



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 17(1) 2024: 46-63

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v17i1p46

Published 15 March, 2024

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ghostly Militanz: The Loss of Discursive Infrastructures and German Antifascist Radical Counterpublics

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that German Antifa is historically grounded in radical counterpublics, established and maintained via discursive infrastructures by which activists declare, debate, justify and limit their direct actions. This process of discursive communication not only allows them to legitimize their direct action (up-to and including violence) as morally justified Militanz, but also delineates these actions as political rather than criminal. Beginning with the case study of the criminal trial against the so-called Antifa East, the paper argues that factions of German Antifa have abandoned these infrastructures, but in doing so have also lost the moral justification for their actions. By abandoning their-own movement limits and traditions, the Militanz wielded instead evokes only a ghost of that justification. Instead, these clandestine assaults – enacted without any discursive explanation or counterpublic engagement – cannot be understood as political, leaving those involved charged under the German legal code (§129) regarding criminal rather than political and potentially terrorist (§129a) engagement.

KEYWORDS: Antifascism, Antifa Ost, Contentious Politics, German Antifa, Militanz, Political Violence

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1. Introduction

On the 27th February 2023 Johannes Domhöver was led into the courtroom of the regional bench in Meiningen, Thuringia, and charged with participating in an antifascist group attack on a neo-Nazi in Eisenach

in December 2019. However, what makes his case unique is that he was simultaneously serving as the crown witness in a parallel case against (other) antifascists in Dresden accused of a number of attacks on actual and alleged neo-Nazis between 2018 and 2020 in Saxony and Thuringia. Domhöver himself had been excluded from the leftwing scene in the wake of allegations of sexualized violence leveled against him by a former partner (Anon 2021). Turning to the protection of the state as a crown witness,¹ he first made extensive incriminating statements to the German secret service (*Verfassungsschutz*) and the police, and then testified again in the Dresden court case, known as the Antifa East trial (*Antifa Ost-Verfahren*). At his own trial Domhöver appeared veiled in a black plastic cape, hiding his face behind a file folder and wearing gloves. *BILD*, Germany's most circulated tabloid, ran the headline: "The Antifa ghost in court" (Könau 2023).

A ghost is a human-like spirit or echo from the past haunting the present. In the figurative sense, this apparition is intangible, inexplicable, and its existence cannot be proven, despite being often invoked or felt. As a defendant and as a key witness, Domhöver is just as real as the defendants in the Antifa East trial, or the suspects in other tangentially related ongoing investigations. The ghost being invoked in this analysis is not Domhöver himself, as the tabloid suggests, but rather the foggy echo of antifascist militant dogma and self-regulation that his actions evoke. The Antifa East trial is used here as a jumping off point for our reflections on the changing nature of antifascist actions, based on the authors extensive fieldwork. As one recent example of the changed nature of Antifa action and practice, the trial points towards the broader loss haunting contemporary German Antifa, which is our primary concern here.

In the following discussion we argue that parts of this "movement"² have moved away from a crucial historical component of its own identity, practice, and self-justification: Militanz. Following the detailed explanation in Jones (2018a), we use this term in contradistinction to right wing violent militancy, as well as other forms of political violence (including structural, objective, etc.). Left radical Militanz in the German context has an intellectual lineage stretching back to at least the 1960s, and strictly limits physical force to only morally justifiable targets – but which are almost never ordinary people, and never using lethal force. In this sense it distinguishes itself from both pacifism and armed struggle. Crucially, its moralized application is couched within extensive structures of self-limitation that we term 'discursive infrastructures', which are maintained within what we call a left radical 'counterpublic': a radical (sub)cultural alternative to the mainstream public sphere.³ Operating after the (perhaps only temporary) loss of these internal mechanisms of self-regulation and external mechanisms of self-presentation, the actions ascribed to the vague configuration dubbed "*Antifa Ost*" remain only an echo of the moralized political values embodied in Militanz that Antifa historically claimed to invoke, and thus leave those scattered individuals allegedly involved floundering amidst what we interpret as a form of ghostly Militanz.

In the broader context of the history of the radical left, we are interested in the use of Militanz by antifascist activists and how they wield, embed, legitimize, justify, and, most importantly, represent those actions as part of their political repertoires. This paper therefore poses the question of the characteristics of these actions themselves and seeks to situate them within the nuances and changing nature of Militanz, Antifa representation, and, in light of these two aspects, the question of 'the Political' itself. In short, we will argue that antifascist Militanz is established and maintained by discursive infrastructures in a historical counterpublic established and maintained by the radical left since the 1970s (albeit with considerable differences between East and West Germany). As this paper will elaborate further, German Antifa emerges from a long trajectory of standard

¹ For a detailed case study of the punishment often wielded by radical left communities against members accused of sexual misconduct, see Jones 2018c.

² Following Schuhmacher (2014), Copsy (2018), and others we distinguish the radical political movement "Antifa" from broader spectrum of people engaging in activities against the far right, even while acknowledging the importance of this heritage.

³ This will be discussed shortly in greater detail. See Nancy Fraser (1992) for a critique and revision of the concept of the bourgeois public sphere, which our concept builds upon.

practice as defined, debated and communicated in these political discursive infrastructures. These logics form a critical step in justifying Militanz as morally justified self-defense, as opposed to a violent offense (Jones 2018a). This paper will explore the left-radical counterpublic sphere that developed and was maintained within a specific (sub)cultural setting, and how it was used collectively to determine, justify, and legitimize actions. Each group that marks itself as engaged in militant self-defense refers to specific strategies of legitimation, representations, contexts and experiences. All this is communicated within counter publics—via debates, declarations, political groups and actions—and thus become recognizable as an (assertion of an) overall context. Even symbolic shows of group solidarity – such as black bloc marches, demonstrations, and protests – serve to communicate group claims to internal *and* external publics. As this paper will explain in depth, the moral justification of physical force—i.e. Militanz—is contingent upon its contextualization and justification within these specific trajectories. Accordingly, the loss of these discursive infrastructures erodes the concept and justification of both Militanz and political agency, as defined and legitimized by Antifa themselves. In other words: if this context is obscured or abandoned, the acts and ethics of the group or movement can no longer be read beyond the circle of those directly involved, i.e. the perpetrators and victims. Rather than an active form of political Militanz, these actions become unmoored from the legitimation frameworks bringing them to political life: they become ghostly.

