresent myth of anti-fascism, disclosed brown shadows of the past could put careers at risk, but submissive loyalty to the young socialist state and its leadership could balance the scales. Keeping silent turned out a successful strategy in many cases: the general exculpation of the populace and the anti-fascist propaganda made serious checks rather inopportune for the Communist regime. For a differentiated evaluation of the ambivalent process of socialist denazification, it is vital to discuss its impact on social structure and to analyze the strategy of the Communist Party.

**Keywords:** Denazification, GDR, socialism, anti-fascism, elite continuity, historical myth, collective memory.

## 1. Introduction

In the 20th year after the downfall of East German Socialism and 65 years after the end of the Second World War, the issue of former National Socialist followers in the GDR is barely new. However, recent empirical studies in this field produced notable details, pose new questions and challenge theoretical interpretations within a larger scope that can provide a substantial input to contemporary historical and sociological thought. The contradictory phenomenon of denazification – the exclusion *and* integration of former NS personnel – is more but a mere detail of *GDR history*, it marked eminent political, ideological and structural challenges. Under the premise that the power structure, the modes of socialist elite formation and elite action (cf. Bauerkämper 1997, Hornbostel 1999), and the political and social development of the GDR (cf. Bessel/Jessen 1996) have to be observed, the contributions to this volume take a pronouncedly interdisciplinary approach.

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Usually, denazification has been observed as a process that followed interwoven patterns of both exclusion and inclusion. In the GDR, unlike West Germany (cf. Niethammer 1982, Frei 2001), the vast majority of the old elites of the Reich were ousted from power and permanently lost their social rights and private property. Of course, this unprecedented elite *discontinuity* (cf. Schroeder 1998: 533), has been overstressed in GDR historiography and public opinion as a historical task fulfilled.

Far more significant from the sociological and historical perspective are the actual mechanisms of *reintegration*, or elite *continuity*, its extent, its contexts, its social relevance – and its limits. It is impossible to make general assertions about the circumstances under which persons with a tainted biography “could get away with it”, or to estimate the odds of a bold lie. But at least it is plausible to make assumptions about the relationship between individuals and the authorities and about the potential conflicts which might have arisen: be it social pressure, psychological stress or a matter of conscience.

On the one hand, the socialist leadership invited *needed* former followers of National Socialism to demonstrations of submissive loyalty which could include exemplary societal activities, a multitude of political affiliations, good moral conduct, and a strong ideological self-attachment to the GDR. Given the effort of probation (in a literal sense, *Bewährung*), members of both the Hitler Youth generation and the *old intelligentsia* were accepted (cf. Best / Salheiser 2006). The Communist Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei*, SED), on the other hand, could have placed her trust on the “orthodoxy of the proselytes” – but of course, Lenin had taught to better rely on checkups. (Moreover, a former NS entanglement known to *some* in a person’s social environment e.g., the company or office he or she worked for, could be employed to stimulate self-discipline: *We know what you did until 1945.*)

Accordingly, the integration of former Nationals Socialists should by no means be mistaken for generosity, ideological unawareness, or a random failure of an otherwise insistent purge. The underlying *arrangement of mutual silence and control* implies a rather *immoral clientelism* – or plain blackmail, especially in cases where the entanglement with the NS-regime had been more than a nominal one or even war crimes had been committed (cf. Leide 2005). There is ample evidence that the records of NS memberships and even NS family backgrounds had been relevant cadre criteria until the 1970s and 1980s. They were never erased from the cadre files. Often, pragmatic cadre policy thrust aside anti-fascist moralism, but the moral conviction of a politically unwanted person could come back in handy if necessary (Boldorf 2009). As repressive and promotive aspects *simultaneously* took effect, that integration policy was consistent with the ambiguous societal constitution of the GDR which Mary Fulbrook coined the term “participatory dictatorship” for (Fulbrook 2005).

