

## **Transnational solidarity: the Kurdish movement and German radical leftists and anarchists**

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### **Abstract**

*The Kurdish movement and German leftist and anarchist activists cooperated in 2018 in criticizing the Turkish military operations in Afrin. Radical left wing and anarchist actors and the Kurds argued that the German government supported the Turkish state in its war on Afrin by its armament policy and thereby violating central human and political rights. This cooperation and the visibility of a formerly external ethnic conflict sheds light on the political impact of migrant social movements in Germany and its political culture. By describing and analyzing current protest activities of leftist and anarchist actors against the war in Afrin, the importance of the concept of solidarity to the leftist and anarchist movement becomes evident. The central source for solidarity by the leftist and anarchist actors with the Kurdish movement is the appealing character of the Kurdish federalism in Northern Syria.*

**Keywords:** Transnational solidarity; Kurdish movement; anarchism; leftist social movement; Turkish military operation

### **1. Introduction**

In early 2018, the Kurdish-Turkish conflict escalated not only in Turkey and Northern Syria but also in Germany. The number of Kurdish initiated and organized protest activities was rising significantly since the Turkish state repeated its military operations in Northern Syria against the Kurdish dominated regions. Therefore, the question arises whether and how this conflict influences German street politics, defined as non-institutionalized, elite-challenging contention beyond parliaments. Mariano Torcal, Toni Rodon and María José Hierro found out that “left-wing citizens (especially extreme left-wing individuals) protest more than any other ideological group” in Europe (Torcal, Rodon and Hierro 2016). Left-wing political activists seem to dominate street politics in Germany.

For Germany in 2018, I could identify three larger and more important protest movements concerning media coverage and number of participants. The right-wing protest movement against immigration and the migration policy of the CDU-led Merkel-government (Zukunft Heimat 2018; Pegida), the environmental protests against coal mining and extractive industries, e.g. in North Rhine-Westphalia (Tagebau Hambach), and finally the protests of the Kurdish movement against the Turkish military operations in Afrin in Northern

Syria were central to German street politics<sup>1</sup>. The present case study describes and analyzes how German radical left wing activists and anarchists supported the protests of the Kurdish movement against the Turkish military operations in Afrin (Syria).

In this paper, I therefore shall address the following questions:

- *How and why do German left wing and anarchists react to the Kurdish-Turkish conflict as a non-German issue?*
- *Which purposes do the concept of “solidarity”, as a mobilizing resource, and the imagination of a Kurdish democratic federalism fulfil for German left wing and anarchist organizations in relation to the Kurdish movement?*

Answering these questions adds new insights to the existing knowledge on social movements and their mobilization capacities by focusing on (transnational) solidarity relations between heterogeneous movements. By describing and analyzing the actors involved, their activities, their ideological preferences and main frames, I will shed light on the importance of solidarity and transnationalism for the contemporary left wing and anarchist movement in Germany for supporting the non-German, Kurdish movement. The study delivers insights into the ideological preferences of German radical left wing and anarchist activists by analyzing their involvement in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. The case study reveals the transnational character of the German leftist and anarchist street politics. We can understand this ideological preference towards transnational solidarity as a core belief of German radical left wing and anarchist political actors. Furthermore, we can learn more about the role of the idea of solidarity within contemporary anti-capitalist movements. Besides this focus on German activists mobilizing for the Kurdish issue concerning the construction of a democratic confederalism, the paper contains valuable information on the Kurdish movement using the solidarity bonds with local populations and movements as a resource to bring their issue to new and different audiences in Germany. Nevertheless, we should be aware that radical left wing actors and anarchists have a marginal standing in Germany, thereby constraining the reach of this politics of solidarity. Analyzing the politics of solidarity between the German left and anarchist movement and the Kurdish movement from a political science perspective is still very important due to Germany having the proportionately largest amount of Kurdish people in the European Union (EU).

The Kurdish diaspora is politically very well organized and visible all over Europe and especially in Germany. Germany has had a very conflicted history

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<sup>1</sup> Franzmann (2016), Arzheimer (2015) and Berbuir, Lewandowsky and Siri (2014) analyzed the development of the right-wing protest movement in Germany and its final institutionalization within the Alternative for Germany (German: Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). Sander analyzed the German protests against coal mining and the “Ende Gelände”-coalition (Sander 2017) and Kaufer and Lein analyzed the eco-anarchist movement (Hambi bleibt!), which occupied the Hambach forest in Germany to prevent its clearing by the RWE Power AG (Kaufer and Lein 2018).

with its Kurdish diaspora. In the 1990s, the conflict between the Kurdish movement and Turkish groups escalated violently and the German government tried to end the conflict by prohibiting the central organization of the Kurdish movement, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party; Kurdish: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê). Against the background of the recent EU-Turkey policy agreements on migration control (EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan activated on 29 November 2015) the political mobilization of the Kurdish diaspora in Germany creates tensions with the Turkish government. This policy agreement and the German-Turkish partnership forces German security authorities to observe and criminalize potentially pro-Kurdish and pro-PKK political activities (Bähr 2017).

