Review Article

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Organizing Antifascism: The Obscure History of the VVN

Elke Reuter and Detlef Hansel, *Das kurze Leben der VVN von 1947 bis 1953. Die Geschichte der Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone und in der DDR*, Berlin, edition ost, 1997; ISBN 3–929161–97–4; 634 pp.
Ulrich Schneider, *Zukunftsentwurf Antifaschismus. 50 Jahre Wirken der VVN für 'eine neue Welt des Friedens und der Freiheit'*, Bonn, Pahl-Rugenstein, 1997; ISBN 3–89144–237–8; 243 pp.

If any group had a firm moral claim to the leadership of postwar Germany then it was those who had resisted it at the risk of their own lives and had suffered at the hands of the Nazi regime. Ultimately the internal resistance movements failed to topple Hitler, yet there were many who had supported them, some from as early as 1933, and swore to carry their 'antifascist' legacy into the postwar era. Their fervent hope of occupying a central place in the new order manifested itself in 1947 in the founding of an organization which sought both to protect their interests and to elevate antifascism to the central ideological component of a resurrected Germany. That organization was the *Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes* (Union of the Nazi Regime's Persecuted, hereafter VVN), which commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of its existence with the publication of two histories, one dealing with the VVN in the Soviet Zone of Occupation and then the GDR, the other with the VVN in the Western Zones of Occupation and then in the Federal Republic.

The appearance of these two separate and unrelated histories fills a yawning gap in the knowledge of an organization which, for all its admirable ideals and grand intentions, drifted remarkably quickly into political obscurity.[1] Its particular fate offers some quite pro-

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found insights into the domestic and international circumstances which conditioned the German failure to create a postwar order which might draw from the deep and genuine antifascism of a passionately committed section of the population.

While both histories of the VVN reviewed here were occasioned by the fiftieth anniversary of the VVN in East and West, they could hardly be more different. The first, by Elke Reuter and Detlef Hansel, was commissioned by one of the VVN's successor organizations, the *Interessenverband ehemaliger Teilnehmer am antifaschistischen Widerstand, Verfolgter des Naziregimes und Hinterbliebener* (Syndicate of Former Participants in Antifascist Resistance, the Persecuted of the Nazi Regime and Surviving Relatives). Nonetheless it is characterized by a carefully researched and deeply critical analysis of the VVN in the East. The GDR-educated authors' capacity for critical analysis may well have been heightened by the early dissolution of the VVN in the GDR — as early as 1953 — but also by the more recent collapse of the GDR itself. On a practical level this has something to do with the possibility of unimpeded access to relevant sources, including witnesses to and participants in the events described. But it also stems from a need to account for failure, not just of the VVN but also of the GDR, which had gone to such lengths to claim the antifascist legacy for itself.

In the West, in contrast, both the VVN and the state which tolerated its existence remain intact, albeit after fifty years of development and sometimes radical change. The organization's history, written from within its own ranks, assumes the qualities of celebration and self-congratulation; inner tensions and upheavals are hinted at but never fleshed out. Understandably, then, the history conveys little sense that the organization was condemned to a peripheral role in a state which, even in its rhetorical gestures, found only a limited place for antifascism and those who propagated it.

Organizing Antifascism: From OdF to VVN

In the immediate aftermath of the war the first concern of those who had suffered under the Third Reich for political, racial, sexual or religious reasons was to survive the privations under which they continued to suffer. Many of them had lost all their property through confiscation or through the course of the war; often there existed no immediate prospects of securing their livelihood in the postwar chaos. The physical or mental health of many, especially those who had endured lengthy incarceration in prisons, concentration camps or even death camps, was irreparably damaged. To meet these

immediate needs committees were formed spontaneously across Germany as the result of local initiatives. Those found to be suffering privation as a result of mistreatment by the Nazi regime were regarded as victims of fascism, *Opfer des Faschismus* or simply OdF, and offered material assistance according to the capacity of their town, city or community to provide it.

