

It may be that there are many ways to a revolution, but the autonomist antifa movement is united in its struggle against nation-states and capitalism. In these times of repression, we fight against the reaction with the methods of subversion, for the revolution. But we know that capitalism is not the end of the story.

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Communiqué from the 08.11.2009



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From Autonomen to Antifa

Exploring the roots of modern antifa in the German *Autonomen* movement of the eighties: an interview with George Katsiaficas

By [NICK SMALIGO](#) NOVEMBER 14, 2017



ANTIFASCISM *has been around as long as fascism, and the abbreviation antifa goes back as far as German resistance to the Nazis. Recently, antifa has become a household word after a series of widely covered confrontations between white supremacists and anti-fascists. But there is much more recent prehistory in Germany that has been overlooked by many commentators: the Autonomen, or “autonomous movement,” of the 1980s, which developed the infamous “black bloc” tactic and violently stopped neo-Nazi pogroms against immigrants after the fall of the Berlin Wall.*

*[George Katsiaficas](#) was once described by an Italian journalist as “the father of the black bloc.” He is the author of the most important history of the Autonomous movement, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (AK Press, 2006). He has been an activist since 1969 and has written about social struggles across the globe.*

In this interview, Katsiaficas discusses the origins of the autonomous movement, the difference between violence committed by oppressors and violence that aims to stop oppression, and the basic human impulse toward autonomous organizing.



Can you describe some of the origins and distinguishing practices of the Autonomen movement in Germany in the late 1970s through the 1990s?

The Autonomen distinguished themselves as autonomous from the nation-state, since the nation-state was seen as irrelevant. They wanted to destroy nation-states and build power from below: grassroots popular power. Some people called these movements “anarchist,” but at that time the movements themselves did not really refer to themselves as anarchist.

There were several different streams of activism in Germany in the late 1970s: Feminist activists were challenging patriarchy in everyday life and peace

activists were challenging the premises of the Cold War and the buildup of American arms in West Germany. The housing situation was desperate for many young people, who had moved to Berlin to avoid the draft. The hundreds of empty buildings, particularly along the Berlin wall, began to be occupied and renovated by their occupants. This became known as a “squatters movement,” or *Instandbesetzung*, which meant “occupy and renovate.”

At the same time, the German nuclear power industry told foreign buyers they would bury nuclear waste from around the world in a disposal site in Gorleben, in a part of West Germany that jutted into East Germany. When protestors carried out a nonviolent sit-in at Gorbelen, the police attacked, beating them mercilessly. There was a very strong anti-nuclear power movement that constructed a village out of felled trees called the Free Republic of Wendland. When I went to Gorleben, no one knew when the bust would happen, but when it happened, we immediately had a demonstration that night in Berlin, and the police teargassed and broke up that demo as well. Peace activists were harassed and not really permitted to demonstrate openly. The squats were attacked one by one by the police, so they developed a system of alarms so that hundreds of people could be mobilized to defend any of the houses at a moment’s notice. Ultimately, a council of people began meeting in Berlin and in other major cities and slowly but surely formed an identity that comprised all these wings called the “autonomous movement.” It was greater than the sum of its parts.

The self-defense units morphed into what became known as the “black bloc”: people who dressed all in black so they could not be identified later with cameras carried by the German police. Slowly the identity of the autonomous movement spread throughout Europe, eastern and western Europe, and became a continent-wide identity for people who thought of themselves as “autonomous,” meaning they were against the hierarchies of government and had no respect for representative “democracy.” They organized themselves autonomously, meaning separately from political parties, from the government. They made decisions through direct democracy and consensus; seldom if ever were there votes to determine a majority view. In all these

various German movements there was also tremendous international solidarity.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, there was an increase in neo-Nazi activity in Germany, with pogroms erupting in cities like Rostock and others. How were the Autonomien influential in anti-fascist activity at the time? Would you say they were successful?

Several months before the wall fell in November 1989, a national alliance of “Antifa” had formed, with organized groups in 10 cities in West Germany, with contacts to activists in 12 other West German cities. In 1990, the autonomist movement took the offensive in Germany. They took over the Mainzer Straße in (formerly) East Berlin, which became an entire block of occupied buildings. There was a women’s house, a gay house, bars, a movie theater, bookstores, all kinds of places to have events and live. This was one year after the wall came down and one month after German reunification. The Mainzer Straße was evicted, but only after a prolonged struggle of many days in which people fought with Molotov cocktails against heavily armed police with cranes, helicopters, all kinds of things.

But soon the neo-Nazi counteroffensive became evident in Hoyerswerda, where Vietnamese and Angolan migrant workers came under attack. Then next year in Rostock, Vietnamese and Roma settlements were attacked. The police basically stood by: They even told the right-wingers, who were against immigrants, that they [the police] would do nothing. The immigrants did escape, fortunately, but a mob of more than 1,000 people continued their attack for more than a week. In that period of time, pogroms spread to more than a dozen cities. The police and fire department in Rostock refused to intervene. It was only when autonomous activists from the big cities, in particular, but from many cities—Hamburg, Berlin, Göttingen—converged on the city of Rostock that they were able to stop the pogrom.

The police, when the Autonomists arrived, arrested 100 of them, which was the same number of right-wingers they had arrested in the entire week of very violent attacks on immigrants. The police basically sided with the right-

wingers in those moments to try to enervate the autonomous movement. Of course the immigrant groups were extraordinarily impressed that some Germans would come to their defense, and alliances were built that would last for many years.

But in the same period of time five Turkish people were killed in the small village of Mölln, and a year later in Solingen, again, five Turkish women were burned to death, in May of 1993. So the neo-Nazi offensive was quite long-lasting. Between 1990 and 1994, neofascist violence resulted in the deaths of more than 80 people. For a time, people were quite unclear what would happen because the Republican Party, as it was called, represented anti-immigrant sentiment in city parliament, in state parliament, and in the national parliament. The autonomous movement, at some point, decided not to let these Republican politicians take office. They disrupted their speeches in communities and cities, they attacked their offices, and a great debate arose in Germany, “What about freedom of speech?”; “What about the freedom for elections?” And the autonomist movement was very clear: Once in their history they had allowed the election of Hitler, they had allowed right-wing mobs to run wild on Kristallnacht and similar events, and they weren’t going to let this happen again.

The militant wing of the autonomous movement completely disrupted the Republican Party. The electoral efforts of the far right wing, of the neo-Nazis, fizzled out at some point simply because of lack of support. That lack of support was most graphically demonstrated in candlelight vigils in Berlin in November 1992, when 350,000 people marched against the violence in Mölln; in December, 300,000 marched in Munich, 250,000 in Hamburg, 300,000 in Essen, and 100,000 in Nuremberg. They marched against racism and against violence aimed at immigrants.