To elaborate this argument, we present the Antifa East case study as a jumping off point. Our analysis then first considers the concept of Militanz in its relation to violence, as applied to the recent history of antifascist contentious politics. Secondly, we discuss how this relates to the question of self-defense, or counterviolence, in (former East) German Antifa. Thirdly, we describe "discursive infrastructures" as radical counterpublic mechanisms in which action is *discursively and structurally* framed and, in this way, becomes recognizable and legitimized as 'the political' to both the counter public and a broader public. Finally, we discuss the multiple contextual factors that must be brought to light, in order to explain the loss of infrastructure and thus the emergence of a "ghostly Militanz" as a mere echo of those structures. Our analysis is based on our empirical archival, interview, and oral history research carried out in the field of the radical (antifascist) left in Germany between 2011 and now (Schuhmacher 2014; Jones 2018a, 2018b, 2024a, 2024b), as well as medial and scene 'gray' literature produced in connection with the Antifa East proceedings.

2. The Case Study: Illuminating an invisible army

Our reflections are inspired by a series of physical assaults on neo-Nazis in East Germany between 2018 and 2022, which are united by the fact that no claims of responsibility were released (even via left-radical channels), leaving the motivations for these actions shadowy at best.⁴ Some of these accusations are being tried against a group of at least ten people allegedly acting in concert since 2018. Four of them sat on trial at Saxony's highest criminal court since September 2021, with a judgment handed down on 31 May 2023 including prison terms ranging between two years and five months to five years and three months. The only woman in the group was held in pre-trial detention since November 2020, and was presented by state authorities and the media as the "kingpin" of an elite squad of Antifa militants. This characterization was reinforced, for example, by the well-publicized image of her being transported to the office of the Federal Prosecutor in Karlsruhe in a state helicopter surrounded by police special forces after being arrested. It is particularly notable that the

⁴ Similar patterns of an undeclared secret war can be found in other acts in Thuringia and Saxony between 2020 and 2022 that were not being tried in this trial, including attacks on neo-Nazis in their homes or in public spaces, and some (arson) attacks on stores and other objects belonging to the right-wing scene (cf. Diehl 2021).

proceedings were taken over by the highest level of judicial authority, usually reserved for serious cases of organized violence considered to endanger the state itself. A total of nine complexes of crimes were tried in Dresden, including five physical attacks (in Wurzen, Eisenach and Leipzig), the theft of two hammers from a DIY-store, and spying on a neo-Nazi for the purpose of preparing an attack. Legal proceedings against five others were severed in early 2022.

Because these acts have remained 'unexplained' by their perpetrators, they have become the subject of speculation and educated guesswork. Some of them have been linked in media reports to an attack by neo-Nazis and right-wing hooligans on the alternative Leipzig-Connewitz district in January 2016. In the so-called "Storming of Connewitz" 250-300 people moved into the area in parallel to a demonstration by Leipzig's Pegida offshoot 'Legida' and staged a riot (Erhard, Leistner, and Mennicke 2019). This included vandalizing stores, trashing a Turkish kebab restaurant, lighting a building, dumpsters and police cars on fire, and assaulting passersby. 211 people were taken into custody by the police. However, the legal process of coming to terms with the events has been slow to date, and the sentences handed down so far have been extremely lenient - even against those with decades-long careers as documented neo-Nazis and right-wing perpetrators of violence. Unlike the Antifa-East trial, questions of organizational preparation or who served as the masterminds of the attack played no role whatsoever in the trials. In December 2016, antifascists published the names of 215 (suspected) participants on an online platform - the so-called "215er-Liste" or "Connewitz-Liste"⁵—several of whom were later attacked, allegedly by antifascists.

It is undeniable that radical antifascist politics have been flanked by state (re)actions of control from their very beginning. This includes situational interventions and restrictions during demonstrations, repression – understood as justiciable prosecutions of groups that have been declared criminal and dangerous (Brodeur 1983; Davenport 2007) – as well as suppression as “on-going projects of surveillance that are aimed at deterring movement participation through police harassment and possible criminalization” (Monaghan and Walby 2012, 137).⁶ However, the current proceedings undoubtedly indicate a remarkably punitive turning point in the history of the German state's handling of militant Antifa groups.

In terms of protest policing, the seriousness of the charges results not least from the fact that they are embedded in the accusation of membership in a *criminal* organization (§129 StGB), whereby authorities of the special investigative branch SOKO Linx also speak of a “threshold of terrorism” (see Schattauer 2020) to further reinforce the charge.⁷ Previously, §129 was typically used for investigative purposes, as it provides police with a variety of ways to x-ray dissenting communities, but to date it has rarely resulted in convictions or even court cases. The primary function of this paragraph in the context of political protest is not to enforce criminal law, but to paralyze, weaken and denigrate certain groups, as well as to open new avenues of accessing a darkfield of ‘usual suspects’ and their networks. In 2017, the paragraph was amended, with the definition of ‘groups’ widened to enable the prosecution of organized crime, such as gangs or mafia, under §129. This allowed greater fluidity in the definition of ‘group’ which previously had to demonstrate continuity of membership, but now only required those accused to ‘share aims’. This offers law enforcement a much wider

⁵ The list was published online, including photos. See <https://le1101.noblogs.org/>

⁶ For example: investigations against political groups (Autonome Antifa (M) 1994), clandestine associations (Autonome AntifaschistInnen 1990), 'near-groups' and political scenes following certain violent actions (Geronimo 1997), as well as broader political milieus who have been subjected to police screening for years. A framework for analysis of repression is detailed in Ellefsen and Jämte 2023. However, there are no published studies on the policing and governing of antifascist groups.

