Putin's Favorite Foothold:

An Analysis of Russian Influence in Germany

A THESIS

Submitted to the University of Michigan Department of Germanic Languages & Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

HONORS BACHELORS OF ARTS

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April 20, 2026

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the relationship between Vladimir Putin's Russia and Germany, arguing that Berlin serves as the centerpiece of Moscow's contemporary foreign policy. Based on research concerning historical context, the Russian-German diaspora, each state's respective principles of rationality, the Kremlin's active strategies of influence, and the Bundestag's leadership within Europe, this paper demonstrates why Germany plays a special role in Putin's affairs. Diplomacy between the two states is driven by personal grievance and popular perceptions, which are nontraditional political factors. The estimated five million post-Soviet resettlers within the German citizenry offer the Kremlin a unique foothold in the populace of the European Union's most powerful member. Moscow mobilizes this diaspora against the Bundestag through disinformation, espionage, the capture of Berlin's political elite, cyber attacks, and sabotage.

After explaining the Kremlin's methods of targeting German citizens, the thesis discusses how they fit into Putin's broader aspiration to expand his sphere of influence. Russian-Germans are a vulnerability for the Bundestag, but not as directly impactful as Moscow might have hoped. By addressing the unhealthy interest that Putin has vested in Germany, this thesis contributes to ongoing scholarship and policy debates about how the West should understand Russia's geopolitical strategy.

Acknowledgments

We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us—the completion of my work reflects the generous assistance from a number of individuals and institutions. This thesis has been the most rewarding experience of my undergraduate studies, and would not have been possible without their unwavering support. Thank you.

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Mary Rodena-Krasan, who originally suggested that I pursue an Honors Thesis. Your advice has shaped my academic career and inspired my favorite undergraduate endeavor. My appreciation also extends to the faculties and staff in the German Department and International Institute, whose resources have been invaluable throughout my time at the University of Michigan. Furthermore, thank you to my professors at the Albert-Ludwig University of Freiburg, whose courses served as the foundation of my knowledge in this topic. My research would not have been feasible without the rich existing expertise across the world.

To my friends over in *Deutschland*, particularly Yolene Straub and her parents, thank you for many entertaining discussions about Germany's history, the Cold War, the KGB and Stasi, and much more. Your perspectives gave me personal insight otherwise difficult to grasp from traditional scholarship. I am endlessly grateful for my A Team in Montana, best friends Annika Gill, Ainsley Barrett, Georgina Branch, and wonderful roommates for being a constant source of joy and laughter, and enduring my constant chatter about this topic. I am also deeply grateful for the support of my personal mentors, whose contributions to the world are my greatest inspiration. Your experiences motivated my interest in challenges and people from all walks of life.

I cannot express enough gratitude for my two advisors, Professor Benjamin Paloff and Professor Silke Weineck. Silke, thank you for your steadfast reassurance and refreshingly honest

line edits. The fellowship of our thesis cohort, especially Daphne Welter, has been an uplifting source of encouragement throughout this project. To Ben, I owe you my sincerest thanks. You were beyond generous with your time, wisdom, mentorship, and patience while my work went through the trenches of the writing mines. Each conversation was intellectually stimulating and personally motivating, and undeniably served as my most valuable asset in the thesis-creation process. Your feedback challenged me to a higher caliber of scholarship and significantly enhanced the quality of my arguments, for which I am eternally grateful.

Finally, I am forever beholden to the United States Navy orders that sent my family to Germany in 2013. Thank you Mom, Dad, Jack, Charlie, and Elise for being my unit, and our shared love for *Butterbrezel* and *Kuchen* in the Alps. My five cumulative years in Poltringen, Tübingen, and Freiburg shaped my individual strengths, academic interests, and professional pursuits. This paper would not exist without the quarter of my life spent in *Deutschland*.

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Introduction

"Wir bleiben in Kontakt und lösen das Problem. Es ist kein Problem."

[We will stay in contact and solve the problem. That will be no problem.]

- Vladimir Putin, 2025

Germany is not equal to other foreign states in Russian policy, they are a centerpiece. In this thesis, I will analyze what makes them a special case. The two have always had *eine besondere Beziehung*—a unique relationship. Their history is complicated, rich, and contextually important to understand the current geopolitical space. The dynamic between Moscow and Berlin has waxed and waned between closest partners and harshest enemies. A particular point of interest for the Kremlin are the five million Russian-Germans which provide them with a reliable audience within the German citizenry. Russian President Vladimir Putin looks for pressure points within Germany to control Europe by its head, and this diaspora provides an opportunistic window for influence.

It's relatively unshocking that Putin surprised a meeting by breaking into German in April 2025. He is personally preoccupied with Germany and driven by a personal sense of grievance towards them after being stationed in Dresden during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Germany has continued to inhabit a special place in Putin's psyche because of strong feelings of indignation, and his idea that this part of Europe belongs to Russia. The relationship between Russia and Germany is an extension of his own.

Moscow uses Berlin as a unique window into the Western world. Russian foreign policy under Putin's direction utilizes the large Russian-German diaspora, uncommon diplomatic methods, disinformation and media, espionage, sabotage, and the capture of political elite to

solidify influence across Germany, which translates into power over the European Union. These methods have been studied separately, but research connecting all the dots to show the bigger picture is relatively scarce. Scholarship has analyzed the Russian disinformation machine, but *how* is it affecting communities in Germany specifically? Think tanks have exposed the meddling of Russia's intelligence services, yet *why* are they targeting Berlin specifically, and not Paris or Rome to the same extent? Why has Putin's Kremlin placed a special focus on Germany, and to what extent have the deployed tactics resulted in Russian gains? This thesis addresses these understudied questions.

I begin with a historical overview of Russo-Germanic diplomacy, starting with 18–19th century Germans who settled the Russian Empire. These families are the ancestors of the diaspora who will later serve as Putin's foot in the door. The 20th century becomes even more tumultuous and bloody. After the conclusion of World War II, the division of Germany and the Soviet occupation of the East reintroduced Russia as a cultural idol, a view that conflicts with previous perceptions. Once the USSR collapsed, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl opened the borders for millions of Russian-Germans to come home. These communities are sprinkled throughout modern Germany, and are convenient agents for Russian influence. The next pillar of this thesis will analyze these *Russlanddeutsche*: Have they integrated into German society? Where do they fit into Putin's picture of *russkij mir*, one united Russian world?

The third chapter will analyze practical strategies the Kremlin uses, beginning with its captain. There is no contemporary Russia without Vladimir Putin, and there is no Vladimir Putin without his formative time in Germany. He has a complicated relationship with the Fatherland, which is reflected through his government's attempts to simultaneously partner with and dismantle Berlin. I describe Moscow's diplomatic efforts, disinformation machine, espionage

activities, and sabotage operations directed at Germany. It is an educated guess at the options that top Russian officials weigh while deciding how to approach Europe.

The next portion of the thesis is a discussion of what sets Germany apart from Russia's perspective. I answer this by arguing that the combination of their leadership in the European Union, large Russian diaspora, and proximity to the United States makes them the ideal candidate for Moscow to win over. Finally, I analyze the extent to which the Kremlin's efforts have succeeded in impacting the Bundestag. Putin's operations have stirred German society, but the magnitude and direction of the shifts are debatable. I regard this more as an agenda for further research than a definitive conclusion. These events are unfolding in the present day, so please read and keep engaging with the topic.

Chapter I.

The Past as Prologue to the Present

"History has taught Germans to respect and fear Russia as a military power while admiring its culture and its people."

- John Lough, author of *Germany's Russia Problem*

Cause and Effect

In today's *Reichstag,* home to the *Bundestag*, the federal German parliament, there are walls filled with graffiti that Soviet soldiers added while storming the building in 1945. Senior parliament members stroll past inscriptions like "Death to the Germans," and "The Russians were here and always beat the Germans" every day on their way into offices widely regarded as the apex of European politics.[1]

The Bundestag, 1945	The Bundestag, 2026





The events of the 20th century are fundamental to understanding why these statements remain unscrubbed today, and why Berlin's and Moscow's respective policies towards one another are

[1] Carter, Elliot. 2017. "Soviet Graffiti in the Reichstag in Berlin." Atlas Obscura.

permanently convoluted. Both societies viewed one another as regressive and progressive, barbaric and civilized, uncultured and cultured, ruthless and nurturing, as an enemy and a best friend in the course of one hundred short years. A full recount of the relationship between the two former empires through their modern statehood could fill a library of textbooks; for the sake of this paper, I will focus on events that I believe to be relevant to the question of how Moscow leverages the Russian-German diaspora today. The dynamic between the two societies is as equally rich and complex as the massive physical, ideological, cultural, and political transformations they have individually undergone since the Middle Ages.

The Greats

Putin has listed Peter the Great, the ruler who massively grew the Russian Empire through expansionist wars in the 18th century, as a beloved role model. The two men, though centuries apart, have a shared obsession with Germany. A young Peter was educated abroad, and evolved into a Germanized Russian. German states developed faster than the Muscovite Empire, and served as a technological and economic role model for their Eastern neighbor. Peter was disturbed by Moscow's lack of sophistication upon his return home, and set to Europeanize Russia.[2] Folklore describes him prowling around the Kremlin with a pair of shears to swiftly cut the men's traditional, long, unruly beards. In 1697, Peter went on a "Grand Embassy" tour through Western Europe and was further impressed by the modernity of German cities. He demanded that Russia adopt Europe's chic appearance and functionality, leading to Russia's second-largest city being named "St. Petersburg" rather than "Petrograd." In 1744, a German princess arrived to marry his grandson. This woman was the notorious empress Catherine the

[2] Peter is one example in a pattern of East-European educated Russian nobility returning home and rebuilding the places in which they studied.

Great. She carried on the Empire's modernization and expansion that Peter began. Under her rule, Russia experienced significant military and diplomatic gains—their territory grew by over 200,000 square miles.[3] Catherine recognized Germans' potential to contribute to Russia's development, and encouraged her former fellow citizens to come settle the new territory. Her second manifesto (the first one failed) invited foreigners into the empire and offered exemption from military service, freedom of religion, thirty years tax-free, gifted land, and compensation for travel costs.[4] Flyers were distributed across German-speaking municipalities in 1763 after the end of the Seven Years' War, and the offer proved attractive to the struggling communities. Over 30,000 people migrated to Russia in the next three years. In 1813, Catherine's grandson extended another invitation, trying to recruit skilled workers to develop the nation's capabilities. The promised provisional benefits went mostly unfulfilled and were officially revoked in 1871.[5] Nevertheless, modern academics have mapped over 19,451 German settlements across the Russian empire.[6] They spoke German at home, but conducted all other affairs in Russian. These communities are the origins of the millions of Russian-Germans that live in Germany today.

A Century of War

Despite fluctuating alliances between European empires throughout the 19th century, economic linkage between Germany and Russia remained steady for a brief honeymoon period. Otto von Bismarck, the "Iron Chancellor" who unified the German states, used financial measures to cement a diplomatic friendship with Moscow.[7] Russia benefited from the increase in foreign

[3] Oldenbourg, Zoé. 2026. "Catherine the Great | Biography, Facts, Children, & Accomplishments." Britannica.
[4] "Catherine's Manifesto 1763 - NORKA." 2024. Norka, Russia.
[5] Frustration with the loss of privileges in Russia contributed to the large-scale migration of ethnic Germans to America.
[6] Bender, Dennis G., and Otto Riehl. 2023. "Germans from Russia and Eastern Europe Settlement Locations." GRSL.
[7] Randall E. Newnham. *Deutsche Mark Diplomacy : Positive Economic Sanctions in German-Russian Relations*. Penn State University Press, 2002. EBSCOhost, 57.

imports, and Bismarck had the assurance of knowing they would not interfere with his wars in Denmark, Austria, and France. The construction of Russia's railroad network, public infrastructure, electricity utilities, and even telecommunications system would have been difficult to materialize without generous, multi-hundred million Euro loans from German banks. This economic codependency soured when Russia took a large loan from France, Germany's mortal enemy, in exchange for supporting Paris' colonization of Morocco. Germany felt betrayed and banned their banks from investing in Russia, which violated a previous commitment to help develop Moscow's markets.[8] Needless to say, their relationship continued to deteriorate in the first World War.

The history of war between Berlin and Moscow throughout WWI is relevant to this thesis because it endangered Germans inside of Russia, laying the psychological groundwork for their mass exodus towards Europe in the 1990s, which I will explain in the next chapter. Germany and Russia came in direct fire in 1914 because they were each treaty-bound to opposing states. Tsar Nicholas entered the conflict on behalf of Serbia, largely to protect Russia's status as a great power. Germany officially declared war on Moscow in 1914, since they were obligated to support Austria-Hungary. Violent clashes ensued in which Germany devastated their forces: an estimated 250,000 Russian men were killed.[9] Anti-German sentiment skyrocketed in Russia. They renamed St. Petersburg "Petrograd" to erase its original European influence. German resettler communities faced increased persecution, and their language and religion were outlawed completely. In 1914, a priest who had fully grown up in Russia identified himself as a foreigner because his ancestors were German migrants. This illustrates how WWI cast a sudden spotlight on heritage, and generated intense suspicion towards anyone within the generational reach of

[8] Newnham. *Deutsche Mark Diplomacy*, 71
[9] "Eastern Front | WW1, Definition, Battles, & Casualties." n.d. Britannica. Historians say that one German brigade was militarily equal to 1.5 of Russia's.

Deutschland. Both Germany and Russia's societies were deeply traumatized by this war and experienced radical institutional changes as a result—communism bloomed in Russia and parliamentary democracy in Germany. The Weimar Republic and Bolsheviks opted for political reconciliation and the reestablishment of economic cooperation, but struggled to heal scars from a very recent war. Skepticism towards Germans persisted in Moscow's political order. With their rise to power, the Soviets ushered in a refreshed wave of paranoia towards Germany, and suspected that they were covertly supporting anti-communist movements. Russian authorities purged foreigners, including descendants of German resettlers from Catherine's era. The Soviet's brutal treatment of Russian-Germans is a significant reason why Berlin would later issue their open-door policy, inviting settlers back to Germany.

In 1933, Hitler assumed power. Not particularly interested in cooperating with the USSR, he maintained a neutral policy towards them. Stalin, otherwise strenuously opposed to nationalism, was fascinated by his leadership style and contemplated whether he could replicate it himself in the Soviet Union. In 1939, they quietly signed the nonaggression Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and partitioned Eastern Europe between the two powers. Stalin thought he had outmaneuvered the West by expanding Russia's sphere of influence and postponing a direct conflict with Hitler. At this point, the USSR abandoned their rhetorical attacks on Germany, and Russian-Germans were granted temporary relief from persecution and gulag sentences. Less than two years later, Hitler violated the pact by launching a surprise invasion, and they became vicious enemies once more. The Nazis subjected Soviet citizens to unspeakable cruelty during WWII. Their "Hunger Plan" starved millions of Russians so that German troops could eat instead. Hundreds of thousands of women were rounded up from Western and central Ukraine alone and enslaved in Germany's war effort. Around 27 million Soviet citizens, the

majority civilians, suffered atrocious deaths at the hands of the Nazis. I could fill pages with horror stories of the inhumanity that Hitler's soldiers imposed on Russians. To this day, neither society has fully forgiven nor forgotten these events. Germans live with a paralyzing sense of guilt from their past, but also remember how the Red Army conducted themselves towards the end of the war. Russians are quick to recall Germany's Nazi past—the Kremlin still uses WWII to justify contemporary interests, such as claiming that Ukrainian independence leaders are Nazis. I will explain the misalignments between Berlin's and Moscow's perceptions in further detail in the next chapter. Meanwhile, Russians take great pride in being the army that finally conquered the Nazis. It's true, the Allies arguably wouldn't have been able to defeat Hitler without the Red Army. Soviet soldiers were the ones to breach and liberate Berlin, during which the men celebrated by vandalizing the Bundestag with Russian inscriptions that prevail today.

East and West

Based on the Bundestag's 2024 census, 12.4 million people live in states formerly part of East Germany, and one in five Germans have East German heritage.[10] This is crucial to understanding the mental framework in which a significant part of the current populace operates in regards to Russia. After Germany was defeated in WWII, it was divided into four parts among the victors. The Soviet Union occupied the Northeastern quadrant, which became the German Democratic Republic (GDR), better known as East Germany. The remaining three portions belonging to the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, formed the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), or West Germany. The FRG was incorporated into the Western capitalist system and quickly eclipsed its eastern counterpart economically. Masses of people left the GDR in search of

[10] "Bevölkerungsentwicklung in Ost- und Westdeutschland zwischen 1990 und 2024: Angleichung oder Verfestigung der Unterschiede?" 2025. Statistisches Bundesamt.

better financial opportunity and quality of life—Germans were terrified to live under the Soviets, who had shown them no mercy after seizing Berlin in 1945.[11] In 1961, the GDR constructed the Berlin Wall to stop their citizens from emigrating, which was a horror story in itself. Families were separated and hundreds of attempted escapees were killed. There are also many success stories: at least four million people fled to West Germany from 1949 to 1989, many of them risking death.[12] Those who stayed in the GDR, whether forced or willingly, lived in complete contrast to the FRG. They existed in a communist system where essentially all decisions were made by the singular political party, the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* [Socialist Unity Party] (SED).[13] Most media was heavily filtered, or blocked altogether in certain areas. Two regions were referred to as *Tal der Ahnungslosen* [Valley of the Clueless] because the government blocked radio broadcasts altogether, fearing that Western music and culture might reach and corrupt their citizens. Life in the GDR was characterized by censorship and surveillance, and trained Germans to exist in a world governed by Russian authority.