Some observers and activists, e.g. Schamberger, argued that the Turkish media regulation RTÜK (Turkish: Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu; English: Radio and Television Supreme Council) instructed the European satellite operator Eutelsat to shut down Kurdish media in Europe (Dick 2017; Schamberger 2018). In the European history of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, it is a well-known practice and strategy that the Turkish government uses its diplomatic power to prevent the establishment of Kurdish media and a Kurdish public in Europe (Hassanpour 1998). Sinclair and Smets argued that Turkey used “to great effect a discourse of terrorism to frame its case, as well as backroom arm-twisting, Turkey brought its European counterparts to see the flourishing of Kurdish-dominated media in Europe as a threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity“ (Sinclair and Smets 2014: 325). Turkey intervened repeatedly to stop the establishment of an independent Kurdish public in Europe (Smets 2016). We have to recognize this pattern of repressing Kurdish media and political freedom in the ethnic conflict constellation when analyzing the current protests of Kurdish activists and German supporters against the war in Afrin. In February 2018, the police prohibited Kurdish demonstrations against the war in Afrin in the cities of Cologne and Dortmund due to expected violent escalations (Police of Cologne 2018). These bans caused protests in the German civil society. NGOs such as the Komitee für Grundrechte und Demokratie, which argued that the police violated the freedom to assembly due to foreign policy reasons, criticized these strategies of no-tolerance of the police headquarters in Cologne and Dortmund. This example shows the importance and relevance of analyzing the current aggravation of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict in Germany.

To understand and analyze the nexus between the Kurdish movement and German street politics I will briefly outline the history of the Kurdish movement in Germany, shed some light on the Turkish military operation in Afrin and finally analyze the cooperation of the Kurdish movement in Germany with German leftist and anarchist political actors. The support of German left wing and anarchist actors for the Kurdish movement therefore still delivers a substantial opportunity to test how and on what basis social movements in Germany organize support for and communicate on a transnational conflict.

In the next section, I will discuss my theoretical and methodological approach and define anarchism and left wing activism as well as the concept of solidarity. Afterward, I will roughly sketch a picture of the Kurdish movement, of the

history of the PKK in Germany and of the Turkish military operation in Afrin in section 3. In section 4, I will describe German street politics, the anarchist perspective on the Kurdish movement and analyze the politics of solidarity between the left wing and anarchist movement and the Kurdish movement. Finally, I will draw a conclusion in section 5.

## **2. Theoretical and methodological approach**

In this study, I will analyze how and why German left wing and anarchist actors support the Kurdish movement. This question is relevant since we get a better understanding of how anarchist and leftist activists politicize a non-German issue based on appeals to feelings of solidarity with the oppressed. The question of mobilization for non-German issues and conflicts becomes even more important against the background of the increased migration to Germany since 2015. For labor unions, anarchists and left wing politicians the very idea of solidarity always was an important tool in mobilizing their comrades for taking actions against class exploitation and all forms of suppression by appealing to their class solidarity and the resulting consciousness. Recently, research on the idea of solidarity within social movements in Germany has increased (Bruckmiller and Scholl 2016; Della Porta 2018). In Germany, as well as in other European countries, relations of transnational solidarity have been established between the left wing and anarchist social movement in Germany and other European movements against the politics on the Eurozone crisis. Blockupy was an example for the establishment of these relations of transnational solidarity (Bruckmiller and Scholl 2016). Accordingly, the central theoretical concept of this study is *solidarity*.

I conceptualize transnational solidarity of German left wing and anarchist actors towards the Kurdish movement as the long-term and short-term result of the perceived humanitarian crisis caused by the repression of German and Turkish authorities against the Kurdish movement. Against the felt and observed oppression against the Kurdish movement, which increased after the newest military operations in Afrin, parts of the anarchist and leftist movement tried to mobilize protest to stop the criminalization of the Kurdish movement. According to Scott A. Hunt and Robert D. Benford, solidarity

has two fundamental foci: internal and external. Internal solidarity is focused on the group to which one belongs and to the members within that group. External solidarity is the identification of and identification with groups to which one does not belong. The construction of internal and external solidarity depends a great deal upon the framing of worldviews or ideologies (Hunt and Benford 2004: 439).

In this specific case of cooperation between the Kurdish and the leftist/anarchist movement a sort of “external solidarity” with the Kurds needs to be developed within and beyond the movement to fight repression. From the perspective of

the leftist and anarchist organizations in Germany, the task was to develop the consciousness of belonging to one collectivity (cf. on this issue Hunt and Benford 2004: 439) or one movement for emancipation to increase participation in the protests against the Turkish military operations in Afrin and against the criminalization of the Kurdish movement in Germany. For mobilizing support for the Kurdish movement a sense of “emotional interest” (Hunt and Benford 2004: 439) towards the Kurdish issue had to be developed. One example for trying to achieve this “emotional interest” is the paper *Understanding the Kurdish Resistance. Historical Overview & Eyewitness Report* (CrimethInc. 2015) by the anarchist group CrimethInc. Taking the existing knowledge of the past mobilizations of the German leftist/anarchist movement against the austerity politics or for global justice, I can easily formulate the hypothesis that *the concept of solidarity is still an important ideological tool for the leftist/anarchist movement to mobilize support for external groups and to mobilize the public for protest.*

## **2.1 Anarchism**

According to Lucien Van der Walt anarchism is

an anti-authoritarian, internationalist, class-struggle socialism, aiming at a self-managed, stateless, egalitarian global society with collectivised resources and participatory planning; syndicalism is an anarchist strategy wherein revolutionary unions help institute the new world through workplace occupations under self-management (Van der Walt 2013: 341; Van der Walt 2016: 93).