⁷ This accusation can be formally distinguished from the charge of membership in a *terrorist* organization (§129a StGB), exclusively applied to political violence cases, while the discursive boundaries are often blurred, also in this case. See the distinction in: *German Criminal Code*, in the version published on 13 November 1998 (Federal Law Gazette I, p. 3322), as last amended by Article 2 of the Act of 19 June 2019 (Federal Law Gazette I, p. 844)

range of freedom to expand the application of §129 to loosely affiliated political activists who could not be otherwise defined as being involved (Sinn, Iden, and Pörtner 2021).

Closely linked to criminal prosecution is the media's role in cementing the representation of "unruly" groups by sensationalizing them as "left-wing extremist" and "violent". On the one hand these framings are largely based on generalizations and distorted images, which unfold in a process of moral mobilization making "folk devils" (Cohen 1972) out of Antifa. This framing allows conclusions to be drawn about the discursive strength of the far right, which has been emphatically producing these images for some years now. On the other hand, the left-radical groups involved do nothing to hinder these narratives, as they decline to demonstrate their actual political agency, aims, and identity to the wider public. Instead, the rise of a meme-ified culture making online "justice porn" out of "punching Nazis" (Ramírez 2020), contribute to and reinforce this caricaturizing, to the detriment of serious discussions of political agency and identity. This is not to argue that silence to an external media is the same as ghostly silence: the latter refers to silence *within* a movement that simultaneously defines and justifies itself via precisely those discursive infrastructures and mechanisms of communication that have been abandoned. In short, the interplay of labelling and discursive self-marginalization contributes to a profound movement crisis of political representation – which becomes evident under the magnifying glass of Militanz and its justification.

3. Militanz: the trajectory of justified praxis

Militanz is perhaps the most widely reported and sensationalized (although by no means the most important) aspect of antifascist political repertoire. In order to understand both the practice and its strict limitations, we shall first briefly survey the foundations and understanding of Militanz as antifascist creed and practice.

In two studies conducted by the authors between 2011-2018 including interviews with 43 Autonomous and 20 Antifa participants,⁸ and a third ongoing study, all described Militanz as a form of morally righteous physical force, directly opposed to the 'mere violence' of 'the other side'. Published articles in the 1987-founded *Antifa Infoblatt* (AIB) magazine reinforce this definition as they seek to distinguish clearly between left- and right-radical use of physical force:

Left-wing and right-wing militancy are not the same thing: While right-wing violence and terror serve as a means of oppression, left-wing militancy is directed precisely against this oppression. It presents itself as a counter-power to this real threat (AIB 2020, 49)

Schuhmacher (2014, 179) summarizes these distinctions in three ways: 1) the "high sense of moral value" placed on "defending human life"; 2) in countering and opposing right-wing violence directed "against the uninvolved, and the weak", which is "generally intended to spread fear and terror", as well as to eliminate outsiders; 3) and in fighting fascism and hegemony in society. In short: to terrorize, murder or drive out minorities is a fundamental priority of neo-Nazis and white supremacists, while Antifa stand in fundamental opposition to these actions and seek to stop or prevent them, to protect those targets of nazi violence, and to try to fight societal conditions that enable that nazi violence. Antifa therefore ascribe justifications that aim to present this type of direct action as morally legitimate.

A critical influence upon Militanz comes from *Autonomie*, which is a distinct (albeit strongly inter-connected) movement that flourished in the late 1970s to the mid-1990s (see Jones 2018b; also Vasudevan

⁸ The distinction is explained shortly.

2015, 2017) and out of which contemporary Antifa coalesced in the late 1980s. Based on her interviews with Autonomous activists, (most of whom also identified as antifascists), Jones (2018a) defines *Militanz* as a limited practice of physical direct action, which can include violence, and which is morally justified based upon both its target (stopping injustice, structural violence, or right-wing violence) and its limitation (only against objects, never people). These limits were debated extensively throughout Autonomist infrastructures, such as the plenums of squatted centers, in national congresses, or in numerous written platforms across many different groups. For example, just one Autonomous magazine *interim* included at least 350 articles between 1988-2001 discussing Militanz (see Haunss 2004, 172). Another collection assembled by the group ‘DokumacherInnen’ (2005) includes 23 lengthy statements from various militant groups published between 2001-2004.⁹ As they emerged and coalesced out of (and often with extensive overlapping membership in) the Autonomous scene, such debates were replicated in Antifascist publications, discussions and experiences. For example, a lengthy self-reflective article was published in AIB 50 (2000, 5-8), while an interview with a Leipzig group who describe their own Militanz debate is included in AIB 43 (1998). This tradition is well established: a 1993 three-day conference in Göttingen with Antifascist Action included lectures and discussions on the role of Militanz in antifascist practice (Verein zur Förderung antifaschistischer Kultur 1993). Two larger conferences—1999 in Leipzig and 2001 in Göttingen—also each included several hundred participants who discussed the strategies, options and limitations of antifascist Militanz. These few examples among so many indicate that such debates were not new to Antifa, but rather that they had inherited the Autonomist culture of discussing, debating, rationalizing and justifying their own versions of Militanz.