Moscow further institutionalized Soviet characteristics in East German society through their establishment of an unforgiving security apparatus. The *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* [Ministry for State Security], commonly known as Stasi, was modeled directly after Russia's KGB. Official responsibilities included domestic surveillance, foreign espionage, the recovery and execution of people who fled, and even the harboring of anti-Western terrorist organizations.[14] By 1989, they recruited up to two million informants and had infiltrated every aspect of society: neighbors spied on neighbors, brothers on brothers, children on parents. Their portfolio amassed files on around six million East Germans.[15] This produced a highly paranoid

[11] Newnham, *Deutsche Mark Diplomacy,* 112.
[12] "Flight & Division | Berlin Wall Foundation." n.d. Stiftung Berliner Mauer.
[13] The SED later developed into *Die Linke*, which is a radical left group that supports Putin in the present day.
[14] Cameron, Joel D. 2026. "Stasi | Meaning, Facts, Methods, & Files." Britannica.
[15] In 1991, the German government granted legal rights to citizens to view their Stasi file, which millions of people have done since.

and neurotic population, who were simultaneously adapting to completely foreign norms. The Soviet Union carefully curated the East German lifestyle after their own. They thought of themselves as a superior big brother who the GDR should strive to emulate in all ways. Learning the Russian language was mandatory in almost all Eastern schools, and students were strongly encouraged to fulfill their civic duty by joining the younger SED branch. This includes young Angela Merkel, who went on to become the chancellor of unified Germany for sixteen years. She speaks Russian fluently, and was a member of a youth communist group. The Society for German-Soviet Friendship, a similar institution, became the largest public organization in the country.[16] Citizens consumed Moscow's media, music, and food products. Two entire generations grew up with the image of the USSR as their dearest friend, with gentle reminders of the consequences if they disagreed. For nearly thirty years, Eastern Germans were both outwardly and subliminally encouraged to idolize Russia, yet faced imprisonment and death at their hands. The Soviet Union was both the good cop and the bad cop, which trapped the GDR in a state of cognitive dissonance and muddled their perception of Moscow. I personally know people who recognize the USSR's oppression, but still prefer Russian snacks and movies. This shows that the Berlin Wall has been physically destroyed, but the Kremlin's subtle cultural influence lingered and remains embedded in Germany.

[16] John Lough. *Germany's Russia Problem : The Struggle for Balance in Europe*. Manchester University Press, 2021. EBSCOhost, 84.

Chapter II.

The Russian-Germans

"Sie haben hier ein Stück Heimat gefunden und dadurch unser Haus um eine weitere Gruppe erweitert."

[They found a piece of home here and then extended our house to a broad group.]

- Quote posted by the Humboldt-University in Berlin

The Chancellor of Unity

"Für die Rußlanddeutschen sind die Grenzen offen…Gleichzeitig haben Sie sich die Liebe und Verbundenheit zur Heimat in einem Maße bewahrt, wie es auch für andere vorbildlich ist."

[For the Russian-Germans, the borders are open…they have maintained the love and unity to our homeland, in an exemplary way for others.]

- Former Chancellor Helmut Kohl, 1998

German resettlers, also referred to as *(Spät)aussiedler*, from the Soviet Union are a case study in how citizenship does not automatically assure a sense of kinship, nor do feelings of belonging guarantee official acceptance. The etymology of the terms used by the German government to address the group indicate a degree of separation: individuals are grouped as *Aussiedler* [resettler] or *Spätaussiedler* [late resettler] based on their year of migration. This vocabulary is used in official bureaucracy as well as everyday conversation. The construction and application of a distinctive label for Russian-Germans shows that the Bundestag regards them as a compartmentalized entity from the general public—otherwise a separate word is unwarranted,

and they would be addressed as mainstream Germans like all other citizens. This terminology persists today, which reveals that the diaspora is still perceived as detached from the common citizenry.

Throughout generations of persecution in Russia, resettlers clung to their inherited German identity to preserve a sense of humanity. *(Spät)aussiedler* truly believed that their ancestry, shared language, and cultural values equated them to citizens back in the *Vaterland*. Centuries of Germany serving as a psychological and emotional anchor built steep expectations in the resettlers' minds, which were unfulfilled upon arrival.[17] To *(Spät)aussiedlers*' dismay, Germans did not consider families whose ancestors left the country over 200 years ago equal to them in terms of ethnicity and nationality. In the eyes of traditional society, centuries of life in Russia, regardless of whether by choice or force, diluted the resettlers' Germanness and made them second-tier citizens. Official stateship was useless in the court of public opinion. A passport secured Russian-Germans entrance into the physical territory, but not the society they had envisioned as home. This disappointment is important because it affords the Kremlin the opportunity to exploit the *Aussiedler*'s deeply jaded attitude towards the Bundestag.

Helmut Kohl, *Bundeskanzler* from 1982-1998, would not have earned his nickname as the "chancellor of unity" without his policies regarding the Russian-German diaspora. His legacy is cemented by his leadership through the collapse of the Soviet Union Kohl was not only committed to reunifying East and West Germany, but all citizens, prompting his initiation of the Russian-German homecoming. He was a member of the *Christliche Demokratische Union* (CDU), a well-established conservative political party.[18] The CDU's political heavyweights

[17] Friedrichs, Nils, and Johannes Graf. 2022. "Integration gelungen? Lebenswelten und gesellschaftliche Teilhabe von (Spät-)Aussiedlerinnen und (Spät-)Aussiedlern," Federal Research Report. bamf.de, 4-11.
[18] Founded in 1949, the CDU represents center-right values and is one of the two unofficial mainstream groups—until the recent 2025 election, the CDU and *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) have consistently been the two most popular parties and have collaborated to govern as a *Große Koalition* [the Big Coalition].

include Angela Merkel (former chancellor), Ursula von der Leyen (sitting President of the European Commission), Friedrich Merz (current chancellor), and Konrad Adenauer (West Germany's first chancellor from 1949-1963). I mention this because Russian-Germans have voted faithfully for the CDU, until the relatively recent rise of the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). Their political shift will be analyzed further later in the thesis. Helmut Kohl's lasting popularity from his reunification and immigration policies has underpinned the CDU's steadfast success today.

Despite WWII having been nearly four decades in the rearview when Kohl assumed leadership of the Bundestag, a large part of the chancellor's responsibilities was the continuation of amending wartime grievances. He was a staunch believer in *Ostpolitik* [Eastern policy], meaning that he prioritized relations with the GDR and sought unity, despite the country being caught in a tug-of-war between the United States and USSR. In addition to the domestic balancing act, Kohl strived to reunify Germans who had been scattered across Eurasia by conflict. The 18th to 20th centuries were marked by long periods of war, which liquidated European borders and caused mass flights of Germans seeking safety. As Chapter I recounts, their ethnicity became an additional hazard, particularly in the 1900s. German minorities, whose ancestors had sought refuge in Bolshevik territory decades (if not centuries) prior, were endangered because of escalating tensions between their homeland and haven. In 1937, Stalin purged more than 55,000 Germans in less than two months and accused even more of being foreign agents for Hitler.[19] The luckier families who got lucky were deported further into exile to remote territories like Siberia. The diaspora who initially left Germany in search of safety in

[19] Plokhy, Serhii. Lost Kingdom : The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation, from 1470 to the Present. First edition. Basic Books, 2017, 245-275.

Russia had hopped out of the frying pan and into the fire. The Bundestag was well aware of their suffering, and felt compelled to atone for Germany's role in the historical volatility.

Kohl's administration recognized that many people, particularly Russian-Germans, had faced hardship from being German at the wrong place and the wrong time, and passed sweeping laws that welcomed formerly displaced people back home. Any person who claimed ethnicity and was affected by a German war in the last 200 years was granted a *Kriegsfolgenschicksals* [destiny of war consequences] status and entry into West Germany. To help resettlers reclaim their German identity, Kohl passed Section 94 of the *Kriegsfolgenbereinigungsgesetzes* (KfbG) [law to rectify consequences of war], which allowed them to easily replace their Russian names with a new adopted German version. Below are the official qualifications for eligibility for these benefits, as defined by the *Gesetz über die Angelegenheiten der Vertriebenen und Flüchtlinge (BVFG)* [Act on the Affairs of Displaced Persons and Refugees]:

§ A displaced person shall also be a displaced spouse or descendant who has left the displaced areas before the 1st January 1993, if the other spouse or, in the case of descendants, a parent on 31 January 31. December 1937 or once before that had his residence in the area of expulsion

§ Soviet zone refugee is a German national or German national who has or has had his residence in the Soviet occupation zone or in the Soviet-occupied sector of Berlin and from there before the 1st July 1990 in order to escape a special difficult situation for which he is not responsible and caused by political circumstances. A particularly difficult situation is given above all when there is an immediate danger to life and limb or personal freedom.

§ A German ethnic group within the meaning of this Act is a person who has become familiar with the German people in his home country, provided that this confession is confirmed by certain characteristics such as descent, language, upbringing, culture[20]

What Kohl's government did not foresee was the scale of the pool of recipients who the broad conditions applied to. Around 2.8 million people immigrated before 1992 (the *Aussiedler*) and 1.7 million since 1992 (*Spätaussiedler*), but modern numbers estimate the population of post-Soviet settlers at up to five million.[21] Paradoxically, the *nicht Auswanderungsland* [anti-emigration] country (the Soviet Union) dissolved ironclad borders as the *nicht Einwanderungsland* [anti-immigration] country (Germany) simultaneously opened theirs. This newfound physical freedom coupled with Kohl's generous policies spurred a mass exodus of people in the USSR to depart for (West) Germany, who had been previously restricted from leaving.[22] The economic burden of the influx in entrants was controversial in the already financially strained society, which pressured Kohl into restricting admission. He hesitated to tighten their legal privileges because *Aussiedler* voted overwhelmingly for the CDU out of gratitude for their charitable open-door laws.

In 1990, the Bundestag passed the *Aussiedleraufnahmegesetz* [Resettlers' Admittance Act], which required admittees to demonstrate working knowledge through a 50 page questionnaire and language test, and provide evidence of their German origin.[23] Another 1992 amendment limited entrants to 225,000 people per year and mandated that allegations of political

[20] Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz. 1953, revised 2024. "Gesetz über die Angelegenheiten der Vertriebenen und Flüchtlinge (Bundesvertriebenengesetz - BVFG)," German Federal Law. 2024.
[21] Friedrichs and Graf, *Integration Gelungen?*, 4.
[22] The demographic of relatively high-status emigrants presented a challenge to Putin's regime, because a large portion of those who left were highly-skilled and educated, causing a brain drain in Russia.
[23] These new stipulations cut admissions almost in half.

mistreatment abroad be verified on an individual basis.[24] At the same time, Kohl tried to reduce the diaspora's desire to emigrate by improving their quality of life in other countries: he established treaties with Eastern European (including Russia) governments to expand protections for ethnic Germans and invested in their cultural centers, schools, and more. Nevertheless, more than 4.6 million people resettled in Germany, and were rudely awakened that they were too German for Russians, and now too Russian for Germans.

Russian-Germans Today

"Man hat die reingelassen. Und uns gibt man nichts!"

[They let them (refugees) in. But they don't give us (Russian-Germans) anything!]

- Mischa, shopper in a Russian supermarket

Maria is a 42-year old nurse in Detmold, a small city in the state of Nordrhein-Westfalen. She lives with her family in a traditional German duplex and sends her two children to the local *Grundschule* [elementary school] every morning. Maria's own childhood differed from their experience—when she was nine years old, her parents uprooted their life in the Russian Volga province to return to their ethnic roots in Germany. Her ancestors took Catherine the Great's offer in 1764 and settled in Russia in search of religious freedom, economic opportunity, and safety from Europe's raging land wars. Maria's great-granduncle died fighting for the Russian Empire in WWI against German forces, men he considered his own kin. Another relative was killed in the Bolshevik revolution after being labeled as part of the bourgeois for owning a modest farm. In 1937, Maria's great-aunt was accused of being a foreign agent and was deported

[24] Klusmeyer, Douglas B., and Demetrios G. Papademetriou. 2009. *Immigration Policy in the Federal Republic of Germany: Negotiating Membership and Remaking the Nation*. Berghan Books, 181.

to the gulag. Her family all learned Russian in school and spoke limited German, despite it being the foundation of their identities. Maria was educated in Volga, where she was taught to read and write in Cyrillic. Despite this, she held her German identity dear, as her parents had told her to, just as their parents had told them. So when Maria moved back to the *Vaterland* with her parents and grandparents in 1993, they felt excited and optimistic, initial enthusiasm that quickly dissipated. Maria discovered that she spoke a foreign dialect, wore mismatched clothes, and had very different habits than her German peers. None of this prevented her from getting an *Ausbilding* [technical certificate], finding employment, or marrying her husband (who also immigrated from the USSR). Over 4.7% of her Detmold region are post-Soviet *Spätaussiedler*, and Maria found community in others who shared her Russian background.[25] She built a satisfactory life, but felt a lingering sense of disappointment in Germany for their estrangement. She considered undergoing the reethnicization process and reapplying for a Russian passport, like many of her friends were doing. These events are fictional: Maria and her family are characters that I invented to reflect the experience of millions of Russian-Germans. The individual figures are imaginary, but represent a very true story.

The disconnect between Soviet resettlers and the general German public persists today, over thirty years after their initial migration. A 2022 study by the Bundestag's Department for Migration and Refugees investigated the success of immigrant integration, and gathered results that are crucial to this paper. They determined that the more often *(Spät)aussiedler* engage with Germans without a migrational background, the stronger they feel connected to the country. This is problematic because Russian-Germans have weaker contacts relative to other immigrant groups. I have summarized the report's noteworthy statistics below that paint a concerning

[25] Zdrzalek, Susanna. 2024. "Russischsprachige Menschen - wer sie sind und wie sie leben." *WDR*, February 22, 2024.

portrayal of isolated *Aussiedler*, which is key to understanding their susceptibility to Moscow's influence—the stronger their degree of inclusion in the German citizenry, the less vulnerable resettlers are to Russian messaging. Demonstrated by the following figures, post-USSR resettlers have shown limited conformment to German society, and have instead built their own parallel communities. In regards to language, friendship, and politics, *Aussiedler* show a strong preference for their home country over Germany. However, they also re-expressed the everlasting belief that they belong in *Deutschland*.

	Post-USSR Resettlers	**Other Immigrant Groups**
Speak German "on occasion" in their neighborhood	17.1%	15.3%
Speak German "rarely" in their neighborhood	12.8%	9.7%
Have contact to people from their own country "very often" or "often"	54.8%	35.8%
See German friends as less trustworthy	25.8%	
Get along equally with Germans	74.7%	
Feel that strangers look at them and know they have foreign ancestry	55.6%	
Feel that they belong to their	34.1%	

	Post-USSR Resettlers	Other Immigrant Groups
homeland (USSR)		
Feel that they belong in Germany	91.6%	
Feel that they belong in their German state	86.4%	
Feel that they belong in their city	91.6%	
"Likely not" to trust German political parties	43%	
"Satisfied" with politics in their home country	40.9%	
"Rather weak" or "not at all" interest in politics	54.6%	
"Slightly disagree" or "completely disagree" that German politicians care about common people	66.9%	
Believe migrants are a threat to Germany	51.6%	
Believe refugees raise the risk of terror attacks	65.7%	

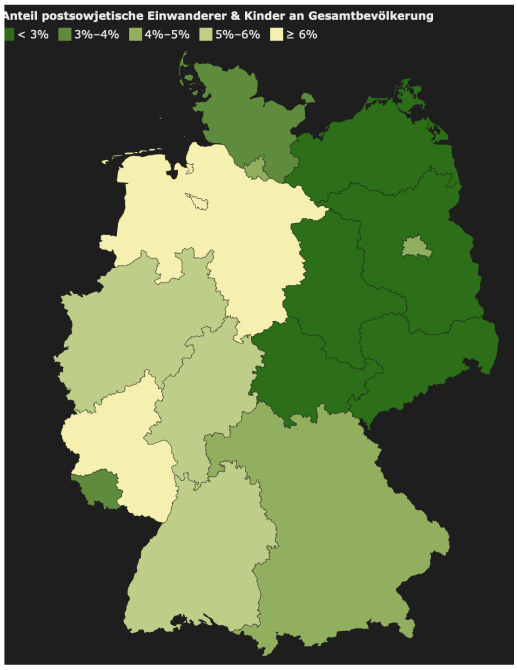
	Post-USSR Resettlers	Other Immigrant Groups
Believe refugees increase criminality in Germany	74.5%	[26]

I would like to highlight that the overwhelming majority of post-USSR settlers feel that they belong in Germany, with a lesser percentage feeling that they belong to their specific state. Perhaps this means that resettlers haven't fully abandoned their perceived attachment to Germany as a home country, but feel foreign in their daily interactions with state institutions. A 91.6% vote in favor of belonging to Germany supports the notion of successful integration, but other factors raise red flags. Some respondents answered that their place is within both Germany and their Soviet homeland. Over half stated that they feel other Germans view them as having foreign ancestry, indicating a degree of perceived distance from the general population.

Regarding communication, post-Soviet resettlers speak German less frequently and see people from their home country more often than other immigrant groups do, which shows that they are comparatively more withdrawn. This is perhaps due to the sheer amount of *Aussiedler*—the network of five million Russian speakers provides a huge enclave to exist in and reduces pressure to find outside contacts, which is a safety blanket that smaller diasporas don't have the privilege of. Another plausible rationale is that their recession into a parallel society was a self-protective measure against frustration with Russia that Germans project onto them. Regardless of their personal political views, post-Soviet resettlers are often assumed to be Putin supporters and expected to formally denounce their countries of origin.

[26] Friedrichs and Graf, *Integration Gelungen?*, 51-86.

The psychological trauma caused by a double rejection from both Germany and Russia built a strong group consciousness and hive mind, and unsurprisingly caused resettlers to gravitate towards the same regions. Russian-Germans sequester themselves in areas already populated by members of their diaspora, which enables them to continue living in their own linguistic and cultural bubbles. The following map to the left depicts the percentage of post-USSR immigrants relative to the overall population in German states: lighter shaded regions indicate a higher level of post-USSR resettlers. They make up over 6% of the demographic in Bremen, Niedersachsen, and Rheinland-Pfalz.