These essentially provisional measures were gradually formalized over time. In the Soviet zone of occupation the authorities insisted that the provision of services be regulated by an office within the local administration, a process which had been completed as early as October of 1945 (Reuter and Hansel, 78). In this way long-term care could be provided through a system of public funding. With the formalization of the process of allocating scarce resources came gradually the demand that the recognition of the status of the OdF be formalized also, since otherwise the risk arose that resources would be wasted on the undeserving. This entailed in practice the completion of a form which requested, among other things, information about the place and length of incarceration by the Nazis, the reasons for it, the loss of property, etc. Claim forms, supported by relevant documentation, would then be assessed by local committees, and the status of OdF either conferred or withheld.

The vast majority of those who gained recognition as OdF in the Soviet zone and in Berlin in the first months after the war were, predictably, political prisoners who had been released from nearby prisons and camps such as Sachsenhausen. Many of them were members of the KPD or of working-class organizations and unions; few were from conservative or bourgeois circles. Officially the dominance of representatives of the left was attributed to the need to allocate limited resources to those with the clearest claims, and that meant above all those who had been subjected to persecution and incarceration from as early as 1933. Unofficially, however, the authors contend that among the KPD members in particular a form of elitism was developing which placed a higher moral value on active resistance as opposed to passive persecution and suffering. In a July 1945 edition of the *Deutsche Volkszeitung* this emerging discrimination was put in the following terms:

> Millions of people are victims of fascism, including all those who have lost their homes, their apartments, their possessions. Victims of fascism are the men who had to become soldiers and were drafted into Hitler's batallions, and all those who had to give their lives for Hitler's criminal war. Victims of fascism are the Jews who were persecuted and murdered as victims of racial lunacy (*Rassenwahn*), the Jehovah's Witnesses and the 'work-shy'. But we cannot interpret the term 'Victims of Fascism' so broadly. All of them persevered and suffered greatly, but they did not fight. (80–1)

This blatant discrimination between 'fighters' and 'non-fighters' had its opponents, but in the end was preserved in the form of an appropriate stamp on OdF identity cards. (85)

That the VVN, as the organization which represented the political interests of the OdF, did not come into existence in the Soviet zone until February of 1947, is illustrative of the complexities of postwar politics rather than of a lack of political will. Understandably German communists, many of whom were recognized OdF, had little interest in blocking the formation of the VVN, especially after OdF support for the creation of the SED had given a clear indication of political tractability. A more imposing potential stumbling block was the Soviet Military Administration (SMAD), which was wary of political developments outside its direct control. When the SMAD's reservations were overcome a foundation congress for the VVN in the Soviet zone was able to take place in Berlin on 22 and 23 February 1947. On that occasion delegates from all over the zone, and in the presence of representatives of the SMAD, affirmed their commitment to an organization which would stand above party politics and act as a kind of conscience of the nation. As one of the delegates, Karl Raddatz, put it, 'Our organization must be a supra-political and non-confessional one, because otherwise it would lose all purpose.' (127) A committee was elected which reflected the firm early influence of the Communists but also represented a wide range of the membership — of its 40 members 23 came from the SED, two from the CDU, two from the LDP and two were independents. In addition the committee gained three representatives of the Church resistance movement, five who were racially persecuted and one who was involved in the plot of 20 July 1944. (133) Missing, however, were Jehovah's Witnesses, deserters, conscientious objectors and Roma and Sinti.

The establishment of a zone-wide VVN was an achievement in the Soviet zone which was never emulated in the Western zones of occupation, since the American, British and French authorities consistently rejected the proposal. In some parts of the Western zones the OdF committees operated with relative independence, albeit only at a local level; elsewhere they were incorporated into existing administrative networks. In Bavaria, for example, the Americans attached the committees to the Bavarian Red Cross and forbade any form of political activity. By and large though the OdF committees in the West carried out the same kinds of activities as in the East — overcoming privation as a first priority, but also investigating the actual extent of Nazi crimes, pointing to the achievements of resistance fighters, and warning against the re-emergence of fascism.

