In recent weeks East Germany’s veneer of socialist culture has been stripped bare. It may now become the more conservative half of a united Germany. But that’s not all. Paul Hockenos reports that neo-fascism is alive and thriving in the anti-fascist state.

Two decades after the East German state officially declared “Nazism extinguished from its territory”, the voice of rightwing extremists at demonstrations across the country is clearly audible. Since the hardline regime’s fall last November, the anti-fascist state’s poorly-kept secret has become public: organised neo-Nazi and fascist groups are an active and potent force in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Small neo-Nazi organisations have operated conspiratorially in the GDR for years. But now, for the first time since the war, the fascist groups’ efforts are no longer confined to the backrooms of local bars or the bleachers of soccer stadiums.

Although neo-Nazism represents only a fraction of the nationalist fervour here, recent events have accelerated the extremists’ strategy by years, giving those close to the movement reason to take their advances very seriously. The vacuum created by the unexpected pace of political change has confronted a depoliticised people with choices over the future of their society that they are ill-prepared to face.

With the possible exception of the late ‘forties, when the country was founded as a socialist, parliamentary democracy, East Germans have only two traditions from the past five decades to draw on: fascism and stalinism. In the absence of a democratic culture, many have simply fallen back on the authoritarian party structures. After years of unquestioned order, people are now suddenly confronted with a chaotic situation, explains Brigitte Steinborn, a professor and criminal sociologist at East Berlin’s
Humboldt University, who has researched fascist movements in the GDR since 1986. “They feel helpless and disoriented. The fascists’ ideology and the manipulative mechanisms that they are using are very attractive to the present mass psychology. Order, nationalism, anti-communism, foreigners out - at least a third of our youth can be brought to their feet with that agenda.”

The country’s young people between the ages of 15 and 24 show the greatest susceptibility to reactionary ideas. Steinborn and colleagues at the Central Institute for Youth Research in Leipzig estimate that 6% of Berlin and Leipzig youth and between 1% and 2% of young people nationwide already identify with an ultra-right politics.

A recent study from the institute showed that 64% of those who rejected extremism nevertheless embraced at least some fascist values. Steinborn figures that one activist is now in the position to convert at least 10 to 20 co-workers, depending on the area. The nascent movement, they conclude, is ripe to expand.
Their numbers concur with those from the district attorney’s office, from experts in the West and from neo-fascist organisations in the West, such as the Republican Party (REP). Under their leader, former SS officer Franz Schönhuber, the REPs in recent regional West German elections have consistently captured over 10% of the urban vote, and twice that in some areas. Their overtly racist, anti-Semitic, nationalistic Weltanschauung appeals to large sections of the lower middle class. Preaching law and order, and a return to a bloc-free, fully-militarised Germany, including parts of Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, Schönhuber won himself a seat in the European parliament last year. The REPs, as well as a handful of like-minded groups, see even greater support in ‘Mitteldeutschland’ or the ‘Soviet-occupied zone’, as they alternately refer to the GDR, as central to their overall strategy.

Although fascist parties are prohibited from organising in the GDR, the REPs have already established footholds in East Berlin and across the conservative South. Reams of propaganda have been confiscated at the border and dozens of REP activists arrested. The lax border controls, however, have enabled neo-nazi groups to circulate millions of pieces of literature. In Leipzig, Schönhuber’s troops report that one afternoon 90,000 were “ripped out of their hands”. On the other side of the wall, leafleters openly greet the hordes of East Berliners visiting the West with directions to the local recruitment office. So great has the response been the REPs are setting up a special GDR office in West Berlin.

Other neo parties, smaller and more militant than the REPs, also back similar GDR organisations. Slipping over the southern border from their headquarters in Bavaria, they’ve met a response more enthusiastic than their miniscule organisations can muster in the West. “I was simply mobbed,” said Michael Kühnen, 34, self-heralded Führer of the Federal Republic’s neo-nazi scene and president of German Alternative (DA), a group that advertises itself with the slogan: ‘The Fourth Reich is Coming’.

The leader of the German Free Workers Party (FAP), Friedhelm Busse, 60, argues that the neo-nazi parties’ uncompromising reunification demands fall on receptive ears in the East. Unlike the REPs, the FAP and DA aim their hate message explicitly at youth, mostly skinheads and soccer hooligans. While they claim to have bases in Weimar, Cottbus, Dresden and Erfurt, electorally their membership is insignificant.

East Berlin producer Frank Neumann recently shot the first GDR television documentary on the formerly taboo issue, entitled ‘The Sad Month of November: The Danger of Neo-nazism in the GDR’ which tracked the phenomenon in the southern Thuringia region. “Even before the war,” Neumann said, “this area was a centre for nationalism and reactionary thought. Now, school kids, 7, 8, and 9 years old, have already begun to scribble swastikas and ‘SS’ on the walls. They have even tried to knock over Jewish gravestones.