[27]



[28]

It is curious that the distribution of Russian-Germans perfectly replicates the border between East and West Germany, which I have displayed above to the right for convenience. Western states' economic security and overall higher stability explains their popularity as a destination, but I argue that the migration pattern also testifies to resettlers' initial confidence in their German

[27] Statistisches Bundesamt. 2023. "Statistischer Bericht - Mikrozensus - Bevölkerung nach Einwanderungsgeschichte - Erstergebnisse 2022." destatis.de.
[28] Duggan, Lawrence G. n.d. "Germany | Facts, Geography, Maps, & History." Britannica.

ethnicity. I believe that Eastern states would have a stronger appeal to anxious immigrants because they are culturally more similar to Russia, after having spent thirty years under Soviet authority. Life under capitalism in West German states is a much harder adjustment. However, resettlers showed preference against East Germany, which demonstrates a refusal, whether consciously or subconsciously, to gravitate towards Russian-leaning areas.[29] *Aussiedler* neglected cities more adjacent to their former system because they didn't associate themselves with it, a belief that wasn't shared by mainstream German society.

The geographic concentration of resettlers in former West Germany benefits Putin because it maximizes the area of people receptive to his influence. Voting patterns show that former East Germans are comparatively more inclined to sympathize with Russia because of economic dependence and forty years of the GDR preaching the Soviet Union as a big brother that Germany should strive to emulate. Therefore, it's less critical for Putin to have Russian-Germans in regions already naturally prone to his agenda. Between Western states populated by resettlers and the former GDR territory, the Kremlin has people planted across the majority of the country who are preconditioned in favor of Russian messaging.

Age significantly impacts the success of resettlers' integration. Younger people with Soviet heritage overwhelmingly speak Russian with their family, but German in school and social circles.[30] This improves their command of both language and culture, which helps assimilation dramatically. The same holds true for middle-aged resettlers, who might speak German at work, for example. Elderly Russian-Germans have less opportunity to integrate through a school or job, and are thus naturally prone to isolation. The effect is evident: the aforementioned 2022 study concluded that the older migrants were at the time of moving, the

[29] People in the GDR were facing a similar struggle: the percentage of East Germans who identified as German dropped from 66% to 34% between 1990 and 1995.
[30] Friedrichs and Graf, *Integration Gelungen?*, 47.

less likely they are to trust German journalism.[31] More precisely, aged resettlers worry about the independence of Germany's news outlets.[32]

In addition to the media, statistics show that *Aussiedler* are skeptical towards German politics and have a higher satisfaction with policy in their former home.[33] Nevertheless, post-Soviet resettlers account for 2.4 million of Germany's 6.3 million immigrant voters.[34] Those who choose to exercise their civic liberties (*Aussiedler* voter turnout is 20% lower than traditional citizens) have voted overwhelmingly for the CDU up until the last decade. Resettlers favor the CDU out of appreciation for Helmut Kohl bringing them home, despite Germany's chilly reception. If not for Kohl, they wouldn't be qualified to vote in the first place. *Aussiedler* value religion and consider Christianity an important part of self, which further aligns them with the CDU's conservative beliefs. However, also this means that Merkel's 2015 refugee policy was particularly disturbing to resettlers, who are ironically staunchly anti-migration.[35] Disappointment in Merkel pushed Russian-Germans towards the rising AfD, who deliberately targeted them with help from Putin. The AfD was the only political party to translate their election program into Russian, in addition to emphasizing their Russian-German party network and nominating six candidates with a Soviet background. The party also pledges to strengthen ties to the Kremlin, which wins points with resettlers stressed about deteriorating Berlin-Moscow relations. I will discuss this further in Chapter IV. The community's political shift from the CDU

[31] Friedrichs and Graf, *Integration Gelungen?*, 68.
[32] I interpret this fear as a scar from life in the muddled Soviet information space.
[33] This data was taken before Putin's handling of the war with Ukraine, which has undoubtedly bittered attitudes towards the Russian leader.
[34] Goerres, Achim, Sabrina J. Mayer, and Dennis C. Spies. 2020. "Immigrant Voters against Their Will: A Focus Group Analysis of Identities, Political Issues and Party Allegiances among German Resettlers during the 2017 Bundestag Election Campaign." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46 (7), 1205.
[35] Post-Soviet migrants are convinced that they integrate easier than other groups because they share Christianity and mentality with the German population.

to AfD should be a point of concern for the Bundestag because it indicates that the desire for closeness with Russia now outweighs gratitude for their life in Germany.

Russian-Germans are easier for Putin to target because they are overlooked by mainstream society, and therefore long for a sense of inclusion that Moscow can provide. However, this presents a new paradoxical challenge for the Kremlin, namely the integration dilemma. The influence that a diaspora has in their new home relies on their ability to meld into the host society. A resettler who has successfully integrated into their neighborhood and job will earn a higher degree of trust. A German citizen is more likely to have a meaningful conversation with an assimilated person versus someone who only speaks Russian. Therefore, the deeper that immigrants embed themselves into society, the more opportunity they will have to shift German public opinion. With that said, groups alienated from society are more susceptible to Russian influence. The further that individuals are ostracized from the mainstream citizenry, the stronger the likelihood that they will resort to Moscow for a sense of inclusion.[36] This creates a difficult equilibrium for the Kremlin to maintain: they need their diaspora to integrate into Germany to gain influence, but remain isolated enough to distrust it. There is a fine line between these two hemispheres, and I argue that the Russian government has found it, exemplified by the events I describe in Chapter III. Russian-Germans are receptive to the Kremlin's messaging, but powerful enough to spur social unrest. This signals that *Aussiedler* have reached a functional degree of integration where they can sway German discourse, but still prioritize their Motherland.[37]

[36] Studies have found that social exclusion is the most detrimental thing for the human psyche.
[37] I don't credit this success to the Kremlin. I believe that they just happened to hit the sweet spot in the degree of integration that their diaspora achieved.

Russkii Mir

"Borders create unnecessary obstacles for the peoples of the Russian World."

- Patriarch Kirill of Moscow

Putin is no social justice warrior. He is not interested in the ethnic struggle of Russian-Germans, but rather the leverage that the label gives him. The Kremlin uses Russian diasporas to justify their intrusions abroad, and resettlers in Germany are no exception, regardless of any efforts to shed their Soviet background. This soft power initiative is known as *russkii mir*, referring to one united Russian World. The founding principals of the common identity are the Russian Orthodox church, shared language, and loyalty to the monarchs.[38] Citizens at home and abroad are reconciled with one another through their descendance from the holy Rus and consequential shared destiny of being Russian. Their modern world is born from the spiritual ashes of the pre-Soviet past and reconnects them with their heritage, meaning that culture and religion is oriented towards Moscow.[39] In return, the capital serves as a savior for all citizens, including those scattered in other countries. There are 25-30 million Russian compatriots abroad (the second-largest diaspora, following the Chinese), which affords Putin a long reach into foreign affairs under the premise of protecting his vulnerable people.[40] This includes stepping into Germany's affairs on behalf of the Russian-German diaspora.

[38] Zabirko, Oleksandr. 2023. "Russkij mir | Russland." Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.
[39] Laruelle, Marlene. 2015. *The "Russian World" | Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Global Interests, 6.
[40] Suslov, Mikhail. " 'Russian World': Russia's Policy towards its Diaspora", *Russie.Nei.Visions* No. 103, Ifri, July 2017, 1.

Russkii mir is an elastic concept that the Kremlin applies retroactively to support their geopolitical ambitions. They fail to list concrete qualifications for membership in the Russian sphere and insist on the fluidity of the term. There are lists of discrepancies in Moscow's statements because they struggle to find a definition that doesn't restrict their power. Ideally, the Kremlin would project an army of tens of millions across the world, but that risks creating a chaotic alternative Russia that spirals out of their control.[41] The Soviet legacy, Russian language, and Russian ethnicity are all included in the framework, but create problems because the subject pool is so large. For example, the Kremlin shouldn't place too much emphasis on the language characteristic because it would allow anyone who learns Russian a claim to the shared destiny. Ethnicity alone can't be the sole guideline because it excludes people in post-Soviet countries that Putin might want to capitalize on. If Moscow mandates the possession of all three traits, *russkii mir* will shrink too much. The Kremlin's solution for preserving the selectivity about when (or when not) to invoke the term is to keep it flexible. Power isn't derived from the individual people themselves, but rather what their Russian tag permits Moscow to do. Putin leverages this to validate their overreach into Germany's affairs, which I explain through a case study in Chapter III.

The most blatant example of Moscow using *russkii mir* is their incursion into Ukraine to "protect Russians living there," but this doesn't mean that other countries have been spared. The Kremlin employs the ~5 million Russian speakers across Germany as their bridge into the Bundestag. The Russian-German diaspora serves as the cornerstone of Moscow's power and provides the Kremlin a direct channel to Europe's engine. News outlets like *Sputnik* and *Russia Today Deutschland* are tailored to their *Aussiedler* audience in Germany and keep them on a strict disinformation diet, feeding nonstop garbage about their host society and glorifying Russia

[41] Suslov, *"Russian World"*, 10.

as the holy land. The next chapter discusses this in further detail. Having a susceptible platform of citizens inside the borders of the EU's powerhouse is a significant competitive edge for Putin, and allows him to permeate the German populace with his own state news. Furthermore, around 5% of Germany's total population has a background in the Soviet Union and is therefore drafted into Moscow's loose terms of *russkii mir*.

Now, I must clarify that this dynamic doesn't mean that the Kremlin thinks favorably of the individuals themselves. Despite the Russian diasporas serving as Putin's political outposts, they are regarded as traitors for leaving the USSR in the first place. Resettlers are allies when they can be of service to Moscow, but tainted with betrayal. Nevertheless, this contempt isn't strong enough to hinder the Kremlin from instrumentalizing Russian-Germans as a landing pad for their initiatives across Europe. Resettler communities are key enablers of the Kremlin's foreign policy, and a valuable tool in establishing Russian authority in modern Germany.

Chapter III.

Active Measures

"*One way of looking at the impact of these activities is to think of drops of water falling on a stone: five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, one hour, one day, nothing happens, but five years, ten years, fifteen years – you've worn a hole in the stone.*"

- Dennis Kux, former head of the Active Measures Working Group, 1984

The Trojan Horse

On Sunday, January 17th, 2016, a woman appeared in tears on a Kremlin news source *Ersten Kanal* [Channel One] from Marzahn-Hellersdorf, an outskirt of Berlin. She claimed that her 13-year old Russian-German niece, Lisa, had been abducted from school by three refugees and raped and abused for hours. The following events spread like wildfire, and have since been known as the *Fall Lisa* [the Lisa Case]. The story was a lie; Lisa was scared to go home to angry parents after receiving a poor report card, so she made up an excuse explaining her disappearance. Her parents rushed her to the police station, where officers noticed that the events didn't add up. Lisa's family believed that the German cops were trying to dismiss her "rape" for political reasons.[42] Russian media outlets took the story and ran, using it as evidence for their narrative of a deteriorating European society and incompetent German police. This situation materialized organically, by which I mean that it was not orchestrated directly by the Russian disinformation machine, but they seized the opportunity to capitalize on it. Less than 24 hours after the initial police report, Russian-speaking communities organized protests against Merkel's

[42] This was less than a year after the hotly debated 2015 refugee crisis.

immigration policy. The call to action spread through private messaging apps and online platforms like *Odnoklassniki*, a network designed to help Russian-German immigrants stay friends.[43] Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs since 2004, personally weighed in and aired concerns about the wellbeing of Russian citizens abroad, referring to Lisa as "our [Russia's] girl."[44] His comments sparked further uproar. German police stations and politicians received scorching phone calls from the Russian-speaking community. There were over 10,000 anti-government demonstrations across Germany in solidarity with Lisa, and around 1,000 protests directly in front of the chancellor's office in Berlin. Officers regulating the mobs in Marzahn were screamed at, shoved, and spit on. Some protestors tried to move the crowd to the refugee camps to "seek proper order."[45]

This case revealed that Russian-Germans, previously overlooked in society, are a force to be reckoned with when properly mobilized. After the rape claim was officially disproven, former German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier expressed frustration at Lavrov's interference into their domestic affairs. Lavrov used Russia's duty to protect their citizens abroad to justify his overstep, stating that "Since the person in question is a Russian citizen, we have every right…to be informed of incidents involving Russian citizens, something that has not been done in a timely manner in this case…however, we were tipped off, not by the German officials, but by the Russian diaspora, and later by the family lawyer and Lisa's parents."[46] Lavrov failed to include that Lisa's family later stated that they felt the entire situation had been manipulated by Russian media.[47]

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[43] Schaubert, Medina. 2018. "Der "Fall Lisa."" *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, October 9, 2018.
[44] Riefer, Felix. 2024. "Russlands revisionistische Außenpolitik und der falsche Diasporadiskurs in Deutschland." *Forum für osteuropäische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte* 28.
[45] Schaubert, *Der Fall Lisa*.
[46] Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Service. 2016. "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions following talks with Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov of Turkmenistan, Ashkhabad, January 28, 2016." MFA Russia.
[47] Lough, *Germany's Russia Problem*, 227.

What the Lisa Case brought to light is a subset of the population otherwise neglected by the Bundestag, and a main character in this paper—namely, the sleeping dragon that is the Russian-German community which makes up 5% of Germany's entire population. Although the majority of resettlers prefer a quieter life in their tight-knit circles, they are effective influencers when prompted into action. The ethnic enclave produced tens of thousands of demonstrations and widespread social disruption over a false narrative; the potential reaction to an even worse story is a point of suspicion for the Bundestag. As the Lisa scandal demonstrated, the Kremlin is capable of causing public turmoil within Germany by a singular message to Russian-Germans. They offer Putin a convenient foothold in the population and act as a sponge, ingesting his chosen narratives. This chapter explores the various practical means through which Moscow targets this demographic, and other initiatives to win German sympathy. The Kremlin's capture of millions of people inside Germany undermines the Bundestag's jurisdiction over their own populace and destabilizes Europe.

Vladimir Putin

"I think it's the key to understanding Putin. We would have another Putin and another Russia without his time in East Germany."

- Boris Reitschuster, German biographer and journalist

The Russian Federation operates under a singular unchecked leader, Vladimir Putin. There is no contemporary government without him, meaning that his personal relationship to Germany is a necessary prerequisite to fully grasp the layers between the two countries. I believe that Russo-German diplomacy is more accurately described as interactions between Putin and Berlin. This is a quintessential example of personality politics: Russia's actions are driven by Putin's

own views rather than bureaucratic decisions. His individual self is highly relevant to the question of how Moscow and Berlin interact with one another, because the Kremlin's direction is determined exclusively by him, unrestricted by internal political institutions. On the other hand, the Bundestag is anchored by the burden of democracy. Therefore, I find that the following assessment of Putin himself is essential to my analysis of Kremlin-Bundestag relations. It is no coincidence that *Deutschland* is uniquely targeted by Putin's agencies compared to other European countries, because he has unsettled personal grievances with them. Germany has assumed various roles throughout his life: a utopian center of European fashionability, the theater in which the greatest Soviet failure took place, a breeding ground for personal and generational trauma, and an advantageous field through which his influence can permeate into the West.

Prior to the man who rules Russia, sat at the helm of the Federal Security Service (FSB), advised the Kremlin, served as the mayor of St. Petersburg, and plenty more, Putin was a KGB agent in Dresden, East Germany. He had been obsessed with the Soviet security service ever since watching a Lenin propaganda film in his early years, and even chose KGB agent busts for his childhood desk.[48] The world of espionage was Putin's mental escape from growing up in a traumatized environment—he was raised in the midst of St. Petersburg's (formerly Leningrad) recovery from losing one million people to WWII. His parents, an older couple in their 40s, had lost one son at birth and another to the German Siege. Despite their losses and weak health, society considered the family lucky for having survived, not to mention their relatively large in a communal apartment. Vladimir was short and scrawny, which are tough circumstances to flourish under in a culture that demands strength in exchange for respect. Girls thought he was shy. He took up judo, the Japanese martial art, because the sport is based on exploiting your partner's weaknesses instead of raw physical power. It's fair to say that Putin took this skill and

[48] ZDF. 2015. "Mensch Putin! Die Geheimnisse des russischen Präsidenten." Documentary.

applied it to arenas beyond the dojo mat. Nowadays, the FSB uses judo studios in Germany to recruit locals to work for them, which I elaborate on later in the chapter. This is a clear example of state tactics mirroring Putin's personal experiences.

Young Putin experienced a pivotal life moment as one of the few KGB officers stationed at the Dresden headquarters during the fall and winter mobs of 1989. On December 5, 1989, large waves of protesters stormed the Stasi building and then turned towards the KGB base. Putin saw the possibility of being overrun as a serious threat; they were sitting on a plethora of classified files on Germans, which the citizens were strictly banned from accessing. He destroyed stacks of documents while desperately radioing for Moscow to send in local backup—a plea that was ignored by Gorbachev. Putin recalled that "I personally burned a huge amount of material, we burned so much stuff that the furnace burst."[49] German eyewitnesses and former KGB colleagues recall Putin walking solo outside and instructing the crowd to leave, threatening that he had weapons and was authorized to protect the property (this was a lie, Moscow had not responded).[50] Fortunately for him, the crowd was convinced enough to be deterred from storming the headquarters. However, the scare made the collapse of the Soviet Union deeply personal to Putin, even a direct attack. He was abandoned, threatened, and outnumbered.

Moscow's silence, leaving their station helpless, was a slap in the face. Yet the events also instilled a sense of authority and his first taste of power. This was the earliest notable instance of Putin successfully manipulating a high-stakes situation—the dispersion of the German crowd showed him that he could exert his will on people without military force. Moscow was absent, his few colleagues were inside: Putin stood alone against an angry mob of

[49] Bowlby, Chris. 2015. "Vladimir Putin's formative German years." *BBC*, March 27, 2015.
[50] ZDF, *Mensch Putin!*.

East Germans, and won. He realized that confidence and strategic wording could move people, despite lacking weapons. The simultaneity of jarring feelings of paralyzing fear and invincibility in Dresden deeply impacted his psyche, and cemented Germany as a place of personal relevance to him. This is important because Putin has an unsettled score with the Bundestag, which affects how he approaches modern diplomacy with them.

