

Translated excerpt

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Das Deutsche Demokratische Reich. Wie die extreme Rechte Geschichte und Demokratie zerstört

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The German Democratic Reich. How the extreme right destroys history and democracy

Translated by David Burnett



“Great again!”

It was an image that went around the world: Donald Trump after the failed assassination attempt during the 2024 U.S. election campaign. With his fist raised and his face contorted, he calls on his supporters to “Fight!” Formally, he uses the language of a labor leader or perhaps a black civil-rights activist of bygone days, though frankly the U.S. presidential candidate has nothing to do with either of these. The white billionaire literally stands for the opposite of this legacy of American history, and yet somehow he managed to sell himself to American voters as the “anti-elite” candidate.

Vladimir Putin, on the other hand, immediately after ascending to the Russian presidency in the year 2000, summoned the “most powerful businessmen in Russia” to the Kremlin in order to haul them over the coals in front of live television cameras. Following this “show trial,” he invited these assembled oligarchs to a barbecue out of the public eye. The British journalist and Russian correspondent Catherine Belton describes how he received his guests deep in the woods on the outskirts of Moscow – in the former dacha of Joseph Stalin.¹ A post-Soviet ruler referencing the Soviet Union sent a clear signal: Russia would once again be dominated by a state mafia.

All of these symbols were borrowed from history. Though torn from their contexts, they were nevertheless understood. Symbols, after all, are not the property of their users. Their meaning is tied to social conventions. Repetitions invoke the past while at the same time changing it. Trump and Putin took elements of history and tailored them to their own needs. This process of appropriating and reinterpreting well-known symbols is known as “resignification.”

Narrative shifts and reframing, reinterpretations and fractured images are all means by which new authoritarian and nationalist movements – whether in the opposition like in Germany or in control of the government like in Russia – are taking a wrecking ball to historical discourse. In their view, everything should be demolished. They delve deep into the stores of national history to dress up the present in a way that is politically desirable. “Nazis,” according to Russian propaganda, are mostly found in Ukraine these days, whereas Lenin has long received a hero’s welcome in the West. Die-hard anticommunists now give a positive

¹ Catherine Belton: *Putins Netz: Wie sich der KGB Russland zurückholte und dann den Westen ins Auge fasste* (Hamburg, 2023), 257 f. [English original: *Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West* (London, 2020)].

spin to the GDR, claiming it was a Prussian law-and-order state, while viewing the Soviet Union as a modernized form of the Russian Empire despite having fought it tooth and nail as the “Evil Empire” in the recent past. The counter-claim that Nazism was a “leftist” movement is used not only to completely rewrite the history of the twentieth century but also to turn the political present on its head. The project of a “historical-fictional counter-narrative,” which the extreme right has long used to shape the historical record in its favor, has gained traction through the movement’s expanding reach.²

This politics of memory posits a past that never existed and then tries to build a future on it: “Make [whatever] great again!” But the ruins of actual history obtruding into the consciousness of the present interfere with the public’s imagination. So historical events first need to be rewritten in order to make the past more appealing and hence pave the way for the glorious future these movements promise their followers. This book intends to describe the process by which the historical is strategically resignified.

The extreme right has used this tool to conduct a systematic assault on modern historiography, the latter having abandoned the identity-building reproduction of national hero myths in favor of a critical examination of the actors, ideologies and processes involved. The critical perspective is seen as an impediment by all those committed to national “rebirth.” To them, the process of historical reappraisal is a “poisoning of the past,” as Götz Kubitschek, one of their networkers, put it in a keynote speech on historical politics, effectively declaring “war” on self-reflective historiography.³

Attacks like this are nothing new. They aim to completely destroy our sense of history by constantly shaking the foundations of knowledge. Even between the two world wars, notes Hannah Arendt, “the methods of civil war” were being “carried over into normal political propaganda.”⁴ A pattern was set that is now being used to hijack terminology, distort events and create “alternative facts.” The recommendation of Donald Trump’s former advisor Steve Bannon on how to deal with critical media has meanwhile become proverbial: “flood the

² Gideon Botsch, “Die historisch-fiktionale Gegenerzählung des radikalen Nationalismus. Über den rechtsextremen Zugriff auf die deutsche Geschichte,” *Jahrbuch für Politik und Geschichte*, no. 2, 2011, 27–40.