But the German government developed a two-pronged approach. On the one side, the constitution was changed to restrict immigration. On the other side, the federal government banned Oi! [right-wing punk-rock] music and raided and closed down CD manufacturing and distribution sites. They banned 11 neo-Nazi groups, who of course could rename themselves and continue to exist. So at the same time as the government cracked down on the Far Right, it

restricted immigration and changed the constitution.

Since the injuries, attacks, and murder in Charlottesville, there has been a surprising level of popular approval of anti-fascist tactics of confronting white supremacists. But there are still many commentators on the Left—Chris Hedges, Noam Chomsky, the Southern Poverty Law Center, to name a few—who denounce “violence as such” and think that the best strategy is to leave fascists alone and let the police or the state deal with right-wing extremist groups. What lessons can be drawn from Germany’s experience of “ignoring” neo-Nazis, or leaving it up to the state to deal with them?

Well, as much as I respect Hedges and Chomsky, I must disagree. We saw in Charlottesville that the police stood by while this violence occurred. In San Diego and Berkeley, police protected neo-Nazis. It was the black bloc that cleared the park. I won't say it was nonviolent, but it was very minimal violence or minimal force that was used to clear the Far Right protesters from Berkeley.

The lesson from Europe is that broad strata of people need to be mobilized: Thousands and thousands of people who are against racism and against hate need to be in the streets. And at the same time, they need to have their own autonomous self-defense teams. The black bloc has served that function.

We can look to the United States for previous incidents; when, for instance, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War protected demonstrators in 1972 in Miami, when we gathered to protest President Nixon being renominated. The police had given those of us in the peace movement Flamingo Park, in the middle of Miami Beach, as a space to converge. People were camped out there, people could arrive and stay there. At a certain point neo-Nazis arrived in uniform and took over the stage we had set up. It was a shock. I remember I was walking with comrades who had just gotten out of Attica and a Black Panther, Bobby Seale's bodyguard, when this occurred. We were about 50 yards away, but we watched neo-Nazis screaming at people that they were not going to leave, that they controlled our stage, and we watched the Vietnam Veterans Against the War rush the stage and expel them from the park. Many

of the veterans were hurt badly, kicked in the face with heavy boots by the Nazis. But they persevered. They overwhelmed the Nazis and evicted them from the park, taking them off the stage without causing major injury.

A few days later, at the rally for imprisoned Black Panther George Jackson, on the first anniversary of his assassination at San Quentin prison, [Black Panther Party cofounder] Bobby Seale was about to speak. I was the MC at the rally in front of the Miami convention center, and I turned around and saw, two blocks away, motorcycle policemen leading hundreds of right-wing Cuban exiles in the direction of the stage. I saw the motorcycle cops take a left turn and leave the right-wing Cubans on a trajectory to come and take over our stage, to disrupt our rally, which was permitted and legal and for which we had prepared long in advance. I announced that the stage was in jeopardy from the microphone, and immediately the Vietnam Veterans Against the War converged on the back of the stage and beat back the right-wing Cuban exiles. So they again defended a stage that was the only platform we had even to speak, to speak publicly about what concerned us. So the Vietnam veterans played the role that the black bloc played today. Of course, the black bloc is a very different constituency—it's a different time now. But the fact remains: We need organized groups that can defend our diffuse and amorphous protest. And as time goes on, whether Donald Trump remains in the White House or whether Mike Pence replaces him, we are going to need our own self-defense units.

The events you describe are instances of when the Left has legally created a space for protest, and the Right has disrupted it. Recently, one might argue that this situation has been reversed, and elements from the Left or autonomous movements are disrupting the legally sanctioned protests of the Far Right. How would you respond to the free speech argument there?

In the same way that we all recognize that you can't yell "fire" in a crowded theater, you can't yell hate speech in public areas. Free speech is very important to me. At MIT I defended a right-winger, "Joe the Polish freedom fighter," who would attend our demonstrations with a sign that said, "Stop the Jewish Communist conspiracy." In 1969, Joe was known, harmless, and

isolated, and no one regarded him as a threat. When the police arrested him, I pushed down the police and tried to defend Joe. I was almost kicked out of MIT for that. However, when the speech is destructive to human life, when the speech seeks to harm other human beings, I don't think that's an example of free speech, I think it's a misuse of freedom to attack other people, to harm other individuals. I think that the preservation of life, of children, of adults, has to be our primary concern, and none of these neo-Nazi people have been killed, none of them have been seriously injured as far as I know. What has happened is that people seek to prevent them from harming others, which is clearly what their intent is.

In your book Subversion of Politics, you cite Frantz Fanon to discuss the liberating dimension of anti-Nazi violence, and you develop a concept of “civic Luddism” (sabotage of the “machinery” of an oppressive society) to understand the tactics of the black bloc. How do you think such violence is linked to understanding truths about a society that are otherwise imperceptible?

Yes, Fanon is a very important psychologist. In the course of doing clinical analysis of French soldiers who tortured Algerians and of Algerians who killed their former torturers, he discovered that violence can *either* be liberating *or* enslaving, that violence is not a flat thing that can be simply understood in a one-dimensional way. Those who had tortured Algerian freedom fighters suffered tremendous depression and guilt in the subsequent time period, while Algerian freedom fighters who had killed the torturers of their comrades and, in some cases, of themselves, felt liberated by the experience, released. Their fears vanished; a cloud was lifted from them. And this was a very important truth that Fanon was able to uncover.

I'd like to point to the Gwangju uprising in 1980 in South Korea. When the military dictatorship sought to renew itself, people in Gwangju continued to protest. And the military, with U.S. approval, sent paratroopers from the front lines with North Korea to Gwangju, and they brutalized the entire city. They bayoneted students, killed taxi drivers who tried to take wounded students to hospital, ripped off women's clothes, bayoneted women; they arrested the police chief because he would not cooperate with them, even arrested the

local army commander General Chung Oong, took him to Seoul and tortured him because he refused to order his men to take part in the violence against the citizens of Gwangju. Many people were killed in Gwangju, but finally the citizens armed themselves and defeated the military. It was an amazing event; at one point it appeared the military would win, because they used M16s, flamethrowers, machine guns against defenseless citizens. But the spirit of the people was such that they refused to submit, and at a crucial moment the city's transportation workers—that is, taxi and bus drivers—mobilized autonomously, without central directive, more than 100 vehicles to drive down the main street of Gwangju in a column and attack the military position. Of course many of their vehicles were destroyed that night, but people fell in behind the column of vehicles and defeated the military in prolonged fighting.

This event in Gwangju is not considered “violent.” It's considered anti-violent, because they stopped the violence of the military. So when we say “violence,” we need to be very careful about who has committed the violence, for what ends, and what's the result of the violence. If it's the kind of violence that results in the degradation of people, as the genocide against Native Americans did, it's very different from the kind of violence of fighting back against such degrading violence.

You coin the term “eros effect” to describe “a sudden intuitive awakening of mass opposition to the powers that be.” Do you think we are seeing something like this now with the popularity of Antifa? What other kinds of actions do you think have the potential to spark an “eros effect” today?