Putin's affinity for *Deutschland* helped establish his early professional career. According to both Stasi and KGB extensive dossiers on German and Russian officers, Putin was the perfect candidate for intelligence work. His near-perfect language skills made him talented at recruiting Germans to spy for Russia. The culture embedded itself beyond his professional life—a former colleague recalls Putin's two young daughters speaking German around the house, instead of Russian as one would expect.[51] He would reportedly spend hours a week browsing advertisement magazines to keep up with current Western fashions.[52] Another indulgence was German beer, which the frequent consumption of caused a decline in marital and personal health.[53] His return to Leningrad was a harsh adjustment: Putin biographer Masha Gessen said that "There's a strong sense that he was serving his country and had nothing to show for it."[54] The transition from European afternoons filled with catalogues and beverages to the streets of the economically distraught post-mortem USSR made him disillusioned with the Russian regime. Since then, Putin has consistently declared the breakup of the Soviet Union as the "greatest geopolitical disaster of the century."[55] This statement implies that the collapse of the USSR was worse than both WWI and WWII. Additionally, he feels that "the greatest criminals in our history were those weaklings

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[51] ZDF, *Mensch Putin!*.
[52] Bowlby, *Putin's formative German years*.
[53] ZDF, *Mensch Putin!*.
[54] Upon being sent back to Russia, Putin's gift for four years of service in Germany was a 20-year-old washing machine.
[55] The Kremlin. 2005. "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation." President of Russia Transcripts.

who threw the power on the floor — [Tsar] Nicholas II and [Mikhail] Gorbachev — who allowed the power to be picked up by the hysterics and the madmen."[56] Putin's deep-seeded resentment towards Gorbachev, the man who refused to send tanks to secure his KGB station, was caused by the events in Dresden. Furthermore, it planted a persistent grudge against Germany.

Explaining Putin's early rise to power is relevant to modern Russian-German relations because he used the same strategies to deal with domestic adversaries in the late 1990s as foreign counterparts today. Putin has told the world many times who he is: the Leningrad street teaching, "if a fight is inevitable, you have to throw the first punch," explains his mentality throughout the period from his exit in Germany to his current position as long-term President of Russia. After quitting the spy service, Putin made new elite connections while maintaining relationships with old KGB contacts and landed a position as an advisor to the Kremlin. He was quick to assert power over opposition.[57] In 1998, Putin became the head of the FSB, the successor of the KGB. He secured a stunning 90% approval rating after presenting himself as a hard liner against Chechen separatists allegedly responsible for the 1999 terrorist attacks in Moscow, which killed hundreds of Russians. However, his FSB failed to provide evidence that these guerillas were actually responsible, and there are widespread accusations that Putin's domestic security service organized it themselves as a staged precursor to invade Chechnya.[58] The Kremlin's version of the National Security Agency, the FAPSI, raised alarm bells about the FSB's involvement and planned to permanently eliminate Putin, a plot that he dodged. If these charges are true, it means Putin orchestrated an attack on hundreds of his own citizens to create an opportunity to win

[56] The Week Staff. 2018. "The making of Vladimir Putin." *The Week*, April 15, 2018.
[57] Boris Berezovsky, an oligarch who played an influential role in bringing him into the elite fold, fled to London and died under mysterious circumstances after the two clashed over their visions of future Russia.
[58] Knysh, Alexander D. Russia's Responses to Acts of Terrorism. 2002, 1.

domestic approval points and the political leeway to take Chechnya by force. The FAPSI was dissolved by President Putin in 2003, erasing any case and evidence against him.

Putin used equally unconventional measures to topple the few individuals left above him on the ladder. In 1999, Russia's prosecutor general responsible for anti-corruption efforts, Yuri Skuratov, was exposed on video for having affairs with two prostitutes. Skuratov denied that the recording was him; Putin insisted it was, and that criminals paid for the raunchy party.[59] Boris Yeltsin, Russia's president at the time, demanded Skuratov's resignation, which further built Putin's credibility and strengthened his established popularity from the Chechyan War. Yeltsin's own political tenure was approaching expiration, and on the last day of the 20th century, he resigned and passed the presidential torch to Putin in exchange for complete immunity from any criminal prosecution for corruption. Many German politicians saw Vladimir as a German-speaking and sympathetic Russian leader, and celebrated his election. Ultimately, the path to presidency was paved by cleverness, and the willingness to prioritize power over everything. Putin's former advisor, Gleb Pavlovsky, described him as a "quick learner" and "talented actor."[60] His former KGB colleagues nicknamed him the "moth" because he was quiet but perceptive, slowly digesting everything and always ready to pounce.[61] Putin's strength comes from his ability to read people and leverage their flaws, a political strategy that most representatives in the Bundestag do not reciprocate. He secured power by playing the individuals inside the system, rather than through the democratic structure itself. Putin's approach to diplomacy with Germany mirrors such tactics.

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[59] *BBC News*. 1999. "Europe | Russian prosecutor in sex video scandal." March 19, 1999.
[60] Rachman, Gideon. 2022. "Understanding Vladimir Putin, the man who fooled the world." *The Guardian*, April 9, 2022.
[61] ZDF, *Mensch Putin!*

After years of separation, Putin and his wife Lyudmila Shkrebneva divorced in 2013.[62] She described him as a workaholic and uncommunicative, despite being highly affectionate towards their children. Putin rarely speaks about his personal life, but is rumored to have fathered other children with multiple affairs in addition to his two eldest daughters, Maria and Katerina, who also have unique ties to Germany. After moving to Moscow in 1996, the girls attended a German-speaking school until Putin became president, which preserved their linguistic skills originally learned in Dresden. Recently, Katerina had a child with the Director of the Bavarian State Ballet, Igor Zelensky. Their relationship was exposed in 2022 after an investigation tracked Katerina's 50+ secret flights between Moscow and Munich, complete with Putin's presidential secret service in tow.[63] It is unconfirmed whether Putin's granddaughter holds German citizenship, but there is a direct biological connection to Germany at the very least. Having the Director of the Bavarian State Ballet in the family tree also supports his cultural influence in the German state.

Putin demonstrates a neurotic and paranoid pattern of thinking, which becomes problematic for German politicians because it means that he enters negotiations assuming that the other parties are out to get him, making cooperation difficult. Putin has faced assassination threats since the 90s. He travels with his own cook out of fear of being poisoned. The ironclad loyalty of his personal bodyguards is bought through top government positions, lucrative rewards, and massive properties.[64] During a virtual meeting with former CIA Director William (Bill) Burns, Putin unpromptedly gazed out the window and stated that his spies reported an American warship on the Black Sea capable of killing him within minutes. This suggests a man

[62] The Week Staff, *The making of Putin*.
[63] Mark, Michelle. 2024. "Vladimir Putin's Children: Names, Ages, Why He Keeps Them Secret." *Business Insider*, November 29, 2024.
[64] His security personnel also play on his ice hockey team in his private rink embedded in the hillside of his Sochi residence, a massive facility on the Black Sea valued at over one billion dollars. Despite playing on a team with elite bodyguards, Putin is the star. He inevitably scores several goals and his team always wins.

who is deeply paranoid and constantly thinking about enemies. Burns was later asked to evaluate Putin's mental state, and assessed that years of "stewing at a combustible combination of grievance and ambition" had hardened him.[65] Because Russia's policy is dictated by his personality alone, the Bundestag needs to be aware of this increase in neuroticism.

The currently 73-year old Putin fears aging and the declination of strength. According to Western intelligence services, he has undergone a number of cosmetic surgeries to maintain a youthful look, including botox, an eye lift, cheek filler, and a full face lift in 2010.[66] The reasons for these procedures are deeper than cosmetic appeal: he is terrified of seeming weak, and must therefore keep up his sharp appearance. Putin is neurotic about health, and his everyday routine includes a swim, a hot and cold bath, and a workout. He loves to take his shirt off and display his physical fitness.[67] This ritual has presumably changed since the full-time war began. Putin's pristine health has shown recent cracks: Burns described his face as extremely puffy in their meeting in fall 2021, a sign of steroid use.[68] It's probable that Putin is relying on drugs to keep himself intact, and the escalation of Russia's aggression indicates that he knows his window of opportunity to cement his legacy is closing. I discuss this more in my conclusion section.

Putin is terrified of losing authority, a trauma stemming from witnessing the near-overthrow of his KGB station in Dresden. German biographer Boris Reitschuster argued that "now when you have these crowds in Kiev in 2004, in Moscow in 2011 or in Kiev in 2013 and 2014, I think he remembers this time in Dresden, and all these old fears come up inside him."[69] The collapse of Russian power in Germany deeply rattled Putin, and he is determined not

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[65] McCloskey, David, and David Corera. 2025. *The Rest Is Classified: Putin's War, The Secret Plot to Invade Ukraine, Episode 1*, Podcast. N.p.: Goalhanger.
[66] ZDF, *Mensch Putin!*
[67] ZDF, *Mensch Putin!*
[68] This meeting was intended to discourage Putin from attacking Ukraine—advice he did not heed. Burns also credits Putin for his grey hair.
[69] Bowlby, *Putin's formative German years*.

to repeat that mistake. During the 2020 covid lockdown, Vladimir spent his time in isolation writing a 5,000 word essay titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." This paper is hugely consequential, as it inspired his invasion of Ukraine two years later in an attempt to be remembered as the man who reunited Great Russia. Putin is desperate to immortalize his power: he idolizes Peter the Great, who grew the empire through expansionist wars in the 18th century.[70] As Chapter I recounts, Peter himself drew inspiration from Europe; he modernized the Russian empire after seeing the trends in Europe, modeled St. Petersburg after German cities, and even had a ten year affair with a German woman.[71] Similar to how Peter was exalted, Putin wants to eternalize himself. He presents himself as the man who will rescue Russians, abandoned in the fall of the Soviet Union, from the clutches of the evil West and "Gayropa," which includes saving resettlers in Germany.

Putin rules with an iron fist and capitalizes on his professional KGB psychology training to this day. In his own words, "There is no such thing as a former KGB man."[72] Bill Burns characterized him as "the ultimate apostle of payback."[73] For example, Sergei Skripal was an agent in the military intelligence branch *Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie* (GRU) who defected to work as a double-agent for British intelligence, MI6. He was caught and sentenced to 13 years in prison, but sent back to England in 2010 under a prisoner exchange. His son died in 2017 from unknown circumstances while visiting St. Petersburg, and his older brother died mysteriously within two years thereafter. In 2018, Russian-hired assassins in the UK poisoned both Skripal and his adult daughter. Despite almost a decade having passed, Putin did not forget

[70] Putin draws directly on the tsar's historical conquests to justify his modern occupation, stating that "You might think he [Peter the Great] was fighting with Sweden [referring to the Northern Wars], seizing their lands…but he seized nothing; he reclaimed it! It seems it has fallen to us [Russia], too, to reclaim [Ukraine] and strengthen."
[71] Miate, Liana, and Oscar Browning. 2023. "Peter the Great." World History Encyclopedia.
[72] The Week Staff, *The making of Putin*.
[73] McCloskey and Corera, *TRIC Podcast: Putin's War.*

Skripal's betrayal and simply waited to exact his revenge. This is one of many cases of him settling old scores.

Putin is equally cunning while dealing with his foreign counterparts; Hillary Clinton was another victim of his vindictiveness. Her public support for Russia's 2012 demonstrations against Putin's return to presidency allegedly confirmed his decision to interfere with the 2016 American election in Donald Trump's favor.[74] Putin applies minor psychological tricks to undermine others; he publicly scolds advisors and journalists, sits at the head of every table, and runs intentionally late to meetings. He allowed German Chancellor Angela Merkel to wait on him for hours, and even kept Queen Elizabeth waiting for 30 minutes.[75] Putin knows that the head of the British monarchy outranks him, but deliberately engineers a sense of superiority. These are aged yet effective KGB tactics which he implements in major diplomatic situations. The new tricks are the same as the old tricks. The most notorious case of this behavior was towards the former head of Germany herself. In 2006, Merkel requested that Putin refrain from bringing pets to their meeting, as he was known to do, so he gifted her a stuffed animal and assured her that it doesn't bite. The comment itself mocked her fears and undermined her status in front of staff. During another meeting less than a year later, Putin unleashed his large black labrador, Koni, on Merkel in front of photographers. I have inserted a picture of the incident to the left. She was visibly disturbed and uncomfortable, but Putin seemed to enjoy the situation.[76]



[74] Rachman, *Understanding Putin.*
[75] ZDF, *Mensch Putin!*
[76] Trevelyan, Mark, and Tomasz Janowski. 2024. "Putin denies he tried to frighten Merkel with dog Koni." *Reuters*, November 28, 2024.

Afterwards, Putin explained to the press, “Frankly - I've already told Merkel, I didn't know she was afraid of dogs. If I'd known, I would never have done it. On the contrary I wanted to create a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere.”[77] Despite the unconvincing statement, he achieved the goal of rattling and humiliating Merkel before their meeting. A picture is worth a thousand words, and the visual image of a tense Merkel beside a relaxed Putin signals that he is in charge of the situation, regardless of their respective political, economic, or geopolitical power.

Putin might lack a concrete long-term policy strategy, but still strong-arms every room he walks into. He does his homework on people and is sharply calculated. Even a brief analysis of Putin’s personality profile shows that forgiveness for his trauma in Germany on December 5, 1985, was unrealistic. Witnessing Russia lose power in Germany has fueled his mission to restore Moscow’s status in the decades since. The ultimate apostle of payback will not allow himself to experience a loss of influence in Germany twice in one lifetime.

A Delicate Politicization of Memory

“It’s unbelievable but true. We are again being threatened by German Leopard tanks.”

- Vladimir Putin, 2023

Up until the shock of Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Bundestag was living with their teeth clenched, understanding that relations with Russia were deteriorating but continuing to accept the status quo. That said, is it possible for states to ever truly be on the same page if they operate on different principles of reality? Successful cooperation becomes even more difficult when it’s between two states with entirely incompatible schemes of decision-making. Unfortunately for the *Russlanddeutsche*, this describes their Motherland and Fatherland, who

[77] Trevelyan and Janowski, *Putin denies frightening Merkel*.

understand the world very differently. Russia operates in a consequentialist framework, defined by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as "the view that normative properties depend only on consequences."[78] This mindset lacks a moral dimension and holds the Machiavellian belief that the end justifies the means. For example, a consequentialist would see murder as the simplest solution to a troublesome person because it accomplishes the goal of erasing the problem.[79] Germany stands on the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum and assumes a deontological understanding of reality, described as "one of those kinds of normative theories regarding which choices are morally required, forbidden, or permitted."[80] Morality factors heavily into their decisions, because they are nervous of repeating past mistakes. While this is an ethically admirable way of thinking, it does not prepare the Bundestag to adequately deal with consequentialist Russia. Since Putin has come to power, Berlin has waited for a change in his moral behavior that will never come and continuously cut Kremlin–favorable deals in the meantime. Putin doesn't operate based on German rationality, which politicians have struggled to level with. The former KGB agent plays a completely different game, dictated by courtyard rules, which the Bundestag's policymakers have failed to understand for a long time. Despite Germany being the world's third-largest economy, voice of reason throughout the European Union's crises, and the unspoken leader of the European continent, they have demonstrated difficulty to soberly approach policy with Russia.

Putin has mastered the exploitation of Berlin's achilles heel, namely their history. The horrific behavior of Hitler's Nazi Germany left a chasm of generational trauma that is still tangible today. Patriotism is something to be weary of.[81] American schoolchildren learn history

[78] Sinnott, Walter. 2003. "Consequentialism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
[79] Putin has killed off individuals who challenge his regime with regularity.
[80] Alexander, Larry, and Michael Moore. 2007. "Deontological Ethics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
[81] Singing the national anthem before a sports game, such as Americans do, would be considered inappropriate.

to gain knowledge and pride about their heritage; German students are confronted with their ancestor's actions as a grave warning of the terror that their country inflicted.[82] This collective sense of guilt has led to a lack of agency. In the past, many members of the Bundestag avoided controversial action because they distrust themselves and second guess their own intentions. When faced with a tough decision, the White House probably asks *will this expand American power and benefit our interests*? Overlooking slavery, Americans have been taught to assume by default that they are the good guys. Decision-making does not trigger a morality crisis—Germans do not have the luxury of such emotional security.[83] The Bundestag weighs the question of *will I have been morally correct, when the world judges us in fifty years*? The Kremlin's process contrasts starkly in comparison: *will this increase my odds of today's survival*? Germany is ruled by fear of themselves; Russia does not evaluate on the basis of such ethical concerns. This misalignment in thought process has impaired Germany's ability to decisively negotiate with Putin for nearly three decades now. Despite the obvious deterioration of relations between Russia and the West, German politicians struggled to accept the problem that Russia was becoming; they chose blissful ignorance and continued to opt for unfruitful diplomacy.

I have my choice of cases to exemplify how Germany has fumbled Russia policy, but will highlight when Putin leveraged their dove–ness to escape punishment for his 2014 annexation of Crimea. The Minsk I and Minsk II agreements were a series of negotiations meant to resolve Russia's occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine. These plans failed, and have since been widely regarded as a demonstration of Western capitulation to Russia. Normally, the United States would assume the responsibility of brokering such high-stakes mediations, but

[82] Even today's youth, over two generations removed from their Nazi relatives, feel a paralyzing sense of shame about their country's history; my German friends and peers have attested so in our personal conversations.
[83] Techau, Jan. 2019. "No Trust In Self, No Money For Defense." *The American Interest* 15 (3).

the Russian president insisted that Germany lead the Minsk II talks.[84] Putin preferred Bundeskanzlerin Merkel to President Obama because he believed she would be softer and easier to manipulate. Allowing Russia, a directly involved war party, to appoint the panel of judges was Germany's first mistake—since when do prisoners get to choose their parole officer? Permitting Putin to name Merkel as the mediator gave him an advantage before talks even began because they were conducted on his personal conditions. Their next error was letting Russia enter discussions as a "worried neighbor" of Ukraine, and not as an antagonist. I have failed to find another historical example where a conflict negotiation between two states treats one of those parties as a concerned onlooker, and not as a direct perpetrator.[85] This was Merkel's opportunity to create an even playing field for both Putin and Poroshenko, the Ukrainian president at the time. However, she yielded to the Kremlin's declaration of innocence and enabled them to shirk their own trial. The final agreement document does not even mention Russia by name, displaying how Putin outmaneuvered accountability through German hesitancy.[86] Minsk II might not have failed so drastically if Germany had asserted more authority as chief mediator, yet they relented the showrunning to Putin. Germany's Russia policy in the 21st century is characterized by a repetition of the same process and expecting a different outcome in behavior from the Kremlin. This example shows how strong-arming Berlin is Moscow's means to dodge geopolitical consequences for their actions across the Eurasian continent.