Unlike the Autonomous definition of largely symbolic violence against objects (and in reality occasionally police), the antifascist version of Militanz includes violence (albeit never lethal) against people identified as Nazis, neo-Nazis, or other such actively violent far-right persons. According to Antifa dogma, this militant action was and is permitted against such foes, but never for its own sake—i.e., it is strictly limited, and its use against (even nazi) persons is stressed as only ever a last resort when other methods had failed. One Antifa author in 2005 situates this in contrast to right-wing violence: “For the Nazi gangs, whether organized or unorganized, violence is not a necessary evil, but the essence of their political ideology” (AIB 69/2005, 17). Similarly, one Antifa activist explains in an interview: “One punches Nazis in the face because they *hate* immigrants, but Nazis punch those people because they *are* immigrants. That is the difference!” (Peter¹⁰, ct. in Schuhmacher 2014, 179). The key distinction here is the concept of an *offensive* racist violence, as opposed to a *defensive* militant action to *counter* this racism. Furthermore, this also points to the critical point that Antifa see violence as *not* a goal in itself, and not even necessarily political, but rather a last, defensive, resort when other forms have failed. The author in AIB seeks to tease out this nuance further:

Condemning violent action per se is undoubtedly ahistorical and apolitical; selling it as political content is just as wrong. Antifascist Militanz has its purpose as a counter to the ideology responsible for Auschwitz - no more and no less. Although it is important to overcome a sense of threat from neo-Nazi thugs collectively and offensively, it is *not suitable as a lifestyle or attitude* (AIB 69/2005, 17)

Such a limitation points towards the larger repertoires of political actions, all of which are designed to counter fascism, whether it manifests in Auschwitz, the racist pogroms of the 1990s, or the racist violence still being inflicted on migrants and undocumented persons.¹¹ While Antifa Militanz – including the physical

⁹ Another compilation counts 43 articles between 1995- 2003. These have been published online in Anon (2003): ‘Militanz. Dokumentation einer Debatte’.

¹⁰ All interviewees’ names have been changed.

¹¹ This has been documented extensively by antifascists, for example in works of the NSU-Tribunals and NSU Watch, an alliance of around 12 groups and activists, who document and track the actions of neo-Nazis (see NSU-Watch 2013).

attempt to intervene in such threats – can wield violence when absolutely necessary, this is never an end in itself, nor can it substitute for a wider political practice, lifestyle or attitude. As one antifascist author concludes: "In any case, Militanz alone is unlikely to make any real difference" (AIB 50/2000, 8). It is this distinction that becomes particularly pertinent for the case of Antifa East.

4. Self-Defense

However, it must also be recognized that militant antifascism is understood by participants as a practice of self-defense, which is described by some sympathizing scholars as “a reasonable, historically informed response to the fascist threat” (Bray 2017, xii). Shaw (2021) argues that this is community self-defense, as activists must engage to protect vulnerable populations from neo-nazi violence, which has existed since WWII. Participants agree, pointing to the legacy of pogroms against migrants and refugees in the early 1990s, arguing that any antifascist militant violence is only ever countering the already existing practice of neo-nazi violence, and therefore is justified.

This concept can be distinguished from both non-violent modes of action and the juridical understanding of legitimate defense, i.e., the situational resistance to a threat (Dorlin 2022, xvii). It instead belongs to a specific “martial ethics of the self” (Dorlin 2022, xvii) by radical self-determining subjects (Jones 2018b) and in this broader sense is closely linked to the Militanz discussed here. However, this “politics of the self” is also reflected in the self-identification and self-formation of Antifa political subjects, who identify as being the last line of defense against neo-nazi violence in cases where state interference is deemed insufficient. This moralization of identity as an urgent intervention to stop lingering fascism helps explain the radical stance of many of these actors, especially in parts of former East Germany where the racist pogroms of the early 1990s remain a touchstone for action, where neo-Nazis establish themselves as a normal part of society and where the white supremacist anti-migrant AfD party won up to 25% of the votes in the last national election (on average twice as high as in the West).

However, this logic of self-defense is also predicated on the structures of limited, discursive Militanz. Self-defense is often invoked in the general sense that Antifa Militanz involves defending oneself or others from fascism, which is an ongoing threat since the 1930s. According to Antifa, the violence of Nazis and later neo-Nazis justifies a counter-violence in response to this ongoing threat. By this logic, identifying, hunting, and then assaulting a person would be broadly construed as self-defense of self and others, as detailed by the anonymous members of a Leipzig Antifa group interviewed in a STRG_F (2022) TV-documentary. However, the question remains whether that person was ever identified as a Nazi, (typically done via discursive infrastructures). If not, then this logic could be used to enact silent violence against almost any target, without having to reveal subjectively perceived motives. An example from the 1990s shows that Antifa attached central importance to this point. “Militant politics”, it says in a brochure documenting claims of responsibility, is “indispensable [...] for an effective, credible, anti-fascist politics” (AA/BO 1994, 71). At the same time, “... effective militant politics” is measured above all by the fact that the action can intervene politically and set progressive social impulses. To ensure this, a broad publicity work is indispensable if militant activism “does not want to run the risk of being reduced to a small-scale war between left and right, between ‘rival youth gangs’” (AA/BO 1994, 71). Without discursive infrastructures, there is no way to communicate what was Militanz versus what was violence, leaving all potential targets in a grey zone, subject to individual whim. This is why, in order for an action to be political, those discursive infrastructures in which Militanz and militant actions were discussed, debated, criticized and limited are so *absolutely critical* within this logic. Otherwise, any Antifa could have *carte blanche* to attack any target, with no accountability whatsoever. While this might

make sense to some radical fringe actors who assume all targets in capitalist democracy are ideologically hostile, and thus justifiable, most antifascists invoking Militanz would disagree.