I think no one can say what sparks the eros effect—it's kind of like falling in love. But we can say that exemplary action very often plays a role. I would say that the eros effect is operative at a number of levels, one of them is even in small groups: New friendships emerge, love relationships emerge; when the streets are flooded, as public advocacy scholar Jason Del Gandio has said, there's a vibe that gets put out, your body gets involved, you get goosebumps sometimes in the middle of these movements.

The best example from what we've talked about today are the candlelight protests in Germany, where in 1992, hundreds of thousands of people, more than a million people total, but hundreds of thousands in at least five major cities—and many more in smaller cities and towns—marched against racism, against hatred, and had a profound influence on society. We see Germany today taking a much more progressive stance than the U.S.: The federal government of Germany today has a leader who's shifted a few times on immigration, but is definitely miles ahead of Trump on the issue of aiding people who have nowhere to go because of wars. I don't know if she says it, but it's mainly wars the U.S. has started, or has prolonged, like in Syria. And in the U.S., the president is clearly against immigration, he's talking about building the wall, he's talking about "illegals" being criminal, he's talking about limiting immigration, and he's helping to spark neo-Nazi protest movements.

So we have a Germany that is far more liberal than the U.S., which has killed millions of people in wars during my lifetime. And, just as it took the international community to put down Hitler and Nazi Germany, I believe it's going to take prolonged pressure from the international community, combined with movements within the empire, to bring down the wars and oppression of the United States today.



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Party / Movement History - Politics of Memory / Antifascism - German / European History - May 8, 1945

The Lost History of Antifa

75 years after the triumph over Nazism, we look back to when socialists gave birth to Antifa.

AUTHOR

Loren Balhorn



Scene from the 1932 Antifaschistische Aktion conference.

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The origins of the word “antifa”—shorthand for decentralized, militant street activism associated with its own aesthetic and subculture—might be murky to most readers. Even in Germany, few know much about the popular forms of antifascist resistance that coined the term.

The movement’s short but inspiring political legacy proved too uncomfortable for both Cold War-era German states, and was ignored in schools and mainstream history. Today its legacy is almost entirely lost to the Left.

Out of the Ruins

By 1945, Hitler’s Third Reich lay physically destroyed and politically exhausted. Basic civil society ceased to function in many areas, as the Nazi grip on power faltered and regime supporters, particularly in the middle- and upper classes, realized that Hitler’s “final victory” was a fantasy.

On the Left, many Communists and Social Democrats had either been outright murdered by the Nazis, or died in the ensuing war. The unimaginable human and material destruction wrought by Nazi rule killed millions and turned German society upside down, decimating the labour movement and murdering most of the country’s Jewish population. Millions who had supported or at least acquiesced to the regime—including many workers and even some former socialists—now faced a new beginning in unknown political terrain.

Yet despite its failure to stop Hitler in 1933 and veritable dismantling in subsequent years, Germany’s socialist labour movement and its decidedly progressive traditions outlived Hitler in the factories of its industrial cities, and began gathering up the fragments as soon as open political activity became possible. As historian Gareth Dale describes:

Of all sectors of the population, it was industrial workers in the major towns that showed the greatest immunity to Nazism. Many trade unionists and socialists were able to maintain their traditions and beliefs, at least in some form, through the Nazi era. A courageous minority, including some 150,000 Communists, took part in illegal resistance. Wider layers avoided danger but were able to keep labour movement values and memories alive amongst groups of friends, in workplaces and on housing estates.

These groups, oftentimes launched from the aforementioned housing estates, were generally called “Antifaschistische Ausschüsse,” “Antifaschistische Komitees,” or the now famous “Antifaschistische Aktion” – “Antifa” for short. They drew on the slogans and orientation of the pre-war united front strategy, adopting the word “Antifa” from a last-ditch attempt to establish a cross-party alliance between Communist and Social Democratic workers in 1932. The alliance’s iconic logo, devised by Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists members Max Keilson and Max Gebhard, has been since become one of the Left’s most well-known symbols.

After the war, Antifas varied in size and composition across the former Reich, now divided into four zones of occupation, and developed in interaction with the local occupying power. Emerging seemingly overnight in dozens of cities, most formed immediately after Allied forces arrived, while some such as the group in Wuppertal “liberated” themselves in street battles with Hitler loyalists before the Allies could.

Pivotaly, these circles were not spontaneous instances of solidarization between traumatized war survivors, but the product of Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Communist Party (KPD) veterans reactivating pre-war networks. Albrecht Lein reports that the core of the Braunschweig Antifa was made up of KPD and SPD members in their forties and fifties who had avoided the front, though Catholic workers’ organizations and other forces were also involved.

The Antifa groups numbered between several hundred and several thousand active members in most cities, while the openly decried lack of youth involvement can be ascribed to twelve years of Nazi education and socialization, which annihilated the once widespread proletarian-socialist attitude among most young Germans. Though the material needs of war and reconstruction incorporated women into economic life in new ways, the male dominance characteristic of German society at the time was also reflected in the Antifa movement, which consisted largely (but not entirely) of men.

Antifas tended to focus on a combination of hunting down Nazi criminals and underground Nazi partisans (the so-called “Werewolves”) and practical concerns affecting the general population. Braunschweig’s Antifa, for example, printed a twelve-point program demanding, among other things, the removal of Nazis from all administrative bodies and their immediate replacement with “competent antifascists,” liquidation of Nazi assets to provide for war victims, emergency laws to prosecute local fascists, and the reestablishment of the public health-care service. Typical of an organization led by socialists and thus keenly aware of the need for print media as an organizing medium, the program’s twelfth and final point consisted bluntly of a “Daily newspaper.”

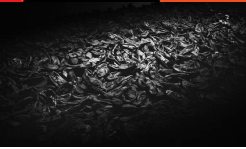
Although surviving records indicate that many Antifas were dominated by the KPD, the political mood in the early months was far from the “Third Period” adventurism of the late Weimar period. Across the board, local Antifas were motivated by a desire to learn from the mistakes of 1933 and build a non-sectarian labour movement bridging divisions. This was buoyed by a widespread sense at the war’s end that the horrors of Nazism had been a result of the instability and inequality of capitalism, and that a new, egalitarian economic system was needed for the post-war order.

Demands for nationalization of industry and other left-wing policies were widespread. Even the forced marriage between KPD and SPD into the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the Soviet zone drew on this sentiment and recruited many former oppositionists in the first year. In British-occupied Hamburg, a joint KPD-SPD action committee convened in July 1945 with broad support from their respective memberships to declare:

The will to merge into a powerful political party lives in the hearts of the millions of supporters of the once warring German workers’ parties as the most meaningful outcome of their shared suffering. This desire is deeply etched into all of the surviving prisoners from the concentration camps, prisons, and Gestapo institutions.

The rest of the document consisted of practical demands around which to unite Hamburg’s

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fragmented labour movement.

