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From Student Riots to Feminist Firebombs: Debates about “Counter-violence” in the West German Student Movement and Women’s Movement

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Drawing on theories of political violence and postcolonial feminist thought, this article analyzes discussions about violent resistance in strands of the student movement and women’s movement in the Federal Republic of Germany. In the late 1960s, Rudi Dutschke and other leading thinkers in the antiauthoritarian wing of the student movement argued that counter-violence in the form of symbolic attacks against property was a legitimate response to state repression and violence. In the 1970s, the militant feminist group “Red Zora” adopted and adapted this notion of counter-violence to fight for the cause of women. The article shows that discussions about counter-violence have developed and changed as a result of debates within the two movements, and in response to broader social and political developments. Although both concepts of counter-violence have reflected and reinforced existing patterns of discrimination and marginalization, they sparked critical debates about the scope and limits of political protest.

Some of the political groups who engage in violent protest against institutions and structures that they consider violent and oppressive describe this protest as “counter-violence.” But is the idea that one form of violence can be overcome with another form of violence not a contradiction in terms? In his recent study of violence and radical theory, media scholar William Pawlett uses the work of Georges Bataille and Jean Baudrillard to analyze the role of violence in contemporary society. He emphasizes that despite all claims to moral superiority and political necessity, counter-violence “is, emphatically, still violence; it cannot be reduced to just, virtuous or

provoked acts of political resistance to tyranny” (16). And yet, Pawlett insists that there are good reasons to distinguish counter-violence from other forms of violence. He understands it as a response to the direct and indirect violence inflicted by the global capitalist system and modern life, which he refers to as “systemic violence.” Similar to philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s notion of “systemic violence” (*Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, 2009), and Johan Galtung’s “structural violence” (“Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” 1969), Pawlett’s concept of systemic violence is extremely broad and covers a range of hidden and widespread forms of violence and oppression, including repressive gender norms and racist power relations (13). According to Pawlett, systemic violence and counter-violence are both excessive in the sense that they challenge boundaries and transgress limits. What distinguishes the two in his view is that systemic violence tends to ignore or deny limits, whereas counter-violence “generally requires and presupposes limits—either those set by the systems it opposes or limits of its own fashioning” (16).

The following article uses Pawlett’s model and other theories of political violence as a starting point for an analysis of discussions about violence and counter-violence in the antiauthoritarian wing of the student movement and in parts of the feminist movement in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s.¹ Of course, these were not the only political movements in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in which activists have discussed the potential and limitations of violent resistance, but the notion of counter-violence featured prominently in debates in parts of these movements, and some of these discussions reached audiences well beyond activist circles.² Following David Apter (5), I understand the student movement and the women’s movement as “discourse communities.” Rather than simply following a fixed ideology, discourse communities evolve around shared narratives, myths, and symbols, and they develop

internal languages and codes. This article shows that the notions of counter-violence that activists developed in strands of these two movements were limited both by their understanding of systemic violence and by implicit and explicit ethical codes and tactical considerations of fellow activists. Apter rightly stresses that legitimacy is the key to political violence. Although antiauthoritarian student activists and militant feminists in West Germany were trying to push the limits of legitimate protest, their notions of counter-violence were tempered by the desire to mobilize fellow activists and to gain public support.

The discussion of counter-violence in the following is based on the assumption that to develop a better understanding of the mobilizing power and limitations of notions of counter-violence in West German protest movements, we must analyze them within the historical and political context within which they germinated. The first part focuses on controversies surrounding violence and counter-violence in the West German student movement, and on the position of Rudi Dutschke and other antiauthoritarian activists in the Socialist German Student League (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*, short **SDS**) specifically.³ In contrast to the so-called traditionalists, the anti-authoritarians in the **SDS** opposed all forms of authority and political dogma. While disapproving of violent attacks against people, many student activists considered “counter-violence” in the form of symbolic attacks against property a legitimate response to state repression and violence.

The second part focuses on discussions about violent resistance in the West German Women’s Movement. These discussions were strongly influenced by the debates and protest tactics of the student movement. Many founding members had played an active role in the student movement, and more than a few shared Dutschke’s view that symbolic attacks against property were a legitimate response to state repression and violence even if they developed a

different political agenda. Inspired by the theoretical and political framework of the New Left, radical feminist ideas from the US, and European feminist thought, the women's movement in the FRG developed structures and a political agenda that differed considerably from those of feminist movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Silies 94). For this reason, a number of feminist activists and scholars refer to the feminist movement in West Germany as the "New Women's Movement" (*Neue Frauenbewegung*; see, e.g. Schwarzer, Lenz), and this is the term that I will use here.⁴

The focus here is on the formation of the New Women's Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical and militant feminist protest against the abortion ban in West Germany, and the under-researched theory and practice of the militant feminist group "Red Zora." Between 1977 and 1988, the Red Zora claimed responsibility for forty-five arson attacks and bombings, most of which took place in the 1980s, with a few more following in the 1990s. Many of these attacks took up those topics central to the New Women's Movement including pornography, trafficking, solidarity with women in the so-called Third World, and issues around population control, reproductive technologies, and genetic engineering.⁵ What distinguished the members of the Red Zora from many other women in the discourse community of the New Women's Movement such as Alice Schwarzer is that they openly promoted counter-violence as a feminist protest tactic. While sharing Dutschke's opposition to global imperialism and capitalism, the Red Zora claimed that the notions of counter-violence promoted by many left-wing groups reinforced the patriarchal structures that formed an integral part of systemic violence. The group wanted to break with these structures by developing an explicitly feminist notion of counter-violence.