Peterson (2001, 75) discusses this issue when she argues that "the connection between the action event and the meaning mediated is a central concern for militant activists utilizing the vulnerability of the body - their *bodily commitment must be explicitly explained*" (own emphasis). She goes on to argue that the function of actions by the "moralised, self-disciplined bodies of militant activists" (Peterson 2001, 69 f.) is threefold: 1. to politically scandalize conditions, 2. to show one's own moral commitment and 3. to present oneself through one's own risky actions as threatened or as actors in solidarity with the threatened. Through this creation of "semi-private performances" (Peterson 2001, 93), militant acts become meaningful in an everyday life setting, which is distinct from the official polity (in what we argue is a radical counterpublic), but nonetheless still speaks. However, this explicit communication of bodily commitment is exactly what has been lost in secret attacks on individuals in their homes (see fn 4), rather than in any public political setting. Instead, such actions are left for anyone to interpret without any guidance, which, in the case of Saxony and Thuringia, results in extremely negative readings by the media, public, and of course responses of state prosecutors. Silently assuming that any act of violence is automatically justified as community self-defense runs into logical flaws when the community being invoked (presumably vulnerable persons) has no way of knowing they are being defended.

This raises the crucial issue of framing and legitimization to a broader public. In contrast to Autonomists, who simply 'turned inward' to their own squatted societies (Jones 2018b), Antifa do seek to justify their actions based on the assumption that stopping Nazis is a morally justified normative good. This is demonstrated in a wide range of formal and informal societal infrastructures, such as archives, refugee support hubs, and networks of migrant solidarity including language classes, legal adoption of minors, marriages, etc. (Sophia, 2018; Linus 2016).¹² Ulrich (2023) is a member of a leading antifascist archive and the 'NSU Watch', a network of grassroots historians, researchers and other volunteers who documented the violence of the underground neo-nazi 'National Socialist Underground' terrorist cell. He explains that such public-facing mechanisms far outnumber the few fringe violent actors such as the alleged members of Antifa Ost. Antifascism as embodied in these organizations is oriented towards contesting fascism in all avenues of society, but a small violent minority receive a disproportionate amount of public and media attention. While these organizations still engage in the Antifascist counterpublic, that contemporary fringe groups decline to participate indicates the relative weakness of a violent minority invoking only the ghost of what must be grounded in a normative public and moral good.

5. Discursive Infrastructures and the Political

Even if antifascist Militanz presents itself as self-defense, and thus *per se* speculates on a surplus of inherent legitimacy, it still must justify this legitimation. This requires the following discursive steps: creating an image of (its own) vulnerability; clarifying its relations to prevailing concepts of values and norms; developing its own concepts of values and norms and corresponding to them; determining the scope and limits of legitimate action; and developing understandings of justice. For this logic, and its moral justification, this last point is crucial, for Militanz was historically established, agreed, and justified within the discursive infrastructures established and maintained within what we can effectively call a 'radical counterpublic', building on Fraser's (1992) "subaltern counterpublics". These included the left-radical mouthpieces where political actions were declared, hotly debated, and, most crucially, justified as per the steps above. For example, when the squatting

¹² These infrastructures cannot be articulated in-depth here, but are being analyzed in a future publication.

wave erupted in Berlin in the early 1980s, squatters councils met to decide tactics (Vasudevan 2015). The plenary bodies of squatted houses continue to meet today, and argue ceaselessly about the actions and limits of their own political groups, cells, or movements (Blechsmidt 2009). In the 1980s a transnational network of infoshops (*Infoläden*) emerged, which allowed left-radicals to travel between cities and immediately find a place to sleep, comrades, and upcoming events (Holger 2022). These hubs also stocked the counterpublic's magazines and newspapers where Militanz was hotly debated over decades, such as AIB. This emulated the future role of the internet (to which such publications would eventually migrate on sites such as indymedia etc.). This alternative counterpublic sphere connected activists to a scene in which actions, morality, and limitations were established and held in common.

The importance of these discursive infrastructures cannot be overstated, as they effectively provide and reinforce the agreed counter-societal consensus as the base of Antifa's claim to morally justified Militanz as a political rather than criminal act. Acting as an individual within a radical group counterculture is the paradoxical heart of the radical left, where a subjective politics of radical self-formation is conducted within a political counterpublic that has established its own rules, limitations, morality, and justifications (Jones 2018b). Activists as individuals therefore nonetheless claim the might and right (and thus also the responsibilities) of the group, as Blechsmidt (2009) points out. To act as part of a political subculture entails accepting, adhering to, and applying the agreed-upon standards of that community, which individuals must do in order to operate as antifascist political actors, rather than individuals committing violence. In order for an action to be 'political'—i.e. part of a community set of agreed norms that govern and dictate behavior in (even a radical) public or counterpublic sphere—it must adhere to the standards of a discursive infrastructure that couches this action within acceptable limits. From this point of view antifascism's own self-justification, Militanz is only politically acceptable when practiced within these self-given norms, which must include at least some form of discursive justification. In contrast to these informal standards, the alleged actions charged to Antifa East were executed silently and in secret, and not leading into a visible debate. While other Antifa could probably assume the reasons behind these actions, this would not be understandable beyond those micro-circles.