## 2. National Socialist Past and Socialist Society

Without belittling the effort of honest democratic newcomers and the enthusiasm of an unsuspecting youth generation, it can be argued that the means, ends, and outcomes of East German denazification policy have always been *embellished*. This, however, was due to the manipulative interests of the state and party leadership and their premeditated veiling of the social reality, rather than a mere naïve fallacy or misconception of the population.

In the GDR, anti-fascism became a state doctrine and a *central ideologeme* of Communist rule, which was expressed in hyperbolic, pseudo-religious practices and institutions of symbolic representation. Because authentic tales of victimization and persecution were far too unpredictable and could have caused disturbance, the Communist Party created its own *master narrative* in which the communist tragedy of the concentration camps and prisons was sublimated in a national cult of heroic resistance, valor, and self-redemption (cf. Danyel 1992). The staging of pathetic mass rituals such as the annual Buchenwald gatherings offered an opportunity of (re-)identification and (re-)integration for the masses and helped to suppress the deeply-rooted collective guilt which would have been contraproductive to socialist collectivity (cf. Danyel 1995). Voices that inclined towards an alternative historical interpretation, such as the Jews or other victim groups, or self-critical doubters, were silenced. As the GDR consolidated its “anti-Zionist” position against Israel and an “anti-capitalist” attitude towards the Jewish Claims Conference, the Jewishness of victims was marginalized. Jewish communists often kept silent in accordance with the Party version; the most prominent example being the Auschwitz survivor and long-time Politbureau member, Hermann Axen (1916-1992). In early GDR schoolbooks, references to the Holocaust were completely missing and official memorial limited itself to the diffuse umbrella term of “victims of fascism”. Until 1989, school education about the Third Reich was confined to the communist interpretation of imperialism that, eventually, placed the entire German people among the victims of the capitalists.

While the Allied amnesty of 1947 had focused on a misled youth, the myth of anti-fascism virtually promised exculpation for *everybody* – without the necessity of repentance. To be a citizen in the anti-fascist state of Workers and Peasants meant to be – and to have been – an anti-fascist, or, as Walter Ulbricht once put it in his memorial address on the 20th anniversary of the GDR, to belong to the winners of history (cf. Kohlstruck 1997: 56; Münkler 1996: 138; Gerber 2004, Bialas 1998).

While West Germany saw a broad overt socio-professional reintegration of old elites in the 1950s and 1960s, accompanied by an outrageous revival of the Extreme Right and epitomized by the semi-public gatherings of Wehrmacht and SS veterans, such brazen activities were downright unthinkable in the East and the merest hints were repressed and rigidly persecuted by the authorities. In

the homeland of communist anti-fascist heroism, admitting a substantial NS burden would have equaled social suicide. Already the nominal NSDAP membership was a taboo which could have nullified collective acceptance and put career chances at risk. The fear of discovery and exposure meant an immense psychological pressure that fostered inconspicuous social behavior and political-ideological over-adjustment. It might even explain efforts of record forgery and perjury. By all means, the SED's policy of exoneration and integration super-imposed a readiness of cooperation and thankfulness on those who had a guilty conscience for what reason ever. Inner-party dissent about the re-admission of NS followers soon ebbed away, and, for the sake of social peace, the explicit hows, whos and whys were no longer debated which gave the encumbered individuals some confidence. The SED had become the proverbial "big friend of the little Nazis" (cf. Danyel 1999).

The German question of historical responsibility as *perpetrators* was *completely externalized* to West Germany and combined with the ubiquitous, aggressive anti-capitalist rhetoric that did not even restrain from untenable assertions and exaggerations (cf. the notorious Braunbuch 1968, among many other similar publications and the obligatory articles in the *Neues Deutschland* Party newspaper). In later years, due to socio-demographic change, the GDR media focused on neo-Nazism in West Germany. While a sustainable effect of general Socialist propaganda on the GDR population could be questioned in many aspects, the success of this genuinely East German way of "anti-fascist reeducation" was undeniable. Western counter-propaganda such as the book of Untersuchungsausschuß (1960) or the ambitious "Braunbuch DDR" (Kappelt 1981) had of course very little impact on the GDR behind the Iron Curtain. It could be argued that those books might have caused serious irritation in the apparatus and forced some of the denounced GDR functionaries to leave office, although such cases have not yet been proven by archive findings. At large, however, the West German propaganda against former NS followers in the GDR was unknown to a broad audience in the East and, remarkably, continued to do so after the *Wende* in 1989/90.