³ 23. Sommerakademie am 22. September 2023, “In Deutschland tobt ein geistiger Bürgerkrieg” – Götz Kubitschek begrüßt 160 Schüler und Studenten, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpfNwxjQIlk>.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft. Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, totale Herrschaft* (Munich, 1986), 669 [English original: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951)].

zone with shit”⁵ Thanks to new technologies, the whole world is now susceptible. German media mogul Alfred Hugenberg, who leveled his media empire against the Weimar Republic, could have only dreamed of the influence and reach of an Elon Musk in our present-day world.

Ironically, these actors are increasingly using methods that were once considered progressive. “Subversion through resignification,” a revolutionary battle cry that was once intended to deconstruct “power,” has long since become a favored tool of the counter-revolution. It is not the first time that a practice meant to break up rigid structures and make way for progress ended up doing the exact opposite. Hannah Arendt describes this diminished capacity for discerning judgment using the example of Stalinist propaganda. Since leftist elites were already “convinced . . . that traditional historiography was a forgery in any case, since it excluded the underprivileged and oppressed from the memory of mankind,” they were “greatly amused by the whopping lies of a totalitarian propaganda that questioned the validity of recorded history in the first place.”⁶ This might explain why the strategy of subverting systems of meaning could in the long run turn against the subverters themselves. It was seen very clearly during the Covid pandemic how the conviction that *nothing* is believable can suddenly flip into believing *everything*. This is not without long-term consequences, as the confusion it creates leads to a “pretotalitarian chaos of opinions,” which, Arendt concludes, made it easier for contemporaries in Germany and the Soviet Union before the Second World War to “accept patently absurd claims.”⁷ In this regard, the demolition of public opinion and historical meaning carried out with reckless abandon is always a worthwhile investment for populists. Once the rational systems have been deconstructed, others can be constructed in their place wholly in line with the new authorities. Hence, attacking history is the prequel to attacking society.

This book addresses the rewriting and reinterpretation of history, a massive trend in the current political landscape. Its chapters build on each other, but can each be read in independently. The concluding section offers a theoretical overview. As concrete examples of these tactics, the first three chapters examine the new Russian-German alliance on the right-wing fringes, its current mouthpieces and historical antecedents. A comparison of official

⁵ Michael Lewis, “Has Anyone Seen the President?” *Bloomberg*, February 9, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-02-09/has-anyone-seen-the-president>.

⁶ Arendt 1986, 713.

⁷ Arendt 1986, 715.

Russian historical policy with positions on the German right against the backdrop of the Ukraine war reveals some surprising commonalities. A subsequent look at attempts in the AfD milieu to give National Socialism a whole new meaning traces the career of a quote attributed to Joseph Goebbels and which plays a key role in this context. It also takes a look at the relevant historical research to underscore the effort that is sometimes required to counter these movements as well as the long-term effects of these acts of revisionism and appropriation. Finally, the book examines the unsettling phenomenon of anticommunist nostalgia for the GDR, which has cropped up recently on the right-wing fringes and managed to establish a positive link to repressive elements of East German society while at the same time adopting as its own the slogan “We are the people!” coined by protagonists of the peaceful revolution who were fighting against this very system. As will be shown, these phenomena are hardly limited to Germany, as comparable trends are evident in other countries as well. The first stage is usually marked by political propaganda “turning things on their head,” as astutely analyzed of late by literary scholar Sylvia Sasse,⁸ before being linked with elements of history and used for political purposes.

One thing that becomes apparent is the central role of concepts and their mutability over time, as many reinterpretations follow in the footsteps of similar tactics employed in the past. Reconstructing such processes can therefore help decipher the political rhetoric of the past and present. Indeed, it is crucial for understanding the politics of memory in historical and modern-day contexts. “Investigating concepts and their linguistic history,” writes conceptual historian Reinhard Koselleck, is “a minimum requirement for understanding history.”⁹ With a view to current events, this book is an attempt to undertake such an investigation. Only by doing so can we see through these destructive strategies of revisionism and counter their misuse for political purposes.

⁸ Sylvia Sasse, *Verkehrungen ins Gegenteil. Über Subversion als Machttechnik* (Berlin, 2023).

