Conference Report

Fascism without Borders

*Transnational Connections and Co-operation between Movements
and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945*

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Abstract

This conference, organized by Arnd Bauerkämper, Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, Anna Lena Kocks and Silvia Madotto, and supported by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung and Freie Universität Berlin, offered important insights into various aspects of the study of transnational fascism and diverse forms of connections and co-operation between fascist movements and regimes in Europe between 1918 and 1945. It fostered the concept of fascism as a border-crossing phenomenon albeit with strong national and local roots. The conference made clear that even without an institutionalized 'Fascist international,' fascism was a transnational phenomenon, which affected national societies and non-national groups. By widening the perspective on different forms of European fascism, the participants of the conference managed to highlight connections, interactions and entanglements not considered by the previous historical research. The conference demonstrated how this methodological approach proves useful for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomenon of fascism and the numerous interactions between fascist activists, groups, parties, movements and regimes.

Keywords

fascism – transnational fascism – transnational anti-fascism – international fascism

In their welcome, Arnd Bauerkämper stressed the admiration for Mussolini that emanated from many countries following Mussolini's seizure of power. Mussolini managed to attract and inspire those who rejected the post-war liberal order, felt menaced by the spread of revolutionary ideas, and supported conservative policies to protect the rights of private property against socialist and egalitarian projects. The exposition in Rome, after ten years of Italian Fascism, exemplified the attractiveness of Mussolini's ideas. We should see fascist nationalism and transnationalism as complementary and contradictory. Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe then pointed out that studies of National Socialism have monopolized and suppressed the academic debate about fascism, leaving studies of fascism and transnational fascism in a peripheral position.

In the keynote opening address, Constantin Iordachi dealt with the evolution of fascism studies. Comparative studies had suffered from the domination of orthodox Marxist perspectives and Stalin's dogma. In the 1990s, as a reaction to these approaches, a new generation of historians had moved towards a conceptual history. These scholars adopted the methods of social and cultural sciences, and elaborated the concept of generic fascism.

The first panel analyzed theoretical and methodological aspects of dealing with transnational fascism. Roger Griffin pointed out that, although historical phenomena are peculiar, common patterns do exist. Fascism represented the great conundrum, as national specificity seemed to overcome common patterns. According to Griffin, fascisms are rooted in the sense of decadence of the modern era. In particular, fascist movements mostly agreed on the causes of decadence although proposing different solutions to cure it. The differences in those solutions specified the different form of fascism, while the radicalism differentiated fascism from proto-fascism. Matteo Pasetti analyzed the transnational connections that disseminated corporatist ideas in Europe. Mostly promoted by Italian Fascism, corporatism was widely acknowledged as a third way between socialism and capitalism and its adoption, besides national peculiarities, worked as mutual recognition between European fascist movements.

The second panel then analyzed the role and dimension of propaganda in the transnationalization of fascism. Anna Lena Kocks described how Italian Fascism used sport and leisure activities to 'fascitize' Italian youth both at home and abroad. She also demonstrated how Mosley's British Union of Fascists imported the model of youth camps, at the same time underlining how the

youth activities of the BUF differed from Italian Fascism. Women did not play any important role in BUF leisure activities. At the same time, activities focused on paramilitary training far more than Italian Fascism did. Goran Miljan's contribution focused on the youth organizations of Ustasha's movement in Croatia and the Hlinka youth in Slovakia. He revealed the influence of Italian Fascism and German National Socialism on the birth of both organizations and explained how important the rise of a fascist youth was, especially for the aims of independence and rebirth of both the Croatian and Slovak states. He also elaborated on several (until now unknown) aspects of the history of the Croatian and Slovak fascist youth movements. Claudia Ninhos concentrated on the mutual relationships between German and Portuguese youth and workers' organizations analyzing German *Kulturpropaganda* as a way of establishing cultural hegemony over other fascist states. In the case of Portugal, Germany made a strenuous effort to export cultural technological and scientific achievements in order to strengthen transnational co-operation but also to impose a supposed German superiority, thus provoking adverse reactions by Portuguese fascists criticizing German colonialism. Even though the beginning of the Second World War changed diplomatic relations between Portugal and Germany, exchanges continued. Overall, this panel raised the question, proposed by Arnd Bauerkämper, of asymmetry in the exchanges between fascist movements.