### 3. Denazification in East Germany and Collective Memory

Until today, a considerable part of the East German public and media has been commemorating the GDR's *allegedly profound anti-fascist purge and societal renewal* as honorable and *realistic*. In our own qualitative research, we found multiple evidence of the adoption of that official legitimization strategy by former functionaries of state as their source of gratitude to the regime at that time, as a strategy of individual vindication, or even as an explanation of continuing loyalty to socialism today. The noteworthy *post-transformatory* impact of propaganda is mirrored by recent opinion surveys which reveal that the majority of East Germans still consider *anti-fascism as a central point of refer-*

*ence to the socialist past* and weight it to the regime's crimes and failures. It is common parlance that, whatever negative proves true about the GDR, "at least there were no Nazis like in the West", and even the disclosure of details about neo-nazist activities in the GDR could not shake this foundation. Thus, a cornerstone of socialist education and socialization is preserved.

20 years of German reunification also mean 20 years of continued historiographic construction and *Erinnerungspolitik* ("the politics of remembrance"). As we write this editorial, the public debate on the true nature of the GDR lingers on: The explicit refusal of post-communist partisans and other exponents of the German Left to refer to socialist state actions as *general injustice* and *systematic victimization* constantly provokes indignant reactions from former GDR dissidents and (West German) conservative or liberal politicians. With regard to a theoretical background to this debate, the Bourgeois Center and Right has firmly embraced the conceptual framework of totalitarianism for their rhetorical system comparisons.

However, the GDR's dubious relation to National Socialist personal continuity is a marginalized subject almost exclusively discussed by historians or social scientists. Either approach, the symbolic devaluation of the GDR as a dictatorship, and the scientific analysis of structural similarities and functional equivalents between National Socialism and socialism, enjoys little popularity and is frequently even understood as a personal insult of individuals with a GDR background. Despite the confirmed historical facts, the *deep ambiguity of East German anti-fascism* is still commonly denied. Today, there is an indisputable mismatch between the plenty of scientific publications, or reliable literary testimonies, and the low awareness – or ignorance – of many East Germans.

While the crimes perpetrated by the SED regime and its secret service MfS (*Stasi*) have been thoroughly debated, GDR's brown shadows of the past still seem to be a truth too irritating and painful. For instance, when historians discovered that a well-known and merited pediatricist, Jussuf Ibrahim, who had even been awarded honorary citizenship in GDR times, had been entangled in the infamous NS euthanasia programme before 1945, unbelief and shock were the reactions of the Jena public in 1999 (cf. Schrul 2003). In addition to the diminution of National Socialist entanglement in the all-German collective memory, the *idealization* of the historical legacy of the postwar years is an important aspect of the genuinely East German "social romanticist" nostalgia (*Ostalgie*).

#### 4. Denazification and Social Structure

In the *Ostalgie* discourse, the early GDR years are still regarded a legitimate attempt to make a revolutionary social vision come true, a promise which justified extraordinary measures for a higher cause. Myth has it that the class strug-

gle of the proletariat did not only include the expropriation of the capitalist *Bourgeoisie* and the major land-owners (*Junker*) but also the disempowerment of old elites in general, the displacement of the old intelligentsia, and an overall restructuring of society – breaking with obsolete traditions. But, in fact, starting society from scratch was an illusion. Even the paramount Soviet model was of limited practical scope; a “progressive German tradition” and a “German national culture” had to be reinvented. Foremost of all, there would be no socialism without the people, and the GDR depended on experienced and trained personnel. Post-war reconstruction was not only the achievement of the Hitler Youth generation, yet socialized in the Third Reich and traumatized by war, now identifying with new ideals and hopefully looking ahead. It would have been impossible without the older generations, too.

