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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The invisible 'Antifa-Ost'. The struggles of anti-hegemonic engagement in East Germany

Christin Jänicke
WZB – Berlin Social Science Center

ABSTRACT: More than 30 years after the end of the GDR, there is still an East-West divide in society, which is also reflected in current German antifa movements. In recent years, the perception of the East has once again become more closely associated with and shaped by the far right. Although the debate about the growth of the far right in the East is not new, we know little about its impact on antifascist resistance. In this article, I demonstrate that today's East-German Antifa finds itself in an ambivalent relationship between recognising and fighting the right-wing hegemony on the one hand, and on the other, evoking a positive reference to the East that emphasises the resistances of antifascist civil society and opposes stigmatisation. Activists evoke historical narratives and common struggles in reaction to the successes of the far right in the region and the re-emergence of homogenising media discourse surrounding the so-called 'Brown East'. The latter reduces the far right to solely a problem of the eastern part of Germany. I argue that activist focus on East Germany functions primarily as a resource to counter the specific far-right movements in the region. Secondly, it serves as an empowerment intended to raise the visibility of antifascist activities, which have been rendered invisible by the discourse surrounding the 'Brown East'. My findings are based on a qualitative content analysis of a public debate in Berlin's Zionskirche in 2021. The results show how shared experiences of marginalisation, othering, and derogation as East Germans can be situated within a broader discourse around the East.

KEYWORDS: antifascism, far right, hegemony, memory, social movement

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: christin.jaenicke@wzb.eu

1. Introduction

Germany, with its National Socialist past, is often used as a reference when studying fascism and antifascism in its historical dimension. However, Germany is also an intriguing case for contemporary antifascism, given that two distinct movements emerged at the end of the Cold War in two separate German states – the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the East and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the West. The East German[1] Antifa movement offers a unique case because of its origin in opposition to a so-called antifascist state. Moreover, the East today is particularly prevalent in the public eye regarding the far right.

Research on independent Antifa in the GDR (Weiß 2015) and East Germany has only existed for a few years (e.g. Jänicke and Paul-Siewert 2017; Lühmann 2021). The origins of the movement were often overlooked by both researchers and activists due to the widespread assumption of a shared movement history with West Germany. As a result, the independent development of the East German Antifa movement was largely ignored (in summary Jänicke and Paul-Siewert 2017, 16 f.). Although there has recently been a growing international strand of research on historical (e.g. Staid 2020; Angermann, Binz, Karwarth, and Müller 2022a) and contemporary antifascism (e.g. Bray 2017; Braskén, Copsey, and Lundin 2019; Braskén, Copsey, and Featherstone 2021; Angermann, Binz, Karwarth, and Müller 2022b), we do not yet know much about what this East-West divide means for the Antifa movement and their identity formation after the end of the GDR. We also know little about how the debate about the far right in the East affects antifascist resistance.

To address this puzzle, I discuss the role of historical narratives and common struggles in the East German Antifa movement and ask how today's activists relate to East Germany more than 30 years after the fall of the GDR. The underlying assumption is that the reference to an East German space of experience within the movement is a reaction to the electoral successes of the far right in East Germany, as well as to the resurgent media discourse surrounding the so-called 'Brown East' ('Brauner Osten'), which reduces the far right to a problem only for the eastern part of Germany. This characterisation overlooks or actively ignores antifascist resistance in the public discourse, rendering those who are actively opposing the far right invisible.

The central thesis of this article is that a focus on East Germany serves firstly to develop agency in countering a specific East German far right, and secondly to empower antifascist activities that are made invisible in the discourse of the 'Brown East'. Furthermore, the article highlights how the shared experiences of othering and devaluation as East Germans can be seen within a broader discourse in East Germany.

My analysis focuses on a public debate within the Antifa movement two years ago, which provides insights into the ongoing debate on how to counter the far right in the East: In November 2021, antifascist activists came together at Berlin's Zionskirche, a church in East Berlin, to discuss the topic of right-wing hegemony and antifascist activism in East Germany. The title "What do we do now? Is there just chasm and hopelessness in the East?" suggests that the antifascist movement is on the defensive after electoral successes of the far right. The choice of the venue commemorates the attack by neo-Nazis on concertgoers in 1987, which can be understood as the "birth of the Antifa in the GDR" (Jänicke, Paul-Siewert, and Wolf 2021).

Employing a qualitative content analysis, I examine what was said and what was referred to at the panel discussion at the Zionskirche – and how it can be understood concerning the larger discourse surrounding the far right and antifascist resistance in East Germany. The event is significant because it is one of the few public spaces that reflects the movement's debate about the specifics in East Germany. With its historical reference to the Zionskirche it explicitly places itself in an East German narrative. During the debate, campaigns and groups were mentioned as examples of engagement focused on East Germany. The self-representations of these actors are included in the analysis as additional material.

Contributing to emerging research on current antifascism and social movements in the 21st century, the article provides new material and analyses of identity, narratives and memory based on the East German Antifa

[1] I use East Germany for the historically and politically shaped area after 1990 on the territory of the former GDR.

movement. It adds to the debate of an East German identity, which is currently being reinvigorated[2], and may initiate a discussion about similarities and differences compared to other countries for an English-speaking audience. Furthermore, knowing about the movement's history is interesting for researchers dealing with counteraction as well as for activists themselves. For the latter, reflecting on their history strengthens the antifascist movement against the far right.

