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RESTRAINED REVOLUTION: ANTIFASCIST COMMITTEES IN OCCUPIED GERMANY, 1945-1946

In the last days of the collapsing NS regime, Allied troops advancing into German territory were often greeted by representatives of antifascist organizations and committees (Antifas). During the chaos of the Nazi dictatorship's breakdown these groups had taken over local power structures in many places and begun to « cleanse » positions in the local governments and economies of Nazi party members and officials. The Antifa movement rested on the popular-front ideal of broad antifascist alliances that transcended the traditional party boundaries among working-class parties and bourgeois and opposition movements. After 1933, these coalitions had survived mainly in exile circles of oppositional intellectuals, but not in the form of antifascist « grassroots » movements in Germany itself. In the spring and summer of 1945, therefore, the Antifa movement represented a resurrected popular-front antifascism that complemented and went beyond the relatively small, conspiratorial circles of émigré intellectuals or exiled Communist functionaries. According to standard historical accounts of the immediate postwar period, they also constituted the « first and only political initiative with revolutionary potential » in the defeated and occupied Reich¹.

ANTIFASCIST COMMITTEES BETWEEN BREAKDOWN AND RECONSTRUCTION

Several hundreds of antifascist committees, leagues, and « action groups » are estimated to have emerged in all parts of the defeated Reich, many of them without leaving any archival records². The committees generally subscribed to plans for denazification and a socialist and democratic restructuring of postwar Germany and were dominated by members of organizations that survived illegitimate

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lity and persecution during the Nazi reign. One of the most prominent groups was the *National Komitee Freies Deutschland* (NKFD) in Leipzig, which took the name of the resistance groups that the Soviets had formed in Moscow out of the ranks of German communists and POWs³. At the end of the war, with the Red Army deep in German territory, the NKFD and its local Antifas were welcomed as temporary assistance to the Russians' advance; they were not seen as political alternatives to the establishment of Soviet occupation authorities. By November 1945, the NKFD itself was dissolved, to the disappointment of many German leftists and their hopes for a more autonomous socialist reconstruction of Germany⁴.

The Marxist historiography of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) portrayed the Antifa groups as « activists of the first hour » who paved the way for the unification of the working-class parties into the Socialist Unity Party (SED) and who harmoniously cooperated with the Red Army on denazification and the setting up of new local administrations⁵. It also emphasized the early prohibition of Antifas in many localities under Western Allied administration, which were seen as cold war suppression of communist activities⁶. Standard GDR history textbooks did not mention that Stalin and the KPD leader Walter Ulbricht disbanded the Antifas in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ) by June 1945 because of the Party leadership's distrust of the « relatively free-floating leftist committees », which usually consisted of broader popular-front alliances between communists, Social Democrats, trade union activists, and bourgeois Nazi opponents.⁷ The GDR historiography also stayed silent on the disappointment felt by some local communist Antifa leaders over the Red Army's conduct in the territories occupied by them — especially the widespread and traumatic experiences of rapes committed by Russian soldiers⁸.

In the German Democratic Republic, the existence of the Antifas became part of antifascism's use as an official « foundation myth ». The existence of the committees legitimized the East German state's self-image as having been built on the shoulders of popular working-class resistance against the Third Reich⁹. In the postwar West, on the other hand, the history of the movement played an almost non-existent role. While the official memory of anti-Nazi resistance in West Germany has been dominated by the Stauffenberg circle or the student resisters of the « White Rose », the revolutionary rhetoric of the grassroots Antifas made their legacy ill-suited as a foundation for the Federal Republic. Instead, West German histories of the period usually emphasize the Antifas' enduring influence on the institution of works councils [*Betriebsräte*] and the concept of co-determination [*Mitbestimmung*] in West Germany's social market economy¹⁰.

It is probably more useful to place the Antifa phenomenon in the context of what Mary Nolan calls the « now forgotten or silenced voices and visions » of democratic and socialist antifascisms that — like the dissident socialist resistance

organization *Neu Beginnen* (New Beginning) — were drowned out by the resurgence of Allied-backed political parties in postwar Germany¹¹. Because even though the action committees were not representative of the « masses » that their hastily improvised leaflets and pamphlets claimed to speak for, the Antifas were part of the wider revolutionary upheavals that transformed the social, political, and ideological structures in Europe during and after World War II¹².

