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Fig. 1. Banner at the second *Rock gegen Rechts* festival, Frankfurt, 16–17 June 1980. Photo by Kurt Schäfer.

Rocking Against the Right: Political Activism and Popular Music in West Germany, 1979–1980

by *Daniel Laqua*

‘70,000 rock freaks and anti-fascists have chased the stinking Nazis away!’ This is how one enthusiastic supporter summarized the outcome of *Rock gegen Rechts* (Rock against the Right), a festival held in Frankfurt am Main on 16 and 17 June 1979.¹ Although other reports assumed a lower turnout, they nonetheless stressed the event’s scale and success.² Through this festival, activists protested against plans by the far-right National Democratic Party (NPD) to gather in the West German city. Yet, as the slogan ‘No Nazi meeting in Frankfurt – or anywhere else’ indicated, *Rock gegen Rechts* was intended to be more than a one-off local affair: it was part of a nationwide campaign comprising concerts, publications and demonstrations.³

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Contemporary observers acknowledged that the initiative 'would not have been possible' without its British forerunner Rock Against Racism (RAR), which had been launched in 1976.⁴ RAR mobilized against the neo-fascists of the National Front and has been interpreted as 'a creative response to the profound social and political crisis that gripped Britain in the 1970s'.⁵ The British campaign attracted considerable support, and several scholars have described it as a mass movement.⁶ *Rock gegen Rechts* did not generate a comparable level of activity. Smaller concerts took place in various German cities, and another large festival followed in Frankfurt in June 1980. Soon afterwards, however, the alliance that had sustained these activities disintegrated. It is therefore hardly surprising that the German campaign, unlike its British counterpart, has largely escaped scholarly attention.⁷

This article argues that *Rock gegen Rechts* denotes a critical juncture in the history of the West German left, which underwent seemingly contradictory processes of fragmentation and coalition-building in the late 1970s. Recent work has shown how anti-nuclear protest helped to forge new activist alliances and gave rise to an influential green movement in this period.⁸ The mobilization surrounding *Rock gegen Rechts* was a concurrent, partly overlapping, attempt to bring together competing political factions – from supporters of state socialism to the anti-authoritarian left. The effort to join forces against the far right evidently had particular resonance in a country where the legacy of fascism loomed large in public debate.⁹ Yet, as this article demonstrates, alliance-building on this subject encountered a major obstacle: the difficulty of agreeing on what constituted 'the right'.

Rock gegen Rechts was not only a forum for political debate but also an instance of radical cultural politics. As such, it was shaped by the interplay of politics, lifestyle and artistic expression. Such relationships have been explored in substantial depth with regard to 1960s West Germany, notably by Detlef Siegfried and Timothy Scott Brown.¹⁰ *Rock gegen Rechts*, however, shifts our attention to the late 1970s and early 1980s – a period when West Germany's 'left-wing alternative milieu' flourished.¹¹ *Rock gegen Rechts* offers particular insights into Frankfurt's alternative milieu, as local activists staged the largest events of the campaign. It also highlights disagreement about the role assigned to music: whereas some protagonists regarded it as an ideal tool for spreading political messages, others believed that sloganeering or the targeting of mass audiences would deprive music of its liberating power. These debates point to questions that are subject to growing scholarly interest, namely the relationship between music, politics and consumption in the late 1970s.¹² While this article shows the difficulties of building political and cultural alliances, it also reveals legacies that extended far beyond 1979–80.



Courtesy of Institut für Stadtgeschichte / Institute for the History of Frankfurt, SZZ1980/137.

Fig. 2. Stage and audience at the second *Rock gegen Rechts* festival, Frankfurt, 16–17 June 1980.
Photo by Kurt Schäfer.



Courtesy of Institut für Stadtgeschichte / Institute for the History of Frankfurt, S7FR 8564.

Fig. 3. Audience at the first *Rock gegen Rechts* festival, Frankfurt, 16 June 1979.
Photo by Kurt Weiner.

FROM BRITAIN TO WEST GERMANY: ROCK AGAINST
RACISM AND *ROCK GEGEN RECHTS*

Rock gegen Rechts was inspired by British efforts, and activists from both countries shared insights and experiences. For instance, the paper of the *Rock gegen Rechts* alliance interviewed RAR spokesperson Wayne Minter,¹³ while Frankfurt's alternative periodical *Pflasterstrand* published a conversation with two RAR organizers – the graphic designer Ruth Gregory and photographer Syd Shelton. Stressing RAR's international contacts, the pair declared, 'one day we'll organize a world conference'.¹⁴ Activists from both countries affirmed the comparability of their respective situations. For instance, one *Rock gegen Rechts* co-founder likened 'the nationalists of the National Front' to the NPD.¹⁵ Similarly, British campaigners stressed the unity of the cause. On behalf of the Anti-Nazi League – a partner organization of RAR – Peter Hain expressed his hope that the Frankfurt festival of 1979 would 'stop the Nazis the way they had been stopped in England'.¹⁶

Claims about commonalities must not be taken at face value. Certainly, the re-emergence of fascism and the need to resist it had been a long-standing concern within the West German left. During the student protests of the 1960s, activists argued that West German politicians, officials and academics had insufficiently addressed the Nazi past.¹⁷ When the NPD gained votes in local and regional elections in 1967 and 1968, students regarded it as another manifestation of the ongoing fascist threat.¹⁸ By 1979, however, the NPD was hardly a vibrant force: in fact, its fortunes had declined over the previous decade. One German activist acknowledged that in comparison to the NPD, Britain's National Front had a stronger urban presence and an 'increasing influx of "fresh blood"'.¹⁹ Although a far-right youth subculture did emerge in West Germany too, its growth largely occurred in the 1980s.²⁰ RAR and *Rock gegen Rechts* also differed in their political make-up. In RAR, the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) – whose ideological underpinnings were Trotskyite – played a prominent part. By contrast, different left-wing currents competed within *Rock gegen Rechts*, ranging from the 'old left' to anti-authoritarianism and green politics. As later sections of this article will show, RAR and *Rock gegen Rechts* reflected the contrasting dynamics of left-wing politics in the two countries.

