On the Ideology of Antifascism

Dan Diner; Christian Gundermann


Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0094-033X%28199624%290%3C123%3AOTIOA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-O

New German Critique is currently published by New German Critique.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/ngc.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
On the Ideology of Antifascism

Dan Diner

The demise of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) goes hand in hand with putting to rest its own ideological justification, namely antifascism. The GDR's demise ironically and belatedly confirms the GDR's materialist self-interpretation: the decline of the (self-declared) socialist state invalidates the theoretical foundation formerly affirmed as true. At the very least, the GDR's passing, its raison-d'être — an intended antifascism — has therefore proved to be historically erroneous. In fact, this very radical proof — the annihilation of a state which justified its existence philosophically — was hardly needed to convict worn-out antifascism of being an ideological lie. From the very onset, it was as erroneous as it was desperately needed. A paradoxical reversal: the GDR's collective project claimed an identity that was opposed to the fascist experience of its German population (and that was therefore fictitious), and this identity functioned predominantly as a way of denying the actual national socialist past. Thus the core event of National Socialism — the killing of millions in extermination camps — was fundamentally skirted, or at least the extent to which it was considered was not nearly appropriate. In any case, the philosophical premise of this antifascist identity ricocheted off the extermination of millions, and the ideologically motivated interpretation of National Socialism remained, at best, highly insufficient.

The obvious denial in the GDR's antifascist foundation is illuminated by a cruelly honest reality that does not end with mere recognition. The damage caused by this existential untruthfulness far exceeds the immediate impact of such a web of lies. Thus the truth of national
socialist crimes, which has — like mass extermination — been disavowed, must vie with the collective denial in the conscience of those who have been misled by this pervasive antifascist sham \([\textit{Lebensläufe}]\). Even though it was omitted, mass extermination fell prey to the erosive effect of an interpretive context that read every single element of national socialist rule as fascism. In this way, the past is doubly obstructed: first, by the officially validated party ideology that interpreted National Socialism as fascism; second, by the defense connected to the fundamental disavowal of antifascism, the defense against all that which used to be part of the — now officially denied — dominant ideology, including the mass extermination.

The consequences of the demise of the antifascist identity are not restricted to the territory of the former GDR. They make themselves felt as well among those who — despite all criticism of and distance from the other German state — had defined themselves through antifascist certainties in the old Federal Republic. Left-wing identity, whatever its provenance, simply cannot help being afflicted by the GDR’s crime. The decaying collective body of the GDR and its historical justification — antifascism — appear to exude a venom which infests all those who feel — however idiosyncratically — to be part of this system of legitimation. Such an incisive effect of historical denial sheds light on the fundamental significance of that which grounds all antifascism, no matter how much those who profess it may define themselves in opposition to the GDR.

What, then, is antifascism — that core of left-wing consciousness — which in Germany more than anywhere else assumed such an important role in forging an identity \([\textit{identitätsstiftende Bedeutung}]\)? The political and historical interpretive force of this formula seems to have such tremendous weight that one simply cannot approach it from its position of worth or worthlessness with respect to orthodox theory of fascism. The latter assumes a quasi-organic connection between capital, capitalist crisis, and fascist rule, which, in order to initiate a social transformation into socialism, needs to be fought in the form of either open fascism or the potential fascism implicit in bourgeois society. The semantic and political iconography of antifascism after 1945, however, particularly in the Soviet-Occupied Zone/GDR, is of a different ilk. By virtue of a context in which National Socialism was interpreted as fascist, as well as because of the specific circumstances of its military
defeat also and above all by the Soviet Union, a conceptual shift has occurred from which antifascism emerges, especially in Germany, as an ethical category. Although the term is still used to evaluate politically the historical occurrences of the period of fascism, it receives its true vocation only as a term describing the period after 1945.

Semantically, this conceptual shift causes two elements to be pulled into the term’s gravitational field. First, it effects a fundamental change in the way the Soviet Union is perceived after its victory over Nazi Germany: its socialist constitution moves backstage whereas the significance of its military triumph over an enemy whose threat is self-evident both on a national and a philosophical level is foregrounded — a two-fold victory over both fascism and Germany. Secondly, the GDR’s understanding of antifascism is based on the notion of certain material preconditions that are supposed to keep fascism from returning and that can be safeguarded without actually striving for socialism. This affirms a broad alliance of diverse social and political forces, leading to the concept of so called “bloc-parties.”

