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# Extreme Right Transnationalism: International Networking and Cross-Border Exchanges

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While many historians have devoted themselves to examining the dynamics of fascist movements and regimes, the topic of 'anti-fascism' has traditionally been neglected. However, historians and other academics are now starting to take greater interest in the study of those who opposed nationalist and racist extremists, and are developing new approaches to understanding these complex cultures. Some, such as Nigel Copsey, have been concerned with developing sober, empirical accounts, exploring left-wing, centre and even right-wing forms of anti-fascism, presenting it as a heterogeneous politicised identity. Others, such as Mark Bray, have been more concerned with developing unapologetically partisan readings of the past, and write in ways that defend the actions of militant, far-left anti-fascists from the 1930s to the present day. Indeed, beyond academia, a number of those active in the anti-fascist movement have been keen to write their own histories. Accounts like M. Testa's *Militant Anti-Fascism* (2015), while problematic, can offer a rich sense of the perspectives of those who lived through key episodes in the development of anti-fascist movements.

In terms of historical roots, anti-fascist activity grew with the rise of fascism itself, a political force that broke through, initially in Italy, immediately after the First World War. As the *Fasci di Combattimento*, and later the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*, developed militant tactics in Italy during Mussolini's rise to power, people such as the anarchist *Argo Secondari* developed their own militant forms of opposition. His organisation, *Arditi del Popolo*, founded in June 1921 and based in Rome, quickly grew into a sizeable movement opposing Mussolini's new politics. Moreover, its history points to the problems facing

forms of anti-fascism: divisions within the left. The Italian Communist Party was also formed at this time, and while initially supportive of the *Arditi del Popolo*, later it instructed its members to withdraw their engagement. The *Arditi del Popolo* was shut down by the Italian state by 1924, while the Italian Communist Party was itself banned from 1926. Splits within the left have often been a characteristic of anti-fascist politics, and in Italy during the 1920s such anti-fascists were driven by competing ideas on how to develop an anti-capitalist revolution. In this case, the issue helped to foster discord between a more eclectic and anarchist variant of anti-fascism and a more centralised Communist version.

As Mussolini rose to power in Italy, so the political space for anti-fascism declined, yet politicians still vehemently opposed early Fascist rule. In 1924, a member of the newly-formed Unitary Socialist Party, Giacomo Matteotti, was killed by Italian Fascists after questioning the legitimacy of recent elections and criticising Italy's Fascists for their use of terror and violence. Not all forms of anti-fascism in Italy were left wing either. For example, a year later, in May 1925, the philosopher Benito Croce published the 'Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals' in *Il Mondo*, a text that was highly critical of the ways fellow intellectuals, such as *Giovani Gentile*, supported Mussolini. Croce has later been idealised as a hero figure for liberal forms of anti-fascism.

As Italy veered towards totalitarianism, violence against Fascists also continued. In 1926 alone, there were three assassination attempts on the Duce, a year after he shut down political opposition and transformed Italy into a one-party state. Later, during

the Second World War, overt anti-fascist sentiment grew once again, and was a powerful element in the variegated Italian resistance movement that fought during the Italian Civil War from 8 September 1943 to 2 May 1945. Famously, Mussolini was eventually killed by such partisans, his body hung in a petrol station in Milan for those who opposed him to see, and even physically beat.

While Italy offered some of the first forms of anti-fascism, Germany's interwar history helped to establish some further, crucial contours of anti-fascist culture. As in Italy, before National Socialism came to power, a number of left-wing factions opposed Nazis on the streets. They saw in Hitler's politics similar features to Mussolini's Fascists in Italy. However, by the end of the 1920s, as the Nazis grew in popularity, the left in Germany had become split between the German Communist Party (KPD) and the German Social Democratic Party (SDP), alongside smaller anarchist groups. By this point, the Soviet Union was itself taking an aggressive stance towards the Social Democrats, who were described by the Comintern as 'social fascists', and seen as even more dangerous than Hitler's fascists.

