Introduction

Most people who know anything about World War II are aware that, in the spring of 1945, Germany was invaded and occupied by the armies of Britain, France, the USA and the Soviet Union. What is not so well known is that, in the chaotic circumstances of the time, there were parts of Germany that remained unoccupied by Allied troops for several weeks or even months after the formal end of hostilities. The most prominent of these pockets of 'unconquered' territory was located in the far north of Germany around the naval base at Flensburg, for it was here that Hitler's designated successor, Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, established a short-lived German government.[1] In Mecklenburg, also in northern Germany, there was a long strip of no-man's-land between British and Red Army lines.[2] But the largest and most enduring of these unoccupied enclaves was located far to the south, in the western Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains) that straddle the border between the East German province of Saxony and what used to be called Czechoslovakia. Here, a block of unoccupied territory, roughly the size of Greater London, lay sandwiched between the American and Soviet lines. Though the area did not include any cities or major towns, it did contain a number of smaller towns, such as Aue, Stollberg, Schneeberg and Schwarzenberg, and a total population of about half a million natives and refugees.[3] Sealed off from the rest of Germany by American and Russian road-blocks, the inhabitants of the unoccupied territory were left to fend for themselves. By locals at the time, and ever since, this patch of land that the Allies had apparently forgotten was simply referred to as 'Niemandsland' (No-man's-land).

The failure of the Allies to occupy their territory confronted the local population with a set of problems that was as serious as it was unexpected. Everywhere in Germany people were going hungry, but in Niemandsland, which could produce only a fraction of the food it needed, the situation

[1] Kitchen, *Nazi Germany at War*, chapter 9; Ziemke, *US Army*, pp. 260–3.
[2] *Daily Herald*, 6 June 1945, p. 2, 'No man's land'.
[3] Bukvić, 'Antifaschistische Selbsthilfe', pp. 89–92.

was catastrophic. So severe was the crisis in the unoccupied enclave that, even in far-off London, the *Daily Express* reported on its front page on 5 June that 'There is famine in the Saxon "no-man's-land", the 600 square miles between the Russian and American areas of control in Central Germany.'[4] There were also crippling shortages of coal, petrol and firewood, as well as an acute lack of accommodation caused by the presence of tens of thousands of refugees and Wehrmacht personnel. Somehow or other, the locals would have to cope with these problems without any assistance from the outside world.

Another very serious issue for the population of Niemandsland was public order. Even in those parts of Germany that had been occupied, Allied troops found it difficult to control the bands of former slave workers and prisoners of war who rampaged across the German countryside in search of food and revenge. In urban areas, feral German civilians were resorting to looting. In the unoccupied territory, however, there were no Allied troops to restrain the POWs and former slave workers or to prevent the looters from taking what they wanted. On the contrary, the situation in Niemandsland was rendered yet more difficult by the thousands of Wehrmacht and SS troops who, during the last days of the war, had sought refuge in the thickly wooded hills. On 27 May the BBC reported that these unsurrendered German soldiers were 'getting in a pretty desperate state searching for food' and were plundering the countryside and terrorising the civilian population to such an extent that 'something like a civil war is developing'.[5]

It was under these awful circumstances that a section of the population of Niemandsland decided to take matters into its own hands. Throughout the unoccupied territory small groups of Communists, Socialists and other antifascists came together to form what they called 'antifascist committees' or 'action committees'. In several localities the antifascists descended on the local town hall and physically seized power from the existing authorities. Elsewhere, they imposed their control on the incumbent mayors and their officials. With great energy and enthusiasm the action committees then set about restoring public order and ensuring the supply of food and essential services to the population.

A particular problem was that, given the absence of Allied troops, it was down to the German antifascists to scour the forests for fugitive Nazis and SS-men, to disarm them and to take them into custody. But this was not going to be easy, for these remnants of the former regime were armed and desperate men who had nothing left to lose and who would do everything

[4] *Daily Express*, 5 June 1945, p. 1, 'They are starving in no-man's-land'.
[5] *Washington Post*, 28 May 1945, p. 3, 'Roving Nazis loot, terrorize section'.

in their power to evade capture. It is a little-known irony that some of the very last skirmishes against Nazi troops in Europe were fought not by Allied soldiers but by German antifascists in the hills and forests of Niemandsland.