With the possibility of zone-wide OdF committees in the West

quashed, efforts were invested in a national, all-zone variant. In July 1946 an initial meeting of OdF representatives from all over Germany was held in Frankfurt am Main. In March of the following year, and no doubt buoyed by the establishment of a zonal VVN in the Soviet zone in the previous month, delegates from East and West met again in Frankfurt to take the next step toward a national VVN. To achieve this aim would be quite unique — there was at this time no unified body operating as a political entity across all the zones. Success could even be taken to herald the re-establishment of a unified Germany, the avowed aim of the OdF committees and of the VVN in the Soviet zone. The outcome, however, fell short of the universally high expectations. There emerged from the Frankfurt conference an interzonal advisory council and an interzonal secretariat, whose function it was to coordinate the activities of the VVN in the Soviet zone and the many state branches of the VVN in the West, where amalgamations at a zonal level were still forbidden. Although in name an all-German VVN came into existence, in practice it functioned according to a federal structure with only loose coordinating powers rather than as a genuinely national organization. Moreover its claim to represent the voice and conscience of the German people and to play a key role in the international negotiations to establish a new and unified Germany was largely ignored. The attitude of the Allies toward it was at best ambivalent. On the one hand they acknowledged the victims of Nazism as the representatives of the 'other Germany'; at the same time their voices were regarded as those of a vanquished population with little right to determine its own future. This attitude was registered with some bitterness by the members of the VVN, especially in the Western zones, who saw their claims to genuine partnership treated with disdain. But with the Cold War entering a dangerous phase in 1948 all of the Allies had other fish to fry.

The Work of the VVN

The full range of work of the VVN can be sketched only briefly here. Initially it was very similar in East and West and was essentially a continuation of the activities of the OdF. Beyond the coordination of welfare services this meant also the setting up of memorials and the organization of commemorative events, investigating the criminal activities of former Nazis, especially those who faced legal proceedings or had somehow managed to conceal their ugly pasts and pursued their careers unmolested. To this end the VVN established a tracing service, which used its official organ *Unser Appell* (later *Die*

Tat, different publications bore the same names in East and West) to inquire into the whereabouts of wanted figures. At the same time the VVN also carried out intensive research into the activities of resistance fighters, so that the full range of resistance activities carried out by Germans would become more broadly known. The results of these investigations were made known in works published in the VVN's own publishing company and in exhibitions organized by the VVN.

After the dissolution of the VVN in the East in 1953, the western versions of the VVN continued their work under quite different circumstances and with a constantly changing focus through to the present. Having failed in its key goal of providing a kind of vanguard for the re-establishment of a united Germany, it directed its activities to a broad range of causes. In the 1950s this meant virulent opposition to the remilitarization of West Germany and to the Adenauer government's consistent military, political and economic integration of the Federal Republic into the West. It meant also continued opposition to a perceived renazification of West German society. At the same time the VVN agitated in favour of appropriate compensation for the victims of Nazism; indeed Schneider claims for the VVN significant influence in this regard. (Schneider, 30) Through later decades the VVN maintained its commitment to the peace movement, but also broadened its focus to such issues as recrudescent Nazism, the environment, the stationing of atomic weaponry, *Berufsverbot*, contemporary racism, asylum policies and even the *Historikerstreit*.

The VVN and the Jews

The topic of how the GDR dealt with its Jews has engendered renewed interest since the GDR collapsed.[2] Hansel and Reuter's book makes an important contribution to an understanding of the East German–Jewish relationship.

That this relationship was to become at the very least a problematic one was foreshadowed in the above-mentioned debates concerning OdF recognition. If some had had their way, the so-called 'non-fighters' would have been accorded no recognition at all, which would immediately have excluded the vast majority of the racially persecuted. The rejection of that argument, followed by the success of prominent Jews such as Heinz Galinski and Jeanette Wolf in gaining key offices in the VVN, promised a more fruitful relationship. It is clear also that many members of the Jewish community held high expectations of the VVN as a means of gaining a wider

acknowledgment of their loss and suffering and bringing about a just compensation. Indeed, as early as November 1947 the VVN had staged commemorations of the November pogrom, and it was the first German organization to recognize the creation of the state of Israel. Reuter and Hansel are able to document the repeated expressions of confidence in the VVN from within the Jewish community, despite the onset of Cold War tensions and despite the re-emergence of a blatant antisemitism.

