

Smash the Fascists From Below!

Peoples' Histories of Anti-Racism

Liam Kliment

2024

a review of

It Did Happen Here: An Antifascist People's History, Editors: Moe Bowstern, Mic Crenshaw, Alec Dunn, Celina Flores, Julie Perini, and Erin Yanke. PM Press, 2023

We Go Where They Go: The Story of Anti-Racist Action by Shannon Clay, Kristin Schwartz and Michael Staudenmaier. PM Press, 2023

When the *It Did Happen Here* podcast started gracing our airwaves, or rather our streaming services, in Spring 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic was still requiring stay-at-home practice and the fires of the George Floyd uprising were still smoldering.

It was a strange period, where most of the U.S. economy had frozen and masses of people took their streets and neighborhoods back from police control, albeit temporarily. It was perfect timing for retrospection and questioning through the medium of history from the bottom up.

In 2014, historian and activist Staughton Lynd proposed three perspectives regarding history from below that radical thinkers would be wise to implement in the struggle against the hegemonic production of knowledge and class ideology.

One, that history from below should challenge mainstream versions of the past. Two, that the United States was founded on crimes against humanity. And three, that those who make history should be regarded not only as sources of facts, but experts in interpreting what happened.

It Did Happen Here and *We Go Where They Go* implement this perspective of anti-racist, anti-fascist activity in their history from below, expertly told through extensive interviews and consulting of personal archives of former members of Anti-Racist Action (ARA), Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice, Coalition For Human Dignity, the Minneapolis Baldies, plus several other anti-racist organizations active throughout the U.S. and Canada in the 1980s and 1990s.

Anti-Racist Action was founded in the late 1980s as a formalized confederation, although a decentralized network in practice, of several anti-racist skinhead crews that had been active across the country. The initial ARA network was made up of chapters in Minneapolis, Chicago, Portland, Los Angeles, and Toronto. While not explicitly an anarchist organization, many ARA members identified as anarchists, and their organizational methods anchored in decentralized action linked by clear points of unity offer a toolbox for anarchists today.

While remaining books about the past, these contributions to the recent history of anti-racist struggle remind us that the present is not at all exceptional. Since the 1980s, mainstream media in the United States have sensationalized grassroots anti-racist organizing as a matter of two sides being equally violent and both deserving of criminal persecution.

Rather than wilt in light of the realization that the violence of the contemporary signifies the continuum of the past, anti-fascist and anti-racist organizers can and should relish the plentitude of lessons available to us in these toolboxes-as-books. Several of the interviewees in both books remark how modern day antifa is a continuation of

the coalitions and street crews fighting neo-Nazis in the 1980s and 1990s. One stark difference is the contemporary's magnified capacity and media outreach. One clear parallel that continues is the mainstream sensationalizing of street violence.

This valued perspective from an experienced gaze reminds me of a workshop I attended in Seattle about grand juries in 2012, when anarchists were the target of a federal investigation into property damage at a May Day rally. Former George Jackson Brigade member Mark Cooke remarked, "I've got respect for you anarchists out there. We never could have gotten away with the crazy shit you've pulled off, and now the federal government is after you for it. I respect all y'all for that." Somewhat comforting, somewhat terrifying.

The days of rival skinhead crews battling on opposing sides of the political spectrum may feel long ago in a land far away, but the parallel similarities abound in these two books. Both contain stories about groups of friends who decided to stand up to the bullies in town and were empowered by language and political ideologies that described what they knew so well: anti-authoritarian direct action.

China, a black skinhead member of Portland ARA, states the ethos of anti-racist successful, militant anti-racist organizing clearly; "It wasn't some highly organized process. It was a group of us that already knew each other and that were already together." Those who have been on the streets recently fighting the presence of fascists, Western chauvinists, and other far-right manifestations understand that a deep affinity for one another is what brings us together in the face of brutal violence. Anti-racists in the streets are not the highly organized cadre, funded by a leftist philanthropist that the media makes us out to be.

The Coalition for Human Dignity (CHD) was formed in Portland in the early 1990s to conduct research on hate groups throughout the Pacific Northwest. It operated on the simple principle that whoever dominated the cultural landscape, dominated a very important tool in defining ideology.

CHD prefigured much of the work of contemporary antifa groups in the United States with the understanding that the only thing that would work in pushing out white nationalism was a diversity of tactics. They took up the much-needed task of showing support for those facing off against Nazis throughout Portland's cultural spaces, as well as providing meeting venues, printing resources, and much needed research to formalized groups of anti-racists.

ARA also knew that the cultural terrain constituted a political arena, and they operated as such, flyering punk shows and regularly posting ads in alternative magazines like *Maximum Rock'n'Roll*. ARA tabled at shows for bands like The Mighty Mighty Bosstones and Rage Against the Machine, an accomplishment that feels fabled given the reluctance of major contemporary artists to align themselves politically.

The striking aspect of this simple act is that it was either at the request of the bands, or through ARA members reaching out to them personally, signifying a mutual relationship of shared politics between militant anti-fascists and cultural producers like musicians. Providing radical anarchist and anti-fascist literature at music venues imbues the cultural space with political initiatives while also creating a chance for attendees to act on their convictions through getting in touch with a local ARA network.

While *We Go Where They Go* charts a history of Anti-Racist Action, and how a confederated group of anti-racists across North America organized to fight racists like the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis, *It Did Happen Here* serves as a magnifying glass into one city's role in this wave of grassroots anti-fascist organizing. The two play off each other remarkably well, both employing extensive use of interviews with participants and allowing interviewees space to interpret the events as the popular historians they are.

As radical history books, they serve as invaluable gifts to our many futures, blueprints for how to craft our own narratives and histories to come.

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