Although their circumstances differed, RAR and *Rock gegen Rechts* resembled one another in their ambition to stage musical events with a political purpose. RAR attracted widespread attention with its large-scale 'carnival' of April 1978, held in Victoria Park, East London. The Frankfurt festivals had carnivalesque features, too, amounting to 'a mixture of Woodstock, flea market ... and street festival'.²¹ In both countries, these larger events operated alongside local activities. For instance, RAR staged 300 local concerts in 1978 and in the following year it also organized a concert tour across Britain.²² *Rock gegen Rechts* was meant to comprise a similar range of activities, which a Hamburg-based association sought to

co-ordinate. Some local gigs did indeed take place, albeit without reaching the scale of RAR activities.²³ Information on such ventures was disseminated through dedicated periodicals: *Temporary Hoarding* in Britain and *Rock gegen Rechts* in Germany.

Music-wise, RAR was particularly associated with two genres: punk and reggae. According to Ian Goodyer, their presence ‘became emblematic of the racial solidarity promoted by RAR’.²⁴ Indeed, to many observers punk seemed to express the frustrations of white working-class youths, while reggae bore strong connections with the culture of black Britons.²⁵ Both punk and reggae also featured at *Rock gegen Rechts*, but less prominently than they did at RAR. Instead, the German events primarily involved rock, folk, blues and jazz musicians. In this respect, they were steeped in the music of the 1960s counterculture, whereas the dominant styles at RAR distanced themselves from it.

Most *Rock gegen Rechts* performers were German – yet their musical idioms had clearly been shaped by Anglo-American influences.²⁶ Moreover, the organizers did manage to enlist British artists such as the Tom Robinson Band, whose leader sat on the RAR steering committee and regularly performed at British anti-racist events.²⁷ His group had started out in London’s pub rock scene, yet its anti-establishment stance meant that it was occasionally considered in a punk context. Tom Robinson was active well beyond RAR; his band’s 1976 single ‘Glad to be gay’ reflected his involvement in the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. While the Tom Robinson Band did not make it to Frankfurt in 1980, it did perform at a German festival offshoot one day later. The Frankfurt festivals included two RAR-affiliated reggae bands: Misty in Roots in 1979 and Steel Pulse in 1980. Unlike in Britain, reggae in West Germany did not have direct links to a large minority community, as the country had seen little migration from the Caribbean. The genre did, however, enjoy considerable popularity in the alternative milieu that nourished *Rock gegen Rechts* in Frankfurt: both the Karl Marx bookshop and Frankfurt University’s students’ union hosted reggae nights.²⁸

One German observer argued that the absence of a home-grown equivalent to reggae demonstrated the ‘deficit in our own oppositional culture’.²⁹ It also meant that, compared with the British African-Caribbean presence at RAR, immigrant culture played a less prominent part at *Rock gegen Rechts*. This contrast becomes even more striking when one considers the French initiative Rock Against Police.³⁰ Launched in 1980 to protest against everyday discrimination, Rock Against Police maintained close links with *beur* rock – music by young people with North African backgrounds. Bands such as Carte de Séjour and Rockin’ Babouches articulated the concerns of youths in the *banlieues*. Compared to Rock Against Police, even RAR had its limitations: Ian Goodyer has noted ‘the relatively slender popular cultural links between Asian and White British youth’, despite occasional

collaboration between RAR and the Indian Workers' Association, the Southall Youth Movement and Asian punk band Alien Kulture.³¹

As the site of the two *Rock gegen Rechts* festivals, Frankfurt certainly offered scope for building multicultural alliances. The city was West Germany's financial and trading centre and hosted a migrant community that had grown substantially during the 1960s.³² At the local level, migrant groups and left-wing activists sporadically co-operated in the 1970s, notably in rent strikes and campaigns to increase the level of child benefit for immigrant families.³³ *Rock gegen Rechts* affirmed such bonds. The 1980 festival featured a Turkish theatre group and an Italian band, thus acknowledging two large migrant communities.³⁴ Such representation did not necessarily suggest deep-rooted co-operation: it could also be an attempt to add multicultural flavour to the proceedings – and this was quite literally the case with the use of international food stalls.³⁵

That said, as an alliance, *Rock gegen Rechts* was backed by left-wing migrant groups, for example in an initiative against the violent ultra-nationalists of Turkey's *Ülkü Ocakları* (Grey Wolves), or when organizers in Frankfurt, drawing on shared political affinities, staged a local solidarity event with Chilean and Kurdish participants in December 1979.³⁶ Half a year later, they also organized a concert by the *Assemblea Musicale Teatrale*, a Genovese group that blended music, politics and theatre.³⁷ Such activities suggest an ambition to frame the critique of 'the right' in a way that could link it to a variety of causes.

DEFINING AND DEBATING THE RIGHT-WING THREAT

RAR's critique of racism ranged well beyond its opposition to the National Front: Ian Goodyer has argued that it sought 'to explore and attempt to draw connections between topics such as gender and sexual politics, British imperialism, the role of the state, and the war in Ireland'.³⁸ In opposing 'the right', *Rock gegen Rechts* potentially covered an even wider set of issues. The German music magazine *Sounds* commented on the breadth of its objectives somewhat sceptically:

Its platform starts with a summary of all manifestations of daily and systematic repression in the FRG [Federal Republic of Germany]: from occupational bans [for suspected radicals] to the discrimination against gays, from nuclear power plants to the difficulties for progressive musicians who enter the capitalist exploitation market. Against the stultifying machinery and ideological snooping and disco fever, the initiative has one answer: 'With Rock music against everything that is on the right, that oppresses us and wants to oppress us.'³⁹

