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► **To cite this version:**

Selim Nadi, Leandros Fischer. A history of German anti-imperialism after 1945. Twelfth Annual Historical Materialism Conference, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Nov 2015, London, United Kingdom. hal-03623190

HAL Id: hal-03623190

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03623190>

Submitted on 29 Mar 2022

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A history of German anti-imperialism after 1945

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Historical Materialism Conference, School of Oriental and African Studies, London.
November 2015

Introduction

This paper aims to analyse the evolution of the relationship between the German radical left and the anti-imperialist struggles. The period covered start at the end of World War II (WWII), thus, focusing the analysis on the dynamics of German anti-imperialism after 1945 and its specificities. If one consider the issue of anti-imperialism in the industrial countries, the question is how the German radical Left evolved from its central place in the anti-imperialist solidarity in Europe to one of the weakest Left? According to our thesis, a possible reason is that the concept of “fascistisation” (Faschisierung) did, progressively, become a reference point concerning anti-imperialism, linking this question to a wider critic of West-German modern democracy.

A global overview of the evolution of anti-imperialism in the German left will be given. It will start from one of its main catalyst: the Algerian revolution. Even if German colonialism was almost overshadowed by the National-Socialist Period (hiding the genocide of the Hereros for example) and we will conclude by today's situation of Die Linke. As we will show, to support the Algerian revolution was a first step in the evolution of German anti-imperialism who became stronger during the protest against the Vietnam War. In this context based on a new political concept, the Faschisierung and the different analysis of fascism became central in the critic of both imperialism and the West-German society. But, in the 70's, Israel began to be a structural element of the anti-imperialist mobilisations. In the 90's one of the biggest “political split” in the German Left since 1945, took place between the Antideutsch (antigerman) and the Anti-imps (anti-imperialists) movements.

I.

The Algerian Revolution consequences were quite different for Germany than they were for France. Germany did not fear the loss of its colonies and its interests were not at stakes. So, it is clear that the German relationship to the Algerian Revolution never was the core of Germany's foreign policy. When, on November 1st 1954, the Algerian National Liberation Front (F.L.N) began to revolt, the German Left was not divided by whether or not it had to support this Liberation Struggle. It clearly was not a priority. In his book *Internationalismus*, Josef Hierlmeier wrote that “The Internationalism of the workers movements has stopped to exist after the National-Socialist Period¹” and that just a few people engage themselves in solidarity with the Alge-

¹ Josef (Moe) Hierlmeier, *Internationalismus. Eine Einführung in seine Ideengeschichte – von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Schmetterling Verlag, Stuttgart, 2006, p. 23.

rian resistance. According to Hierlmeier, it is with the Student Movement of the 60's that Internationalism began to have theoretical relevance again. If Hierlmeier is right to point out the Student Movement as a key moment in International Solidarity, the fact that his book begins with the Vietnam War did not grasp the political roots of the Vietnam solidarity which have grown from the solidarity with the Algerian Revolution. We will focus on the role played by organisations – especially the S.P.D – because it shows the evolution of the balance of forces in Germany concerning anti-imperialism. What is relevant to our analysis is that, by supporting the Algerian Revolution, the S.P.D lined its critic of colonialism to a critic of West-Germany. Thus, the German S.P.D had nothing to do with the French S.F.I.O.

After WWII, French socialists widely supported Colonialism, as Ian Birchall pointed out:

One of the most appalling aspect of the Algerian war, was the way in which the main traditional organisations of the working class abandoned any pretensions to internationalism. It was Guy Mollet, leader of the S.F.I.O, who was responsible for the escalation of the war in 1956, while the P.C.F, aiming to revive a "Popular Front", backed Mollet's introduction of "special powers".²

In France, the so called "Algerian policy" was widely lead by socialists¹. As Jacques Jurquet – former member of the P.C.F who became later a figure of french Maoism – wrote in his book *Années de feu*, the French socialists were also responsible for the colonial repression, following WWII, in Algeria and a large part of the french radical left was completely unable to have an efficient anti-colonial policy. In Germany, the situation was quite different, as Germany was occupied by the allies, every single "German policy question" turned quickly also as a question of "international policy". According to Thomas Scheffler, who wrote a book about the S.P.D and the Algerian war, the situation of Germany after WWII may explain why it was easier for the German left, at least theoretically, to support anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Asia than for many European social-democratic or communist parties. But, in Germany, the Social-Democratic Solidarity with the Algerian Struggle did not explode with the beginning of the fights in 1954. Actually in its "policy statements"³ from 1951, the word "*Kolonialismus*" did not even appear once. From 1954 to 1956, the Solidarity with the Algerian people, from the S.P.D, was mainly the fact of a few trotskysts⁴. But, the support of the Algerian Revolution, coming from German organisations, really began in 1956/57, when the F.L.N exported its political strategy to Europe.

