GENDER AND "THE EAST"

Anticommunism and Antislavic Racism in West Germany

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Photo credit: Udarnitzi (record-breaking workers) at the factory Krasnaya Zaria. Pavel Filonov, 1931. Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0

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Gender and sexuality are critically important factors in postwar West German anticommunist and antislavic attitudes. Fantasies and fears about a reversed gendered order in 'the East' significantly contributed to anti-'Eastern' resentments in Adenauer-era Germany.

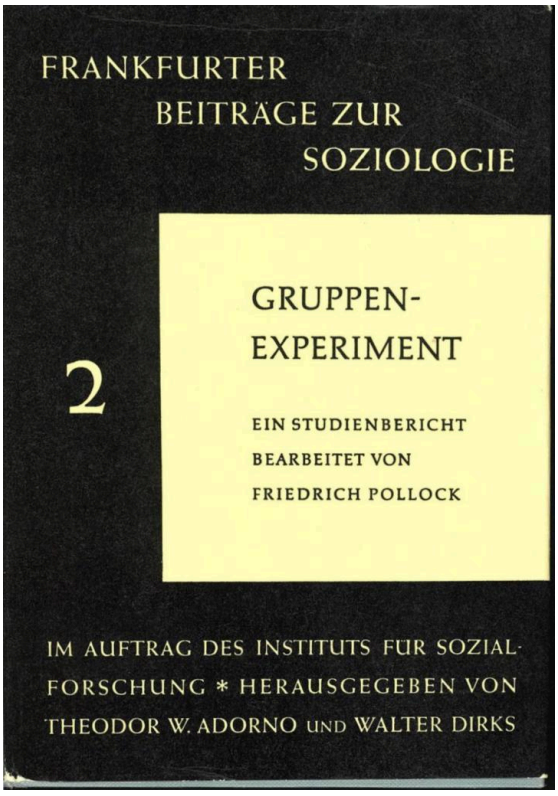
Twentieth-century German views of 'the East' are indivisible from the pervasive anticommunism that has been described as "the historical key to the 20th century."[1] Historians of postwar West Germany have long noted the centrality of anticommunism in the formation of the early Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the 1950s and agree upon the doubly integrative function that anticommunism fulfilled in stabilizing and legitimizing the newly founded FRG both internally and externally. Likewise, anticommunism in its anti-totalitarian variant provided a new, respectable identity that demarcated the FRG as a decidedly democratic state, setting it apart from both the Third Reich and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), while allowing West Germans to cling to one of the most characteristic elements of National Socialist ideology. In a similar vein, the notion of anticommunism as an "Occident ideology" ("Abendlandideologie"), most prominently put forward by historian Axel Schildt, emphasizes both the anti-Bolshevist and racist antislavic dimension of the overly popular image of a unified Western occident that defends Western civilization against a primitive "Slavic storm from the East."[2]

Schildt's observations indicate that postwar West German anticommunism was steeped in colonial rhetoric and images. This article elucidates how anticommunism was a site where postcolonial attitudes toward "the East" were perpetuated and transformed. It argues that in addition to the dimensions outlined above, postwar West German anticommunism was centrally characterized by a gendered dimension, as West German women's views of "the East" were dominated by fantastic ideas about a gender-reverse social order in the Eastern Bloc. To illustrate these connections, I analyze a small set of interviews from the 1950–51 group experiment conducted by the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (Frankfurter Institut für Sozialgeschichte).

The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research's Group Experiment

In 1950 and 1951, members of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research conducted 137 group interviews under the aegis of Friedrich Pollock, Theodor W. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. Upon their return to Germany from US-exile in 1947, the German-Jewish Frankfurt School scholars aimed at getting a deeper insight into the legacies of Nazism in West German public opinion than would have been possible through ordinary opinion polls. The group interviews were meant to approximate realistic conditions as nearly as possible, thereby serving "to provoke the so-called nonpublic opinion".[3] This was attempted through

the creation of homogenous discussion groups in which opinions would form in conversation rather than being merely extracted.[4] In 1955, Pollock edited the volume "Gruppenexperiment" (Group Experiment), providing insightful yet mainly quantitative analyses of the interviews. Pollock's analysis confirms the centrality of anti-Eastern attitudes in postwar German society and politics: 83% of the participants exhibited a radically negative attitude toward "the East" and "no other topic ha[d] such a low level of ambivalence."[5] Interestingly, Pollock also notes that the topic of "the East" is the only theme in which opinion is independent of gender. My cursory qualitative analysis of four female-only group discussions and two male-only group discussions indicates that anti-Eastern attitudes in 1950s West Germany were in fact heavily informed by normative images of gendered identities that the participants saw threatened: in their imagination, "the East", in its Soviet-style communist constellation, embodied the reversal of the gendered social order, upsetting the assigned roles of men and women.



