

## From environmental protest to climate protest – A historical overview of activism in the former GDR and the “Fridays for Future” movement in present-day Germany

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Because of its increasing impact on every corner of our planet, climate change has become one of the most widely discussed and at the same time most polarizing subjects in current international politics. This holds true in the case of domestic political discourse as well, Germany being no exception in this regard. In this paper, I would like to discuss from a historical perspective the shift from the locally oriented environmental protests under the repressive regime of former East Germany – which were sparked by certain environmental problems that I will introduce below – to the more globally oriented “Fridays for Future” protest movement in Germany today.

After World War II Germany was divided into two separate countries, the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) commonly referred to as West Germany, under Allied influence and the GDR (German Democratic Republic) or East Germany, under Soviet control. The GDR regime was reluctant to gather or disclose information about either the state of environmental damage or any protection policies, so it was not until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 that the full extent of environmental degradation came to be known outside East Germany.

Data made available after German reunification showed that “East Germany [faced] a serious environmental crisis” (Ionata 1991: 333) for several reasons. For one, the GDR lacked either crude oil or natural gas, and thus used brown coal to fuel its post-war industrialization. Because of the extensive burning of coal, the GDR emitted roughly double the amount of sulphur dioxide compared with the FRG,

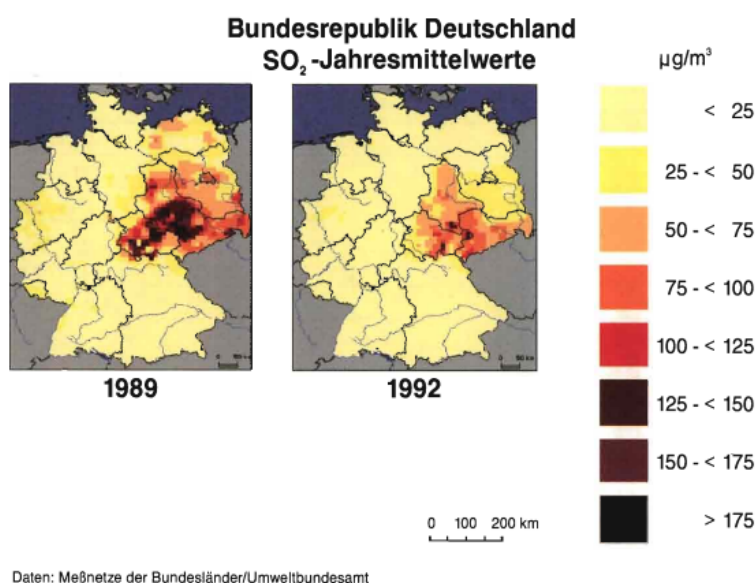


Figure: Comparison of average annual values of sulphur dioxide for the years 1989 and 1992 after transitional measures for the integration of the GDR into the EU were put into effect (Deutscher Bundestag 1994: 11)

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despite the GDR's much smaller population. Other problems included soil contamination and water pollution, the former caused by the mining of uranium ore and the latter resulting from the dumping of wastes by the chemical industry, as well as from potassium mining, and insufficient wastewater treatment. The widespread use of nitrate fertilizers in agriculture was yet another factor impacting water quality. In the 1980s nitrate levels in the water were five times higher than in 1960, a development resulting in large part from the uncontrolled dumping of industrial and agricultural waste. After reunification it was stated that only 20 percent of the water supply was fully usable for drinking water, 35 percent of the water could be used after expensive, advanced treatment, and 45 percent was completely unusable even after treatment (Ionata 1991: 335-338). All these factors led the European Commission to propose several transitional measures in order to make it possible for Germany to achieve compliance with the environmental standards of the European Community (Ionata 1991: 338-339).

All the same, these destructive effects that mostly impacted rural areas failed to trigger a protest movement in the GDR. However, in the end it was the government's blatant disregard for environmental damage, that led to the constantly growing frustration in the population, eventually culminating in uprisings.

Noticeable organized protest first emerged in the GDR's industrial centres, where the populace experienced the direct effects of environmental pollution on their health. According to a survey in the early 1970s, some 90% of the population of two industrial cities (Bitterfeld and Schwerin) regarded the pollution in their city as bad for their health. That impression can be connected to data, as respiratory diseases, circulatory disorders, and cancer increasingly spread and a significant deficit in children's bone growth was observed in those heavily industrialized areas (Langsdorf & Hofmann 2014: 3).

There was a visible difference in motivation for protest in East and West Germany at that time. People in the large industrial cities of the GDR rebelled against actual health issues they experienced, while citizens in West Germany were concerned with the possible risks of, for example, nuclear energy or plans for large-scale industrial infrastructure. Still, what sparked protest in the GDR and West Germany alike was the perceived passivity of the government regarding environmental policies. However, due to systematic restrictions on civil society movements, environmental activism was more difficult to carry out under the GDR regime. Environmental themes served to enable the expression of criticism of the system (Langsdorf & Hofmann 2014: 3). That explains why the environmental movement was put under exceptionally strict surveillance by the Ministry for State Security. When ecological groups became too critical, they were criminalized (Langsdorf & Hofmann 2014: 5). What makes the environmental movement in the GDR distinct is the fact that until 1990, when Germany was reunified, it acted in cooperation with the Evangelical Church. As Neubert (1998: 445) states, the fact that any self-organized environmental protest would lead to conflict with the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, the "Socialist Unity Party of Germany") made it necessary to "always create the cultural and organizational prerequisites of oppositional environmental politics together with the actual activities." This was an atmosphere that only the church could provide, as the church in many instances offered a safe space for controversy that was not approved by the government (Langsdorf & Hofmann 2014: 6).