Beginning with the research on antifascism in (East-)Germany, the article provides a brief insight into research on (East German) identity in social movements. In the main chapter that follows, I present the results of my case study, which include 1. the effects of invisibility and negation of antifascist resistance in the debate on the far right in the East, 2. the rediscovery of the movement's contradictory origin in a seemingly 'antifascist' state, and 3. current examples of how antifascist activism tries to become visible in East Germany. Finally, I conclude that Antifa in the East has an ambivalent relationship to East Germany and East German identity. On the one hand, they recognize the problem of a strong far right; on the other hand, they defend themselves against stigmatisation and the resulting invisibility of their commitment.

2. Research on antifascism and East German identity

The second section briefly reviews the research on the Antifa movement in (East-)Germany. To understand the ambivalent relation of today's activists to East Germany, I then introduce work from social movement and East-German-Research on identity, narratives and memory.

2.1 Antifascism in Germany

Contemporary manifestation of the German Antifa movement originated in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the old FRG, activists of the radical left began to devote more time to antifascism and to militantly fighting Nazis. At the end of the 1980s, the first independent Antifa groups formed in the GDR. As an intersection of different social movements and youth cultures, activists organised not only in explicit Antifa groups but were also active in the GDR opposition and had connections to the environmental, peace, and third world movements as well as to the squatter scene (Jänicke and Paul-Siewert 2017, 8 f.). To this day, the boundaries between organising in explicit Antifa groups and other actors are blurry, especially in rural areas. Researchers agree that 'Antifa' is a heterogeneous term (Jänicke and Paul-Siewert 2017; Schuhmacher 2017a). The movement consists of various scenes and subcultures. In many cities, informal, self-organised groups are held together symbolically. Their organisational form, political orientation and thematic focus of activism vary. It also includes formal organisations such as antifascist archives, magazines, cultural and youth centres and (formerly) squatted houses. In a broader sense, the Antifa movement contains also counselling services on far-right issues and those affected by right-wing violence, and documentation centres tracking right-wing activities. Many of these organisations were established from 2000 onwards and supported through state funding programmes and are therefore pejoratively referred to by activists as "State Antifa" (Burschel, Schubert, and Wiegel 2013). Therefore, following the political scientist Schuhmacher (2013, 51 f.), 'Antifa' is understood as a collective term that includes "different currents, political approaches and structures of action".

[2] Most recently, Dirk Oschmann's book "Der Osten - eine Erfindung des Westens" (The East - an Invention of the West) (2023) heated up the debate about East German characteristics and identity. Although the book contains no new theses, its angry, polemical language has made it very popular in East Germany. Even before that, various books on the East described or wished to create a new "Ostbewusstsein" (East consciousness) (Schönian 2020).

After over 40 years of Antifa in the FRG, researchers and activists took an in-depth look at its history. Over the past few years, publications on the left-wing and antifascist movement in Germany have emerged. Most of them have sought to provide a comprehensive history or looked at individual aspects or currents. What they had in common was that they described the years 1989/90 as the turning point for the Antifa. However, little attention was paid to the Antifa movement in East Germany, which had already begun to form in the declining GDR. Instead, the assumption was made that the development of the Antifa had occurred as part of a broader movement with origins in West Germany. Moreover, in previous publications, the East German movement's characteristics only appeared marginally, fragmented and without systematisation (in summary Jänicke and Paul-Siewert 2022). Yet, there are so many details to be told: for example, how Antifa activists in the East distanced themselves from the antifascist doctrine of the GDR[3], while Western Antifas referred positively to the GDR or the state party SED.

2.2 East German identity

The recurring debate about East German identity has been expanded, at the latest since the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2019, by new identity offerings from parliamentary and extra-parliamentary far right as the "East German avantgarde" (apabiz 2019, 2; also Begrich 2022). The social scientists Decker, Kiess, and Brähler (2023) investigate the influence of East German identity on far-right political attitudes. Their results indicate that East German identity contributes only minimally to explaining far-right attitudes in East Germany; rather the influence of authoritarian longings is much stronger (Decker et al. 2023, 25 f.). Social scientist Hascher (2023) uses interviews to show the importance of referring to East Germany for a leftist: Hascher concludes that East German identity influences political consciousness. In this context, confrontation with the far right plays a central role in the formation of political consciousness and identity.

The analysis of the Antifa movement in the East benefits from ethnographic and sociological research on East Germany and identification as East Germans (e.g. Heft 2018; Kubiak 2020). Even more than 30 years after the fall of the Wall, the East-West difference is a structural category in Germany. It is not only the experiences in the former GDR but also the post-socialist influence that can be observed in the younger 'post-reunification generation' born after the 1990s (Kubiak 2020, 37). First, they are shaped by the experiences of their parents and their grandparents in the GDR, by biographical discontinuities (e.g. due to unemployment or moving away), by a socialisation in post-GDR kindergarten and school, as well as by media representations. Secondly, they shared the experience of being addressed as a collective group to which negative characteristics are attributed. These include derogatory jokes about East Germans, the attribution of right-wing extremism, or the one-sided portrayal of the GDR in history lessons, which is characterised by the secret service *Stasi*, the state-party SED, and dictatorship, but does not address everyday culture (Kubiak 2020, 37). A third aspect Kubiak highlighted is a form of othering of East Germans, where the West is the norm and the East the deviation. As one of Kubiak's interviewees in reference to Simone de Beauvoir said, "one is not born an East German but is made an East German" because of derogation and the othering: Thus, experiences of derogation become the "catalyst of identification" (Kubiak 2020, 37).

