

Hugo García, Mercedes Yusta, Xavier Tabet, Cristina Clímaco (eds.): Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics, 1922 to the Present, New York, Berghahn Books, 2016. 360 pp. – ISBN 978-1-78533-138-1.

Kasper Braskén

Åbo Akademi University

Åbo/Turku, Finland

Rethinking Antifascism constitutes a long awaited edited volume that sheds new light on the contested history of antifascism from 1922 to the present. The book is divided into two sections. In the first part of the volume the focus is on “historical antifascism” (1922–1945), while the second part is dedicated to the political uses of antifascism, memory wars and ‘revisionism’ from 1945 to the present. The main focus of the volume is on Romance-speaking Europe (Italy, France, Spain and Portugal), although countries like Russia, the USA, Britain and Argentina are also discussed. Besides the impressive geographical scope of the volume, the chapters deal with antifascism from a number of new perspectives that contribute to the rethinking of the subject, including the relation between women and antifascism, the memory politics of antifascism, and the construction of an antifascist identity. Moreover, the volume makes a significant contribution to the international research field as it introduces the very latest studies on antifascism by Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and French researchers to scholars in the English-speaking world.

Among the definite highlights of the volume are the chapters by Hugo García on the culture of antifascism in interwar Spain, Mercedes Yusta’s article on the relation between women and antifascism, Stéfanie Prezioso’s chapter on Italian revisions of the history of fascism/antifascism, and Enzo Traverso’s concluding chapter on revisionism. All in all, the 17 chapters of the volume bring to light important themes from the history of antifascism and discuss the contested usages of the concept in both scholarship and politics. The volume is the result of three international conferences on the history of antifascism held in Geneva (2012), Paris (2013), and Saarbrücken (2014). In the following, eleven of the chapters in the volume will be reviewed and discussed more thoroughly.

The volume is introduced by a stimulating, collaborative introduction by the editors Hugo García (Madrid), Mercedes Yusta, Xavier Tabet, and Cristina Clímaco (all Paris). Here it is convincingly argued why a significant rethinking of the history of antifascism is needed. Firstly, antifascism is still all too often mainly connected to the history of communism and especially totalitarian Stalinism. The main bone of contention in the volume is the totalitarian paradigm and the ongoing historical revision of the history of fascism/antifascism by the political Right. As the title of the introduction indicates, the authors see a trajectory ‘beyond revisionism’ that is supposed to launch a renewed process of analysing antifascism as a part of a much broader framework. Although there is no attempt to construct a new antifascist paradigm, it is strongly emphasized that antifascism was not only advocated by communists, but also by socialists, anarchists, liberals, Catholics, and freemasons, which crucially affects the historical understanding of antifascism as a phenomenon integrally connected to the history of liberal, democratic Europe.

In the first chapter, Anson Rabinbach presents the transnational “Freedom for Thälmann!” campaign (1933–1939). It was coordinated by an international Thälmann Committee led by the German propagandist Willi Münzenberg in Paris under the mandate of the Communist

International (Comintern). In the highly readable chapter, Rabinbach highlights the difficulties of maintaining the public's interest in the liberation of the leader of the German Communist Party (KPD). Unlike the extremely successful campaign for the liberation of the defendants in the Reichstag fire trial – which ended in the exoneration of, among others, the future general secretary of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov – the Thälmann campaign lacked the same degree of popular appeal. Clearly the image of Thälmann as Stalin's man in Germany diminished the possibilities to drum up popular support, although the demands for Thälmann's liberation were successfully connected to the general fight to liberate all antifascist prisoners in Germany. Moreover, as Thälmann was secluded into various prisons in Germany and never set on trial, the campaign was doomed to fail. In the end, Rabinbach argues, Thälmann was more useful as an imprisoned symbol of the antifascist struggle than a free party leader. Thälmann was murdered in Buchenwald in 1944.