The purpose of this book is to reconstruct in detail the narrative of Niemandsland based on the wealth of primary material that is to be found in the archives of the district. In particular, the book will focus on the German antifascists who took control of the situation in Niemandsland. Who were they? What did they hope to achieve? In what ways did their prior life experiences influence their behaviour in this crisis situation? How, and how effectively, did they respond to the terrible problems that confronted them? In themselves, the answers to these questions might seem unimportant, for the events that I describe in this book were of no particular significance to the course of the war, and they had little impact on subsequent developments. But the story of the antifascists of Niemandsland is nonetheless so curious, so illuminating, and raises so many questions about existing historical interpretations of the period that it deserves to be told in full.

1 The antifascist committees

In the beginning there were the antifascist committees. Whereas orthodox political parties and the apparatus of the German state only began to revive some weeks or even months after the end of the war, rank-and-file antifascists, acting on their own initiative, began to establish antifascist organisations in their local communities even before the guns had fallen silent. Though these bodies went by all sorts of names, they are collectively known to historians as the antifascist committees or 'antifas'. It is with the antifas that the story of postwar German politics begins.

Particularly in those parts of Germany that had once been strongholds of the labour movement, the antifas existed in significant numbers. In Frankfurt, for instance, the Americans reported that there were at least seven separate antifascist committees.[1] In the Mansfeld region there were some fifty local committees, while in the vicinity of Dresden there were no fewer than sixty-eight. It has been estimated that there were at least five hundred antifascist committees in Germany as a whole.[2] Given the utter collapse of the Nazi regime and the inability of the occupying armies rapidly to fill the resulting political vacuum, the antifascist movement dominated the political stage in Germany for the simple reason that it was the only domestic political actor left standing. Everywhere, however, the antifas were regarded with great suspicion by the occupying powers, including the Soviets, and by the late summer of 1945 they had everywhere been suppressed.

The action committees that emerged in the unoccupied territory of the western Erzgebirge were part of this larger antifascist movement. To understand their full significance, therefore, it is first of all necessary to place them in this wider historical context.

[1] Borsdorf and Niethammer, *Zwischen Befreiung und Besatzung*, p. 90.
[2] Benser, 'Antifa-Ausschüsse', pp. 786–7.

The origins of the antifas

The roots of the antifascist committees are to be found in the so-called 'circles of friends' (*Freundschaftskreise*) which, from the mid 1930s onwards, were all that was left of the once mighty German labour movement. When the Nazis took power, in January 1933, they immediately unleashed a ferocious wave of terror against the organisations of the German working class, in particular the Communist Party (KPD), the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the trade unions. Tens of thousands of activists and functionaries were arrested, incarcerated, beaten, tortured, and in many cases killed. According to Alan Merson, of the 300,000 members of the Communist Party in January 1933, at least half were persecuted in some way and around 30,000 were executed or died as a result of mistreatment.[3]

Despite the heroic resistance of many thousands of working-class activists, it soon became impossible to sustain any kind of organised underground resistance to the Nazi regime. There remained, however, informal networks of former Socialists and Communists that were based on long-standing personal connections. These 'circles of friends' rarely participated in acts of open resistance, but rather confined themselves to listening to foreign radio, discussing the political situation and providing assistance to the families of persecuted comrades as well as foreign slave workers and prisoners of war. Precisely because they engaged only in low-level resistance activities, and were comprised exclusively of people who were well known to each other, the 'circles of friends' proved difficult for the Gestapo to detect and even harder to destroy.[4]

During the closing stages of World War II, as the military situation of the Third Reich became increasingly desperate, many of these antifascist circles began to crystallise into something more concrete. The city of Leipzig, for example, had a long tradition of radical working-class politics which the Gestapo had never been able entirely to extirpate. In 1943 a number of underground networks, comprising Socialists, Communists and non-party intellectuals, came together to establish a united resistance organisation which they called the National Committee Free Germany (Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland or NKFD).[5] Similarly, in the industrial region of Halle-Merseburg the defeat of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad provided the catalyst for the formation of a body that

[3] Merson, *Communist Resistance*, p. 309.
[4] Allen, 'Sozialdemokratische Untergrundbewegung', pp. 850–9; FO 371/46747, 'Jupp's report', 31 January 1945, p. 4.
[5] Arndt, 'Leipzig', pp. 87–8.