Volume 2 of the 1955 study "Gruppenexperiment" edited by Friedrich Pollock. Herder-Institut, Abt. Digitale Geschichte und Informationssysteme,
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Female Fantasies – About Women in 'the East'

Various statements from both sets of groups demonstrate just how prominently fantasies

about gender in the Eastern Bloc figured among postwar West Germans. For example, when the conversation in a group of fourteen women at a convalescent home for mothers turned to the topic of 'the East,' one woman, Schaefer (a pseudonym), recounted what one of her friends had told her about her experience in "Russia"[6]:

"The mothers and the women – this is really true – when they are expecting a child, they are all in the factory, right. They work until the last day. There are these halls in the factory, the doctor comes there, right, and they are examined until – when there's no other way – she goes there to give birth. Then the child is taken away from her and put into a children's home, and the mother continues to go to work."[7]

Schaefer's attitudes were fundamentally rooted in fantastic notions about the status of women and the state's role in the configuration of the family in Soviet Russia. To her, this dystopian vision of the separation of mother and child, depriving the woman of her 'natural' role as a mother and caregiver and forcing her into alienating forms of labor when she returned to the factory immediately after giving birth, was what most substantially distinguished 'the East' from 'the West.'

This theme comes up repeatedly during the conversations of the "Gruppenexperiment," indicating the importance of gender in anticommunism. A further discussion was held among twenty-one women in a camp of barracks – some of them "Ostvertriebene" (Germans who fled or were expelled from Eastern and Central Europe), some of them homeless after having been 'bombed out'. One woman from this group, referred to as Illing, showed herself to be equally appalled by the purported conditions in the GDR (or, as the women still called it at the time, the "Eastern zone"):

"The women are also not allowed to go outside. And then the worst thing is, the men are unemployed, and the women have to toil on the construction site ("auf dem Bau schaffen"), have to carry two hundredweight bags and so on. This is men's work, not women's, and if a women has an accident, no one cares, she doesn't receive a penny of support or anything else. And if you're a woman with children, you won't make it at all." Another woman joined in, calling out "That's right," and a third woman contended: "Just like in Russia, there the women also have to work, right."[8]

For Illing, as for some of her fellow interviewees, "the worst thing" about the GDR was the proposed reversal of the conservative gender order, with the woman being forced into a traditionally male role. Further, this imaginary development was clearly in conflict with the 'laws of nature.' Explaining why it was especially this issue of women being put to work ("Fraueneinsatz") that made her suspicious of "Russia," one woman in the group from the convalescent home for mothers argued:

"[…] because the woman is increasingly becoming a work-machine (Arbeitsmaschine) and that is not her purpose in nature. And when I see or hear something like that it can make me tremendously sad, although that's not really like me. We have to get away from such things – women in the factory and so on. The woman does not exist to excel in the workplace. It says very clearly: The occupation and the vocation. When she is forced too much into an occupation, she loses her vocation, indeed."[9]

The interviewees' primary association with the Soviet Bloc was evidently the notion that the 'natural' order between men and women had been upset, an idea that seemed to question their very identity as women. The woman, in their narrative, ceases to be a woman and instead takes on a male role when carrying heavy bags and working on a construction site, when being separated from her newborn, when not living or being allowed to live in compliance with her 'natural' purpose. The role that projection played within German anticommunism becomes especially apparent here: having to work in a factory was precisely what many of these women had experienced during World War II, when the Nazi war effort required women to join the workforce and thereby upset pretensions of a gendered division of labor that confined women to their "natural" role as mothers and wives.

Male Fears of Russian Men

The theme of rape comes up only very incidentally in the all-female interview groups, with a few of the women hinting at what was perceived as a common experience on the Eastern front, with expressions like "one hears bad things about the Russians and the women"[10] or the warning to "not fall into the hands of the Russians."[11] By contrast, in all-male interview groups, the purported rapes of German women by officers of the Red Army at the end of the war constitutes the main reason for why they deem it necessary to remilitarize Germany and defend it against "these masses" in Russia. For example, in a group of dentistry students, one young man referred to as Ettinger argued: "And for every single person – in case it comes to that [in case the Soviet Union invades West Germany] – for every man – let's say – it's a matter of honor. Or do we want to witness yet again that our women are seen as whores or fair game. Because what happened in this area, I believe, justifies mounting a proper defense. And he who does not understand this, he—" At this point another participant joined in: "… is beyond remedy!" And Ettinger agreed: "… is really beyond remedy."[12]

The men's fierce opposition to the Soviet Union is thus also strongly linked to issues of gender and sexuality. Preventing "the Russians" from invading West Germany is here framed as a defense of the sovereignty of the German female body and as a matter of male honor. 'Real men,' those who are not 'beyond remedy,' would have to understand the threat the Russian soldier posed to what was inherently theirs: German women, and by extension their identity as

'real' men.