Although the theories of violence and counter-violence outlined above offer an excellent framework to examine discussions about violent tactics in the West German student movement

and in the New Women's Movement, they are of limited use for an analysis of the ways in which notions of counter-violence can reflect and reinforce existing patterns of discrimination and marginalization. While critically examining masculinist approaches to violence and counter-violence, the Red Zora developed a concept of counter-violence that was limited by a universalist notion of patriarchal oppression. To analyze the significant blind spots and shortcomings of this approach, I draw on the group's own self-critical reflections on their actions. Further, I reference the work of the feminist and postcolonial theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty who rejects the assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic, or racial location, or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy that can be applied universally and cross-culturally. (21)

Following Mohanty, I argue that expressions of feminist solidarity should be based on and constrained by the consensus reached in a communicative process involving all parties. The primary question, then, is not whether feminist protest can or should be violent but whether the voices of women who experience sexism, racism, economic exploitation, and other forms of oppression are heard.

Discussions about Violence and Counter-Violence in the West German Student Movement

The German term *Gewalt* is characterized by an ambiguity that was of critical importance to discussions about political protest and violence in the FRG. Going back to the Indo-Germanic word *giwaltan*, *Gewalt* can imply both violence (*violentia*) and power (*potestas*). German law reflects this constitutive ambiguity. *Gewalt* features prominently in the Basic Law for the FRG, which defines the scope and limits of state authority, and in the German Criminal Code, where it

appears in a range of forms including but not limited to the threatened or actual use of force against people or their property.

According to Donatella Della Porta, the dominant position in the student movement in the 1960s involved “the limited violation of rules [. . .], that is, a conscious, non-violent use of lawbreaking as a disruptive form of action” (37). While parts of the movement considered it legitimate to damage or destroy property as part of such protests (“Gewalt gegen Sachen”), most activists were opposed to “Gewalt gegen Menschen,” which refers, in this context, to behavior that could hurt or kill people. The broad concept of violence in German law allowed for a range of interpretations of such protest activities. Due to their disruptive effect, some courts classified blockades and other forms of direct action as coercion or violence (in fact some judges and journalists went as far as to call it “terror”).⁶

Central themes in the German student movement included university reforms, German rearmament plans, the Vietnam War, fascism, imperialism, and internationalism. Inspired by demonstrations in the US and political struggles in the Third World, students in West Germany drew on a number of innovative forms of protest including sit-ins, teach-ins, and civil disobedience. Police brutality in the FRG and violent conflicts across the globe sparked a controversial debate about the limitations of non-violent protest in the student movement. The SDS played a central role in the planning and coordination of student protest in West Germany and in the debate about violence and counter-violence in the student movement. The theoretical frameworks underpinning this debate included Marxist thought, psychoanalysis, the social theory of the Frankfurt School, and the writings of revolutionary thinkers from the Third World (Slobodian 51–77).

Inspired by the “foco theory” of guerrilla warfare—as developed in practice by Ernesto

Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, and theorized by Régis Debray—Rudi Dutschke and other activists in the antiauthoritarian wing of the SDS called for “propaganda of action” in the metropolis to support revolutionary movements in the Third World (Klimke and Scharloth 101). Although student activists were not using this term, it can be argued that they understood the existing global power relations as a form of systemic violence that reflected and reinforced patterns of colonial oppression, Western imperialism, and racism. While a growing number of student activists in the FRG became convinced that people in the Third World had no other option than to use counter-violence to fight against colonial rulers, bloody dictators, and economic plundering, there was less consensus on the question of whether the use of violent tactics in Germany was legitimate and necessary to support Third World struggles.

By 1962, the number of students from Third World countries residing in the FRG had risen to about 12,000 (Slobodian 17). Foreign students played an active role in West German protests, and they had a marked influence on discussions about violence and counter-violence in the antiauthoritarian student movement. A first event that illustrates this point was the demonstration against the visit of the Congolese politician Moïse Tshombe on 18 December 1964, which was organized by the African Student League, members of the SDS, and other student organizations as well as by Rudi Dutschke and other members of the small radical leftist group “Subversive Aktion” (subversive action). According to Timothy Scott Brown, 150 of the 800 participants in an anti-Tshombe demonstration in West Berlin were foreign students. Brown highlights that the protest was a key experience for Dutschke and other antiauthoritarian student activists, because the African students “helped turn what had originally been planned as ‘a silent demonstration’ [. . .] into an assault on public order involving catcalls, thrown tomatoes, and scuffles with the police” (39).

Quinn Slobodian has shown that foreign students have played a similarly prominent role in the protests on the day that “marks the beginning of West Germany’s ‘1968’”: 2 June 1967 (101). On this day, the Shah of Iran visited West Berlin, and thousands of Iranian dissidents and German students took to the streets to protest for democracy and intellectual freedom in Iran. During one of these protests, the student Benno Ohnesorg was killed by the plainclothes police officer Karl-Heinz Kurras. Initially charged with manslaughter, Kurras was acquitted from all charges a few months later (“Urteil im Zwielicht”).⁷ The fact that a member of the police force could get away with shooting a peaceful demonstrator shocked and enraged student activists. Their anger was also directed at the tabloid *Bild* and other newspapers that blamed the protesters for Ohnesorg’s death and other acts of violence. According to Slobodian, the events on 2 June mark a profound change in the way in which many student activists in West Germany related to political struggles in the Third World. For the first time, they “saw themselves in a position of vulnerability comparable with their Third World colleagues” (132).

In the wake of the Ohnesorg killing and other attacks against protesters, many student activists began to discuss the limits of non-violent protest. Even Dutschke, who had previously called for non-violent forms of civil disobedience, acknowledged that political activists were sometimes left with no other option than to use violence against people in self-defense. A few weeks after the attack against Ohnesorg, the newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* published an interview with Dutschke, in which he declared: “Violence [*Gewalt*] is a key constituent of power and thus requires demonstrative and provocative counter-violence on our part. What form it [the counter-violence] takes, depends on the form of the confrontation.”⁸ While openly defending the use of violence by political activists, Dutschke insisted that it was legitimate only if it was a response to a greater form of violence, if it was limited to situations in which other means of protest are

futile, and if it took the form of a symbolic provocation rather than being an end in itself. To distinguish this notion of violence from other forms of violence, Dutschke used the term “counter-violence” (*Gegengewalt*), which had been prominent in the student movement since the publication of Herbert Marcuse’s essay “Repressive Tolerance” in 1965, the German translation, “Repressive Toleranz,” published shortly thereafter.

