Public Opinion and Violence Against Foreigners in the Reunified Germany

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Abstract: The reunified Germany has faced an increasing incidence of violence against foreigners. The study presented here focuses on the interrelationship between public opinion (measured in opinion polls) and the number of violent attacks (counted by the German Federal Police). The empirical analysis detects a positive correlation between the two factors. This correlation was to be expected in theoretical terms. Violent events, widely covered by the media, are important for both data sets. Xenophobic riots like Hoyerswerda and Rostock support critical comments and an increase in violence, whereas the murders of Mölln support a decrease in both. Specific forms and quantities of violence seem to enable people to communicate a critical opinion towards foreigners and thereby stimulate renewed violence. However, "too much" violence builds up a new latency of communication, which decreases violence once more.

The reunified Germany has been rocked by acts of violence committed against foreigners. There appears to be a new threat from the Right. Whereas the main cause of concern in the late 1980s was the electoral successes scored by the Republikaner party in particular, the problem of the 1990s has been one of brutal attacks coupled with right-wing slogans, making people both in Germany and abroad sit up and take notice. Foreigners have been set upon, people with differing political views attacked, hostels for asylum applicants set on fire, and people have died as a result. What is more, in many instances residents living close by the hostels or other accommodation which have come under attack have supported the offenders by openly applauding them. The result has been a wave of violent acts. At first sight, it seems quite clear to the public who the culprits are: radical right-wingers, extreme right-wing youths, groups antagonistic towards foreigners in the west and east of the country alike. However, those actually brought to book for their offences tend to be small groups of adolescents who are conspicuous in their appearance to varying degrees, not necessarily having links to officials in right-wing political parties or other groupings. Counter-movements have also been quick to mobilize: human chains with lighted candles were soon organized as a new form of protest, concerts have been staged with well-known musicians, sportspeople have spoken out in the stadiums. Yet despite all this, the danger of renewed outbursts of racial violence does not appear to have been banished.

One of the most-discussed issues is to what extent the public debate on legislative changes to restrict the procedures for granting political asylum in the wake of the increased number of applicants in the early 1990s may have influenced the number of acts of violence committed. One view expressed is that discussion of the asylum issue tended to make public opinion especially critical or indeed hostile towards foreigners (Jaschke 1993: 32). The media and politicians, so this argument goes, gave an acceptable face to racism. To begin with, politicians raised the asylum issue and dramatized it, yet this did not lead on to any swift solution. The media, the argument continues, played upon public anxieties by exaggerating the threat posed by these people beyond any realistic bounds while denouncing the politicians for their inability to make any common effort to deal with the "problem". As a result, public opinion is said to have changed. The critical attitude towards foreigners displayed by more and more citizens is in turn said to have led to the increase in acts of violence. The argument is that the perpetrators felt encouraged by parts of society to carry out their attacks.

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1 This manuscript has its origins in the Research Unit "The Public and the Social Movement" at the Science Centre Berlin (WZB). I am grateful to my colleagues at the Centre, especially to Friedhelm Neidhardt, for their severe yet productive criticism. A previous version of this paper was published as a WZB Discussion Paper (FS III 93–104). I would also like to thank the editorial board of the Zeitschrift für Soziologie and the anonymous referee for their constructive suggestions. Special thanks to Peter Rzhah, University of Hamburg, for methodological advice, to Thomas Eller, WZB, for the graphical assistance and to Neil Johnston, Bielefeld, for the cooperative handling of the translation into English.
ever, a converse presumption is that it was the acts of violence themselves which aroused attitudes increasingly hostile to foreigners, in turn setting the scene for still more violence (Eckert 1993: 368). This controversy is the point of departure for the present article, which poses the central question: What mutual influences have occurred between public opinion and acts of violence? What, in the broadest sense, can be identified as the cause, and what as the effect? To address this question, selected time series recording acts of violence and based on opinion polls will be correlated, and investigated for possible mutual influences.

1. The Current State of Research on Right-Wing Radicalism and Violence

On the whole, one has to say that the literature available on parties, movements and protest action critical of foreigners in contemporary Germany is unsatisfactory from the sociological point of view. The field is dominated by politics essays focusing on the history of right-wing ideas (e.g. Langewiesche 1993; also in large part the entries in Jahrbuch Extremismus und Demokratie 1989 ff.), by papers on organizational development (cf. considerable portions of: Dudek/Jaschke 1984, Feit 1987, Stöß 1989, Greß et al. 1990, Asseheuer/Sarkowicz 1992, Mantino 1992), or by portraits of activists and journalistic reviews of the right-wing scene (e.g. Leggewie 1987 on "think tanks"; Schomers 1990 on the Republikaner, Benz 1989 on various topics, Borchers 1992 on the scene in "the East"). The only area where at least some methodologically satisfactory work has been produced is that of youth studies (Heitmeyer et al. 1992, Österreich 1993, Korfes 1992, Melzer 1992). The latter mainly endeavour to explain young people's hostility to foreigners and willingness to use violence by referring to individual data from surveys. The actual use of violence cannot be explained by these methods due to the small number of people in any particular sample who would admit to carrying out violent acts. A number of researchers into political parties have also applied high methodological standards as they sought to classify the new parties to the right of the political spectrum within the prevailing political cleavage structure, with the aid of representative surveys such as EUROBAROMETER (Patti 1990, Ignazi 1992, Inkmennberg 1992). The EUROBAROMETER has also been used more recently by authors demonstrating a correlation between criticism of foreigners in various western European countries and the proportion of Non-Europeans in the population they account for in the countries concerned (Fuchs et al. 1993). In addition to Eurobarometer, Hill (1993) has also used the ALLBUS to investigate polled public opinion critical of foreigners since 1980. Opinion surveys and the data on attitudes and party affinities obtained from them have also been used in efforts to explain the electoral success of the Republikaner in the late 1980s and early '90s (Roth 1990). An interesting, methodical contribution both on east-west distinctions and on the definition of right-wing extremism has been provided by Stöss (1993), based on comparative questionnaire surveys in East and West Berlin. Analyses of electoral swings between parties are also designed to offer pointers as to the future prospects of right-wing parties (Hennig 1993). Work of a high methodological standard, but lacking sharp outlines in the conclusions drawn, has been produced by researchers into prejudice and stereotypes (Jäger 1992, Metin 1990, Fischer 1992).