Postwar Transformations in German Anticommunism

In light of the particular formation of anticommunism before and during the Third Reich, the prominence of gender and sexuality in these early 1950s discussions seems curious. Considering, for example, the relative absence of the virulently antisemitic image of a Judaeo-Bolshevik conspiracy that was characteristic of and rampant during National Socialism, the postwar continuity of anticommunism that is often proclaimed clearly did not extend to all areas. Indeed, research on anticommunist propaganda in the early 1950s notes that post-1945 anticommunism was much less antisemitically loaded, with antislavic racism usually taking the place of antisemitism.[13] This is apparent also in the Christian Democratic Union's (CDU) election campaigns in the late 1940s and early 1950s. CDU election posters exemplify the idea that communism was a threat specifically to German women and children.[14] This perceived communist threat was at the same time portrayed in distinctly antislavic racist imagery (image 3). No doubt, this decline in antisemitic discourse within anticommunism was to a certain extent a result of mere political opportunism. However, in the "Gruppenexperimente", antisemitism as such was not tabooed at all; in most conversations, "the Jew" was at some point blamed for the Holocaust because of his alleged "workshyness," "haggling" ("Schacherjuden"), warmongering, and "bloodsucking."[15]

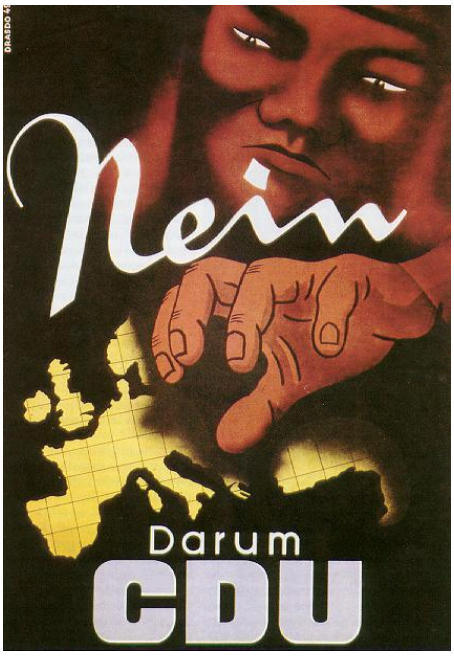
CDU election poster for the 1953 federal elections, illustrating the notion that German women need to be protected from communist invasion. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0

Attempting to understand the specific configurations of anticommunism that characterized postwar German attitudes toward 'the East' and the role that gender played in them, Claude Lévi-Strauss' concept of bricolage

Bricolage

The term bricolage is derived from the French word "bricoler" (roughly: to cobble together, patch up, fiddle about, tinker with) and refers to the improvised solving of problems with ad hoc, but usually non-purposeful means. The French anthropologist, ethnologist and philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) introduced the concept of bricolage to social and cultural anthropological research in his 1962 work "La pensée sauvage" (1962), in which he contrasts the figure of the "bricoleur" - who improvises on the basis of the existing means at his disposal - with the type of the planning, structured and rationally acting "engineer". Following Lévi-Strauss, the concept of bricolage has also been widely used, for example, in sociology, cultural studies, linguistics and organizational theory. Depending on the field, the concept of bricolage can also be associated with other practices of appropriation, rededication or creative and artistic techniques.

can be illuminative. Rather than constituting a direct



Election poster of the CDU for the federal elections in 1949, illustrating antislavic racist elements in postwar German anticommunism. Landesarchiv Baden-Würtemmberg, W 110/2 Nr. 0144, Free access - no reuse

continuity of National Socialist ideas, postwar anticommunist images were composed of assumptions and attitudes that German society, like a bricoleur, had collected over a much longer time. This aligns with Axel Schildt's notion of postwar anticommunism as an occidental ideology ("Abendlandideologie") as well as with Ulrich Herbert's suggestion that early 1950s West Germany was marked by substantial references to the bourgeois culture of the "Kaiserreich" and, relatedly, constituted a more general, cultural-critical rejection of modernity (as embodied by both National Socialism and communism). While some of these ideas remained latent during the Weimar years and National Socialism, concepts like a Judaeo-Christian occident and the pertaining social norms that focused on the gendered order of society made a comeback in the early 1950s (or at least figured as "invented traditions" that functioned as imagined continuities with the past). They were positioned in opposition to the Godless, anti-Christian communist enemies without and within. And, at the contingent nexus between anticommunism and "Abendlandideologie" in the specific configuration of postwar anticommunist imagination, gender and the family took center stage.[16]