Antifas enjoyed varying degrees of success depending on the composition of the local movement and the amount of leeway allowed to them by occupying powers. Despite forming outside of the Allied administration and pushing forward popular de-Nazification policies against occupying forces who sought reconciliation with the old authorities, they were in no position to contest Allied hegemony and represented militant minorities at best.

The southwestern industrial city of Stuttgart, for example, was fortunate enough to be involved in territorial manoeuvring between the United States and France, which occupied the city pre-emptively. Keen to avoid civil unrest and thus give the Americans a pretext to take it back, French authorities allowed Stuttgart's antifascists considerable leeway in dismantling the Nazi-era German Labour Front (DAF), rebuilding shop-floor organization in the factories, and organizing the population in cross-party antifascist alliances.

Stuttgart is also noteworthy for the presence of the **Communist Party (Opposition)**, or KPO. This group around former KPD leaders August Thalheimer and Heinrich Brandler had recruited a large number of the city's mid-level KPD factory activists and functionaries following that party's ultra-left turn in 1929. The KPO's vocal advocacy for an anti-Nazi front of all workers' organizations in the run-up to 1933 allowed it to consolidate a small but considerable base of experienced Communist cadre repulsed by the Stalinization of their party.

Although never a mass organization and only a shadow of its former self after the war, what remained of the KPO had a decisive influence over Stuttgart's metal workers' union for several years and was able to play a role in the factories. These activists and others provided the city with a core of capable militants who understood, through experience, the need to unite workers on a cross-party basis around basic social demands.

Like everywhere else in Germany, Stuttgart's Antifa movement was soon neutralized and diverted back into the old divisions between SPD and KPD, but the city's **rebellious tradition and penchant for unity in action** would re-emerge in 1948, when widespread anger at drastic price rises triggered a citywide general strike that encompassed 79 percent of the workforce and spread to several other localities.



Overdetermined

The Antifa movement faced an almost impossible situation in 1945. The country lay in ruins in every sense imaginable, and had gone through a phase of destruction, brutality, and wanton murder unprecedented in scale.

The Antifa's predicament was by and large "overdetermined," in the sense that historical forces beyond their control would ultimately seal their fate. These socialists and antifascists, though numbering in the tens of thousands across the country, could not have been expected to provide a plausible political alternative to the overwhelming might of the Cold War.

Germany in 1945 was set to become the staging ground for the longest geopolitical confrontation in modern history, and there was no way the fragments of a shattered socialist movement could have influenced developments in any meaningful way. Nevertheless, statements and documents from the time reveal thousands of determined antifascists and socialists, keenly aware of the unprecedented nature of their historical moment and putting forward a political perspective for what remained of the country's working class.

Although their numbers were comparatively and regrettably few given the movement's former glory, their existence refutes the notion that the pre-war German left was entirely destroyed by Nazism. Hitler certainly broke the back of German socialism, but West Germany's post-war prosperity laced with anti-Communist paranoia would finally bury what remained of the country's radical pre-war traditions.

Albrecht Lein recounts how the incredibly difficult conditions facing the Antifa also necessarily restricted their political perspective. Though they attracted thousands of socialists and were soon bolstered by returning Communists and other political prisoners from the concentration camps, briefly becoming the dominant political force in cities like Braunschweig, they were unable to offer a political road out of the country's social misery.

Lein argues that the labour movement's failure to defeat Hitler and the fact that Germany had required liberation from without drove antifascists to a largely reactive policy, vigorously pursuing former Nazi officials and purging society of collaborators, but neglecting to build a plausible vision for a "new Germany" beyond both fascism and Cold War machinations.

After the Communists dissolved the National Committee for a Free Germany (NKFD) in the weeks after the war, underground Nazi resistance groups began calling themselves the "Movement for a Free Germany." Lein argues that this circumstance was symbolic of the overall political trajectory at the time: "Other than the notable exceptions of Leipzig, Berlin and Munich, the antifascist movements described themselves as fighting organizations against fascism, and not as Committees for a Free Germany. Leaving the task of gathering social forces for 'liberation' and thus, implicitly, renewing Germany to the Nazis and reactionaries characterized [...] their defensive position."

Germany's failure to engage in popular resistance to Hitler even in the second half of the war understandably demoralized the Left and shook its faith in the masses' capabilities—a trait **historian Martin Sabrow** also ascribes to the caste of Communist functionaries operating under Soviet tutelage in the East.

In the French, British, and American zones, Antifas began to recede by the late summer of 1945, marginalized by Allied bans on political organization and re-emerging divisions within the movement itself. The Social Democratic leadership under Kurt Schumacher sided with the Western occupiers and returned the party to its pre-war anti-Communist line by the end of the year, decreeing that SPD membership was incompatible with participation in the Antifa movement.

In Stuttgart, the Antifa and what remained of the old trade union bureaucracy fought each other for political influence from the outset. The old leadership of the ADGB, pre-war Germany's central trade union federation, sought to re-establish formalized employment relations in the occupied zones, which would at least mean a return to normalcy for Germany's working class. This ran counter to the approach of the Antifas, however, who cultivated strong ties to leftist shop stewards and factory committees, and usually called for nationalization and worker control of industry. These demands were ultimately not realistic in a shattered economy occupied by powerful foreign armies.

The prospect of stability and a degree of economic recovery under the SPD simply proved more appealing to workers forced to choose between that and the principled but harrowing struggle put forward by the Antifa.

Antifas were further hindered by the decision by the Allies, particularly the United States and Britain, to cooperate with what remained of the Nazi regime below its most executive levels. Antifas seeking to imprison local Nazi leaders or purge municipal bureaucracies were often stopped by occupying authorities who preferred to integrate functionaries of the old state into new, ostensibly democratic institutions.

This had less to do with any particular affinity between the Allies and ex-fascist functionaries so much as it served the practical interests of keeping German society running under exceedingly difficult conditions without ceding influence to the re-emerging radical left. Outnumbered and outgunned by the occupying powers and outmanoeuvred by the SPD, the Antifa's influence in the three western zones of occupation would evaporate in less than a year. West German society stabilized, the Cold War polarized the continent, and the political forces of old Germany in alliance with Social Democracy and the emerging Western bloc consolidated their hold over the country.

The KPD, for its part, initially took on waves of new members, as its prestige rose in light of the Soviet

... victory over Hitler and broad anti-capitalist sentiment. The party soon rebuilt its industrial bases, and by 1946 controlled just as many shop floor committees in the heavily industrialized Ruhr Region as the SPD. In his classic study of the German labour movement, *Die deutsche Arbeiterbewegung*, German scholar Arno Klönne places its total membership in the three Western zones of occupation at three hundred thousand in 1947, and six hundred thousand in the East prior to the founding of the SED in 1946.

Following a brief period of participation in post-war provisional governments, however, the Allies sidelined the KPD, and the party soon returned to its ultra-leftist line. It sealed its political irrelevance in 1951 with the passage of "Thesis 37," a position paper on labour strategy riddled with anti-Social Democratic and anti-trade-union slurs. The motion, passed at the party conference, obligated all KPD members to obey party decisions above and against trade union directives if necessary. This move obliterated Communist support in the factories veritably overnight and relegated the party to society's fringes. It failed to re-enter parliament in the 1953 elections and was banned by the West German government outright in 1956.