Social movement scholars Della Porta and Diani (2020, 99) emphasise that identity is not fixed or persistent. This is especially true for Antifa because, as described above, it is understood as a heterogeneous collective term. Therefore, this case study is a snapshot of the current debate. Analysing identity is also limited because the memories are selective, and the choice of examples is influenced by the actors involved. Therefore, I will focus on a narrative approach. Research based on this approach focuses on how activists make sense of their

[3] At least in the activists' self-image. There were also dissident parts of the SED and especially its youth organisation, the FDJ, which felt part of the independent Antifa or were looking for cooperation. After the end of the GDR, the PDS (later *Die Linke*) and its youth organisation *[´solid]* were significant partners for Antifa activists.

experiences and memories and how storytelling contributes to identity formation in movements (summarising Daphi 2017, 22-27).

A first study on East German biographies of Antifa activists is offered by Schuhmacher (2017b). He also notes differences between West and East German socialised Antifa activists. He identifies three main narratives of how antifascists started their activism in East Germany: One is the threat and the feeling of marginalisation that are mainly present among activists who began their activism in the early 1990s. Second, there are indications of an East German specificity in the politicisation processes of the individuals. According to Schuhmacher, they are based on similar experiences: the threat of right-wing violence, a lack of civil society and a lack of space for alternative youth culture and way of life, and the need to develop a political commitment to make life more bearable. Activists of the 1990s and early 2000s reported on threats and violence not only from organised Nazis but also on hegemonic right-wing youth culture, which threatened all those who belonged to minorities, other youth groups and those who did not want to join them. For that reason, antifascist engagement is, thirdly, an open statement against right-wing hegemony, which carries risks and could entail dangers for one's own life and security. Therefore, Schuhmacher speaks of an "anti-hegemonic type" of antifascist engagement (2017b, 97). Here my case study ties in. I can expand and refine the findings by linking them to the current debate about the far right in the East and East German identity. From this I can point out how multi-layered the anti-hegemonic position of Antifa is.

3. Case Study: The Antifa movement in East Germany

The following chapter presents how East German Antifa activists refer to East Germany and remember the movement's history. I analyse a one-hour debate in Berlin's Zionskirche in November 2021, which I was invited to moderate. The panel discussion was part of a public concert of East German musicians organised by the musician Geigerzähler and others. The debate was recorded and streamed online by the organisers. I transcribed the audio recording and analysed the transcript using qualitative content analysis, according to Kuckartz (2018). Therefore, categories were formed deductively along the theoretical and empirical references, as well as inductively from the material.

The event is particularly suitable for analysing identity and memory because it can be seen as one of the few places where activists speak publicly about their perception of the political situation and their activism. Four people participated in the panel discussion, offering various perspectives on age, gender, and race. They came from different parts of East Germany: Berlin, Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt. Dietmar was active in the *Autonomous Antifa East Berlin*, one of the first antifascist groups in the GDR (Dietmar 2021). Katharina is a sociologist born in Saxony-Anhalt who writes about right-wing violence and racism in East Germany. In her work, she makes marginalised voices visible (Katharina 2021). In addition, two discussants from Plauen were taking part: Steff is involved in the local Infoshop[4], and Manu is active at the *Freie Arbeiter*innen Union/ FAU Plauen*, an anarchist, syndicalist union in Saxony, which focuses on supporting people in labour conflicts and grassroots youth and education work.

In the following section, I first introduce the current public discourse on the 'Brown East' (1). Then, I show that Antifa activists develop an East-specific analysis for their counterstrategy against the far right, which includes, on the one hand, looking at the past and learning from their history (2) and, on the other hand, empowering current activism through visibility in the East (3).

[4] An Infoshop (a portmanteau of information and shop) is a self-organised, non-profit space run by volunteers.

3.1 The 'Brown East' and the invisibility of antifascist resistance

In order to understand the event's purpose and intention, it is worthwhile to review the announcement text, which states:

> 32 years after the fall of the Wall, we look from the top of the steeple of the Zionskirche to the East. Chasms are opening up. Also, in real existing capitalism, hopelessness can hardly be covered up. All that remains of the diverse socio-political demands of the autumn of '89 is a black-red-gold uniformity that, in many places, is visibly fading into the blue. Especially in smaller towns, the many years of right-wing hegemony combined with migration and economic heteronomy have left deep scars. Election results of up to 40% for the 'Alternative für Deutschland' make this clear […] (Geigerzähler 2021) [5]

The text clearly shows how the organisers perceive the political situation in East Germany. They paint a dark picture of the East, characterised by the far right (the term 'blue' here refers to the colour of the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland*), migration and economic crises. A line of continuity is drawn from the demands of the GDR opposition to the present. However, the hopes associated with left-wing renewal in the autumn of 1989 no longer exist today. This event is supposed to be a starting point for countering this pessimistic scenario. Therefore, the panel addressed the history of the movement and discussed the current political practice in East Germany, as the last part of the announcement text states:

> […] In the search for ways out of the disaster, it is worth taking a closer look. In the East, too, left-wing, antifascist groups had (and still have) their (local) successes. At the same time, 'the Antifa' in the East was always post-migrant. Slowly becoming more visible and louder, actors from then and now are speaking out with their view on the past and present (Geigerzähler 2021)

The event picked up a topic that had been discussed extensively in the media and revealed an imbalance in eastern Germany: the focus on the far right and right-wing violence. This "hypervisibility" of the far-right aims to characterise the East by racism, neo-Nazism and anti-democratic forms (Böhm, Boßmeyer, and Goel 2024). The discourse of the 'Brown East' returned at a time when not only right-wing violence and racist street mobilisations against refugees increased. Furthermore, despite several personnel changes, the AfD, founded in 2013, has entered parliament in every election since 2014. The racist protests during the summer of migration in Germany in 2015 are considered decisive for its nationwide success. In this context, the 'Brown East' discourse appears again and again. The 30th anniversaries of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2019 and of reunification in 2020 increased interest in this topic. At the same time, those affected recounted their experiences with right-wing and racist violence and their resistance to right-wing hegemony in the GDR and the 1990s in published auto-fictional books under the keyword 'Baseballschlägerjahre' (engl. 'baseball bat years')[6] on social media and in (online) newspapers.

Underlying the 'Brown East' discourse are statistical and material realities that find expression in, among other things, the electoral successes of the far right, approval of right-wing attitudes, demonstrations and campaigns against refugees, and acts of violence against marginalised people (Heft 2018, 358). But if we examine a longer period or consider social demographics, neither statistics nor the historical development of the far right paint a clear picture (Quent 2016; Frei, Maubach, Morina, and Tändler 2019). Thus, the question here is not whether the East has a bigger problem with right-wing extremism or not: I assume, as other

[5] The discussion and all material used are in German; therefore, I have translated the quotes for this article.

[6] The term describes the right-wing violence of the 1990s and 2000s. The baseball bat stands symbolically as one of various weapons used by neo-Nazis and racists during this time. Started as a Twitter hashtag #baseballschlaegerjahre, hundreds of people told how they were persecuted, harassed and beaten up by neo-Nazis in the 1990s and 2000s. The hashtag was initiated by the journalist Christian Bangel, who wrote about his experiences with right-wing violence in a novel.

sociologists do as well, that there is a specific problem because, firstly, the far right developed differently there (Quent 2016; Kollmorgen 2022), and secondly the commitment to combatting it was set under different conditions. Various social scientists have pointed out this discourse (Quent 2012, 2016; Lessenich 2014; Heft 2018). The discursive asymmetry between East and West Germany can be explained by an "othering" and derogation of East Germany, which Kathleen Heft (2018) calls "Ossification"[7]. East Germany and the East Germans appear as a deviation from an unmarked West German norm (Heft 2018, 358). Therefore, the narratives of 'Brown East' or 'Angstzone Ost' are the counterpart of an assumed plural and democratic West-German society and are inadequate to analyse the phenomenon (e.g. Quent 2016). The consequence of a hypervisibility of the far right in the East is the invisibility of resistance against the far right in the East.

For activists in the East, it is a tricky balancing act between acknowledging the existing problem of a far right in East Germany on the one hand and the defence against a generalising judgement as the 'Brown East' on the other. Both are made explicit in the following two quotes from Steff. When asked about defining being East German, activist Steff highlights their growing up in the East. Their youth was affected by a Nazi organisation in the neighbourhood,

> that definitely shaped my youth because it was always about how do I relate to it, am I against it [...] or am I supposedly neutral towards it, which actually means I am for it [...]. So it was always about how do I relate to it, and therefore it is defined (Steff 2021)

The experience of having a far-right threat on their doorstep had already challenged Steff as a young person to position themselves politically. On the one hand, the existence of a far right was part of the reality of their life. But, on the other hand, they refused the attribute of a 'Brown East':

> We should still make visible the good things that are happening. That doesn't mean that this whole shit doesn't happen and that it shapes the realities of people's lives. For me, being East German means coming from Saxony and saying, 'Let's blow it up in a controlled way' one day and saying, 'Hey, stop with the Ossibashing; I live here too' on the other. So that's the range in which it moves (Steff 2021)

Both quotes demonstrate that their activism is filled with ambivalence. The activist Steff makes it clear that as an antifascist, they are confronted with right-wing violence, far-right activities, and neo-Nazi organisations – summarised here as "whole shit". This experience shaped their life and activism. But, on the other hand, they refused the negative attribution as East German, which goes hand in hand with a derogation. They thus demanded visibility of different voices that do not appear in the attribution as 'Brown East'. It is clear from the quote that these voices and their activism are to be made visible.

This is where Katharina picks up. For her, the 'Brown East' attribution also implies that civil society is made invisible, and existing activism is not seen. She, who grew up in Saxony-Anhalt, says she was confronted with the statement that civil society must first be built in the East. Here, too, her message is ambivalent, adding that there is some truth in this but criticising that it overlooks the fact that there is already a lot of participation. For Katharina, participation not only means Antifa activism but many other actors with different political practices and knowledge (Katharina 2021).