Another asymmetry between Russia and Germany are their respective time horizons, referring to the timeframe that each party plans for. There is no overlap—Germany's time

[84] The United States was not exactly jumping at the opportunity to get involved. In 2014, the Obama administration was focused on islamic militias in the Middle East rather than Eastern Europe. Plus, Germany was still irritated with them after Edward Snowden leaked that the NSA had been spying on Merkel.
[85] I stand corrected: Vietnam was technically treated as a concerned regional player in the official UN resolutions regarding Cambodia's Khmer Rouge government, despite their belligerent involvement in the decades-long conflict.
[86] Allan, Duncan. 2020. "The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine | The Minsk-2 agreement." Chatham House, 11.

horizon is too long, and Russia's too short. Berlin's tunnel vision regarding the historical moral equation blinds them to short-term impacts of their policy.[87] In contrast, the Russian system is set up so that leaders ignore long-term opportunities in favor of short-term gains. Putin is a tactician, not a strategist. He uses Germany's delicate consideration of the past and future to his advantage and steers diplomacy by politicizing their memory.

Russia leveraged Germany's desperation for an iron moral compass to solidify their foundation of soft-power. Pro-Kremlin initiatives meant to cultivate Germany as a Russia-friendly asset in the EU are welcomed throughout the *Bundesländer* under the rationale that Berlin must repair post-WWII relations.[88] Putin's narratives flow through dozens of foundations across Germany.

The German-Russian Youth Exchange Foundation, established 2005, promotes contact among youth ranging from school children to young politicians. The Russian House of Science and Culture serves as the base for Russian state agency *Rossotrudnichestvo*—-their mission is to help Russians in Germany preserve their language, culture, and traditions, and "promote the interests of Russians living abroad."[89] This center is spearheaded by a council in Berlin in addition to societies in 14 out of Germany's 16 federal states. Official *Russkiy Mir* centers work with local churches to promote Russian culture and strongly encourage Russian-speakers to serve their Motherland. Other foundations are more discreet about their Kremlin ties: despite its name, the European Academy of Natural Sciences in Hanover was surprisingly founded and financed by Russia. The West-East Institute in Berlin has links to the Russian Orthodox Church. The 2014–established Tolstoi Institute was supposed to promote German-Russian friendship, yet is

[87] The clearest example of this is the 2015 refugee crisis. Merkel made the morally correct decision to welcome nearly one million people into safety, but failed to plan for this on a day-to-day basis. Logistical details about food and shelter have been a challenge ever since.
[88] Mankoff, Jeffrey. *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2020. 5.
[89] Lough, *Germany's Russia Problem*, 219.

connected to extremist forces working for the Kremlin. Putin's personal brainchild, the Moscow-based Academy of Security, Defense, and Public Order, was founded to unite Russian security organizations, prepare intelligence reports, and establish contacts abroad. They quickly acquired a German affiliate and infiltrated business circles, which received enthusiastic support from the FSB and other Russian enforcement agencies.[90] And the list goes on. The improvement of German-Russian relations is a moot point to these "diplomatic initiatives," which are solely supposed to gain soft power. Despite this, Berlin invested in the cultural exchange until the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[91] Germany's unwillingness to accept that their relationship with Russia is upside down does not follow their usual behavior as a logical and forward-thinking state. The Bundestag has used the magnitude of trade between the two states to excuse their leniency towards the Kremlin.

There is a legitimate interdependence between Germany and Russia in the energy sector, but even this is adversarial. Until the Russia-Ukraine war fully broke out, positive relations with the Kremlin were seen as crucial due to their supplyage of oil and gas, both critical components for Germany's automobile industry. On the flip side, Germany was Russia's largest customer. They created joint ventures Nord Stream I and II to streamline the delivery route and optimize the purchase of Russian gas.[92] In 2021, Nord Stream I single-handedly supplied ⅔ of Germany's energy imports—33 billion cubic meters of natural gas from June to December alone.[93] The value in a Russian-German partnership is clear to both parties, yet they understand their roles in that differently. Germany perceived Nord Stream I and II as means to logically secure resources and facilitate diplomacy between two equal parties. Energy interdependence would appease

[90] Lough, *Germany's Russia Problem*, 221.
[91] I mean this literally: The Petersburger Dialog, an annual conference which sparked interest from Putin himself, met from 2001-2019 (excluding 2014) on the German Foreign Office's dime.
[92] These also conveniently deepened Russian dominance over Germany's fuel market.
[93] "German natural gas imports from Russia monthly 2021-2024." 2025. Statista.

Putin through increased inclusion in the global community, and deter him from attacking the European Union. Russia, on the other hand, saw this codependency as immunity from European punishment. How could Germany possibly invoke consequences against the state who provides their energy? Both parties were bitterly mistaken: Putin went ahead and invaded Ukraine, but was immediately slapped with unprecedented punitive sanctions. Both the Bundestag and Kremlin regarded their energy partnership as a political tool, but misjudged the other's agenda that it served. This demonstrates how Russian-German diplomacy is inherently dysfunctional, even in its greatest success. Efforts by the Bundestag to land in Putin's good graces have been meaningless because they refuse to operate in Russia's consequentialist framework. Berlin lives in a higher standard of morality, but that is worthless to Putin, and doesn't offer protection from his active measures against them.

Information Overload

"Berlin's current 'elite' may be masochists, delighting in taking rough treatment and insults from the US, Ukraine, and even Poland. But Germans as a whole are, of course, less bizarre. By now two thirds are dissatisfied with the coalition in power. If their national misery has a face it is that of its leader, chancellor Friedrich Merz, an ex-BlackRock cadre who charmingly combines tone-deaf, offensive pep talks implying the nation consists of lazy lay-abouts with rants about Russia, drones, and, of course, the AfD, now also accused of being in cahoots with – drumroll – Moscow."

- Russia Today

I chose this opening quote from Russia Today (RT), one of Putin's prominent state-owned news outlets, complete with a *Russia Today Deutschland* branch catered towards resettlers.[94] The Kremlin weaponizes the information space and uses media as a primary tool to sow chaos in both Russia and Germany. Prior to the 2022 war, Russian news was censored but somewhat independent—now it is controlled entirely by the state. Channels falsely project free speech; for example, Meduza advertises a podcast called "Russia Underground," whose idea is to "speak to Russians who oppose the regime and the war, but who remain inside the country."[95] This is a clever way to identify dissidents, and also reinforce the facade of independent journalism. Meduza and The Moscow Times have been labeled as "foreign agents" and outlawed by the Russian state. Do not be disillusioned—they are all still run by the Kremlin. These media machines are keyed into modern trends and impressively emulate Western sources—Meduza goes as far as using a font identical to the New York Times and begins every newsletter with "*Howdy, folks*." The owners, oligarchs adjacent to the Kremlin, feed consumers state messaging under the guise of democratic platforms. All reports are tailored to the narrative of Putin's choosing; the only variance is the extent to which media outlets try to mask it. These channels are the primary news sources for Russian-Germans, which permeates German society from the inside and is difficult for Berlin to combat.

The Kremlin has an advantage due to the one-way flow of information and the difference in how each country regulates their news space. Russian-Germans enjoy Germany's genuinely free media environment that offers a spectrum of opinions, including Putin's state news. People inside Russia do not have such a privilege, and face the choice between unified messaging from

[94] Months of monitoring outlets revealed very distinct narratives regarding Germany and the broader West: the United States is losing its power competition against China, there is rampant political instability and unrest in the European Union, United Kingdom, and United States, Ukraine has a neo-Nazi problem, and Russia is of course decimating their little brother in the War.

[95] Rothrock, Kevin. 2025. "A new podcast from Howard Amos and Nina Berezner zeroes in on 'quiet resistance' in Russia," Meduza Email Newsletter. Meduza.

the state, or chaotic nonsense from the state. Russia's heavy censorship limits the possibility for a German counterattack because their media would be immediately blocked. Putin can reach audiences across Germany, which the Bundestag can't reciprocate across Russia. This modern accumulation of soft power through media was drawn from American success in penetrating the USSR through movies, music, news, and culture during the Cold War. Today, the Kremlin mimics these efforts through a massive disinformation complex controlled from the top down. Former letter writing campaigns have been replaced with troll factories and social media bots, but have the same structural bones. The nature of Russia's extensive propaganda model is accurately summarized by the characterization as a "firehose of falsehood."[96] Rapid, continuous, repetitive, and inconsistent messaging is effective at targeting particularly vulnerable groups across Europe, specifically Germany.

If Russian disinformation were a car, the infamous Internet Research Agency (IRA) would be its engine, responsible for churning out lies with assembly-line efficiency. The IRA opened their St. Petersburg doors in 2013 with the sole mission of hiring hundreds of employees to spread disinformation across the internet like wildfire.[97] The neatly organized conglomerate of trolls is ironically responsible for sowing confusion and bewilderment across the internet. Workers are assigned for twelve hours on the clock, twelve hours off, another twelve hours on, and then two days off.[98] This schedule mirrors that of a hospital, intentionally designed to operate 24/7 through the day and night. There are production quotas: a whistleblower detailed that she had two shifts to create a mandatory five political posts, ten nonpolitical posts, and 150-200

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[96] Paul, Christopher, and Miriam Matthews. *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*. RAND Corporation, 2016. 1.
[97] This was initiated by Yevgeny Prigozhin in the aftermath of anti-government protests in 2011. Prigozhin, Putin's "chef," was also chief of Wagner, a private military group. He grew too comfortable and staged a march on Moscow, resulting in his death via plane crash in 2023. This uprising is the closest Putin has come to being overthrown.
[98] Abrams, Steve. 2016. "Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin's Russia." *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 15 (1). 20.

comments. She was one of four hundred employees at the headquarters, excluding additional local and regional offices.[99] Based on the numbers from her testimony, I have created a table below to illustrate the stunning scale of this operation.

	24 hours	**One week**	**One month**
Political posts	2,000	14,000	60,000
Non-political posts	4,000	28,000	120,000
Comments	60,000 - 80,000	~ 490,000	~ 2,000,000 +

Stalin himself said that "quantity has a quality of its own," the sheer magnitude of output makes the IRA impactful. They have created the facade of a pro-Russia army—employees post under fake identities to build the illusion of thousands of pro-Kremlin supporters, not the same four hundred staffers. It is impossible for online users to decipher who is actually behind the other screen, making the trolls' job easy. For example, the IRA (allegedly) ramped up focus on the United States during the 2016 presidential election.[100] Hypothetically, one singular Russian troll can stage a vicious fight between a Republican and Democrat using two different accounts. This invokes feelings of fear in onlooking American citizens about the state of their politics.[101] Multiply this effect by the hundreds of IRA employees, and the danger becomes clear. Trolls build on each other's narratives and propagate one another's work, forming repetition that is hard to psychologically combat; if a person hears something often enough, they will eventually start

[99] Abrams, *Beyond Propaganda,* 20.
[100] Calamur, Krishnadev. 2018. "What Is the Internet Research Agency?" *The Atlantic*, February 16, 2018.
[101] If you take one lesson out of this thesis, please let it be this: do not argue about politics with strangers online. There is a significant likelihood that your opposition is a Russian bot. It is almost impossible to determine whether or not Amy from Kentucky is actually Svetlana from St. Petersburg.

to believe it. Russia's organized effort to pollute the internet poses an overlooked threat and yields sneakily significant weight in shifting public attitudes. This is one of the main tools used to prey on Russian-Germans.

In addition to the IRA's social media presence, there are a range of established Russian news sources deeply embedded in the resettlers' media landscape. The *Russlanddeutsche* community relies more on Russian than German channels—primarily *Russia Today Deutschland* (RT DE) and *Sputnik*.[102] RT DE is funded and controlled by the Kremlin, and an important instrument in the hybrid war for influence thanks to its four million monthly views. However, this is relatively little traction compared to a reputable German source—for example, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) amasses two million views a day.[103]

Russia prioritizes non-traditional channels: FAZ has more engagement on Twitter (known today as X), but RT has a larger presence on Facebook and Youtube as well as a network of influencers and politicians.[104] Subsidiaries that do not immediately show a connection to the Kremlin are much more valuable because they are perceived as more authentic; Redfish, Maffick Media, SNA Radio are some examples of sophisticated attempts to mask Russian affiliation.[105] A portion of Germany's outlets were quick to blame Ukraine and separatists for the failure of Minsk II, yet failed to disclose the Russian support they received.[106] Readers had no idea that they were consuming Kremlin-controlled narratives, and likely took the reports at higher value because the reports came from what appeared to be a legitimately German source. Another example of this happened in 2020, when a former-Stasi Eastern German couple bought the

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[102] Mankoff, *With Friends Like These*, 5.
[103] *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*. 2025. "Analyse: Die russische Propaganda wirkt | Russland-Analysen | bpb.de." June 16, 2025.
[104] Officially, Germany has put a stop to RT Deutsch and Sputnik through sanctions. They have continued with their disinformation campaign regardless.
[105] Mankoff, *With Friends Like These,* 7.
[106] Kobzar, Svitlana. 2016. "Reporting on the Minsk II Agreement: the Effect of Russian Narratives in French and German Media," Policy brief. In *Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel*. CORE. 3.

Berliner Zeitung to stream stories directly from China's *Xinhua* and Russia's *TASS*, both state-run propaganda agencies.[107] Why would subscribers ever suspect that a Berlin newspaper was feeding them Xinhua messaging? Furthermore, the couple's biographical background as Stasi members undoubtedly primed them to work for the Kremlin in projects like this. This illustrates how Russia's historical relationship with Germany has positioned them favorably to continue to control the narrative in Russian-German communities today.

The Russian-German community is by nature a highly susceptible target for disinformation. Narratives spread by the Kremlin are mainly adopted by individuals estranged from the political system, like supporters of radical populist groups.[108] This follows the "an enemy of my enemy is my friend" logic—the more someone distrusts the German government, the more likely they are to agree with Russia's disinformation. Research in 2024 showed that the biggest indicators for support for Putin are political trust, conspiracy mentality, and alienation from public discourse.[109] These results are concerning because the traits almost perfectly describe the ostracized *Spätaussiedler* community, isolated from Germany's broader society. The more reclusive that Russian-Germans become, the higher the risk of them believing fake news.

Russia makes it a point to contact the diaspora community before German news outlets can reach them.[110] First impressions and repetition are powerful because people are psychologically inclined to accepting information that aligns with their preconceived notion of the truth. Putin's outlets are skilled niche targeters and pick on younger respondents and Eastern Germans, whose backgrounds predisposition them to sympathize with Russia. A journal article

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[107] Mankoff, *With Friends Like These*, 28.
[108] Members of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) are the primary example of this. Putin has helped prop this party up in numerous ways that will be discussed later in this paper.
[109] Hoffeller, L., Steiner, N.D. Sympathies for Putin Within the German Public: A Consequence of Political Alienation?. *Polit Vierteljahresschr* 65, 679.
[110] The ability to break stories earlier than other channels is another reason for having the IRA work around the clock.

confirmed that "to help undermine the EU and US, Russian agencies appeal to conservative and populist right strains, left system-critics, religion-infused nationalism, fascists, and anti-fascists."[111] Alienated Russian-Germans who exist in their reclusive social networks and are estranged from the German public create the perfect cornerstone for these outlets. Therefore, a weak sense of inclusion among Russian speakers in Germany doesn't only create feelings of dejection, but also a significant threat to the country's security.

I should make clear that Russia's media machine produces both propaganda and disinformation. Traditional propaganda presents a prescribed view of the state, compelling the audience to believe all other countries are second-rate to them. It has a clear message: everything is terrible, but we are the exception. Disinformation is different in the sense that it lacks an explicit narrative. The goal is to present so much false information and outlandish stories that readers completely lose touch with the truth and trust nothing at all. The Kremlin engages in both of these strategies—consumers should be bewildered and confused at the world, but if they must believe someone then it needs to be Moscow.

The narratives that Russian news promotes are relatively straightforward: European states are spiraling into anarchy, whereas Russia maintains stability, tradition, Christian faith, and conservative values. Putin's media exacerbate existing insecurities in German society and present Russia as a fatherly alternative to the Western descent into chaos. Their goal is to coax people into accepting the Kremlin as a major power on their own terms, rather than forcing it upon them.[112] The messaging itself ranges from silly memes to serious, elaborate diplomatic

[111] Wood, Steve. 2019. "'Understanding' for Russia in Germany: international triangle meets domestic politics." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34 (6): 785. Notice how they appeal simultaneously to the far left and the far right. This shows that Russia's disinformation is opportunistic, not ideological.