Relatively recently, and partly initiated by the Commission for Research into Social and Political Change in the New Federal Länder (KSPW) and by the Federal Ministry for Women and Youth, empirical studies have been conducted on an extensive scale. The most interesting of the individual findings obtained, in that they have the furthest-reaching theoretical consequences, are summarized below:

(1) No correlation has been found between violent acts and current material and psychological problems, but the perpetrators of violence do show a tendency to be very fearful of future social decline. People currently unemployed are only represented above average in the over-25 age group (Kräupel et al. 1992: 5, Korfes et al. 1992: 24, Heitmeyer et al. 1992: 10, Förster et al. 1992: 169, Willems et al. 1993: 17, 34).3

3 By referring to Gurr's deprivation theorems, Willems (1992: 440) endeavours to apply some theoretical order to these observations: the crucial factor, so Willems maintains, is not the immediate deterioration in people's living situations, i.e. not absolute deprivation. Rather, the relative deprivation which tends to generate greater effects is a function of the differential between an individual's expectations and perceived capabilities. One could add to Willems' assessment a further distinction, to speak (also with Gurr)

2 A similar assessment was also made recently by Butterwegge (1993: 17), and in the late 1980s by Bockes/Jesse (1989: 144). They refer, as this article does, mainly to German literature.
(2) The violence done to non-nationals is normally perpetrated by groups, normally of youths (Willems 1992: 437, Willems et al. 1993: 38 ff.), with "right-wing youth culture" playing an increasingly significant part (Korff 1992: 79); however, in absolute terms, apolitical cliques and groups remain the most important factor (Willems et al. 1993: 30 ff.).

(3) The mostly young offenders' motives are not explicitly extreme right-wing, and tend instead to be fairly unspecific. Lethargy and boredom are a greater determinant triggering off acts of violence than any clear political motivation (Kraupl et al. 1992: 20). Boredom combined with large amounts of alcohol would appear to be the critical mixture for spontaneous acts of violence (Willems et al. 1993: 40, 81). This is echoed by the fact that the majority of the youth offenders concerned resist attempts made by right-wing groups to involve them or to use them for their own purposes (Willems et al. 1993: 39, 48, Kraupl et al. 1992: 20 ff.). However, perpetrators above the age of 25 do tend to be more closely associated with extreme right-wing groups (Willems et al. 1993: 16 ff.).

(4) A comparison between the two parts of the country points up a particular problem situation in former East Germany: a further study concludes that the boredom already noted is a product of what young people see as the "triviality" of their lives after the political transformation. "The subcultures' modes of living are no longer politically coded by their environment." (Stock 1992: 26 ff.) This conclusion that the young people concerned lack self-esteem gives a more concrete form to the rather general hypothesis put forward by Heitmeyer in his work on western German youth violence (1992, 1993).4

of decremental deprivation in western Germany (unchanged expectations plus fall-off in perceived opportunities; competitors are felt to be foreigners and "East Germans"), and of a combination of aspirational and decremental deprivation in eastern Germany (rising expectations plus fall-off in perceived opportunities; competitors are felt to be foreigners). This distinction might serve as an explanation for a greater willingness to act violently in the east.

Heitmeyer speaks of "instrumentalistic working experience" as a consequence of the capitalist mode of production (and associated individualization tendencies resulting from processes of modernization), and as a cause of the willingness to use violence by extreme right-wingers. Although he has thus cited a possible factor establishing the background for the willingness to be violent, his investigations do not shed any light on the social mechanisms by which this

(5) Taking a summary view, it is fair to assume along with Kühnel (1993) – not just for the eastern part of the country but also, with good reason, for the west – that group interdependences or interactions provide the "opportunity structures for violent action". Apart from such interactions, he also stresses the significance of "dramatization processes" in the media (402). The manner in which they thematize such matters, states Kühnel, can be assumed to play a major role. Media reporting of violence is said to give the groups concerned a feeling of "collective significance". Among the hypotheses put forward by Kühnel is that the violation of taboos by political parties (as in the discussion of immigration and protecting the country's borders) could have had a mobilizing effect. He argues that the polarization produced by party political debates coincides with "forms of sociation" which are apolitical in themselves (for/against foreigners) but become charged with a political stance and with violent actionism as a result (cf. Korff et al. 1992: 27). Young people, says Kühnel, go out looking for ways of transgressing the "boundaries of everyday life" (403). Thus acts of violence can be assumed to be triggered off by the attention they are likely to gain rather than by any directly desired consequences for the victims.

2. The Climate of "Public Opinion" and Violence against Foreigners

2.1 The Concept of Opportunity Structure as a Starting Point of an Empirical Study

What other social phenomena ought to be correlated with outbreaks of violence? The research outlined above has elaborated and tested propositions regarding attitudes on which violence is predicated at a micro level. However, rather less light tends to have been shed on what precisely is implemented to give rise to violence, i.e. on the process of mobilization. Little elucidatory work has yet been done on the transmission processes occurring within the more or less amorphous groups and milieux. In large part, this may be a result of the problem of gaining access. Finding young people who are prepared to perpetrate violent acts and then actually interviewing them must be among the most difficult tasks facing sociological researchers (Esserveld/Eyerman 1992). However, exceptions to this

is put into practice, to the point of perpetrating politically motivated violent acts (cf. the review by Pfahl-Traughber [1993] for a critical assessment).
rule have shown that it is indeed possible to gain access to these milieux for sociological purposes (Gerth 1993, Farin/Seidel-Pielen 1993, Bergmann/Leggewie 1993).