The Antifas were transitional organizations that contained elements of the mass politics of the prewar period as well as aspects of the new and more atomized politics of the postwar public sphere. The failure of the Antifas to become a mass movement but also the organizations' own programmatic statements and publications suggest that Germans after 1945 did not regard antifascism as the basis for grassroots mass politics. Instead, despite their revolutionary and martial rhetoric, the Antifas contributed to the transformation of early twentieth-century mass politics, which were often based on paramilitary organizations.

THE END OF THE ANTIFA MOVEMENT AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MASS POLITICS AFTER 1945

Many Antifas, such as the *Kampfgemeinschaft gegen den Faschismus* (Fighters' Community against Fascism, or KGF) in Bremen, consisted of subgroups at the district and village levels. The organizations' most basic units were usually the « street cells » [*Straßenzellen*] at the neighborhood level¹³. Amid the material hardship of the immediate postwar months, the Antifas worked with the Allies on the reconstruction of local administrations and the distribution of goods, services, and housing in the destroyed cities. The military administrations generally tried to ward off anything that could contribute to a revolutionary atmosphere in Germany. The occupation authorities in most industrial centers could not prevent, however, the spontaneous creation of independent works' councils. The works councils were not only effective in cleansing positions of NS functionaries at the factory level, but they also introduced the principle of co-determination, which would become one of the characteristic traits of West German postwar capitalism¹⁴.

While the Allies did not interfere in the creation of independent works councils, postwar objectives in the Western zones did not entail the wholesale restructuring of Germany's capitalist economy but rather its modified — or « decartelized » — restoration, with the U.S.-backed long-term goal of integrating the occupied country into a liberal global market economy. The Allies therefore tried to limit from the outset the role of the Antifas in the socioeconomic and political reconstruction of their respective zones. In Leipzig this even led to an early prohibition of the NKFD by the U.S. military administration, which did not appreciate the group's attempts to become a mass movement¹⁵. In a letter of May 17, 1945, the NKFD therefore welcomed the takeover of the Leipzig region by the

Red Army, which replaced U.S. troops in accordance with the Yalta resolutions¹⁶. At least initially, the Antifas faced fewer obstacles under Soviet administration, which seemed to have accepted the committees as allies in their efforts at replacing the old power structures. On the occasion of the Red Army's arrival, the NKFD Leipzig stressed its pluralist character and the Antifas' self-definition as a catalyst for revolutionary change in Germany: « Welcoming the Red Army must not become the operation of one party. It concerns the antifascist population in its entirety. [...] The NKFD's prohibition led to a loss of momentum for the antifascist movement. Now is the opportunity for us to make up for the loss of momentum and proceed boldly and decisively¹⁷. » The « bold and decisive procession » of the Antifa in Leipzig ended in September 1945 with the subsuming of the NKFD in the increasingly centralized fold of the Communist Party¹⁸. In the West, the « revolutionary potential » of the Antifas yielded even fewer concrete influences on the social and political structures of the postwar German order.

The Western Allies' anti-communist policies of curbing the influence of the Antifas have often been described as a crucial step towards « the restoration attempts of the old party and trade-union bureaucracies¹⁹. » It is doubtful, however, whether the Antifa movement would have become a long-term force of revolutionary change in Germany even without the presence of Allied occupation. The movement's understanding of direct democracy and its reliance on non-party based political mobilization went against the grain of the transformation of mass politics and the changed forms of political organization after 1945. Therefore, unlike the new or reestablished parliamentary parties in the Western zones, or the resurfaced German Communist Party (KPD) in the SBZ, the Antifas' informal grassroots democracy model, and their vaguely nationalistic attempts at making antifascism the basis of a reconstructed socialist Germany, never developed into a nationwide movement.

The Antifas' concept of democracy and political reconstruction presupposed the ability to mobilize and unite masses of people in the name of an antifascism that for many had outlived its purpose with the end of the NS regime. In one of the earliest memoranda to its local cells, the KGF leadership in Bremen urged: « If we are to achieve decisive influence on the emerging new order of all social life, it will mainly depend on the political influence that our organization will gain by mobilizing all antifascist forces ». In July 1945, the KGF organ *Aufbau* explained: « Democratic structures and laws are important and necessary, but the practice and the manner of applying democracy are even more critical. [...] True democracy can only exist if the broad masses are at all times vigilant and prepared to fight for the defense of democratic rights against forces which, under the disguise of democratic speeches and purely formal democratic procedures, pursue dictatorial aims and reactionary politics²⁰. »