Developments were markedly different in the Soviet zone, but ultimately ended in perhaps an even grimmer dead end: that of SED leader Walter Ulbricht's thoroughly Stalinized German Democratic Republic (GDR). An old-school Communist cadre from the party's early years, Ulbricht had survived twenty years of Stalinist purges and fascist repression to lead the "Ulbricht Group," a team of exiled KPD functionaries who now returned from Moscow to rebuild the country under Soviet occupation.

Though the Red Army generals certainly did not have a particularly democratic or egalitarian vision for East Germany in mind, they rejected cooperation with the old Nazi hierarchy for their own reasons and for a while permitted Antifas and related institutions to operate relatively freely. Eyewitness accounts from as late as 1947 report of factories in East Germany's pre-war industrial centres like Halle (traditional Communist strongholds) where KPD-led works councils exerted a decisive influence over factory life, confident enough to conduct negotiations and argue with Soviet authorities in some instances.

In an interview with *Jacobin* to be published later this year, veteran KPO activist Theodor Bergmann tells of Heinrich Adam, pre-war KPO member and mechanic at the Zeiss optics factory in Jena who joined the SED in hopes of realizing socialist unity. Heinrich was an active Antifa and trade unionist who organized protests against the Soviets' decision to take the Zeiss factory as war reparations (he suggested building a new factory in Russia instead). Adam was kicked out of the party for his independent views in 1952, although never persecuted, and lived out his days in Jena on a modest state pension for antifascist veterans.

In Dresden, a group of roughly eighty Communists, Social Democrats, and members of the left-social democratic Socialist Workers Party (SAP) formed a committee in May 1945 to surrender the city to the Red Army, citing broadcasts from the NKFD as inspiration. In cooperation with Soviet authorities, this group subsequently raided food and weapons stores from the German Labour Front and other Nazi institutions, and organized a distribution system for the city's populace in the first post-war weeks.

Reports from Soviet officials and the Ulbricht Group describe rival antifascist groups, generally tolerated by the occupation, which beyond arming residents and organizing shooting practice also arrested local Nazis and opened soup kitchens for refugees from the eastern provinces. Internal communications reveal that leading Communists thought little of the Antifa, dismissed by Ulbricht as "the antifascist sects" in a communiqué to Georgi Dimitrov in mid-1945.



Antifascist rally at Buchenwald concentration camp, 1945.
Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

The Ulbricht Group's initial goal was to incorporate as many of these antifascists into the KPD as possible, and feared that repression would repel rather than attract them. Former Ulbricht Group member Wolfgang Leonhard would later claim in his memoirs, *Child of the Revolution*, that Ulbricht explained to fellow Communist functionaries: "It's quite clear – it's got to look democratic, but we must have everything in our control."

This period ended as the German Democratic Republic began to establish itself as a Soviet-style one-party state in the late 1940s, particularly after relatively free elections in 1946 delivered disappointing returns. Former KPO members and other oppositionists permitted to join after the war were investigated for past political crimes, purged, and often imprisoned. In the workplaces, the SED sought to rationalize production and thus neutralize the instances of factory control and democratic representation that had emerged.

The establishment of the Free German Trade Federation (FDGB) in 1946 marked the beginning of the SED's attempt to establish party control over the factories. These "unions" in fact organized East German workers in line with the interests of their practical bosses, the East German state, and sought to buy their loyalty through "socialist competition" schemes, piece work, and union-sponsored vacation packages.

However, the "free" unions could not afford to phase out competitive elections overnight. Antifa activists were often elected to FDGB shop floor committees in early the years, thus exercising continued influence in the workplace for a bit longer. Some were integrated into mid-level management, while others refused to betray their principles and stepped down or were removed for political reasons.

The public split between the Soviet Union and Tito's Yugoslavia in 1948 accelerated Stalinization in the Soviet occupation zone, and these limited spaces of self-organization were soon shut down entirely. Subsequently, the GDR's antifascist tradition would be diluted, distorted, and refashioned into an ahistorical national origins myth in which the citizens of East Germany were officially proclaimed the "victors of history," but where little space remained for the real and complicated history, not to mention ambivalent role of Stalinized Communism, behind it.

Dare to Dream

Following their collapse in late 1945 and early 1946, Antifas would disappear from the German political stage for nearly four decades. The modern Antifa with which most people associate the term has no practical historical connection to the movement from which it takes its name, but is instead a product of West Germany's squatter scene and autonomist movement in the 1980s—itsself a unique outgrowth of 1968 considerably less oriented towards the industrial working class than its Italian counterpart. The first Antifas functioned as platforms to organize against far-right groups like the National Democratic Party (NPD) in an autonomist movement still numbering in the tens of thousands of active members and capable of occupying entire city blocks in some West German metropolises.

As the far right began to rebuild in the wake of German reunification, expressed in shocking mob attacks against asylum-seekers in several eastern provinces in the early 1990s, Antifa increasingly became a movement unto itself: a national network of dedicated antifascist groups organized into the "Antifaschistische Aktion/Bundesweite Organisation" (AA/BO).

In some ways, these groups were the inverse of their progenitors: rather than a broad alliance of socialists and progressives from separate, ideologically distinct currents, they were single-issue groups, expressly radical but vague and deeply heterogeneous in their specifics. Rather than a point of departure for young activists into a broader socialist and political left, Antifas outside of major cities are often the only political game in town, and function as a counter-cultural space with their own fashion styles, music scenes, and slang, rather than a component of a rooted mass movement within wider society.

After the AA/BO split in 2001, Antifas continued to work locally and regionally as dedicated networks of antifascists opposing far-right demonstrations and gatherings, though many also take up other left-wing issues and causes. What remains of the squats and infrastructure built up between the 1970s and 1990s continue to serve as important organizing and socializing spaces for the radical left, and "Antifa" as movement, trope, and general political outlook will no doubt continue to exist for

quite some time – but it would appear that this iteration of antifascism has also exhausted its political repertoire.

The movement has shrunken continuously since the late 1990s, fragmented across ideological lines and unable to adjust its original autonomist strategies to shifting patterns of urbanization and the rise of right-populism. Its most promising products of late—the mass mobilizations against neo-Nazi marches in cities like Dresden, as well as the formation of a new, distinctively post-autonomist current in the form of the **Interventionist Left**—mark a departure from rather than a revival of classical Antifa strategy.

Antifascism has surged to the fore of debates on the American left under Trump's presidency, and many of the tactics and visual styles of the German Antifa can be seen emerging in cities like Berkeley and elsewhere. Some argue that with the arrival of European-style neo-fascist movements on American shores, it is also time to import European Antifa tactics in response.

