Unsere Kinder
GDR, 1989, 88 min., color & b/w,
aspect ratio 4:3, doc.,
EN ST, German CC SDH

DIRECTOR Roland Steiner
SCRIPT Roland Steiner, Anne Richter
CAMERA Michael Lösche, Rainer Schulz
EDITORS Angelika Arnold, Johanna Jürschik
DRAMATURG Anne Richter
SOUND Rainer Baumert, Ulrich Fengler
NARRATOR Roland Steiner
Featuring the authors Christa Wolf and Stefan Heym
PRODUCTION
DEFA Studio for Documentary Films

DEFA Film Library
at the University of Massachusetts Amherst
umass.edu/defa
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**OUR CHILDREN**

*Our Children* offers a rare portrayal of marginalized youth communities and subcultures in late-1980s East Germany. By juxtaposing interviews with members of neo-Nazi, goth and leftist groups, as well as with other people concerned about the social precarity and beliefs of marginalized youth, the documentary provides a window onto political and cultural differences in GDR society, and the challenges faced by these young people. At the same time, *Our Children* makes viewers aware of differences and similarities between the time and place being represented and today’s political trends and debates, in Germany, as elsewhere. An exceptional pedagogical tool to help students think through and discuss some of the complex issues they face in today’s world, the film’s value also lies in its rare, frank and impartial portrayal of a multiplicity of perspectives and opinions about GDR society and Germany’s Nazi past.

**Keywords:** East Germany, youth in socialism, youth subcultures, surveillance and censorship, Stasi, rebellion and alterity, social movements, GDR legal system, everyday life in the GDR, East Berlin, rightwing extremism, white nationalism, neo-Nazis, punks, goths, antifa, violence, delinquency.

**Ideal audiences and courses:** Adult audiences. College and graduate courses in: German Studies; History; Sociology; Anthropology; Communications; Film & Media Studies; Political Science; Psychology. Topic areas: German history; alterity; subcultures; social movements; rightwing movements; life under socialism; 1980s; Cold War; German society and culture.

**Content Warning:** Racist slurs (00;31;40;00 - 00;31;59;00).

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**DVD CHAPTER BREAKS**

1 ........... 00;00;00;00 ........ Director’s Prologue
2 ........... 00;05;20;00 ........ Two Skinheads
3 ........... 00;14;01;00 ........ Xenophobia
4 ........... 00;19;24;10 ........ The Fatherland
5 ........... 00;22;43;24 ........ Anti-Skins
6 ........... 00;28;29;12 ........ Police Intervention
7 ........... 00;31;58;14 ........ Goths
8 ........... 00;37;02;12 ........ Letter from Prison
9 ........... 00;42;12;17 ........ The Social Worker
10 .......... 00;51;38;17 ........ Socialism in Crisis
11 .......... 00;54;27;00 ........ Christa Wolf Interview
12 .......... 01;06;04;05 ........ The Verdict
13 .......... 01;10;36;07 ........ Heiko’s Mother
14 .......... 01;14;25;08 ........ A Missed Opportunity
15 .......... 01;19;45;00 ........ Exit
16 .......... 01;23;58;09 ........ Director’s Epilogue
This film documents marginalized youth communities—such as goths, skinheads, antifascists, punks and neo-Nazis—in late 1980s East Berlin. While subcultures were ignored and denied in official GDR discourse, *Our Children* offers an unbiased portrayal of these communities and their alternative lifestyles, addressing the taboo topics of non-conformity, rebellion and alterity.

Over more than four years (1985-89), director Roland Steiner met with and interviewed members of various youth groups, in an attempt to understand what drew and drove young East Germans to seek out such communities. His documentary presents many different voices—not only of the young people, but also of concerned parents and social workers. These voices explore the quest of young East Germans for acceptance and belonging and to overcome social constraints. Well-known (East) German authors Christa Wolf and Stefan Heym demonstrate genuine interest in the presence and opinions of alternative youth groups and their potential for provoking dialogue about uncomfortable topics in socialist society. By connecting the concerns of the young people to broader problems of the GDR—such as its isolation from the West, cultural hegemony and social hierarchies—Steiner validates the rights of youth with alternative lifestyles to raise their voices.