The first component of this new concept of antifascism imposed itself in the form of an attitude toward the Soviet Union that ordained May 1945 and subsequently October 1917 as the core of a new identity. It granted the Soviet Union a postwar bonus [Nachkriegsbonus] far beyond the circle of Communist Party members. From the German perspective, there are once again two elements coupled in this solidarity with the Soviet Union: on the one hand, there is the thoroughly national component of a collective confession of guilt for the 1941 assault on the Soviet Union and the subsequent war of annihilation led by Nazi Germany. This confession of guilt was incorporated into a collective memory when World War II was brought into interpretive connection with World War I in an attempt to criticize society. Both wars were interpreted as the outcome of imperialist aggression, obliterating — in line with national intent — all difference between the two wars in favor of a perspective motivated by Soviet patriotism. This German guilt, or rather this guilt of the ruling classes — as well as the allegedly identical war goals of Wilhelmism and Hitlerism — obscured the obvious differences between the German and the Russian regimes as well as between the diverging German intentions in the two wars, not to mention the disparities in specific conduct. The mere fact that in both wars Germany acted upon Russia does not make these two phenomena
historically identical. This leveling perspective of Soviet patriotism, and the antifascism derived from it, obliterates significant historical differences, particularly since questions of national continuity and the Soviet perspective on the “Great Patriotic War” reach further into the past and thus inextricably link the antifascist pathos to the fate of the Soviet Union in its Russian pre-history. This perspective erects the year 1945 as the central focus of a historical evaluation, crushing under its weight more recent German-Russian history.

The post-1945 importance of the victory of Soviet weapons over national socialist Germany — simultaneously over the nation and the regime — is further enhanced by a mostly practical, historico-philosophical element which helped develop the antifascist identity as a pattern to interpret the world at large. From a communist or pro-communist perspective, the victory of Soviet weapons means not only the just outcome of a just war, but also the actual triumph of an obviously superior social formation over one which has become historically obsolete. Therefore, the Soviet Union’s victory corroborates both the superiority of the socialist system and the historico-teleological interpretation of reality connected with it. No mature materialist epistemology was needed. Reality was intuitively lent the weight of a historiosophical divine judgment [historiosophisches Gottesurteil].

Thanks to the Soviet Union’s postwar bonus, whatever the reasoning behind it, antifascism in the German context implies a benevolent attitude toward this country and its system. Whether or not an antiwestern affect was operative here as well shall not be this essay’s concern. In any case, the influence of the antifascist mentality exceeded by far the camp of political antifascism proper. Its consequences are manifold; one of its most fateful ones was philo-sovietism, that erratic complex which stubbornly denied stalinist crimes.

Such an extensive denial may be due to the erroneous concern that merely recognizing those crimes would justify National Socialism and fascism — that a Soviet flaw would turn into a bonus point for Hitler. Such Manichaean reasoning is, after all, the outcome of a specifically German historical experience: in Weimar, fascism and bolshevism were facing each other as in a civil war. And unlike in any other country, the domination by one was followed by the rule of the other, if only in one part of the (divided) country. Due to this immediacy the discourses around both regimes and their ideological terms have carved themselves
into everyday culture. They find expression in ideologically charged comparisons; mutual ways of holding the other responsible represent avenues of discharge for those caught up in these discourses. On the one hand, from the early Federal Republic’s perspective, the apex of this development was the comparison — via the theory of totalitarianism — between the GDR and the “Third Reich”; on the other hand, marxist-leninist fascism theory situated the Federal Republic in a logical and historical continuity with fascism.

The GDR’s official antifascism, in other words, linked together two central elements: first, a steadfast loyalty sworn to the Soviet Union that continued to feed upon the postwar bonus of the Soviet victory over fascism; secondly, the material preconditions, anchored in social politics, to prevent all that was deemed to be a prerequisite of fascist rule, notably “imperialism,” “militarism,” and “revanchism.” Antifascist coalitions in the people’s republics of eastern Europe, particularly in the former GDR, that laid claim to this ideology, justified the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production not so much with the extension of socialism as with an all-encompassing antifascist consent. The “destruction of monopolies,” the nationalization of land ownership of the lower nobility and so on, was directed less along the lines of socialist planning than in agreement with the assumptions of communist fascism theory, since the latter had postulated that the ruling classes were directly responsible for Hitler’s coming to power, for his rule, and for the war. Social measures to prevent fascism and war thus enabled all “legitimate” parties in the GDR to form what was considered to be a basic antifascist coalition without having to subscribe to socialism. Antifascism as the GDR’s official doctrine, then, made it possible to combine elements of communist social theory and practice, all with a specifically German perspective on the Soviet Union’s victory and its historical implications. In this sense, the GDR defined itself not so much as an explicitly socialist, but rather as an eminently antifascist state [Gemeinwesen]. Due to this antifascist profession, it understood itself to be the antithesis both of Hitler Germany and of the Federal Republic, which was prone to a return of fascist rule because of its capitalist social order. The critique of the western state made use of antifascist rhetoric based on notions of economic continuity. The continuity of the elites further supported this argument. The polemical and exaggerated comment about the role of the Globkes and Oberländer in the
On the Ideology of Antifascism

political structure of the Federal Republic was convincing because the personal continuity seemed to corroborate the structural one. Such over-generalizing defamation of the Federal Republic, however, did little more than trivialize National Socialism.