called itself the Antifascist Workers' Group of Central Germany (Antifaschistische Arbeitergruppe Mitteldeutschlands or AAM).[6] In Bremen, another city with a long tradition of working-class radicalism, a series of talks took place during the last months of the war between members of various left-wing circles, which led to the emergence of a fairly tight-knit group of between 250 and 400 workers. As soon as the city was liberated, at the end of April 1945, these antifascists came out of hiding in order formally to constitute themselves as the 'Fighting Community against Fascism' (Kampfgemeinschaft gegen den Faschismus or KgF).[7] In Hanover a wave of arrests had effectively smashed the organised resistance by 1936 at the latest. There survived, however, a loose network of antifascists who were able to meet regularly by disguising themselves as an informal bowling club. Upon the liberation of Hanover, members of this circle of friends gathered in the town hall on 11 April 1945 in order to constitute themselves as the 'Committee for Reconstruction' (Ausschuss für Wiederaufbau or AfW).[8]

In many places it was only after the arrival of Allied troops that informal networks of antifascists crystallised into antifascist committees. When troops of the Red Army arrived in Chemnitz, on 8 May, a spontaneous crowd of antifascists turned out to greet them. The antifascists then retired to a local pub in order to found an antifa. In the small town of Limbach, in Saxony, an antifa was established two days after the arrival of American troops. In Niederwiesa, also in Saxony, it was only at the end of May, three weeks after the arrival of the Soviets, that an antifascist committee was officially founded.[9] Riederwald, a solidly working-class suburb of Frankfurt, was liberated by the Americans at the beginning of March 1945, but the American soldiers passed through in pursuit of the retreating Wehrmacht and did not leave a garrison behind them. After two weeks there was still no sign of the district coming under occupation, so local antifascists decided to fill the power vacuum by creating an 'Antifascist Organisation' (Antifaschistische Organisation or AFO).[10]

The antifascist committees that emerged in the spring of 1945 varied enormously in terms of their size. Some were tiny, consisting of no more than a handful of individuals. The central antifa in Weimar was made up of just four men, a Communist, a Social Democrat, a liberal and a former member of the Catholic Centre Party (Zentrum).[11] In the small Saxon

[6] Gotsche, 'Unser gemeinsamer Kampf', pp. 396–400.
[7] Brandt, 'Kampfgemeinschaft', pp. 391–4; Bunke, *KPD in Bremen*, pp. 19–20.
[8] Schröder, 'Ausschuss für Wiederaufbau', pp. 455–61.
[9] Pritchard, *Making of the GDR*, p. 32.
[10] Borsdorf and Niethammer, *Zwischen Befreiung und Besatzung*, pp. 84–5.
[11] *Manchester Guardian*, 24 May 1945, p. 5, 'The four men of Weimar'.

town of Olbernhau the local antifa consisted of six members, three Communists and three Social Democrats.[12] In Eilenburg, near Leipzig, the antifascist committee had nine members, including three liberals and progressive Christians.[13] At the other end of the scale, in some of the larger industrial conurbations the antifas became substantial organisations. At the end of April 1945, according to one account, the NKFD in Leipzig consisted of no fewer than thirty-eight local committees with 4,500 members and 150,000 supporters, of whom 90 per cent were working class.[14] Just two weeks after its foundation, the KgF in Bremen allegedly comprised fourteen local groups with 4,625 members, with another fourteen groups and 2,230 members in the surrounding countryside.[15] Wolfgang Leonhard claims that, in Dresden, the 'Anti-Fascist People's Committee' possessed between 20,000 and 30,000 members.[16]

Political character and composition

In terms of their political character and composition, almost all antifas had certain basic features in common. They were created spontaneously on the initiative of rank-and-file activists. Nowhere did they have any contact with the exiled leaderships of the anti-Nazi political parties. They rarely possessed formal membership lists and they went about their business in a rather ad hoc and uncoordinated manner. They normally acted independently of each other and they rarely had any contact with, or even knowledge of, antifas in neighbouring localities.[17] The main thing that distinguished the antifas from previous forms of anti-Nazi organisations in Germany was their inclusivity. Whereas the resistance movement had hitherto been fractured along class, confessional and political lines, the antifa movement represented – in the words of Leonard Krieger – an 'ad-hoc instrument of the Left for the mobilisation of all possible mass support on the basis of an immediate action programme'.[18] Though they were usually led by Communists or Social Democrats, the antifas typically included representatives of the other democratic political parties of the

[12] BPA Karl-Marx-Stadt, I-4/23, Bl.30.
[13] BPA Leipzig, I/3/27, 'Entwicklungs- und Tätigkeitsbericht der Ortsgruppe Eilenburg', 28 August 1945.
[14] Schmollinger, 'Bezirkskomitee Freies Deutschland', p. 237.
[15] Brandt, 'Kampfgemeinschaft', p. 396. [16] Leonhard, *Revolution*, p. 319.
[17] Boehling, *Question of Priorities*, pp. 99–102 and 162; Borsdorf and Niethammer, *Zwischen Befreiung und Besatzung*, pp. 89–90 and 111–12; Carlebach, 'Frankfurts Antifaschisten 1945', p. 14; FO 371/46934, '21 Army Group. Weekly Political Intelligence Summary', 18 August 1945.
[18] Krieger, 'Inter-regnum', p. 513.