Recent work has attempted to place outbreaks of violence within their social context and to interpret the escalation of violence as a broadly-spanned process of social interaction. Building upon the concept of political opportunity structures (Tarrow 1983, 1991; Kriesi 1991), Willems (1992) has provided the most prominent contribution on the subject of right-wing violence. He cites four interactive relationships in the form of hypotheses on the factors which may have played a significant part in the spread of violent hostility to foreigners in the reunified Germany:

"a) the procedures for processing applications for asylum and the interaction between asylum applicants and the resident population;
b) the response by political elites and the change in political opportunity structures for radical, xenophobic, nationalist minorities;
c) the weakness of institutions of social control and the change in the cost/risk structure of violence;
d) the change in public opinion and the experience of collective significance by stigmatized minorities." (442)

According to Willems, the picture up to the end of 1992 can be interpreted as follows: (Non-violent) protest against foreigners in general and asylum applicants in particular had already been voiced locally before any acts of violence were committed – relationship (a) above; the local police was helpless due to poor organization and inadequate resources, and the violence was ultimately successful in that the asylum applicants were moved elsewhere – (c); political parties, by breaking with taboos, helped make right-wing themes "acceptable" – (b); local public opinion (and some portions of visible public opinion in general) appeared to be at least partly on the side of the youths carrying out the attacks; the media gave them a feeling of "historical significance" – (d). All this meant that people prepared to use violence now had a more favourable perception of the opportunity structure for committing such acts, thus again triggering off renewed violence – (c). This subtle depiction of the dynamics operating in this field will be used as a starting point for the following empirical analysis.

The literature to date has also spoken of "copy-cat riots", including the report prepared by Willems, Würtz and Eckert (1993: 87, 112, 128) on behalf of the Ministry for Women and Youth. The reporting team presumes that the attacks on asylum applicants in Hoyerswerda (Sept. 1991), in conjunction with which the media conveyed a "... 'sense of success' in the face of the weakness shown by controlling government authorities", particularly showing the apparent powerlessness of the police and the fact that the asylum applicants living in the hostels attacked were indeed then moved elsewhere, led on to an escalation of violence. "The use of violence had proved itself to be an efficient instrument" (125), thus paving the way for more incidents to follow. As for the people directly involved in the attacks, the authors speak of an "infecting, stimulating experience of anarchy and anomic" (127). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to make those actively involved in the attacks perpetrated in Hoyerswerda and Rostock responsible for all other acts of violence which followed. The report's authors accept this reservation, and stress the role of the media (128 f.). They emphasize, firstly, that because of a lack of "firm organizational elements and infrastructural networking among xenophobic subcultures" the media constituted an important factor in "inform[ing] and mobilizing like-minded people and supporters" and, secondly, that the media held out the prospect of what amounted to an "attention bonus for the use of violence". This bonus operated both on the political level (stage management of violent actions) and on the individual level ("from a thug, to a fighter, to a hero", 129).

Another presumption made in the literature is that a change in the climate of public opinion in the 1990s encouraged the outbreak of violence. Either covertly or overtly, topics previously felt to be taboo (nationalism, racism etc.) were also felt to have been restored to respectability by the debate over granting political asylum (Willems et al. 1993: 116 ff., 120 f., 130; Kühnel 1993: 30). During the previous decade, criticism of foreigners had declined over the years in Germany (Hill 1993: 66). However, politicians proved incapable of providing satisfactory or swift solutions to the "asylum problem" which they themselves had raised and made such an issue of. In the early stages of the debate on asylum, established politicians had even shown moral disdain for the anxieties shown by people in particular localities. This gave rise to a loss of confidence in established politics among the general public, allowing right-wing organizations

5 Butterwegge (1993: 18) speaks of the taboo being broken regarding the term "racism", by replacing it with "hostility towards foreigners" (Ausländerfeindlichkeit) (similar observations are made by Willems et al. 1993: 130).
to take up their concerns. Thus their political interpretations fell on fertile ground which had been prepared for them by established politicians. The latter did not devote renewed attention to the issue until the balance of overall public opinion had tipped, and then they were under pressure to adopt for themselves the interpretations that had been put into circulation by the Right (Willems et al. 1993: 120f).

In the empirical part of this paper, the focus will be upon polled public opinion, defined as a particular part of public opinion in general or of the "climate of public opinion". In the case in question, the climate of opinion can be operationalized at any one of the following levels:

- How actions are judged in opinion expressed directly by the media (publicized opinion 1);
- the remarks made by politicians, victims, accomplices, passers-by, etc. as passed on by the media (publicized opinion 2);
- the general mood of the public, sensed by those committing violence, as measured in public opinion surveys (polled public opinion);
- the manner in which this sample of public opinion is reported in the press (polled public opinion as publicized).

By analysing the mutual influences flowing between the climate of opinion (in the general public and in the media) on the one hand and the perpetration of violence against foreigners on the other, it should be possible to show (a) how pronounced the correlation is between collective violent action and the climate of public opinion and (b) in which direction the influences have evidently occurred. As mentioned above, many of the offending youths are described as having unspecific, diffuse political conceptions. This suggests that those performing acts of violence are likely to have personalities which are easily influenced or led from outside. That is to say, the opinion of others and the wishes and attitudes of those around them play an important part for these people in deciding in favour of certain actions and attitudes of their own. For these reasons, polled public opinion is taken as the starting point here for an analysis of societal context structures.