⁹ Reinhard Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten. Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache*. Mit zwei Beiträgen von Ulrike Spree und Willibald Steinmetz sowie einem Nachwort zu Einleitungsfragmenten Reinhart Kosellecks von Carsten Dutt, (Frankfurt am Main, 2006) 9.

Bridges in the Ukraine war

The Martyrs

He grew enraged toward the end of his speech. Having bemoaned the decline of the entire Western world, citing the example of the “decadent” and “blasphemous” opening ceremonies of the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris, politician Hans-Thomas Tillschneider declared his willingness to become a martyr. Trembling with excitement, he proclaimed from the lectern, shouting into the microphone: “I am not afraid of persecution, because I know God is with us, God is with the AfD!”

The AfD deputy in the state parliament of Saxony-Anhalt had actually only wanted to justify his faction’s motion against “queer propaganda,” which in their view was evident in the Paris ceremonies, but then his holy wrath erupted. The opulent festivities on the Seine included performers whose gender identity was unclear at first to the Islamic studies scholar Tillschneider. Other performers simply failed to meet the aesthetic criteria of the shaven-headed, full-bearded man in his late forties who, during a parliamentary session in Magdeburg, far from the Parisian metropolis, was now riled up by the impertinence of it all. The performance also allegedly referenced Leonardo da Vinci’s famous mural *The Last Supper* – in the eyes of the parliamentarian, sheer “blasphemy” and “perversion.” Employing dramatic language and unimpeded by the steering committee of the venerable state parliament, he unleashed his cultural pessimism and resentment with full force. In familiar jargon, he fumed about the “sick ideas, born of utmost decadence” that were on display at the ceremonies in France.

But how can one denounce the ugly without lavishing praise on the beautiful? Which is why the would-be holy warrior began his temper tantrum with nostalgic reverie for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Russian Sochi. This, he said, had been a “wonderful celebration” that “far surpassed any Olympic opening ceremony we have ever seen before.” “Opera-like performances” by aesthetically pleasing bodies showcased various highlights from the “history of the host country.” “Hundreds of slender dancers, beautiful men and women, moving harmonically with vigor and grace.” An “opening ceremony the way it was meant to be” – and what a contrast to Paris. The West, he lamented, with an eye to France, no longer knows such heroic forms, having sunken to blasphemous depths of ugliness. But the AfD, he vowed, the right-wing Alternative for Germany party, would do everything in its power to put

the nation back on track. For it has the historic mission, as the “dragon-slayer of our era,” to “stand on the side of life and light in the worldwide struggle between the powers of life and death, between light and dark!”¹

Tillschneider’s paean to the rigorously self-disciplined bodies gracing the stage in Sochi in 2014 used the classic visual language of fascism by contrasting it with motifs of Western decadence in Paris of 2024, buttressed, in turn, by a range of subtle references to Russia. He invoked the Russian Orthodox Church’s criticisms of the Paris pageantry, whereas his idol, Saint George the dragon-slayer, is none other than the patron saint of Russia. Some historical references were doubly charged: Tillschneider’s “God with us” not only adorned the belt buckles of German soldiers in both world wars, it was also a heraldic motto of the Russian tsars. His diatribes against the “decadence” of queer culture in Paris as opposed to the “clean” show in Sochi alluded to the repression of non-heterosexual lifestyles in today’s Russia. His sometimes drastic choice of words in the speech he gave before the state parliament left no doubt that he would like to see similar repressive measures in Germany. Even the name he chose for his motion against “queer propaganda” was entirely in keeping with Russian policy, which saw the passage of a 2013 law against “propaganda for homosexuality.” And yet, even with this law, the definition of punishable offenses was deliberately left vague, opening the door to despotism.²

In fact, the only actual propaganda here was Tillschneider’s presentation of the Winter Games in Russia, as the Sochi of 2014 was hardly proof of integrity and good governance. On the contrary, the Winter Games for the most part went down in history as a celebration of power and corruption and as a testimony to Russian autocracy. Russian opposition members estimate that half of the 50-billion-euro price tag was diverted to private channels in the orbit of the Kremlin. Foreign critique of the desolate state of Russian democracy and doping scandals further tarnished the heroic self-image presented by Russia.³ Internally, however, the

¹ Landtag von Sachsen-Anhalt 2024, 215; Video: <https://www.landtag.sachsen-anhalt.de/32-sitzungsperiode#/?accordion=0&accordionPlenar=21&accordionVideo=0>.

