

Who are Antifa?



Edu Bayer for the New York Times

Antifa: Definition and History:

The anti-fascist protest movement known as antifa gained new prominence in the United States after the white supremacist Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA, in August 2017. In Charlottesville and at many subsequent events held by white supremacists or right-wing extremists, antifa activists have aggressively confronted what they believe to be authoritarian movements and groups. While most counter-protestors tend to be peaceful, there have been several instances where encounters between antifa and the far-right have turned violent.

These violent counter-protesters are often part of “antifa” (short for “antifascist”), a loose collection of groups, networks and individuals who believe in active,

aggressive opposition to far right-wing movements. Their ideology is rooted in the assumption that the Nazi party would never have been able to come to power in Germany if people had more aggressively fought them in the streets in the 1920s and 30s. Most antifa come from the anarchist movement or from the far left, though since the 2016 presidential election, some people with more mainstream political backgrounds have also joined their ranks.

These antifa sometimes use a logo with a double flag, usually in black and red. The antifa movement began in the 1960s in Europe, and had reached the US by the end of the 1970s. Most people who show up to counter or oppose white supremacist public events are peaceful demonstrators, but when antifa show up, as they frequently do, they can increase the chances that an event may turn violent.

Today, antifa activists focus on harassing right wing extremists both online and in real life. Antifa is not a unified group; it is loose collection of local/regional groups and individuals. Their presence at a protest is intended to intimidate and dissuade racists, but the use of violent measures by some antifa against their adversaries can create a vicious, self-defeating cycle of attacks, counter-attacks and blame. This is why most established civil rights organizations criticize antifa tactics as dangerous and counterproductive.

The current political climate increases the chances of violent confrontations at protests and rallies. Antifa have expanded their definition of fascist/fascism to include not just white supremacists and other extremists, but also many conservatives and supporters of President Trump. In Berkeley, for example, some antifa were captured on video harassing Trump supporters with no known extremist connections. Antifa have also falsely characterized some recent right wing rallies as "Nazi" events, even though they were not actually white supremacist in nature.

Another concern is the misapplication of the label "antifa" to include all counter-protesters, rather than limiting it to those who proactively seek physical

confrontations with their perceived fascist adversaries. It is critical to understand how antifa fit within the larger counter-protest efforts. Doing so allows law enforcement to focus their resources on the minority who engage in violence without curtailing the civil rights of the majority of peaceful individuals who just want their voices to be heard.

All forms of antifa violence are problematic. Additionally, violence plays into the “victimhood” narrative of white supremacists and other right-wing extremists and can even be used for recruiting purposes. Images of these “free speech” protesters being beaten by black-clad and bandana-masked antifa provide right wing extremists with a powerful propaganda tool.

That said, it is important to reject attempts to claim equivalence between the antifa and the white supremacist groups they oppose. Antifa reject racism but use unacceptable tactics. White supremacists use even more extreme violence to spread their ideologies of hate, to intimidate ethnic minorities, and undermine democratic norms. Right-wing extremists have been one of the largest and most consistent sources of domestic terror incidents in the United States for many years; they have murdered hundreds of people in this country over the last ten years alone. To date, there have not been any known antifa-related murders.

Antifa: Scope and Tactics:

Today's antifa argue they are the on-the-ground defense against individuals they believe are promoting fascism in the United States. However, antifa, who have many anti-police anarchists in their ranks, can also target law enforcement with both verbal and physical assaults because they believe the police are providing cover for white supremacists. They will sometimes chant against fascism and against law enforcement in the same breath.

While some antifa use their fists, other violent tactics include throwing projectiles, including bricks, crowbars, homemade slingshots, metal chains, water bottles, and balloons filled with urine and feces. They have deployed noxious

gases, pushed through police barricades, and attempted to exploit any perceived weakness in law enforcement presence.

Away from rallies, they also engage in “doxxing,” exposing their adversaries’ identities, addresses, jobs and other private information. This can lead to their opponents being harassed or losing their jobs, among other consequences. Members of the alt right and other right wing extremists have responded with their own doxxing campaigns, and by perpetuating hateful and violent narratives using fake “antifa” social media accounts.

Because there is no unifying body for antifa, it is impossible to know how many “members” are currently active. Different localities have antifa populations of different strengths, but antifa are also sometimes willing to travel hundreds of miles to oppose a white supremacist event.