Yet the Antifa of today is not a product of a political victory from which we can draw our own strength, but of defeat—socialism's defeat at the hands of Nazism and resurgent global capitalism, and later the exhaustion of the autonomist movement in the wake of the neoliberal turn and the sweeping gentrification of many German cities.

Although Antifas continue to function as important poles of attraction for radicalizing youth and guarantee that the far right rarely goes unopposed in many European countries, its political form is of an exclusive nature, couched in its own aesthetic and rhetorical style and inaccessible to the masses of uninitiated people getting involved in activism for the first time. A left-wing subculture with its own social spaces and cultural life is not the same thing as a mass social movement, and we cannot afford to confuse the two.

Of course, the Antifa's experience in 1945 offers us equally few concrete lessons for how to fight a resurgent far right in the Trump era. Looking back at the history of the socialist left is not about distilling victorious formulas to be reproduced in the twenty-first century, but rather understanding how previous generations understood their own historical moment and built political organizations in response, in order to develop our own (hopefully more successfully models) for today.

The Antifas in Stuttgart, Braunschweig, and elsewhere faced impossible odds, but still sought to articulate a series of political demands and a practical organizational vision for the radicalizing workers willing to listen. Antifas refused to capitulate to their seemingly hopeless predicament and dared to dream big. Facing an even more fragmented and weakened left than in 1945, American antifascists will have to do the same.

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Mark Hemingway, “Roots of Antifa: This ‘Idea’ Has Violent Consequences.” *AI and International Law Blog*. November 4th, 2020.

<https://www.killerrobots.org/2020/11/04/roots-of-antifa-this-idea-has-violent-consequences-2/>

Roots of Antifa: This ‘Idea’ Has Violent Consequences

 killerrobots.org/2020/11/04/roots-of-antifa-this-idea-has-violent-consequences-2/

Mark Hemingway

November 4, 2020

As riots and looting consumed Philadelphia this week after a fatal police shooting, a radical left-wing group, the Philly Socialists, began monitoring police scanners and relaying information to help protesters evade arrest.

At one point, the Philly Socialists tweeted out a clue as to its street allegiances: “Do humanity a favor and learn what antifa stands for.”

The scene in Philadelphia was similar to scores of violent protests around the country since May, which have often featured a common and shadowy element—black-masked men and women who seemed as intent on breaking windows and confronting the police as chanting social justice slogans.

The one thing most people can agree on is these people have a name—Antifa, short for anti-fascists. But larger questions—

Who are they? Where did they come from? What do they want?—have been lost in the battle of partisan politics.

President Donald Trump has denounced Antifa as an organized terror group, like the Ku Klux Klan. At the first presidential debate, Joe Biden disagreed, paraphrasing Trump’s own FBI director, Christopher Wray, as saying that “unlike white supremacists, Antifa is an idea, not an organization, not a militia.”

While Wray did testify to that effect before a House panel in September, he also said Antifa was a real threat and that the FBI had undertaken “any number of properly predicated investigations into what we would describe as violent anarchist extremists.”

A U.S. attorney with the Justice Department told Congress in August the FBI had opened more than 300 domestic terrorism investigations related to the ongoing riots.



Antifa is, in fact, hard to pin down. It has no known leaders, no address, not even a Twitter account. A number of specific groups involved in street violence embrace the Antifa label. Those groups, in turn, are highly secretive and loosely organized.

Stanislav Vysotsky, a former Antifa activist and author of “American Antifa: The Tactics, Culture, and Practice of Militant Antifascism” (2020), concedes that “for most people Antifa is a mystery wrapped in an enigma wearing a black mask.”

This elusiveness, which appears to be by design, makes it difficult to define or even identify members of a movement that nevertheless has had an outsized impact on American society.

Yet, the black mask slips. Scholarly research and daily journalism shed light on Antifa’s ideology and its long history in the United States. Its mixture of left-wing politics and anarchist nihilism can be traced back more than 100 years.

Its modern incarnation, centered in the Pacific Northwest, features 1960s radicals, including former members of the Weather Underground, anti-racist skateboard punks who emerged in the 1980s, and younger radicals.

Their racial and ethnic makeup is uncertain, but significant numbers are white. Arrest records and other publicly available information suggest many of those identifying as Antifa are itinerant or marginally employed.

Scholars agree with Vysotsky that “antifascism is simultaneously a complex and simple political phenomenon.” It is simple in that it is an oppositional movement—it is defined by its resistance to “fascism.”

Unlike leftists, its adherents are not seeking to gain the levers of power to build a utopia. They are skeptical of state power, hence their frequent clashes with the police, and are more intent on confronting those they see as enemies.

But antifascism is also complex because fascism itself “is often an extremely murky concept,” writes Mark Bray, a history lecturer at Rutgers, self-described political organizer, and author of “The Antifa Handbook.”

To clarify what fascism is, Antifa sympathizers try to connect the American movement to a series of obscure 20th century left-wing groups that resisted the likes of Hitler, Mussolini, and Gen. Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. The leftist slogan of that war, “No pasarán” (“They shall not pass”), is often invoked by American adherents.

In general, Antifa partisans show no embarrassment from associations with leftist totalitarians. Bray notes that an Antifa-sympathizing self-defense group called the Maoist Red Guards is still active in Austin.

At the same time, Antifa activists are intensely hostile to American historical traditions.

In Portland, rioters recently smashed windows of the Oregon Historical Society, stealing and damaging a quilt made by black women to celebrate America's bicentennial. That same night, rioters tore down statues of Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt that had stood in Portland for more than a century.

While American Antifa adherents explicitly reject the First Amendment and other classically liberal ideas about free speech and assembly, they see as their spiritual ancestors 19th-century slavery abolitionists and others who fought slavery and later racism.

Bray writes that John Brown, the white man who tried to spark a slave revolt by attacking a federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in 1859, is a particular hero.

More recently, Antifa in America has drawn power from punk rock subcultures and post-1960s left-wing extremism. After white supremacists recruited disaffected youths as "skinheads" and racist "Oi" bands began to appear, countermovements formed in response.

In particular, a group of punk rockers known as the Minnesota Baldies in 1987 formed the Anti-Racist Action Network to engage in "direct action" confrontations using spray paint, crowbars, and bricks against racists in the punk scene.

Word of the group and its exploits, which sometimes involved violent skirmishes with racists, spread via underground punk publications known as "zines" and the organization spread across the country.

The Anti-Racist Action Network's anarchist and hard-left sympathies became more overt in 2013 when it was reformed as the Torch Network, sometimes known more explicitly as the Torch Antifa Network. The Torch Network today is the closest thing to an Antifa organization.

According to Torch's website, affiliated groups are "autonomous organizing bodies ... they may call themselves whatever they want, and can organize the best way they see fit." The groups that sign on to Torch do, however, agree to support the organization's five "Points of Unity":

1. We disrupt fascist and far right organizing and activity.

2. We don't rely on the cops or courts to do our work for us. This doesn't mean we never go to court, but the cops uphold white supremacy and the status quo. They attack us and everyone who resists oppression. We must rely on ourselves to protect ourselves and stop the fascists.

