

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Antifascist Conversations: A Literary Political Geography

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The hashtag *baseballschlägerjahre* (years of the baseball bat) recently ignited a public debate concerning the ubiquity of far-right violence in post-reunification East Germany. Numerous adolescents of the 1990s and early 2000s shared their experiences with far-right violence at that time. They recounted being threatened, attacked, and hunted; verbally abused; and experiencing existential dread and panic. This discourse exploded on Twitter and percolated into mainstream media and cultural conversations, and eventually into academic literature. Thus, in recent years, a notable number of books by young East German authors, which will be the subject of this text, have been published that address growing up in a post-socialist transformation society; navigating the fundamental disruption of social, cultural, political, and economic life; and having their adolescence shaped by a violent polarization of neo Nazi-youths and those who were not far-right (e.g. Bangel 2017; Bolz 2022; Irmschler 2020;

Kubiczek 2014; Lemke 2021; Meyer 2006; Müllensiefen 2023; Präkels 2017; Rabe 2023; Richter 2015; Rietzschel 2018; Schulz 2022; Wenzel 2020; Werner 2023; Witte 2008).

Mirroring in many ways the testimonies shared on twitter, this strand of literature maps the violence of the far right in East Germany during the 1990s and early 2000s. Thus, these novels entail a literary geography that provides insights into diverse forms of remembering and witnessing.

We argue in this essay that the aforementioned books can provide pathways for three major conversations: 1) between the political and literary geographies of far-right violence, 2) about the legacies of historical far-right violence and how they continue to unfold in the region, and 3) between literature, academia, and activism.

Conversation I: A Political literary geography

As Laurie McRae Andrew (2018) has shown in this journal, literature is inevitably political. The production, marketing, and reception of each novel is embedded in political atmospheres and discourses, the narratives of such novels could be intended and/or perceived as political writings. They can tell a political history of the past, provide commentaries on present situations, or be utopian/dystopian forecasts of the future.

This is clearly the case for the aforementioned novels. Their narratives can be considered as a political, literary geography, as their narratives represent and map historical political geographies of the far right and antifascist counter-strategies. They are embedded in current political discourses as they firmly negate the far right, warning against its hegemony, thus, taking on a dystopian outlook. Novels recounting the far-right violence in post-reunification East Germany are also political, as they represent the testimony of its victims, which had been marginalized. Interestingly enough, the genre typically lacks migrant voices (with Wenzel 2020 as a rare exception), which is relevant insofar as racism was the primary motivation for hate crimes during this time. Still, these novels are a prime example of a conversation between literary geography and rather specific forms of scholar activism often found in political or radical geography.

While engaging with the representation of political geographies opens up new fields of study for literary geography, research on literary representations provides new insights and ideas for research on the political geographies of the far right. For example, Peter Richter describes how the city of Dresden became divided into right-wing and left-wing neighborhoods in his book *89/90* (2015), while Daniel Schulz's *Wir waren wie Brüder* (2022) is a testimony about growing up as a non-far-right youth in rural East Germany. Through these examples, we can see that a political literary geography can reveal the spatial and affective dimensions of far-right violence, along with its cultural representations.

Moreover, an analysis of the public reception of these novels allows further insights into how literature contributes to public debates and their related political geographies. For our case of the 'years of the baseball bat' literature, the books received a great deal of attention, including reviews in national newspapers, winning book prizes, and being adapted into movies

and theatre plays. Despite this public attention, current violent events and electoral successes of the far right are repeating the past described in the novels.

Conversation II: Continuities of far-right violence in East Germany

During the early 1990s, neo-Nazi youth culture became hegemonic in many towns and cities in East Germany (Begrich 2023). This shapes the narratives of many *Baseballschlägerjahre* books. Far-right violence features prominently in the everyday geographies represented in several of the novels, rendering public spaces and/or public transport inaccessible for characters, with people chased through streets, others hiding, and some leaving their hometowns, while others stayed and engaged in antifascist counter-actions. The books also refer to the establishment of ‘safe spaces,’ but these remain rare and often temporary and mostly existed in the inner-city neighborhoods of large cities. Other, darker coping strategies include self-harm, drug-use, and suicide. A generation of people in East Germany came of age heavily influenced by far-right violence, while state institutions, such as the police, the justice system, and the local political milieu, seemed unable and sometimes unwilling to intervene.

Novels like Manja Präkels’ *Als ich mit Hitler Schnapskirschen aß* (2017) illustrate how the transformation in East Germany from state socialism to market capitalism was accompanied by the breakdown of established beliefs and institutions, as well as the rise of a militant neo-Nazi scene. Books that also cover recent years, like *Kinder von Hoy* by Grit Lemke (2021), illustrate how persistent and strong the far right is in East Germany. Such books serve as testimonies about that period but also as a warning of the dangers that could stem from the current rise of the far right. Especially in East Germany, the far-right party the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has gained a great deal of electoral support, and the results in the last 2024 elections even reinforced this trend. The *baseballschlägerjahre* books bear witness to what can happen if far-right ideology gains support and power. Thus, these books not only map out a historical political geography but are in themselves political, antifascist statements.

Conversation III: Literature, academia, and activism

In January 2024, a large number of demonstrations spread in cities and towns in Germany, protesting against the leaked plans of the far-right party, the *AfD*, to deport migrants. Especially in East Germany, these demonstrations garnered a great deal of interest from the media, as the *AfD* has its stronghold in East Germany and it requires courage to protest against the far right there (rbb 24 2024). This reality results in a precarity of activism against the far right in the region. Thus, we understand these literary representations of far-right violence as an antifascist practice. The books document the former normality of far-right violence, focusing on the perspective of the victims and highlighting the inaction, as well as incompetence, of public institutions in East Germany. Some of the authors, like Manja Präkels, Paula Irmschler, and Gorm Witte have participated in cultural projects against the far

right. Consequently, a political literary geography of the far right also needs to reflect the relationship between the far right and political activism against it. This includes questioning how literary or geographical writing about far-right violence can reinforce the stigmatization of certain towns and regions, and tends to neglect the small but existent antifascist activism in those locations. They also serve, however, as examples of the limitations and danger of antifascist counter-action.

Some books like *Nullerjahre* by Hendrik Bolz (2022) or *Oder Florida* by Christian Bangel (2017) received broader attention because their authors were already established as public figures. Such publicity and increasing general interest in the topic open up new opportunities for establishing broad coalitions of culture, academia, and activism against the far right, which could have a much larger range of influence than small antifascist initiatives. In light of the current rise of the *AfD* in Germany, and similar developments in other countries, such conversations have become more urgent than ever.

In that sense, we understand our three conversations as an integral part of a political literary geography. These conversations allow not only a highly productive crossing of the border between political and literary geographies but also between literature, academia, and activism, fostering an antifascist consent and encouraging opposition to the far right.

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