Marcuse’s work was a crucial point of reference in discussions about violence in the West German student movement. Similar to Dutschke, Marcuse called for the creation of a more humane society, but he was no pacifist. He criticized the fact that non-violence was usually expected from the weak, while the ruling elites would reserve their right to use violence (e.g. in the form of police violence, institutionalized racism or prisons).

A brutal attack against Rudi Dutschke on 11 April 1968 added further fuel to the fire in these discussions. On the night after the attempt on Dutschke’s life, protesters in Berlin and several other cities in West Germany tried to stop the delivery of *Bild*.⁹ These protests, which became known as “Easter riots,” resulted in violent clashes with the police, leaving two people dead and hundreds injured. Once again, the West German press blamed the protesters for the escalation of violence. Student activists challenged this narrative and defended their notion of counter-violence. A few weeks after the attack against Rudi Dutschke, the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* published an interview with six unnamed student leaders entitled “Strategie der Gegengewalt” (Strategy of counter-violence). While reaffirming their commitment to non-violent protest forms, the interviewees expressed the view that violence against people was acceptable if individual protesters were attacked and had to defend themselves. Further, similar to Dutschke, they argued that “violence against property” was justified if it was a response to a greater form of violence, and if non-violent means of resistance had failed (“Strategie der

Gegengewalt” 4).

The notion of counter-violence promoted by Dutschke and other activists in the antiauthoritarian wing of the German student movement can be read as evidence for Pawlett’s claim that counter-violence is a form of violence that “may break, challenge or suspend boundaries, barriers, and limits, but certainly requires them” (16). While trying to push beyond the boundaries of what many German citizens considered legitimate protest, student activists wanted to mobilize fellow political activists and gain public support. To achieve this aim, they had to convince people that counter-violence was both legitimate and necessary, and had to be limited to property damage and self-defense.

In the late 1960s, some on the radical Left reached the conclusion that symbolic attacks against property were not enough to expose and challenge the existing social structures in the **FRG**. One of these people was Ulrike Meinhof, who had earned a reputation as a critical journalist and public intellectual in the 1960s. Meinhof had first used the concept of counter-violence in February 1968 in her journalistic writing in an article with the ambiguous title “Gegen-Gewalt,” which can be translated as “counter-violence” and “against-violence.” Here, the then chief-editor of the leftist magazine *Konkret* had argued that student activists had campaigned for university reforms in a “quiet and noble manner” (*leise und vornehm*) for too long and had no option but to draw on more confrontational tactics to achieve their aims (“Gegen-Gewalt” 128). Meinhof read the Easter Riots against Springer as a sign that West German students had finally begun to realize that it was necessary to cross “the line between protest and violent resistance” to bring about real change.¹⁰ Although she warned that counter-violence could turn into violence if it was driven by “helpless rage” (*ohnmächtige Wut*) rather than by “superior rationality” (*überlegene Rationalität*), she clearly supported a transition from verbal protest to violent resistance.

While opposed to behavior that could harm or kill people, an increasing number of activists on the radical Left considered property destruction a tolerable or even necessary form of political activism. A rapidly growing number of more or less organized attacks mainly against courts, police departments, and US institutions between 1969 and 1970 by leftist activists reflect this development (*Linksradikale Bestrebungen* 15). One of the first arson attacks by student activists that attracted considerable public attention took place in April 1968, when Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Baader, and two acquaintances planted incendiary devices in two department stores in Frankfurt. In court, the arsonists presented their deed as a form of violent protest against the Vietnam War and tried to defend it with reference to Marcuse's essay "Repressive Tolerance." Although the court acknowledged that the perpetrators were "delinquents of consciousness" (Sedlmaier 51), the judges dismissed their argument that the arson attacks were a form of counter-violence. Meinhof attended the trial and visited the arsonists in prison. In May 1970, she helped Ensslin to liberate Baader from a prison in Berlin by use of armed force—an event that former participants and scholars refer to in highly gendered terms as the "birth" of the Red Army Faction (RAF) (e.g. Proll 11; Varon 62).¹¹

Shortly after the liberation of Baader, the founding members of the RAF released a first statement in which they justified their deed and called for a violent revolution (Hoffmann 24–26). Although the RAF gave credit to the student movement for breaking with the "provincial isolation" (*provinzialistische Abkapselung*) of the Old Left and for engaging in acts of counter-violence, the self-declared urban guerrilla claimed that the "petit-bourgeois revolt" (*kleinbürgerliche Revolte*) of students in West Germany lacked revolutionary potential (Hoffman 34–35). The RAF wanted to spearhead a revolution carried out by marginalized groups in West Germany and oppressed people in the Third World. In the eyes of the founding members of the

RAF, there was no alternative to an armed struggle against the state, and they dismissed questions and criticisms concerning the appropriateness of violent tactics as counter-revolutionary (Hoffman 129).

Although many activists on the antiauthoritarian Left supported the detained RAF members in their protest against solitary confinement and harsh prison conditions, they rejected the group's approach to violence. In Dutschke's eyes, the attacks of the RAF and other armed leftist groups in the FRG were not manifestations of counter-violence but acts of "individual despotism" ("Toward Clarifying Criticism of Terrorism" 10).¹² Although some on the Left sympathized with the revolutionary rhetoric of the RAF, the group's open disregard for the ethical limitations and tactical considerations expressed by many student activists alienated many people from this discourse community. In the course of the 1970s, no more than a handful of groups in the West German Left followed the RAF's example and took up arms to fight against the existing political order. One of these groups was the Red Zora. Inspired by themes and campaigns in the New Women's Movement, the Red Zora developed a feminist notion of counter-violence.

The Formation of the New Women's Movement and the Red Zora: Towards a Feminist Notion of Counter-Violence?