In the third panel, Miguel Alonso Ibarra opened the discussion with an analysis of memoirs by international volunteers in the Spanish Civil War. He reconstructed the motivations and the ideological background of young people who gathered from different countries to fight against Bolshevism. Although acknowledging that their ideological commitment to fascism was not always strong, Ibarra stressed that these volunteers saw fascist ideology as a way to self-fulfillment. In fact, the Spanish Civil War represented a center of aggregation, exchange and circulation of fascist ideas. The processes of transfer from the international volunteers to the Spanish fighters also affected the evolution of Francoist Spain. The next two papers focused on conflicts rather than co-operation between fascisms. Controversies are an intrinsic feature of transnational studies. Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe presented three examples of conflict. These involved relations between National Socialists, and the Austrian fascists, the radical faction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists headed by Stepan Bandera, and the Rumanian Iron Guard respectively. These cases showed how ideological affinities lost importance when *Realpolitik* came into play. The National Socialists persecuted some East European fascist movements and collaborated in those countries with non-fascist politicians who appeared to them to be more reliable than the indigenous fascists did. During

the presentation, it became clear that the ideological differences between movements, which were allowed to collaborate with the Nazis such as the Ustaša or the Hlinka Party, and those who were not allowed such as the Ukrainian nationalists or the Rumanian Iron Guard, were relatively unimportant. Other political and geopolitical factors decided if a fascist movement would be permitted to transform itself into regime controlling a state. The paper presented by Antonis Klapsis also stressed conflicts between fascisms, showing how the Metaxas regime in Greece, despite its political and ideological affinities and sympathies towards Italy and Mussolini, strongly opposed Italian aims in the Mediterranean and Mussolini's revisionist ideas about the post-war European order. In fact, Metaxas never criticized fascist Italy as such but maintained a clear and pragmatic foreign policy which brought the Greek regime to support Britain and her allies instead of the Axis. This was a clear example of how nationalist policies by fascist regimes often overruled ideological affinities. The panel led to a discussion dealing at first with the definition of fascist regimes. As Constantin Iordachi pointed out, there were neither mass movements nor revolutionary events that led to Metaxas' dictatorships. Despite the use of symbols, rituals and an outward appearance typical of fascism, this was a conservative authoritarian regime. Furthermore, Arnd Bauerkämper argued that probably fascist movements and regimes needed a crisis or a common enemy to overcome national interests and rivalries.

The fourth panel focused on transnational actors. Mario Ivani analyzed the way in which the Italian government tried to export its ideas to Salazar's Portugal, in order to strengthen the relationship and foster co-operation. It is noteworthy that Mussolini progressively ignored the fascist *Nacional Sindicalismo* to improve the relationships with Salazar, therefore showing once again how pragmatism overcame ideology in fascist foreign policy. Mussolini sent police officers, intellectuals and politicians to Portugal, allowing Salazar to renew his dictatorship according to Mussolini's role model. He created paramilitary groups and extended censorship and control over the media. The development of the *Istituto Italiano di Cultura* also constituted a bridgehead to spread fascist cultural elements, which were adapted into the Portuguese context.

Marleen Rensen focused on Robert Brasillach, novelist, poet and critic, who was fascinated by National Socialism after witnessing a rally in Nuremberg in 1937. His admiration for National Socialist ideology made him entertain several contacts with German personalities and members of the regime. During the occupation of France, he collaborated with the invaders through the German Institute in Paris. He further developed his ideas of a French fascism through the concept of a new European order where Franco-German relations would have played a central role. In the final paper of the panel, Raul Cârstocea also

focused on a single personality. By depicting the figure and activities of Ion Mota, second in charge of the Legion of Archangel Michael (Iron Guard), Cârstocea elaborated on the essential role of religion in the ideology and self-understanding of the Rumanian fascists and illustrated their transnational aspirations that relied mostly on Mota's strong anti-Semitic ideas. At the meeting of European fascists in Montreaux in 1934, Mota supported the idea of fascism's international enemies, especially the communists, and the Jews. He also stressed that an international effort was necessary to eradicate them. Mota's international activity showed that the Iron Guard was keen to extend its efforts and goals beyond national borders.