Steiner also engages with the forms of rebellion that marginalized youths level against imposed East German social norms. He explores why some groups, especially the neo-Nazis, see violence and xenophobia as legitimate ways to address social problems, while other groups, such as antifa youths, instead propose that socialism be renewed and reformed. Devoting a significant part of the film to neo-Nazis—for whom provocations and intrusions into public spaces seem to offer a way to make their voices heard—Steiner highlights the social and personal contradictions that appear foremost in his encounters with them. In their interviews, meanwhile, punks, goths and antifascist youth explain why they are against the neo-Nazis, citing divergent approaches to Germany’s Nazi past and rejecting the use of violence. Despite these differences, the desire to oppose corruption and renew East German society and politics is common to all these groups.

Over the course of the documentary, it becomes clear that many young people in 1980s East Germany were looking for the kinds of openness that would eventually fuel the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989: freedom of speech, opportunities to express differences and the chance to engage in critical debates about their society and past and present injustices. The documentary also reveals that the most marginalized young adults were often left alone with their ideas and problems and shunned at home, school and work, as well as by society at large.
Youth rebellion was a familiar phenomenon in both East and West Germany. From the late 1940s into the 1960s, as Uta Poiger explains in her seminal 2000 monograph, *Jazz, Rock and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany*,

East German officials and the East German press attacked the influence of American popular culture on East and West German youth. First targeting westerns, gangster movies, and jazz, then rock ’n’ roll, East German authorities claimed that American imports destroyed the German cultural heritage, that they “barbarized” both East and West German adolescents, and made them prone to fascist seduction.1

Parents, educators and politicians on both sides of the Wall worried about the influence of cinematic icons like James Dean and Marlon Brando, who inspired the so-called Halbstarken (rowdies), a youth subculture that publicly displayed provocative behavior, especially towards the police and state structures. Georg Tressler’s 1956 film *Die Halbstarken* (Teenage Wolfpack, West Germany) and Richard Groschopp’s *Die Glatzkopfbande* (The Baldheaded Gang, 1962, GDR) portrayed these youths on screen, as did Gerhard Klein’s DEFA classics—Berlin – Ecke Schönhauser… (Berlin – Schönhauser Corner, 1957, GDR) and its banned sequel, Berlin um die Ecke (Berlin Around the Corner, 1965-66/1990, GDR).

Adults in East and West were outraged by leather jackets and electrifying dance rhythms, long hair and the tight, androgenous clothing worn by both genders. Over the course of the 1960s, more and more East German adolescents began listening to western-style pop music, and a good number of East German bands modeled their music on music from the West. East German authorities repeatedly campaigned and railed against listening to West German radio or watching West German TV, but in vain. When the Prague Spring protests began in in Czechoslovakia in 1968, young East Germans—workers and students alike—“voiced protests during dance events, or […] by playing Western hits in informal gatherings.”2

Significantly, political protest and alternative lifestyles often went hand-in-hand with or resulted in dramatic clashes between youths and GDR state authorities. Mark Fenemore and other historians have identified such violent clashes, starting with the 1956–58 Halbstarkenkrawalle, when rowdies clashed with the police, the Leipzig Beat Riot in 1965 and unrest at the 1976 Altenburg music festival, stretching all the way to unrest on East Berlin’s Unter den Linden in 1987, when fans from all over Eastern Europe gathered in East Berlin to hear the legendary band Pink Floyd playing over the Wall, in West Berlin.3


2 Ibid., 187-188. The Prague Spring (January – August 1968) stands for a time of political liberalization and mass protests for reforms in Czechoslovakia. In August 1968, Soviet and Warsaw pact forces invaded the country and violently suppressed the protests.