The antiauthoritarian student movement in the FRG laid the intellectual foundations for the formation of the New Women's Movement, and it has strongly influenced feminist ethics, politics and tactics in the FRG. Like other tactical concepts and political ideas, the notion of counter-violence that some activists in the New Women's Movement promoted was clearly shaped by discussions in the student movement. Yet, the formation of the New Women's Movement was also a response to the perceived sexism in the student movement. While sharing

guiding principles and common aims with the student movement, activists in the New Women's Movement developed a feminist political agenda, which led to different discussions about violent resistance in the movement.

Although the antiauthoritarian wing of the German student movement offered women more opportunities to get involved than many other political groups in the 1960s, discussions in the student organizations tended to be dominated by male activists. Moreover, housework and childcare were in relationships between students often the primary or sole responsibility of women. The ideas of free love and sexual liberation, which promised freedom from repressive sexual morals and authoritarian family structures, were put into practice in ways that reinforced sexist structures: many women in the antiauthoritarian student movement were insulted as “frigid” or “counterrevolutionary” if they refused to be promiscuous.¹³ The woman question was, as Timothy Brown highlights in *The Antiauthoritarian Revolt*, a significant blind spot of the movement; for all that activists in the movement “attempted to upset authority relationships in society one such relationship—the one between men and women—proved remarkably resistant to such interventions” (18).

Against this background, it is not surprising that women activists in West Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich, and other university cities in West Germany began to set up women-only groups to analyze political theory and to discuss problems that they faced in their everyday lives.¹⁴ While some of the participants in these discussions returned soon to mixed gender groups, others used the emerging women's networks to campaign for a decriminalization of abortion in West Germany. Since this struggle played a vital role in the development of the New Women's Movement and provides the context for the formation of the Red Zora, it deserves closer attention.

According to paragraph 218 of the Criminal Code of the FRG, abortion was a punishable act that could lead to a yearlong prison sentence (Schulz 143). Although protest against the abortion ban in Germany can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, the campaign against paragraph 218 in the FRG did not gather momentum until the early 1970s.¹⁵ Feminist protests for the decriminalization of abortion in the 1970s took many forms, including large rallies, walk-ins at medical conferences, public self-declarations, and organized trips to legal abortion clinics in the Netherlands. Initially the protests seemed to work. Growing parts of the population declared themselves in favor of a deletion of paragraph 218, and the social-liberal government in West Germany proposed legislation that exempted abortions within the first three months of pregnancies from legal consequences. In April 1974, the parliament approved the reform with a narrow majority, but in February 1975 the Federal Court of Justice decided that a decriminalization of abortions was incompatible with the sanctity of human life as defined by the constitution. While Church representatives, conservative politicians, and the German Medical Association welcomed the judgment, it was met with disappointment and anger from the numerous women who had campaigned for reform.

Many feminists saw the court's decision not as an unfortunate error of justice but as an expression of systemic violence against women. When the ruling was leaked to the public, women's groups organized protests in several German cities ("Selbstherrlich und zynisch"). The demonstrators made no secret of their disappointment about the decision and their anger against the authorities and institutions that they deemed responsible for it. For example, on 16 February, women poured red paint on the stairs to the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, a famous church in Berlin (Zimmer). In Frankfurt, a group of women publicly burnt three rag dolls—one dressed as a clergyman, one as a medic, and one as a judge (Zimmer). On the day of the judgment, a

group of women chained themselves to the gates of the Federal Administrative Court in Berlin (Schulz 170). A few feminists expressed their protest against the judgment with physical attacks against the Federal Court of Justice in Karlsruhe. A first attack on the court caused only minor damage. According to one observer, a group of women entered the compound during opening hours. While some of them distracted the guards, the rest of the group wrote in big letters on the glass façade of the reception hall: “My belly belongs to me!”¹⁶

A second feminist attack against the Federal Court of Justice caused considerable damage. On 4 March 1975, a group of women attached a time bomb with magnets to one of the steel girders on the glass facade of the reception hall. The explosive device detonated when no employees or visitors were in the building. The estimated damage to the building amounted to 150,000 German Marks (Kühnert). One day after the bombing, the editors of several West German newspapers and a publishing house in Berlin received envelopes with photocopies of a typed letter. In the short text, the Women of the Revolutionary Cell (*Frauen der Revolutionären Zelle*), a formerly unknown group, claimed responsibility for the attack. Contrary to other critics of paragraph 218, the Women of the Revolutionary Cell emphasized that they did not understand the court’s decision as a misinterpretation of the constitution. Rather, the group declared the constitution an effective tool of state oppression and patriarchal violence. The authors of the statement claimed that they had planted the bomb to protect themselves from a “constitution that illegalizes women and that incites the death of many women who do not want to accept that the mafia of medics and judges decides about their relations to their own bodies and the number of children they have.”¹⁷

The tone of writing of the Women of the Revolutionary Cell was more aggressive than that of most opponents of the abortion law. They referred to politicians and judges as

“sleazebags” (*Widerlinge*) and encouraged women to publicly shame and beat up medics who made money with illegal abortions. They accused the Churches of being a “fascist institution” (*faschistische Struktur*) dividing women into “mothers and whores, ‘purified’ by or punished for their sexuality with pregnancy,” and referred to priests as “pitiful chickenfuckers” (*armselige Hühnerficker*).¹⁸ “We have not forgotten,” declared the group, “that, in the Middle Ages, they [i.e. churchmen] burnt our feminist sisters at the stake.”¹⁹ The authors claimed that the only reason why women should still go to churches is to use chants, placards, firecrackers, stink bombs and other disruptive forms of protest to desecrate these “breeding grounds of sexism” (*Brutstätten des Sexismus*).

While their name identifies the authors as part of the larger militant leftist network “Revolutionary Cells,” their emphasis on the oppression of women and identification with female victims of the inquisition suggests that they also identified as feminists.²⁰ Some of the women involved in the court bombing began soon to plan further actions to protest the abortion law. They formed a feminist subgroup in the Revolutionary Cells, known today as the Red Zora. On 28 April 1977, the newly-formed group planted a bomb at the headquarters of the German Medical Association in Cologne. It was accompanied by a pamphlet letter with the headline “Women rise up, and the world will see you,” which was a quote from a giant banner at the Federal Women’s Conference (*Bundesfrauenkonferenz*) in March 1972, the first event where women from towns and cities across West Germany discussed “aims and self-conception of the women’s movement.”²¹ It was also a quote from a song by “the Flying Lesbians,” the first female rock band in West Germany. The claim of responsibility for this attack was the first document that featured the name and logo of the Red Zora.