Although there is no clear turning point in East German–Jewish relations, it became apparent well before the demise of the VVN in the GDR that Jewish confidence was misplaced. The single issue which did most to damage the relationship was that of compensation.[3] As the self-proclaimed proponent of the interests of the victims of Nazism, compensation was a key pillar in the work of the VVN; the question of the size and extent of entitlements dominated countless discussions within the organization. For many Jewish members it was a crucial issue, because the loss or theft of Jewish property in Nazi Germany was greater than that suffered by any other group. On the one hand was the view that there existed an obligation to make good the wrongs perpetrated by the Nazi regime, but on the other was the desire to create a society along communist lines, and that meant without private ownership of the means of production. The outcome of discussions within both the VVN and the SED was at no point a rejection in principle of the right to compensation. But at the same time there was resistance to the adoption of an all-encompassing regulation which could have the effect of resurrecting capitalism. Instead, the favoured approach was to acknowledge the right of the racially persecuted to a form of compensation, but one which would stop short of restoring wealth on a large scale. This led to not entirely unjustified fears that the stated aim of creating a communist society would be used as a pretext to deny many Jews the restoration of their property. The man who argued most tenaciously for the restitution of formerly Jewish property was himself a non-Jew, Paul Merker. His suggestions were already in the form of a compromise, since he expressly excluded the return of wealth to representatives of 'Jewish big business' (Reuter and Hansel, 427), but he did insist on the return of the property of Jewish communities and of private individuals insofar as this had not already passed into the possession of the state.

Never far from the surface of the debate was a latent antisemitism which occasionally manifested itself in the form of traditional antisemitic stereotypes. Arguments against generous levels of restitution were often accompanied by warnings of the dangers to the new order posed by 'Jewish capitalists'. A draft compensation law from mid-

1948 did not satisfy Jewish members of the VVN, not least because it failed to extend the right to compensation to those Jews still living outside the Soviet zone. Despite protests the final form of the legislation, passed just days before the foundation of the GDR and later than similar legislation in the West, gave the Jews no joy. It offered uniform compensation to all the recognized victims of fascism, including the racially persecuted. But the return of Jewish property, it was argued, would only serve the restoration of capitalism; of greater benefit to all the citizens was the destruction of the very roots of the fascism which had caused so much suffering to Jews and others in the first place. Over decades this was the kind of official argument that was applied whenever the question of the restitution of Jewish property was raised.

That the relationship between the East German state and its Jews was to sour even further through the early 1950s cannot be attributed to the VVN. The causes were overwhelmingly external, and of particular importance was the virulent antisemitism generated by the Slansky trials in Czechoslovakia in November 1952, where eleven of the fourteen defendants were Jewish, followed the next year by the public allegations in the Soviet Union that Jewish doctors had conspired to murder Stalin. It was only a matter of time before this wave of antisemitism reached the GDR also. When it did, it manifested itself in the form of widespread allegations of 'zionism', 'cosmopolitanism' and spying. Even as early as 1953 campaigns to 'cleanse' the SED of unwanted elements were not unknown — an earlier wave of cleansing in 1949/50 had targeted people who had spent their exiled years in the West and were exposed to allegations of spying. But the severity and open antisemitism of the steps taken by the SED's leadership in late 1952 and early 1953 were considered shocking.

Not surprisingly under these circumstances large numbers of Jews opted to leave the GDR for the West. According to Reuter and Hansel the state of the archives suggests that this was the authorities' preferred option, since it brought about the required 'cleansing' and at the same time provided a defence against charges of antisemitism. For the VVN the situation was much less welcome, since among those departing the country were many of its own members. The bitter irony in the reports received in the VVN that many Jews were beginning to panic and to fear the recurrence of pogroms was not entirely lost on its membership.

The End of the VVN

For the relatively few who knew or remembered the VVN, the question why it was dissolved in the GDR entirely without warning in February 1953 has never been answered satisfactorily. Reuter and Hansel go some way toward tackling this conundrum, not least by asking a completely different question, namely, why did the VVN last as long as it did? They are able to reveal that as early as 1951 the SED's ruling elite was contemplating the dissolution of the organization. An unpublished investigation of the VVN carried out within the SED reached the conclusion that the VVN at that time was 'politically weak' and, more tellingly, contained some members who were regarded as enemies of the party. With expressions like 'sectarianism', 'arrogance' and 'hostility to the party' (454), the report sealed the fate of the VVN, at least in the medium term.