Even though the site of the Buchenwald concentration camp is right next door, most children are told little or nothing about the Nazi era. When they vandalise a Jewish monument or harass one of the 170,000 African, Asian, Cuban or Polish guest workers, parents and police take little notice. From films that run at least monthly on West German TV, they get a harmless, if not benevolent, picture of German fascism during the War. Aryan Wehrmacht officers are depicted as tall, intelligent and heroic. The allies are cast as ‘the Other’, foreign forces on German soil. And then there is the eldest generation, now in their seventies. There are some who “stashed away fascist books and other material, waiting for a crisis when they would become useful again”, says Neumann. “They’ve been waiting for their hour and now they think that it’s come.”

The fascist movements in the GDR tend to fall into three overlapping categories: skin-heads, neo-nazis and ‘fascos’. Skins, usually in their teens, express the crudest and most militaristic form of reactionary protest. Clad in steel-toed Doctor Martens’, rolled-up jeans, bomber jackets and razor-thin hair cuts, their style is identical to that of their West German counterparts. Most estimates put the number of organised skins in East Berlin at about 600 with another 2,000 or so hangers-on. Their bigotry is vented spontaneously and violently - on the streets, at discos and at sporting events. The young thugs move in packs, showing a fierce loyalty to one another, particularly their leader, and a reflexive hostility towards their enemies. At the top of their long hate list are foreigners, leftists, punks and gays.

Street violence has become so common that many punks are afraid to venture out alone. “You can’t talk with these people, they just come at you swinging,” says Jahn, an 18-year-old punk with a black and red ‘Against Nazis’ armband on his tattered jacket. “You know, it used to be the cops who’d knock you around for something like this,” he explains, pointing to the insignia of a smashed swastika.

He and his friend Dirk, with whom he shares a squat in the run-down Prenzlauerberg district of East Berlin, are members of the Prenzlauerberg Anarchist Antifa Project. As most of their group, the two have had some hasty tangles with skins. After a hardcore concert one evening, a few skin gangs had planned an ambush. “We ducked most of it,” says Dirk, 19, hair hennaed and ears laced with silver rings. But “on the way back we found one punk lying in the street, really bloody and unconscious. We thought he was dead. Twenty skins jumped him for no reason.”

The two youth cultures are diametrically opposed. East Berlin-Friedrichshain, one of the city’s many high-rise ghettos, is typical of the Stalinist planning that breeds alienation in youth. Friday evenings, at its self-contained centre, the Kalinker disco opens its doors.

For years a notorious skins hang-out (a Mozambique worker was stabbed to death on his way past the building last winter), the club’s clientele illustrates the overlap between a large segment of East German youth and the much smaller percent who endorse fascist ideology. In the sterile, cavernous room, a cafeteria by day, clean-cut, smartly-dressed boys and girls dance listlessly to ‘seventies pop tunes. They recognise me immediately as a foreigner, become impatient when I order beer at the lemonade counter,
Max, a 19-year-old window washer, was brought up by his mother in a Berlin suburb. His father in jail, a “total Asi” - state slang for ‘anti-social’, he looked up to his grandfather, a former pilot in the Wehrmacht. “I learned about the Nazis through books that my Opa gave me. He’s not a Nazi himself any more, he just thinks he lived better then than now, earned more for his work,” says the boy, outfitted in a snazzy track suit. His mother knows about his politics, but is primarily concerned that he doesn’t wind up in prison.

He identifies closely with the goals of National Socialism, but feels that it can be done better, more effectively than it was by the Nazis. “There’s a good and bad side to Adolf,” he explains with a disarming ease. “Bad was to gas the Jews. He could have just sent them away, and if they wouldn’t leave, lock ‘em up. Good was that he said what he wanted and did something...

call the bouncer when I prop myself against a table. “What d’you think chairs are for?” Nothing non-identical is tolerated in their rigid, accustomed order.

Before I’m asked to leave for having carried my drink into the hallway, a few regulars agree to chat. “I ain’t a Nazi, I’m just German. There’s nothing wrong with that,” says Willi, 17, a ‘mode-skin’ who distances himself from the explicitly fascist identity of ‘Nazi-skins’. He and his mates sport crew cuts, less uniform and militaristic than the skinheads, dark baseball jackets and high-top basketball shoes.

