Röhl’s suspicion illustrates the extreme end of what grew into an intense political and intellectual battle over not only the social and cultural origins of far-right violence in the former East, but also the significance of neo-Nazi presence in reunified Germany, and which German Erinnerungspolitik this phenomenon belonged to – the Federal Republic or the GDR; fascism or ‘antifascism.’

While the international media “presented the riots in Rostock as images of terror reminiscent of the Nazi era,”¹ in Germany they triggered a fierce debate in the press and in the Bundestag over the question of whether they could be explained by a variety of factors unique to East German culture. Chancellor Helmut Kohl, for one, “resorted to an absurd attempt at an explanation straight out of the Cold War era,” insisting that the riots had been planned and directed by former Stasi members.² Although outbreaks of neo-Nazi violence occurred throughout the early 1990s in both the former GDR and the former West, the meaning-making involved in media discourse and in political debates surrounding such events was markedly different depending on location. When a group of teenage skinheads in the West German town of Hünxe threw Molotov cocktails into the home of a Lebanese family on the eve of Unity Day, 1992, and when the house of a Turkish family in Mölln was bombed, killing a woman, her niece, and her granddaughter, West Germans theorised that these were ‘isolated incidents’ committed by perpetrators who came from “broken homes.”³ While the response amongst the German public was an outpouring of grief in the form of silent, candle-lit vigils,⁴ Kohl and other CDU (Christian Democratic Union) politicians tended throughout the early 90s to brush aside outbreaks of far-right extremism aimed at foreigners and asylum seekers as anomalous, within a cultural discourse of remembrance and remorse particular to the Federal Republic.⁵

³ Kramer, p. 222.
⁴ Kramer, p. 229.