3. We oppose all forms of oppression and exploitation. We intend to do the hard work necessary to build a broad, strong movement of oppressed people centered on the working class against racism, sexism, nativism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and discrimination against the disabled, the oldest, the youngest, and the most oppressed people. We support abortion rights and reproductive freedom. We want a classless, free society. We intend to win!

4. We hold ourselves accountable personally and collectively to live up to our ideals and values.

5. We not only support each other within the network, but we also support people outside the network who we believe have similar aims or principles. An attack on one is an attack on all.

Ties to Terror

Beyond what is posted on the Torch Network's website, not much is known about the organization and what, if any, material support it supplies to affiliates.

Some insight came from written testimony supplied to the Senate Judiciary Committee in August by Kyle Shideler, director and senior analyst for homeland security and counterterrorism at the Center for Security Policy.

Shideler described Torch Antifa as "one of the largest regional networks of Antifa in the United States," and identified a man named Michael Novick, "the web registrar of the Torch Antifa website," as a key figure in the movement.

Novick "establishes the historic relationship between the communist guerrilla and terrorist movements of the 1970s and Antifa of today," Shideler reported. "Novick is former member of the Weather Underground terrorist group. He is a founding member of the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee and a founding member of Anti-Racist Action-Los Angeles."

The business address associated with the national Anti-Racist Action organization is Novick's home in Los Angeles. Attempts to reach him for comment were unsuccessful.

He appears to have kept up with his former domestic terrorist associates somewhat—he spoke at an Anti-Racist Action conference in 2011 alongside more notorious Weather Underground members Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn, controversial associates of former

President Barack Obama in his Chicago political rise.

Novick's affiliation with the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee, founded by Weather Underground members in 1978 and active into the 1990s, is also notable because of that organization's ties to violence.

While the John Brown group did confront Klan groups and work for various anti-racist causes, it also fought for a much broader spectrum of radical causes ranging from Puerto Rican independence to defending leftist governments in Central America at the height of the Cold War.

Three members of the John Brown group were convicted for their roles in a string of bombings in Washington and New York between 1982 and 1985—including an explosion in the U.S. Capitol building in 1983, along with explosions at three military installations in the D.C. area, and four more bombings in New York City.

Two of the three served long prison terms, but on his last day in office, President Bill Clinton commuted the 40-year sentence of the third, Linda Evans, after 13 years. Evans had also been involved with both the Weather Underground as well as the John Brown group.

Such cross-connections between groups appear to be characteristic of groups of that time, and of Antifa's loose organization today. In the book "Extremist Groups in America," published in 1990, author Susan Lang reported that the John Brown group "is thought to be a front for the May 19th Communist Organization."

That organization, which took its name from the shared birthday of Ho Chi Minh and Malcolm X, also had strong ties to the Weather Underground and was linked to the bombings.

Its most notable figure today is Susan Rosenberg, 65, who went to prison on weapons and explosives charges and for her role in helping Assata Shakur (formerly JoAnne Chesimard) escape to Cuba after her conviction as an accomplice to the murder of a New Jersey state trooper. Rosenberg's 58-year sentence was also commuted by Clinton.

Rosenberg today has a prominent tie to Black Lives Matter, not Antifa. She is vice chair of Thousand Island Currents, the fiscal sponsor of the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, which received millions in corporate donations after George Floyd's death while in custody of the Minneapolis police.

The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation itself was founded by self-described "trained Marxists" who established a relationship with Venezuela's radical left-wing government.

Foreign actors may play a role enabling Antifa's domestic violence, Shideler says. "In 2019 Novick travelled to Cuba as part of the 50th Venceremos Brigade, showing the substantial continuity of these movements," he notes in his Senate testimony.

Rosenberg has also been a participant in the Cuban Venceremos Brigades, founded by leftist radicals in 1969 to forge ties with communist Cuba. It has often served as a recruitment program for Cuban intelligence and fomented radicalism within the U.S.

Anarchy in the USA

While Antifa can be placed in the tradition of left-wing extremist violence, it is also influenced by anarchic political movements. Antifa's imagery is red and black—red representing communist and syndicalist sympathies, while black symbolizes a commitment to anarchy.

Loosely speaking, anarchists seek to dissolve governments and abolish all use of forced compliance, reorganizing society according to principles of mutual cooperation.

Anarchy also helps explain why Antifa is so prevalent in Portland and the Pacific Northwest generally. The area has strong historical ties to anarchists.

An anarchist community in Washington state around the turn of the 20th century briefly gained infamy after President William McKinley was assassinated by an anarchist. More recently, anarchist philosophy was foundational to the eco-terrorist movement that's been active in Oregon since the 1970s.

According to Portland State University history professor Marc Rodriguez, contemporary Antifa grew out of the 1999 riots at the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, when a subset of black-masked protesters used the cover of a larger protest to engage in violent destruction.

Though the Antifa label was not in wide use—the first American group calling itself Antifa would emerge in Boston in 2002—the anarchist influence was well-understood at the time.

There is little doubt that over several decades an anarchist “scene” in the Pacific Northwest has been fertile ground for left-wing radicalism, and that helps explain why Portland and Seattle are the locus of so much Antifa activity.

Antifa groups make most major tactical decisions by democratic vote, while tolerating individual decisions to engage in action presumably consistent with the group ethos. “Militant antifascist practices ... are frequently spontaneous, decentralized, and directly democratic,” notes Vysotsky.

There's also quite a lot of overlap between anarchism and communist ideologies.

“For the most part, you're looking at an ideology of autonomism, which is bottom-up Marxist organizing rather than a top-down Leninist vanguard organizing. This was an ideology that came out of Italy and Germany in the late 60s, early 70s,” Shideler says.

“It was influential with the Red Brigades and the Red Army Faction, and you still see this in their language. When they talk about autonomous action or setting up an autonomous zone, that’s what they’re referring to.”

A dramatic example of this approach was evident this summer when protesters established an autonomous zone in downtown Seattle after the mayor forced police to abandon a precinct. The lawless zone quickly became a hub for violence and two African American men were slain inside its boundaries.

The lack of formal hierarchy inside Antifa affinity groups and their model of “leaderless resistance” may have Marxist and anarchic ideological origins, but this same phantom cell structure makes it similar to how more commonly understood terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda commonly operate.

At protests, Antifa stalwarts carry weapons and coordinate their actions on the ground in order to evade law enforcement and do maximum damage.

“They communicate in large Signal chat rooms, an encrypted peer-to-peer app,” said Andy Ngo, a Portland-based journalist who has been covering Antifa for several years. “They also use hand signals, they have walkie-talkie devices, and scouts who watch where the police are and provide real-time updates.”