[112] The media is also used to absolve Moscow from the court of public opinion: in 2019, Russian citizen Vadim Krasikova received training and support from the FSB before he was dispatched under a fake identity to assassinate political activist Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin's Tiergarten in broad daylight. Russian media declared the FSB-orchestrated murder as a gangland hit against Khangoshvili, the terrorist. This supports the projection that Russia is a stable, traditional state based on morality.

campaigns. Troll factories produce thousands of memes about "jackasses" from Ukraine, the immoral "Gayropa," and the impending downfall of the United States.[113] Russian bots intentionally target German cultural failings and pigeonholes Europe as a homosexual hub that is open to Islam and dangerous immigrants. This is a particularly touchy subject for Germany because their immigration policy has been highly debated ever since Merkel accepted over one million refugees in the 2015 crisis. A series of inflammatory events, including several terror attacks on beloved *Weihnachtsmärkte* [christmas markets], in the past decade have made the issue even more contentious. Thorniness surrounding immigration politics has surged everywhere, but particularly in Germany because of these events. I would argue that Putin capitalized on the sore subject of migrants for personal political gain long before Trump introduced this idea. The Kremlin's involvement in the Lisa Case, explained at the beginning of this chapter, was manufactured from refugee politics and *russkii mir*, and exemplifies Russia's media-driven influence in Germany.

The *Fall Lisa* rape story took shape naturally by Lisa lying on her own accord, but its immediate exploitment by the Russian regime reveals the characteristics of their media discourse. First, they leverage pre-existing societal strains to weave further distress—they don't have to create turmoil from scratch, and instead exacerbate ongoing issues. The German political scene, down to the local level, was already divided regarding how to approach the mass influx of refugees—Lisa's case provided a perfect opportunity for Russian media to trash their policy and spotlight how Germany is out of control. Second, they created a feedback loop between different sources to establish legitimacy and make the story more convincing. The Kremlin's outlets, local Russian-German platforms, and the Russian foreign ministry itself all expanded upon the other's

[113] Decker, Philip. 2021. "'"We Show What Is Concealed": Russian Soft Power in Germany." *Problems of Post-Communism* 68 (3: Comparing China and Vietnam): 222.

reporting, cited each other, and fleshed out the false narrative. Moreover, they recycled previous material: digital content used in the Lisa Case was taken directly from the IRA's activity during the 2016 American presidential election.[114] This shows how Russian media chooses nonstop repetition over any regard for the truth to capture their audience. Third, the Kremlin strategically invokes *russkij mir* to meddle in other country's domestic affairs. Lavrov publicly incited more rage and insecurity among Russian-Germans at a relatively minor diplomatic cost with Germany by using the excuse of needing to protect his citizen from a dangerous migrant-filled country.

The actions of the Kremlin during the Lisa scandal were applied for a larger purpose: testing the loyalty of Russian-Germans. Moscow wanted to measure the aptitude of their diaspora and estimate how many people would protest on the Bundestag's lawn, versus defending German institutions. Officials suspect that Russia chose the Lisa Case as a trial run to analyze their influence across Germany's networks ahead of meddling in the 2017 parliamentary elections.[115] Russia deploys media as a flexible weapon to infiltrate circles within Germany, which leads to real consequences if the communities choose to mobilize in response. The Lisa Case is one of many instances; in 2017, the Kremlin attempted create animosity between German forces deployed under NATO by claiming troops raped a Lithuanian schoolgirl.[116] They pollute the information space with identical false narratives whose reiteration makes the story compelling, despite how absurd the lies seem.

Instead of directly responding to the Kremlin's media, Berlin opts for a more low profile response and pushes counter-narratives highlighting German success based on facts. They only address disinformation in extreme scenarios, like the Lisa Case. This implies that the Bundestag

[114] Mankoff, *With Friends Like These*, 10.
[115] A German cybersecurity analysis found that 23% of tweets surrounding the 2017 Bundestag election came from bots.
[116] Mankoff, *With Friends Like These*, 31.

feels that Germany is stable enough to live with some level of false information, and acknowledging Russia's ridiculousness would empower the Kremlin further. However, the *Bundesamt für Justiz* [Department of Justice] did pass the *Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Rechtsdurchsetzung in sozialen Netzwerken* [bill to improve the law enforcement in social networks], mandating that social media platforms self-police junk content or face fines up to €50 million.[117] The German government is attempting to cleanse their media environment, but it is difficult to fully eradicate the Kremlin's presence from online platforms. Moscow's dominance over Russian-German media consumption and their ability to reach resettlers directly through these channels remain one of their most effective tools of controlling *Aussiedler* opinions.

Espionage

"There is no such thing as a former KGB man."

- Vladimir Putin, 2006

Once a KGB man, always a KGB man—intelligence agencies are popular means that Putin elects to deal with opposition. An estimated 80% of Russia's elite have ties to security services in the "neo-KGB" state that Putin has built by placing his *siloviki* [strongmen or "power guys"] in positions of influence.[118] The conglomerate of Russian intelligence and security agencies is characterized by the Greek mythological beast Hydra—for every plot foiled, more regrow in its place.[119] The Soviet era division of labor was relatively straightforward; the GRU was responsible for military intelligence and the KGB handled essentially everything else, ranging from foreign espionage to domestic security. This is much more convoluted now—there are

[117] "NetzDG - Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Rechtsdurchsetzung in sozialen Netzwerken." 2017. Gesetze im Internet.
[118] Abrams, *Beyond Propaganda*, 17.
[119] Putin favors the symbolism of a Hydra—for his birthday in 2014, he was gifted an exhibition of him as Hercules slaying the "hydra of sanctions."

nearly a dozen agencies with overlapping roles and responsibilities, creating conflict between the departments.[120] The discombobulated system is by design: Putin wants to mitigate the threat of a singular service gaining enough popularity to usurp his throne. He has made the branches dependent on his approval.[121] Agencies who prove themselves useful are rewarded with cushy budgets and proximity to Putin. Because their survival is based on positive performance, operatives prioritize missions with quick results that can win them brownie points. They do not share valuable information with other branches to maximize their own credit. Lucky for Russia's adversaries, this lack of cooperation produces an inefficient system. It also means that agencies are driven to take bigger risks to impress their boss. They operate by three quotes:



1. "If the West loses, we gain."
2. "Russia is at risk."
3. "Better action than inaction."[122]

The traditional purpose of an intelligence agency is to gather sensitive information from other countries and recruit individuals to act in your interests. Operations should be covert so that the host country doesn't realize they have been influenced. Based on this covert nature, I will not

[120] Galeotti, Mark. *PUTIN'S HYDRA: INSIDE RUSSIA'S INTELLIGENCE SERVICES*. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016. 3.
[121] One way to measure the performance of each intelligence service is by observing the seating order of rare group portraits released by the Kremlin. The closer to Putin, the more favorable their agency has performed.
[122] Galeotti, *Putin's Hydra*, 5.

delve into an exact estimation of the Russian assets in Germany.[123] However, publicly available evidence shows that the Kremlin's intelligence and security services are indeed active in Germany. Large chunks of the population are naturally predispositioned for recruitment, including the five million Russian speakers, ostracized *Spätaussiedler* communities, and East Germans who enjoyed life under the USSR. Putin has increasingly relied on such minions to garner support after his full-scale invasion of Ukraine caused German public opinion on Russian to sour. I will list a few examples of unclassified cases of Russian espionage in Germany, but these are just the tip of the iceberg.

Pockets of Germans disagreed with their government's condemnation of Russia and wanted Berlin to stay friendly with Moscow for energy benefits and a break from dependence on the United States. Nevertheless, people were shocked to see pro-Russia vehicular demonstrations pop up all over the country in 2022. The city of Hannover saw 350 cars parade through, and 275 in Allgäu. The 700+ automobile train through Frankfurt would have eclipsed these both, had the majority not been blocked by police.[124] Thousands of people protested against German aid to Ukraine and "rampant Russophobia," while also chanting glory to their homeland.[125] Kremlin–financed foundations organized these demonstrations, but would have failed without Russian operatives on the ground to spark the flame.

A singular 2023 Reuters investigation profiled six individuals tasked with inciting pro-Russia movements across Germany. Their backgrounds ranged from business executive to former GRU officer. Wjatscheslaw Seewald, a man identified in this report, is specifically responsible for running "Der offizielle Putin Fanclub" [the official Putin fan club] on Telegram.

[123] Even Western intelligence's numbers are essentially an educated guess, because the agents are supposed to be undercover.
[124] Zollner, Sabina. 2022. "Autokorsos für Putin." *taz* (Berlin), April 10, 2022.
[125] Average German citizens were shocked, bewildered that their trusted neighbors held such opinions. This led to skepticism towards Russian-German communities. Russian-Germans increasingly had to explicitly condemn the invasion in order to prove themselves innocent.

This is one of at least 27 channels that consistently post pro-Kremlin messages in the German language to a combined base of 1.5 million subscribers.[126] This highlights how Russia uses assets to manufacture good will for themselves across Germany. Putin's people are deeply embedded in everyday life and can trigger broad movements that disturb society. Reports found that average Germans were unsettled by the magnitude of pro-Putin parades, and grew suspicious of their neighbors' opinions. This agitation was especially prominent in regards to Russian-Germans, who were suddenly expected to clarify their allegiance to Germany. In this sense, Putin's services were successful in exposing underlying support for the Kremlin while unnerving the general population. His agents of influence are better described as the gatekeepers of chaos.

Another aspect of Russian espionage activity in Germany that I find particularly intriguing is their means of recruitment—namely martial arts schools, "Systema." These clubs are linked to Russian military intelligence and have popped up in over thirty German cities.[127] The niche sports gatherings are used to retain police, army personnel, and extremist right-wing personalities that can be employed for public disturbances.[128] Men recruited from these studios are sent to Moscow under the pretense of advanced judo training—in reality, they are taught hand-to-hand combat and how to handle explosives/firearms before going back to Germany to await further orders.[129] Most of these recruits speak Russian and are German citizens; several have landed in the police ranks and *Bundeswehr*, the federal military. By no means does this technicality stop them from adopting a sense of Russian pride: when two fighters were detained by the *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* [Department for Constitution Protection] (BfV), Germany's domestic intelligence service, they boasted that "we are Russian officers and

[126] Nikolskaya, Polina, Mari Saito, Maria Tsvetkova, and Anton Zverev. 2023. "Pro-Putin operatives in Germany work to turn Berlin against Ukraine." *Reuters*, January 3, 2023.
[127] This does not mean that every student is a guerilla fighter in training.
[128] Lough, *Germany's Russia Problem*, 222.
[129] Schuhmann, Efim. 2016. "Putin's 'secret sleepers.'" *dw.com*, April 18, 2016.

demanded to be treated accordingly."[130] A German who considers himself a patriotic officer of Putin's army is a thorough recruit, and testifies to the Kremlin's success in the Systema operation. However, what interests me most is the choice of martial arts studios as their gateway, since judo clubs aren't always hubs for extremists and oddballs. The most plausible rationale traces back to Putin's personal background—recall that he thrived in martial arts as a kid thanks to the exploitation of weakness being more important than physical size. Once again, his personal biography is reflected through Russia's ongoing projects in Germany today.

Moscow's espionage is far more extensive than a few boots on the ground. Their sophisticated technology can intercept information from an office inside Russia. In 2024, RT published a discussion between German military officers about delivering missiles to Ukraine, a conversation they overheard because one participant joined the call on an unencrypted line.[131] Nevertheless, the network of agents they have established inside Germany is their most valuable resource. In 2023, a German military reserve officer was convicted of passing information to Russian intelligence for years; in 2024, prosecutors charged another officer for volunteering secrets to diplomats; in January 2026, a German-Ukrainian woman was arrested for using personal connections in the German defense industry to pass secrets for years; and the list goes on. Within a singular year, Moscow's agents were caught flying drones 446 times over American military bases to gather intelligence on NATO training programs, which I will expand further upon in the next chapter. Bavaria has an especially high number of connections, facilitated by the Russian Academy of Security, Defence, and Public Order. They have awarded over 75 medals for "services to Russia" to journalists, cops, and civil servants—among recipients is the CSU's

[130] Schuhmann, *Putin's 'secret sleepers'*.
[131] Benoit, Bertrand. 2024. "Germany Detains Two Dual German-Russian Nationals Over Latest Alleged Spy Plot." The Wall Street Journal.

deputy minister.[132] This leads me to introduce Putin's next instrument in his quest to compromise Germany the segment of the elite who work for Russia's interests. Moscow flips lower-class, standard citizens for petty sabotage and chaos, but focuses on higher-status individuals for larger strategic gain. The imminent threat to Germany is not rooted in the quantity of Russian assets, but the quality of who they are.

Capture of Elite

"Ich bin aber auch gegen die Dämonisierung Russlands als ewiger Feind…Russland, das ist nicht das Land der Barbaren, sondern ein Land mit einer großen Kultur und vielfältigen historischen Verbindungen zu Deutschland."

[I am also against the demonization of Russia as an eternal enemy…Russia is not a country of barbarians, but a country with a large culture and multifaceted historical ties to Germany.]

- Former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, 2026

Another liability to the Bundestag is the extensive network Russia has interwoven into the political elite. Influential individuals are Putin's ideal capture, because having compliant puppets eliminates the need to directly sabotage or attack the European Union. Russia-sympathizers execute the Kremlin's will through powerful positions across the private and public sectors. This pattern isn't new—Willy Brandt, chancellor from 1969 to 1974, resigned after his personal secretary, Günter Guillaume, was caught spying for the Soviet Union. Stasi, which employed Guillame among thousands of other Germans, planted the original seeds that blossomed into today's network. Citizens in the GDR were groomed in favor of Russia, and are even more susceptible to Moscow's influence if post-reunification life has treated them poorly and made

[132] Lough, *Germany's Russia Problem*, 221-222.

them jaded towards Germany.[133] The Kremlin has monitored these circles and waits to give high-potential individuals the tap on the shoulder. The AfD's keynote speaker at a Russian conference in 2017 was a former Stasi spy, showing how some of the same people who helped the Soviet Union govern Eastern Germany still enable modern influence.[134]

An explanation of every single *Russlandversteher* [Russian sympathizer], their reasons for defecting, and how their abdication benefited Putin is well beyond the limits of this paper. Instead, I will focus on the Kremlin's favoritism towards elite politicians who represent their interests—one could describe Russia as a very aggressive and determined lobbyist. A primary example happened in 2017, when the Kremlin evaded Germany's strict election financing laws to support Markus Frohnmaier, a 26-year old candidate for the Baden-Württemberg parliament. In a leaked message, a Russian operative urged Moscow to provide "media and material support" because he will "belong to us and be under our absolute control."[135] With foreign backing, Frohnmaier won the election and holds the seat to this day.

While in public office, Frohnmaier has organized pro-Kremlin demonstrations, critiqued European sanctions on Russia, recognized Crimea as Moscow's territory, and discredited German citizens' criticism of Putin, all in exchange for funding and appearances in Russia's media channels. Frohnmaier's close associates run other active measures: his staffer, Manuel Oschenreiter, hired a man for €1500 to firebomb a Hungarian center in Ukraine, trying to damage Ukrainian-Hungarian relations.[136] Despite the openness of these plots and Germans' condemnation over his closeness with the Kremlin, Frohnmaier has been in office for nearly ten years now, showing the Bundestag's inability to mitigate contaminated politicians. The capture

[133] There is still a substantial number of Germans who have mixed feelings about reunification and blame their economic misfortune on the FRG. The steadfast wealth gap between East and West has made them feel like second-class citizens.
[134] Wood, *'Understanding for Russia in Germany'*, 781.
[135] Mankoff, *With Friends Like These*, 17.
[136] When he is not busy with sabotage, Oschenreiter contributes to both German and Russian media outlets.

of elite characters presents a unique challenge to Berlin, because it's difficult to legally oust people from democratically-elected positions. Since 1974, no German politician has stepped down over a Russia scandal. Frohnmaier is only one actor in a long cast of characters that infest corporate and political offices, sometimes both.

This chapter would be incomplete without mentioning former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, a major beneficiary of the Kremlin. He lobbied heavily for Putin's interests during his tenure from 1998-2005. Despite backlash from the Bundestag, Schröder refused to disengage from Russia, or end his personal relationship with its leader. In 2004, Putin made administrative hurdles disappear so that Schröder and his wife could adopt a Russian baby after facing fertility issues.[137] To my knowledge, a human child errs on the more bizarre side of diplomatic gifts, even usurping China's precious giant pandas. Schröder also reaped conventional rewards: in 2005, he was appointed to Russia's Nord Stream, Rosneft, and Gazprom shareholder committees.[138] This role enabled him to engineer increased energy interdependence between Moscow and Berlin, all while pushing against European sanctions on Putin, a "thoroughly democratic leader." Although Schröder's kindness to the Kremlin earned him a child and an estimated €1 million a year, Russia's profits were larger. Having the loyalty of a top German leader helped Putin secure natural resource deals and construct Nord Stream I and II, which solidified Germany's reliance on Russian companies for crucial fuel. The capture of one person alone secured invaluable leverage over Berlin's energy markets, which is a continued challenge for the Bundestag.

The Kremlin appeals to political parties as a whole, in addition to specifically targeted members. Germany is a federal parliamentary republic, organized as a multi-party democracy.[139]

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[137] *The Guardian*. 2004. "Schröder adopts Russian orphan | World news." August 17, 2004.
[138] Mankoff, *With Friends Like These*, 21.
[139] This political structure slows the Bundestag's agency because there are so many cooks in the kitchen. They have to find a governing coalition that dissatisfies everyone equally. Putin is unburdened from such obligations.

The percentage of the national vote determines how many seats each party receives, with a minimum requirement of 5%. This is helpful for Putin because it decentralizes power from the most popular political party. He can win significant influence by ignoring typical major players and appealing to multiple smaller factions, who are more desperate for funding and therefore vulnerable. The well-established and successful parties like the CDU and *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) have political connections in Russia, but are secure enough in their establishment to refuse Moscow's direct help.[140] However, the AfD, *die Linke* (the Left), and *Bündnis Soziale Gerechtigkeit und Wirtschaftliche Vernunft* (BSW) are all involved with the Kremlin.[141]

Putin does not discriminate across the political spectrum: he simultaneously supports far-right AfD candidate Alice Weidel, and far-left BSW leader Sahra Wagenknecht. Donations for both political extremes seems counterintuitive, and illustrates how there is no ideological reasoning for aid—it is based solely on who will represent Russia's interests. Each of these groups' policies are in natural alignment with the Kremlin. The AfD, Putin's main puppet, is an inflammatory populist movement for anti-immigration, a strong traditional energy sector, and conservative values. I address their Russian-backed political rise in more depth in my conclusion. *Die Linke* is a continuation of the *SED*, East Germany's communist party. They are anti-U.S., anti-NATO, and anti-capitalism—therefore, pro-Russia. Sahra Wagenknecht led this party until she decided to start a one-woman show with her self-titled "BSW" in 2023, which failed to meet the 5% cutoff in the 2025 election.