In summary, these two participants of the Zionskirche panel draw on the specificity of the East as a strategy to combat the far right. Therefore, they must find a balance between the necessity of making the far right visible as a problem and the defence against the hypervisibility of the East in the context of the far right.

[7] "Ossi" is a short, usually derogatory term for East Germans.

3.2 Rediscovery of the movement's history

The Zionskirche panel aims to make early activism and the movement's origins visible. It indicates that little knowledge has been passed between activists over the decades. As a result, the understanding of past events and struggles was lost. The event demonstrates which historical events are part of the collective memory of the movement. It is important to highlight three narratives that were decisive for the beginning of the movement in the GDR and East Germany.

The first narrative is indicated by the choice of Zionskirche as a venue. The Zionskirche in Prenzlauer Berg, then a borough of East Berlin, was a centre of the peace and environment movement and the left-wing GDR opposition throughout the 1980s. Thirty-four years earlier, concertgoers of the West Berlin rock band *Element of Crime* and the East Berlin punk band *Die Firma* were attacked by neo-Nazis at this location. That night in October 1987 was a turning point for dealing with the far right in the GDR (Hayton 2015; Weiß 2015). From the moment of its foundation, the GDR saw itself as the more antifascist of the two German states. Nevertheless, right-wing attitudes were present in the GDR population, as were racist violence and antisemitic incidents.

While Nazi activities had been played down previously and not taken seriously, the attack attracted the attention of the West German media and the GDR public. Therefore, the GDR authorities now had to deal with the problem. Within the alternative left – especially punk – scene, it led to a debate about self-defence. The demand for public awareness of neo-Nazis and racism became louder and louder. A few weeks later, on November 5th to 6th, 1987, a group of antifascists put up leaflets with the slogan "Warning, there are neo-Nazis in the GDR too" in downtown Potsdam. The activists wanted to draw attention to racism and neo-Nazism as problems in the GDR. The secret service (*Stasi*) observed the activity and then tried to destroy the group by using informal collaborators of the *Stasi* (Wolf 2017). The *Antifa Potsdam* was the first independent Antifa group in the GDR. After that, several groups formed in East Berlin and other cities in the GDR, such as Halle, Guben or Dresden (Jänicke et al. 2021).

The second narrative becomes evident from the announcement text of the event, as cited before. In it, the activists also relate to Germany's political change in 1989/90. The reference is particularly relevant because antifascist groups were part of the opposition movement at the end of the GDR. Not all the panellists actively experienced this time, yet it is still a reference point in their collective memory. One of the panellists, who was already active in the Antifa in the GDR, shared his memory at the event. From his statement, it is clear how the Antifa activists positioned themselves at that time:

> I think the people who are doing the concert here today share the knowledge that the GDR was not a socialist state and the experience of having tipped over the state [...] we had an idea of socialism, and we wanted to try it out, namely a form of liberal social order, a form of grassroots democracy (Dietmar 2021)

In his view, the activists of the time had a conception of a society and a political order that corresponded to the claim and image of the GDR but did not correspond to the reality of the political system. As part of the GDR opposition, they did not demand unification with capitalist West Germany but a change – reform or revolution – towards a democratic socialist state. However, things were to turn out differently, and they could not realise socialist ideas in a free, democratic state. Being in opposition to the SED, the GDR's ruling party, also leads to a tense relationship with the SED's follow-up party, the PDS, after 1990, and later with the party *Die Linke* (*The Left*), as Dietmar hints[8]. Despite that, the fall of the Wall and the end of the GDR opened up

[8] To this day, the Left (former PDS) is a close partner of Antifa groups. Nonetheless, it was a special relationship considering the SED past, see also footnote 3.

new possibilities for the activists. They squatted houses and created left-wing centres and spaces for their ideas. But far-right violence hit them hard.

This leads to the third narrative, which relates to the 'Baseballschlägerjahre', the right-wing violence of the 1990s and 2000s. Squatted houses, cultural projects, groups and individuals were under permanent threat:

> And then attacks everything left-wing, without ifs and buts. And not only on the left but also on migrants, people of colour, squatters, everything that was not right-wing was attacked on a daily basis. […] There are many reports from people in different cities in the East for whom it was everyday life, who had to defend themselves and fight defensive battles. That was essentially the work of the Antifa (Dietmar 2021)

As the attack on the 1987 concert in the Zionskirche illustrates, Dietmar's quote also shows that in subsequent years, activists repeatedly reacted to the right-wing violence that surrounded them. Organising in (militant) Antifa groups was one response to counter the threat.

The other discussants reinforce this description of the 1990s and the 2000s. Huge violent events, such as the racist pogroms in Hoyerswerda (Saxony) in 1991 and Rostock-Lichtenhagen (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) in 1992, are part of the collective memory. Both are East German cities. Although there were numerous riots and attacks in those years in East and West Germany, the narratives refer to the East German events as a reference point for the movement. The violence at that time was a drastic experience; one participant explicitly named it as part of her East German socialisation:

> Growing up in East Germany in the nineties is part of my history, for better and for worse. I wouldn't be the person I am today if I didn't have this history. I believe that even though the time was difficult, to put it positively, I took away and learned so much from it (Katharina 2021)

Part of this narrative of the 'Baseballschlägerjahre' is also the analysis of the state of society at the time: Activists reported of a weak civil society, little support for antifascist struggles and a lack of recognition and appreciation for the work. For Katharina, this analysis was proper for that period and is still partially applicable today.