While the first representative of the F.L.N in the French Metropolis was Mourad Terbouche (former member of the *Mouvement pour le triomphe des libertés démocratiques* – M.T.L.D), who was arrested in 1955, the French federation of the F.L.N was reorganised in 1957 by Mohamed Lebdjaoui. Thus in 1957 the French federation of the F.L.N really had become an integral part of the political strategy of the F.L.N. The French federation of the F.L.N began to organize a wide solidarity network across different countries in Europe. But, in our opinion, a European network did not exist at all since there was no real relations between the different groups of each country.

Concerning Germany, as the chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, was an ally of France, his government did not help Algerians to come to Germany. According to Kader Benamara and Fritz Keller in 1958 (when De Gaulle

² Ian Birchall, "Mitterrand's war", In : Ian Birchall (ed.), *European Revolutionaries and Algerian independence : 1954 – 1962*, Merlin Press, Pontypool, 2012, p. 168.

¹ Ex. : From 1944 to 1951, all the "*gouverneur général*" (General Governor) in Algeria were socialists (Yves Chataigneau and Marcel-Edmond Naegelen), from 1944 to 1950, the Ministers of Home Affairs were also socialists.

³ See : "Ziele und Aufgaben des demokratischen Sozialismus : Erklärung der Sozialistischen Internationale, beschlossen in Frankfurt a. Main am 3. July 1951", *Rote Revue* : sozialistische Monatsschrift, Heft 7, 30 (1951), pp. 318 – 324.

⁴ Especially from Georg Jungclass, member of the K.P.D in his youth who took part to the fight against nazism, and Jakob Moneta – who went to Palestine during the Nazi Period, became anti-zionist, and, after coming back to Europe, took a place at the German Embassy in Paris in 1954, at the beginning of the Algerian Revolution. His diplomacy position enabled him to take a large part in the support of the Algerian cause alongside other members of the IV. International like Ernest Mandel and Sal Santen. Several years later, he published his famous book about the french CP : *Die Kolonialpolitik der französischen K.P.*

came back at the head of the country), 2000 to 3000 Algerian lived in West-Germany and had huge issues to live decently. In West-Germany, big demonstrations were organized in solidarity with the Algerian people. A lot of organizations took part in the solidarity movement, but the S.P.D really was the most important of them.

The evolution of the S.P.D concerning the colonial question should be analysed in its relationship to its student movement, the S.D.S. Indeed, the party and its student organisations had pretty tense relations. The S.D.S wanted to transform the solidarity with the Algerian Revolution in a main Theme in West-Germany through the Link between Colonialism and German policy, this was especially the case of Georg Jungclass, one of the main figures of the German S.D.S. So, if it is true to say that the S.P.D was a leader of the solidarity with Algeria, it was mainly through its youth and student organisations.

The Solidarity of the Student Movement took two forms: propaganda in order to bring back the German Soldiers from the "*Légion étrangère*" (one of the main forces fighting against the F.L.N) and anti-war mobilizations who was not just against the French army in Algeria but also against the German rearmament. With the Algerian Revolution the Student Movement became more and more autonomous and independent of the German Social-Democracy. The final fracture between the Student Movement and the S.P.D occurred in 1959, during the Bad-Godesberg Congress where the S.P.D assumed its reformist, non-marxist and anti-communist turn. Of course, the Bad-Godesberg Program assumed a new way of thinking international solidarity. The internationalist tradition was abandoned and the "*Entwicklungspolitik*" (development policy) was promoted. The political aspect of the solidarity with the Algerian Revolution was abandoned and the S.P.D became a kind of promoter of humanitarianism. The international political solidarity became the fact of the student organisations who played a crucial role in the next steps of anti-imperialist struggles in Germany.