Weimar period, as well as anti-Nazi Christians, business people and intellectuals.[19]

Another feature the antifas had in common is that they were usually led by men and women who had suffered years of persecution at the hands of the Nazis, and who were thereby stamped with a visceral determination to eradicate all traces of Nazism in Germany forever.[20] The author of a report on the AFO in Frankfurt-Riederwald, for instance, noted that of the twenty or so activists whom he had met, almost all had spent many years in prison or had in some other way suffered badly under the Nazis. As a result they were 'burning to take vengeance on the Nazis ... The intensity of these people's feelings reminds me of the whipped-up emotional reaction of the French maquis against collaborators during the first phase of liberation'.[21]

In other respects the antifas were politically diverse in terms both of their origins and their orientation. A few committees, particularly in southern Bavaria and parts of the Rhineland, were dominated by anti-Nazi conservatives and regionalists who had no connection with the German labour movement.[22] In Oberstdorf in the Bavarian Alps, for example, a group that called itself the Home Defence (Heimatschutz) was established in 1943 by three men: a mountain guide, a doctor and a lawyer. By April 1945 the Heimatschutz had recruited about 350 members, who had sworn to defend their locality and their families against Nazism. In its composition and character, the Heimatschutz connected not with the traditions of the labour movement but with the conservative, particularist temper of Bavarian Catholicism.[23] In Coelsfeld in north-west Germany the British came across a religiously based antifascist committee called the Catholic Democratic Movement (Katholische Demokratische Bewegung), which was reported to have 300 members. In Hamburg, meanwhile, a group of middle-class antifascists established a 'Free Hamburg League' (Bund Freies Hamburg) that put forward the demand for a free and independent

[19] Bessel, *Germany 1945*, pp. 297–9; Boehling, *Question of Priorities*, pp. 99–102 and 163–4; Borsdorf and Niethammer, *Zwischen Befreiung und Besatzung*, pp. 63, 65, 84–7, 90–1, 104–5, 109–10, 119–20 and 124; Gotsche, 'Unser gemeinsamer Kampf', pp. 397–8; Major, *Death of the KPD*, pp. 42–3; Michelmann, *Aktivisten*, p. 9; FO 371/46933, '21 Army Group. Weekly Political Intelligence Summary', 7 July 1945, 4 August 1945, 18 August 1945 and 24 August 1945; *Manchester Guardian*, 24 May 1945, p. 5, 'The four men of Weimar'.

[20] Borsdorf and Niethammer, *Zwischen Befreiung und Besatzung*, pp. 63, 109–10, 124; FO 371/46933, '21 Army Group. Weekly Political Intelligence Summary', 14 July 1945 and 24 August 1945; *Manchester Guardian*, 24 May 1945, p. 5, 'The four men of Weimar'.

[21] Borsdorf and Niethammer, *Zwischen Befreiung und Besatzung*, pp. 84–7.

[22] Eschenburg, *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschlands*, p. 106; FO 371/46933, '21 Army Group. Weekly Political Intelligence Summary', 7 July 1945 and 14 July 1945.

[23] WO 219/1700, 'Political Intelligence Report', 2 July 1945.

city of Hamburg.[24] In the small town of Velbert half of the activists in the local antifascist committee were reported to be either business people or government officials.[25]

Despite such manifestations of middle-class, conservative and religious antifascism, it was much more common for the antifas to be dominated by men and women with roots in the German labour movement. In a number of localities prominent roles were played by members of former left-wing splinter parties such as the Socialist Workers Party (SAP), the Communist Party Opposition (KPO) and the Lenin League. Of the thirteen members of the central committee of the KgF in Bremen, for instance, six were former members of splinter parties.[26] More frequently, it was members of the former SPD who took the leading role. Though men and women of many political orientations worked together in the AfW in Hanover, at least two-thirds of the members were former SPD members, whilst sixteen of the twenty-two district leaders (Bezirksvorsteher) had also been active in the SPD during the Weimar period, primarily as middle-ranking party functionaries.[27] In the Stuttgart district of Vaihingen the driving force in the local antifa was a former SPD member of the regional parliament.[28] Similarly in the Rhineland town of Siegburg the antifascist committee was established and led by a former Social Democrat.[29] In Friedersdorf in Saxony the antifa had been founded and led by Social Democrats with no KPD involvement whatsoever.[30]