2.2 Waves of Violence

Actually obtaining data on the number of violent acts committed against foreigners in the Federal Republic of Germany is by no means a simple business. What one would normally assume to be the "natural" means of gaining access to them are in fact blocked off. Both the Federal Criminal Investigation Department (Bundeskriminalamt – BKA) and the Federal Agency for the Protection of the Constitution (Verfassungsschutz – BfV) have remained "tight-lipped" as to their statistics. Written enquiries to them did not get the author any further. All that they sent out were press releases and a suggestion that one should read the BfV's annual report. Nor did pursuing the quest on the telephone produce any more progress. The stock reply resorts to "reasons of principle", though on closer questioning it switches to "the sheer volume of enquiries we are receiving at the moment". It is not as if the enquirer was asking so much: what I wanted was a simple monthly breakdown of acts of violence, possibly also divided up by region. The search turned out to be a difficult one. At the suggestion of one of the BKA's staff, I got in touch with the parliamentary Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). Since the beginning of 1992, it has become virtually a ritual for the PDS to ask exactly the same parliamentary question, which includes a request for details of the number of xenophobic criminal offences, how many such offences involved violence being done, how many offenders have been identified, and how many arrested, both for the country as a whole and for individual federal states (PDS/Linke Liste 1993). The replies given are based on the most up-to-date statistics from the BKA. Via a circuitous route, I did eventually also gain access to an internal BKA document (BKA 1993), and a great deal of effort would have been saved if I had had that document much earlier.

The data analysed henceforth are obtained by combining the BKA's figures (either past, updated statistics or current figures supplied in parliamentary replies or contained in press releases) with those of the Verfassungsschutz (either from the BfV's own reports or from articles based on their press releases). The basic distinction is made between criminal offences hostile to foreigners in total and the proportion of those offences in which violence was perpetrated. The total category in

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6 In a similarly constructed survey of the societal conditions underlying collective violence (in this case, left-wing violence), Keplinger (1981) endeavours to explain the frequency of violent demonstrations and political attacks in the 1960s and early '70s by changes in the social environment. The independent variables he chooses include the extent to which writers and academics concern themselves with the topics of violence and revolution, and the reporting of demonstrations in the weekly magazine Der Spiegel (474). He believes his findings demonstrate, inter alia, "... that the height of the violent demonstrations [in quantitative terms – Th.Oh.] followed after the height of reporting on the issue [in Der Spiegel – Th.Oh.]. ... People's behaviour had the ground prepared for it by press communication." (485) Keplinger attributes to writers and academics the function of having legitimized violence. They created a climate, he maintains, in which "... the slightest thing could trigger off violent struggles." (495)
### Table 1: Criminal Offences Hostile to Foreigners in Germany. January 1991–October 1993.

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**Key:**

bka1 Offences hostile to foreigners of which: Explosives and arson attacks, or attacks against the person (does not include damage to property)  

bfa Acts of violence with an extreme right-wing motivation  

### Figure 1: Criminal Offences Hostile to Foreigners in Germany 1991–1993.

- - - - - Offences hostile to foreigners of which: Explosives and arson attacks, or attacks against the person (does not include damage to property) Source: German Federal Investigation Agency (BKA), see Table 1
- - - - - Acts of Violence with an extreme right-wing motivation Source: Federal Agency for the Protection of the Constitution (BFV), see Table 1
cludes such items as violations of the prohibition against disseminating extreme right-wing literature (e.g. incitement to racist hatred, glorification of Nazism), breaches of the law on assembly (e.g. marching in public following a demonstration ban), or violations of the law on weapons and firearms. As far as acts of violence are concerned, the data recorded by the BKA and BfV differ in two fundamental respects: (1) The data provided by the agency for the protection of the constitution (BfV) are more “comprehensive”, in that they cover all offences committed by persons who have come to notice at some time in the past for having extreme right-wing views. In other words, even offences which are not necessarily political in character may appear in the statistics. The BKA applies a more restrictive definition, and only cases in which investigations show an unequivocal association with hostility to foreigners or right-wing extremism are recorded in the statistics (hence the continual adjustments made to the figures, though these are mainly upward and attributable to the reporting delays involved). (2) The BKA counts all attacks using explosives or arson, and bodily attacks on individuals, while the BfV also includes all damage to property in addition to that.

The combined data provide a distribution as illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 1. The graph depicts the BKA count of all offences hostile to foreigners, together with both BKA and BfV measures of acts of violence. The first point of interest is that all three curves are largely parallel, with almost identical rises and falls. What this means directly is that the BKA and BfV only operate with differently wide-ranging definitions of acts of violence. The types of action recorded by the BfV do not differ structurally over time from those of the BKA. As a result, it is appropriate to disregard the BfV data in the remaining analysis, which creates the further advantage of allowing us to work exclusively with BKA-based data

(both on total offences hostile to foreigners and on acts of violence against them). Thus, whenever acts of violence are referred to henceforth, these really are a subset of the category of offences hostile to foreigners. That helps to make imminent data comparisons more valid. Turning now to the shape of the curves, it is clear that both offences in general and acts of violence rose from a relatively low level in the first quarter of 1991 (when the monthly average was 40–50 offences and 5–10 acts of violence) to a slightly higher one in the next four months (the corresponding May-July figures were 65–70 and 10–25 respectively. The figures rise again in August to one third as much again as the previous monthly rate, before actually trebling in September. In October the figures are again virtually trebled (though not quite to such an extreme extent for acts of violence). In November and December, the figures are halved in each successive month. The police statistics then settle down at this much higher level relative to one year previously, remaining roughly similar (200–280/45–60) until July 1992. In August and September, the figures double once again (indeed, offences in general increase by a factor of 2.5 between the two months). The figures thus attain peaks (1163/257) above the levels of autumn 1991. Acts of violence subsequently decline by one third in October and stabilize at that level (140–160) until the end of the year. The overall number of offences hostile to foreigners also drops by one quarter in October, but returns to September's level in November. The figures do not fall again (as the number of acts of violence did) until the following month. Offences in total then oscillate between 300 and 500, with acts of violence generally in the 60–90 range. In both cases, this is the highest value yet for any stable phase in the time series. Then, in June 1993, total offences reach the previously unequalled figure of approx. 1,300 cases. The figure then declines steadily once again to a level of approx. 250 offences per month. Acts of violence also peak again at the same time (to 160), but not at such a high level as the previous maximum of over 200 attacks. Values oscillate in the late summer and autumn of 1993 between 60 and 80 cases per month. According to the most recent statements issued by the Federal Chancellery based on BfV data, the number of acts of racial violence in 1993 was 15% lower than the corresponding figure in 1992.