3.3 Political practice: empowerment and visibility

Given the current circumstances, the discussion aims to increase the visibility of activism in the East. Here, the East-specific perspective can be understood as a strategy to strengthen the existing Antifa movement. An East-specific view can not only be found in the analysis of the far right but also in the analysis of counter-resistance, which is expressed above all in practical politics, as panellist Katharina points out:

> There is a strong left practice in the East that was needed and still is needed. There is so much expertise that goes beyond debate culture. I have the feeling that there is a strong left debate culture on the one hand and a very strong left practice on the other. And I'm not saying one is the West, the other is the East; there is also a strong left practice in the West. But I find it totally exciting to have both sides reconciled more. Because we have knowledge, there is a lot of expertise reflected in practices that are tried and tested on the street. So I think it's really good and important to find more visibility for this, to find expression and to strengthen ourselves in this (Katharina 2021)

In the quote, the activist refers to a dichotomous distinction between theory and practice as part of political activism. She picks up on the fact that West German activists attribute themselves a theoretical role, while the practice 'on the street' is attributed to activists in the East. This distinction is linked to a derogation of the

practice of East German Antifa as being lacking in theory. It is also reflected in a larger East-West discourse: With a deficit-oriented view of East Germany, East Germans were portrayed as less intelligent than West Germans or in need of development.[9] Katharina refers to this discourse and wants to counter it by describing the practice not as a deficit but as a strength of East German activists. Manu argues similarly. From their perspective, experiences in East Germany, such as precarious employment, unemployment (especially in the 1990s) and other forms of poverty, are a resource that political practice can draw on. Manu explains,

> it is difficult to name that [experiences poverty etc.] as a strength because nobody wishes to live like that, but at the same time, it is a point where we, as people who position ourselves as left-wing and want to fight, can connect. And what makes us different from western leftists to some extent (Manu 2021)

Accordingly, the panel made references to various practical examples of contemporary antifascist activism. The participants referred to two campaigns: The first was the *Polylux* network, which provides money for activism in the East. The second was the *WannWennNichtJetzt* (WhenIfNotNow) campaign, which was mainly about supporting in the form of personnel in the East. Money and people are resources lacking in the East but are essential for independent and effective activism. The two examples are presented below in Steff's words, "making things visible that are good" (Steff 2021).

Polylux funds campaigns and political and cultural projects in East Germany. On their website, they explain why they are focusing on East Germany:

> We focus on the East because we come from the East or came from the East, live here or moved here, and we know: there is the other East beyond the sometimes-one-sided portrayal as 'AfD-positive'. We also know that the AfD, with its right-wing positions and inhuman attitudes and views, is a problem for the whole of Germany. So we are starting to back committed people and uncomfortable projects in the East (Polylux n.d.)

Activist Manu promoted *Polylux* on the podium. They describe it as a network that provides resources for activism in the province. For Manu, it makes a massive difference that the financial support also supports the activities of people who otherwise do not have access to funds or do not want to rely on state funding. In this way, people from western Germany or larger cities can support the work in rural areas without having to be there themselves. Manu emphasised independence from state funding, which also means freedom in shaping the content, which is particularly important in Saxony (Manu 2021). It is not about large amounts of money, they said, but also about concrete, practical support, for example, through a lecture or a sound system that can be borrowed:

> the people there have, maybe because of the everyday struggle, just other problems, but they are really happy when people come and say something like 'we have an event tour, can we do it at your place'. That makes a huge difference in a small town, and I think it's worth thinking about more in bigger towns (Manu 2021)

The second example, *WannWennNichtJetzt*, is a campaign of the *Interventionist Left* (IL) on the occasion of the state elections in the three eastern German states of Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia in 2019. The IL is an association of radical left groups and individuals from the undogmatic and emancipatory left in German-speaking countries (IL n.d.). In the call to the campaign, there is a similar analysis as in the previous quote from *Polylux*: the starting point is right-wing developments in the East, which are attributed a specificity but not a singularity. Right-wing violence, racism and social division are seen as an all-German problem that must be countered in a specific way in East Germany. The basic idea of the campaign was that activists from

[9] For the Antifa movement, Müller (2017) analysed the way West German Antifa looked at East German Antifa, using the example of the *Antifaschistische Aktion/Bundesweite Organisation* (AA/BO) in the 1990s.

larger cities would support activists in small towns and rural regions. They organised cultural and political events at central places to bring together residents and activists. The campaign referred to the realities of life in the East and addressed the development since the fall of the Wall 30 years ago (wannwennnichtjetzt 2019). Activist Steff experienced this campaign and thought it made a positive impact, mainly because it meant that activists in the big cities took on more organisational tasks. In small towns, there would generally be fewer people active, and they would often be involved in different contexts. Therefore, individuals would shoulder a lot. Steff felt it was a relief that more people got on board. An important factor was working as equals. The local activists were perceived as local community experts (Steff 2021).

Both examples feature the panellists' demand to make activism against the far right visible in the East. In doing so, they want to empower those active locally and support them in the fight against the far right. Making the activism visible is a concrete empowerment strategy against the right and a response to the invisibility in the 'Brown East' discourse.