Another report characterized this diversity as 'Rock against the Right, pagant against plastic, solar energy against nuclear power, collectively run businesses against capitalist interest, bio-dynamic nutrition against

chemistry, lust for life against the programmed slumber trip'.⁴⁰ Similarly wide-ranging aims were articulated from the festival stage. Before launching into an instrumental number, jazz rock band Missus Beastly proclaimed that 'to us, *Rock gegen Rechts* also means: declare anarchy, abolish the military, legalize cannabis, no power for anyone'. Meanwhile, a song by the Dutch group Bots impelled audience members to 'stand up' if they were opposed to nuclear power plants and 'dynamite in the hands of a child', but also if they were 'women who do not want to be enslaved', 'gays who are red rather than blue', 'guest workers pining over German women' and, indeed, people 'who desire a better life'.⁴¹

The 1979 festival did, of course, address a specific issue, namely the NPD's proposed Frankfurt meeting. The far-right party had previously gathered in the city in 1978, triggering clashes between anti-fascist demonstrators and the police.⁴² *Rock gegen Rechts* was not the only attempt to prevent its return to Frankfurt: trade unionists and Social Democrats as well as representatives from the city's Christian churches and its Jewish community had formed their own alliance, planning a demonstration outside Frankfurt's city hall. *Rock gegen Rechts* intended to send its audience to that rally before the festival's opening. However, the local authorities cited security concerns and banned both the NPD gathering and the counter-demonstration. *Rock gegen Rechts* subverted the ban by encouraging 'communal walks' from the festival site to the city centre, staging quasi-demonstrations that largely passed peacefully.⁴³ Moreover, the organizers provided a forum for the local anti-NPD alliance: in lieu of the cancelled central demonstration, its representatives spoke at the festival, held on the fringes of the city. One activist noted that the visiting trade unionists must have found this experience 'exotic and strangely attractive' and suggested that the encounter had helped to overcome 'mutual prejudices' between the different constituencies.⁴⁴

Conservatives criticized trade unionists for their contacts with *Rock gegen Rechts*. For instance, the Christian Democrats' district chair asked union leaders to distance themselves from the planned 1980 festival as it would become a 'demonstration against the Bavarian prime minister, the NATO Dual Track Decision and against solidarity with the United States of America'.⁴⁵ The 'Bavarian prime minister' in question was Franz Josef Strauss, the conservative candidate in the 1980 federal election. Many left-wing activists suspected Strauss of harbouring authoritarian ambitions. From this perspective, rocking against 'the right' could thus be applied to Strauss as well. Like the NPD, the Bavarian politician was a foil against whom different factions could unite. For instance, having stressed various misgivings about *Rock gegen Rechts*, one activist concluded that he would nonetheless support 'Rock against Strauss ... because it's a provocation to put up such a rat as candidate'.⁴⁶

Whereas the remit of *Rock gegen Rechts* was too broad to attract conservative backing, some campaigners regarded it as too limited. In particular,

they argued that the NPD was not the principal threat on the right and that the initiative should address wider systemic issues. A comparable critique has been expressed with regard to RAR by Paul Gilroy, who acknowledged the ‘heterogeneous concerns’ of RAR but was critical of the Anti-Nazi League which, in his view, contributed to a narrowing of the campaign.⁴⁷

In the German context, arguments against the focus on the NPD were summarized by Wolfgang Kraushaar – at the time a left-wing activist in Frankfurt and now a prominent scholar of social movements. Kraushaar questioned whether, in targeting the neo-Nazis, the protests had ‘really hit the vanguard of the reactionary-authoritarian tendencies’ in Germany.⁴⁸ Similarly, a *Pflasterstrand* contributor argued that NPD members made rather ‘anachronistic, frumpish figures’. In his view, the slogan ‘Nazis out!’ was a distraction as it shifted attention away from ‘those who intend to install a thoroughly authoritarian state’.⁴⁹ These local critiques were echoed by the *tageszeitung* – a Berlin-based daily and major voice among the alternative left: it claimed that the event had failed to offer a ‘shared interpretation and assessment’ of fascism and its nature.⁵⁰

To such critics, the real threat lay elsewhere. The comments of Frank Wolff – formerly a prominent 1968 student activist – exemplified this line of argument. According to Wolff, the ‘principal dangers of the authoritarian state operate at the centre of the political and social state rather than coming from traditional right-wing associations’.⁵¹ With these remarks, Wolff picked up a well-established trope: fears about a re-emerging fascism at the heart of the Federal Republic had been a predominant left-wing theme in 1968. The terrorist wave of the ‘German Autumn’ of 1977 reinforced such concerns. While many left-wing activists denounced the murders committed by the Red Army Faction, they were critical of the state’s anti-terror measures, which some interpreted as part of a creeping authoritarianism. As Karrin Hanshew has noted, ‘West Germany’s highly diverse extraparliamentary left perceived the SPD [Social Democratic Party]-led counterterrorism efforts as exceeding the bounds of acceptable state force and as exemplary of a larger assault on leftist politics’.⁵²

The run-up to the 1979 *Rock gegen Rechts* festival nourished such anxieties. When Walter Wallmann, the Christian Democratic mayor of Frankfurt, banned the anti-NPD demonstration in central Frankfurt, some interpreted it as an expression of authoritarian tendencies. This was the position of the *Frankfurter Rundschau* – a left-leaning but by no means radical daily. The newspaper acknowledged that Wallmann was no neo-Nazi but criticized him because he ‘knew that ever since the Nazi era, no trade-union event had been banned and that his actions therefore provoked bad memories of this period’.⁵³ Indeed, looking back at the 1979 event, Wolfgang Kraushaar suggested that with its heavy policing, the ‘authoritarian state’ had been ‘the true victor of the situation’.⁵⁴

Yet if state authority was the problem, ‘the right’ potentially included some of those with whom *Rock gegen Rechts* sought to join forces: after all,

the federal government was led by the Social Democrats. In this context, the SPD's support for the construction of nuclear power plants was an additional problem. Anti-nuclear protest was more than an environmental matter in Germany: it constituted a social movement in which activists developed 'a shared vision of what kind of society was desirable and what kind was not'.⁵⁵ Comments by Jutta Ditfurth – a *Rock gegen Rechts* organizer who went on to become a Green politician – illustrate the intersection of different activist concerns:

I came from the women's and anti-nuclear movement, had been a member and active on the left wing of the Socialist Bureau ... For us ecologically oriented socialists, this party alliance [with the Greens] was a necessary reaction to the 'German Autumn'. The movement against nuclear power plants had been crushed by a state that was armed to its teeth.⁵⁶

As Ditfurth's statement illustrates, the attack on nuclear power was entwined with a critique of the authorities that sought to repress such protests. Wolfgang Kraushaar directly drew a connection to *Rock gegen Rechts*. As he argued, the festival had lent 'a face and a voice to the tens of thousands who – in Wyhl, Brokdorf, Kalkar, Gorleben, Grohnde, Biblis [sites of anti-nuclear protests] and elsewhere – fight persistently, carefully and tenaciously for the conditions of their life despite a situation that seems unwinnable in power-political terms'.⁵⁷ Kraushaar noted that both 'supporters and opponents of nuclear power' had gathered at *Rock gegen Rechts* and argued that Social Democrats were establishing an 'authoritarian state' in the shadow of conflicts about power plants. His critique extended to trade unions which, in his view, needed to accept a referendum on nuclear energy instead of hiding behind arguments about the 'protection of jobs'.⁵⁸ Such unease was shared even beyond Frankfurt's left-wing circles. Udo Lindenberg – a rock star who performed at the 1979 festival – stated that he was 'scared' of SPD chancellor Helmut Schmidt, explicitly mentioning his stance on nuclear power.⁵⁹

The inability of *Rock gegen Rechts* to embrace a more radical critique of state authority ruptured the alliance. In June 1980, the radical leadership of Frankfurt University's students' union withdrew from the campaign. It declared that it had sought a 'political-cultural offensive against "the Right"', that is to say, not only against neo-Nazis, but also against the state and its parties.⁶⁰ Accordingly, the student activists criticized the youth organizations of the Social Democrats, communists and trade unions, arguing that 'problematizing the term "right" would rather embarrass' these aspiring politicians. Likewise, the Green List Hesse, which had helped to organize the festivals, withdrew, deploring a lack of commitment to 'militant resistance'; it argued that *Rock gegen Rechts* 'needed to be "politicized" and should not become "rock for Schmidt and the SPD"'.⁶¹

FRANKFURT'S ALTERNATIVE MILIEU AND THE QUESTION OF RADICAL UNITY

The fallout from the 1980 festival confounded earlier optimism about *Rock gegen Rechts* and its potential to overcome the 'hopeless and traditional disunity of the German left'.⁶² Yet in its own way, the campaign did signify convergences. Detlef Siegfried has noted a 'broadening of the New Social Movements' between 1977 and 1982, reflecting transformations in the relationship between 'everyday culture and politics'.⁶³ *Rock gegen Rechts* exemplified this development: it was a cultural event, located in a specific local setting and with manifold links to activist groups. The reciprocal relationship between alternative milieus and new social movements was important in this context: according to Dieter Rucht, the former provided 'fertile soil' for the formation of the latter. In their turn, interactions with these movements helped to solidify the 'left-wing alternative milieu'.⁶⁴ Frankfurt was well suited to such encounters. In the late 1960s, the city had been a centre of the German student protests. During the subsequent decade, former 'Sixty-Eighters' sustained the city's lively alternative scene, which boasted its own bookshops, concert venues and magazines. *Rock gegen Rechts* drew on this infrastructure. For instance, the Club Voltaire – which had been a pub and left-wing meeting space since the early 1960s – provided an office for the festival organizers. Moreover, from 1976 *Pflasterstrand* served as both a fortnightly listings magazine and a forum for radical debate.⁶⁵

Alongside its aforementioned links to the anti-nuclear movement, *Rock gegen Rechts* intersected with another movement: gay liberation. Less than a month after the 1979 festival, Frankfurt became the site of the 'Homolulu' congress, staged by the National Working Group on Repression against Gays (NARGS). With an estimated audience of 1,000–2,000, it was the largest German LGBT gathering up to that point. Homolulu went beyond earlier campaigns, urging its participants to build an alternative society and thus 'make utopia concrete'.⁶⁶ NARGS not only organized Homolulu but also supported *Rock gegen Rechts*. Indeed, one Homolulu organizer described the music festival and congress as two parts of 'a new youth movement'.⁶⁷ Conservatives commented on such links: in 1979, a Christian Democrat member of the Hesse state parliament attacked trade unionists for participating in *Rock gegen Rechts*, arguing that they were collaborating 'with left-wing extremists, musical and gay groups'.⁶⁸ Although the intention of these remarks had been derogatory, the organizers used them as a badge of honour, and one festival flyer proudly quoted the phrase.⁶⁹ At the event itself, left-wing satirist Henning Venske quipped: 'a gentleman from the executive floor of the CDU [Christian Democratic Union] has said that this is a gathering of . . . left-wing extremists, musical and gay groups. Fair enough – welcome to the popular front!'.⁷⁰

Rock gegen Rechts was embedded in Frankfurt's alternative milieu and reflected the distinct features of the local left, in particular its Sponti scene. The Spontis, based mostly in Frankfurt, built on the anti-authoritarian

legacies of 1968. They initially pursued a revolutionary strategy through factory agitation, squatting and confrontation with the police. *Pflasterstrand* magazine was strongly associated with them. Its founding editor (and leading Sponti) was Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who had risen to fame as a student leader in the Parisian protests of May 1968. Expelled from France, he continued his activism in Frankfurt. By the late 1970s, Cohn-Bendit and other Spontis had largely abandoned street violence. Silke Mende has argued that they subsequently ‘engaged intensively with the green-alternative formation process’.⁷¹ Indeed, in this period, different radical forces – from environmentalists and pacifists to Maoists, Trotskyists and the anti-authoritarian left – began to coalesce under the umbrella of green politics. In January 1980, this process resulted in the creation of a new party, *Die Grünen* (The Greens).