Thus it is fair to describe the development of violent acts over time as a wave-like process. The number of violent acts stabilizes at a higher level in between the first and second peaks before gradually falling off thereafter, though the decline is interrupted by a third, smaller wave. It is impossible to ignore the chronological proximity between the

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7 The BKA data are liable to the criticism that the reports themselves are influenced by the public attention given to right-wing extremism or radicalism. On the one hand, the BKA is accused of “dramatizing” the situation, by declaring unclear cases hostile to foreigners in order to emphasize the need for the BKA's powers and resources to be extended in this sphere. Reporting activities have tended to intensify following any events given prominent media coverage. On the other hand, the BKA stands accused of paying inadequate attention to the right-wing scene, which leaves it unable to classify offences appropriately. The two criticisms would appear to cancel each other out to some extent, and there is no reason to fundamentally question the validity or reliability of the data. For a criticism of the data, cf. Willems et al. 1993: 6.

8 The precise figures publicized were 1,814 acts of violence in 1993 and 2,166 in 1992. A sub-category, namely the number of attacks against hostels for asylum applicants, fell from 400 in 1992 to 113 in 1993 (cf. Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung, 27th January 1994). In other words, the number of all other kinds of violent attack remained roughly the same.
first two peaks and the violent attacks carried out in Hoyerswerda (17th September 1991) and Rostock (22nd-27th August 1992) respectively. In both cases, the attacks were directed against hostels for asylum applicants, and in Rostock the attacks carried on over a period of several days. Both incidents were widely broadcast with intensive media reporting. It is also possible, as suspected above, that these reports may have triggered off further violent acts. It is possible that Hoyerwerda acted as an amplifying influence on what was already a rising number of offences in the late summer and autumn of 1991. Similarly, a gentle upward trend is discernible before the Rostock riot, though the trend is not unequivocal as it was one year before. At any event, this second event symbolizing xenophobic outrage in the reunified Germany certainly coincides with, or indeed is located at the beginning of, another upward leap in the statistics.\(^9\)

The consequences for the statistical trends of the arson attack in Mölln (on 23rd November 1992), which came relatively soon after Rostock, are rather ambivalent. The curve at the time was on a downward cycle after the peak in which Rostock played its part; Mölln could be seen as having reversed the trend to bring about another upswing (reflected in the overall number of offences), or as having produced a short plateau to interrupt the downswing (as in the number of violent acts). There does appear to be an explanation for the differing effects on the two sets of figures, for the fire in Mölln was the first time that an act was clearly designated as xenophobically motivated murder by both the media and politicians, with comprehensive reporting in that vein for a period of several days. The attack was rendered all the more despicable by the fact that two children died as a result. Thus the number of offences as a whole rises in the aftermath of Mölln, while the seriousness of the crime and the response to it may have prevented any renewed upsurge in acts of violence.

The situation was different again following the Solingen murders (29th May 1993); in this case both the total number of offences and acts of violence increased. Total offences can be seen to reach a new absolute maximum, whereas acts of violence rise to a peak which remains below the maximum values attained in the wake of Rostock, falling off subsequently to a relatively low level. The fact that acts of violence increased at all after Solingen suggests that the shock effect generated by murder, which apparently prevailed after the Mölln fire, may now have lost its impact.

The main features of the curve for acts of violence may be summarized as follows: (a) the overall pattern is one of waves; (b) the waves peak at points chronologically close to events given major media coverage (Hoyerswerda and Rostock); (c) the figures decline after the Mölln arson-attack murders; (d) they rise again after the Solingen murders.

2.3 Pollled Public Opinion

Although opinion research now casts an ever wider net in Germany, it is by no means a simple matter to draw up time series over a period of several years. In our case, the main issues we were interested in related to foreigners, asylum, violence against foreigners, and right-wing extremism. It was important that the way poll questions were put should not have changed over time, and that the sampling should have set out to satisfy the need to be representative. The best type of survey to use would have been a panel survey, but none was available. However, with the assistance of the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research (ZA) in Cologne it was indeed possible to obtain the monthly differentiated frequency counts produced by the POLITBAROMETER.\(^10\)

The POLITBAROMETER is sampled almost at monthly intervals by the Electoral Research Group, as a representative survey. Separate surveys are carried out in eastern and western Germany. The eastern German portion of the survey is conducted by the USUMA institute in Berlin. The eastern and western samples each constitute approximately 1,000; thus a differentiated account for the east and west will be given in the follo-

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9 Strictly speaking, time series analyses with interventions at critical points in time would be needed here (e.g., using SPSS trends). However, two few points of measurement were available for the period ahead of the first major incident (Hoyerswerda) to be able to clearly identify any pre-existing trend. For specialists: the presumed pattern of the shift would be a combination of the "abrupt temporary" and "abrupt permanent" models (Norpoth 1987: 7).

10 The data and tables used in this section of the paper were made available by the Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung (ZA) (= Central Archive for Empirical Social Research) at the University of Cologne. The survey data were obtained by the Electoral Research Group (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen) of Mannheim and by USUMA in Berlin. They were processed for analytical purposes and documented by the Central Archive. Neither the Central Archive nor either of the research institutes named above bears any responsibility whatever for the analysis or interpretations of the data contained in this paper.
wing. The surveys used here are the cumulative data sets for 1991 and 1992.