Van der Walt argues for historicizing anarchism and by doing this, we can find its origins and core principles formed in the period beginning around 1864 in “the First International around Mikhail Bakunin and the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy” (Van der Walt 2016: 91/92). In this period the anarchists, building on some ideas of the French anarchist Proudhon and the on the ideas of the British anarchist William Godwin, formulated

three or four main fundamentals of the movement. These include opposition to relations of domination between human beings, including those expressed in the government (or the state) and those expressed in capitalism, but also including those expressed in all sorts of other ways among human beings (such as national oppression). These positions were expressed clearly in the works of Bakunin and Kropotkin and the movement that was born in the First International (Van der Walt 2016: 93).

By dating the anarchist ideology and movement back to the 1860s, no reasonable definition of anarchism can deny the centrality of the

aforementioned principles to the movement and its ideology. Again, Van der Walt argues:

Liberals stress the importance of individual freedom and so forth, and Marxists stress the importance of abolishing capitalism, but it is anarchism that took these two parts, and put them together in a way that none of these others really managed to do, with a radical libertarian socialism. So, anarchism is a movement that is against hierarchy and that is against exploitation, and it is a movement that (in other words) links the struggle for individual freedom to the struggle against capitalism and the state (Van der Walt 2016: 93).

Anarchism is a socialist movement with a particular emphasis on individual liberties (see McLaverty 2005 for a critique of the term “libertarian socialism”). The German political scientist Klaus Von Beyme also subsumes anarchism to the broader socialist movement and socialist theory (Von Beyme 2013). Anarchism is, according to Von Beyme (2013: 11), one stream of the socialist movement besides “Frühsozialismus” (or utopian socialism), communism, Marxism-Leninism and democratic socialism.

The contemporary anarchist movement in Germany has four main manifestations:

- *Political anarchism* containing different anarchist currents such as anarcho-communism and anarcho-feminism organized within the Federation of German speaking anarchists (German: Föderation deutschsprachiger Anarchist\*innen (FdA-IFA))
- *Anarcho-syndicalism* within the labor union Free Workers’ Union (FAU; German: Freie ArbeiterInnen- und Arbeiter-Union)
- *Anarchist activism* in affinity groups and political groups (inspired by the anarchist network CrimethInc. and rather clandestine)
- *Anarchist publishing and anti-militarist activism* in a transnational network of different organizations (such as the publishers of the magazine *Graswurzelrevolution* and the publisher of the same name)

## **2.2 Left wing activism and leftist radicalism**

Left wing activism or leftist radicalism in Germany, as a visible social force, came into being in the 1970s. Its main ideological currents were the communist organizations, anti-imperialist activists and organizations and the Autonomous movement. The protests of students and workers in the late 1960s, also known as the 68er rebellion, influenced the further development of left wing activism in Germany. According to Sebastian Haunss, central issues for left radical protest in the 1970s were the struggles for educational and university reforms, the critique of women’s discrimination, a critique of the capitalist mode of production and anti-imperialist and solidarity campaigns (Haunss 2008: 507).

In the 1980s, the focus of the leftist radical movement focussed on environmental issues such as the civic and military use of atomic energy. In the 1990s, the formulation of anti-nationalist protests and organizations became central to German left wing activism. Despite this change of central issues over the time, the critique of exploitation, subordination and discrimination still was central to German left wing radicals. Core issues of this broader movement were and are anti-nationalism (the campaign “nationalism is no alternative”) and anti-fascism, anti-capitalism, pro-feminism, anti-gentrification, anti-globalization protest and anti-imperialism and anti-coal protest. Some well-known organizations of the leftist radical movement are the *Interventionistische Linke (IL)*, “...ums Ganze! – kommunistisches Bündnis” (uG) (communist alliance), *Rote Hilfe e.V.* (anti-repression organization), *Ende Gelände* (anti-coal protest network) and *Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterjugend (SDAJ)* (German socialist workers’ youth organization). Furthermore, I add *Linksjugend [’solid]* to the left wing activism because they are the youth and social movement organization of the left wing party *DIE LINKE*.

### **2.3 Methodology**

Methodologically, I draw on a content analysis to find out which role solidarity plays as a mobilization tool for German leftist radicals and anarchists. I took the data and information concerning the patterns of solidarity between German leftist and anarchist actors and the Kurdish movement from internet statements of political actors, newspapers and oral speeches during assemblies. I analyzed 21 documents concerning:

- *the justifications for solidarity towards the Kurdish movement,*
- *the forms of action by which left wing and anarchist actors express their solidarity with the Kurdish movement and*
- *the policy objectives that left wing and anarchist actors want to attain.*

As this study aims at exploring the reasons and patterns for mobilizing solidarity by German street political actors for the Kurdish movement it seems plausible to search for justifications, forms of actions and policy goals in the documents of left wing and anarchist organizations. I took documents from the *Anarchist Group Dortmund*, the *Anarchist Group Krefeld*, *A & O Kassel* (anarchist organization from Kassel), *Federation of German speaking Anarchists* (German: Föderation deutschsprachiger Anarchist\*innen (FdA)), *Free Workers Union* (Freie Arbeiterinnen- und Arbeiter-Union (FAU)), the *Interventionist Left* (German: Interventionistische Linke), *the Left youth organization [’solid]* (German: Linksjugend) from several cities, the *Left party* (German: DIE LINKE) and from the *Committee on constitutional right* (German: Grundrechtekomitee) (see List of analyzed statements). Further attention was paid to the anarchist group CrimethInc. and its paper on the roots of the Kurdish Resistance *Understanding the Kurdish Resistance. Historical Overview & Eyewitness Report* (CrimethInc. 2015).