The second chapter by Michael Seidman investigates whether the French Popular Front was really antifascist. Seidman identifies both a 'revolutionary antifascism' and a "non-revolutionary antifascism" (also described by Seidman as a 'counter-revolutionary' or 'conservative antifascism'). Seidman introduces this dichotomy as a way to open up the discussion on the character of antifascism, in a way similar to the intense debate on the revolutionary or counter-revolutionary nature of fascism. According to Seidman, revolutionary antifascism was a movement that engaged in terror, collectivization of private property and violent anti-clericalism, and played its most important role in Spain. Moreover, it directly identified capitalism with fascism. The chapter then shows that the French Popular Front government was much more concerned with fighting domestic fascist movements than engaging in the fight against foreign fascism. This was proved most clearly by the French non-intervention policy in Spain and the appeasement policy towards Nazi Germany, which, according to Seidman, proves that the Popular Front government favoured pacifism over antifascism. Therefore the 'counter-revolutionary' antifascism of the Daladier-Reynaud government that followed the Popular Front was 'more antifascist than the Popular Front itself', Seidman argues. The chapter provides an excellent example of how a rethinking of antifascism can open up new understandings of how antifascism can be analysed as a broad analytical category.

The third chapter by Tom Buchanan is mainly concerned with the historiography of antifascism in Britain. In a rather polemical style, Buchanan discusses the work of Nigel Copsey and the question whether antifascism could take both "active" and "passive" forms. Through his extensive work on British antifascism Copsey has suggested that by limiting antifascism to the 'active' part of the movement one ignores a large section of society that articulated antifascism in defence of democratic values and by pursuing 'non-fascist' politics. This would then include, besides the communists, the social democratic, liberal, middle class, feminist, religious opinion, conservatives, and responses by intellectuals to fascism. How is antifascism then defined? Contrary to Nigel Copsey's 'antifascist minimum' that defines antifascism as a movement rooted in the democratic values of the Enlightenment, Buchanan contends that antifascists did not promote humanism or rationalism in the spirit of the Enlightenment tradition. On the contrary, Buchanan argues, 'active' (communist) antifascism was aimed at dehumanising the fascists 'so that they could be physically attacked.' For Buchanan violence forms an essential component of the antifascist political identity. 'Antifascism thereby gave new license to violent behaviour', Buchanan argues, implying that violence is one of the central features of 'active' antifascism. One could argue that this represents a limited view of communist antifascism, as it above all was a cultural project of the Left that created a set of symbols and rituals in the form of an antifascist political identity that went far beyond the limits of party lines (see the next chapter by Hugo

García). As Nigel Copsey concluded, hundreds of thousands of Brits took part in antifascist activities, however, contrary to Buchanan's suggestion, only a fraction of them engaged in acts of violence. More to the point is that active antifascism was clearly not based on pacifism, but on the idea to actively defend society against the fascist threat. Buchanan is right to highlight the problematic relation between antifascism and violence, and it certainly needs further investigation. However, it remains unclear in Buchanan's discussion why the active defence (if necessary by violent means) of the democratic values of the Enlightenment would distance antifascism itself from the Enlightenment tradition it was defending.

In chapter five, Hugo Garcia elaborates whether there was an antifascist culture in Spain during the 1930s. Significantly, the chapter shows that the antifascism of the Spanish Left cannot be understood without the analysis of the transnational spread of an antifascist culture, or the emergence of an 'informal global Left'. The active and massive antifascism that emerged in Spain in the 1930s was at first not matched by a strong mobilisation of the Spanish fascist movement. Garcia subscribes to the idea of an emerging 'transnational consciousness' (Gerd Rainer Horn) in the Spanish Left. The so called transformative moment for both the Spanish Left and Right was provided by Hitler's rise to power in January 1933. Fascism could not anymore merely be seen as an Italian threat, but an international phenomenon. Garcia defines Spanish antifascism as a meeting point for republicanism, social democracy, communism and anarchism. However, these varieties of antifascism partly disagreed over the nature of fascism and employed different conceptions and practices of antifascism. In other words, Spanish antifascism was as 'plural as its broad political and social base.' However, as Garcia profoundly shows, despite these differences and disagreements, an antifascist culture in Spain was constructed. This meant for example that a new body language was adopted (the raised clenched fist became the main salute among antifascists) or slogans such as No Pasaran (They shall not pass) were widely adopted beyond the boundaries of political parties. Garcia thus highlights the 'syncretic character' of the antifascist culture which reflects the need to emphasize what united the antifascists and conversely ignored their differences. The strength of this antifascist culture was exactly its inherent vagueness.