This paradox rests at the heart of the debate over Antifa East, and the legal charges against them as criminals (§129) rather than political activists potentially charged as terrorists (§129a). The State could only charge the accused as violent criminals (§129) rather than potentially as political terrorists (§129a) since silent clandestine attacks on individuals outside of political contexts (rallies, protests, etc.) can barely be 'read' as political, not to mention morally justified, even according to counterpublic political standards. From the other direction, the widespread slogan "anti-fascism is not criminal but necessary" only actually make sense if that criminalized action is given a political justification. Shaw (2021, 20) might agree that 'violence...speaks volumes'. However, in this context, the only ones able to 'hear' such a message were the neo-Nazis themselves, who understood their injuries as revenge for the 2016 'Storming of Connewitz'. Without any declaration, manifesto, or debate, it remains incredibly difficult for anyone else to understand the meaning of these attacks within a militant political rather than merely violent criminal context.

6. Understanding Loss: The Context of Ghostly Militanz

One might look at the violence sometimes wielded by antifascists as a simple binary of actors and counter actors. This is usually followed by a warning about the seemingly unstoppable "escalation spiral" between the left and right, as authorities and prosecutors indeed sought to characterize the Antifa East trial. However, this tired pattern is not only theoretically simplistic and empirically dubious (see Busher, Holbrook, and Macklin 2019), it also obfuscates the mechanisms by which antifascist politics adapt and alter mere violence into a

morally justified (display of) physical refusal and power. Acknowledging the complexity of this process means investigating *how* and *why* it develops and changes, and in this case, what contextual factors exist that can elucidate how discursive infrastructures became so damaged that they resulted in the configurations of political powerlessness and speechlessness we find today. The ghost of Militanz practiced in the actions analyzed here is only one result of a much larger and more complex process of becoming invisible, which we shall briefly summarize here in terms of the following three key aspects.

6.1 The Normalization of the Far Right

That the AfD is polling at around 20% nationwide (Politico 2023) indicates the growth of a party that has quickly moved from a neoliberal, eurosceptic position to a blatantly racist and nationalist programme. While this all points to a growing German landscape of far-right tendencies, ranging from classical neo-Nazism to forms of “apocryphal neo-fascism” (Burschel, ct. in Korsch 2018, 66), empirical findings also underline significant differences between East and West. Right-wing and racist violence has occurred to a greater degree in Eastern Germany for decades (Entorf and Lange 2019; for Saxony Backes, Gräfe, Haase et al. 2019). Right-wing group mobilizations—for example in the context of the PEGIDA demonstrations between 2014 and 2018 (Rosellini 2019, 89-116) or in local protests against the accommodation of refugees since 2013 (for Saxony Nattke 2017; Mannewitz 2018)—are always larger in the East than in the West. The AfD (still) achieves significantly larger vote shares in elections compared to West Germany (Weisskircher 2020).¹³ June 2023 local elections saw the AfD win a position equivalent to county Mayor in the eastern district of Sonneberg in Thuringia. Current developments in eastern Germany suggest that this trend will continue, with Sachsen polls forecasting 35% electoral support for AfD in 2024 (Schlottmann 2023).

This normalization of the far right in the East points to four important aspects for this paper. *Firstly*, during the cycles of crisis in recent years—from the “refugee crisis” to the “covid crisis” to the “energy crisis”—the far right has discovered East Germany as a social laboratory and successfully established an authoritarian “rhetoric of systemic upheaval” (Leistner and Böcker 2021, 131), which is linked to the experiences and narratives of personal and collective devaluation in the transforming society of East-Germany.¹⁴ *Secondly*, the rise of the far right is accompanied by the particular weakness of civil society counter-forces and democratic counter-narratives. That is to say: in East Germany right-wing mobilizations meet less resistance, just as nationalist and racist positions are less decisively excluded. Figuratively speaking: if an “anti-fascist minimum” (Copsey 2010) represents some kind of normative-moral and practical protective shield against the influence of anti-democratic attitudes, it is no longer in place in larger parts of East Germany. *Thirdly*, stories of leftwing political socialization in the East highlight the experience of isolation and loneliness, alongside the omnipresent threat of the far right, which is not mirrored in the West. Leftwing or alternative youth perceive their political communities as disinterested, helpless, paralyzed, often even explicitly as hostile (see Schuhmacher 2014, 105-117; see also Paul-Siewert and Jänicke 2022). This can result in withdrawal, encapsulation and, perhaps, escapist variants of the “martial ethics of the self” (Dorlin 2022), characterized by a renunciation of political communication. *Fourthly*, this experience of isolation and hostility lead to the increased significance and all-round symbolic power of places where conditions are markedly different. Amidst a sea of conservative and far-right values, left-wing spaces, neighborhoods, and centers such as Leipzig-Connewitz became “safe spaces”, and even assume a socio-political function as “sovereign spaces”:

¹³ This is not to argue that the West is exempt from growing far-right sentiments, as even the notoriously multicultural Berlin was polled at 9.1% AfD support in 2023. Instead, it indicates that the AfD is increasingly gaining support, and acting as a bridge party between traditional conservative and more authoritarian or fascist agendas.

¹⁴ One exception are urban university towns like Leipzig, specifically those left-wing cultural bastions like Connewitz.

refuges of alternative and radical left-wing lifestyles that are protectively encased, and governed, by existing left-wing publics to some degree (Jones 2024a, 2024b). This encoding transforms Connowitz into a highly politicized symbolic “island” to be either defended or conquered.¹⁵

6.2 Disillusionment

Some of the attacks Antifa East are charged with occurred not in the Leipzig area, but rather on “enemy turf” in nearby Eisenach. In their study Salheiser and Quent (2022) describe Eisenach as a space where decades of social passivity have allowed the far right to establish itself as a normal part of the community. Although contested by democratic activism, participants emphasize the limits they face, as the persistence of right-wing extremist actors and the continuity of right-wing extremist structures reinforce the impression that resistance against them is only useful to a limited extent, and in fact could ultimately reinforce the far-right (Salheiser and Quent 2022, 175). For example, antifascists fear for good reasons that any high-profile engagement would lead to accusations of the left ‘causing trouble’ amidst a right-wing status quo. Since this resembles the situation in Leipzig, one could extrapolate that such hopelessness and isolation would not encourage activists to try to speak to a public that is by no means sympathetic. In these cases, it is conceivable that Antifa might indeed feel that undeclared direct violence against neo-Nazis is the only avenue left to them.