To answer the question how the support of the Kurdish movement by the German leftist and anarchist movement is framed in terms of solidarity the content analysis seems to be an adequate method. More specifically, I conduct a protest event analysis. Therefore, I focus on the mobilization and protest activities of German leftist/anarchist actors before and after the protest events (Kurdish demonstrations in Dortmund, Duisburg, Kassel, Köln and Rostock). The goal of the present analysis is to understand the patterns of mobilization against the war in Afrin and the criminalization of the Kurdish movement and more specific the role transnational solidarity plays within it. Thus, I analyze statements, drafts and strategies of German leftist/anarchist organizations. I read the documents to find arguments that support the hypothesis that the concept of solidarity is a central mobilization concept to the German leftist and anarchist organizations and to understand how solidarity matters to the anarchist and left wing movements.

### **3. The Kurdish movement, the PKK in Germany and the Turkish military operations in Afrin**

Between 1993 and 2005, the Kurdish movement discussed and developed the ideology of a democratic federalist order being its central political goal. This concept develops around the ideas of pluralism, democracy and humanism and is in contrast to the political ideology of the Turkish government being anti-pluralist, authoritarian-nationalist and religious. According to Tarrow, social protest or contention is a reaction to state policies and regulation (Tarrow 1994). This is especially true for radical democratic and federalist movements such as the Kurdish movement due to its contestation of Turkish public policies and existing states. The political opportunities in a homeland and in a potential country of destination are important factors, influencing the migration choices of members of these contesting movements. In the case of the Kurdish movement political opportunity structures in Germany, e.g. support infrastructure, already existing Kurdish communities and the economic outlook in Germany (Lyon and Uçarer 2001: 931), were decisive for migrating there. In the 1970s, Kurdish migrants applied for political asylum in Germany due to the political situation in Turkey (Lyon and Uçarer 2001: 931). These developments led to the increase of the Kurdish diaspora in Germany and enabled Kurdish activists to mobilize political support and resources for the critique of Turkish policies. The strengthened Kurdish diaspora and its resources helped to develop the German arm of the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK (Kurdish: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê).

This transnationalisation of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict influenced German politics heavily. Kurdish and Turkish immigration and Kurdish political activism in Germany made the ethno-political rebellion of the Kurds visible to a broader public and it became obvious that Germany took centre stage in the conflict (Baser 2015: 1; Eccarius-Kelly 2002; Lyon and Uçarer 2001: 932). The PKK became a recognizable political actor in the German public sphere and this new actor urged the German government, political parties, the mass media and

extra-parliamentary political activists to adopt a position in relation to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. The Kurdish diaspora used the political opportunities of freedom of expression and other political rights in Germany, e.g. freedom of association and freedom to assembly, to express their cultural identity freely. One outcome of these efforts was the foundation of cultural associations, which helped the PKK to mobilize activists and financial resources. According to Tarrow the political institutions context can provide incentives to actors to mobilize for their ideology freely. In this respect, the German context differed from Turkey, where the Turkish government and the institutions of the Turkish state sanctioned the Kurdish movement and its protest and restricted its access to political institutions (Lyon and Uçarer 2001: 934). The PKK could develop in Germany based on “the contributions of members, the sale of publications, and donations” (Lyon and Uçarer 2001: 934) an activity infrastructure, which enabled the organization to mobilize its community for various protest events. Part of the infrastructure was and is a telecommunication and information network (Lyon and Uçarer 2001: 934; Smets 2016). TV channels that were in the focus of repression by German and Turkish national authorities were important parts of the communicative infrastructure of the Kurdish and PKK diaspora. Besides strengthening its communication infrastructure the PKK developed good relationships to other groups such as the Alevis to increase the number of potential supportive actors.

In the history of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict in Germany, military operations were recurring reasons for the PKK and its German supporters to criticize the Turkish policies. This is true for the current situation, in which the Kurdish movement and German left wing activists’ protest against the war in Afrin led by the Turkish military. In the 1990s, the PKK was able to mobilize large-scale demonstrations in German cities against Turkish military interventions. The Kurdish diaspora dominated these demonstrations. From the perspective of German left wing activists, the Kurds were victims of Turkish authoritarianism and support had to be organized through demonstrations and other activities. This form of providing solidarity towards the Kurdish “comrades” by blaming German authorities for illegitimately repressing the Kurdish freedom fighters continues until today. We can observe protest notes and protest activities by German political actors from the radical left criticizing the authorities for pursuing the Kurdish movement (ANF 2018; Meyer 2018).

Furthermore, the Kurdish movement and the PKK used publicly visible hunger strikes to create awareness for the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, the oppression of the Kurds in Turkey and their policy goals, e.g. autonomy. The Kurdish diaspora also had internal conflicts that caused publicly visible assaults of Kurdish individuals and groups that were driven by the tensions between the PKK and KOMKAR (The Association for Kurdish Workers for Kurdistan) (Lyon and Uçarer 2001: 936). From the perspective of political stability, sovereignty and conflict limitation in Germany, public policy makers and security agencies, e.g. the Office of the Protection of the German Constitution (Bundesverfassungsschutz), had to reduce the risk of importing the ethnic conflict by the Kurdish immigration and its violent manifestations to a

minimum. In the German public, the Kurdish question came up as a domestic security problem, which derived from intra-Turkey development restrictions and ethnicity problems. Public policy makers connected Kurdish migration with problems of governing ethnic and social conflicts.