² Sergei Katsuba, “Russlands Gesetz gegen ‘Propaganda für Homosexualität’ und die Gewalt gegen LGBTQ-Personen,” *Russland-Analysen*, no. 440 (2023), 6–9. The classification of the entire LGTB scene as “extremist” by the Supreme Court in 2023 was tantamount to an outright ban, see <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/russland-verbot-lgbtq-bewegung-extremismus-100.html>.

³ Carsten Upadek, “Sotschi 2014 – Der Krieg und die Spiele,” *Deutschlandfunk*, February 11, 2024, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/sotschi-olympia-wladimir-putin-russland-100.html> and Christoph Becker, “Die Schande von Sotschi,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/sport/sportpolitik/annektion-der-krim-nach-olympia-2014-schande-von-sotschi-19538185.html>.

games left a favorable impression and the spectacle had the desired effect. The effort paid off in particular for the Russian president, as Putin's approval ratings among his own people soared to new heights during the Olympics. Putin capitalized on this popularity: shortly after the games in Sochi, soldiers in unmarked uniforms, the famed "little green men," appeared on Ukraine's Crimea and began the annexation of the peninsula. The Russian-Ukrainian war had begun.

For British historian of Russia Ian Garner, the spectacle of Sochi and the subsequent invasion of Crimea were directly linked. In his view, the celebrations at the Winter Olympics bore witness in particular to the efforts the regime had made to raise a new and completely loyal generation. The show that stirred such longing in AfD politician Tillschneider was described by Garner as a gigantic feat of national propaganda, celebrating both in form and content above all the state's demand that Russian youth unconditionally fuse with the Russian nation: "A new model of Russian childhood – imperial, fairy-tale, martial, unabashed – was being formed on the biggest of stages. Weeks later, the troops set off for Crimea."⁴ The case of the AfD politician is exemplary for the extent to which Russia has become a positive reference point for the extreme right. Tillschneider, a representative of the ethno-nationalist "wing" of his party, founded the "Patriotic Platform" of the AfD and has ties to the network of Antaios publishing house in Schnellroda. He is thus on the extreme right of a party on the right-wing fringes as it is. At the 2024 "Prussian Festival" he organized in Schnellroda, he paused for a photo op in front of a Nazi-era Prussian flag from which the swastika had been removed.⁵ It was not the first time the politician showed pro-Russian sympathies: in 2022 he made waves with a trip to Russia accompanied by other AfD deputies that was originally supposed to include an excursion to the Donbas. The planned outing to the Russian-occupied war zone ultimately had to be cancelled, however, due to concerns about the party's image.⁶ In late March 2023, Tillschneider attended a "security conference" in Vienna, a small, clearly right-leaning and Putin-friendly gathering hosted by members of the AfD's sister party, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), in collaboration with the Russian Center for Geostrategic

⁴ Ian Garner, *Z Generation: Into the Heart of Russia's Fascist Youth* (London, 2023), 92.

⁵ Frederik Schindler, "Wir, die Preußen in der AfD, wissen, dass das Verrat wäre! Und deshalb spucken wir aus!" *Die Welt*, September 20, 2024, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus253584410/Preussenfest-der-AfD-Wir-die-Preussen-in-der-AfD-wissen-dass-das-Verrat-waere-Und-deshalb-spucken-wir-aus.html>.

⁶ Nicholas Potter, "AfD auf Kremlsafari," *Belltower News*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.belltower.news/gescheiterte-russland-reise-afd-auf-kremlsafari-139427/>.

Studies.⁷ Like his entire party, he strongly campaigns against Russian sanctions and for an end to Western support for Ukraine. He does so not only in Germany but also on Russian media like state-run broadcaster RT. Since January 2023, he told reporters from *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung*, he has been a regular contributor to the Moscow daily *Vedomosti*. His columns there are said to support Kremlin talking points, arguing for a partition of Ukraine ostensibly in the name of peace.⁸ Time and again he demonstrates his support for the Kremlin narrative that the West provoked the conflict because of its anti-Russian policies.