Three sets of issues from the POLITBAROMETER were of interest for this enquiry: (1) the popular perception of the political asylum problem; (2) the view on xenophobic violence; (3) the perception of right-wing radicalism. The first criterion applied in selecting particular questions was the frequency with which they were put in the surveys, as not all questions were included every month. Questions which would otherwise certainly have been of interest thus had to be excluded, as the comparative values, if available at all, were too few or were unfavourably located on the time axis. The second criterion was how plausibly particular categories of questions and answers could be regarded as relevant to peoples’ actions. It had to be possible for the answers given to be seen as a possible condition for supporting acts of violence, or conveying the impression that the perpetrators had popular support.

The resulting shortlist not only included questions on attitudes but also questions on the perceived importance of certain problems or problem complexes over time. However, despite the high frequency with which they are asked, questions as to “the most important problem currently in the Federal Republic of Germany” proved of little use. The problem is that an answer category such as “political asylum/asylum-seekers” is too general, as it is impossible to determine whether the response applies to the number of people applying for asylum, to the attempts to arrive at a political solution, or to the violence done to asylum applicants – so the respondent’s underlying attitude remains unclear. A person might name this category as “the most important problem” because he/she is anxious at an influx of foreigners, yet his/her concern may equally well apply to the way the foreigners are treated when they arrive. Hence, because they could not be unequivocally interpreted, questions enquiring into the relative importance of “the problem” could not be taken into consideration. A different problem arose with the areas of right-wing extremism and violence, namely that these questions were polled only a small number of times, insufficient to be systematically analysed so they too had to be eliminated. That left only questions which (a) really could be relevant to the number of acts of violence and (b) had been recorded at enough different points in time. The only question which fulfilled both criteria concerned respondents’ perception of misuse of the asylum laws (see Table 2).

A short time after the disturbances in Hoyerswerda, in October 1991, the question “Do you believe that most asylum applicants misuse Germany’s laws on granting asylum?” was answered in the positive by almost 70% of respondents in western Germany. The number of “yes” responses declined to about 63% by the end of the year. During the first half of 1992, the proportion oscillated between 65% and 70%. Following the Rostock disturbances, the proportion increased to around 75%. By way of contrast, in the month subsequent to the Mölln attack, a value of just 66.3% was recorded. The data collected in eastern Germany showed a higher proportion of “yes” responses across the board: after Hoyerswerda,

Table 2: Perceived Misuse of Asylum Laws.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1991</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>West</td>
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<td>East</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
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<td>66.0</td>
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<td>Feb</td>
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<td>Mar</td>
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<td>64.6</td>
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<td>Apr</td>
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<td>68.2</td>
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<td>May</td>
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<td>67.9</td>
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<td>76.5</td>
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<td>Aug</td>
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<td>68.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sep</td>
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<td>67.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct</td>
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<td>67.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov</td>
<td></td>
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<td>66.3</td>
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</table>

Source: POLITBAROMETER 1991/92

The question read: “Do you believe that most asylum applicants misuse Germany’s laws on granting asylum, or do you believe this not to be the case?”

The values in the table show the percentage of respondents saying they did believe that most applicants misused the law.

almost 80% said they felt the law was misused, and the figure for the first half of 1992 was 75–80%. After Rostock, the figure rose to over 85%, falling by 2.5% in the month after Mölln. Thus the values recorded trace the cycle of acts of violence. However, once again the Mölln arson attack is exceptional in inducing the opposite effect, though it dampened the “yes” responses more in the west than it did in the east.

2.4 The Reciprocal Relationship between Polled Public Opinion and Violence

The next step of analysis is to establish what relationship may exist between polled public opinion and violence. Popular opinion is operationalized by means of the responses obtained by the POLITBAROMETER on the perceived misuse of the asylum laws, while violence is measured by means of the BKA’s figures on arson and bomb attacks and other attacks against the person committed against foreigners. How plausible can such a link claim to be between the factors operationalized in this way, and what limitations need to be expressed?

Firstly, on the measure used here, polled public opinion is a function of the perception that people are misusing
the rules (on asylum). One should not automatically conclude from that perception that the group of people committing the misuse are rejected as a result. Secondly, even if people belonging to this group are viewed negatively, that does not mean to say the respondents are prepared to act violently towards them or to condone violence done by others. Thirdly, the presumption that rules are being misused relates solely to asylum applicants, yet the statistics on acts of violence include a much larger group of victims (i.e. all foreign nationals in Germany). Fourthly, the percentage variations in polled public opinion are relatively small. Is it appropriate to assume that a potential perpetrator of violence will perceive a change of a few percentage points and will change his/ her behaviour accordingly?11

Thus the proportion of the general public perceiving misuse of the asylum rules by the majority of applicants should only be seen as the most comprehensive statistic available to characterize the potential for mobilizing and supporting acts of violence against foreigners. A change in this potential, or a change in the perception of the potential, could have influenced the number of acts of violence. It is also appropriate to test the converse assumption that the number of acts of violence could have influenced the popular perception of misuse of the asylum laws. An increase in the number of violent acts may have encouraged some people to state positions hostile to foreigners, whereas an excessive number of such acts or particularly extreme outbursts of violence could have had an inhibiting impact on such statements. One can therefore assume not only that reciprocal processes of amplification and attenuation occur (changes in the same direction contributing to a positive correlation), but also counteractive processes (changes in opposite directions contributing to a negative correlation).