That this damning report did not have immediate consequences was probably due to the VVN's capacity at that time to reflect some glory onto the newly-formed state. It had gained international recognition as the representative of the interests of Nazism's victims, it was committed in principle to the creation of a united Germany, and it was playing a role in arguments against the remilitarization of the West. Furthermore, precisely at a time when the VVN in the West was encountering a good level of hostility, it may have seemed opportune in the East to accord it some respect.

If these sorts of considerations were at play in 1951, they were no longer present, or at least no longer decisive, in 1953. As the VVN members busily prepared for their already postponed Fourth General Conference, not even its highest officials suspected what was about to occur. Throughout the previous year government and party had consistently praised the contribution of the VVN; the fifth anniversary of its foundation was publicly acknowledged. But then on 3 February 1953 the Politburo resolved that the conference would not take place after all. Instead, the Central Committee of the VVN would decree that all activities of the organization would cease by the end of the month. The decision was conveyed to the members of the VVN's central committee and to the secretaries of the regional committees on 21 February and then enforced in such a way that there was no possibility for discussion among the broader membership, neither at the planned conference nor even at local level. Indeed, in some instances considerable effort was taken to prevent any form of discussion — police or state security officers woke the officials of local VVN branches in the middle of the night, informed them of the dissolution of their organization and then confiscated files and membership details (507). In the place of the VVN was

formed a committee consisting exclusively of 'outstanding and well-known fighters against fascism'. (491) With the formation of what was soon to be known as the *Komitee der Antifaschistichen Widerstandskämpfer* (Committee of Antifascist Resistance Fighters, KdAW) the already anticipated foregrounding of the achievements of fighters over other victims was complete. The responsibilities of the new committee, defined quite precisely, lay primarily in the areas of education, commemoration and international cooperation. Other activities formerly performed by the VVN were shared out among a host of institutions and organizations.

Police strongarm tactics aside, the SED had taken the way of, in effect, praising the VVN out of existence. The official line of justification offered the many bemused members was that the roots of fascism had now been destroyed; a re-emergence was out of the question. The VVN had played a key role in this process, but, now that its work was completed, it could be disbanded. Without doubt many of its members accepted this intepretation of the VVN's sudden demise. But for others the response was disappointment, anger or incredulity.

Even the thoroughness of Reuter and Hansel's research does not offer incontrovertible answers to the questions surrounding the VVN's dissolution, but their speculations are persuasive. The ruling elite's official view that the VVN had in effect rendered itself ripe for 'self-dissolution' was useful propaganda, and yet it probably also contained a grain of truth. Political developments since the founding of the GDR were such that the VVN had indeed become largely superfluous. Despite the continuing rhetoric of non-partisanship, it had long since fallen into the grip of the SED and acted consistently as a voice and instrument of SED policy. Whether the social roots of fascism had indeed been smashed is a moot point, but it is clear that in the GDR 'antifascism' had been adopted wholeheartedly as the state ideology. Under these circumstances the need for a separate entity devoted to proclaiming the virtues of antifascism genuinely did stretch the limits of credibility.

Most of the reasons for the dissolution, however, were never publicly articulated. The scathing report from early 1951, which suggested that the organization contained some intractable elements, has already been mentioned. A considerable proportion of those elements, especially at lower levels of the organization, may well have been victims of Nazism who held deep reservations concerning the role of the National Front, which after denazification sought to reintegrate former Nazis into East German society. For many of their victims the willingness to forgive the sins of the recent past was understandably limited; the aims of the National Front were by their

very nature deeply suspect. The dissolution of the VVN deprived the victims of fascism of an opportunity to express their concerns about the reintegration of former Nazis into their own avowedly antifascist society.

Beyond fears in the SED that the VVN provided a home for these and perhaps other kinds of 'sectarian' political interests, it seems that political differences within the SED itself could have been part of the cause of the VVN's demise. The most influential group within the party — but by no means unchallenged in that position — were those around Walter Ulbricht, who had returned to Germany after spending their exile in Moscow. For this reason they were committed and highly disciplined Stalinists, eager to stress the role of the victorious Soviet army in the liberation of Germany, and sceptical of those in the Party who had spent the Hitler era in German camps or prisons or who, even worse, had gone into exile in the West. The dissolution of the VVN, in which the 'non-Muscovites' were well represented, can be seen as part of the process by which the Moscow clique gained tight control of the party.