The Spontis themselves did not play a leading part in the Greens’ party formation. Joschka Fischer – a former Frankfurt-based Sponti who became Germany’s most prominent Green politician and eventually Minister of Foreign Affairs (1998–2005) – remained aloof from the party until the summer of 1981.⁷² By contrast, members of other left-wing groups actively co-operated with environmentalists in founding the new party. The organizers of *Rock gegen Rechts* partly came from this constituency. A regional rainbow alliance, the Green List Hesse (GLH), played a central role in staging the Frankfurt festival of 1979.⁷³ After the event, one observer praised the efforts of the GLH ‘politics freaks’, but also mentioned the Socialist Bureau (SB) and the Communist Alliance (KB).⁷⁴ From its beginnings in Offenbach, a city bordering on Frankfurt, the SB brought together socialists who were ‘emphatically critical towards any form of dogmatic communism’.⁷⁵ *Rock gegen Rechts* organizers such as Klaus Zieran and Jutta Ditfurth were involved in both the GLH and the SB. Meanwhile, the *Rock gegen Rechts* association in Hamburg had links to the KB – a Maoist association that contributed to founding a Hamburg-based forerunner of the Greens.

In the late 1970s, anti-authoritarians, ‘undogmatic socialists’, Maoists and environmentalists could join forces both in the Greens and in *Rock gegen Rechts*. By contrast, they remained critical of the German Communist Party (DKP), which promoted state socialism along Soviet lines. The East German-backed DKP was founded in 1968, as the original Communist Party had been banned in West Germany since 1956. The new party’s youth wing – the Socialist German Workers’ Youth (SDAJ) – engaged with music both through its magazine and cultural events. In doing so, it built links to parts of the *Liedermacher* scene, which had emerged in the 1960s and featured political singer-songwriters.⁷⁶ Another ally was the group Floh de Cologne, whose members eventually joined the party. Founded in 1966, the band had countercultural links, performing musical cabaret with rock influences.⁷⁷

This engagement with elements of popular culture partly explains the early communist interest in *Rock gegen Rechts*. This development contrasted somewhat with the DKP's British counterpart. Having traditionally viewed pop music as a tool for American imperialism, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) maintained an ambiguous relationship with youth culture and did not play a prominent role in RAR.⁷⁸ Yet the DKP's role in *Rock gegen Rechts* was ambivalent too, as for other activists it could be either an ally or a *bête noir*.

As early as November 1978, the SDAJ used the *Rock gegen Rechts* moniker when staging an antifascist concert in Essen, featuring British blues musician Alexis Korner alongside various German bands. Floh de Cologne later edited a *Rock gegen Rechts* book that accorded a prominent place to such SDAJ activities.⁷⁹ In fact, however, the DKP and SDAJ initially stood apart from the wider campaign: their Essen concert took place without any links to the KB-influenced *Rock gegen Rechts* initiative in Hamburg. Moreover, in Frankfurt DKP members did not want the existing local anti-NPD alliance to enter the planning committee for the 1979 *Rock gegen Rechts* festival: they denounced the involvement of East German dissidents and 'anti-communist' forces among the event's organizers.⁸⁰

Such antagonism cut both ways. The magazine of the *Rock gegen Rechts* association attacked the DKP, claiming that it sought to rejuvenate 'its pensioners' shop' by appropriating a broader cultural movement.⁸¹ It criticized the communists for behaving 'as if there was no musicians' initiative *Rock gegen Rechts*' and 'as if the Frankfurt festival had not existed'.⁸² The rock group Octopus made similar complaints in an open letter to the SDAJ.⁸³ The Berlin-based New Left magazine *konkret* dismissed this 'quarrel' about the parenthood of the movement and appealed to the activists to refrain from mutual attacks.⁸⁴

By 1980, the DKP and SDAJ had indeed begun to support *Rock gegen Rechts* in Frankfurt, and Floh de Cologne performed at the second festival. Yet communist involvement provoked fears about political hijacking. Reviewing the 1980 festival, one *Pflasterstrand* author expressed his concerns:

[The DKP] must learn that an *alternative* festival isn't managed by a handful of bureaucrats, but in some way also belongs to the people who come together in tens of thousands. And that these people are more than a mass that listens, pays and allows itself to be celebrated in newspaper headlines. And that these people bring their own ideas, their own heads and their own needs that they want to articulate.⁸⁵

For anti-authoritarian Spontis, critiques about party agendas extended beyond the DKP. For instance, one *Pflasterstrand* author complained that

when reggae band Misty in Roots performed in Frankfurt in November 1979, KB members had ‘sat next to the stage throughout the concert, as if the band was their property’.⁸⁶

In light of these disputes, German campaigners asked British activists about their experiences. Interviewed by *Pflasterstrand*, Ruth Gregory and Syd Shelton said that RAR ‘had been superbly supported by the left, especially by the Socialist Workers’ Party’, but stressed that most members of RAR’s central committee had no party affiliations. Likewise, in conversation with *Rock gegen Rechts* magazine, Wayne Minter denied that the SWP had ‘sought to use RAR for its political ends’.⁸⁷ Scholarly studies broadly sympathetic to the party have also contradicted claims that RAR was a ‘front organization’.⁸⁸ Admittedly, the Anti-Nazi League, formed in 1977, had close ties to the SWP: Adam Lent has described it as being ‘tightly controlled by the party’.⁸⁹ Yet the League did not steer RAR all by itself – and, more generally, the situation was not comparable to *Rock gegen Rechts*. After all, with its Trotskyite politics, the SWP differed ideologically from the DKP. Moreover, the history of SWP involvement was dissimilar from the German case: its members had participated in RAR from the outset and the party even provided office space to the fledgeling campaign.⁹⁰