As the early 1930s saw concerted fascist growth, the SDP formed the Iron Front as a more aggressive anti-fascist group. The Communists meanwhile launched Antifaschistische Aktion in 1932. While these organisations were failures in terms of stopping the rise of Nazism, both have become key reference points in the development of anti-fascist culture. The Iron Front's logo of three arrows pointing south-westwards has become a regular piece of anti-fascist imagery, as has the Antifaschistische Aktion name, which is now

widely referenced by 'Antifa' groups in Europe and America, who also usually use variants of its logo of two flags within a circle.

Militant anti-fascism did little to stop the rise of Mussolini or Hitler, yet continued to impact on Europe during the 1930s. Emblematic cases of a growing international anti-fascist culture included the International Brigades, Communists who volunteered to fight nationalists led by Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War of 1936 – 1939. By the mid-1930s the Comintern no longer promoted the 'social fascist' argument, and instead called for Communists to unite with others who opposed fascism to form Popular Fronts, alliances that could include moderate left-wing and liberal anti-fascists. Steeped in a Soviet culture that presented Franco as the latest would-be fascist dictator, the Comintern's International Brigades came from across Europe, including France, Germany and Poland, as well as Great Britain, America and Canada. Around 35,000 people volunteered in total, although again their efforts were not strong enough to prevent Spain from becoming a dictatorship. Despite this, the International Brigades have become another evocative aspect of anti-fascist culture ever since. For example, the slogan '¡No pasarán!' was used memorably in a speech in July 1936 by Dolores Ibárruri of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), during the Siege of Madrid. It has been adopted by anti-fascists ever since. Use of the '¡No pasarán!' slogan included in Britain, when 4 October 1936 saw one of the country's most famous episodes of anti-fascism, the 'Battle of Cable Street'. Here, thousands of anti-fascists opposed around 7,000 of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF). Communist anti-fascists were joined by Jewish people as well as Irish migrants, who all

aggressively rejected the divisive politics of the BUF. British Jewish groups, such as the Board of Deputies of British Jews, had also denounced the BUF's provocative march beforehand as anti-Semitic, and were engaged in a range of other activities to resist fascism in Britain. As fascists and anti-fascists clashed in the East End of London, police had to break up the disorder. Echoing the Spanish context, the Battle of Cable Street also saw protestors use the slogan '¡No pasarán!', and though ideologically diverse, such statements helped to unify them in a shared desire to prevent fascists from spreading their message. The Cable Street Riot, as the event was often referred to at the time, led to new legislation, the Public Order Act of 1936, which placed greater restrictions on Mosley's BUF, including a ban on the use of political uniforms. Anti-fascism developed in complex ways during the Second World War, and a wide range of resistance movements offered variants of anti-fascist narratives. Before the Soviet Union was invaded in 1941, Communist anti-fascists struggled to resolve the contradictions created by the 1939 alliance between Nazi Germany and the USSR and their own anti-fascist instincts. However, as the war progressed, resistance movements in France, Italy, Yugoslavia and elsewhere all helped to shape narratives of rebuilding their countries after the Second World War. Even in Germany, groups such as the Edelweiss Pirates and White Rose offered opposition to Hitler's regime during the Second World War. As the conflict came to an end, Germany then saw new Antifa groups emerge, which grew in number as Communists and others were released. However, their political relevance was limited, as anti-fascism alone was unable to offer a clear trajectory for a new Germany. Anti-fascism in America was also developing in the

1930s and 1940s. For example, these anxieties were reflected in Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*, which explored the emergence of a fascist regime in America, and how a journalist, Doremus Jessup, opposed the new regime. Christopher Vials argues that this cultural reflection on fascism in America helped to generate forms of anti-fascism in the country that stretched into the post-1945 period as well. Other cultural figures in America also promoted anti-fascist ideas around this time. For example, the folk singer Woodie Guthrie placed the slogan 'This Machine Kills Fascists' on his guitar in 1941 and wrote songs celebrating anti-fascist themes. This included 'Taking Hitler's Head Off Blues' and 'Miss Pavlichenko', which idealised the Red Army sniper Lyudmila Pavlichenko.