Denouncing the western state as prone to fascist rule made the left of the Federal Republic — critical of communism though it may have been — susceptible to antifascist reasoning. The West German left found itself in an unintentional, yet historico-philosophically comparable, complicity with the GDR; this is not of marginal importance, since this claim is pivotal for the West German left in constituting its political identity. The GDR was considered literally to be the better Germany, despite the West German left’s distancing and despite the fact that the GDR was not as well off as the former Federal Republic. This literalness symbolized the concealed umbilical chord that linked the West German left to the GDR. It is, then, hardly surprising that the West German left was affected by the venom of the latter’s putrefaction — no matter how much the West German left disassociated itself from the system of “real socialism.”

Antifascism was the GDR’s official “state doctrine.” The term implies that the polity legitimated itself solely on the basis of historical philosophy. The sovereign and the executive of the political will was not the state’s people, but rather historical images cast into consciousness which — in the manner of a foundational myth — referred at once back to the fascist past and its monopolized interpretation as well as forward to a utopian hope for the future. Legitimacy based on an ethos that had grown historically was not merely foreign to the GDR, it was in fact diametrically opposed to its synthetic identity. Even though the GDR had its own phases of German nationalistic excess, the legitimacy of the polity was essentially based on a humanitarian construct. Agreeable as such a universalist construct may appear, a polity based exclusively on political goals, loses its right to exist once its basis of legitimacy, a specific past and its interpretation (fascism/antifascism) as well as a redeeming future (communism), collapses. Unlike the GDR, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and other “socialist” states did not cease to exist as political collectives after the collapse of communism. The GDR had no obliging raison d’être other than the interpretation of the national socialist past as fascism. After all, it understood itself as the only appropriate historical and political response to German fascism.
For the GDR, a specific interpretation of fascism buttressing its own ideology was quite simply existential, while the Federal Republic—despite all claims to the contrary—understood itself more as a purified and redeemed Weimar Republic. National Socialism and the conclusions to be drawn from the experience of fascism did not determine its general orientation. Rather, the “founding fathers” of the “Bonn Republic” aspired to avoid making the very mistakes that—according to dominant interpretations of history—had led to the downfall of the first republic. Of course, this interpretation of history also functions as a supra-constitution here: for example, the assumption codified in the West German constitution (a constitution hardened by the experience of Weimar) that Weimar fell prey equally to right- and left-wing radicals. The difference between this and the GDR’s antifascism as a basis of legitimation, however, is that, in the case of the Federal Republic, we see an interpretation of history seeking hegemony, not an existentially binding historico-philosophical premise as official state dogma.

To legitimate oneself exclusively on a theory of history is indeed shaky [schütterer Grund]. This weakness explains why any interrogation of the antifascist core of the GDR’s polity had to be defended against so virulently—especially when such interrogations described German fascism predominantly as National Socialism. The field of history was thus the GDR’s first line of defense, especially contemporary history, and here, in particular, the historiography of National Socialism as fascism. The polity was defended primarily along two axes: first, the aforementioned dogmatic assumption that the fascist party had in no way been independent, but rather had acted as capital’s henchman. Fascism was therefore seen as a derivative phenomenon. Intricately linked, yet quite independent of this line of defense, is the second axis, which was—because of its precarious implications—never openly proclaimed: the refusal to interpret the “final solution” beyond economic reasoning [jenseits ökonomischer Deutungen].

This is not to say that national socialist mass extermination itself was denied in the GDR and in the context of its antifascist identity. After all, the GDR’s collective project was based on a dogma which, in turn, was erected on the meaning of this past for the present and the future. And yet, the constant and institutionalized reference to this past, the memory of fascism on which the state was predicated, disavowed the specific circumstances of mass extermination by means of a memorial
that was calibrated in antifascist terms. The specific circumstances were shunted to the margins of perception by the economistic view that monopolized the interpretation of the event’s context. This resulted in a striking paradox: any comment on national socialist mass extermination as a core event of German fascism that transcended economic relevance not only meant a deviation from the dogmatic understanding of history, but was ultimately also felt to be an attack on the basic historical assumptions of the GDR’s collective project.