4. Common struggles of the Antifa movement in East Germany[10]

The initial objective of this article was to identify how today's activists relate to East Germany more than 30 years after the end of the GDR. The previous section has made it clear that in recent years activists have increasingly referred to East Germany as a reaction to the strength of the far right in the same region. The following section summarises the results and discusses the role of historical narratives, common struggles, and an East German identity for the Antifa movement in the East.

One main finding is that the activists have a shared analysis of the socio-political situation according to which the far right is perceived to have strengthened. Their shared goal is pushing back the far right. At the same time, they criticise the overemphasis on the East, which makes their antifascist activities invisible. That is why today's activists refer to an East German movement in two ways: On the one hand, it is about strengthening the visibility of antifascist work in the region. The East-specific perspective is a necessary differentiation in analysing the far right in the East. And on the other hand, the reference to East German Antifa includes the rediscovery of the movement's history. The act of remembering is seen as a political practice in which knowledge from the past helps activists to develop agency in the present.

I noted that the activists refer to historical events that are part of the common narrative of the movement. These include (1) the attack on the Zionskirche in 1987 as part of the movement's origins story, (2) the political upheaval of 1989/90 as a significant event for Antifa and (3) the 'Baseballschlägerjahre' in which activists were confronted with enormous violence and organised themselves as victims. Collective memory with this goes beyond simply remembering. It is also about using knowledge and experience from earlier years and involving older activists in current practices. It functions as a political practice in which East German activists' narratives are set against the dominant West German narratives both in the context of the 'Brown East' and in derogation by West Antifa or leftists.

In addition to the common narratives, the individuals' share a few experiences: The most obvious commonality is growing up in the GDR and East Germany. This includes first of all personal or family experiences of growing up in an authoritarian state, the impact of political, economic and social change after 1990 in the form of instability, unemployment and poverty, and migration to West Germany, as well as getting used to a new political and economic system. The activists share this experience with most East Germans. A second experience that the majority of society in the East is not confronted with is the experience of being a victim of threat, violence and right-wing hegemony. To overcome their powerlessness as victims of right-wing

[10] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer 2 for their feedback and the concise summary, which I have included in the conclusion.

violence, they organised Antifa groups, practised self-defence and developed agency. In an earlier article, Paul-Siewert and I (2017, 115) pointed out that self-defence and militant counter-defence as action options arose from a need to act and can be understood as "forced self-defence". The panel discussion, thirdly, showed that the activists share a feeling of marginalisation, as they felt alone in their political activism and received neither support nor recognition for their work. The feeling of marginalisation because of a lack of civil society and spaces for youth culture can be seen as specific to Antifa activism in the East. Schuhmacher called it a "anti-hegemonic type of antifascist activism" (2017b, 97), a term that refers to obligations that involve risk and may endanger the life and safety of an individual.

In summary, this anti-hegemonic engagement can be further differentiated based on the analysis of the empirical material. The anti-hegemonic type shows itself on three levels:

1. against right-wing hegemony in the past and present, as it still exists in some places today.
2. against the recurring hegemony in the (media) discourse about the East as 'Brown East'.
3. against a hegemonic understanding of East German identity with its far-right offerings and connotations.

Since antifascist engagement confronts all three levels at the same time, it is particularly precarious.

This study's results indicated that the Antifa activists share views on the far right and counter-resistance in the East and critical moments in time, as has already been explained. The activists want to reformulate this supposed weakness as a strength and thereby reclaim the narrative about the East. Embracing otherness made them feel empowered. The following quote from Dietmar also reflects the sense of being 'othered'. He said in his conclusion that he adopted the East identity for himself in response to West Germany's invisibilisation of the East. He states: "Leftists socialised in West Germany say yes, after 30 years of reunification, there has to be an end to the East – we are somehow all Germans and everything and blah, blah, blah and so no: I'm an East German and I'm proud of it" (Dietmar 2021). Although the quote also positively references an East German identity, this cannot be generalised to the heterogeneous Antifa in the East. This article explained how ambivalent the relationship to East Germany and East German identity is for the activists.

The reference to an East German Antifa is equally variable – during the discussion, some participants explicitly referred to the Antifa. Still, at other points, participants mentioned a larger non-parliamentary left. The fact that they refer to both is not contradictory because the Antifa movement can be understood as a subset of a left or radical left movement. They addressed solidarity with other struggles and broad alliances. However, even though these common experiences and shared narratives exist, it is important to emphasise that individuals do not just refer to an East German Antifa as a collective. Being an Antifa activist is – as the definition provided at the outset of this article indicated – heterogeneous. Therefore, it must also be understood as a dialogue between activists who have different perspectives and come from various regions and backgrounds but nonetheless relate to each other. Three dimensions are relevant here:

Firstly, regarding class, East Germans' derogation is closely related to classism. For example, Manu reported insults on the sidelines of a demonstration as 'Ronny' and 'Mandy' (Manu 2021). Commonly used in East Germany, these first names are negatively associated with unemployment, low levels of education, and poor housing conditions. Classist attributions are also found in the 'Brown East' discourse: Nazis, who are equated with East Germans, are portrayed as uneducated and unemployed. Although East Germans are given the same classist label, in reality, privileges are distributed differently in the East, and activists are not all equally impacted by personal or familial poverty, precarious employment, and unemployment.