The echo of Russian propaganda in the state parliament of Saxony-Anhalt is not an isolated incident. Tillschneider is just one particularly striking example of these decidedly pro-Russian sentiments within the AfD. Other figures routinely mentioned for harboring similar views are Bundestag member Markus Frohnmaier from Baden-Württemberg and his former aide Manuel Ochsenreiter (who died in Moscow in 2021), as well as European Parliament members Maximilian Krah and Petr Bystron. But also many less prominent party representatives share these inclinations and have accepted invitations to Russia in the past. Party chairman Tino Chrupalla has been a guest of Foreign Minister Lavrov in Moscow, and observers have noted the AfD's well-developed "Russia connection."⁹

The AfD has proved from the very start to be a party fond of the notion of an eastern empire led by the iron hand of Vladimir Putin. The Russians, for their part, appreciate this soft spot for them. In April 2024, the news magazine *Der Spiegel* ran a cover story which reported that Moscow was providing the AfD with a strategy concept to help them achieve an even greater following. Apparently the Putin regime and German nationalists share some common interests, which is why Russia sees enormous advantages for itself in a strong AfD and is doing what it can to influence German debates in its favor. The same goes for anti-European and populist forces in other countries – in Hungary, Austria, Italy, France, Great Britain and elsewhere. With the waning influence of a European left nostalgic for the Soviet Union, the

⁷ See Tillschneider's Facebook post of April 2, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/unddieVerantwortungwaerdein/posts/pfbid0rPP3AVeT5BvBZ6tPgFubKwPdH4GKUNRFhZEHdCCNhrE4hUoi1ocX7Wh3GrXhW4ynl> and the presentation of the Institute for Geostrategic Studies, https://geostrategy.rs/en/page/2/?s=Vienna&post_type=post&trp-form-language=en.

⁸ Hagen Eichler, "AfD-Politiker Tillschneider lobt in russischer Zeitung das Zerstückeln der Ukraine," *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung*, May 2, 2024, <https://www.mz.de/mitteldeutschland/landespolitik/afd-politiker-tillschneider-lobt-in-russischer-zeitung-das-zerstueckeln-der-ukraine-3837073>.

⁹ Christian Fuchs and Paul Middelhoff, *Das Netzwerk der Neuen Rechten. Wer sie lenkt, wer sie finanziert und wie sie die Gesellschaft verändern* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2019), 227 ff. On the struggle between different factions of the party and the development of a pro-Russian stance, see Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the European Far Right*, (London, 2018), 231 ff.

radical right has become the new darling of Russian foreign policy. And, indeed, the European right, for its part, sees its interests well represented by its big eastern neighbor.

The intensive Russian contacts of right-wing extremists from various quarters are well-documented, and will be explored in more detail below. They are perplexing, however, if only for reasons of historical policy, as German-Russian relations were exceptionally hostile in the periods the German right uses as its points of reference. The Wilhelminian German Empire fought on the side of the Habsburg monarchy in a deadly war with the Tsarist Russian Empire, and the Nazi Third Reich ravaged the Soviet Union in a campaign of extermination with plans to significantly and violently extend its borders eastward into ethnically cleansed territory. World War I was fueled by anti-Russian resentment, which was only heightened in World War II by the image of an enemy comprised of “Slavic subhumans” and “Jewish Bolsheviks.” Many of these enemy images persisted into the peacetime era, where they proved politically expedient, the anticommunist consensus holding the majority of the European far right on a firm policy course antagonistic to “the East.”

On the Russian side, the “Great Patriotic War” between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, precisely because it was waged as a bitter struggle for survival, is still to this day a core element of Russian identity. For good reason, “German Nazis” were a persistent symbol for absolute evil in both Soviet and post-Soviet Russian propaganda. But clearly this wasn’t the whole story, because something changed in the historical narratives of German, European and even Russian nationalists that made it possible to bridge this divide. I will begin by outlining this shift in historical policy below. One of the most remarkable twists was the emergence of “Nazis” outside Germany, namely in Ukraine, which was used to legitimate the Russian invasion of its neighbor in 2022.