Moving onto a wider context, the fifth panel focused on the visions of a fascist Europe. Monica Fioravanzo argued that Italian Fascism aimed at the 'fascistization' of Europe with Mussolini's regime at the center of a new European order. This led to the creation of the *Fasci Italiani all'Esterio*, as a driving-force of fascist culture and ideology representing the unreserved fascist commitment to imperial and hegemonic politics. This goal partially changed once fascism had to compete with National Socialist hegemonic goals. With the creation of the *Comitati per l'Universalità di Roma* (CAUR) in 1933, Mussolini's regime explicitly embraced a universalistic view and supported the idea of a fascist Europe as a central actor in world politics. This idea involved intellectuals, journalists and politicians and created a lively debate amongst representatives of different European fascist movements. Discussion was enriched by Johannes Dafinger's paper on concepts of a *völkisch* Europe, in which the development of a racist idea of Europe was presented with a particular emphasis on non-German and non-Italian intellectuals and politicians. Dafinger explained that many fascists throughout the continent had to engage the idea of Europe notwithstanding the fact that they often started from an anti-European point of view and were adherents of radical nationalism.

In the final panel, Wolfgang Wippermann drew attention to the wider context of transnational anti-fascism. He challenged the limits of periodization and conceptualization of the conference by suggesting that the history of fascism did not end in 1945. According to Wippermann, the distinctions between fascism, para-fascism and authoritarianism are diverting attention from contemporary fascism and hamper efforts to identify it. According to the speaker, this has led to the current situation in which fascism still exists in Europe, although not clearly defined as such, while anti-fascism seems to be relegated to the past. Francesco Di Palma, in his paper, came back to the interwar years and analyzed the attempt of two social democratic groups to oppose fascism as a European problem. The *SOPADE* (German Social Democratic Party in exile) and *Giustizia e Libertà* (an Italian resistance group) represented major efforts

to understand the nature of fascism, the reasons behind its success and find ways to fight it. Despite ideological differences, both groups co-operated, although maintaining a strong rejection of communist and radical groups. As tensions grew and war broke out in Europe, the two groups had to flee from one country to another and eventually were almost dismantled, ending their exile in London or New York. Although they clearly recognized fascism as an international menace and supported international actions to fight it, they eventually ended up with a far too ideological and less active anti-fascism. From a different perspective, Silvia Madotto portrayed some interesting aspects on resistance in the universities. Sometimes crossing other resistance networks, sometimes acting locally, European universities saw both theoretical and practical anti-fascist activities. The universities received and spread information on anti-fascist actions, persecutions and repression of students and professors. The paper also identified some issues that we have to face in the definition of resistance. In depicting anti-fascist practical support provided by mutual help or small sabotage, we encounter a thin line between active resistance and the pragmatic exertion of personal influence and contacts that give help in very specific situations.

Drawing the conference to its close, Arnd Bauerkämper emphasized the many challenges that historians of transnational fascist studies have to face and highlighted some points that emerged from the various panels. Starting from defining 'transnationalism' as a concept in which we have several different actors, at least one of them being non-governmental or non-state, the debate brought out the diversity of fascist experiences. Transnational fascism seems to refer to visions, goals, claims and propaganda. It also comprises cross-border interactions, despite the obvious differences between the national cases. Transnational fascism, then, includes a wide range of different alliances and experiences that express themselves through transfers and entanglements that may be slightly or strongly asymmetrical or even one-directional. From a methodological point of view, we also have a wide range of experiences including diachronic comparisons with contemporary movements and different levels of transnational interactions that may be racial, cultural, or economic, or combining some of these. Transnational fascism originated and developed through ideology, cultural estheticism and religious elements or simply for pragmatic reasons. Fascist movements spread and moved across borders to create emotional and political bonds, achieve common goals and fight common enemies. Conflicts were an intrinsic element of interactions between regimes and movements. The charismatic leader and the youth as the source of hope are to be found in all fascist movements. Thus, it is important to reconstruct the networks and the shifting centers of transnational processes. Finally, there was a common