In the 1970s, appearances, viewpoints and lifestyles associated with subcultures—e.g., in fashion, music and art—continued to differ from those that were officially prescribed and thus continued to be stigmatized and sanctioned in East Germany. The slowly emerging alternative scene was mostly critiqued in East German media as a puppet show with strings pulled by the West, whose rebellious youth culture was seen as a byproduct of capitalist class relations. As Seth Howes writes, such forms of expression “were held to be weaponized ideologies, carefully managed by capitalist governments.”4 The police and Ministry of State Security (Stasi) closely monitored GDR youth subcultures, criminalizing them by equating alterity with deviance. Focusing on the punk movement in the GDR, Jeff Hayton has argued that, by using punk music to voice their discontent with real-existing socialism, “youths mobilized punk to confront the legitimacy of the SED state.”5 While, on one hand, the SED continued to elevate clean-cut young people as the “vanguard of socialism” and the future of socialist society, policy and propaganda, on the other hand it perceived rebellious youths as unreliable and prone to Western political influences. As Dorothee Wierling explains, the SED considered these youth subcultures as “highly charged confrontations with power.” Accordingly, the Stasi profiled their members and incriminated all East German youth subcultures, from punks to skinheads to neo-Nazis.6

Following the 1970s punk movement, in the 1980s three different youth groups emerged on East Germany’s extreme right wing: the Oi-Skinheads (punk-rock skinheads), the Nazi-Skinheads and the Faschos (the nickname for fascists). Whereas the Oi-Skins increasingly attacked leftwing punks, LGBTQ+ people and People of Color, Nazi-Skins protested the East German government’s limitations on their freedom and demanded German unification, and Faschos built their discourse on fascist ideology, mythologizing the Third Reich while rejecting communism, the GDR’s socialist structures and the country’s subservience to the Soviet Union.7 Meanwhile, the population at large was not immune to xenophobia and racism, and most foreigners living in the GDR were kept isolated. Consequently, as Young-Sun Hong points out, East German society struggled to develop and maintain social tolerance for all “others”—including people manifesting various political, cultural or linguistic differences.8

In contrast to these groups, antifascist (i.e., leftwing) youths of the period considered themselves pro-socialist, though they were critical of aspects of GDR

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4 Howes, Seth. “Subcultural Studies Between the Blocs: Unexpected Cosmopolitanism and Stubborn Blind Spots in East German Theories of Punk.” *Beyond No Future: Cultures of German Punk.* New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2016. 72
state-socialism and hoped for reforms. The antifascist youths interviewed in *Our Children* also hope for organized opposition to the rise of rightwing extremism, which they experience firsthand in clashes with neo-Nazis. Finally, they articulate various positions in their discussions about the Third Reich and Nazi past. When it comes to what is expected of them in East German society, some seem to feel that the only option available is prescribed participation in state-sponsored youth groups.

As indicated in Steiner’s interviews with goth youths, rejection of—or, at least, an ambivalent relationship to—the state-sponsored FDJ organization (the Free German Youth) was common to youths in all different subcultures. And there were real consequences for young people with alternative lifestyles if they refused to comply with social and political norms, including being barred from higher education and good jobs, or even sentenced to time in a juvenile detention center.

After German Unification in October 1990, rightwing groups from the East and West came together more easily, creating a dangerous environment that has had a lasting impact on rightwing activities in Germany for over thirty years. In contrast to the GDR, foreign workers brought to West Germany in the 1960s and 1970s had not been segregated from the general population. Nevertheless, after unification a growing debate about national identity in former West Germany engendered xenophobic attitudes and violence against People of Color and all newcomers, including immigrants from the former socialist bloc. For East Germans, it quickly became clear that the myth of being saved by the “Golden West,” in which many had believed, was an illusion; instead, those in formerly East German states experienced unemployment, bitterness and a felt loss of national identity.9

Identity discourses, combined with ideology, racism and misogyny, play a major role in the identity of rightwing social movements and in creating a feeling of belonging to a valued group. In the 1990s, this was one important element used to explain the fast-growing popularity of extreme rightwing movements, especially among young people in the former GDR. While some East Germans with far-right tendencies joined the NPD (the National Democratic Party of Germany), other younger people—including on the far right—continued to view the political system as unable to meet their needs and saw their newly won freedom as a chance to assert their own opinions outside of party politics.