Each of these factors contribute to an environment where activists feel that any attempt to contain or contest far right ideology or speech is nearly impossible, and where traditional antifascist strategies of social degradation and stigmatization are no longer effective against diversified forms of “modernized” far right political rhetoric. According to activists, this results in the rejection of “any approach that somehow [...] propagates reaching a lot of people [...]” (Dennis, quoted in Schuhmacher 2014, 109). This also changes antifascists’ concrete relationship to civil society, as they effectively claim the function of a “civil society substitute” (Dennis, quoted in Schuhmacher 2022, 97), without actually believing that an external civil society exists any longer at all. Furthermore, this disillusionment with a public that no longer wishes to be “saved” or even “informed” is compounded by disparaging state categorization of Antifa as “extremist” and “dangerous”, which extends to all possible forms of political engagement. For example, between 2011 and 2018 there were four large-scale police investigations against people accused of participation in protests against the annual neo-Nazi memorial march in Dresden in 2011, and also against members of the football fan scene of the club ‘Chemie Leipzig’ (Pietrzyk 2012; Eisenberg, Vogel, and Voigt 2015; ADDN 2021). Even if these proceedings were ultimately dropped without result, the mere fact that several hundred people were investigated under §129 for protesting openly neo-nazi marches or being involved in left wing sports fan groups understandably led to a climate of repression, and continued the stigmatization of antifascist politics.

6.3 The Loss of Infrastructures

Already in 2014 Schuhmacher found that Antifa, especially in East Germany, sought to reduce their own vulnerability by retreating from public exposure, such as deliberately avoiding the term “Antifa” for group actions, and sometimes acting more like fluid circles held together by friendship and shared cultural interests. Other times they strategically use the label in order to be publicly perceived as a relevant and powerful actor (see Schuhmacher 2014, 150 f.) when a show of force (rather than nuance) is required.

¹⁵ That is why protests against gentrification in the neighborhood were so highly charged that the state created a Special Commission (Soko Linx) to investigate in 2019.

This context of loss brings us back to the near absence of visible internal infrastructures, whether they be discursive or otherwise. According to antifascist activist publications, interviews, and online statements, collective action must be based on an agreed-upon practice with strict limits. To be justified as Militanz, (i.e. morally justified direct action sometimes including political violence when absolutely necessary), this action must be limited to a defensive strategy of countering neo-Nazis, or protecting vulnerable peoples or spaces. Most importantly, militant political violence must be political, lest it become only the mere violence of criminal activities or gang turf wars. While previously this framing was enacted in a radical counterpublic, including magazines, newspapers, blogs, or online forums, the contemporary climate of isolation, repression and fear has caused most of these avenues to go silent.

One might reasonably ask why a group engaged in criminalized activity would ever choose to admit to their actions in a forum easily accessible by police. Such a critique would argue that Antifa have ceased engaging in discursive infrastructures, or being visible in the counterpublic whatsoever, in order to avoid repression. Yet this critique actually points to the very heart of the issue: the question of how these clandestine actions can be read as political, rather than merely criminal. Amidst the ongoing normalization of the far-right, legal and societal repression, and a general sense of disillusionment with political possibilities, some activists have turned to clandestine revenge tactics against individuals who would understand why they are being assaulted. However, in order to justify these attacks as *politically* motivated, they would need to follow a *political* logic. This justification is claimed via participation in counterpublic discursive infrastructures to ensure that actions remain limited by the standards of the group rather than the whims of an individual.

Indeed, indymedia could have been used to anonymously clarify the background of the attacks and the role of the neo-nazis who were attacked. This could have opened the discussion on the moral justification of such acts and provided much needed context and explanation. Such a conversation would not only provide societal and judicial context, but has also been identified by Antifa groups themselves as supporting their own political movement and sense of identity. For example, a Dresden Antifa group released a 2020 statement on indymedia that they had “visited” someone named on the Connewitz list, whom they accused of being a rapist and participant in race riots. The group explained that actions were generally only directed against neo-Nazis, but “[t]he only reason to write something here is the nationwide increase in attacks on comrades, who are accused by the cops of anti-fascist engagement.” Working in isolation from their broader movement, such “[s]truggling comrades lose courage and confidence in themselves and their structures. The fear of being affected by repression exceeds the realm of rational and legitimate doubt” (Anon 2020). To address these fears and struggles, the group detailed their action and sent solidarity greetings to other antifascists. They perceived their statement not only as helping other Antifa groups, but also as addressing the political repression against those “who are accused by the cops of anti-fascist engagement.” To date, legal charges have not been brought against the authors of the statement.

One might also argue that a statement might have marked those involved in Antifa Ost as a group, and potentially shifted legal actions to fall under political or terrorist legislation. However, it is notable that, in handing down this sentence, the judge referred precisely to a political motivation as a mitigating factor when reducing the requested sentence from eight to five years. One can only speculate as to an outcome if the trial proceeded under terrorist (§129a) legislation. However, 1994 charges against visibly political groups such as ‘Antifa M’ in Göttingen notably only resulted in fines and short periods of community service. What *can* be argued here is that those Antifa accused neither engaged in this counterpublic, nor the discursive infrastructures by which violence is limited and justified as Militanz. As a result, their attacks evoke the ghostly rights of this legitimacy, while abandoning the political responsibilities it requires.