In varying degrees of articulation, they express the politics of many of their peers. One “non-socialist Germany for Germans only” is the common denominator. “Punks, they’re dirty,” he explains unmaliciously. “You know, they don’t work and want anarchy. There must be order. Or else who’d work?” he reasons. The same goes for guestworkers: “For little work, they make a lot of money. We don’t need them to rebuild Germany.” The skin ethic, as well as that of the other extremists, draws on traditional German values which, they feel, the state has betrayed. Virtue, discipline, industriousness and obedience are values that paid off in the Third Reich, they claim. In contrast to the resignation typical of GDR youth over the past decade, the new libermenschen are proud to want to achieve something, to have ideals and goals. By and large, they subscribe to a petty bourgeois German mentality. They keep family obligations, pay rent on time and are hard workers. Many sign up for extended military duty. Older people consider their public behaviour exemplary.

The growth of fascism in the GDR is inextricably tied to the policies and structures of the stalinist state, argues dissident Freya Klier, author of the forthcoming book *Fatherland of Lies: Growing Up in the GDR*. Klier, who now lives in West Berlin, was expelled from the East in 1987 for her work in the leftwing underground. “The German values of discipline and strong forms of authority and obedience are values that paid off in the Third Reich, they claim. In contrast to the resignation typical of GDR youth over the past decade, the new libermenschen are proud to want to achieve something, to have ideals and goals. By and large, they subscribe to a petty bourgeois German mentality. They keep family obligations, pay rent on time and are hard workers. Many sign up for extended military duty. Older people consider their public behaviour exemplary.

The skin ethic, as well as that of the other extremists, draws on traditional German values which, they feel, the state has betrayed. Virtue, discipline, industriousness and obedience are values that paid off in the Third Reich, they claim. In contrast to the resignation typical of GDR youth over the past decade, the new libermenschen are proud to want to achieve something, to have ideals and goals. By and large, they subscribe to a petty bourgeois German mentality. They keep family obligations, pay rent on time and are hard workers. Many sign up for extended military duty. Older people consider their public behaviour exemplary.

The suppression of “creative, original thinking co...
bined with the state's dogmatism about its own accomplishments gave frustrated young people no social alternative," explains Klier. Some opted for the illegal peace and human rights movement as a constructive form of opposition. But others felt that if this was as good as 'socialism' got, then the only way to turn was right. "Their alienation was indigenous. First it was just released as rage in the schoolyard, and then they found the whole skins movement in the FRG which gave it expression," she argues.

The state's policy of Abgrenzung, or 'delimitation', attempted to shield the population from western influence through strict censorship laws. Its orthodox line on aesthetics narrowed opportunities for cultural enrichment, while the prioritisation of the European, particularly German, tradition in the humanities engendered a feeling of European superiority. Before November, the vast majority of young people had travelled only in Eastern Europe and most possess only a smattering of a foreign language.

Inherent in the Abgrenzung policy was the suppression of German nationalism in favour of a political, statist identity. In contrast to the Federal Republic, the GDR maintained that the relationship of the two Germanies was one of two unrecognisable states, one capitalist, one socialist - a distinction that nationalism blurred. Through constitutional changes in 1968 and 1974, East Germany dropped references to a 'German people', one 'German nation', or unification. The socialist identity imposed from above, however, never took hold. Nationalism was artificially blocked, festering beneath the surface in its old forms. Suppressed and frustrated, German nationalism today, as it did between the wars, has taken an extreme form.

Historically, the re-emergence of fascist ideas in the 'eighties, four decades after the war, is no accident. It is in the third generation since Germany's capitulation, born between 1963 and 1975 and educated in the Honecker era, that the ideology has again found open expression. The deep-seated fascist values of their grandparents were never properly addressed as the East was transformed from part of the Third Reich to a 'socialist, anti-fascist state' in a matter of years. Those beliefs, often unconsciously, were passed on to the second generation, raised in the orthodox 'fifties. The values of National Socialism and national stalinism became intertwined. There they simmered until today's young people, burdened by war guilt, exasperated with the East-West discrepancy, and with more room for expression, gave the old values a new form.

The anti-fascist process was effective only in the early years of the Republic, before the party monopolised the movement and power, argues author and filmmaker Konrad Weiss, 42, a co-founder of the opposition group Democracy Now. "Once the party asserted itself as the sole anti force, bourgeois, Christian and Jewish traditions of resistance to the Nazis were omitted from school books."

Anti-fascism and the SED became synonymous, leading students to identify their distrust of the latter with the former. The anti-fascist idea became functionalised through its official representatives, the Union of Nazi Victims and the Anti-Fascist Resistance Fighters, both tied to the party bureaucracy. These groups "were so far from any grassroots basis that their rhetoric lacked credibility," says Weiss, whose independent documentaries on the German resistance challenged the party line. "Old bureaucrats lectured at high schools, but in the long run it proved counterproductive. The authoritarian party apparatus also perpetuated fascist principles. The top-down hierarchy - democratic centralist in theory, bureaucratic centralist in practice - was controlled by a small old guard in Berlin.