Disputes in Germany did not just concern the relationship with communists: they also reflected tensions between activists who operated within established parties and those who rejected hierarchical structures. Tensions erupted at the 1980 festival as squatters wanted to announce a successful building occupation. Members of the organizing committee – including representatives of the SDAJ and of socialist youth organization *Die Falken* (The Falcons) – sought to prevent this. To them, such an announcement would have been problematic in terms of focus, legality and respectability. Their refusal provoked an attempted stage invasion and threats by rock band Schroeder Roadshow to cancel their performance.⁹¹ Further ruptures revolved around activities beyond Frankfurt. As the NPD had moved its 1980 gathering to Philippsthal – a two-hour drive away – activists planned to travel there for a counter-demonstration and for *Rock gegen Rechts* performances in nearby Eschwege. The DKP and other organizations were reluctant to support this plan, lest it reduce attendance at a scheduled trade-union demonstration in Frankfurt.⁹² Because of these conflicts, one *Pflasterstrand* author proclaimed that ‘*Rock gegen Rechts* had basically been dead to us on Sunday evening’, although the subsequent activities in Philippsthal and Eschwege somewhat mollified him. He concluded that ‘the fun stops if we’re asked to subjugate ourselves to an SPD-DKP unity soup just so that the alliance is not “threatened”’.⁹³

ROCKING AGAINST THE RIGHT ... IN GERMAN

If it was difficult enough to identify ‘the right’ and to unite ‘the left’, the definition of how to ‘rock’ did not prove much easier. In the *tageszeitung* Johannes Beck expressed his dilemma: ‘Rock Against Racism is a form of

demonstration that enthuses me as an idea, although I have difficulties imagining this with German rock musicians and a German audience'.⁹⁴ With regard to the 1979 festival, he criticized the largely 'platitudinous and grotty German, or German-language, rock music'.⁹⁵ Such comments indicate the need to analyse the musical context of *Rock gegen Rechts*.

Until the late 1960s, popular music with German lyrics primarily fell into the *Schlager* genre, an 'easy listening' style with lyrics about love and leisure. This changed in the 1960s when several groups adopted German lyrics with a political focus, using musical styles that were far from sentimental. Three bands played a pioneering role: the aforementioned Floh de Cologne (1966), the political rock group Checkpoint Charlie (1967) and Ton Steine Scherben (1970), an anarchist band with connections to West Berlin's squatting milieu.⁹⁶ Their political focus was shared by artists from the *Liedermacher* scene. Detlef Siegfried has therefore argued that German 'pop music was at no other point as politically charged as it was between 1968 and 1971'.⁹⁷ The International Essen Song Days of 1968 exemplified this development. As Timothy Brown has suggested, the event was 'rooted in confident assumptions about the fundamental symmetry between pop and politics'.⁹⁸ Indeed, the very first chapter of Floh de Cologne's *Rock gegen Rechts* book discussed the Song Days, relating the campaign of 1979–80 back to the counterculture of the 1960s.⁹⁹

Bands from the late 1960s did support *Rock gegen Rechts*: Ton Steine Scherben signed the campaign's founding appeal, while both Floh de Cologne and Checkpoint Charlie performed at the 1980 festival. There were also younger bands with a political focus, for instance Hamburg-based rock group Oktober as well as Schmetterlinge, an Austrian group that performed musical cabaret. Yet the relationship between rock music and politics was subject to intense questioning. *Pflasterstrand* authors were particularly critical of mixing the two. One argued that the 1979 festival 'at times ran the risk of ... drifting towards a civic studies lesson', explicitly criticizing 'pedagogue-musicians' such as Oktober and Schmetterlinge. He likened them to "'progressive" priests who, through beat music, want to attract young people to their church service, where they offer the old crap in a modern guise'.¹⁰⁰ Another author dismissed Schmetterlinge and Oktober as 'shit' and ridiculed those who seemed to conceive the ideal audience as people who 'listen in awestruck fashion, joylessly mute and consistently vigilant that antifascist sobriety isn't disturbed by their potentially dancing body'.¹⁰¹ By contrast, the magazine's festival coverage celebrated performers who were less overtly political, believing that rock music should 'provide space for feelings, for inspiration, for intoxication'.¹⁰²

How did punk fit into this picture? As has been noted, punk figured prominently at RAR. Its role at the German festivals remained marginal, despite the existence of a West German punk scene. The socialist periodical *spw* acknowledged the 'tensions between punks and *Rock gegen Rechts*'.¹⁰³ Indeed, many activists had reservations about punk. Journalist Kerstin

Eitner, who was involved in Hamburg's left-wing milieu, recalled that '[f]or all the alternative people there, punks were simply fascists. They did not want to engage with it. Not with the music either. After all, music was supposed to be progressive'.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Frankfurt's alternative milieu proved hostile to punk.¹⁰⁵ Of course, many British activists had been sceptical about punk, too – not least because of the use of swastikas and other Nazi insignia by some on the scene. Yet punk could mesh with left-wing politics.¹⁰⁶ The political commitment of bands such as The Clash and X-Ray Spex helped to allay activist concerns, with RAR itself an important factor in this rapprochement.

In Germany, however, the gap remained largely in place, with few exceptions. The 1980 festival featured a performance by Hans-A-Plast, a female-fronted punk band from Hannover. Politically, it seemed a good fit, as Hans-A-Plast lyrics attacked misogyny and police violence.¹⁰⁷ Yet the one punk-related band that had a sustained involvement with *Rock gegen Rechts* was less overtly political: Strassenjungs, who performed at both Frankfurt festivals and a series of smaller *Rock gegen Rechts* gigs, sang about sex, drugs and parties. It was precisely because their songs did not preach politics that *Pflasterstrand* applauded their festival performance. Moreover, the band had personal links to the Frankfurt *Sponti* scene, frequenting the same bars in this period.¹⁰⁸ In general, Strassenjungs were hardly representative of the punk scene: they faced suspicions of being a 'manufactured' group, created by music journalists.