The appeal to the mobilization of the « broad masses » appears almost quixotic in its attempt to reverse the process of « disintegration and de-idealization » that differentiated the postwar era from the first half of the twentieth century²¹. The failure of Weimar democracy, the « reorganization and fragmentation » of the working class under the Nazis, as well as the experiences of mass agitation, total war and defeat, had created a « strongly reduced mobilization potential » even among workers²². Thus, when the *Kampfbund gegen den Faschismus* in Essen renamed itself *Einheitsorganisation der Arbeiterschaft* (Unity Organisation of Workers) and developed rudimentary « party-like structures » with formal membership recruitments and collection of membership dues, its appeal to the unity of workers of all confessions and political parties found little resonance. Moreover, even before the prohibitions by the Allied authorities, the remaining Communists in the Antifas had begun to abandon the committees to focus on the reformation of the KPD.

Therefore, despite their takeover of factories and the establishment of works councils — on the surface the most revolutionary actions of the committees — the Antifas did not resume the tradition of the workers' and soldiers' councils of the 1918 revolution. Instead of reviving the traditions of 1918, the Antifa version of antifascism seems to be the last remnant of Weimar-era mass politics. The very names for the Antifa groups — the plethora of antifascist *Kampfgemeinschaften* (fighting associations) or *Aktionsgruppen* (action groups) — imply a conflation of politics and combat that evokes the paramilitary political organizations of the turbulent Weimar democracy rather than the situation in Germany after twelve years of Nazi rule. Thus, Antifas such as the KGF still adhered to the rhetoric and activist self-understanding of such organizations as the SPD's *Reichsbanner* or the KPD's *Roter Frontkämpferbund*. As James M. Diehl argues, paramilitary politics — which had their right-wing manifestations in *Stahlhelm* and the Nazi « Storm Division » (SA) — « became a surrogate for the unresolved civil war that had followed the incomplete revolution of 1918 ». Moreover, these « combat leagues had continued and radicalized the practice during the Empire of 'blockbuilding' (*Blockbildungen*), the formation of militant 'blocs,' 'cartels,' 'fronts,' and 'movements' designed to mobilize mass support either in favor of or in opposition to the prevailing social and political order²³. »

As many historians have pointed out, the NS system institutionalized paramilitary politics by interweaving militarized mass organizations into the fabric of daily life in the racialized national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*]. However, works such Lutz Niethammer's *Alltagsgeschichte* (History from Below) of Ruhr workers also reveal that by the late 1930s, these organizations were seen as leisure options in a budding consumer society rather than as sources of political mobilization²⁴. In fact, as the interviews with former BDM members testify, while the League's leisure activities were fondly remembered after the war, the political

agitation and lack of individual control in these institutions were often resented²⁵.

These findings suggest that the quasi-revolutionary Antifa movement in Germany in 1945 reflected the organizational and rhetorical political structures into which the members of the immediate postwar generation were socialized. At the same time, the civil war between Germans and fascists that the rhetoric of the Antifas claimed to be fighting had already been decided in the 1930s. This made the antifascist *Kampfgemeinschaften* and action committees of 1945 shells of the revolutionary councils of the post-1918 era; the revolutionary potential of « the masses » had long since been diluted by the Nazis' militarily organized leisure activities, which in turn paved the way for postwar West German consumer society.

As George L. Mosse has shown, the militarization of the public sphere in the 1920s and 1930s capped the development of mass politics in German-speaking Europe that had begun with the Napoleonic Wars²⁶. The Antifa movement seemed to have been one of the last manifestations of this trajectory, at least in the west of Germany. It accompanied and was replaced by the process towards what has been called Europe's post-1945 « individualistic mobilization » — the transition from class-based mass organizations and the politicization of culture to interest-groups politics and consumer identities²⁷.

The « transformation of the public domain » in the second half of the twentieth century seems prefigured in the Antifas' own inner tension between paramilitary revolutionary mass organizations and small localized communities that offered a public forum for what could be called early attempts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Like many Antifas, the KGF in Bremen, called for the « intellectual, spiritual, and political process of the German people's self-cleansing [*geistigen, seelischen und politischen Selbstreinigungsprozess des deutschen Volkes.*]²⁸ ». This democratic « self-cleansing processes », however, took place not in mass rallies but on the level of the group's street cells, which organized weekly « discussion and reading nights » and « courses on general political, economic, and cultural topics²⁹. » These rudimentary « cells of public life » formed early institutions of civic society, rather than hearkening back to the « totalitarian choreography of the masses » that characterized right-wing as well as left-wing politics during the interwar years³⁰.