The intra-Kurdish conflicts and assaults brought the German authorities finally to assess the chances for banning the PKK. This was not an easy option due to the legal conflict between the constitutional rights of freedom of association on the one hand and the policy goal of guaranteeing public security. The Office of the Protection of the German Constitution had observed the PKK since 1983. The Federal Prosecutor tried to ban the PKK as a terrorist organization. The police intensified its raids against the Kurdish associations in the early 1990s. In early 1993 some Kurdish activists occupied the Turkish consulate in Munich and other European states to put pressure on European governments to influence the Turkish government to end the war against the Kurds, which in combination with ongoing hostilities led finally to the ban (Lyon and Uçarer 2001: 938). In November 1993, the German Ministry of the Interior outlawed the PKK as a “terrorist organization” and prohibited affiliated associations. To politicians it was not clear what would follow from the ban but finally there were no options left over to guarantee public security. The Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) therefore supported the implementation of a PKK ban from the perspective of public security while the Green party argued that a ban might lead to further attacks by individuals that would feel singled out and left no other option (Lyon and Uçarer 2001: 939). Baher explains that the Kurdish movement changed its strategy in the aftermath of the ban and the repressive public policies in Germany from confrontational politics to contesting the “criminalization of the movement within Germany”. Furthermore “there is also a significant discursive change that demonstrates that the Kurds now perceive themselves as citizens or residents of Germany, and are thus a part of German society and challenging the policy makers in terms of equal citizenship and opportunity frameworks” (Baher 2014: 3).

In the current stage of the conflict in 2017 over the criminalization of the symbols of Kurdish organizations, such as the Northern Syrian Kurdish party of democratic unity (PYD) and the Kurdish-Syrian self-defence organizations YPG and YPJ, Sevim Dağdelen and other parliamentarians from the left wing party DIE LINKE criticized the prohibition of the symbols of these organizations (German Bundestag 2017: 3). The CDU/CSU and SPD supported the prohibition of the symbols by the German Federal Ministry of the Interior. The German government justified the extension of the list of prohibited symbols with the increase of public assemblies related to the PKK and Kurdish organizations since 2016 and the argument that the Kurdish movement would use these symbols to strengthen the cohesion of the prohibited PKK (German Bundestag 2017: 5). The Kurdish movement organized these public assemblies to support from Germany the military operations of the Kurdish-Syrian self-defence organizations YPG and YPJ against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The parliamentary group of the party DIE LINKE questioned the government

whether the Turkish government had influenced its decision to ban further symbols of the Kurdish movement. The German government referred in its answer to the prohibition of the PKK and argued that it was implementing the prohibition of related symbols to guarantee the internal security (German Bundestag 2017: 6). The prohibition of the symbols of legal organizations, e.g. the Association of University Students of Kurdistan (YXK), is legal according to the federal government if the PKK or other prohibited associations use these symbols to strengthen their cohesion (German Bundestag 2017: 7). The Federal Government argued additionally that the prohibition on showing pictures of Abdullah Öcalan, the arrested former leader of the PKK, during demonstrations strengthens the cohesion of the Kurdish movement and causes tensions between the Kurdish and the Turkish diaspora in Germany. These tensions would arise from the violent history of the conflict in Turkey that is inevitably connected to the person of Öcalan. The federal government argued that Turkish activists and citizens in Germany might interpret Öcalan's picture as a provocation, which could lead to hostilities. The current stage of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict develops around the question of whether the security agencies and the Ministry of the Interior interpret Kurdish symbols as a tool for strengthening the cohesion of the criminalized PKK. The federal government argues that the PKK still exists as a hidden network that supports the YPG in Syria (German Bundestag 2017: 11). From the government and security perspective in Germany, the PKK still is a terrorist organization that aims at Kurdish autonomy by using violence (German Bundestag 2017: 15).

Currently, the Kurdish movement in Germany protested peacefully or tried to protest against the military operations of the Turkish state in Afrin and against Germany supporting these operations and the Turkish army by weapon delivery (Huffington Post 2018). Against this background of renewed Kurdish protest against the Turkish military operations in Afrin, German security authorities and police headquarters seem to have aggravated their strategy in relation to Kurdish protest towards a more repressive strategy. In early 2018, the police headquarters of the cities of Cologne, Dortmund, Duisburg and Hannover prohibited pro-Kurdish demonstrations (NAV-DEM 2018; Police of Dortmund 2018; WAZ 2018). These strategies of the local police headquarters and the authorities for inner security seem to implement the above-mentioned prohibition of the Kurdish symbols by the German Federal Ministry of the Interior to weaken the cohesion of the PKK. However, though there is until now no clear evidence that local police authorities implement the guidelines of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, it seems to be plausible that the prohibition of the big demonstrations in Cologne, Duisburg and Dortmund followed the revised strategy towards the Kurdish movement and tried to prevent the use of prohibited symbols.