7. Reviving the Ghost

Shortly after the house searches and the arrest of the sole female suspect in November 2020, an initial solidarity group was founded. However, it had relatively few outputs, and did not release any far-reaching political statements or assessments. It was only after a considerable delay that the Antifa East Solidarity Alliance (*Solidaritätsbündnis Antifa Ost*) was launched in August 2021. Also the lengthy period between the actions and the return to public communication can be read as an indication of the weakness of contemporary Antifascist discursive infrastructures. However, their retreat into invisibility is not irreversible. In light of the state prosecution of Antifa East for wielding “criminal violence”, several other Antifa groups have sought to bring the ghost back to life and make politics visible in this discussion once again, (albeit with limited success in terms of the trial outcome). Within the “Antifa Ost” solidarity campaigns, some groups have returned to the once-ghostly counterpublics, and begun to offer the statements, details, and debated justifications that would have given a moralized justification and political context for the actions carried out silently in Leipzig. Networks and groups such as ‘Solidarity Group (*Soligruppe*)’(2021), ‘Antifascists from Leipzig (AAL)’ (2021), or ‘South Thüringen Antifascists’ (AGST 2020, 2021, 2022) have conducted online research, including by infiltrating far-right web platforms, gathering and releasing evidence especially regarding the activities of pub manager Leon Ringl in Eisenach, who was attacked twice, and others. They publish this data via *Antifa Infoblatt* or *Indymedia*, where the majority of statements are traditionally normally shared and debated within the counterpublic. For instance, Soligruppe (2021) actually explained that Ringl is the “central figure of the Eisenach nazi-scene”. They also publicized evidence that he actively supports the British group ‘National Action’ who operated under the slogan “#Hitlerwasright” and were banned in 2016 after they publicly celebrated the murder of MP Jo Cox by a white supremacist (Cobain and Taylor 2016). Thanks to this solidarity group, it is now public knowledge that Ringl is also a member not only of the now banned ‘National Assembly Eisenach’ cell, but also the (identical populated) ‘Knockout-51’ Martial Arts club, who participate in neo-Nazi events thinly disguised as a sports group. On the right-wing web-platform ‘Iron March’ Ringl introduced himself by expressing his desire to deport Jews to an island, that he was in favor of the Holocaust over freedom for Jewish people, and that Germany was his religion and Hitler his ‘prophet’ (AGST 2020). Furthermore, the group leaked screenshots from the site where he revealed his support for the terrorist group ‘*Atomwaffen Division*’, or ‘National Socialist Order’ - an international far-right terrorist network responsible for at least 5 murders and hate crimes in the USA. Ringl is also a member of their German division, and helped create, for example, promotional material for the cell (AAL 2021). In April 2022 Ringl was charged under §129 with being a member of a criminal organization for his involvement in Knockout 15, *Atomwaffen Division* Germany (AWDD), as well as the already banned group Combat 18 (Rietzschel 2022; Die Zeit 2023). These various factors would presumably have made it relatively easy for Antifa East to explain their motivations for the actions taken against Ringl and his pub, just as another group of Antifa from Leipzig in fact simply did in AIB in July 2021. Furthermore, the antifascist paper “10 Theses on Betrayal & Patriarchy & Militant Violence as a Political Tool” (Anon 2023) has been circulating since March 2023. In addition to addressing the issues of sexism, patriarchy, and betrayal regarding the crown witness (unfortunately beyond the scope of this article), it also appeals for collective responsibility and organizing to protect against such ‘contamination’ and repression, and calls for the formation of “reflective contexts”. It does not go so far as to address the wider societal public, instead remaining focused on internal understandings of militant politics. Nevertheless, the beginnings of such a dialogue, as well as the solidarity campaigns described above, echo the politicizing discursive infrastructures that were mere ghosts for the Antifa East, but which seem to be at least partly trying to return to life in response to the trial.

8. Conclusion

Former East Germany still sees a significant portion of the popular vote going to the AfD, judicial leniency against far-right violence, and a normalization of fascist rhetoric in everyday life. In this delicate balance of legality and far-right ideology, militant (and non-militant) Antifascists face an especially difficult audience who are not likely to read activism in a *de facto* positive light, nor are they likely very receptive to radical critiques of the status quo. While a particularly sympathetic observer could perhaps understand why milieus around Antifa East would therefore simply give up trying to convert – or even address – this public, anyone else would struggle to understand their secret attacks as anything other than, at best, a sort of retaliatory turf war violence.

Justifying and legitimizing such actions as moral, and therefore not simply criminal, requires the logic of Militanz, which itself is grounded in certain constraints and responsibilities. Indeed, it is notable that in handing down a sentence to the accused three years lighter than the prosecutor requested, the judge identified their actions as a “clearly politically motivated” form of “self-justice”, despite still charging them as part of a criminal (§129), not political and potentially terrorist (§129a), organization. However, he also explained that vigilante justice must not claim the sovereign power of the monopoly on violence in a democratic society, as it is solely the purview of a state. While Antifa would reject this monopoly, it is important to understand that their own claiming of that same right to apply violence in a kind of “alternative policing” (Vysotsky 2015) is grounded in what is effectively a similar claim to statehood, in terms of a strict, self-regulated counterpublic sphere where norms and values are debated, discussed and limited in a manner that some might say holds truer to original democratic ideals than many states today. As the judge points out, claiming the monopoly on violence also implies emulating the role of a state, including structures of radical justice (Jones 2018a, 2018c, 2024a). And as Antifascists have long acknowledged, invoking this right also entails the responsibilities and duties set out in the concept of Militanz. To abandon the requirements of these structures and simply wield silent, secret violence in a private context no longer evokes the moral righteousness claimed by such political foundations, but instead only weakly gestures towards the mere echo of their ghost.

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