The blatant antisemitism of 1952 and early 1953 described above is also a likely factor in the demise of the VVN. Its credibility as a body representing the interests of all victims was compromised by the wave of antisemitism, not just because so many Jewish members of the VVN emigrated, but also because the antisemitism had assumed public, official dimensions. Many of those who in effect had been forced to leave the country were cast as traitors and branded as 'zionists' or 'imperialist agents'. Perhaps over-generously Reuter and Hansel prefer to label this antisemitism tactical rather than racially motivated, because it was allegedly a means to a political end, namely to deny opponents the political platform of the VVN.

In the West the VVN did not disappear, but neither was it the image of good health. The dissolution of the East German branch was a serious blow to the VVN in the West, and problems closer to home came to threaten its very existence. The SPD refused membership to members of the VVN, a policy that was imitated a few years later by the CDU. In both instances the exclusions were prompted by the fear that the VVN was little more than the mouthpiece of the Soviet Union and the Communists. Similar reservations persuaded prominent antifascists like Eugon Kogon to resign their membership. An alternative organization was founded in early 1950, the *Bund der Verfolgten des Naziregimes* (League of Nazi Persecuted, or BVN), which enticed some VVN members to move sideways and appealed for a VVN ban. Indeed the Federal government succeeded in banning the all-German Council of the VVN in 1951, and various

state governments similarly managed to impose a ban on the relevant state branches of the VVN during the 1950s.

In the longer term, however, a greater threat to the organization lay not with political rivalry but with apathy, especially in the course of the economic miracle. The legacy of antifascism seemed increasingly irrelevant to broad sections of German society, and when an interest in the sins of the fathers was finally awakened in the late 1960s, the ideological impulse that drove it had little in common with the VVN's Cold War dogmatism. Amalgamation with the *Bund der Antifaschisten* (League of Antifascists) in 1971 symbolized a generational change, but it was also an attempt to reverse the process of decline. Even Schneider's otherwise eulogistic account hints at fundamental differences of opinion within the organization as it battled atrophy.

The greatest crisis of all, however, was yet to come. The fall of the Berlin Wall was by itself a blow to an organization which was so passionately devoted to constructing socialism. But it was also accompanied by the news, already suspected by some, that the VVN in the West had been heavily financed by GDR authorities, who, in turn, had exerted enormous influence on the make-up and direction of the organization. The disenchanted left in large numbers; the rest remained and began the painful adjustment to a world of triumphant capitalism.

The Failure of 'Antifascism'?

It would be inappropriate to speak of the total failure of the VVN in East and West. In the East even some of its members were quite sympathetic to the official line that, in essence, the primary tasks of the organization had been completed by 1953. In the West the VVN survived and continued to play a role in a range of activities. Countless protest marches in the Federal Republic were headed by VVN members, typically wearing concentration camp uniforms with the red triangle, the ubiquitous badge of courage worn by the former political prisoners of the Nazis.

But the fact remains that in the East the VVN, even before its dissolution, had become a servant of the SED. True, in the new state 'antifascism', the passionately promoted legacy of the many victims of Nazism, was elevated to the status of the official state ideology. But by the time the state was founded the good intentions of its antifascists had been corrupted, and in the West, an initial 'antifascist' consensus similarly broke apart under the strains of the emerging bipolar world order. In both East and West, the hopes or

even expectations among the members of the VVN that they would provide the moral building blocks from which a new, united Germany would be constructed came to nothing.

These histories of the VVN in East and West seek the reasons for failure in similar places. Both books concede crucial tactical errors. Reuter and Hansel contend that the VVN should have done more to protect its claim to stand above partisan politics, a claim it had abandoned by allowing itself to be impressed into the service of the SED. In this way the rare opportunity to act as an independent but influential pan-German entity was discarded, never to present itself again. Although otherwise inclined toward the panegyric, Schneider's history of the VVN in the West also concedes that errors were made which damaged the organization. But both histories balance these errors committed within the VVN against the broader, international political climate of the Cold War, and both conclude that this broader climate was in large part responsible for the breaking of an initial postwar antifascist consensus. Both agree that this broader political climate fatefully restricted the political room for manoeuvre in postwar and placed the VVN's essentially noble goals out of reach. This argument is quite compelling — the Cold War unquestionably did create a difficult, if not impossible, environment for the VVN. The history of the organization and of its failure to establish a workable antifascist consensus is in many ways a kind of case study of what was happening internationally and on a much bigger scale, namely the collapse of an alliance which had come together to defeat Hitler, only to discover that the successful completion of its mission had deprived it of its very *raison d'être*.