By 1945, the Allies in Europe and America had become victorious in a conflict where fascism revealed its true extremes, in the form of the Holocaust. Dan Stone argues that, in the wake of the Second World War, a new anti-fascist consensus emerged, a shared attitude that all but destroyed the idea of fascism. In the parts of Europe that fell under Soviet domination during the later 1940s, from Poland to Yugoslavia, the narrative of the Second World War specifically as an anti-fascist war was used to help restructure societies along Stalinist lines. This culture of Communist anti-fascism could also be seen in later decades, for example in the justification for the Berlin Wall, described by the German Democratic Republic as the Anti-Fascist Protective Rampart. Across the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union, until the collapse of Communism, anti-fascism remained a central justification for the continuance of one-party states.

In Western Europe, Stone's theme of the embrace of anti-fascism as part of postwar European culture can be seen in the ways overtly fascist parties and organisations struggled to find any political legitimacy. Stone is certainly right to highlight the marginalised nature of fascism after 1945, although this did not mean that fascism ceased to exist in the politically plural contexts of western Europe. In many parts of Europe, fascism continued and so new anti-fascist groups also emerged, organisations that drew on the interwar cultures of anti-fascism to ensure that such extremists remained marginalised, if not silent. In Britain, for example, a wide range of anti-fascist groups and networks have developed since 1945. These included the militant, Jewish 43 Group of the later 1940s, which used violence as well as espionage techniques borrowed from resistance cultures to attack new fringe fascist groups, such as Mosley's Union Movement. By the 1970s, anti-fascist groups also included the Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism, which developed largescale networks, and a politicised music scene, to express opposition to the growth of the National Front and wider racist cultures in Britain. Anti-fascist strategies that emerged in the UK also included 'no platform', which tries to deny the ability for fascist speakers to address audiences. More recent British organisations, such as Unite Against Fascism, founded in 2003, continue to promote this approach; while again predominantly far-left in political inclination Unite Against Fascism has drawn support from a wide range of mainstream politicians, such as David Cameron. Meanwhile, the formation of bodies such as the Community Security Trust in 1994, and more recently Tell Mama in 2012, exemplify a trend of organisations that monitor extremist and neo-Nazi groups and gather credible data on their impact on

Jewish and Muslim communities. While less likely to identify with the label 'anti-fascist', such organisations use their data to press for greater government action against marginalised fascist and extremist cultures. The UK has been a pioneer of anti-fascism in other ways too. For example, the investigative journalism magazine Searchlight emerged as a monthly publication during the 1970s, and has sought to expose a wide range of extremist groups in Britain ever since. While reporting on, and exposing, the extreme right, Searchlight developed techniques, such as the use of moles and informers operating from within the extreme right, to ensure that it could discover the most incriminating information about such groups, and then use it to discredit them. More recently, in the 2010s the organisation Hope Not Hate has taken on a similar role to Searchlight in Britain. Searchlight has also inspired other anti-fascist publications, such as Sweden's Expo, founded in 1995 by the novelist Stieg Larsson. Since its creation, Expo has developed into a more comprehensive organisation monitoring extremist groups across Scandinavia. Other groups influenced by Searchlight include the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights in America, and Antifaschistisches Infoblatt in Germany.

A new era of militant anti-fascism emerged in Britain, Germany and elsewhere in the 1980s and 1990s. In the UK, groups including Anti-Fascist Action promoted militant attacks on British fascists as a means of fighting class war and fostering an anti-capitalist revolution. Meanwhile, in Germany the reunification of the country in the 1990s saw a growth of neo-Nazi groups, which developed attacks on migrant communities, especially Turkish populations. Steeped in memories of the early 1930s, as well as recalling the

Antifa groups that emerged in 1944 in Germany as the Nazi regime crumbled, new militant German Antifa networks emerged, which coalesced into Antifaschistische Aktion/Bundesweite Organisation. This was another countercultural network that both opposed Nazi-era inspired activity and offered younger people access to a radical left-wing, countercultural space. Antifaschistische Aktion/Bundesweite Organisation has since broken up, yet Antifa groups still operate in Germany.