The first Rote Zora statement was an open call for feminist counter-violence. The group

demanded physical autonomy for themselves and other women and declared that they did not want to accept that “rapists in white coats” (*Vergewaltiger in weißen Kitteln*) and pharmaceutical companies had the power to decide what happened to their bodies. The Red Zora argued that the only way to tackle sexist oppression was to fight back. The authors encouraged women to locate their oppressors and to attack their private property. Inspired by a children’s book with a red-haired protagonist, *Die Rote Zora und ihre Bande* (The Red Zora and her gang), the Red Zora sought to encourage women and girls to form gangs to fight back against the many forms of violence and abuse that they experienced in their everyday lives.²² The novel, which the Jewish communist writer Kurt Kläber published in 1941 under the pseudonym Kurt Held, provided an example of female leadership as the Red Zora envisioned it: the leading character was unconventional, wild, and subversive, but also responsible and caring.

Similar to antiauthoritarian student activists in the 1960s, the Red Zora held the view that violent protest was legitimate only if it was a response to a greater form of violence, and had the clear objective to overcome existing forms of oppression and violence. Like many activists in the student movement, the Red Zora actively supported violence against property but had an ambivalent relationship to violence against people. The militant feminists declared solidarity with women who used violence to defend themselves against men who abused and exploited them and who hurt or killed their abusers in this context, but they made it a priority not to hurt or kill people in their attacks. Like in Dutschke’s case, this focus on attacks against property can be attributed to strategic and ethical considerations in their discourse community. On the one hand, the Red Zora was clearly aware of the fact that violence against people would meet with even stronger opposition in feminist circles than attacks against property. On the other hand, it seems that at least a part of the group rejected such violence for ethical reasons.²³

One of the key differences between Dutschke's approach to violence and that of the Red Zora was that the militant feminists analyzed violence and counter-violence through a gender lens. The Red Zora criticized that in leftist circles the decision to take up arms was often mystified and regarded as a revolutionary act per se. According to the later declaration "Mili's Tanz auf dem Eis" (Mili's dance on the ice, 1993), many leftist activists promoted a notion of counter-violence that failed to consider "the structural, subtle and direct violence that constitutes and reinforces patriarchy."²⁴ As long as armed leftist groups did not challenge masculinist power patterns, argued the Red Zora, they would try to seize power within the existing patriarchal structures rather than helping to overcome them. In the context of the Red Zora's ideological framework, counter-violence had thus a second meaning: it signaled the group's opposition to "macho militancy" (*Mackermilitanz*) on the radical Left ("Mili's Tanz auf dem Eis"). The group believed that feminist counter-violence was vital to the success of the political struggle against patriarchy. In 1981, the Red Zora claimed, "it is clear to us that subversive activities and counter-violence are of critical importance to the struggle of women."²⁵

The Red Zora considered counter-violence legitimate from a feminist point of view for a number of reasons. Firstly, the group argued that the existing political regime was sexist and imperialist to the core, and that many women had no other option but to use violent means to defend themselves against legal and illegal forms of exploitation and abuse (*Die Früchte des Zorns* 460). Secondly, the Red Zora claimed that, as part of broader protest campaigns, the use of violent tactics could make a vital contribution to the success of feminist struggles. Finally, they stressed that the use of violent tactics could have an empowering effect on women. The group criticized that passivity and submissiveness were instilled in women from an early age. Thus, women had to stop thinking of themselves as mere victims of patriarchy and stand up to fight for

themselves and other oppressed groups (“Mili’s Tanz auf dem Eis”). Drawing on their own experiences, the militant feminists claimed that counter-violence could help women to overcome fear, powerlessness, and resignation and to challenge repressive (gender) norms (“Mili’s Tanz auf dem Eis”). While some individuals and groups in the New Women’s Movement shared this view and expressed support for the Red Zora, many feminists in West Germany rejected the use of violent protest tactics.

Feminist Responses to the Red Zora

There are a number of reasons why the Red Zora’s notion of counter-violence received little support in the New Women’s Movement. A first reason lies in the history of the German women’s movement. The development of the German Women’s Movement was, as Ute Gerhard highlights, no “continuous process,” but “a history of repeated setbacks, stagnation and of many new beginnings under constantly changing social and political circumstances.”²⁶ In contrast to Britain, where it is widely accepted that militant and violent protest for female suffrage is a part of the long and varied history of feminist movements, there are no documented cases of such protest in the history of German feminism. Moreover, while there has been a long and proud tradition of feminist pacifism in Germany, the rise of fascism and totalitarianism in the early twentieth century had a detrimental effect on pacifist networks, and many groups in the bourgeois women’s movement showed little or no resistance to the National Socialist regime and its gender politics. Against this background, many feminists in West Germany felt a need to distance themselves from all forms of violence.

A second reason is the escalating conflict between armed leftist groups and the West German state in the 1970s, which peaked in the “German Autumn” in 1977. In response to the killings of Federal Prosecutor General Siegfried Buback, the bank CEO Jürgen Ponto, and the

president of the Association of German Employers Hanns-Martin Schleyer by members of the RAF, and the death of the leading cadre of the RAF in the high security prison Stammheim, the feminist magazine *Courage* published a feminist polemic against violence and counter-violence. With a hint of irony, the anonymous authors noted that they had to declare some “great truths”: “you cannot shoot power, you cannot shoot countervailing power, you can only shoot people.”²⁷ The authors were not alone in the opinion that violence in all forms is destructive and will not help to create a better world. In the second half of the 1970s, many feminists distanced themselves not only from the state and the militant Left but also from all politics in the conventional sense. In line with the feminist principle that “the personal is political,” activists focused their efforts increasingly on their own lives and immediate environments. Some parts of the New Women’s Movement and groups in the radical Left criticized this as a retreat into the private sphere (Gerhard 204). In the 1980s, feminists played an active role in the West German peace movement, which further strengthened their opposition to violent forms of protest.