The Cold War paradigm of Totalitarianism Research has been criticized for its equalization of authoritarian societies or the overemphasis of parallels. Nevertheless, it might be useful to ask to what extent the structural conditions of communist rule demanded and supported the development of an *authoritarian mindset* that had been previously imprinted on a great part of the populace and “prepared” by the National Socialist experience.

Crucial to that interpretation is that the most important organizational principles and rituals of the Communist Party tradition date back to the barricade days – and the times of their “fascist” nemesis. On the level of symbolic representations of power and the interaction between leadership and masses, there was a blatant liability to pathos and staffage in the GDR that was all too known to the people and, thus, was replied with discreet sneer. Despite the changed catch phrases of political leaders and the different color of flags and uniforms, one could easily get the idea that not so much had changed. Word of mouth has it that elderly people were quick to confuse the socialist youth organization FDJ with Hitler Youth when the adolescents sang and marched in the torch-lit streets. For instance, this *déjà-vu* impression is recorded in the postwar diaries of the Jewish writer, philologist and documentalist of the Third Reich, Victor Klemperer, who also noted the meaningful parallels between the vocabularies of the Third Reich and the Stalinist GDR (cf. Klemperer 1999).

Although diametrically opposed in contents, National Socialism and socialism became to some extent convertible and compatible, offering mental “connectivity” (*Anschlussfähigkeit*) i.e., the conservation of psychological patterns of orientation. No doubt, the relatively calm and inoffensive everyday life in the GDR was a *normalization* of totalitarian ways, but the dictatorial claim for society and the mechanisms of power enforcement and control stayed absolute and had a lasting impact on collectivity and socialization (Wolle 1998). Discipline and obedience were ultimate categories of social action that constrained individualism. Remarkably, the GDR made a very late and rather superficial departure from Stalinism. Personality cult, the militarization of civil society,

the perversion of justice and the utter absence of democratic legitimacy and plurality did not expire until 1989.

In sum, the National Socialist past casted a very long shadow on the GDR by its symbolic function, the biographical relevance, and the configuration of socio-political milieus. The integration of former NSDAP members also had a paradoxical effect on the social composition of the GDR cadre system. While former Communist underground activists and concentration camp prisoners often lacked formal qualification because they had early been excluded from educational institutions of the Third Reich, members of the old intelligentsia qualified for high-ranking occupations in the GDR bureaucracy, economy, and the social services without difficulty. Other disadvantages of former inmates were their bad health condition, or reduced expectancy of life, and – arguably – their moral independence from a caste of Party rulers who themselves had hibernated in Moscow and thus escaped the great bloodletting of the Movement. The cadre statistics of the 1970s and 1980s still displayed a marked predominance of former NS nominals over “anti-fascist resistance fighters” or “victims of fascism” which acuminated across the hierarchy in accordance with Putnam’s *Law of Growing Disproportion*. Eventually, this effect was even perpetuated by intergenerational inheritance of status: cadres with a “fascist” family background were a rather average phenomenon in the last period of the GDR, but cadres with an immaculate “heroic” background (in the respective cohorts) were an exception.

## 5. Overview and Editorial Notes

As already mentioned above, the debate on former National Socialists in the GDR ranges from vehement condemnation of the GDR by politicians and former dissidents to disillusion, disbelief, and outrage of those who still consider denazification in East Germany a genuine historical heritage. In order to bring the discussion onto a more objective level and to avoid vague assumptions, it is vital to analyze the real course of socialist denazification, the institutional settings and networking strategies of the persons involved.

In this volume, three concepts of analysis are covered: (1) the general evaluation of GDR denazification and integration policy from the macro perspective, (2) qualitative case studies focusing the interaction of individuals, their social networks and the power apparatus, and (3) the quantitative research into larger groups of persons with regard to the logics of elite action and processes of social structure development throughout the Ulbricht and Honecker eras. Previous studies of GDR denazification included examples from the judiciary (Rößler 1999), the military (Wenzke 1995), the *Staatssicherheit* (Gieseke 1997), the education system (Mertens 1999), the universities (Hoßfeld 2003), and the medical profession (Böhm 2006), among others. This publication focuses the power apparatus and the economy. Some of the studies address spe-



cial aspects that have been of little or no scientific concern yet. For the sake of brevity, we dispense with the further discussion of relevant publications and refer to the following contributions.