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[140] Until the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, even these parties were still split on Russia policy. A fraction of the CDU campaigned for good relations with Russia for energy companies, and a portion of the SPD advocated for increased ties with Moscow to decrease Germany's dependence on Washington.

[141] BSW originally stood for Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht [the Alliance of Sahra Wagenknecht], until her self-titled party underperformed at the 2025 polls. Wagenknecht had misjudged her citizens' apprehension towards a political party centered around one person.

In the most recent German election, the AfD won 151 seats and *die Linke* secured 64. This means that over 34% of the Bundestag, 215 out of 630 total seats, belong to politicians from Russia-sympathetic groups. This excludes offices held by politicians in other parties who are more discreet about their relationship with Moscow. The influence that Putin gains through this network inside the Bundestag is grossly overlooked. Take a moment to imagine the chaos that would ensue if Washington realized over ⅓ of Congress was on Beijing's payroll. However, the Kremlin's seats at the tables of Germany's corporate and political elite have managed to withstand the housefire of their geopolitical relations. The Bundestag's leadership in the EU's passage of unprecedented sanctions against Russia does not change the fact that a third of their body is friendly with the very institution they are trying to condemn. That being said, there is still significant volatility between Putin and the Bundestag. The Kremlin reverts to the sabotage of the German government in lieu of failing to control it.

Cyber Attacks and Sabotage

"For a money example, look no further than Germany, where it turns out the Kremlin only had to pay a few useful idiots €100 per vehicle to blow up 270+ exhaust pipes and make it look like the work of a hawkish party Moscow didn't like, all while polarising Germany."

- Former Diplomat Jeremy Dicker, 2026

The millions of Russian-Germans offer Putin bodies inside Germany's physical borders, but aren't a crucial component for his other operations. Cyber warfare is a common Russian practice, which Berlin has not been immune from. In 2015, the Russian hacker group "Fancy Bear" launched a DDoS (distributed denial of service) attack on the Bundestag's federal computer system. The GRU-linked group stole 16 GB worth of data from fourteen members of parliament

(including Chancellor Merkel), presumably gathering information to meddle in the upcoming 2017 Bundestag election. Putin refrained from releasing the stolen documents—there was no need to publish the data itself after the world already witnessed their success, but there is speculation that a high-level German official warned him not to.[142] In the years following, German think-tanks and organizations fighting the Kremlin's corruption have been increasingly targeted; a 2019 report by the *Bundesministerium des Innern* [German Interior Ministry] confirmed that Russia and China were the most active states in cyber espionage against them. Now that Putin is in a full-blown war with Ukraine, he is further incentivized to escalate sabotage against Kyiv's potential allies, which I elaborate on in Chapter IV. There has been a notable spike in Russian sabotage across Europe, with Germany being no exception.

Germany is the unspoken leader of the EU, a major foothold for American military bases, and historical industrial manufacturing hub—all of which positions them high on Russia's hit list. A spate of arson attacks has occurred across the Baltics, Eastern Europe, the United Kingdom, and Germany. In 2024, a commercial vessel was caught scanning the seabed off their Baltic coast to identify critical maritime points in a potential full-blown conflict with NATO. Although the culprit wasn't an official state ship, Moscow's fingerprints are all over this. The Kremlin enlists others to do their dirty work to maintain plausible deniability. These attacks fall narrowly below the threshold of war, thanks to the operators who claim innocence and absolve Russia of liability. Recruited individuals often agree to such jobs for small payments, and do not realize they are working for Russia. These people are referred to as "useful idiots."

Europe has gotten more vocal in accusing Moscow of waging hybrid warfare, but still hesitates to blame them for specific attacks due to fear of an uncontrollable escalation of tensions. In other cases, Russia intentionally leaves a trail of breadcrumbs exposing their

[142] Lough, *Germany's Russia Problem*, 227.

involvement. In 2022, Germany's two main communication cables were plowed to destruction, causing a railroad network shutdown. The tracks of the responsible machine match Melkart 5, a trawler unique to Russia.[143] The press quickly pointed out the stupidity of such a blatant attack, yet they overlooked the possibility that Putin was trying to get caught. Privately dismantling Germany's beloved *Deutsche Bahn* (DB) effectively disrupts society and blocks aid deliveries to Ukraine, but doing so publicly is a larger embarrassment to the Bundestag. Moscow is taunting Berlin, signaling that they can attack them without repercussions. Their 2022 assault on DB's infrastructure was one in a long string of plots.

In 2024, a *Bundesministerium des Innern* [German Interior Ministry] spokesman explicitly stated that Moscow was actively waging a campaign of threats, cyberattacks, disinformation, sabotage, and at least one specific act of terrorism.[144] These initiatives are in retaliation for Berlin's support for Kyiv. In summer 2024, Britain's intelligence service, MI5, exposed seven hitmen paid by Russia to burn down a London warehouse owned by Ukrainian businessmen—similar saboteurs were suspected of a fire in a Berlin factory that builds air-defense systems. Moscow also tried to assassinate Armin Papperger, the CEO of German defense company Rheinmetall, for sending hundreds of vehicles and millions of rounds of ammunition to Ukraine. The plot failed after U.S. intelligence warned Germany about the plan, but arsonists succeeded in burning down his personal shed.[145] Moreover, Russia has used Germany as a transportation channel for their sabotage, not only the end destination. Putin shipped explosive devices to Leipzig (Germany) and Birmingham (England) via DHL planes. These packages were a trial run for a larger plot to send explosives to the U.S. and Canada over

[143] Pancevski, Bojan. 2024. "Exclusive | Europe Sees Signs of Russian Sabotage but Hesitates to Blame Kremlin." The Wall Street Journal.
[144] Pancevski, Bojan, Alistair MacDonald, and Bertrand Benoit. "U.S., Germany Foil Russian Plot to Kill Defense Executive." *The Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2024.
[145] There are strong suspicions that Russia financed this small act of vengeance.

European delivery routes.[146] The plan was ultimately abandoned after President Biden issued Putin a stern warning about harming American passenger planes. Nevertheless, this demonstrates Moscow's willingness to use Germany as a stepping stone in their engagement with Washington. Berlin has served as both the ends and the means for Russian operations. I address this in further detail in the next chapter.

To summarize, everything old is new again. Putin, champion of the KGB, conducts his foreign engagements based on the old Soviet intelligence's playbook. He is the ultimate *siloviki* at the unreachable top of the hierarchy. This means that the tactics used by Russian services are aggressive, relentless, and desperate to succeed. Their disinformation machine pollutes the media with junk that is reaffirmed by supporters planted inside Germany, creating a false sense of legitimacy through a rapid feedback loop. Other agents are recruited on the ground for later activation—sometimes they know they are working for Moscow, sometimes not. These recruits extend beyond misled people looking for extra coin, and include the very top of Germany's elite. Nevertheless, this doesn't spare the Bundestag from attacks on their physical and cyber infrastructure. This behavior is consistently inconsistent: these tactics are nothing new, and simply follow the old Cold War framework. Germany's naivete is more surprising than any of Russia's schemes, and their inability to stop bringing knives to gunfights has left them prone to infiltration by Putin's hydra.

[146] Pancevski, Bojan, Thomas Grove, Max Colchester, and Daniel Michaels. 2024. "Exclusive | Russia Suspected of Plotting to Send Incendiary Devices on U.S.-Bound Planes." *The Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 2024.

Chapter IV.

Deutschland als Sonderfall

[Germany as the Special Case]

"I believe that the Europeans, first and foremost, the Germans, will also understand me…Our nation, however, unequivocally supported the sincere, unstoppable desire of the Germans for national unity. I am confident that you have not forgotten this, and I expect that the citizens of Germany will also support the aspiration of the Russians, of historical Russia, to restore unity."

- Vladimir Putin, speech following the annexation of Crimea 2014

The Ideal Candidate

The establishment of cultural centers, disinformation campaigns, recruitment of politicians, espionage, and cyber attacks are Russian strategies that are reduced, reused, and recycled all over the world. They are not even unique to Moscow; every country is guilty of projecting their own narratives onto others, lying, and spying. However, Russia's particular hyperfocus on Germany is what sets this case apart from standard global affairs. They devote more time and resources to Berlin than Paris or Rome. I believe that this favoritism stems from three core aspects:

1. Germany's leadership in the European Union and NATO
2. Susceptibility as a target, stemming from the 3.5 million resettlers and memory culture
3. Germany's proximity to the United States

Germany is the unspoken leader of the European Union. Their €4.3 trillion GDP makes them the third-largest economy in the world and wealthiest EU member, with France coming in second

with an approximate €2.9 trillion share.[147] As of 2024, Germany made up for 24% of the European Union's €17.9 trillion pie. They led the Union through the 2009-2014 Eurozone crisis and implemented delicate regulation to ensure indebted member states did not collapse the communal currency. One year later, Germany assumed the lion's share of responsibility in the refugee crisis: they received over 442,000 asylum seekers in 2015 alone, followed by Hungary with 174,000.[148]

Out of all members, Germany has the largest share of political representation in the European parliament. The distribution of seats is based on population, and their 84 million people secure them 96 out of 720 total delegates. Ursula von der Leyen, a German politician from the CDU, spearheads the body as President of the European Commission. There is a joke that heaven is where the police are British, the chefs French, the mechanics German, and all organized by the Swiss—I find truth in this. Germany is the engineer who keeps the European Union well-oiled and running, holding the 27 members together and steering states through policy challenges. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, declared Germany's role as the "Chief Facilitating Officer," responsible for coordinating and executing a united European response to international crises.[149]

Germany's authority inside the EU makes Berlin the most enticing government for Russia to win over. Each bit of influence that the Kremlin gains in the Bundestag applies to the broader European Union. By establishing a hold in Berlin's politics, Moscow also wins power over other countries. The recruitment of a German politician essentially gets them more mileage than a Greek, for example, because their country's standing gives them more sway inside Parliament.

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[147] *Key Figures on Europe: 2025 Edition*. 2025. Publications Office of the European Union.
[148] "Record 1.3 Million Sought Asylum in Europe in 2015." 2016. Pew Research Center.
[149] Auswärtiges Amt. 2015. " 'Maintaining Transatlantic Unity in a Complex World'. Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington." auswaertiges-amt.de.

Germany's political and economic leadership in the European Union makes them a highly sought after collaborator.

Aside from the power appeal, Russia has a natural inclination towards Germany based on their conveniently direct channels to 4.8% of the population. In addition to millions of resettlers, East Germans were brought up under intense Russian idolization which laid the groundwork for both fear and respect for the Kremlin. That said, this doesn't set Germany apart because other European countries have an arguably tighter linked history. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are all EU members who were formerly part of the Soviet Union. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic operated as satellite states under Moscow's influence. None of them have evaded Putin's schemes—Hungary's pro-Russian President, Viktor Orban, has used his EU veto power multiple times to block financial and military aid to Ukraine.[150] The Baltic states suffer from hybrid operations including cyber attacks, ventures into their airspace, and the usage of migrants to destabilize borders.[151] Estonia dedicated five out of seven chapters of their national intelligence report to Russian threats. Therefore, Moscow's active measures clearly aren't a characterization of their Germany policy, but their standard of engagement across Europe. However, the variance in reactions is what sets Germany apart.

Tens of thousands of people gathered in front of the Bundestag in outrage over the Lisa story—around the same number that is now marching against Orban because of his coziness with Russia. Putin has been unable to trigger favorable demonstrations elsewhere to the same scale as Germany because he does not have backdoor access to millions in the demographic. This is why Russian-Germans are a key asset. They are Moscow's unique weapon that wields a soft, subtle

[150] The Orban situation has caused the European Union a major headache. I personally witnessed multiple conversations between distraught Germans advocating for banishing Hungary from the EU. The legal process for this is unclear, as such a removal would be unprecedented.

[151] Russia and Belarus have engineered a refugee crisis in Poland by smuggling Middle Eastern immigrants to their border, with rumors of an actual secret tunnel connecting the countries underground. The goal is to destabilize the region by overwhelming the Polish government with asylum seekers.

cultural influence but can cause real headaches for German politicians in charge of soothing social turmoil. Putin can orchestrate a puppet regime in Hungary, but his influence is visible and rejected by the commonfolk. In comparison, Russia's ability to permeate German politics through citizens directly is more effective because its authenticity makes it compelling. A singular politician who has been bribed is not as persuasive as tens of thousands true believers gathered on the street.

The *Aussiedler*'s position to bridge Russia to Germany facilitates advantageous cultural influence. Their power to gently shift public opinion, not to mention legitimate election results, is impactful in ways impossible to achieve through cash bribes or physical threats. I find it highly plausible that if the four million people had landed in a different country, let's say Spain for example, Madrid would become a focal point for the Kremlin's operations instead. However, Spain doesn't have the same paralysis when it comes to countering Russia because they aren't sentenced to the generational shame and memory culture that Germany faces from WWII. Spaniards are unburdened from the historical tab that Germans feel they owe Russians, and would likely be harsher to judge and quicker to punish misbehavior. On another note, even if the Kremlin did reach 5% of Spain's population, their impact would be limited to Madrid's own relative share of influence within the EU, which is not as strong as Germany's. Therefore, the combination of Berlin's position at the top of the European hierarchy and the chunk of ethnic Russians inside their borders makes them the most favorable country for Moscow to win over. They wield the most power, and are predispositioned towards sympathy for Russia. In business terms, the input versus output ratio for Russian operations in Germany has the greatest return on investment.

Another critical aspect that I have neglected thus far is Germany's alliance with the United States, which infuriates Putin yet incentivizes further active measures. A full explanation of the decline between Putin and the White House over the last thirty years exceeds the limits of this paper. In summary, he went from being the first world leader to offer President George W. Bush condolences after the 9/11 attack to labeling America a "global parasite." Saying that relations between Washington and Moscow have gone poorly is an understatement. Hostile hybrid operations on both sides have skyrocketed, and Americans consider Russia one of their biggest adversaries, ranked in the top three along with China and Iran. In 2025, 73% of Russians voted the U.S. as the country that poses the biggest real threat to Russia's stability and global influence.[152] They had consistently chosen the U.S. as the country "most unfriendly to Russia" up until 2025, when Germany stole the top hostile place. Moscow and Washington are locked in competition, with Putin pursuing the revival of Russia's great power status and the U.S. wanting to maintain the status quo and their superpower monopoly. Germany is caught between the two and therefore offers the Kremlin special opportunities to access the United States. They served as the theater for the Cold War showdown between Moscow and Washington once before, which is true again for the new era of conflict.

The U.S. has a major military presence in Germany, with an estimated 50,000 personnel on the ground. Bases are strategically critical for American-led NATO operations across Europe and Africa because of Germany's geographic positioning. I cannot overstate the strategic advantage these outposts have in regards to U.S. defense capabilities; they can deploy troops and equipment into Eurasia and Africa exponentially quicker than from American soil. Germany provides an operational hub and extends their global reach. The same is true for the reverse;

[152] Deutsche Sacharow Gesellschaft. 2026. "Russland und die Welt: Feinde, Konkurrenten, Partner," Research Study by Lewada-Zentrums. Berlin: Deutsche Sacharow Gesellschaft, Amnesty International. 7.

Russia can gather information about their adversary without having to travel overseas. In 2024, three German-Russian dual citizens were arrested for illegally gathering intelligence on U.S. military facilities in Grafenwoehr as a precursor for bombings and arson attacks on infrastructure and service members.[153] They specifically sought information about weapons stockpiles and training courses that the base was providing to Ukraine. The men had expressed intent to blow up the German railway transporting the aforementioned American military aid. This highlights how Russia's conflicts with other states (i.e. Ukraine and the United States) unfold within Germany.

In 2023, there were 446 reports of drones flying above a U.S. barracks, in addition to cameras that the GRU instructed their collaborators to install.[154] Therefore, by housing a notable American military presence, Germany is giving Russia further incentive to interfere in their affairs. If Washington had their bases in a different country, Moscow's meddling would likely transfer over there and leave Germany in partial peace. However, the United States installed their satellites in Germany, which is convenient for Putin given their pre-existing susceptibility to his schemes. Berlin's strong partnership with Washington, both bilaterally and within NATO, makes Germany a uniquely interesting target for Russia's active measures compared to other states. Aside from the opportunity to gather intelligence on America's pure military strength in Europe, Russia can unearth future projects and discussions. For example, a German politician has heavier negotiating power in the EU and is more privy to Washington's sensitive information and plans compared to a politician from a smaller, less established NATO member. This means that recruiting members in the Bundestag gives Russia better access to American plans than

[153] Burke, Matthew. 2025. "Men convicted of plotting to attack US forces in Bavaria and surveilling bases for Russia." *Stars and Stripes*, November 3, 2025.
[154] Noryskiewicz, Anna. 2024. "Germany arrests 2 alleged Russian spies accused of scouting U.S. military facilities for sabotage." *CBS News*, April 19, 2024.

individuals from other parliaments could unlock. This pins Germany between the two powers, and gives Putin another reason to encroach in their affairs.

I claim that Germany is a uniquely valuable destination for Russia's operations across the West. One counterargument is that they are not a special case because global tensions and hostility are rising everywhere. Every tactic that Moscow uses against Berlin has also been unleashed on other countries. The United Kingdom has suffered from a series of sabotage attacks sponsored by the Kremlin. Putin has interfered in Moldovan and Georgian politics by backing populist candidates that will keep the states in their orbit and abandon ambitions to join the EU and other Western alliances.[155] Russian banks loaned millions of Euros to Marine Le Pen, a far-right French politician with a pro-Kremlin platform. Other states with sizable Russian diasporas, including Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are viewed as property through the lens of *russkii mir* and heavily targeted by propaganda. These cases show that the Kremlin's efforts to pollute the information space, install puppet foreign governments, and sabotage what they can't control are not exclusive to Germany.