On the basis of the empirical data in this enquiry, then, the relationship between the two factors of polled public opinion and violence against foreigners can only be described as a very loose connection and, what is more, as an interplay which may be reinforcing or counteractive. Great caution is therefore needed before claiming any causal relationship. The measures operationalized here can only, at best, act as indicators of polled public opinion (and the climate of opinion in a broader sense) on the one hand and the perpetration of violence against foreigners on the other. The loose, many-faceted links between the two must be properly taken into account when consideration is given to causal relationships.

Before progressing to a closer examination of the mutual influences between these two factors, the statistical correlation between them will first be tested. That is to say, do they correlate positively (with acts of violence and perceived misuse of the law by asylum-seekers rising and falling in parallel)? Or is the correlation inverse, with figures running in opposite directions (e.g. an increase in acts of violence leading to a fall in the perceived amount of asylum misuse)?

If the monthly percentage data for the number of people perceiving misuse (MISWEST/-EAST) are combined with the simultaneous figures for acts of violence (BKA2), some clear pictures emerge (see Figures 3 & 4). The data plot suggests a linear regression, but possibly also a curvilinear, exponential correlation. The link is more clearly brought out by the lines of regression sketched on to the graphs. Regression analysis produced values of $r = 0.68$ for the western data and $r = 0.88$ for the eastern.12 Greater perceived misuse correlates with a greater number of acts of violence, and a drop in the violence statistics is paralleled by a lower perceived level of misuse of the asylum laws.

To sum up: there is a positive correlation between the curves for offences/acts of violence against foreigners on the one hand and polled public opinion on the other. Nevertheless, the crucial question is which aspect ought rather to be considered as the causative context, and which rather as the effect. Did the offences committed influence popular opinion as expressed in poll responses, or was the effect the converse one, that polled public opinion led to a change in the number of acts of violence? This is a difficult question to answer because the synchronous monthly measurements do not provide a clear picture of whether, for example, the

11 However, another factor comes into play at this point, namely that the perception of misuse of the asylum rules could be taken as an indicator of a more substantial shift in the climate of opinion. That climate, too, could be expected to be more readily perceived by people prepared to use violence. If looked at this way, a correlation does again appear more plausible.

12 The objection may be made to the regression analysis applied here that it neglects the auto-correlation between the data of individual points in time which a time series analysis could provide. Unfortunately, though, the small number of time points made it impossible to compute a time series. Moreover, the objection loses some of its persuasiveness during the course of the analysis, as the results compared in this instance were all obtained in breach of one and the same methodological rule.
polling took place before or after particularly important incidents. Yet this timing element could be very significant in months such as those in which the Hoyerswerda and Rostock incidents took place.

To investigate this relationship, I additionally analysed the two data sets *asynchronously*. A minimum requirement for any assertion of causality is that the presumed causal factor must precede the effect on a time axis. To establish whether any such links exist, the data are again correlated but with a time gap between them. This was done in two different ways, each corresponding to one of the following opposing hypotheses. In hypothesis 1, changes in polled public opinion were suggested to precede increases or decreases in the number of violent acts; this was tested by connecting opinion survey data from month \( x \) with statistics on violent offences from month \( x + 1 \). Similarly, the converse hypothesis 2 (that acts of violence influence polled public opinion) was tested by combining the data set for the number of acts of violence in month \( x \) on the poll data from month \( x + 1 \). The results of the regression analyses are shown in Table 3.

When compared against the synchronous figures the changes shown up by these asynchronous regressions run in the same direction in both the east and west of the country. If *violence* is assumed to be the causal factor, the coefficient diminishes in value. In addition, the values are significant on a lower level. On the other hand, if *polled public opinion* is assumed as the causal factor not only is the coefficient higher, but so too is the level of significance. This clear trend supports hypothesis 1, i.e. that polled public opinion has a stronger (in statistical terms) positive influence on the number of acts of violence than *vice versa*. Nevertheless, the fact that the regression values for hypothesis 2 are also relatively high suggests that some influence also occurs in this direction. A provisional summary can be made as follows: Acts of violence against foreigners and a critical attitude to foreigners among the general public exert reciprocal positive influences (i.e. both amplifying and dampening influences occur); however, as far as net positive influence is concerned, the influence of polled public opinion upon acts of violence is apparently greater than the converse one.

What explanations might there be for these findings? As noted earlier in the summary of the literature, the positive relationship observed between polled public opinion (independent variable) and the number of violent acts (dependent variable) can be assumed to be plausible. After all, people who are prepared to use violence may feel they

![Figure 2: Acts of Violence against Foreigners and Perceived Misuse of Asylum Laws (West)](image)

![Figure 3: Acts of Violence against Foreigners and Perceived Misuse of Asylum Laws (East)](image)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3: Results of Regression Analyses.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Type of analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Causal Factor</td>
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<td>r West</td>
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<tr>
<td>r East</td>
</tr>
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* : significant at 5% level
** : significant at 1% level
have the backing of popular opinion, seeing this as a legitimation of their choice of violent means. An increase in the proportion of the general public perceiving the misuse of asylum laws may have encouraged these people to resort to violence. Likewise, if the percentage perceiving misuse of the asylum laws falls, so too does the level of violence against foreigners. The reverse causal link (that the number of violent acts affects polled public opinion) is not so clear-cut. In this instance, one not only needs to look at the number of acts committed, which could well have encouraged the general public to adopt a critical attitude to foreigners, but also to take account of the seriousness and the nature of particular acts of violence. The "critical moments" in the violence curve are chronologically linked to the riots and murders which have been highlighted; both the violence figures and those showing the perception of asylum misuse responded by rising (or falling) after these incidents. It is, as a first step, possible to argue that attacks against foreigners which attract a lot of media coverage (such as those in Hoyerswerda and Rostock) and the consequential increase in the number of violent acts may have led ordinary citizens to adopt a more critical attitude towards foreigners. However, a more plausible explanation than any such sudden change in attitude is one which takes account of the actual situation in which public opinion is polled as an intervening variable. Firstly, one might expect survey respondents to be more willing, in the wake of events such as the Hoyerswerda or Rostock attacks, to express truthfully to an anonymous interviewer the latent views they may already hold. Extensive media reporting of such incidents and the growing number of violent attacks may possibly have caused a shift in the perceived social desirability of specific responses, with the result that people felt more at ease after Hoyerswerda and Rostock in expressing their suspicions that asylum applicants misuse the law. Secondly, a similar kind of effect probably occurred in the month succeeding the Mölln arson attack, but in the opposite direction. This murder will have tended to push attitudes back into latency due to a renewed shift in their perceived social desirability. The murder discredited further acts of violence.13