*Heinz Fehlaue*r had been a staff member of the *Berlin Document Center* since 1976 and attended the transfer of NSDAP documents from the BDC to the German Federal Archives in 1994. Today a staff member of the Archive's *Reich* department, Fehlaue discusses the history of NS file transmission after World War II, their integration to German archive holdings, and the historical and political contexts. Since the commissioning of NS files from the US authorities to the Federal Archives and the passing of the Federal Archives Act, the former Central Membership Record of the NSDAP have been open to public usage according to the terms and conditions of the Federal Archives. These NS documents still rank among the most consulted holdings. Recent media reports revived the debate on the frequent entrance date to the NSDAP on April 20, 1944. In January 1944, the age of admission had been lowered from 18 to 17 years. As Fehlaue argues, the NSDAP Party bureaucracy was still functional back then. Every candidate had to file a *personal application*. Summary applications (i.e., mass lists as suggested by some historians with regard to April 20, 1944) were *prohibited*, and the forgery of signatures was checked and prevented by the office of the *Reichsschatzmeister* of the Party. Fehlaue dismisses the argument of many German celebrities that they had unwittingly been affiliated to the NSDAP. Thus, the article delivers an important background for the historical and sociological analyses in this volume. The methodology of quantitative sociological research into the NSDAP member files of the BDC was addressed in various past contributions to Historical Social Research (cf. Botz 1980, Genueit 1980, Kater 1980, Schneider-Haase 1991).

In *Heinrich Best's* article, the personal continuity between National Socialism and East German Socialism is discussed with regard to the legitimacy of Communist rule, leadership allocation, and social structure. Contrary to the cleanliness of cadre biographies in the SED cadre files, BDC records prove a considerable share of former NSDAP memberships among SED Party Secretaries of the respective birth cohorts. Within the regional power elite of Thuringia, former NSDAP members were clearly *over-represented* in comparison to the populace. This poses the fundamental questions of how and why.

In order to find answers, *Sandra Meenzen* has meticulously scanned regional and national archives and consulted a plethora of personal documents about Thuringian County Secretaries of the SED who had been NSDAP members. Meenzen thereby follows Heinrich Best's theoretical interpretation of the institutional framework and provides detailed information for German readers. In cadre policy, the SED had tried hard to cultivate the image of an organization with high moral standards that vigorously persecuted dishonesty and misconduct. But, apparently, the reservation to avail oneself of former NSDAP members in the party's own cadre echelons was rather low. While *bourgeois* class

background was a criterion for exclusion of generations to come in the cadre system of the GDR, remorseful – or *mute* – “fascists” indeed could embark on careers in the communist power elite, not even mentioning their old SA, Wehrmacht or Hitler Youth ranks. And the *Staatssicherheit* flashed into action only after serious reproaches and rumors in the populace. This, of course, was little consistent in comparison to the keen interest the private life of comrades was usually monitored with, or the pedantic party trials on the occasion of a minor ideological lapse. The NS past of Party Secretaries was one of SED’s best kept secrets – or one of her most calamitous blind spots. Today, as first details are revealed, it is still difficult to induce a general interpretation. Future archive investigations will hopefully enable us to verify or falsify the version of a systematic over-concentration of former NSDAP nominals rooted in the informal or semi-institutionalized whitewashing of biographies. We argue that the stupefying results of Meenzen’s case studies and Best’s quantitative research will challenge the perspective of GDR history and elite studies.