### **3.1 The Turkish military operation in Afrin**

In January 2018, the Turkish military attacked the Kurdish dominated and controlled Afrin district in Northern Syria to fight the Kurdish-led Democratic

Union Party in Syria (PYD), its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). It was the first Turkish military operation in Syria since 2016. The Turkish military called the operation Olive Branch. The Syrian Afrin district borders on Turkey in the north and the west. Turkish officials argued that the operation is necessary to protect the Turkish south from a transgression of the war from Syria. The military conflict is a very complex issue and shall not be discussed or analyzed further. The importance of the military operation for the study arises because the Kurds in Afrin and the Kurds in Germany started to protest against the war immediately after the beginning of the military operation. The Kurds argued that the Turkish state and its NATO allies would weaken the capacities of the Kurdish military forces to defend the territory against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)). Furthermore, the Syrian Kurds argued that the Turkish state would violate the regional sovereignty and become a more imperial power in the region. In Germany, the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) reported and discussed German military involvement in the Turkish military operations in Syria and the Kurdish dominated regions (Hemicker 2018). The FAZ-author argues that German Leopard-2 battle tanks were used in the military conflict and refers to the "Information Center of Afrin Resistance" (ICAR) from Qamischli. For German political activists and policy observers the political and human rights scandal was the German military involvement (GrundrechtKomitee 2018). The military operation in Afrin seems to put the Kurdish movement in Turkey and its membership in other European states under pressure to protest against the military policy in Turkey and Germany. Therefore, the military operations could intensify the inner-Turkish radicalization processes, which take place against a more and more repressive political background, and the antagonistic political and societal developments in the Turkish-Kurdish question (Popp 2018).

#### **4. German street politics, the anarchist perspective on the Kurdish movement and the Kurdish solidarity movement**

In January and February 2018, the Turkish military operations in Afrin captured the agenda of German domestic and street politics. The wide spread Kurdish protest mobilizations against the Turkish military operations in Afrin motivated German left wing and anarchist political organizations as well as other civil society actors such as the networks of #unteilbar and #Seebrücke to join the protest activities. In several German cities, organizations such as Attac, the left wing party DIE LINKE, the anarcho-syndicalist union FAU (Free Workers Union) or the Linksjugend [’solid] organized demonstrations supporting the Kurdish movement and protesting against the German involvement in Turkish war making and the anti-democratic policies of the German state authorities (cf. DIE LINKE – Kreisverband Essen 2018; FAU 2018; Linksjugend [’solid] Bremerhaven und Cuxhaven 2018; Linksjugend [’solid] Konstanz 2018). The Linksjugend [’solid], a youth organization that

supports the left wing party DIE LINKE by contributing a social movement identity and a more radical praxis to its institutionalized party politics, can be identified as a major actor which organized street political support for the Kurdish movement. Linksjugend [’solid] organized and supported in January and February 2018 demonstrations in the cities of Bremerhaven, Cologne, Konstanz, Mainz and Stuttgart (Linksjugend [’solid] Bremerhaven und Cuxhaven 2018; Linksjugend [’solid] Konstanz 2018). Linksjugend [’solid] called for support for the Kurdish movement in Northern Syria as this movement strived for the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria aiming at grassroots democracy, women’s liberation and ecology (Linksjugend [’solid] Bremerhaven und Cuxhaven 2018).

Furthermore, Linksjugend [’solid] North Rhine-Westphalia argued for the necessity of international solidarity due to the emancipatory project of Kurdish federalism in Northern Syria with its seemingly positive prospect for self-government, women’s and minorities right policies (Linksjugend [’solid] North Rhine-Westphalia 2018; Linksjugend [’solid] Ortenau 2018). Moreover, Linksjugend [’solid] criticized that the German government was directly involved in the war on Afrin by approving weapon exports for the Turkish military, which uses these weapons such as tanks against the Kurdish self-organization units (Linksjugend [’solid] Mainz 2018). Linksjugend [’solid] Mainz also criticized that the German government supported the Turkish government, namely president Erdogan, by repressing the Kurdish movement (Linksjugend [’solid] Mainz 2018).

Linksjugend [’solid] argued that the prohibition of symbols of YPG und YPJ, Syrian Kurdish party and women’s organization, suppressed the constitutional rights of freedom of speech and the freedom of association. With reference to the prohibition of Kurdish symbols, the police stopped the demonstration in Cologne and confiscated all Kurdish flags and Öcalan pictures. The Kurdish movement tried to transcend the limits set by the police and the ministries of the interior by continuously showing prohibited symbols. The police stopped and ended the demonstration. Linksjugend [’solid] framed this as a violation of human and political rights (Linksjugend [’solid] Mainz 2018). At the demonstration in Mainz and in their statements Linksjugend [’solid] Mainz and Linksjugend [’solid] generally argued that the police strategies were motivated by German foreign policy interests that are congruent with the interests of the Turkish government (Linksjugend [’solid] Mainz 2018). At this point, it becomes evident that the statements of Linksjugend [’solid] argue for solidarity with the Kurdish movement due to the Kurdish movements’ progress in establishing a socio-political order that seems to be in accordance with the ideology of Linksjugend [’solid]. It is hardly possible to say whether the mobilization for the Kurdish movement is based on facts, because I do not know the sources of the argumentation of Linksjugend [’solid]. Finally, I can conclude that all statements of Linksjugend [’solid] focus on the achievements of the Kurdish federalist project in Northern Syria and the attacks on the project by the Turkish military as the central reasons for solidarity (Linksjugend [’solid] Bremerhaven und Cuxhaven 2018a).

The reason for solidarity with the Kurdish movement thus seems to be the congruence of the seemingly realizing emancipatory project in Kurdistan and the desire for change in Germany (there is no explicit explanation by Linksjugend [’solid] why to support the Kurdish movement). The central form of support of Linksjugend [’solid] was the organization of demonstrations or manifestations in which they expressed their solidarity with the Kurdish movement and articulated their critique of the German and Turkish governments. Central policy goals of Linksjugend [’solid] were to mobilize the public against the German government’s armament policy as a reason for the war in Afrin and against the anti-Kurdish internal policies of the German Federal Ministry of the Interior on the prohibition of PKK-symbols or other Kurdish symbols. Besides the activities of Linksjugend [’solid], some local committees of the leftist party DIE LINKE demonstrated against the war in Afrin and expressed their critique of the German government’s involvement in the Turkish war on Afrin (cf. DIE LINKE local committee Chemnitz 2018; DIE LINKE local committee Essen 2018; DIE LINKE local committee Kiel 2018).