While it is important to acknowledge the pivotal role of pacifism and antimilitarism in the history of the German women’s movement, it would be wrong to limit feminist politics to non-violent activism. Patricia Melzer critically observed that disagreements about the use of violent tactics in the New Women’s Movement “have been flattened out in favor of a definition of feminist politics as nonviolent” (19). Indeed, a great part of the existing literature on the New Women’s Movement in the FRG suggests that it is possible and necessary to draw a clear-cut line between peaceful feminist protest on the one side, and “bad” patriarchal violence on the other. If they mention the Red Zora at all, feminist historians tend to reinforce the assumption that its attacks were not feminist because they were violent (e.g. Vukadinović 147).

Although the Red Zora did not succeed in spreading violent tactics in the New Women’s

Movement, feminist reactions to the group show that some of its attacks sparked vivid debates on the scope and limits of feminist protest. The first attacks by the group that attracted considerable attention in feminist circles took place in February 1978, when the Red Zora targeted sex shops in Koblenz and Cologne. The March issue of the feminist magazine *Emma* included parts of the claim of responsibility for the attacks (“Die Rote Zora”). A little cartoon figure next to the text, which had a striking similarity to the chief editor Alice Schwarzer, said: “Help! I feel overwhelmed with clandestine joy!”²⁸ In a 1993 document, former members of the Red Zora admitted that their rage against sex shops was at least in part the result of a bourgeois-Christian distinction between “good” and “bad” sexuality (“Mili’s Tanz auf dem Eis”). The women declared that there were still good reasons to attack sex shops, but they confessed that their protest in the 1970s had failed to consider the views of women who worked in the sex industry and not paid enough attention to less visible forms of sexism and abuse (“Mili’s Tanz auf dem Eis”).

One of the most spectacular manifestations of feminist militancy in West Germany, a series of arson attacks against the German clothing chain Adler in 1987, shows that discussions about feminist counter-violence in the New Women’s Movement have continued well beyond the German Autumn. On 15 August 1987, members of the Red Zora planted incendiary devices in nine stores. According to one former member, the group understood the attacks against Adler as a form of “armed propaganda” (*bewaffnete Propaganda*) for the cause of women workers in South Korea.²⁹ In May 1986, the Korean Women’s Group in West Berlin had received a letter in which trade unionists described the poor working conditions in a garment factory that produced a significant part of the clothes that Adler sold at cheap prices to customers in West Germany and other European countries. The call for “sisterly help” (*schwesterliche Hilfe*; Kosczy, Stolle, and

Pak 61) from South Korea sparked a thriving solidarity campaign in West Germany that involved groups across the political spectrum. Although the South Korean workers had explicitly asked for help, and activists in West Germany tried to engage in active communication with them, this proved to be difficult because of the language barrier, geographic distance, and the difficult situation in the South Korean factory.

In a claim of responsibility published in the leftist newspaper *die tageszeitung*, the Red Zora presented the series of arson attacks against Adler stores in West Germany as a form of solidarity with the Flair Fashion workers and as a complement to the predominantly peaceful protest campaign in West Germany (“Flammende Grüße bei Adler”). The fires and the sprinkler systems that they activated caused substantial property damage. According to the Adler management, the loss to the company amounted to between 30 and 35 million German Marks (“Die ‘Rote Zora’ bezichtigt sich der Anschläge auf Adler”). On 11 September, “The Amazons” (Die Amazonen), an until-then unknown group of militant feminists, followed the example of the Red Zora and set fire to an Adler store in Berlin (“Neuer Anschlag”). They, too, framed their attack as a contribution to the predominantly peaceful solidarity campaign. A few weeks later, *die tageszeitung* reported that another attack was thwarted by pure chance (“Adler-Anschlag per Feuerzeug”). The Adler management responded to the repeated attacks against its premises with a surprising turn-around. A representative of the company declared that they saw no alternative but to “succumb to violence.”³⁰ Representatives of the company promised to accept the wage increase, to reemploy dismissed union activists, and to meet other demands of their employees in order to prevent further attacks (“Neuer Anschlag”).

Feminist responses to the attacks against Adler ranged from celebratory enthusiasm to grave concern. In a press release from 17 August, the executive board of the international

women's rights organization "Terre des Femmes," whose members had played a key role in the solidarity campaign, expressed its indignation about the militant protest against Adler and strongly condemned the attacks. The women claimed that such actions would discredit the nonviolent work of feminist activists who had been in close contact with women workers at the Adler factory (Kosczy, Stolle, and Pak 91). The women were concerned that the militant protest of the Red Zora could lead to an association of their organization and the women's movement as a whole with violence. Moreover, they expressed the fear that the attacks deflected attention from the situation of the workers. The Korean Women's Group in Germany took a similar stance. In early September, the organization declared in a public statement: In the "interest of effective and far-reaching educational work [. . .], we distance ourselves decisively from any recourse to violence to enforce the objectives of unions."³¹ This statement was one of a few contributions to the discussion about the arson attacks that came from South Korean women.

In an article in *die tageszeitung*, the feminist activist and scholar Christa Wichterich argued that the attacks posed a risk to the broader aims of the solidarity campaign. "This firework," claimed Wichterich, "was a disservice to the attempt to use a single protest campaign to create a triangle of solidarity between workers in the Third World, and consumers and workers here. Reason enough to discuss these fiery tactics in the women's movement."³² In Wichterich's opinion, the attacks had done more harm than good, because they jeopardized the bond of solidarity with the workers in South Korea and Germany.

