

# Left must remain critical in Germany and elsewhere

By Diana Johnstone

**T**HERE IS LITTLE POINT IN USING *IN THESE TIMES*' limited space to justify what is already glorified in the establishment media. Gordon Lewis' glowing account (*In These Times*, Nov. 8) of East German refugees' winning attitudes (the talented woman who wants to "get ahead without having to get involved in politics") differs from mainstream media only by its attack on the West German left for making inhospitable cracks at newcomers' allegedly material motivations. In his contagious sympathy for the fugitives from the East, Lewis distorts and dismisses left positions on immigration and reunification.

Citing wisecracks about the refugees' consumerist aspirations, Lewis maintains: "Such polemics hide the left's difficulty in determining just where the dividing line between political and economic motives lies." This is not just the left's difficulty, and the answer is not provided by concluding, on the basis of one example, that there is no real difference at all. Saying that political and economic refugees are, after all, the same in effect undermines the very concept of asylum for fugitives from genuine political persecution who risk torture and execution. Moreover, whether the motives are political or economic, there are enormous differences of degree. People who are literally starving in many parts of the world

could also, if they had the strength or the access to the media, argue that their plight stems from political mismanagement. Rich Western countries are not about to take them in, however.

As usual, employers welcome free migration as enlarging the labor pool and potentially lowering their costs, while workers feel threatened. The left, defined as the so-

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cially critical opposition within the dominant system, is constantly embarrassed by such conflicts between the values of individual freedom and the values of social welfare. The left is for both. But this does not mean they coincide. Being on the left implies being sensitive to the collisions between liberty and equality and seeking ways to reconcile them. It means being sensitive to the needs of the socially weak as well as of the go-getters.

When the left fails, as it often does, to find solutions to the conflicts between individual freedom and the social distress inevitably engendered by free enterprise, the far right comes along with its own heavy-

handed solutions. Immigration and asylum are becoming more and more explosive political issues in all the rich countries. Some of West Germany's Social Democrats fear, not without cause, that resentment at competition for jobs and especially housing will make more and more working-class voters switch to the extreme-right Republicans.

Lewis refers in passing to the suggestion of immigration quotas, made by one isolated member of the Berlin Alternative List (AL). But he makes no mention at all of the more broadly held left policy position, advocated by West Berlin's Social Democratic Mayor Walter Momper and his SPD-AL coalition government, that the border between the two German states should be made into a normal border such as exists between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and Austria or Switzerland. East Germans could freely enter the FRG and even stay if they find jobs and housing, but without the current privileges and financial incentives that cause resentment among less-fortunate citizens of the FRG. The opening of the border by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is a first big step toward such a normalization. Political reforms will be another. The final step would be for the FRG to recognize GDR citizenship.

Lewis opposes this left position implicitly by his advocacy of reunification. "Accepting a permanent two-nation status in Germany would mean imposing a state on the East German people against the will of the majority," he writes. As proof, he cites the unsurprising lack of GDR patriotism on the part of people he talked to who were moving to the FRG.

This is the position of the German right,

which dangerously simplifies an extremely complex historical, political and legal situation.

Moreover, it is grossly misleading to write, as he does, that "the left ... resolutely opposed reunification from the start." It should at least be recalled that the Social Democrats were "from the start" much more committed to a reunited Germany than the Christian Democrats. The subject is too vast to cover here, but the primary responsibility for dividing Germany into two states is at the very least debatable.

It is true that in more recent years most of the left, especially the younger left, is opposed to reunification. But Lewis dismisses their misgivings all too lightly. "Underlying this position is the very non-socialist assumption that the German people as a whole are incapable of change," he writes.

The "non-socialist" is a bit annoying, implying that Lewis is arguing on socialist grounds, when there is nothing to indicate this other than his attacks on socialists and "the left."

In any case, his remark is beside the point. The question is not whether "the German people as a whole are incapable of change." Of course they are capable of change, very much so—which is precisely what worries some people who recall just how drastically the Germans changed during Hitler's era. The real questions involve conflicting historic rationales behind the two German states and the ways to bring them into a peaceful and lasting harmony.