In Germany today, it has become clear that rightwing extremism is no longer as homogenous or self-contained a phenomenon as was believed. It exists in various forms, including extreme rightwing skinhead or neo-Nazi groups promoting a

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totalitarian state, parties using populist discourse to jockey for political influence in local elections, and authors and artists whose work contains extreme right-wing messaging. Most importantly, rightwing extremism is found throughout Germany.

Roland Steiner’s prior documentaries had focused, among other things, on young people and juvenile detention centers. Our Children was thus not the director’s first project about marginalized East German youth. Moreover, he was well acquainted with dissent and stressors in East German society and with the reform attempts of the 1970s and 1980s.

Steiner’s empathetic encounters with those on the margins of society clearly shape his approach to documentary filmmaking and narratives. He tends to base his films on interviews, allowing his subjects to speak openly in front of the camera. Interviews are set in authentic locations—such as where the young people usually spend time. His questions are often directed from behind the camera; exceptions to this include a few interviews with neo-Nazis who refused to appear on camera and his conversation with goths on Alexanderplatz, where a police officer intervenes in the shoot. Steiner generally avoids interrupting his interview partners and attempts to include as many voices as possible when he is filming a group. This is a conscious attempt to capture a conversation, instead of insisting on a dialogue between himself and the interviewee. Moreover, in post-production Steiner favors minimal editing and typically adds no background music that might influence the emotional response of the audience.

Steiner’s approach to documentary filmmaking, especially the way it gives voice to various perspectives without filtering them, did not curry favor with the authorities. His 1982 film Jugendwerkhof (Juvenile Detention Center) focused on so-called “asocials”—e.g., young people who refused to comply with public education, had problems with their parents at home or, in rarer cases, were politically defiant—and was swiftly censored. In 1984, he then conducted interviews with East Germans in their thirties for Woran wir uns erinnern… (What We Remember…). In an interview (see Resource Materials, below), Steiner summarizes the attitude of this generational cohort towards state officials and cultural policy makers, as follows:

You on the other side of the table, in possession of power, want to raise the “new human being” who will stride toward the future in “real existing socialism” (as they called their view of our life)! We want to be close to the people and to document their life as authentically as possible. Trust us and listen to us. Don’t dictate what WE—the audience, the people in our films, creators—must remember and how we must dream our

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10 Braunthal, 117-119.
future. "What We Remember..." was released in 1984, but only after cultural officials threatened to withdraw the film due to its frank perspective on contested issues.

The making of Our Children, which took over four years, demonstrates how difficult it was for Steiner to establish trust and convince the marginalized young East Germans he wanted to interview to speak in front of the camera. The fear of being persecuted was very strong within their communities. It sometimes took the director and his crew up to six months to convince youths from various alternative groups to talk openly. Even if the youths had initially agreed, they’d often get scared when they got to the meeting place. Thanks to those who finally spoke, however, the interviews deliver a document of East German youth subcultures that is unique in a number of ways, including: how they express their views; their conversations with one another; and their display of paraphernalia and symbols of anarchy and rebellion.

The documentary’s focus is on young individuals from different subcultures. Most of them are outcasts, ostracized by GDR citizens and the state, by their teachers and the educational system at large. The “otherness” of these young people was generally viewed as a refusal to conform to the values promoted by the state. This is exposed, for instance, in a scene in which Steiner interviews two young East Berlin goths at Alexanderplatz—a well-known meeting place for alternative youth. They seem uneasy talking in front of the camera and their feeling is exacerbated by a passing police officer who approaches the film crew and inquires whether they have a permit to film. The policeman calls the goths “blacks,” allegedly referring to their black clothing; but for Steiner the comment raises the specter of discrimination and bigotry. The filmmaker protests their treatment, and the scene leaves viewers feeling unsettled. The inclusion of this scene in the film illustrates the kind of collisions that frequently took place between the East German police and youth subcultures.