Understanding national socialist mass extermination as a significant core event beyond all other elements crucial for the antifascist consciousness — like the persecution of the Nazis’ political enemies or forced and slave labor practiced to the point of death of the people subjected to it — was not only contrary to the official concept of history in the GDR; it also constituted a fundamental threat to the dogmas of the polity that fixated upon the ordinary conception of fascism. The memory of groups of victims who had been stigmatized and murdered by the Nazis — neither because of political resistance nor for economic exploitation, but merely because of their origin — clashed with the GDR’s semiofficial identity and its foundational antifascism. This distinction had consequences as well for the reality of the national socialist constellation of concentration camps: political prisoners tried to eschew dangerous confrontations that might have cost them their lives in order to preserve their cadres for later. By contrast, those victims stigmatized for their origin were condemned to die irrespective of their behavior and were therefore forced to act without consideration for their life and the future. The drama of these contrary realities precipitates in memory [Gedächtnis]: the antifascist interpretation of the national socialist past, along with the antifascist political conclusions drawn from this past, opposed remembering the negative radical core of mass extermination — extermination beyond all economic utilization or political oppression was to be ignored. The primacy of antifascism ultimately stripped Auschwitz of its core.

Historical memory in the GDR — limited by antifascism — was reduced to political resistance and its economic equivalent: the theory of monopoly. Thus the glorification of the Communist Party’s (KPD’s) resistance correlates with the theories of fascism and of monopoly on the level of interpretation. In line with its historico-philosophical intent, mythologized KPD history and its associated teleology (“after Hitler —
us!”) found their territorialized manifestation in the polity of the GDR [Gemeinwesen der DDR]. Such a historical construction and the reality of the socialist German state bound up with it would have consequences for the political identity of West Germany’s left as well.

This left, critical of communism, of course articulated serious reservations about the GDR. The reality of the socialist state was univocally denounced as a political betrayal of the socialist idea and its vision. Nevertheless, criticism was exercised with considerable reserve — and not only because the GDR knew how to disseminate that antifascist illusion about itself, an illusion that should not be underestimated. Much stronger than the pressure for antifascist solidarity was what preceded it, notably the analysis — obliging for the entire left — of National Socialism as fascism, which produced an almost self-constituting effect. One could be legitimate as a “lefty” in a materialist sense only if one accepted the interpretation of fascism as an integral part of capitalism. Mandatory agreement as a theoretical ticket was so all-encompassing that this interpretation legitimated virtually all social phenomena and strategic calculations.

An interpretation of German fascism that placed mass extermination outside the framework of economic understanding was bound to be perceived as a menace — such interpretations were hardly seen as a pliable tool in the hands of the political adversary. Rather, it was sensed intuitively that the dissolution of the causal link between capitalism and fascism — and the related economic explanation of national socialist mass extermination — would raise once again the issue of individual guilt and responsibility as a collective problem in Germany. But above and beyond this, there was another threat lurking behind any refutation of the alleged fundamental link between economic utility and national socialist mass extermination. Such a refutation would also obliterate optimistic historico-philosophical premises as such. Especially after 1945, the interpretation of National Socialism as fascism — proclaimed both by the communist and the independent left — offered an optimistic, progress-oriented perspective that all were more than eager to adopt. All this after the radical historical denial “Auschwitz.” The horror was, then, all the more to be brought under control: the eerie indication that Auschwitz meant the end of all optimistic historical philosophy; the fact that trust — whatever shape it may take — in moral teleological assumptions had become obsolete, was understood
On the Ideology of Antifascism

as an assault on individual as well as political identity and was countered with corresponding anger.

Antifascism offered shelter against such interpretations — felt to be theoretically presumptuous — of "Auschwitz" beyond all economic utilitarianism. Mass extermination could be read as the doing of certain classes, particularly historically declining classes; actual and alleged fascists could be showcased for one's own political certainty; this political idiosyncrasy was actually carried through for internal security: society divided itself up into good and evil, into friend and foe along the antifascist line. And this approach was not limited to Germany — it was harnessed to transcend the familiar cultural and political horizon in order to understand the world at large in a rationalist scheme. Yet all this seems to have ended once and for all. The decline of the GDR entailed the demise of the antifascist ideology. The claim, however, to the national socialist past as a foil against which to project one's own identity propels the demise of this basis of legitimation far beyond the circle of its former practitioners. The denial of the antifascist monopoly in interpreting the past seems to afflict that very past itself. . . .

Translated by Christian Gundermann