In most instances, however, the driving role in the antifascist committees was played by Communists.[31] In Chemnitz the antifa consisted at first almost exclusively of former KPD members and, although a number of non-Communists were later persuaded to join, the organisation continued to be dominated by Communists.[32] In the nearby town of Flöha 80 per cent of the antifa members were reported to be Communists.[33] In the Hanover district of Döhren the antifa consisted entirely of Communists who would assemble one day as the local antifa and on the next day as the local cell of the KPD.[34]

[24] FO 371/46933, '21 Army Group. Weekly Political Intelligence Summary', 7 July 1945.
[25] Borsdorf and Niethammer, *Zwischen Befreiung und Besatzung*, p. 104.
[26] Brandt, 'Kampfgemeinschaft', p. 394.
[27] Schröder, 'Ausschuss für Wiederaufbau', pp. 464–5.
[28] Borsdorf and Niethammer, *Zwischen Befreiung und Besatzung*, p. 65.
[29] FO 371/46933, '21 Army Group. Weekly Political Intelligence Summary', 4 August 1945.
[30] Bouvier and Schulz, *. . . die SPD aber aufgehört hat*, pp. 23 and 266.
[31] Boehling, *Question of Priorities*, pp. 99–102; Borsdorf and Niethammer, *Zwischen Befreiung und Besatzung*, pp. 84, 90, 104–5 and 158–9; Diskant, 'Scarcity', p. 552; FO 371/46933, '21 Army Group. Weekly Political Intelligence Summary', 14 July 1945 and 4 August 1945.
[32] BPA Karl-Marx-Stadt, V/5/126, Bl.53. [33] BPA Karl-Marx-Stadt, V/5/245, Bl.16.
[34] Schröder, 'Ausschuss für Wiederaufbau', p. 467.

Even where Communists did not predominate in numerical terms, they were nonetheless the most active members and those most likely to take on leadership positions. In Bremen only two of the thirteen members of the central committee of the KgF were Communists, yet the lower levels of the organisation were dominated by former KPD members. At a KgF delegate conference held on 17 July 1945, 102 of the participants were Communists, compared to only 45 Social Democrats, 12 former members of the splinter parties and 26 non-party antifascists.[35] Similarly, in Frankfurt-Riederwald a report compiled by the American intelligence agency, the 'Office of Strategic Services' (OSS), noted that although only four of the nine members of the leadership committee of the AFO were former KPD members, it was nonetheless the Communists who were 'the driving and deciding force in all undertakings'.[36]

Though the perception of contemporaries of the dominant role played in the antifas by Communists was certainly correct, it needs to be qualified. As Rebecca Boehling points out, military government officers and German officials usually had little or no understanding of the traditions and language of the German labour movement. They therefore found it hard to distinguish between Communists and members of other left-wing currents, such as Social Democrats and trade unionists, who were often rather moderate in their political views but who nonetheless used Marxist terms and who called each other 'comrades'. As a result, there was a tendency for uninformed observers to exaggerate the degree of Communist influence in the committees.[37] Moreover, it should be remembered that the men and women who called themselves 'Communists' in 1945 had been cut off from their exiled party leadership for at least ten years. The later 1930s and 1940s had consequently witnessed a widening gulf between the émigré cadres and rank-and-file Communists.[38] The official party line emanating from the exiled party leadership in Moscow often made little sense when applied to the real political situation obtaining on the ground in Germany, and in any case most former Communists had very little information about what was going on in émigré circles.[39] Many of the younger 'Communists' in 1945 had never even been members of a party that had been banned twelve years before, and had never received any formal political education. Instead, they had picked up half-understood bits and pieces of Communist ideology

[35] Brandt, 'Kampfgemeinschaft', p. 397.
[36] Borsdorf and Niethammer, *Zwischen Befreiung und Besatzung*, pp. 85–6.
[37] Boehling, *Question of Priorities*, pp. 102–4. [38] Merson, *Communist Resistance*, p. 190.
[39] Major, *Death of the KPD*, pp. 29–30; Pritchard, *Making of the GDR*, pp. 60–2.