On 8 October, a radical women's group from Reutlingen made a critical contribution to this debate. In their letter to the editors of *die tageszeitung*, the group argued that Wichterich's article and the Terre des Femmes-statement were naïve and divisive. While the authors agreed that militant protest alone did not make a solidarity campaign, they claimed that the Red Zora

had made an important contribution to the campaign's overall success. "Radical resistance on all levels is necessary if we want to put our ideas of a non-hierarchical, non-sexist, non-racist society into practice."³³ Addressing Wichterich and other feminists, they write: "It is up to you what forms of resistance you choose and how you put your ideas about change in this society into practice."³⁴ But they find it unacceptable that participants in the solidarity campaign "serve dominant forces" by "denouncing some forms of resistance in the same vocabulary as the State Protection Office."³⁵ Other women in the radical Left expressed similar views (see, e.g. "Zora"). The Red Zora was thus clearly not the only group in the women's movement and in the radical Left who believed that women should be free to choose militant tactics in expressing their solidarity with the Korean workers and supporting their struggle.

Unlike Dutschke and other activists in the antiauthoritarian student movement, the Red Zora considered the open and hidden forms of violence in sexual relations and gender norms to be a key feature of systemic violence. Yet, the Red Zora's notion of counter-violence had a different blind spot. In line with radical feminist ideas, the group considered the exploitation of women to be one of the earliest and most universal forms of oppression and a governing principle in patriarchal structures (*Die Früchte des Zorns* 209–11). As a result of this conviction, the Red Zora considered women around the globe to be members of the same oppressed group and paid little attention to constitutive differences within this group (e.g. different class backgrounds, ethnic origins, sexual orientations, etc.). Retrospectively, former members of the Red Zora admitted that their focus on the shared oppression of women made it difficult for them to see how privileged they were as white middle class women in Germany. In 1993, the group highlighted that discussions with African-American and Jewish feminists, postcolonial thinkers, and queer activists had helped them to refine and revise their notion of patriarchal oppression

(Die Rote Zora, “Mili’s Tanz auf dem Eis”). At that point the question of violent tactics had moved into the background, and another question occupied feminist activists in the FRG: How can feminists show solidarity with women across the world without ignoring or reinforcing global inequalities and hierarchies within feminist movements?

Conclusion

The discussions about counter-violence in the antiauthoritarian student movement and in the feminist campaigns examined above show that there is no simple or absolute answer to the question as to which forms of protest were considered peaceful or legitimate in West German protest movements. Rather, the scope and boundaries of political protest in the FRG developed as a result of the discussion in these movements and were both enabled and limited by discussions in these discourse communities. While trying to push the boundaries of legitimate protest in these movements, advocates of counter-violence wanted to encourage fellow activists to engage in acts of violent resistance. Their concepts of counter-violence were thus not only determined by their understanding of systemic violence, but also shaped by ethical and political frameworks in the student movement and the New Women’s Movement.

Rudi Dutschke believed that protest tactics had to evolve with and against the systemic violence that they sought to challenge. In response to global conflicts and police brutality against protesters in the FRG, he and other activists in the antiauthoritarian wing of the German student movement reached the conclusion that symbolic counter-violence could be a legitimate and necessary response to institutionalized forms of violence. Equally important for the development of their notion of counter-violence were conversations and collaborations with foreign students who played an active role in the political struggles that they wanted to support. Women took up a marginal role in these discussions and collaborations, and the actors involved gave little thought

to the gendered nature of systemic violence and the ways in which their notions of counter-violence might reinforce patriarchal power relations.³⁶

In line with other feminist activists in West Germany, the Red Zora criticized patriarchal structures around the globe and “macho militancy” in the radical Left. The group argued that prevailing notions of counter-violence failed to consider the organizational and interpersonal forms of violence that created and reinforced patriarchal structures, and developed an explicitly feminist notion of counter-violence. The practice of the Red Zora, however, reinforced at least in part existing patterns of discrimination and marginalization within feminist movements by endorsing a universalist notion of patriarchal oppression and feminist resistance. Mohanty argues that universalist understandings of sexist oppression fail to account for the fact that women have different interests and desires, class backgrounds, ethnic or racial locations, ages and religious beliefs. The fact that the Red Zora attacked sex shops in West Germany without talking to the women who worked there and carried out arson attacks to support the struggle of women workers in South Korea without discussing their plans with these women shows that the members of the Red Zora assumed that they knew what problems these women faced and how to tackle them. This approach reinforced existing patterns of discrimination in the New Women’s Movement and other feminist movements in the West: sex workers, Third World women, and other women different from the majority of feminist activists were considered helpless victims of patriarchy, and their voices were often not heard.

Feminist responses to the arson attacks against Adler show that the question of how feminist activism can avoid reinforcing existing patterns of discrimination and marginalization is inextricably bound to the question of solidarity. According to Mohanty, feminist solidarity must be the product of a constant dialogue and a political struggle that accounts for similarities and

differences among women. She suggests thinking of solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. (7)

This means that feminist solidarity begins with communication and involves constant negotiations. Expressions of solidarity by individual actors are then based on and constrained by the consensus reached in a communicative process involving all parties. Although it does not imply a fixed position with regards to the use of violent protest tactics, it requires an amount of communication and negotiation that poses significant challenges for the planning of clandestine and illegal activities.

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Notes

1. This article draws on research carried out for my PhD thesis "Sisters in Arms? Female Participation in Leftist Political Violence in the Federal Republic of Germany." It includes material from several chapters of the forthcoming monograph *Sisters in Arms?: Militant Feminisms in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1968*, which offers the first comprehensive discussion of the activities of the Red Zora and other militant feminist groups in post-WWII Germany.
2. Other examples include the environmental movement, the *Autonomen* movement, the peace movement, and the antinuclear movement.
3. The German SDS should not be confused with the US movement of the same period "Students for a Democratic Society". For a detailed discussion of both, see Varon 7, 31.
4. The women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s is sometimes also referred to as "second wave feminism" or as the "autonomous women's movement" (*autonome Frauenbewegung*). While the latter was an important current within the movement, I agree with Ilse Lenz (23)

that we should not reduce feminist activism in the FRG to radical feminism or assume that all groups in the movement wanted to achieve independence from the state.