Another uneasy encounter with authority is described in an interview with a group of young antifascists. One of the young man recounts an incident with a teacher: One day, his teacher interpreted a hammer-and-sickle sticker he was wearing as a disrespectful mocking of the state and a hostile act of anti-socialist propaganda. To understand his shock at his teacher’s reaction, we must remember that the hammer and sickle were the symbols of proletarian solidarity adopted during the Russian revolution. But a teenager wearing them on his alternative clothing, apparently, provoked the teacher’s hostility. This incident shows how little tolerance for free expression was granted to adolescents. Indeed, the fact that their beliefs in socialist values are doubted by those in positions of authority made these young people question and become even more doubtful about “real-existing socialism.”
The East German author Stefan Heym expresses sympathy for the position of young people in the face of authoritarianism. “Of course, it would be better if these young people would help us develop positive guidelines. But they often had the experience that if they criticize or suggest something—I’m not talking about skinheads, but about young people in general—what they say is rejected; nobody listens.” A far more probing and complex picture emerges from the filmed conversation between author Christa Wolf and neo-Nazi youths. Wolf demonstrates her willingness to listen and understand what motivated them to become neo-Nazis. There are tense exchanges about the disappointment of having friends leave for the West and the painful experience of seeing friends sent to prison. Then they tell Wolf that this is when they “came into conflict with the law for the first time.” When Wolf asks whether it was the need to “assert” themselves that led them to join a neo-Nazi group, one young man responds that what drew him to the group was “camaraderie, team spirit,” which allows you to not “face life on your own but along with others.” According to Steiner, this desire for acceptance, belonging and group solidarity is what motivated many of the young people to join a marginalized group—even though the various subcultures were often in conflict with each other.

Overall, Our Children can be understood as a plea to East German society to take another look and engage with marginalized youth—not as a problem, but as a symptom of its internal conflicts and unresolved problems—or, in other words, to recognize that these young people, too, are “our children.” The film premiered to the acclaim of film aficionados at the Leipzig Documentary Film Festival on November 1, 1989, where it won both the Silver Dove and the FIPRESCI Prize of the International Federation of Film Critics. The opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 would overshadow the film’s wider distribution and reception. It was officially released in theaters on December 1, 1989 and, as Steiner says in his interview (see Resource Materials, below) “for a week it was screened all over the GDR, as well as at some West German universities. After a week, the film was dead, and the fall of the Berlin Wall was already history!”
Roland Steiner (b. 1949)
Roland Steiner was born in Altenburg, Germany, on October 5, 1949. He studied directing at the Academy for Film and Television (now, Film University) in Potsdam-Babelsberg from 1970 to 1974, followed by two years as a master student with director Heiner Carow. Steiner joined the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films as a director in 1976. At first, he worked on documentaries for children, but he was more interested in the lives and problems of young adults. In his three-part Jugend-Zeit (Youth) series, Steiner explored the world of young East Germans. He has also created film portraits of people who were considered outsiders in East German society, either because of their political involvement or their personal lifestyles. Reflections on social debates, these include films on the undercover journalist Günter Wallraff; defense lawyer Heinrich Hannover; poet Erich Fried (Die ganze Welt soll bleiben); cultural philosopher and architectural theoretician Lothar Kühne (La Rotonda Vicenza); and filmmaker and politician Konrad Weiβ (Demokratie jetzt). For more, see the written interview with Steiner (see Resource Materials, below) and Steiner’s page on the DEFA Film Library website.

Please note: The following activities are divided into those that can be used before, during and/or after viewing Our Children. They are suggestions and not necessarily meant to be scaffolded to build on each other.

Pre-screening activities
• Roland Steiner chose to call his documentary Our Children. Brainstorm with your students: What kind of a film would this title lead you to expect? What are possible interpretations of the title and what would it be associated with in your own culture? What might this phrase mean in the social and historical context of 1980s East Germany? What are the responsibilities of parents, educational institutions and society-at-large when it comes to raising children? Then have your students work with a partner to discuss these questions and write up a 100-200-word summary of their discussion.