Perhaps ironically, the tasks of reconstruction required the mobilization of a large part of the defeated German population — most notably German women, many of whom had only shortly before enjoyed the leisure activities of the BDM and other NS organizations. The much-analyzed absence of men in early postwar Germany through war and captivity might not have prevented the restoration of patriarchal gender norms in the 1950s, but it does seem to have had an enduring effect on the post-1945 public sphere. While the official memory in the SBZ and the GDR upheld the ideal of the male antifascist fighter even after the

end of the Antifas, in the Federal Republic the male-gendered rituals and the martial rhetoric of paramilitary politics did not return. As Elizabeth Heineman has shown, the foundational icon of West German collective identity became the *Trümmerfrau* (woman of the rubble) — not the predominantly male Antifa militia fighter³¹.

Yet, if not as an enduring icon of West German reconstruction, the Antifas' hybrid blend of paramilitary rhetoric and restrained revolutionary activity through the publication of articles and discussion in small groups might have contributed to what could be called the « demobilization » of postwar Germany after at least four decades of intense mass agitation. The Antifas employed the rhetoric of mass-based political activism that had dominated the public domain before 1945, but the committees also channeled the still existing potential for political mobilization and popular retribution into rudimentary forms of civil society. Therefore, the Antifas — commonly regarded as forces of an unsuccessful revolution — also contributed to the « de-revolutionizing » of German society, i.e., the undoing of the early-twentieth-century emphasis on political agitation and mass mobilization and the gradual change towards the political culture of the post-1945 period.

It was part of the new political culture in Western Europe after 1945 that most West Germans — after the demise of the Antifas — did not regard « anti-fascism » as an appropriate base for mass politics. After the initial, rather restrained, actions of popular retribution by the Antifas, one aspect of antifascism — retribution against Nazi perpetrators — was left first to the Nuremberg trials and other Allied tribunals, then allowed to peter out in the West German denazification courts. The other thrust of antifascist activism, the intense intellectual preoccupation with fascism and its relationship to German culture that reverberated in Antifa leaflets and street cell discussions found a new location in a public sphere of cultural-political journals and discussion circles. This helps explain István Deák's observation of « one of the great paradoxes of the postwar era. [...] In all of Europe, the smallest percentage of former Nazis was executed or imprisoned in Western Germany. On the other hand, Western Germany made a greater effort than any other country in Europe to atone collectively for its past³². »

CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis suggests that the Antifas, which contained elements of the interwar paramilitary politics in their organizational forms and rhetorical strategies, served as an intermediate form of mass politics that channeled the remaining potential for militant mobilization in Germany into early activities of denazification and reconstruction. The demise of the Antifa movement meant that these acti-

vities were not to be continued in the realm of mass politics of the interwar period. After 1945, politics in West Germany became the business of the new *Volksparteien* rather than of quasi-revolutionary *Kampfgruppen* and grassroots democratic street cells.

A parallel demise of the Antifa-movement took place in the Soviet Occupation Zone. With Order No. 1 of June 9, 1945, the Russians established the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (*Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland*, or SMAD). The order also dissolved many of the roughly 200 anti-fascist committees in the Soviet Occupation Zone (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone*, or SBZ)³³. With the simultaneous end of the Antifa movement in the Western zones — either through Allied policies or lack of German support, or both — antifascism had ceased to be a revolutionary concept. In the West as well as in the SBZ — where SMAD Order No. 2 allowed the formation of political parties and mass organizations as early as summer 1945 — antifascism became a rhetorical trope in the service of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) rather than the foundation of actual policies. The long-term decline of antifascist mass politics became even more evident with the downfall of the SED regime. Long before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the de-revolutionizing of Germany in 1945 had not only transformed the public sphere in the West but also oppositional politics in the East. Consequently, the revolutions of 1989, based on grassroots circles of oppositional activists, built on a slowly emerging sense of civil society rather than on the traditions of antifascist councils and interwar paramilitary politics.