A second point relates to race, which is evident in the question of (post-)migrant perspectives within Antifa. It is, above all, Katharina who questions the perception of a "homogeneous white East" as well as a "homogeneous white Antifa" (Katharina 2021). She emphasises that there have always been East Germans of colour who were antifascist activists. The negotiation around post-migrant perspectives in East Germany is also recognisable in the already quoted announcement text for the event. It says, "At the same time, 'the Antifa' in the East was always post-migrant" (Geigerzähler 2021). However, the sentence seems disconnected from

the rest of the text. Therefore, it can be assumed that although there is a demand for the visibility of post-migrant perspectives, there is still a lack of implementation.

The third is the urban-rural divide, as the absence of left or radical left actors and debates in rural areas significantly impacts local engagement. As explained, the number of activists is usually limited. Decisions by members to move away to bigger cities after finishing school or changing jobs affect the groups. Far right actors are, as Steff described, the neighbours (Steff 2021). Without permanent structures, such as cafés, youth centres, and info-shops, and without the activation of other subcultures, civil society actors and new activists, the groups only last a few years (more detailed Bürk 2017).

Furthermore, the participants also mentioned the importance of subculture. It is a unifying element and creates closeness between different left/radical left currents. Factors that were not discussed were the a) role of age – it was implied that activism should be made possible across age boundaries, and b) the role of gender, which was, however, analysed elsewhere in the context of the East German Antifa (see Sanft 2017; Degener and Jänicke 2022).

5. Conclusion: Making Antifa visible in East Germany

The article highlights the importance of shared narratives and common struggles for a movement. It underlines that the inclusion of an East German perspective in the movement is a response to the recent electoral victories of the far right in East Germany, as well as the renewed media attention on the so-called 'Brown East'. Thereby it expands on the research using the example of the Antifa movement in East Germany and shows how difficult it is for activists to navigate in the homogenising discourse around East Germany and East German identity under precarious conditions of marginalisation and a strong far right. Therefore, I explored the (re-)discovery and memory of the history of an East German movement and the current struggle for visibility, which are practices that empower antifascist engagement and strengthen the movement to counter the far right. The results also indicate that shared experiences of marginalisation, othering and derogation have contributed to a sense of East German identity, which can be observed in a larger discourse about East Germany.

The East German antifascist movement, in particular, forms a unique case because of its origin in opposition to a so-called antifascist state. While there has been increasing attention to the East German movement within Germany, the East German case has previously been overlooked in research on antifascism. This article has not only provided insights into the Antifa movement in the East. Moreover, it has the potential to strengthen the antifascist movement against the far right: making past and present visible helps to develop agency, maintain civil society and push back against right-wing hegemony.

Their anti-hegemonic engagement in East Germany is particularly precarious, because of 1. the continuity of right-wing hegemony (in many places); 2. the persistent discourse about the ‘Brown East’; and 3. the understanding of East German identity with right-wing connotations. As a consequence, this leads to an invisibility of antifascist engagement.

The East German Antifa developed in distinction to other actors of civil society and the parliamentary left. Antifa activists have an ambivalent relationship with both, as they are essential allies against the far right. At the same time, they distance themselves from some positions and want to set their own agenda. If we include urban-rural as a distinction for analysing the Antifa movement, it becomes clear that there are differences between activism in the city and the countryside. In rural areas, Antifa activists are more exposed, fewer in number and usually active in different political areas, so Antifa is only one part of their activism.

As the definition of Antifa implies, it is difficult to separate the Antifa movement from other civil society structures, especially in rural areas. Activists are often involved in various associations, clubs, initiatives or

even political parties. Likewise, many established NGOs in democracy counselling and prevention have emerged from antifascist structures - but this does not apply to all civil society organisations in this field. However, it should have become clear from my research that there are specific characteristics in East German contexts and that these – as well as questions of an East German identity – are important for Antifa activists.

In conclusion, the activists who refer to East Germany and themselves as East Germans have not actively adopted the label 'East German' of their own accord but have accepted it defiantly due to the experience of derogation. In other words, the process by which the attribution to others became an attribution to oneself is more interesting than the content of the identity ascription itself (see also Kubiak 2020). The search for history and characteristics can be placed in a larger discourse around East Germany, including questions of representation in politics, economy and media, fair payment, pension, gender equality and so on. Right-wing violence and counter strategies are just a small part of this ('Baseballschlägerjahre').

These findings suggest several courses of action for the Antifa movement in the East and West: First, recognising an East-West difference leads to a deeper analysis and better understanding of the movement in both parts of Germany. Second, the East experience or identity connects different political struggles and enables the creation of broad alliances against the right within the East. Third, an East perspective is key to understanding and fighting the far right in the East.

This article thus offered new material and analysis on the antifascist movement in (East) Germany. Moreover, knowing the history of a movement is interesting for researchers who want to understand how movements form identities and for activists themselves. Furthermore, reflecting on their history can also strengthen antifascist movements against the far right.

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Author's Information:

Christin Jänicke is a social scientist who specializes in studying civil society, far-right actors and violence, and counteraction against the far right. She is currently working on her doctoral degree at Freie Universität Berlin, researching how civil society responds to far-right contention in (East-) Germany.