• Have your students discuss the following questions in small groups or with a partner:
  ○ What is bias? Can you think of examples of bias in relation to race, gender, sexuality, class?
  ○ What does “alterity” or “otherness” mean? How does it relate to the idea of “alternative”?
  ○ What does the word “marginalized” mean?
What are manifestations of racism and other forms of discrimination in your social environment? (For example, in communities, on college campuses, at high school, in social media and advertisements.)

What different ways can you react when you are confronted with or are a witness to racism or other forms of discrimination?

- Have small groups of students research US and German definitions of the following examples of youth subcultures:
  - Punks
  - Neo-Nazis
  - Skinheads
  - Goths (Grufties)
  - Fascists (Faschos)
  - Antifascists or Antifa (Antifaschisten)

Then have your students discuss their findings all together. Have them address questions such as: What similarities and differences did you identify? Are there different theories about the origins or characteristics of these groups?

- Invite students to brainstorm or write a short reflection on their own experiences with alternative youth, alterity and subcultures. How were such experiences similar or different from the representation of a given group in the media? Encourage students to reflect on specific personal encounters and stories, rather than voicing general opinions.

- Have your students examine the following image, developed by the East German Stasi (secret police) to represent young people with alternative lifestyles in the mid-1980s. It is entitled “Overview of the Appearances of Negative-Decadent Youth in the GDR” and was used by the Stasi to quickly recognize and identify young people. Have your students observe and list what elements of the appearance of each was considered unusual and unacceptable. Have your students read them (in German or English), compare and discuss the attributes the Stasi assigned to each group.
Assign your students to read the interview with director Roland Steiner (see Resource Materials, below). Then have them discuss and/or write about the following questions:

- What drew Steiner to the topic of alterity and subcultures in the GDR?
- What difficulties did the director face when he attempted to make films on these topics and why?
- According to Steiner, what motivated young people in the GDR to join skinhead, punk and/or other subcultural groups?
- If you could ask Steiner a question, what would it be?
• The goal of the following activity is to help students: a) explore how representations are constructed and understood, and b) how different factors can affect our interpretation of representations (such as cultural and generational contexts, gender, family or social traditions, etc.). Have your students take pictures of themselves that include several objects with personal meaning (e.g., clothes, book, poster, toy, instrument, colored object, pet, etc.). They might also wish to include a certain gesture or expression. Then, in small groups, have students show their partners the picture. The partner’s task is to interpret the photograph by decoding the messages that each student has included. Students then discuss their pictures and interpretations. To follow up, ask them questions such as: How did your partner’s interpretation compare or contrast with your intended meaning? Why might there be different interpretations of one image?

Activities for during the screening

• Worksheet for note-taking. Have students use a worksheet you prepare in advance to express their initial reactions and observations regarding: social and historical context; specific scenes; topics of the interviews; setting; and the film’s treatment of subcultures. Follow-up for after the screening: Have them discuss whether they think the film contains any moral judgments and how they arrived at this conclusion.

• Alternative worksheet activity. While they watch the film, have your students take notes on the characteristics of each of the four main types of GDR youth groups, listed in the following table. Characteristics might include: hairstyle, clothing and fashion accessories, philosophy, point of view on the GDR and socialism, other opinions, etc. If you had students work on these subcultures as a pre-screening activity, they can now compare those findings to their impressions from the film.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of that group</th>
<th>Questions?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Punks</td>
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<td>Neo-Nazis</td>
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<td>Grufties / Goths</td>
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<td>Antifascists</td>
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• The following exercise should first be modeled by the teacher; its objective is to show how documentaries structure a viewpoint or create a message for viewers. During the screening, have students take notes on an interview, conversation or a scene that impresses them. Which words, opinions, phrases or topics do they find best define the director’s project? Brainstorm important keywords and topics to capture it.
Post-screening activities

- Scene analysis: Share the short description of Steiner’s documentary style (in *About the Film*, above) with your students. Then: a) choose a scene for them to focus on, or b) have small groups of students work on scenes of their own choosing. Have them view the scene twice and list their observations about the directorial choices Steiner made in it. Then have them discuss and write down their thoughts on: 1) What words, opinions, phrases or ideas best define the director’s overall intentions in this film? and 2) How do the director’s choices in this scene illustrate and convey these intentions? These answers can form the basis for a discussion about how documentaries structure a message and influence the perception of viewers.