Perhaps the Nazi past makes the West German left too wary of calls for reunification. But *In These Times* should help Americans understand their misgivings rather than dismiss them as foolish.

## Left's hallmark cynicism muddles German question

By Gordon Lewis

**I**N HER CRITIQUE OF MY ARTICLE ON EAST German refugees, Diana Johnstone takes exception to my "glowing" account of a talented young woman who wants to get ahead without getting involved in politics. This kind of sarcastic cynicism is just what I criticize among many in the German left. These refugees are catalogued and put in an ideological cubbyhole without much more than a glance. Johnstone implies this young girl is apolitical, but that is not what I was trying to say. In the East Germany she lived in, getting "politically involved" didn't mean critical political activism but toeing the party line and kowtowing to some functionary. Beate's story was meant to show the problems some have in trying to be two people at once.

Here in Germany, the children of 1968 make up much of the leadership of the Green/Alternative List. They are approaching or are already over 40. They are doctors and lawyers—comfortable people living in large apartments in the best parts of town. They have lost contact with the young generation, as many of them readily attest. Their politics are comfortable too. Sipping Nicaraguan coffee and reading the *Tages-*

*zeitung*, they pat each other on the back, but the cutting edge—the revolutionary potential of their movement—is gone. They are "go-getters" just like Beate and the others Johnstone seems to object to.

She takes exception to my pointing out the left's problem in determining the difference between political and economic refugees. She says this isn't just a problem of the left—absolutely true. But as a socialist, I expect more from the left than from the right. Just because the opposing side has problems with an issue is no excuse for one's own failures. Anyway, the funny thing is that the left and right have swapped arguments. The positions the left once rejected in respect to Third World refugees are suddenly appearing in their own comments on East bloc emigration. It was once the right that demanded proof of "genuine political persecution," closing borders or deporting those who did not meet this criterion. The left, on the other hand, traditionally argued that politics and economics are inseparable.

Johnstone cites the differences in scale between the truly oppressed and politically endangered and the people of East Germany. There is an element of truth in this argument. However, as rich nations and former imperialists, we in the West should

be capable of integrating many more people than we do today. I do not believe the East Germans will take away the places of others. As we now see, after the events in Berlin, many are returning home and very few are arriving.

Being part of the left, Johnstone continues, "means being sensitive to the needs of the socially weak as well as the go-getters." Precisely! But what many in Germany's AL/Green movement don't consider is that the "go-getters" can have positive effects too. They are taxpayers filling up government coffers that threatened to dry up as West Germany's population ages. This money can be used to initiate new social programs—for Third World refugees, for instance. Instead of harping on the East Germans, many among the AL/Greens should get busy drafting social legislation.

Johnstone and I define the left differently. She says it is "the socially critical opposition within the dominant system." Does that mean that in a left-dominant system the right is the left? Are the contras the left because they are socially critical of the dominant Sandinistas? My definition of the left is of an opposition based on the ideas of socialism—a fine yet important distinction.

Johnstone goes on to say that I advocate German reunification. I advocate nothing of the sort. Reunification, federation, two independent states, a European house—all these options should be left open. Let the people decide this issue when the time is right.

Johnstone quotes my statement that "im-

posing a state on the East Germans would mean going against the will of the majority." She fails to mention my statement that this applies to an East Germany that developed on its own, a social-market economy similar to that of West Germany. The thrust of my argument was that this is an East German issue to be decided by the East Germans in free and open debate, not by any political party in the West. What irks me about the Green position is not the call for two states but that they take this stand out of fear of reunification of any kind, not considering the human element involved. That is a big problem for the Greens. Instead of making concrete politics for real people, they get bogged down in laborious abstract ideological discussions. This makes them great critics but terrible managers.

As for my alleged sympathy with the refugees from the East, it's no greater sympathy than I have for people from elsewhere. Does Johnstone somehow think that Third World refugees have a deeper social consciousness than the "go-getters"? Immigrants, regardless of where they come from, are generally "go-getters," otherwise they wouldn't have the strength to leave.