trait between fascism and anti-fascism, represented by the concept of crisis. Transnational anti-fascism showed that the rise of fascism was interpreted as an element of decline and stressed the importance of a correct diagnosis to implement the right cure. Responding to the challenges that appeared concerning geographical and chronological boundaries, Bauerkämper stressed that there is no need to keep 1945 and Europe as strict limits. However, the new context after 1945 should not be underestimated. Although being not only a European problem, fascism originated from Europe, and was the result of a European specific context. As a final remark, he reminded scholars that a precise conceptualization is essential. Historians should be cautious in how they use the terms and concepts of fascism and anti-fascism.

Conference Overview

Welcome and Introduction: Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe (Freie Universität Berlin)

Opening Address: Constantin Iordachi (Central European University, Budapest): From Comparative to Transnational History: New Perspectives on the Entangled History of European Fascism

Panel 1: Transnational Fascism – Theories, Concepts and Approaches

Chair: Arnd Bauerkämper (Freie Universität Berlin)

- Roger Griffin (Oxford Brookes University): 'Die Krankheit Europas': The International Dimension of Fascist Diagnoses of Decadence
- Matteo Pasetti (Università degli Studi di Bologna): Corporatist Connections: Reflections on the Transnational Flow of Ideas and Experiences in Interwar Europe

Panel 2: Propaganda and Representations

Chair: Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe (Freie Universität Berlin)

- Anna Lena Kocks (Freie Universität Berlin): Organizing Leisure: the Extension of Propaganda into New Spheres by the Italian and British Fascist Movements
- Goran Miljan (Central European University, Budapest): The 'New Youth' for the 'New Future' – A Comparative Case Study of the Ustasha and Hlinka Youth Connections and Exchanges

- Cláudia Ninhos (Universidade Nova de Lisboa): German-Portuguese Relations (1933–1945): Science, Knowledge and Power

Panel 3: Conflicts and Violence

Chair: Anna Lena Kocks (Freie Universität Berlin)

- Miguel Alonso Ibarra (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona): Brother in Arms. Fascist Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War
- Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe (Freie Universität Berlin): East European Fascists in Nazi Concentration Camps
- Antonis Klapsis (Open University of Cyprus): A Fascist State with an Anti-Fascist Foreign Policy? Greek Diplomacy towards Italy During the Metaxas Dictatorship

Panel 4: Actors

Chair: Albrecht Betz (New Sorbonne University)

- Mario Ivani (Universidade Nova de Lisboa): Exporting the Fascist Political Model of Salazar's *Estado Novo*. Intellectuals, Diplomats, Journalists, Political Activists and Police Officers in the Service of the Fascist Idea between Italy and Portugal in the 1920s and 1930s
- Marleen Rensen (Universiteit van Amsterdam): Robert Brasillach and the Fascist Spirit in Europe
- Raul Cârstocea (European Centre for Minority Issues, Flensburg): Native Fascists, Transnational Anti-Semites: Ion I. Moța and the International Section of the "Legion of the Archangel Michael"

Panel 5: Visions of a Fascist Europe

Chair: Paolo Fonzi (Seconda Università di Napoli)

- Monica Fioravanzo (Università degli Studi di Padova): Italian Fascism in Transnational Perspective: the Debate on the New European Order (1930–1945)
- Johannes Dafinger (Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt): The Nazi "New Europe" – Fascist or "Völkisch"? Cultural and Academic Exchange within the "Axis" Sphere of Influence

Panel 6: Transnational Anti-fascism

Chair: Constantin Iordachi (Central European University, Budapest)

- Wolfgang Wippermann (Freie Universität Berlin): Transnational Anti-fascism
- Silvia Madotto (Freie Universität Berlin): Transnational Aspects of the Anti-fascist Resistance at European Universities during the Second World War
- Francesco Di Palma (Freie Universität Berlin): German and Italian Democratic Socialists in Exile: Fascism Interpretations and Transnational Aspects of Resistance in the *Sopade* and *Giustizia e Libertà*

Conclusion: Arnd Bauerkämper