Apart from these efforts of Linksjugend [’solid] and DIE LINKE to organize street political support for the Kurdish movement, German anarchist organizations tried to support the Kurdish movement. The anarcho-syndicalist organization and labor union FAU called for solidarity with the democratic federation in northern Syria. In their declaration for solidarity, the FAU accused the German government of supporting the Turkish government by weapon delivery, of illegitimately persecuting Kurdish organizations and their symbols in Germany and by “threatening activists with deportation” (FAU 2018). Through organizing demonstrations in Berlin, Dresden, Hamburg, Magdeburg and Mannheim the FAU tried to influence the public agenda towards support for the Kurdish movement and to prevent the government from further supporting the Turkish government. The FAU argued that the Kurdish movement and the Kurdish institutions in Northern Syria would enhance the possibilities of women to emancipate from patriarchal suppression, that the new institutions could contribute to a trans-ethnic and basis democratic organization and enable the implementation of a cooperative economy (FAU 2018; FAU Flensburg 2018; FAU Mannheim 2018). Since the Kurdish project in Northern Syria seems to be convincing to the FAU, the organization called for solidarity with the people in Afrin and Rojava. Again the convincing nature of the Kurdish institution building project in Northern Syria combined with the rejection of the war led by the Turkish army are the reasons for solidarity with the Kurdish movement. Accordingly, the FAU demanded that the German government should condemn the Turkish war on Afrin, stop any weapon exports to Turkey and stop the plans of the Rheinmetall Group to modernize Turkish tanks (FAU Mannheim 2018). From the statements of the FAU, I can draw the conclusion that the solidarity with the Kurdish movement followed from two sources: the emancipatory and basis-democratic project in Northern Syria (Kurdish federalism) that needs support and on the other hand the attacks on the project by the Turkish military. Anarchists and left wing activists mobilized external solidarity for the Kurdish because of ideological congruence

with the Kurdish federalist and radical democratic project (cf. Hunt and Benford 2004: 439).

Besides the FAU, further organized anarchist groups, e.g. the Anarchist Group Krefeld, the Anarchist Group Dortmund and the federation of German speaking anarchists (German: Föderation deutschsprachiger Anarchist\*innen (FdA)), tried to support the Kurdish movement in Germany and in Afrin by mobilizing against the German involvement in the Turkish military operations in Afrin. They argued that the German government should stop weapon delivery to Turkey and they called for peace in Syria (Anarchist Group Dortmund 2018; Anarchist Group Krefeld 2018). The federation of German speaking anarchists (German: Föderation deutschsprachiger Anarchist\*innen (FdA)) reported about a spontaneous demonstration against the military operation in Afrin in the city of Kassel. On 3 February, approx. 50 people from the FdA, the Kurdish movement and other leftist groups joined a demonstration lead by the slogan "Solidarity with Rojava – Drop the prohibition of the PKK" (FdA 2018). Furthermore, the FdA and the anarchist group A & O from Kassel called and mobilized for a demonstration in Frankfurt (24th of March 2018) against the war in Afrin and for solidarity with the people in Afrin (A & O Kassel 2018).

German anarchist and left wing organizations clearly tried to practice solidarity with the Kurdish movement in Germany and criticized the German and the Turkish governments. Additionally in February and March 2018, in the German cities of Flensburg, Münster and Rostock mixed action groups consisting of Kurdish inhabitants, German citizens and left wing actors such as the Interventionistische Linke protested against the military operations in Afrin using demonstrations and civil disobedience (Interventionistische Linke 2018; Jolly 2018; Münstersche Zeitung 2018). From these public statements, it becomes clear that solidarity and trans-nationalism and anti-nationalism are still core beliefs of the leftist and anarchist movement in Germany. This central element of the socialist ideology can be traced back to the establishment of the First Workers' International in 1864. As a labor union, the International tried to support the economic and political struggles and protests of the working class in different national states against capitalism and domination.

Against this background, I interpret the current solidarity movement of the left wing and anarchist German street political actors to be a practical implementation of transnational solidarity with the ethno-political minority of the Kurdish movement. Since the Turkish governments oppressed the Kurds as a cultural and political minority ranging back to the 1920's, German leftist activists want to show their practical solidarity, thereby realizing two main ideological elements of the leftist movement: activists practice solidarity by contentious politics and the left wing movement develops inter-national, trans-national or anti-national solidarity against any national ideology. Some political actors, e.g. the Social Democratic Parties, challenged this positioning towards inter-, trans-national or anti-national solidarity against the nationalist ideology in the socialist history due to party political strategies, e.g. the German Communist Party changed its strategy in the 1930s towards a national

communist strategy due to the success of the nationalist ideology. Therefore, we can see that in the socialist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries, there was a struggle between Social Democratic parties, Communist parties and the anarchist and libertarian-communist movements about the positioning towards nationalism and anti-national solidarity. Today this conflict still seems to be relevant when we compare the policy preferences of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) with the ideological positions of more radical left wing or anarchist organizations.