II

This brings us to our second point, which is the emergence of a wide anti-imperialist mass movement in Germany led by the student movement in the form of the SDS. Of course, this kind of anti-imperialism not only appeared in Germany, but the German specificity was to point out the continuity between German fascism and the Federal Republic. Thus, the concept of "Fascism" became central for a wide array of left-wing political analysis, something that naturally included a critique of US imperialism. The thesis of fascistisation (*Faschisierung*) of West Germany arose with the protest movement against the introduction of the "state emergency laws" in the German *Grundgesetz* (basic law) in 1968. The laws permitted the German state to restrict civil liberties in case of war or insurrection. However, the idea of *Faschisierung* quickly began to be applied to international questions. In his 1965 Essay "Repressive Tolerance" (part of *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*), Marcuse developed the idea that "what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today, is in many of its most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression⁵". Marcuse was not limiting his critique to Germany but extended it to US-imperialism after the latter's growing involvement in Vietnam. In a letter to Horkheimer, written in June 1967, Marcuse wrote that he saw in the US, the historical successor of Fascism: "The fact that concentration camps, dead people and torture are outside of the Metropolis did not change reality in any way. What is happening in Vietnam are war crimes and crimes against humanity". However, it was Adorno, who also formulated a critique of the war in Vietnam by implying a continuity with Auschwitz. Hence, the assumption of a continuity between fascism and democracy in industrialized countries was ins-

5 Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance", <http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/60spubs/65repressivetolerance.htm>

trumental in generating anti-imperialist solidarity among the German radical left with a number of struggles. As Matthias Dapprich wrote in his 2013 PhD about the historical development of West Germany's new left:

During the '1968 years', student activists frequently incorporated resistance movements and their protagonists in foreign countries into their ideals, involving almost unconditional partisanship in favour of resistance forces all over the world, most notably, the Vietcong in South Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the Vietnamese Democratic Republic and Che Guevara.⁶

The influence of the Frankfurt School in creating a specific form of German anti-imperialism stands in sharp contrast to an assumption widely shared today, even among authors on the German left. Namely, that the degeneration of the German student movement began when it moved away from Critical Theory and embraced an orientation towards the working class, often in the form of a “vulgar” Maoism. In fact, the reasons for Critical Theory’s declining influence within the student movement did not lie in its political orientation but its inability to strategically relate to an upsurge of working class struggles that was gripping Europe, and to a lesser extent the Federal Republic, in the form of a series of wildcat strikes in 1969.

After the SDS disbanded in 1970, its many currents took the form of many successor organizations, mostly Maoist, but also orthodox-communist, workerist and to a lesser extent, Trotskyist. The relative social peace prevalent in Germany, the entanglement of the “German Question” with global geopolitics, and the isolation of the radical left from society gave the issue of struggles in the periphery a key role in defining political identities and paradigms. The most obvious manifestation of this was the attraction emanating from groups like the Red Army Faction (RAF) and the Revolutionary Cells (RZ), whose cooperation with radical Palestinian faction is well documented today. Solidarity was articulated primarily out of a *programmatic* basis. That is to say that the struggles supported most strongly were the ones lead by organizations deemed ideologically close to the positions of the respective German organizations.

Maoism proved the main benefactor of the wave of 1968. The best example of the influence of Critical Theory among the 1970s Marxist left was the *Kommunistische Bund* (KB), a “soft Maoist” splinter party that elevated the “theory of fascistisation of state and society” to its main theoretical cannon. According to this view, the Federal Republic and its elites were on a slippery slope towards fascism, and were aided in this by Social Democracy. The implication that society was also becoming fascist implicitly created a contradiction between an orientation towards the working class on the one hand, and the anti-imperialist solidarity that was perceived as one of the weapons needed to counter the tendency of fascistisation on the other. For the entire radical left, this solidarity entailed supporting the struggle against Apartheid, against the Chilean coup, as well as the Palestinian struggle. The KB’s example is just one of the many manifestations of the importance of anti-imperialism in defining the German left’s political identity, amidst an apolitical and often hostile environment.

III.

But like its counterparts elsewhere, the German radical left began declining around the mid-1970s. The fact that periphery-oriented Maoism was more influential in Germany meant that there were more leftists disillusioned by the course of Mao’s successors, but also by the revelations about the character of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. This mass of now former Maoists often moved to the new Green party and the radical

⁶ Matthias Dapprich, *The historical development of West Germany's new left from a politico-theoretical perspective with particular emphasis on the Marxistische Gruppe and Maoist K-Gruppen*, PhD Thesis (unpublished), University of Glasgow, 2013, p. 45

environmental movement that was beginning to gain traction around the end of the decade. One of the defining features of this transformation involved the replacement of political paradigms by a moralistic outlook, as well as the replacement of anti-imperialism with outlooks promoting development aid. Meanwhile, the massive peace movement was largely hostile to anti-imperialist theory and was mostly characterized by a moralistic pacifism.