Germany's tradition of 'Antifa' has also become an international marker of radical left forms of militant anti-fascism in recent times. This culture has spread to America in the past 30 years, as new forms of opposition to US neo-Nazi and white supremacist organisations have developed. Echoing elements of Europe's Antifa culture, the American group Anti-Racist Action emerged in Minneapolis during the later 1980s and, like many European anti-fascist cultures of this time, it combined elements of opposing those deemed to be fascist with a counter-cultural skinhead and punk ethos steeped in an anarchist ideology. Standout moments in Anti-Racist Action's militant opposition to white supremacists included the Toledo Riot of 2005, when activists in Ohio demonstrated against a march by the National Socialist Movement, which descended into widespread disorder and attacks on the police.

More recently, Antifa groups in America have found new relevance in response to the election campaign and election of President Trump, and the growth of the so-called alt-right. In January 2017, white supremacist ideologue Richard Spencer was punched by an Antifa activist, an act of anti-fascist violence recorded and

publicised around the world on YouTube. Contemporary American Antifa groups often celebrate such acts and are again typically animated by anarchist principles, combining their distrust in the state with a decentralised organisational structure. While specific groups, such as New York City Antifa, are clearly identifiable, ultimately the latest Antifa networks in America lack a singular structure and coordinate through online activity. Like other forms of militant anti-fascism, they believe in the need for direct action by Antifa activists, as they argue the state in a capitalist system will not stop the rise of fascism.

While these far-left groups offer modern Americans new forms of militant anti-fascism, other organisations have developed in America that offer more respectable forms of opposition to racist and neo-Nazi groups. For example, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), formed in 1913 to protect Jewish interests, has opposed waves of anti-Semitic organisations in America, from the Ku Klux Klan, to the German-American Bund, to the Christian Identity Movement, to the National Alliance. The ADL's work includes gathering data, and producing reports to highlight the nature of extremist groups. The Southern Poverty Law Center has developed a similar role since it was founded in 1971 by Morris Dees and Joseph J. Levin. It began life as a law firm specialising in civil rights issues, and by the end of the 1970s acted on behalf of victims of the Ku Klux Klan. It is now a well-resourced monitoring and legal advocacy organisation, with an endowment of over US\$300 million. It is also seen as a credible voice on the nature of extremist groups by both mainstream media outlets and academics. Moreover, unlike far-left groups, such as Antifa networks, organisations like the SPLC work more closely with the state, for example by offering programmes to help train police officers, and by

creating educational resources through its Teaching Tolerance programme.

To conclude, in America as well as in Europe, there has been a wide range of activity that can be placed under the broad banner of 'anti-fascism'. However, as this essay has highlighted, what this term really means remains contested. While historians such as Nigel Copsey have tried to establish some clear parameters for anti-fascism, it is important to stress that a full history of the phenomenon remains to be written. Nevertheless, some general observations are clear. Since 1945, many forms of anti-fascism are steeped in a culture mythologising the anti-fascism that developed in the interwar years, such as during the rise of Mussolini and Hitler, in response to the Spanish Civil War, or at places like Cable Street. For the far-left, 'true' anti-fascism is usually militant and is distrustful of the state, which it sees as complicit in allowing the growth of fascist organisations. Meanwhile, other forms of anti-fascism have been far more engaged with promoting democratic processes and the role of a liberal state. These include monitoring and watchdog organisations, such as Expo, the Community Security Trust and the Southern Poverty Law Center, which advocate on behalf of communities targeted by racist, extreme right and fascist groups, and generate data and reports that can help influence states to tackle such forms of extremism. As such, anti-fascism is a phenomenon as complex and variegated as the fascists they oppose.

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