My rebuttal is that none of these other states offer them the same combination of susceptible consumers and high payoff. Ethnic Russians make up 14.6% of Kazakhstan's demographic, which might outweigh the diaspora in Germany, but gaining influence in Berlin is far more preferable in terms of Putin's end goal to control EU and NATO policy.[156] Germany is the only country that possesses a government powerful enough to make the operations worthwhile, and also houses millions of people with a direct point of contact and shared ethnicity with Moscow. These two traits in conjunction is what makes Germany so valuable.

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[155] Moldova was granted official EU candidate status in 2022, and Georgia in 2023. Georgia suspended membership talks in 2024 under pressure from Moscow.

[156] "Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan by individual ethnic groups and age groups (at the beginning of 2025)." n.d. Stat.gov. Accessed March 23, 2026.

Timing

Timing is everything, and Putin has reason to target Berlin now more than ever. The Kremlin has ramped up their activities across Europe in the last few years, which Germany has not been spared from. A general explanation is that adversarial behavior is simply increasing everywhere, and Russia's meddling in Germany is simply growing relative to the rest of the world. Today, China's intelligence and security services employ upwards of an estimated 600,000 people, which outsizes the KGB in their Soviet prime time.[157] If major powers are now operating on such a large scale, then Russia's increased aggression is merely growing at the natural rate. However, I believe the Kremlin's reasons for escalation are more specific than keeping pace with China or the United States. First, Putin is becoming desperate and reckless as he ages. Second, the Bundestag's support for Ukraine has aggravated the Kremlin. Third, the right-leaning voting trend in Germany makes citizens more agreeable to receive Russia's conservative messaging. These three factors in combination create the perfect storm. The war with Kyiv encourages Moscow to take more daring measures against the West, and the heightened German political controversy creates a window of opportunity.

Putin's desperation to solidify his legacy as one of the Russian Greats is shown through his willingness to start the first European land war since WWII. Some political and security analysts believe that the full-scale invasion was a consequence of his jaded self having too much time on his hands during Covid. He spiraled down a rabbit hole and convinced himself that annexing all of Ukraine is the best path to apotheosis.[158] Putin, the man who regards the loss of the Soviet Union personally traumatizing, has taken it upon himself to restore it. This is his purpose in life, and time is running out. Each day that he grows older increases Russia's risk

[157] McCloskey, David, and Gordon Corera. 2025. *The Rest Is Classified: The Chinese Spy Scandal: Breaching Westminster, Episode 1*, Podcast episode. Goalhanger.
[158] Russian efforts to undermine other post-USSR governments indicates that he doesn't plan on stopping with Kyiv.

tolerance because his chance of forever imprinting on the world is shrinking. The chance of restoring Russia to its former glory and solidifying Putin as the man who course-corrected their history is worth the possibility of another global war, especially if he won't be around to deal with the repercussions anyways. Consequently, Putin will likely authorize increasingly radical actions against Germany. For example, ten years ago, it would have been improbable that the Kremlin blatantly destroy their railroad infrastructure with a vehicle easily traced back to Russia. At that time, they wanted to preserve relations and cultivate the Bundestag as a resource, which requires a degree of good graces. That sentiment has been aged out, demonstrated by Putin's readiness to brazenly attack their civil infrastructure, indifferent to whether he gets in diplomatic trouble. The Bundestag should be cautious of his readiness for foul play, as it will only escalate as he gets older and older.

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine is a symptom of Putin's restlessness, but has unsurprisingly pulled a wider cast of characters into the conflict. Germany orchestrated the European Union's massive package of unprecedented sanctions following Putin's invasion. An estimated €48 billion worth of exports to Russia have been blocked, and €91.2 billion of imports (primarily gas resources) have been banned.[159] Their restrictions apply to over 2,600 actors, including but not limited to top members of the Russian government and businesses. Additionally, Germany has bilaterally sent €39 billion in civilian support and €55 billion of military aid to Kyiv since 2022. In August 2025, they pledged another $500 million package of defense assistance, and proudly declared themselves Europe's largest contributor to Ukraine.[160] This infuriated the Kremlin, who I believe falsely assumed that the EU would take a lukewarm stance against their invasion. Moscow's retaliation took form in a spike in sabotage attacks. It

[159] "EU sanctions against Russia: questions and answers." n.d. Consilium.europa.eu.
[160] The Bundestag's support has come a long way. At the beginning of the war, they received mocking jabs from the security community for donating a mere 5,000 helmets to Ukraine.

also materialized in the failed assassination of the Rheinmetall CEO, a large defense company responsible for producing munitions for Ukraine. Although morally questionable, these actions are relatively logical: incapacitating the state (Germany) who fuels your enemy (Ukraine) is a routine wartime occurrence. The FSB's purpose behind espionage on American military bases in Germany, and the attempted destruction of *Deutsche Bahn* railroads, was to gather information on NATO's training of Ukrainian forces and ultimately block military aid from Kyiv. Therefore, Germany's involvement in the current conflict is going to draw more attacks from Russia. Moscow's escalation is unethical, but sensible from a purely military perspective.

Setting Ukraine aside, the final reason behind the hike of Russian interference in the last 10-15 years concerns the everyday public discourse in Germany. A German professor told me that American political trends reach them about ten years later, and predicts German voting behavior using this timeline. His accuracy is stunning. The Trump MAGA wave rose a decade ago, which Germany is currently experiencing their own version of. Society is shifting further towards radical conservatism.

The right-wing populists "AfD," a political party nearly banned under anti-Nazi laws, is now the second largest in parliament. They hold 150 seats, usurped only by the CDU with 208. The AfD campaigns heavily on anti-immigration, cutting spending on Western institutions like NATO, and reversing sanctions on Russia to revive the energy partnership. This message resonates with the German public, as shown by voter outcomes. Germans are fatigued with their state of affairs, and the AfD presents an alternative. The public has been strained by the influx of immigrants and the Bundestag's vow to achieve climate neutrality by 2045 and 80% non-renewable sources by 2030. Providing security for refugees and saving the planet are morally admirable initiatives. However, they are economically and socially taxing, and causing

citizens to grow tired with their status quo. This, along with other complex reasons that are worthy of their own thesis, are causing the pendulum to swing back towards far-right policies, which creates an ideal space for the Kremlin's messaging.

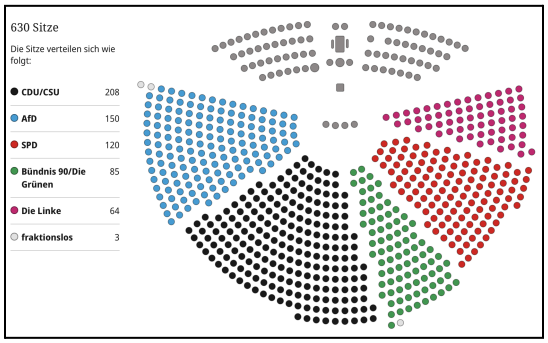
Recall that Russian disinformation specifically targets European cultural failings and presents themselves as a preferable replacement. This means that a German frustrated with the makeshift refugee center that moved into their neighborhood is especially prone to the Kremlin's stories about the European descent into anarchy. Paired with a follow-up message about Russia's Christian faith and traditional values, they may very well be persuaded to vote AfD to improve ties with Moscow. Based on this line of thinking, Germany's shift towards conservatism and the rise of the far-right creates the perfect environment for the Kremlin to project their media campaign in. Moscow is capitalizing on the current attitude and intensifying content on *Russia Today DE*. The discontent with Germany's status quo presents a prime opportunity to exacerbate existing pessimism and present themselves, and the AfD, as a fatherly figure with a cure for all.

Conclusion

"Russia is naturally exerting its obvious influence in parliament, especially in the AfD, in order to spy and obtain sensitive information…The AfD is gratefully allowing itself to be used for this betrayal by Putin."

- Marc Henrichmann, chairman of the Bundestag's Intelligence Oversight Committee

In conclusion, I would like to discuss the extent to which Russian attempts to influence Germany have been successful. The rise of the *AfD* is arguably Putin's greatest accomplishment. The party was founded in 2013 and won just 4.7% of the federal vote, failing to amass enough support to join the Bundestag. Twelve years later, they won 20.8% of the vote and are the second-largest faction in parliament, as shown by the sea of blue dots in the graphic to the left. Their popularity isn't showing signs of slowing down, which is beneficial for Moscow. The Kremlin helped mobilize the Russian-German voter bloc for them in exchange for favorable policy down the line.



Russia has contributed to the AfD's campaign through financial donations to candidates, advertisements on state news outlets, and even the establishment of a counterpart in the United Russia party to the AfD's youth branch, *Junge Alternative*. In return, the AfD has pledged to end German weapon deliveries to Ukraine and dissolve European sanctions against Russia. Furthermore, a 2024 study found that 45% of AfD voters have confidence in Putin.[161] Therefore, the traction that the party has gained is a massive achievement for the Kremlin. The AfD

[161] Hernandez, Sofia. 2024. "Key facts about Germany's AfD party and its supporters." *Pew Research Center*, September 20, 2024.

estimated that around a third of their political support came from Russian-speaking voters. They were the only party to translate fliers and brochures into Russian; they ran outreach programs in *Aussiedler* neighborhoods; they highlighted how their own candidates shared a Russian background. In the words of the founder of a Russian-German advocacy group, "The AfD really looked after the Russian Germans like no other party. It is the only party that said to the Russians, 'You are part of the German nation."[162] This quote explains the natural partnership between Moscow and AfD, and also highlights a sore failure of other German politicians in connecting with the diaspora. With this being said, the AfD's popularity undoubtedly grew from a range of factors, especially disapproval at refugee policy. Germany's shift towards the far-right leaders might have risen even without Russia backing the AfD. The answer to this question is outside the scope of my thesis. However, I attribute at least a portion of the AfD's growth to the initial faction of Russian-German supporters, recruited with the Kremlin's help. This exemplifies a clear impact that Moscow has had on the German political landscape.

Another unit of measurement of Russia's success in Germany is the comparison to that of other countries. China, for example, was listed alongside Russia as the biggest perpetrator of cyber espionage and attacks within Germany. Moscow and Beijing are cozy with one another and coordinate operations—Russia tackles the political and energy sectors, whereas China takes technology. However, Chinese services struggle to permeate Germany to the extent that Russians do because they don't have the same historical trump card.[163] They cannot leverage Germany's past guilt, nor the admiration that Germans have for Russian culture, which shows how cultural relations are key. Despite having more economic power, Beijing is unable to influence the Bundestag as effectively as Moscow. This indicates that money isn't everything, and the Russian

[162] Shuster, Simon. 2017. "How Russian Voters Fueled the Rise of Germany's Far-Right." Time.
[163] Kociszewski, Jarosław. "How Putin Entangled Germany in Schröder's Net." *New Eastern Europe* 62, no. 4 (2024): EBSCOhost. 114.

diaspora is a key component for power. Based on this logic, Russia is indeed successful to some degree because they can reach Germans in ways that other countries don't—with the United States as the one exception.

The U.S. military and diplomatic presence usurps even fellow EU states. The alliance between Berlin and Washington has (overlooking a few minor political embarrassments) been a strategic pillar for both. Having said that, it is an asymmetric partnership, and the Bundestag mostly heeds the White House's vision for the world. In 2015, Germany spent €38.17 billion on their military.[164] Washington, particularly under the second Trump administration, grew vocal in complaints about Europe shirking their NATO contributions. Since then, Germany has remarkably increased their defense expenditure—they expect to spend $127 billion in 2026 alone, which outranks Britain and France combined.[165] Of course, there are other incentives to expand their military complex (particularly the ability to defend themselves against Russia), but the immediate prioritization of the expansion was prompted by Washington's suggestions. This dramatically undermines Putin's jurisdiction. Despite all of the Kremlin's media and espionage campaigns, the Bundestag primarily follows America's leadership instead. Although Moscow has managed to mobilize a few million people, the majority of the German government is dutiful to the U.S. agenda. The American stronghold therefore limits the extent to which Russia can claim authority over Germany.

The final aspect to analyze in the debate of Russia's impact in Germany is Berlin's reaction itself. Defensiveness is a reliable indicator that someone feels threatened. For the most part, Berlin tends to push out factual counter-narratives highlighting German success instead of

[164] SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. n.d. "Military expenditure (current USD) - Germany." World Bank Group Data.
[165] Bundesministerium der Verteidigung. 2025. "Investitionen in unsere Sicherheit: Verteidigungshaushalt 2026." bmvg.de.

hitting back against Russia's state media.[166] They opt for a low-profile response and only address disinformation directly in extreme scenarios like the Lisa Case. I argue that their subdued reaction reflects two beliefs: first, Germany is stable enough to live with some level of disinformation. Their society is resilient and has a strong social safety net. Trust in public institutions is solid enough that citizens won't panic over a few headlines calling their politicians "masochists" and "mindless terrorists willing to kill each other on behalf of Washington and Moscow." The second assumption is that a strong reaction from the Bundestag would give Russia more power by drawing attention to their nonsense. By ignoring the garbage outlets, Germany appears calm and unbothered. If they are not worried about Russian headlines, neither should their citizens.

In contrast to their projected composure, the Bundestag's policies indicate a level of concern. Since 1956, Germany's intelligence service, the *Bundesnachrichtendienst* (BND), has operated under tight legal restrictions meant to keep the security agency's power in check to prevent a repeat of WWII abuses. In February 2026, the government announced that it would be lifting these laws to give their agents more freedom and power to operate. A former diplomat commented that "these restraints, a legacy of the post-WWII era, mean German spooks have had to watch while the Kremlin wages various forms of hybrid warfare on Germany and its neighbors. It seems Berlin now wants to hit back."[167] They are also increasing the BND's budget by 26%, for a total allowance of €1.51 billion.[168] This is a sharp change in initiative compared to their usual nonchalance. Germany's newfound motivation to muscle up its security implies a significant level of concern in the Bundestag. Moscow's presence (or the threat thereof) is perceived as grave enough to warrant a notable policy reversal from Berlin.

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[166] Mankoff, *With Friends Like These*, 31.
[167] Dicker, Jeremy. 2026. "Pentagon vs Silicon Valley," Newsletter. In *Archived Posts*. International Intrigue.
[168] Reimer, Sören. 2025. "Mehr Geld für Nachrichtendienste und Bundestag." *Das Parlament*, November 26, 2025.

All things considered, my consensus is that Putin's Russia has indeed succeeded in shifting the German political and social landscape, but not how they necessarily intended. The Bundestag's recent push to bolster military and security services is in response to Moscow's meddling. The Kremlin has accomplished enough to elicit Berlin into taking action, which is a compliment to Putin. However, their shift is going in the wrong direction. Remember that Putin doesn't aim to dismantle Germany, he wants to use them as an asset to exert influence in the EU and NATO. Not ruling over, but ruling through. German policy that further isolates Moscow is the opposite of what they were striving toward. If Putin's goal was to impact Germany, regardless of how, then he should consider the mission victorious. However, if the Kremlin's ambition was to specifically shift Berlin's policy into Moscow's sphere of influence, then Russia has failed.

At this point, I hope that my audience has a better understanding of the Trojan Horse that Putin has parked inside of Germany, his principal contact in the West. The Kremlin has an unshakable foothold in their society by the millions of ethnic Russian-Germans who were graciously invited home in a heartfelt attempt by the Bundestag to repair Nazi grievances. What the Kohl government did not foresee is that their policy would hold the door permanently open for future Russian influence. I believe that the following *Wall Street Journal* quote encapsulates the threat perfectly:

> German security officials have been particularly concerned about attempts by Russia to influence the 3.5 million Russian speakers who live in Germany, including a large community of ethnic Germans from Russia, via propaganda and direct outreach through Moscow's diplomatic representations. German security officials have said they also

> suspected Russian intelligence services of maintaining close relationships with criminal organizations dominated by Russian-language speakers in Germany.[169]

This liability is layered on top of the existing struggle to maintain a cohesive diplomatic strategy with their centuries-long frenemy. It is important to understand Berlin's vulnerability to Putin's active measures because they are, once again, a theatre for the new Cold War. Germany served as the grounds for the apex of American-Soviet competition in the later half of the 21st century, a history that appears to be repeating itself.

There is terrific research on the intersection of Russian foreign policy and Germany. However, it is a constantly evolving field in which large questions remain unanswered. Does Putin truly perceive Germany as within his sphere of influence, or is he merely trying to counter America's leadership in the EU powerhouse? What does the Kremlin consider a "success" in regards to gaining control over German society? To what extent is Moscow responsible for the AfD's stunning growth? Does the Russian-German community feel like they are being treated as pawns? Updated opinion polls are critical, because Putin's invasion of Ukraine has significantly altered public perceptions. A proper study about the impacts that the full-scale war has had on the psyche of Russian-Germans would be a fascinating and highly relevant research topic.

The beauty and the curse of this paper is that it is situated in ongoing affairs. Dynamics that I presented can become instantly irrelevant as the world's events unfold. Laws are subject to change, disinformation narratives will adopt a new story, attacks and sabotage could happen tomorrow. At the beginning of my thesis research, I would not have expected Germany to increase their intelligence budget by 26% to facilitate more aggressive counter-operations to Russia. On the other hand, global leaders could declare peace tomorrow and the world live happily ever after, which would make the topic of Berlin-Moscow hostilities completely

[169] Benoit, *Germany Detains Two German-Russians*.

irrelevant and my arguments void. Nevertheless, the theme of Germany being pulled in two different directions, East and West, has constantly recurred. The United States and Russia have laid conflicting groundwork for longer term relationships within a country seeking to keep the peace and restore the integrity of their principles. I believe the next few decades, if not years, will be pivotal for Germany's trajectory towards a larger role as a Western security power, or enabler for Russia's authority over Europe. To end on an optimistic note, if anyone can problem-solve, it's German engineers.

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