Its power rested on the maintenance of a system of privileges, domination and party obedience. "The Führer ethic lived a renaissance under a different label," argues Weiss. "First the Stalin cult, then the unconditional allegiance to the communist party vanguard under (the GDR's first party secretary Walter) Ulbricht and Honecker." Founded as a pacifist state, the practice of violence was central to its modus operandi. A feared secret police force, Stasi, presided over the banning of books, the jailing of dissidents and the general intimidation of the population.

The first skins began to appear in East Berlin around the early 'eighties, still scattered and wholly unorganised. By 1986, however, a new pattern clearly emerged: trained martial arts techniques dominated in assaults. The skins had begun to organise. Almost overnight, troops outfitted in boots and bombers worth hundreds of scarce West Marks popped up. They had also solidified contacts with the West. Since the 1968 constitution declares the GDR to have "extinguished Nazism in its territory", the police could only deal with the offenders as common criminals.

Not a word appeared in the party newspapers about the problem. The state stubbornly refused to acknowledge the phenomenon's indigenous social roots. Police cracked down harder, trial after trial followed, but the movement proliferated.

A more organised, political faction of 'neo-Nazis' broke off from the skins. The neos, slightly older, shed the skin
regalia, opting instead for street clothes and close-cropped Hitler-style haircuts. They stress physical training and abstain from heavy drinking and drugs. Unlike the predominantly working class skins, their social backgrounds span the GDR spectrum. For example, on Hitler's 100th birthday, April 20 of last year, several groups of assorted neos rented out a bar for a celebration. A police raid arrested dozens, but charges were not pressed - the ringleaders were sons of prominent SED members.

The group known least about, and potentially the most dangerous, are the fascos. Older, more educated than the neos, they work conspiratorially with a specific, long-term political program. Confiscated documents make their goal clear: the complete abolition of sodalism as well as bourgeois democracy, and the re-establishment of the German Reich.

They are as anti-American as anti-Soviet. The fascos view the 'tragedy of Yalta' with the same bitterness with which their grandparents saw the 'treason of Versailles'. Ambitious and intelligent, they are "the over-achievers that the system held back," says Klier. "And they've put their minds to bringing it down." With a solid knowledge of Fascist theory, the fascos consider themselves the elite of the movement, its future leaders. According to several sources, they have been recruiting, planning and making contacts with the West, including neo-Nazi organisations in the US and Canada, for three years.

Violence has been an integral part of fasco strategy from its inception. At first, they attempt to convince acquaintances of their program's logic. If they meet with resistance, the trouble-makers find a brick through their windows or are beaten up on their way home from the pub.

The recent events have presented the vanguard with legitimation much sooner than they had anticipated, overtaking their former long-term strategy. The manipulation of neutral, nationalist-oriented citizens is now critical to their program, says Steinbom. There is also "proof that since 1988 fascists have been infiltrating sodal organisations. You can be sure that in all of the newly-formed parties there will be infiltrators." The existence of extremists in the SED and Stasi, she and others confirm, has long been public knowledge.

Of late, many skins and neos have gone underground, likely joining up with more organised groups. Although there are still street assaults, the level of violence has dropped conspicuously since November. The criminal police report that the number of prosecutions against rightists tripled from 1988 in the first nine months of 1989 alone. But lately "It's become strangely, unnaturally quiet," Neumann as well as insiders have noticed. "The right is concentrating and organising itself. They realise that now there's much more to be gained from strengthening their internal structures and from working within."

Opposition parties argue that the days of secret police and the repression of ideas are over. The content of political movements won't disappear through its prohibition or censorship, asserts Weiss. "Democratisation must really be a process and the legal expression of all political opinions is part of that process. If the constitution allows room for non-violent right parties, incorporates them rather than excludes them, their power and attractiveness will be neutralised. This seems to work quite well in Western Europe."

The extremists' popularity in the West and potential in the East, however, must be confronted as more than a healthy expression of pluralism. The tolerance that mainstream West German and French parties show the right effectively condones its bigotry. The extreme nationalism that could accompany German unification presents yet another variable that multi-party structures might prove unable to contain.

Fascism made its rise once before through a fragile democracy. With only the Christian Democrats, who had functioned for years as one of the government's rubber-stamp bloc parties, on the right side of the political spectrum, plenty of space is open to the ultra-right. Although it is unlikely that they will be able to form a legal party anyway, their patient, conspiratorial strategy perhaps suits their aims better in the long run. Their numbers are still small, but armed extremists with violent philosophies can inflict considerable damage. The anti-fascist state must now embark on the extermination of Nazism once again. But this time the task will be even harder - the new fascism is the product of its own system.

PAUL HOCKENOS is a freelance writer who lives in Budapest.