Johnstone objects to my statement that many on the left believe the Germans are incapable of change. She is annoyed that I claim this is a non-socialist assumption, but it is. It attributes past events to some nebulous "German problem" and downplays the concrete economic and political facts that came together at a particular period in history and led to the rapid rise of Hitler and German fascism.



## Free speech and official offal

"The common notion that free speech prevails in the United States always makes me laugh," H.L. Mencken complained in his diary in April 1945. "It is actually hedged in enormously both in peace and war. ... The American people, I am convinced, really detest free speech. At the slightest alarm they are ready and eager to put it down. ... War, in this country, wipes out all the rules of fair play, even those prevailing among wild animals. Even the dissenters from the prevailing balderdash seek to escape the penalties of dissent by whooping up the official doctrine."

True enough, though Mencken was being, as usual, a bit hard on the American people. Even if someone is served up offal on a daily basis, it scarcely means he does not crave a decent meal. The crucial words in Mencken's note are those about "the slightest alarm" and war wiping out all the rules of fair play. Witness what happened at the end of October when Daniel Ortega used the occasion of a two-day meeting in Costa Rica of heads of state of the Western Hemisphere to announce his government was ending its 19-month cease-fire against the contras. There was scarcely an editorial writer or columnist in the U.S. who did not hasten to whoop up the official doctrine, which was that once again, just as Nicaragua was finally heaving itself into the good graces of the international community, Ortega had shot himself in the foot.

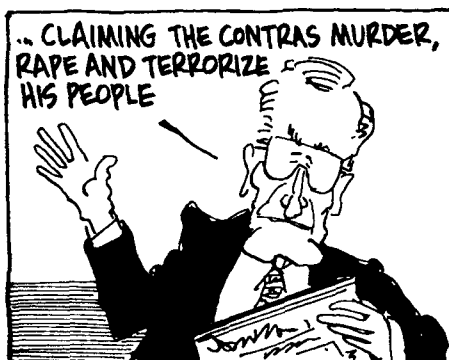
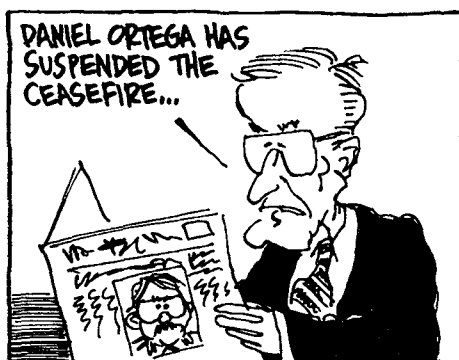
The thesis that Ortega keeps spoiling things is by now a whiskered one. When he went to Western Europe and the Soviet Union in 1985, shortly after Congress voted down military aid to the contras, this too was ridiculed in the U.S. press as another foot-shooting (or nose-thumbing, depending on anatomical preference). Documents unearthed in the Iran-contra scandal showed that the Reagan administration was devoting itself on an hour-by-hour basis to flouting that congressional ban, organizing mayhem and murder inside Nicaragua. But none of the whoopers of official doctrine conceded in retrospect that Nicaragua was entirely correct in believing a congressional ban did not mean an end to contra attacks, and therefore a trip to Europe and Moscow in search of support was a sensible idea.

In fact, if Ortega puts his foot anywhere but in the tracks prescribed for it in the Washington script, the howls go up that he's shot it anyway. In a rather elephantine essay in irony, the news commentator Daniel Schorr suggested Ortega's marksmanship could best be explained by assuming he was in fact a plant of the CIA. Part of Schorr's evidence for the commandante's supposed bumbling was his "endorsing the massacre of pro-democracy students in Beijing in 1989." Readers of this column may recall that this was a lie disseminated and later retracted by the Associated Press, which had misrepresented *Barricada* and distorted Sandinista reactions.