*Jens Gieseke* analyses the disreputable role of *Stasi* and other GDR authorities in the investigations and law enforcement against NS perpetrators. In spite of the harsh denazification and excessive show trials in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the early GDR, judicative practice was often deficient. On the one hand, secret service action led to the discovery of several hundred committers of war crimes that had submerged in East Germany. However, on the other hand, *Stasi*’s abstruse methods of conspiracy, blackmail, and calculating disinformation served the primary task to damage the “Class Enemy” in the West. This resulted in a systematic circumvention of international practice of law against NS perpetrators, e.g., when suspecting West German or Israeli prosecutors requested the GDR authorities of information. Gieseke describes a variety of alarming cases in which Nazis who cooperated with the GDR regime were protected. But when ambitious secret service officers and attorneys finally took the investigations to a new level, a publication of the facts would have been too delicate and, also, would have come much too late. “The better Germany” had gambled its credibility away.

*Jens Kuhlemann* focuses the whereabouts of former NSDAP members and NS followers in the socialist state apparatus and the administration of economy. In the 1950s, there were several hundred encumbered persons in the government bodies, accumulating to a share of 5-6 % among the ministry personnel. Kuhlemann investigated about 150 persons. A serious concentration could be observed in such departments as Communication, Forestry, or Agriculture, and some encumbered cadres even worked in central offices. Apart from an estimated number of unreported cases, the cadre staff departments were reluctant to disclose information about the former NSDAP members, partially because they feared the protest of the lower employees. Sometimes, when NS pasts were unveiled, the respective cadres were forced to leave office. More often they were irreplaceable and tried to integrate unsuspectingly.

The integration of former NS followers to elite groups of the Socialist society is another piece in the framework of the *illegitimate attribution of social status* as a factor of socio-structural differentiation that thwarted the egalitarian socialist project. In his article, *Axel Salheiser* argues that illegitimate patterns of social inequality also underlay the processes of recruitment and career mobility of cadres in the state-owned industry of the GDR. Social justice was an illusion which the GDR propaganda succeeded to maintain (cf. Thieme 1996), but in the long run, hereditary aspects limited class mobility and aggravated stratification. In the sectors of vocational and academic education, the impact of family backgrounds was intensified – remarkably not by a perpetuated privilege of disadvantaged workers as envisioned (also cf. Miethe 2007), but by a strengthening of the intelligentsia and *bourgeois* milieus. It can be argued that, in late socialist society, social and cultural capital covered the discriminating function that economic capital has in capitalist societies. Salheiser analyses the social backgrounds, formal vocational and academic qualifications, and the party affiliations of managers. Given the necessary balance of political alignment and professional career assets, family background was no longer a fixed precondition but an intermediate career factor. *Functional and ideological fit* was crucial in centrally controlled economy, thus the way was paved for (inter-generational) status continuity of unwanted or encumbered social milieus. The traditional arrangements between power and the German technocratic intelligentsia explain the National Socialist family background or personal past of GDR cadres and put them into a longitudinal historical social perspective. The total claim of authoritarian regimes on the lives and biographies leaves a permanent imprint on families and *milieu* structure and, thus, triggers mechanisms of ill-omened *inter-system latency*.

*Armin Müller* explores personal networks and institutional settings in 9 East German companies with regard to the continuity of old business elites who had already taken responsibility in the NS war economy. The processing industry of the GDR relied on those specialists in the years of reconstruction, so they were allowed to determine the development of the companies. But throughout the years a gradual change of management personnel was enforced and the old CEOs (*Werkleiter*) were replaced by younger and politically more reliable cadres who were the Party's own creation. This transformation process covered a period of 20 years and accompanied the incremental nationalization of private businesses in the GDR. However, the SED was more interested in the consolidation of political power and control of economy than in a profound denazification.

*Ronald Gebauer*, in the concluding article, discusses the fate of victims of GDR injustice, the process of their rehabilitation and compensation after 1990, and the fragmentary collective awareness of East Germans. The German collective memory and memorial culture is still divided between East and West – with regard to *both* German dictatorships. Today, victims of communist repres-

sion face significant social and health disadvantages in comparison with the “normal” populace, while other East Germans are prone to *Ostalgic* palliation. Many of them still carry a heavy psychological burden and, as compensation has partially been delayed and denied, some even tend to mistrust the current democratic authorities.

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