- In his interview, Steiner describes the legal and educational systems of the GDR and refers to situations in which young people might come into conflict with the law. Have your students discuss situations and stories from the film in relation to what we learn from Steiner’s interview. You may wish to assign a notetaker. What possible alternative solutions for conflict situations between young people and the law would they recommend?

- Watch the scene that Steiner and his crew shoot on Alexanderplatz, including when the policeman questions the film director. Have the students clarify and discuss what takes place and what is said in this scene. Then focus the discussion on the policeman’s use of the word “black.” What are the connotations of the word in the popular imagination? What does he mean by using it in this situation?

- Show your students the following screenshots of the young people in the film who call themselves *Abfall* (i.e., garbage) and *Schmutz* (i.e., dirt). Have them respond in writing or in a group discussion to the following questions:
  - Describe how these two young people look.
  - Why do you think they chose these names?
  - Do you think they belong to a specific subculture or group? If so, which one/s? Why do you think so? Support your answer with examples from the film.
Several people in the film, as well as the director himself imply that group belonging and acceptance is an important factor in young people’s development and, in particular, of their self-confidence. Have your students debate for and against this perspective, using examples from the film.

Related research topics

- Research paper: Students who are interested in the role of the Stasi and their profiling of GDR young people with alternative lifestyles could be assigned to research and write a short paper building on their observations of the film, the Stasi “Overview of Appearances” (in Pre-Screening Activities, above) and the following article by Jeff Hayton: “Härte gegen Punk: Popular Music, Western Media, and State Response in the German Democratic Republic” (German History 31 (4), 2013, 523–549).

As current documentaries such as Sabine Michel’s 2017 film Merkel Must Go (Montags in Dresden) illustrate, rightwing extremism in Germany today is no longer dominated by neo-Nazis with shaved heads and combat boots, nor is it as homogenous or self-contained a phenomenon as we believe it to be. In addition to marginalized groups, it also encompasses political parties striving to gain influence through populist discourse and local activism and is a phenomenon that exists throughout Germany. The following two activities take a comparative approach to rightwing extremism, something that students may be interested in and/or concerned about in today’s world.
**TEACHING ACTIVITIES**

- Have your students conduct online research about the history and contemporary manifestations of rightwing extremism in Germany, the USA and/or other countries today. In small-group discussions or as writing prompts, have your students explain: What similarities and differences are they able to identify in different countries? On what evidence do they base their claims? How can such similarities and differences be explained?

- Research paper: In *Our Children*, Steiner and several people he interviews have implicit or explicit theories about what motivated the young people who were part of rightwing subcultures in late-1980s East Germany. A thought-provoking film to help delve into such motivations among contemporary Americans is Peter Hutchinson’s 2020 documentary, *Healing from Hate: Battle for the Soul of a Nation* (released by the Media Education Foundation, available on Kanopy). Drawing on these films and other sources, have your students write a research paper on psychological aspects of rightwing extremism.

**RESOURCE MATERIALS**

**Texts on the DVD and the DEFA Film Library website:**

- “They Are Our Children! An Interview with Director Roland Steiner,” conducted by Hiltrud Schulz (DEFA Film Library), 2021.

**Related Films on the DEFA Film Library website:**

- Kahane, Peter. *Tamara* (Germany, 2007, 85 min., color, EN ST)
- Sahling, Bernd. *But Living Like I Do* (Weil ich so leben will, GDR, 1988, 21 min., color & b/w, EN ST)
- Sahling, Bernd. *It'll Be OK* (Alles wird gut, GDR/Germany, 1987-1990, 85 min., color & b/w, no subtitles)
- Steiner, Roland. *Juvenile Detention Center* (Jugendwerkhof, GDR, 1982, 31 min., b/w, no subtitles)