So what was Ortega meant to be spoiling this time? Recall that the U.S. assiduously opposed Esquipulas II, popularly known as the Arias peace plan, which called for all countries in the region to take certain steps toward securing peace and installing democratic procedures. By early 1988, the Arias plan was dead, and instead, in March 1988, came the Sapoa agreement. There would be a cease-fire. The U.S. Congress agreed

## ASHES & DIAMONDS

By Alexander Cockburn



that the contras would be maintained by our old friend "humanitarian aid" and voted \$47.9 million, most of it to be distributed by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Nicaragua observed the cease-fire; the contras did not. The latter's function has always been the one forthrightly expressed to the *Los Angeles Times* on May 28, 1988, by a Defense Department official: "Two thousand hard-core guys could keep some pressure on the Nicaraguan government, force them to use their economic resources for the military and prevent them from solving their economic problems—and that's a plus."

It would not have been hard for the press here to report exactly how and when the contras were ignoring the cease-fire. That excellent U.S. organization, Witness for Peace, has volunteer investigators and observers living in Nicaragua and documenting the war. Since last April 13 they have recorded 59 attacks by the contras, adding

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that these are only the ones they have managed to document, but that "we hear of many, many more."

Since the start of the cease-fire on March 23, 1988, the contras have killed 149 civilians, wounded 31 and kidnapped 364. Military casualties bring the death list to about 730 since the cease-fire. More recently, as even habitual lapdog institutions like the *Washington Post* have reported, they have been especially assiduous in attacking San-

dinista preparations for the election. It was the killing of 18 Sandinista militia on their way to register that finally prompted Ortega's decision to end the cease-fire. These assaults presaged even more determined attacks. The State Department recently reported 2,000 contras had entered Nicaragua since early October.

What about the U.S. Congress, which said, when it okayed yet another transfusion of "humanitarian aid" to keep armed contras in the field, that it would keep a vigilant eye on the situation? On July 14, Rep. Peter

A. DeFazio (D-OR) sent a letter, co-signed by fellow members of the House, to Secretary of State James Baker chronicling several contra attacks since April 13 and requesting investigation of them and assurance that delivery of U.S. aid to those units would be stopped.

This is where we see the particular force of Mencken's lines that "even the dissenters from the prevailing balderdash seek to escape the penalties of dissent by whooping up the official doctrine." There were 83 co-signers to Rep. DeFazio's letter in July, but in November only 29 members of the House could be found to vote against a resolution condemning Ortega's announcement. The Senate allowed nothing to mar the unanimity of its outrage at a government presuming to defend the lives of its citizens, voting to condemn Nicaragua 95-0.

Poor Nicaragua! Under U.S. rules upheld by the president, it is supposed to endure without response the contra onslaughts, tolerate U.S. sabotage of the recent Tela regional accords requiring contra demobilization by early December, and furthermore suffer without complaint the deluge of U.S. dollars designed to buy the upcoming election for U.S. clients in Nicaragua. According to the Boston-based Hemisphere Initiatives, these clients have received about \$26.2 million in U.S. aid since the 1984 elections. This is roughly equivalent to a foreign country injecting over \$2 billion into a U.S. election campaign, an amount more than four times the \$457 million spent on all U.S. congressional races in 1988.

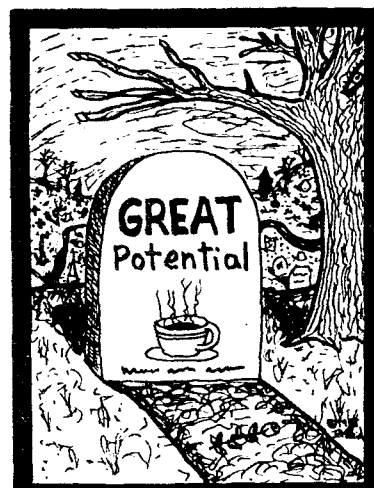
And if Nicaragua objects to this attempt at wholesale purchase of its election? Why, Danny Ortega will have demonstrated he's not serious about democracy.

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