Antifa openly and broadly share strategic and tactical intelligence. After a precinct in Minneapolis was overrun in the riots earlier this year, the Antifa-friendly website CrimethInc published a [detailed after-action report](#) where anonymous “participants in the uprising in Minneapolis in response to the murder of George Floyd explore how a combination of different tactics compelled the police to abandon the Third Precinct.”

Antifa groups may operate and make decisions according to unusual principles, but they are organized and can coordinate quite effectively.

Defining Fascism Down

Antifa’s exceedingly broad definition of fascism (in Portland it includes the Republican Party), combined with left-wing and anarchist ideology that regards basic law enforcement illegitimate, serves to justify some especially radical beliefs. For one, Antifa adherents believe their opponents have no right to speech or assembly and must be confronted and shut down wherever they appear.

“The Antifa Handbook” has an entire chapter offering up a series of defenses for “no platforming” Antifa opponents.

“Militant antifascism refuses to engage in terms of debate that developed out of the precepts of classical liberalism that undergird both ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ positions in the United States,” Bray writes.

“Instead of privileging allegedly ‘neutral’ universal rights, anti-fascists prioritize the political project of destroying fascism and protecting the vulnerable regardless of whether their actions are considered violations of the free speech of fascists or not.”

Other rationales for rejecting free speech rest on embracing anarchy: “The false assumption that the United States maximizes free speech rests on the unstated fact that this right only applies to non-incarcerated citizens,” he adds. “In contrast, antiauthoritarians seek to abolish prisons, states, and the very notion of citizenship—thereby eliminating this black hole of rightlessness.”

Bray justifies this position by arguing that broad denial of free speech rights is necessary to prevent latter-day Hitlers from arising.

“At the heart of the anti-fascist outlook is a rejection of the classical liberal phrase incorrectly ascribed to Voltaire that ‘I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it,’” he writes. “After Auschwitz and Treblinka, anti-fascists committed themselves to fighting to the death the ability of organized Nazis to say anything.”

As a result of this purported vigilance, Bray observes, Anti-Racist Action and Antifa have been a “victim of their own success” in that the last 20 years have seen a marked decline in once sizable and influential white supremacist organizations.

He even quotes a New Jersey Antifa member saying, “At a certain point the biggest group was the National Socialist Movement, with just 80 dudes doing reenactments.”

If the numbers of actual fascists are waning, why has Antifa violence exploded this year? One answer is that Antifa portrays the Trump presidency as a threat. “No Trump—No KKK—No Fascist USA!” has become “the most popular anti-Trump chant” at protests, Bray writes.

More problematic is the way this anti-Trump sentiment has resulted in attacks on ordinary voters and local political organizations.

In 2017, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler canceled an annual parade in the city after “antifascists” threatened violence because the Multnomah County GOP was marching in the parade.

“You have seen how much power we have downtown and that the police cannot stop us from shutting down roads so please consider your decision wisely,” read the threat sent to the city.

The larger goal of Antifa is an end to negotiated politics where political dissent is met with intimidation and punishment.

“Our goal should be that in twenty years those who voted for Trump are too uncomfortable to share that fact in public,” writes Bray. “We may not always be able to change someone’s beliefs, but we sure as hell can make it politically, socially, economically, and sometimes

physically costly to articulate them.”

Justifying Violence

Antifa members fetishize and celebrate their violence.

“One of the more shocking aspects of militant antifascist culture for observers outside of the movement is the consumption and trade of violent images,” Vysotsky notes. “Pictures of being beaten or bloodied in addition to memes that extol the virtue of antifascist violence or mock injured fascists are a common element of antifa culture.” Such pictures are known as “riot porn.”

In addition to actual violence, threats are another key part of Antifa’s toolbox. The group is a proponent of “doxxing”—internet slang for exposing someone’s name and/or personal information in order to shame and intimidate them.

The results of such vigilantism are predictable.

After left-wing activists in Portland solicited the names of “non-friendly” businesses that didn’t support the Black Lives Matter movement online, an Antifa-affiliated Twitter account alleged that Heroes American Café in Portland, which has American flag décor and pictures of various American heroes on the wall, supported local police.

The owner of Heroes Café, an African American veteran, soon got a threatening phone call. A few days after that, his windows were smashed and bullets were fired into his restaurant during a protest billed as a “Day of Rage.”

In broader ways, Antifa’s embrace of violence makes adherents remarkably similar to the violent racist extremists and alt-right groups they claim to oppose.

Both groups use self-justifications for violence that vastly overstate a threat from within broader society. They both rely on tribal identitarian politics to enforce a purity of ideology that is incompatible with the existing cultural and political order that they hope to overthrow.

Antifa’s beliefs regarding violence appear to plainly meet the definition of domestic terrorism in federal law, defined as activities done “to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.”

Downplaying the Threat

Observers sympathetic to social justice goals express concern that Antifa violence is counterproductive.

“I think [Antifa] also need to understand how difficult they may be making the situation for the promotion of Black Lives Matter in this time where black people are really trying to make some headway,” Portland State University sociologist and black studies professor Shirley Jackson told a local television station last month.

Public opinion seems to bolster Jackson’s worries that violence at protests is impeding the larger goals of racial justice. Last month, Pew reported support for Black Lives Matter had dropped significantly since June, and the “findings come as confrontations between protesters and police have escalated.”

Despite this, political leadership is often afraid or unwilling to crackdown on Antifa. Major police departments across the country have been hamstrung and asked to stand down in the face of ongoing violent riots. Antifa may consider Wheeler a tyrant, but the city dropped 90% of charges against rioters in September.

Despite the city tolerating violent riots, Wheeler is up for reelection in November and is currently tied in the polls with challenger Sarah Iannarone, who has publicly declared, “I am Antifa.”

In 2016, when Iannarone previously ran for mayor, she tweeted out a photo of a ballot of a constituent who had voted for her but had elsewhere written in Josef Stalin, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, Angela Davis, and other violent Marxists for city offices. Iannarone remarked the ballot was, “Quite possibly my favorite ‘I voted this way’ photo.”

Far from creating pressure to achieve specific political reforms related to racial injustice or police violence, Antifa appears to be using this moment to further press its radical political agenda on a national stage.

A group called Shutdown DC has been distributing a 38-page guide called “Stopping the Coup” that offers specific guidance on how to disrupt the national election in November, should it be contested, in order to stop Trump, “who is energized by the forces of white supremacy and brutal capitalism.”

The “Stopping the Coup” document disavows violence, but Shutdown DC has not shied away from working closely with affinity groups such as All Out DC, a “collective of DC antifascist activists” who want to “burn down the American plantation” when organizing major protests in the nation’s capital.

In the meantime, two high-profile election simulations done by mainstream political groups—the Transition Integrity Project on the left and the Texas Public Policy Foundation in conjunction with the Claremont Institute on the right—both found a high likelihood of Antifa violence following November’s election.

Regardless of whether Antifa is most accurately described as broad ideology or a unified movement, the threat it presents to disrupting the democratic elections and enforcing basic law and order is tangible.

Originally published by RealClearInvestigations

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