Anti-imperialism in the 1980s was mostly confined to the growing autonomous movement that engaged in squats and battles with the police. However, the overall decline of the radical left meant that there was little theoretical development on the concept of anti-imperialism. The real turning point came during the end of the decade with the simultaneously occurring events of German reunification, the first Palestinian Intifada and the second Gulf War against Iraq. The KB took its theory of fascistisation a step further. The group split following disagreements over German reunification. While a wing joined the refounded Eastern communist party PDS, another declared the abstract notion of "Germany" as a nation as the main enemy for the left. It was this wing that eventually coined the term *Antideutsch*, or "anti-German", which is today associated with a pro-Zionist outlook towards the Middle East combined with some form of leftist self-identification. Against this background or resurgent German nationalism, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ebbing of liberation struggles in the periphery, German anti-imperialism collapsed overnight as a current. The fear of a resurgent Germany autonomous from its constraints after World War II led in many instances to left-wing support of actions by governments deemed to be counterweights to the new Germany, be it the US attack on Iraq, Israel's clampdown against the Palestinians and even the war fought by Slobodan Milosevic in the Balkans. However, the projection of German history into the present was not just practiced by subaltern elements of the radical left, for even the Green foreign minister Joschka Fischer justified the attack in Yugoslavia in 1999 with the need to "prevent another Auschwitz". Anti-imperialism and antifascism, so it seemed, were no longer complementary but were turned against each other for short-term political gain.

Nevertheless, tensions within the German radical left really escalated with the advent of the War on Terror and the outbreak of the Second Intifada. Amidst the mass movement against the Iraq War, the *Antideutsch* began distancing themselves from the left and accusing anti-imperialists of being anti-Semitic due to their opposition to Israeli policies towards the Palestinians. A good example of this trend of ex-leftists are the writings of Matthias Küntzel, a former KB-member who – without knowledge of Arabic – has written a much-cited book "proving" the Nazi origins of Arab nationalism and Islamism in Palestine.

However, these debates from the 1990s and the early 2000s had major consequences for the formulation of anti-imperialist positions, even among a great part of the left that does not share the pro-Zionist outlook of the *Antideutsch*. While there can be no talk of a triumph of the *Antideutsch*, there exists today a more complex debate regarding solidarity with liberation struggles like the Palestinian one. In a way, these disagreements can be seen as a reflection of the debates between Lenin and Luxemburg on the question of Polish independence. Therefore, some anti-imperialist liberation struggles are deemed worthy of support because they are perceived to be emancipatory, while others are deemed as "regressively nationalist" and in the case of the Palestinian struggle "anti-Semitic", disregarding any objective benefit the positive outcome of these struggles might produce, or even the mere fact of oppression that needs to be challenged.

Nowhere can this contradiction be seen best as in the case of the Kurdish and Palestinian struggles. Whereas the bulk of the German radical left, in its Marxist or autonomist tendencies supports the Kurdish fight against ISIS unconditionally and often uncritically, a double standard is being applied to the Palestinian struggle. The main argument given in defence of this situation is the "progressive character" of the PKK compared to the "reactionary" character of Hamas. The nationalist character of one struggle is thus muted, whereas in the other case it is overemphasized. In this, one can find continuities as well as breaks from the Third-World-solidarity of the 1970s. While the position on Palestine has in many cases been turned on its head, the focus in both cases remains strictly programmatic and oriented towards "ideological purity". What has begun as an application of postwar antifascism on anti-imperialist struggles has in many cases ended

with the generalization of the German experience of fascism and its “export” to the periphery, something undermining anti-imperialist solidarity.

Conclusion

In this presentation, we tried to outline some contours of a specific tradition of German anti-imperialism. We have emphasized the role German history – in the form of the fascist experience as well as the Cold War – has played in predicating Third World solidarity among a number of actors, ranging from Social Democracy to the radical left. Today, the deepening crisis of the autonomous antifascist movement, the deepening economic crisis combined the rise of islamophobic far-right populism in the guise of PEGIDA, resurgent geopolitical rivalries over the Ukraine and Syria, but also the growing strength of the Global BDS solidarity movement with Palestine and the growing interactions between movements operating in different national spheres, are all developments that challenge previously held assumptions among the German left about the “primacy of the ideological” factor. These developments make the growth a new anti-imperialist movement – and one that will be guided by the premise of solidarity with the oppressed and not by projections and a quest for ideological purity – all the more urgent.