Footnotes

1. Margot Kampmann, Elfriede Müller, and Krunoslav Stojaković, "Die Aktualität des Antikommunismus, in: Anti! Kommunismus: Struktur einer Ideologie, ed. by Bini Adamczak and Jour-Fixe-Initiative Berlin, 1. Auflage (Münster: edition assemblage, 2017), p.11

2. Ulrich Herbert, Liberalisierung als Lernprozeß. Die Bundesrepublik in der deutschen Geschichte - eine Skizze, in: Wandlungsprozesse in Westdeutschland: Belastung, Integration, Liberalisierung 1945-1980, ed. Ulrich Herbert, Moderne Zeit, Bd. 1 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002), 21; Axel Schildt, "Antikommunismus von Hitler zu Adenauer," in Der Antikommunismus in seiner Epoche: Weltanschauung und Politik in Deutschland, Europa und den USA, ed. by Norbert Frei and Dominik Rigoll, Vorträge und Kolloquien / Jena Center Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts, Band 21 (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017), 186–203. Cf. also Bernd Faulenbach, Antikommunismus, in: Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte (2017). https://docupedia.de/zg/Faulenbach_antikommunismus_v1_de_2017. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14765/zzf.dok.2.978.v1.

3. Jeffrey K. Olick and Andrew J. Perrin: Introduction, in: Guilt and Defense: On the Legacies of National Socialism in Postwar Germany, by Theodor W. Adorno, ed. and trans. Jeffrey K. Olick and Andrew J. Perrin (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 23. Emphasis in original.

4. For an in-depth discussion of the methodology and context of the group experiment see Jeffrey K. Olick and Andrew J. Perrin: Translator's Introduction, in: Theodor W. Adorno and Friedrich Pollock and colleagues, Group Experiment and Other Writings, ed. and transl. Jeffrey K. Olick and Andrew J. Perrin (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Jonas Knatz: The Perils of Privacy and Passivity. Antidemocratic, Racist, and Antisemitic Sentiments in Postwar West Germany, in: Central European History 58.1 (forthcoming).

5. Friedrich Pollock and Theodor W. Adorno: Group Experiment and Other Writings: The Frankfurt School on Public Opinion in Postwar Germany, ed. Andrew J. Perrin and Jeffrey K. Olick, trans. Jeffrey K. Olick and Andrew J. Perrin (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 82; Friedrich Pollock: Gruppenexperiment, ed. Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Dirks, vol. 2, Frankfurter Beiträge zur Soziologie (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955), p. 188,191.
6. "Russia" or "the Russian" was used throughout the interviews; there was no reflection on the difference between Russia and the Soviet Union and/or other Eastern European states and peoples, with the exception of East Germany.
7. Protokoll Nr. 79: Frauen aus einem Müttererholungsheim, Gruppenexperimente (Frankfurt am Main, December 19, 1950),p. 36, Institut für Sozialforschung.
8. Protokoll Nr. 91: Frauen in einem Barackenlager, Gruppenexperimente (Frankfurt am Main, January 4, 1951), p. 24–25, Institut für Sozialforschung.
9. Protokoll Nr. 79: Frauen aus einem Müttererholungsheim, p. 37.
10. Protokoll Nr. 9: Frauengruppe, Gruppenexperimente (Frankfurt am Main, October 10, 1950), p. 79, Institut für Sozialforschung.
11. Protokoll Nr. 79: Frauen aus einem Müttererholungsheim, p. 34.
12. Protokoll Nr. 74: Dentistenschule, Gruppenexperimente (Frankfurt am Main, December 14, 1950), p. 39, Institut für Sozialforschung.
13. Klaus Körner, Die rote Gefahr: antikommunistische Propaganda in der Bundesrepublik 1950-2000 (Hamburg: Konkret Literatur, 2003), p. 45. Cf. also Gerhard Paul, Alle Wege des Marxismus führen nach Moskau. Schlagbilder antikommunistischer Bildrhetorik, In: Ibid. (Ed.): Das Jahrhundert der Bilder, Bd. 2: 1949 bis heute. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck
14. Cf. Robert G. Moeller, Protecting Motherhood: Women and the Family in the Politics of Postwar West Germany, (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1996).
15. For example, Protokoll Nr. 86: Studentengruppe, Gruppenexperimente (Frankfurt am Main, December 18, 1950), p. 1, 7, 9, Institut für Sozialforschung; Protokoll Nr. 70: Abiturientengruppe, Gruppenexperimente (Frankfurt am Main, December 5, 1950), p. 2, Institut für Sozialforschung.
16. An earlier and slightly different version of this text has been published on the Journal of the History of Ideas Blog. See Yanara Schmacks, "The Woman as 'Work-Machine'", 2021, https://jhiblog.org/2021/01/13/the-woman-as-work-machine/

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