Isabelle Richet takes on the important question of how antifascism has been gendered. Typically antifascist action is seen as a part of a masculine universe. Richet shows the challenges of writing about women and antifascism, as most sources deal with the political space occupied by men. The problem is that the collected sources in the archives were first put together by men who assumed that women could generally not be autonomous political actors. Furthermore, female antifascist activists significantly challenged traditional gender roles, which was perceived 'embarrassing' when traditional family values were reinstated during the post-war period. Richet then elaborates on the ambiguous relation between women's emancipation and the antifascist movement. In fact, antifascism did generally not lead to the changing of traditional gender roles. Richet makes a good case for her argument that feminine antifascism was less 'feminist' than one might assume. Therefore, antifascist women adopted a 'gender blind' attitude in order to maintain the unity of the antifascist camp.

Mercedes Yusta continues the analysis of women and antifascism through the study of the Women's World Committee against War and Fascism and the Women's International Democratic Federation. Yusta argues that the historiography of antifascism has largely neglected and minimised the role of women and that there in fact was an emerging alliance between feminism and antifascism in the 'early days' of antifascist mobilisation (1933-1934). There were also significant frictions as on the one hand the labour movement perceived feminist activism as 'bourgeois' and while, on the other hand, liberal feminists were

'frightened' by the transnational antifascist organisations' loyalty to the Soviet Union and close ties to the communist parties. Yusta described antifascism as a 'cultural melting pot' that enabled various understandings of antifascism to co-exist in a heterogeneous movement. Yusta then shows how women's antifascism took a conservative turn during the Cold War and how the term antifascism became ruthlessly utilised by the communist side, declaring veritably all anti-Soviet movements 'fascist'. The chapter thus forms a very useful empirical case of women's antifascist mobilization both during the interwar period and the immediate post-war years.

José María Faraldo continues the debate on how the Soviet Union abused the concept of antifascism. The chapter deals with the 'cult of antifascism' in the Soviet Union and post-socialist Russia from a critical perspective. The concept of antifascism has recently reemerged during the Ukrainian crisis when the Soviet heritage of antifascism was ruthlessly used to mobilise support against the 'fascist regime' in Kiev. Putin accordingly argued that the main reason for invading Crimea and Sebastopol was that he wanted to 'protect' the region's inhabitants against the 'fascists' in Kiev. The chapter is profoundly informative about the abuses of antifascism as a political tool by the Soviet Union and post-socialist Russia, and how the term 'fascism' was turned into a common invective already during the interwar period. However, although Faraldo argues that antifascism was merged with nationalism especially after 1968, it could be argued that this process had begun decades earlier in the Soviet Union, already during the Great Patriotic War, when antifascism was merged with the defence of the Soviet Union and Russia especially. In the words of Faraldo, antifascism became a method to defend the own national identity. Yet at the same time the term 'fascism' became so broadly used against political adversaries of every kind that fascism became a 'universal negative characteristic' without a possible definition. Thus Faraldo argues that antifascism was foremost a 'tool for combating generic enemies' that mainly reaffirmed a self-identity.