Indeed many punks were sceptical about the festivals. In 1980, the Salinos – a short-lived group from the industrial city of Gelsenkirchen – ridiculed *Rock gegen Rechts* as 'Juso Rock' – that is, music serving *Jusos*, the youth wing of the Social Democrats. Their song on this subject cast political and musical conformism as one: 'This is Juso Rock / the Boomtown Rats, the Rolling Stones have been playing it for years'.¹⁰⁹ Their song appeared on Zickzack, an independent record label that later became the home of influential underground bands such as Abwärts, FSK and Einstürzende Neubauten. Zickzack's founder, Alfred Hilsberg, was a music journalist who had published the first major article on the German punk scene.¹¹⁰ To some extent, Hilsberg's background should have made him sympathetic to *Rock gegen Rechts*: he had been involved in Hamburg's left-wing circles, participated in KB-affiliated ventures and produced a documentary on anti-nuclear protests.¹¹¹ In 1978, he had also covered the green movement in an article for *Sounds* magazine.¹¹² His stance on *Rock gegen Rechts*, however, was sceptical as he dismissed the 'teutonic-missionary zeal' of the organizers'.¹¹³ In one way, then, Hilsberg's comments did not express a fundamental political objection, but rather a question of whether the message should drown out the music.

MUSIC AND COMMERCE

The *Rock gegen Rechts* festivals raised wider questions about music, consumption and commerce. This was no peripheral matter. As Sven Reichardt and Detlef Siegfried have pointed out, claims to authenticity were central to the ‘alternative milieu’.¹¹⁴ The founding appeal of *Rock gegen Rechts* was a case in point, reflected in its complaints about music being commercialized and making people ‘uncritical towards the existing conditions’.¹¹⁵ Some *Rock gegen Rechts* performers urged their audience to eschew consumerist attitudes. At the 1979 festival, Missus Beastly asked its listeners to ‘bear in mind that this is not a consumption festival, and the [Rolling] Stones won’t play here either’.¹¹⁶

Yet consumption was certainly a feature of the *Rock gegen Rechts* festivals – quite literally, as vendors sold food, drinks and other goods. Writing for the conservative daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a journalist described the 1980 festival as ‘escapist’ and suggested that its alternative principles did not run deeply: ‘politics was marketed just as much as environmental protection and alternative lifestyles’, while ‘slogans for the protection of the environment, saving resources and energy’ sat comfortably alongside ‘extensive aluminium waste from drink containers’.¹¹⁷ The journalist’s follow-up report questioned whether it was ‘enough to advertise sangria “for Chile”, roast pork “for Nicaragua” and kebab “for the liberation of Turks from the Grey Wolves” to turn consumption into progressive action’.¹¹⁸ The left-liberal *Frankfurter Rundschau* noted that some audience members had themselves questioned the ‘consumerist nature of the festival’, citing one visitor’s comment that ‘I felt like on a holiday in Spain: souvenirs everywhere’.¹¹⁹

The critical attitude towards consumption was not universally shared. Indeed, one *Pflasterstrand* author praised ‘the consumers’ alley, the colourful, expensive, multilingual, bazar’ for its ‘pulsating life’ and its ‘smells, food, laughter and pushing’.¹²⁰ Such views reflected the stance of a magazine that celebrated alternative lifestyles while being critical of traditional politics. Meanwhile, activist Frank Wolff stated that while he disagreed with some definitions of ‘fascism’ at *Rock gegen Rechts*, he ‘felt at ease, just like at a fun fair. And I didn’t mind that I didn’t like much of the music’.¹²¹ Seen from this angle, consumption could be positive, as it fostered a sense of community in a way that political slogans did not.

As a mass event, *Rock gegen Rechts* raised questions about its performers’ commercial appeal. By far the most successful artist associated with the festivals was Udo Lindenberg. On his seventieth birthday in 2016, the broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* described him as ‘Germany’s undisputed king of rock’ – a point underlined by the fact that he topped the German album charts that year.¹²² Having started off as a drummer, Lindenberg developed a solo career in the early 1970s. His lyrics were characterized by their informal, slang-infused language and addressed everyday concerns: casual flings, ill-fated relationships, evenings spent in bars, the

desire to break free and the joys of rock music. At the time of *Rock gegen Rechts*, Lindenberg was a household name, with several top ten albums under his belt. From January to April 1979, his ambitious *Dröhnland-Tournee* had played to sold-out venues across West Germany, with an elaborate staging by renowned theatre director Peter Zadek.

Lindenberg was a late addition to the 1979 festival. While his presence was something of a coup for the organizers, it also attracted criticism. Some Spontis, for instance, thought that Lindenberg had wanted to ‘polish his image on the back of the movement’.¹²³ In similar terms, Missus Beastly regarded Lindenberg’s involvement as a promotional ploy: ‘Our Udo has now managed what he probably didn’t dare to dream of: he’s now the Big Star at Rock “against the Right”.’ The band complained that the organizers had ‘fallen for his line – for days, there’s been nothing but Udo up, Udo down, Udo left and Udo right’.¹²⁴

Yet Lindenberg also had his defenders. *Pflasterstrand* credited him with ensuring that the event had been a rock festival, rather than a festival of political music.¹²⁵ Reiterating this point, the *tageszeitung*’s correspondent claimed that the festival ‘would have remained a fart’ without Lindenberg, who had avoided the ‘beat-the-fascists la-la music’ of political rock groups.¹²⁶ Further backing came from Heiner Goebbels, co-founder of Frankfurt’s Linksradikales Blasorchester (‘Left-Wing Radical Brass Orchestra’) and nowadays a well-known contemporary composer. With his avant-garde links, Goebbels was perhaps not the likeliest of Lindenberg supporters. However, he commended the latter’s Frankfurt performance, particularly his song ‘Na und!?’ (‘So what!?’). The latter’s lyrics recounted a friendship with a gay man and the prejudices that he faced, ‘just like under the Nazis’.¹²⁷ To Goebbels, the personal focus made the song far more effective than political sloganeering.