5. I use the term “Third World” in this essay for two reasons: first because it was used commonly by activists in the student movement and in the New Women’s Movement, and secondly because Chandra Talpade Mohanty and other postcolonial feminists have shown that it can be used in a critical and antihegemonic way.
6. For an illustrative example, see Sedlmaier 147–50.
7. In 2009, the case was reviewed when investigations exposed Kurras as a secret agent for the Ministry of State Security of the GDR. For a detailed discussion of the case, see Kellerhoff.
8. “Gewalt ist constituens der Herrschaft und damit auch von unserer Seite mit demonstrativer und provokatorischer Gegengewalt zu beantworten. Die Form bestimmt sich durch die Form der Auseinandersetzung” (“Wir fordern die Enteignung Axel Springers,” 32). Unless otherwise noted, all translations in the text are mine.
9. Dutschke’s attacker Josef Bachmann had no personal connection to him. His negative image of the student leader was based solely on the polemical attacks against Dutschke in Axel Springer’s newspapers and right-wing newspaper *National-Zeitung*.
10. “Die Grenze zwischen verbalem Protest und physischem Widerstand” (“Vom Protest zum Widerstand”).
11. For a detailed discussion of Baader’s liberation, see Karcher, “Die Perücke ist ein Element das alle Katzen grau macht.”
12. See also Negt.
13. For a range of accounts by women in the antiauthoritarian student movement see, e.g. Kätzel and Heinrich Böll Stiftung.
14. For a detailed discussion of this process, see Karcher *Sisters in Arms?: Militant Feminisms in the Federal Republic of Germany Since 1968*.
15. For a brief history of the abortion legislation in Germany from 1871 to 1992, see Osborne 4–6.
16. “Mein Bauch gehört mir!” (Lamprecht 159).
17. “Einer Verfassung, die Frauen illegalisiert viele in den Tod treibt wenn sie sich nicht von der Ärzte-und Richtermafia ihre Sexualität, den Umgang mit ihrem eigenen Körper, die Zahl ihrer Kinder vorschreiben lassen” (*Erklärung der REVOLUTIONÄREN ZELLE*).

18. “[E]ntweder Mütter oder Huren, geläutert bzw. bestraft für ihre Sexualität durch Schwangerschaft.”
19. “Wir haben nicht vergessen, daß sie unsere feministischen Schwestern im Mittelalter auf dem Scheiterhaufen verbrannt haben” (*Erklärung der REVOLUTIONÄREN ZELLE*).
20. The Revolutionary Cells originated 1973 in Frankfurt. Members of the group participated in a range of local and national protest movements and political subcultures including the New Women’s Movement, the squatting scene, and the antinuclear movement. Between 1973 and 1993, the Revolutionary Cells carried out more than 180 attacks, see Karcher *Sisters in Arms?: Militant Feminisms in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1968*.
21. “Frauen erhebt euch und die Welt erlebt euch!”; “die Ziele und das Selbstverständnis der Frauenbewegung” (Schulz 158).
22. The novel was translated into English in 1967 as *The Outsiders of Uskokken Castle*.
23. Unpublished interview with three former members of the Red Zora, conducted by the author on 17 August 2012.
24. “[D]ie strukturelle, subtile und direkte Gewalt, die das Patriarchat ausmacht und stützt” (“Mili’s Tanz auf dem Eis”).
25. “Für uns ist es klar, daß der Frauenkampf nicht auf die Organisierung von Subversivität und Gegengewalt verzichten kann” (*Die Früchte des Zorns* 213).
26. “[E]ine Geschichte wiederholter Rückschläge, Stillstände und vieler mühsamer Neuanfänge unter immer wieder veränderten gesellschaftlichen und politischen Bedingungen” (191).
27. “Hört, wir verkünden hiermit folgende große Wahrheiten: Die Macht lässt sich nicht erschießen. Die Gegenmacht lässt sich nicht erschießen. Erschießen lassen sich nur Menschen” (“Aufruf an alle Frauen zur Erfindung des Glücks” 10).
28. “Hilfe—Da überkommt mich ja klammheimliche Freude!” The expression “clandestine joy” hints at an incident in 1977, when the author of an article in a student magazine in Göttingen used this notion to describe his feelings about the assassination of the attorney general of Germany, Siegfried Buback, by members of the Red Army Faction.
29. Unpublished interview with three former members of the Red Zora, conducted by the author on 17 August 2012.
30. The management declared: “Adler beugt sich der Gewalt” (“Neuer Anschlag”).
31. “Im Interesse einer wirksamen und möglichst weitreichenden Aufklärung [. . .] distanzieren

wir uns eindeutig von jeglicher gewalttätiger Form der Durchsetzung gewerkschaftlicher Zielsetzungen” (Kosczy, Stolle, and Pak 95).

32. “Das Feuerwerk hat dem Versuch, in einer einzelnen Widerstandsaktion ein solidarisches Dreieck zwischen Arbeiterinnen in der Dritten Welt, Konsumentinnen hier und Arbeiterinnen hier aufzubauen, einen Bärendienst erwiesen. Anlaß genug, um sich mit der feurigen Taktik in der Frauenbewegung auseinanderzusetzen” (“Einen Bärendienst erwiesen”).
33. “Radikaler Widerstand auf allen Ebenen auch international ist notwendig, wenn wir unsere Ideen von einer herrschaftsfreien, nichtsexistischen, nichttrassistischen Gesellschaft ernsthaft durchsetzen wollen” (“Bärendienst für wen?”).
34. “Es ist eure Sache, welche Widerstandsformen ihr als Gruppe wählt und wie ihr eure Vorstellungen von Veränderung dieser Gesellschaft umsetzen wollt” (“Bärendienst für wen?”).
35. “[D]en Herrschenden zuarbeitet und wenn ihr Widerstandsformen denunziert, mit dem gleichen Vokabular wie der Staatsschutz” (“Bärendienst für wen?”).
36. In the course of the 1960s, the number of female students at West German universities grew significantly, see Diewald-Kerkmann 51.

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