NOTES

- ¹ Theodor Eschenburg, *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Band 1. Jahre der Besatzung 1945-1949*, Wiesbaden, F.A. Brockhaus, 1983, p. 107.
- ² The most comprehensive account of the Antifa movement is Ulrich Borsdorf, Lutz Niethammer, and Peter Brandt (eds.), *Arbeiterinitiative 1945: Antifaschistische Ausschüsse und Reorganisation der Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland*, Wuppertal, Hammer 1976. Cf. Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung: Deutsche Geschichte 1945-1955*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982, p. 121-126.
- ³ Letter of the NKFD Leipzig to the High Command of the Red Army, May 5, 1945, SAPMO - BArch, SgY 26/1, V G125/1, Bl. 5.
- ⁴ Cf. Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation,*

1945-1949, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press, 1995, p. 253.

⁵ Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der SED, *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, Band 6: Von Mai 1945 bis 1949*, Berlin [East], Dietz, 1966, p. 23-25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷ Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany, op. cit.*, p. 271.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁹ For the official memory of the anti-NS resistance in both German states, cf. Jürgen Danyel (ed.), *Die geteilte Vergangenheit: Zum Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Widerstand in beiden deutschen Staaten*, Berlin (West), Akademie Verlag, 1995.

¹⁰ Cf. Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung, op. cit.*, p. 121-126; Theodor Eschenburg, *Jahre der Besatzung, op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹¹ Mary Nolan, « Antifascism under Fascism: German Visions and Voices », *New German Critique* 67, Legacies of Antifascism, winter 1996, p. 35-55, here: p. 35.

¹² For an overview of the immediate European-wide reactions to World War II, cf. István Deák, Jan T. Gross, and Tony Judt, (eds.), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and its Aftermath*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2000.

¹³ Peter Brandt, *Antifaschismus und Arbeiterbewegung: Aufbau - Ausprägung - Politik in Bremen 1945/46*, Hamburger Beiträge zur Sozial- und Zeitgeschichte Band XI, Hamburg, Hans Christians Verlag, 1976, p. 101, 109-111.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 144-149; cf. also Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung, op. cit.*, p. 124-126.

¹⁵ Cf. Ulrich Borsdorf et al., *Arbeiterinitiative 1945, op. cit.*, p. 242.

¹⁶ Letter from the NKFD Leipzig to the Supreme Command of the Red Army, May 17, 1945, SAPMO - BArch, SgY 26/1 G125/1, Bl. 9.

¹⁷ NKFD proclamation, n. d., SAPMO - BArch, SgY 26/1 G125/1, Bl. 13.

¹⁸ Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung, op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁹ Peter Brandt, *Antifaschismus und Arbeiterbewegung, op. cit.*, p. 102.

²⁰ Quoted in Brandt, *Antifaschismus und Arbeiterbewegung, op. cit.*, p. 122, 119.

²¹ Martin Broszat, Klaus-Dietmar Henke, and Hans Woller (eds.), *Von Stalingrad zur Währungsreform. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Umbruchs in Deutschland* (Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte, Band 26), Munich, Oldenbourg, 1988, p. xxvii.

²² Mary Nolan, « Antifascism under Fascism... », *op. cit.*, p. 55; Peter Brandt, *Antifaschismus und Arbeiterbewegung, op. cit.*, p. 107.

²³ James M. Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany*, Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1977, p. 21, 4.

²⁴ Lutz Niethammer (ed.), *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930 bis 1960, Band 2: « Hinterher merkt man, daß es richtig war, daß es schiefgegangen ist. » Nachkriegserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet*, Berlin, J. H. W. Dietz Nachf., 1983, p. 323.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156 et seq.

²⁶ Cf. George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich*, New York, Howard Fertig, 1975.

²⁷ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent, op. cit.*, p. 302. Cf. Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1987, p. 165 et seq.

²⁸ *Der Aufbau-Organ der Kampfgemeinschaft gegen den Faschismus*, Bremen, May 6, 1945, SAPMO - BArch, SgY 26/4 Bl. 8, Bl. 19. Emphasis in original.

²⁹ Quoted in Peter Brandt, *Antifaschismus und Arbeiterbewegung, op. cit.*, p. 113.

³⁰ Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik, op. cit.*, 164.

³¹ Cf. Elizabeth Heineman, « The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany's 'Crisis Years' and West German National Identity », *American Historical Review*, 101, 2 (April 1996), p. 354-395.

³² István Deák, Jan T. Gross, and Tony Judt (eds.), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe, op. cit.*, p. 4.

³³ Cf. Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany, op. cit.*, p. 259.