In his own way, Lindenberg was clearly a political artist. As early as 1973, he tackled Germany’s Cold War division in song; by the early 1980s, he maintained a widely publicized dispute with the GDR authorities, insisting on being allowed to perform in East Germany.¹²⁸ Interviewed by the *Rock gegen Rechts* paper in 1979, he reflected on his role as a star. The singer suggested that he was in a position to ‘somehow attract interest for our corner among the wider public’. Once this had happened, ‘specialist lyricists and musicians’ could serve this audience with more overtly political lyrics. To Lindenberg, it was ‘incredibly important’ for activists to ‘lure others in’:

Because the time has to be past when people sit together in masturbatory fashion in their small elitist grouplets or sectarian corners and pat themselves on the shoulder and say how much they are in the know, while the majority of the population traipses through life in rather dull and uninterested fashion.¹²⁹

One band that performed at the 1979 festival thanks to Lindenberg's involvement was Gebrüder Engel. Their case showed that the festival could uncover some performers' commercial potential. Although the first two Gebrüder Engel albums had made little impact, their Frankfurt performance was deemed a success. Their song 'Klau, lies und kotz' ('Steal, read and vomit') inspired audience members to burn copies of right-wing tabloid *Bild*. According to one account, the band's barnstorming Frankfurt performance demonstrated that the band had 'a lot of fans', resulting in a contract with Musikant, a new German imprint of major record label EMI.¹³⁰

Musikant was founded in 1980, focusing on music with social and political overtones. Several bands that performed at the 1979 and 1980 festivals later released albums on this label.¹³¹ Indeed, Musikant's very creation was entwined with *Rock gegen Rechts*. Musikant's co-founder, Diether Dehm, had been a member of the festival's organizing committee. As he put it, EMI approached him with the idea to create a label 'for the left-wing corner'. For this development, he partly credited the performance of Dutch band Bots, which he had brought to Frankfurt. Dehm stated that soon after the festival, the band went from being an 'insiders' tip' to becoming 'market leaders'.¹³² Asked in 2006 about the most memorable events in his forty-year long artistic career, he mentioned 'the premieres of Dutch left-wing rockers Bots, in 1979 and 1980, at *Rock gegen Rechts* in Frankfurt/Main, [the festival] which I helped to launch'.¹³³

Dehm's case highlighted intersections between music, politics and entrepreneurship. Since the late 1960s, he had performed as a singer-songwriter under the alias of Lerryn, even winning an award at the Essen International Song Days of 1968.¹³⁴ In 1973, he co-operated with the Frankfurt authorities in launching annual singer-songwriter events, *Lieder im Park* ('Songs in the Park'). Early on, Dehm combined his musical work with political engagement. He had joined the SPD in 1966 and sat on the board of the Socialist German Student Alliance (SDS) during the late 1960s.¹³⁵ By 1978, he was deputy president of *Die Falken*, representing the socialist youth organization at *Rock gegen Rechts*. At the festival, he thus aligned with those who sought keep potentially unruly radicals away from the festival stage. Following the disputes in 1980, he was attacked for being a right-winger and even subject to physical assault.¹³⁶ During the 1980s, he managed a range of musicians while being a prolific lyricist for other artists. In the same period, his ongoing involvement in the SPD led him to produce a musical celebration of the party's 125th anniversary.¹³⁷ In the 1990s, he joined the successor party of the East German communists and since 2005 has sat in parliament on behalf of the Left Party.

As a politician, Dehm has courted controversy on several occasions. In the context of *Rock gegen Rechts*, however, his involvement points to an important development in German popular music. The Musikant record label tapped into an audience for bands whose lyrics addressed social and

political realities. Throughout the 1980s, the label released commercially successful albums. As Albrecht Koch has put it, it became ‘one of the most important labels of German-language rock’ and ‘established something like a show business between social democracy and green politics’.¹³⁸ *Rock gegen Rechts* had demonstrated that there was an audience for such music and, in some respects, it had helped to cultivate it.

CONCLUSION

Rock gegen Rechts was neither insignificant nor inconsequential. Inspired by anti-racist activism in Britain, it came to occupy a place in the story of the West German left. In her study of the Greens’ founding years, Silke Mende has noted several processes that connected left-wing groups and alternative milieux during the late 1970s.¹³⁹ While rarely discussed in this context, *Rock gegen Rechts* formed part of those developments: it was a forum where different groups and individuals could test possibilities for further collaboration. Hesse and its largest city Frankfurt became important centres of the new party, with the Hessian Greens becoming the first to enter regional government.

The tensions within *Rock gegen Rechts* demonstrate the challenges for radical coalition-building in 1979–80. Conflicting attitudes with regard to political parties and state authority triggered manifold debates and contributed to the eventual demise of the alliance. This is hardly surprising, if one considers the heterogeneous base from which the initiative had emerged. As a form of radical cultural politics *Rock gegen Rechts* nonetheless left a clear legacy.

In the context of the Frankfurt festival, the use of music for political purposes was heavily contested, with some parts of the alternative milieu criticizing such instrumentalization. During the 1980s, however, several events took this approach forward. One example was a large-scale concert in December 1981, held at Frankfurt Festival Hall in protest against the construction of Runway West at Frankfurt Airport. The campaign against airport expansion rallied different forces and further sustained the rise of the Greens during the early 1980s. The Musikant label and Bots were involved in the Runway West concert and, according to Albrecht Koch, other record companies soon discovered such activities as ‘an interesting promotional model’.¹⁴⁰ In the same period, a number of ‘Artists for Peace’ concerts protested against the nuclear arms race, featuring several Musikant (and former *Rock gegen Rechts*) musicians.¹⁴¹ In 1983, artists like Lindenberg were also involved in *Grüne Raupe* (‘Green Caterpillar’) – a tour on behalf of the Greens, held prior to elections that saw them enter the West German parliament for the first time.¹⁴² In all of these respects, *Rock gegen Rechts* formed part of an emerging marketplace in which green politics, social activism and rock music intersected.

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