

Trans-Atlantic (Mis)Translations. A US expat's musings on antifascist activism in the Land of the Gun

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Anti-racist organizing in the United States has a long history, and yet the emergence of a militant, leftist, street-fighting movement that has violently disrupted neo-Nazi rallies in Berkeley, California and Charlottesville, Virginia has introduced new nomenclature into the American political lexicon: Antifa.

Journalistic attempts to historicize this movement have connected American Antifa to an older, European, tradition of antifascist resistance but it is important to recognize the limitations of this interpretive device.



Manifest der Antifaschistischen Aktion

Einstimmig beschlossen auf dem Antifaschistischen Einheitskongreß in Berlin, am 10. Juli 1932

Arbeiter und Arbeiterinnen! Werktätige in Stadt und Land!

Antifaschistische Aktion was a wing of the German Communist Party dedicated to meeting the Nazis' exhortations to violence with violence. These "original Antifa" organized their first action in 1932. In his work, *Antifaschistische Aktion 1945: "Stunde Null" in Braunschweig*, Albrecht Lein observes that Antifaschistische Aktion cells composed of a fifth column of German socialists who had avoided military service re-emerged immediately upon the Allies'

invasion of Germany. Some of these cells engaged Nazi loyalists in pitched street battles in anticipation of reinforcement from Allied troops. It is this tradition that birthed the term “Antifa.”

Organized government repression of Communists and a political order historically hostile to organized labor, particularly to socialist labor organizations, makes tracing direct lines of descent between contemporary American Antifa and any historical tradition of violent resistance to racist authoritarians through the organized labor movement in the US impossible. To be certain, there has always been resistance –violent resistance, too—to racist authoritarianism in the US but that resistance has only recently been couched in the terms, and adorned with the trappings and outward symbolism, of European-styled (German-styled, really), black bloc, anarcho-collectivist, squadism.



The image of the black balaclava-clad Antifa is inseparable from the history of the black bloc, a protest tactic developed in response to police repression of German anti-nuclear activists in the 1970's. Anonymous demonstrators articulated their solidarity by dressing completely in black enabling them to answer police violence with violence without fear of prosecution. Throughout the 1990's, black blocs became regular components of May Day demonstrations in Germany. The violence of these demonstrations and the aggressive confrontations between black bloc and German police served as inspiration for anti-capitalist protests around the world, including the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, Washington.

In the US, the tactic was appropriated by anti-Imperialist activists though there is disagreement as to the circumstances of the first black bloc protest: one account has the first American black bloc marshalled at protests against the Gulf War in 1991, another account marks the date of the first black bloc protests to demonstrations against US support for death squads in El Salvador in 1988. In any case, the economic crisis of 2008 facilitated a renewed interest in Europe and the US in far-right wing political organizations, including openly fascist movements, a political development that provided an additional target for anti-capitalist activists.

The history of contemporary Antifa in the US, like the history of the black bloc, can be traced directly to European inspirations. However, there is also a parallel history of American anti-racist struggle that informs American Antifa that makes it a distinct, and in some ways a very separate, movement from that in Europe. The most obvious contextual difference is that the United States, though in many ways a far more authoritarian political space than Europe, does not reserve a monopoly on the use of deadly force and so activism centered around organized street violence in the US is a very different proposition.

The American struggle for minority civil rights in the 1960's is often portrayed as a politically mainstream movement commandeered by Martin Luther King, Jr and conducted according to a firm commitment to non-violent direct action. This view, however, ignores the complexities of the American Civil Rights movement. As Robert F. Williams details in his 1962 book, *Negroes with Guns*, Martin Luther King Jr's non-violent protests were buttressed by a firm commitment to meet white supremacist violence with deadly retaliation. "We will shoot back," is the way Charles Evers, brother of murdered Mississippi civil rights activist Medgar Evers, articulated that commitment. Contemporary American antifascist/anti-racist activism borrows as much from that tradition as from European anarcho-communists.

Neither the English BNP, the Dutch PVV, nor the French FN have cadres of street activists armed with assault rifles demonstrating on behalf of their political agenda. Nor are European anarchist collectives known for stockpiling assault weapons. In Charlottesville, there were armed militias marching with neo-Nazis and armed anti-racist militias like The John Brown Gun Club (named for a famous white American abolitionist and insurrectionist) and Redneck Revolt (the anomalous openly-socialist, working class, predominately white, armed militia whose tagline is “putting the ‘Red’ back in Redneck”). These militias were more heavily armed than the Charlottesville police. None of these organizations have direct counterparts in Europe, despite the surface-level similarities with European activist movements.

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Read more:

Antifaschistische Aktion 1945: "Stunde Null" in Braunschweig by Albrecht Lein
<https://search.socialhistory.org/Record/156489>

“Negroes With Guns: Rob Williams and Black Power” (film)
<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/negroeswithguns/rob.html>

Negroes With Guns by Robert F. Williams (book)
https://books.google.nl/books?id=i4YiA0jWz4EC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement By Akinyele Omowale Umoja
<https://books.google.nl/books?id=0jQUCgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=we+will+shoot+back&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjsbjFmOjVAhWNJVAKHfTdALAQ6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=we%20will%20shoot%20back&f=false>

This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible By Charles E. Cobb
<https://books.google.nl/books?id=DapVDgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=this+nonviolent+stuff%27ll+get+you+killed&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi39OujmujVAhVOLLVAKHekyBmUQ6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=this%20nonviolent%20stuff%27ll%20get%20you%20killed&f=false>