#### **4.2 The anarchist perspective on the Kurdish movement**

In Germany, the anarchist network CrimethInc. has influenced the perspective of at least some streams of the anarchist movement. CrimethInc. published an historical overview and eyewitness report on the Kurdish resistance movement that is the basis for anarchist perspectives on the Kurdish movement (CrimethInc. 2018; cf. also Azadî for crimethinc 2015). In this publication and from the anarchist perspective, the Kurdish movement is a very old resistance movement that continues

the long tradition of resistance and uprisings in the Kurdish regions across the Zagros and Taurus mountain chains. It's the area that was probably first targeted for colonization by the evolving state system, whose roots lay in Lower Mesopotamia, today's northern Iraq, and which was also the predecessor of today's Western state system (CrimethInc. 2018).

The authors argue that

the PKK and the Kurdish movement today understand themselves within this long tradition of anti-governmental resistance, counting themselves as the 29th Kurdish uprising in history (Azadî for crimethinc 2015).

The authors refer to the Kurds' decentralized social organization in village confederations that had contributed to the long-standing autonomous cultural development of the Kurdish community. This ideological-historical narrative of decentralization seems to fit perfectly into the anarchist ideology, which contains the political goal of a decentralized social organization to limit the centralization of power. Here we can find the ideological congruence between the anarchist project of fighting any kind of rule, especially states and capitalism, and the Kurdish movement. From the anarchist perspective, the Kurdish movement had to struggle from the beginning of the 19th century with the establishment of the Turkish nationalism that followed the breakdown of the Ottoman-Empire. The anarchist historical narrative contains that Abdullah Öcalan, Kemal Pir, Haki Karer and others combined the Kurdish movement, as a very old cultural community, in the 1970s with a revolutionary socialist

perspective, which followed the 1968 youth rebellion in Turkey. They had organized the movement in accordance with classical Marxist-Leninist theory. The PKK in following years organized a political vanguard to start a revolution to free the Kurdish territories and establish socialism. This revolutionary perspective led to the military conflict with the Turkish state and caused the mass emigration to Western Europe.

What contributes furthermore to the attractiveness of the Kurdish movement from an anarchist perspective is the role that the women played in the aftermath of the civil war with the Turkish state. Women's committees on social and political issues seem to have increased the political influence of women in the Kurdish movement and thereby reducing the patriarchal structures in this region. Additionally the Kurdish youth increased its influence on the movements' strategy and the organizational power of youth. For the anarchists it seems that the youth and women seem overcome the entrenched legacies of hierarchy in the Kurdish society. Institutionally, the federal structures of assemblies and civil organizations in the Kurdish concept of democratic federalism seems to resolve common problems of hierarchy and to contribute to the self-organization of the whole population through bottom-up democratic processes. From the anarchist perspective, the ideological move in the Kurdish strategy towards these elements and the concept of democratic federalism, taken from the intellectual work of the libertarian thinker Murray Bookchin, has increased the normative acceptance of the Kurdish movement and the need for anarchists to engage in solidarity with this movement. The Kurdish movement seems to provide arguments for the anarchist movement that a social revolution in line with anarchist principles and containing decentralized and rather non-hierarchical structures and institutions is possible in a large region of the world. Thereby, the Kurdish movement sets an example for other world regions to reorganize society according to anarchist principles.

## **5. Conclusion**

From the perspective of the Kurdish movement, the German government's support for the Turkish military operations violates the political rights of the Kurdish movement in Syria. The Kurdish movement actors argue that the German government supports the Turkish government by repressing the political opportunities for an independent organization and development of the Kurdish movement in Germany. German left wing and anarchist organizations supported the Kurdish movement in its critique of the war in Afrin by organizing assemblies and demonstrations. The central reason for solidarity and support was that the Kurdish movement seems to build a self-governing federation in Northern Syria, which is congruent at the policy goal level with the ideology of German leftist and anarchist actors. The central form of support of Linksjugend [solid], FAU and other anarchist groups was the organization of demonstrations or manifestations in which they expressed their solidarity with the Kurdish movement and their critique of the German and Turkish governments. Furthermore, Linksjugend [solid], FAU and other anarchist

groups published solidarity statements in which they criticized the role of the German government in oppressing the Kurdish movement due to the export of weapons for the Turkish army. This involvement in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict follows from the centrality of the solidarity ideogeme within the left wing and anarchist movements.

Solidarity is still a core belief of the leftist and anarchist movements. We therefore need further research on the importance and effects of the concept of solidarity in contemporary working class movements. We can see, that radical left wing and anarchist actors argue for an international respectively anti-national perspective. This perspective, going beyond the borders of nation states, separates these organizations from other political movements. The article shows that radical left and anarchist organizations differ from the institutionalized left-wing actors, such as the social-democratic party, due to their solidarity politics towards the Kurdish movement. At this point, a further investigation on the question whether the leftist and anarchist support for the Kurdish movement's self-government project follows from its own historiographic narrative of being victim to state violence should be done. According to this historiographic narrative, states always smashed radical, anarchist and emancipatory projects, e.g. the Spanish revolution 1936 onwards, the Machno movement between 1917 and 1921 in Ukraine and the Munich soviet revolution in 1919, and by that, they destroyed the imaginative power of alternative modes of organization. From this perspective of the radical anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian movements, the Kurdish democratic federalism with its council structure is as appealing as the movement of the Zapatistas in Chiapas and the commune of Oaxaca (2006) in Mexico. From the anarchist and left wing perspective, the observation that states put pressure on emancipatory projects by using military violence is a central cause for mobilizing external solidarity with these projects.

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