Neither history explores or even raises the more uncomfortable possibility that the VVN's failure was pre-programmed regardless of the Cold War. For all its ideological breadth and its numerous martyrs, German antifascism under Hitler can best be summarized as a dismal failure. The vast majority of Germans gave the regime their tacit or even there vocal support; attempts to bring down the regime were weak, uncoordinated or too late to have averted the bulk of Nazism's crimes. Ultimately the collapse of Germany and the creation of, as it happened, two new orders was imposed from outside, without the express consent of Germans, even if many soon reconciled themselves to whichever version of democracy fate had dealt them. With this in mind, was it really any more likely that the postwar 'antifascism' embodied by the VVN would cope any better than its Third Reich antecedents? Did the VVN's claim to moral leadership ever stand a chance of determining the new order, with or without the Cold War? Rhetoric aside, the reality was that in both West and East the bulk of the population had willingly supported or

at least tolerated Hitler; antifascism was the rare exception rather than the rule. Any new political order which sought to establish its legitimacy on antifascism alone was destined for trouble, since it would be restricting its social base to a narrow moral elite.

Of course the ideology of antifascism was never openly rejected, but in practice broader bases of legitimacy were sought in both East and West. In the latter the integrative power of 'anti-totalitarianism' was soon recognized and instrumentalized, an ideology which subsumed antifascism and relegated it to a distant second place behind anti-communism, whose integrative power in German society had already been well proved by none other than Hitler. In the East, as Reuter and Hansel have so carefully shown, the concept of antifascism was installed as the official ideology, but in the process was distorted almost beyond recognition. On the one hand it was narrowed in such a way as to alienate much of the relatively small section of society which would have supported it, and at the same time it was dehistoricized by directing its venom to an allegedly fascist West. Though the strength of its claims to moral leadership were never denied in the East or the West, the weakness of its social base had doomed the VVN to the political margins even before the Cold War sealed its fate.

Notes

1. Historical narratives of postwar German and even East German history conventionally overlook the existence of the organization. Even reference works are loathe to include it, or tend at best to mention it in passing as a forerunner to the *Komitee der Antifaschistischen Widerstandskämpfer* (Committee of Antifascist Resistance Fighters, or KdAW). Rare and therefore notable exceptions are a twelve-page summary of the work of the VVN by Jan Foitzik in Martin Broszat and Hermann Weber, eds, *SBZ-Handbuch. Staatliche Verwaltungen, Parteien, gesellschaftliche Organisationen und ihre Führungskräfte in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands 1945–1949* (Munich 1990) 748–59, and Andreas Herbst, Winfried Ranke, Jürgen Winkler, eds, *So funktionierte die DDR. Band 2. Lexikon der Organisationen und Institutionen* (Reinbek 1994) 1125–31.

2. See especially Angelika Timm, *Hammer, Zirkel, Davidstern. Das belastete Verhältnis der DDR zu Zionismus und Staat Israel* (Bonn 1997), and Jutta Illichmann, *Die DDR und die Juden: die deutschlandpolitische Instrumentalisierung von Juden und Judentum durch die Partei- und Staatsführung der SBZ/DDR von 1945–1990* (Frankfurt a.M. 1997) and Mario Kessler, 'Zwischen Repression und Toleranz. Die SED-Politik und die Judgen (1949 bis 1967)', in Jürgen Kocka ed., *Historische DDR-Forschung. Aufsätze und Studien*. (Berlin 1993), 149–67.

3. For a more detailed discussion of the thorny issue of compensation for Jewish victims in the SBZ and then the GDR see Olaf Groehler, 'Integration und Ausgrenzung von NS-Opfern. Zur Anerkennungs- und Entschädigungsdebatte in

der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands 1945 bis 1949', in Kocka, op. cit., 105–28; Constantin Goschler, 'Paternalismus und Verweigerung: die DDR und die Wiedergutmachung für jüdische Verfolgte des Nationalsozialismus', *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung*, Vol. 2 (1997), 93–117.

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