Hence the correlation between a lower level of polled public agreement that misuse was occurring and a lower number of acts of violence after the Mölln attack. The murders led to a reduction in the number of acts of violence, and the amount of criticism of asylum applicants also fell. This does not call into question any legitimizing or delegitimizing effect of polled public opinion on the level of violence, the analysis simply qualifies the extent and dynamics of such effects.

3. Polled Public Opinion and Violence against Foreigners: Reciprocal Escalation and De-escalation

The increase in the number of violent acts committed against foreigners in Germany in the early 1990s would only appear at first sight to be the most important finding to report here. Similarly, the increases in violence after the Hoyerswerda and Rostock incidents do not really need to be stressed any further at this point, as that particular ground has already been well covered in other publications. Rather, there are four characteristic features of the rise and fall in the statistics on violence which have been drawn to attention in this article. Firstly, the level of violence has moved in wave-like cycles. Secondly, the events of Hoyerswerda and Rostock did not, as often presumed, trigger off increased violence in themselves, but acted as catalysts to that increase. The frequency of violence was already rising in the run-up to the incidents concerned. These events with such enormous consequences (most of all for their victims, but also because of the media attention they received) thus had the effect of amplifying but not initiating the trend towards increased violence. It is quite possible that the "success" of the attacks encouraged others to perpetrate violence of their own. Thirdly, the tragedy of Mölln, reported equally intensively in the media, led to a decline in

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13 This hypothesis is supported by responses obtained by the POLITBAROMETER regarding the acceptability of violence. Unfortunately, this question was only asked in a small number of months, and it was not therefore possible to put it to systematic use. The exact question, formulated after the Rostock riots, was "Can you sympathise with people who take violent action against asylum applicants?" In the west, the question was asked in September, October and December 1992, but in the east it was unfortunately only put in October. The proportion of respondents in the west expressing such sympathy after Rostock was 13.6% in September and 11.5% in October; the proportion in the east was higher in October, at 16.2%. Following the Mölln murders, approval fell below 5% in the west, thus backing up the supposition that the events of Mölln had a deterrent effect on further violence.
the amount of violence, and not to an increase as in the earlier cases. The shock-waves generated by this murder apparently dampened down the number of acts of violence. *Fourthly*, however, the next prominent case of murder against foreigners in Solingen was followed by a renewed increase in acts of violence – the shock which followed Mölln appears to have lost its effect by then, no longer providing the deterrent against further attacks. It appears that society may have become accustomed to the violence.

The analysis of polled public opinion confirms these assumptions. This can be summed up as follows: The oscillations in polled public opinion correlate with those of the curve of violent acts against foreigners. As the incidence of violence is seen to rise, there is a parallel increase in the frequency of public annoyance at the perceived misuse of asylum laws, and the latter also stabilizes at a new, higher level. The level of annoyance falls off again after the multiple murder of Mölln, and so too do the violence statistics. The parallel course of these two curves is manifested in the high, positive correlation recorded between the number of violent acts and the extent of public opinion critical to foreigners established by polling. Thus there would appear to be reciprocal positive influence between the two variables, which is also quite plausible in theory. However, which of the two variables should we regard more strongly as a cause, and which more strongly as an effect? If the two data sets are staggered in time, first in one direction and then in the other, and analysed on this asynchronous basis, causal hypotheses can be tested in each of the two directions. The findings of regression analysis show that the relatively stronger positive influence is exerted upon the acts of violence by polled public opinion. That is not to say that no direct causal relationship exists in the other direction (i.e., violence affecting public opinion), but this effect is less positively pronounced, and also includes an element of countervailing, inverse causal impact.

The relationship between these quantities can, then, be described as a *spiral* relationship – though the spiral is out of balance. Polled public opinion can be assumed to act as a stimulus to acts of violence; the perpetrators of such violence evidently believed it had been legitimized by a critical attitude towards foreigners in large sections of the general public. Conversely, a reduction in the perceived level of misuse of the asylum laws also leads to a reduced number of acts of violence. The weaker positive causal impact of violence upon polled public opinion may be a result of countervailing, inverse effects which also occur: *too much* violence led to a lower level of perceived asylum misuse. That *too much* is not a function of the pure quantity of acts of violence, but of the intensity and nature of particular incidents. This can be explained to some extent by the elimination of latency in communicating the attitudes in question following the Hoyerswerda and Rostock attacks, but also by the restoration of that latency following the tragedy of Mölln. Contrary to the assertion of Bergmann/Erb (1986: 226), one cannot necessarily assume that the anonymity of the interview situation in opinion polling will render communication latency irrelevant as a potential influencing factor. For here too, perceived social desirability seems to have an effect. After Hoyerswerda and Rostock, criticism of foreigners appeared to be more legitimate, to have better prospects of success and to be easier to express – including to an anonymous interviewer. Taking up the ideas put forward by Noelle-Neumann (1984), one can assume that what one might term a *spiral of speaking out* was in operation here, not a *spiral of silence*. After Mölln, though, opinion polls showed a less pronounced critical attitude towards asylum applicants. The murder committed there presumably led critics to be more cautious in expressing their views. Whether that means their underlying attitudes have changed must remain an open question.

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