Gilles Vergnon revisits again the 'myth and historiography of republican antifascism' in France in two consecutive cycles: the 'Cold War Cycle' (1947–1962) and the second, still unfinished cycle, that started with the National Front establishing itself in French politics. In a refreshing way Vergnon shows how historiography has been formed by French scholars such as François Furet, who defined antifascism as a product of Stalinism. As Vergnon shows, this perspective has distracted the focus of scholarship from various forms of antifascism that were not Soviet manipulations. Vergnon argues that to understand fascism in France, 'we have to return its diversity and reintegrate it into the long-term history of left-wing parties and of the 'Republican idea of France', of which antifascism was perhaps the last expression.' The chapter thus forms a relevant introduction to Vergnon's important book on antifascism in France which analyses its long term developments.¹

In one of the most impressive chapters of the volume, Stéfanie Prezioso discusses the Italian case between 'loss of historical consciousness and nostalgia.' Prezioso shows how Italian society has experienced a wave of revisionism based on anti-communism and anti-antifascism. Prezioso argues that revisionism has in fact been advanced to such a level in Italy that it is legitimate to ask whether it has actually won. There are several factors that support Prezioso's case. The 'over-mediatisation' of the history of fascism and the Second World War have led to a loss of historical consciousness. In this process, history has been rewritten in a fashion that for example in Italy has been expressed through the rehabilitation of Mussolini. From this perspective, fascism was after all a necessity in the struggle against

¹ Gilles Vergnon: *L'Antifascisme en France. De Mussolini à Le Pen*, Rennes, PUR, 2009.

communism. Prezioso shows how the idea of a 'fascism with a human face' began to circulate during the 1980s, accompanied by a new image of a 'blind' antifascism that did not take the real danger against democracy (i.e. communism) seriously. Prezioso makes the important point that when one revises the history of antifascism and resistance, it is by necessity accompanied by a revisionism concerning the fascist dictatorship itself. By delegitimising antifascism and the resistance, one conversely opens a way to rehabilitate fascism.

Filippo Focardi continues the discussion on the public debate and politics of memory in Italy from the 1990s to the present. One of Focardi's examples are the revisionist efforts to disassociate Italian fascism from the history of Nazi totalitarianism. When the fascist/antifascist paradigm was replaced with a totalitarian/anti-totalitarian one, it became possible for the Italian far right to argue that German Nazism and communism were totalitarian, whereas Italian fascism did not belong to the totalitarian family. Consequently, Gianfranco Fini of the Italian far right could 'purify' Italian fascism through official condemnation of the Holocaust and the antisemitic past. Thereafter it was possible to begin from 'a clean slate' and start to propagate the historical merits of fascism through a broad revisionist program, and thereby to discredit antifascist resistance as one of the founding ideas of post-war Europe.

Enzo Traverso concludes the excellent volume with a final reflection on antifascism between 'collective memory and historical revision'. Traverso shows how fascism is 'rehabilitated' through various apologetic interpretations. However, Traverso notes that there is a central difference between 'revisionism' in continental Europe and the USA. In Europe, revisionism is concerned with rehabilitating fascism, while in the USA it emerged as an efforts to reinterpret the history of the Soviet Union that was not based on Cold War anti-communist dogma. With short overviews over the revisions of antifascist history in Germany, France and Spain, Traverso constructs a broad basis for his analysis of the revisionist 'anti-antifascist' narrative. The most important points of this narrative concern, first, the efforts to brand antifascism as a form of totalitarianism due to its close connection to communism. Out of this follows, secondly, that fascist and antifascist violence are equated as equally 'evil'. From this perspective antifascism was at its most a 'trick' or tactic used by the communist movement to gain democratic credentials. The goal is clearly to delegitimize antifascism as a variant of totalitarianism, which, according to Traverso, implies an 'ethical and political turn in our vision of the past'. Traverso's sharply written chapter gives the volume a thought-provoking conclusion and guidelines for a 'critical historian' in contrast to the 'anti-antifascist' historian. Traverso argues that antifascism was 'one of the most important currents of European culture' during the 1930s that by the end of the Second World War had become a shared ethos of post-war democratic Europe. Thus the book makes a strong stand against revisionism and a significant contribution to the analysis of the limits and possibilities of antifascism, while refusing to reduce it to a form of totalitarianism.