



Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009

The Government Offers an Explanation for Xenophobia (March 2, 1994)

Alarmed by the violence against foreigners, the CDU-FDP government issued a report that blamed xenophobic incidents on teen unemployment and nationalism in the Eastern states. The only potential remedy identified in the report was intensified “media education” – a suggestion that was roundly criticized by the opposition.

Unemployment Makes Young People Go Astray

Three-quarters of xenophobic crimes are committed by people under 20

Politicians generally have a hard time winning points when it comes to the concerns of young people. The CDU/CSU and FDP party caucuses were shocked last year when youth violence appeared to be escalating. Right-wing extremists – many not older than twenty – set fire to homes for asylum seekers, and teachers sounded the alarm in response to the brutality of their students. This was reason enough for a Major Interpellation [*Große Anfrage*] to be directed at the federal government.* In response, Federal Minister for Youth Affairs [Angela Merkel] expressed her views in a report on “the situation of youth in Germany.”

The report names deficiencies and substantiates them with figures. Authorities assume that from January 1991 to April 1992 roughly 75 percent of all xenophobic crimes were committed by young people under twenty. Investigations confirm that unemployment leads young people to commit crimes against foreigners, especially in eastern Germany. Eight percent of West Germans and 18 percent of East Germans between 14 and 27 said that they can understand why people commit violence against asylum seekers. Sixty-six percent of respondents in the West and fifty-eight percent of those in the East, however, said that they were ashamed of the violence against asylum seekers.

“Are you proud to be a German?” Opinion pollsters wanted to know what young people had to say. Here, too, the responses revealed differences between East and West: 68 percent of East Germans – but only 47 percent of West Germans – answered in the affirmative. Moreover, it

* Bundestag representatives can initiate a Major Interpellation [*Große Anfrage*] to obtain information on political matters from the federal government. These inquiries need to be sent by a party caucus (they often come from the opposition) or by a minimum of 5% of all Bundestag representatives. The government is obliged to respond to in writing. After it does so, the response is debated in a Bundestag plenum – eds.

appears that many young people don't know where and how to spend their free time. Sixty-two percent in the East and 32 percent in the West complained of "insufficient options."

Drug consumption remains a problem as well. Although young people have a more negative stance toward addictive drugs than they did a few years ago, it is still assumed that in the old federal states [of western Germany] 23 percent of young men and 14.7 percent of women between 18 and 24 have drug addictions.

In addition to an overall appraisal of the situation, the ministry's response also includes a series of goals that the oppositional SPD and the teachers' union (GEW) regard with little seriousness. For Ralf Walter, SPD Bundestag caucus spokesman on youth issues, the Merkel report reads like a fairy tale. In his opinion, it evokes an ideal world that is totally incompatible with the policies of the government coalition. The report shows the influence of the media on the growing aggressiveness of youth. Walter recalled that the Union [CDU/CSU] couldn't move fast enough a decade ago to institute private television stations so that public broadcasting would have some competition. He called it "hypocritical" to lament the terrible effects of that now.

The youth ministry now recommends that "media education" be added to school curricula. Making this recommendation doesn't cost the government anything, criticized Erdmute Safranski of the Berlin teachers' union. "Media education certainly makes sense," she said. But she feels that this recommendation is inconsistent with what is presently going on in schools. The class schedule is actually being reduced and the CDU is demanding that the school day be shortened, she said. "Once again the schools are supposed to tackle the problems that politicians are unable to solve," said Walter.

The minister is in fact asking a lot of teachers: They are being asked to encourage environmentally-conscious behavior, to promote the integration of foreigners, and to reduce the inclination toward violence. But *how* and especially *when* all of that is supposed to happen remains unanswered.

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Source: Hans Helmich, "Unemployment Makes Young People Go Astray"
["Arbeitslosigkeit bringt Jugendliche auf Abwege"], *Der Tagesspiegel*, March 2, 1994.