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Anti-US books find an eager audience among German youth

By **Charles Hawley** | Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor

MUNICH, GERMANY - Wenzel Mielke doesn't trust the United States. And he has begun devoting an increasing amount of his free time searching for confirmation of his suspicions.

In the past six months, Wenzel, a teenager from the eastern German town of Strausberg has read four books by his new favorite author - American filmmaker, humorist, and vocal critic of President Bush - Michael Moore. Wenzel recently attended one of two sold-out appearances by Mr. Moore in one of Berlin's largest concert halls.

"Not only do I really like what Michael Moore is saying, but I can really imagine that Bush had something to do with the [Sept. 11] attacks," says the ninth-grader. "It could, of course, be a coincidence - but a really good one for Bush; it is too good an excuse for his wars. The Americans needed a good reason to attack so that they could exploit other countries for oil or whatever."

The US Embassy in Berlin has begun to take notice of the increased wariness toward the US among young Germans like Wenzel. Citing a fear that an entire generation of young Germans is coming of age politically amid an atmosphere of anti-Americanism - and what officials are calling a growing potential for violent anti-Americanism - the Embassy's public-affairs department has recently started sending Americans into German schools to talk to children and youth about life in the US.

Embassy officials, who declined to go on record for this article, are focusing on eastern Germany because of an increased tendency there to believe in conspiracy theories. Many observers attribute this attitude to a residual anti-Americanism from the education easterners got in communist East Germany.

"I have heard from many that among young people - especially from eastern Germany - that such theories [regarding Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and US motives abroad] have reached the level of common sense," says Klaus Hillenbrand, editor in chief of an influential Berlin daily, Die Tageszeitung, who has written about the anti-Americanism phenomenon. "They honestly believe that the Americans were behind 9/11."

A survey carried out in the spring by the Forsa Society for Social Research, an independent polling firm, shows that 1 in 3 Germans under the age of 30 says that the US government had something to do with the terrorist attacks, which sparked Bush's war on terror.

Books critical of the US are selling rapidly in Germany and elsewhere. Moore's newest book, "Dude, Where's My Country?" has topped German nonfiction bestseller lists since its release on Nov. 14, and is second overall only to the new Harry Potter book. And books promoting the idea that the US itself was behind the Sept. 11 attacks, including "The CIA and the 11th of September," by Andreas von Bülow, the minister for research under former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, remain

stubbornly high on German bestseller lists. Likewise, "The Frightening Fraud" by French author Thierry Meyssan, has sold 200,000 copies in France since its publication in 2002.

Packed houses greeted Moore on his recent tour of Germany to promote the book, which is heavily critical of how the war on terrorism has been conducted and questions the honesty of the US government's campaign leading up to the war in Iraq.

"I have the impression," says Mr. Hillenbrand, "that a number of people here concluded that [Secretary of State Colin] Powell knowingly lied in front of the United Nations [about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq], and out of that comes the belief that the United States is a threat and even likely to lie again."

While gatherings held by these and other authors are well attended, most of the discussion among conspiracy theorists takes place on the continually growing number of Internet forums dedicated to the topic.

While mistrust of the US has pushed many Europeans to embrace such theories, some observers say that there is a uniquely German aspect to their proliferation here.

"I think that some - not all - of the people who believe in these theories see a certain pardon for Germany's history there," says Hillenbrand. "They see that Germany is still measured against the Holocaust, and they have now found a point where the Americans are also very evil and that we Germans then don't have to feel inferior to them."

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