One important point in time that defined the movement in the 1980s is the public protest regarding coal, the chemical industry, waste, and forest decline. Another one is the disaster that

happened in Chernobyl in 1986. Protests were sparked by cover-up attempts that failed partly because GDR citizens informed themselves using FRG media. Thus, the movement used environmental issues to criticise a totalitarian regime that did not seem to care about the health interests of its people. Eventually the environmental movement merged with the movement for democratization that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (Langsdorf & Hofmann 2014: 7-8).

In the year 1989 a newly formed Green Party was founded, which still holds influence today and is part of the current government coalition. Activists joining the Green Party, as well as other political initiatives and parties, resulted in the church losing its role as the locus of action for the environmental movement. The Green Party along with other major parties was involved in the process to democratize the newly reunited Germany, but when it became clear that financial, economic and social factors were paramount to bringing the former FRG and GDR closer together and there was no longer a need to rebel against the oppressive system of the GDR, the environmental movement lost its momentum (Langsdorf & Hofmann 2014: 8).

Years after the reunification not many people were politically active. Environmental organizations were still smaller in the former GDR, but research institutions were founded in Dresden, Potsdam, Leipzig and other East German cities (Langsdorf & Hofmann 2014: 9). Climate protest started to gain widespread traction in Germany when Greta Thunberg held her first “school strike for climate” using the slogan “Fridays for Future” (FFF) in August 2018. Similar strikes took place in Germany later the same year and rapidly attracted large numbers of participants. By February 2019 activists had founded 155 local groups in different places. On March 15, 2019 an estimated 300,000 people took part in protests held throughout Germany (Sommer et al. 2019: 2).

FFF can be described as an international movement of pupils holding school strikes every Friday. They “demand politicians to pass policies which provide a safe pathway to keep the global warming under two degrees in line with the Paris agreement” (Scheitle 2020: 20). This might appear underwhelming for a protest movement since these goals were already agreed upon in Paris by multiple nations. One could still call them ambitious, because the aim of FFF was to mobilize the general population to live in a way that sustained the planet while accepting the restrictions and limitations required by such a lifestyle (Sommer et al. 2019: 2).

Soon the German branch of Fridays for Future developed into one of the biggest worldwide in both relative as well as absolute terms and became increasingly visible in the German media (Scheitle 2020: 20). From its inception, FFF has been carried out by young people, for the most part students. However, the movement has come to be supported by scientists, religious organizations and other social organizations such as WWF and Greenpeace, even forming connections to state actors in the Green Party and the Left Party (Scheitle 2020: 31). Looking at all these developments it seems counterintuitive to state they only had partial success in influencing German environmental policy, but the situation is not that clear. In 2019 a highly anticipated government plan for climate protection was released. It contains measures to achieve the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 55 percent by 2030. In a nutshell, it consists of funding programs to reduce CO<sub>2</sub>, a systematic pricing of CO<sub>2</sub> and financial relief for citizens (Scheitle 2020: 21-22). The last point can be read as an attempt to make the policy more popular. The fact that the said plan emerged around the same time that Fridays for Future

grew influential and members met with government officials hints at the impact FFF has come to have on German environmental policy.

Some political agreements regarding climate protection were made before FFF existed, though, and the German government had already formulated a climate protection goal in 2015. Hence, credit for the enactment of these policies should not go entirely to the movement and one could argue that the movement is only part of a trend that was already in existence. Still, climate protection issues have been put on the agenda of the German cabinet with greater frequency after the emergence of FFF. For example, a so called “climate cabinet” was assembled and started its work in April 2019, which originally had not been part of governmental plans. In sum, issues of climate protection have been discussed more intensively within the government starting in 2019 than initially intended. Therefore, it seems reasonable to believe that the high level of visibility of FFF in the media during 2019 had a major influence in that regard. This view is supported by Chancellor Angela Merkel, who in August 2019 told young activists it was good that they put pressure on the government (Sommer et al. 2019: 37). The widespread popular support for FFF would seem to have been a contributing factor to the change of government two years ago.

In autumn 2021, a new government was elected in Germany, which marked a political shift from the Christian-conservative CDU and CSU to a coalition made up of the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the liberal Free Democratic Party. After 16 years of conservative leadership, German environmental policy can be expected to undergo changes in the coming years. The new government has already promised to simplify the present, complicated and time-consuming process of installing wind turbines. From now on the climate impact of all government policies are to be examined. It is not yet clear how the new government intends to raise revenue to fund the implementation of its new climate policies. Furthermore, it is questionable how much increase in financial strain German voters will tolerate, when for example the price for electricity in Germany is already one of the highest in the world, in part due to the phase-out of nuclear and coal-based energy.

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Figure: Deutscher Bundestag (1994): *Umwelt 1994. Politik für eine nachhaltige, umweltgerechte Entwicklung*. Bonn: Bundesanzeiger Verlagsgesellschaft.