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What is Anti-Fascism?

Its values, its Strength, its Diversity

JOŽE PIRJEVEC, EGON PELIKAN, AND SABRINA P. RAMET

What is anti-fascism? For that matter, what is fascism? The starting points for this volume are the understandings that neither fascism nor anti-fascism is monochromatic, and that there may be some variation in values defended by one or another anti-fascist movement just as there may be some variation in the values advanced by one or another fascist regime or fascist movement. Roger Griffin has provided what might be the most useful definition of generic fascism. In his words,

Fascism is a revolutionary species of political modernism originating in the early twentieth century whose mission is to combat the allegedly degenerative forces of contemporary history (decadence) by bringing about an alternative modernity and temporality (a 'new order' and a 'new era') based on the rebirth or palingenesis of the nation...[Concretely,] fascism is a form of programmatic modernism that seeks to conquer political power in order to realize a totalizing vision of national or ethnic rebirth...and usher in a new era of cultural homogeneity and health.¹

Fascism, as a form of political religion—to quote Emilio Gentile—

...rejects coexistence with other political ideologies and movements, denies the autonomy of the individual with respect to the collective, prescribes the obligatory observance of its commandments and participa-

1 Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 181–82.

tion in its political cult, sanctifies violence as a legitimate arm of struggle against enemies and as an instrument of regeneration. It adopts a hostile attitude toward traditional institutionalised religions, seeking to eliminate them, or seeking to establish with them a relationship of symbiotic coexistence...²

But fascism historically has not proven to be uniform. For example, while Hitler's Third Reich imposed clear limits to what was allowable in art,³ Mussolini's Fascist Italy (capitalizing Fascist in the case of Italy) proved to be tolerant of a degree of diversity in art and cultural pluralism. This was exposed to full view at the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, which ran for two years starting on 28 October 1922. The aesthetic pluralism on display at the exhibition was reflected in the fact that four alternative artistic movements were represented there: Futurism, Novecento, Rationalism, and neo-Impressionism.⁴ Or again, while the fascist Independent State of Croatia, which lasted from 1941 until 1945, instrumentalized Catholicism as a badge of loyalty to the Croatian state, pressuring Orthodox Serbs to convert to Catholicism, Hitler's Nazis worked with Protestant collaborators to create a pro-regime German Christian Movement, which redefined Jesus of Nazareth as an Aryan and removed the Old Testament from the Bible.⁵

Fascism may also be seen as quintessentially anti-liberal. Where the classical liberal tradition has championed the rule of law, tolerance, individual rights, respect for the harm principle, and some notion of human equality, fascism has championed the rule of the leader (*Führer*, *Duce*, *Poglavnik*, etc.) and intolerance as a badge of pride, insisting on the inequality of peoples, and rejecting both the harm principle and any notion of individual rights. But one does not have to be a liberal to be an anti-fascist. On the contrary, as Ramet and Hassenstab note in their chapter for this

2 Emilio Gentile, *Le religioni della politica: Fra democrazie e totalitarismi* (Bari: Laterza, 2001), 208. Extract translated by Stanley G. Payne and cited in his review essay, "Emilio Gentile's Historical Analysis and Taxonomy of Political Religions," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Summer 2002): 123–24.

3 See Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (New York: Overlook Press, 2002; 2018).

4 See Sabrina P. Ramet, *Alternatives to Democracy in Twentieth-Century Europe: Collectivist Visions of Modernity* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2019), chap. 3.

5 See Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

volume, anti-fascism may be inspired not only by a liberal commitment but also by anarchist,⁶ monarchist, communist, social democratic, or Christian conservative conceptions. While there are certainly some differences in the anti-fascisms originating in these diverse ideologies, there is a core set of values which we may identify with all of these except communist anti-fascism, viz., respect for individual rights and autonomy, respect for Christian faith (and potentially, but not necessarily, also freedom of religion), and repudiation of the fascist championing of racial inequality. Communists opposed fascism for mostly different reasons; while they objected to the championing of racial inequality, they also rejected fascism's downplaying of class inequality as an issue and understood, whether consciously or not, that the fascist quest to construct an alternative modernity directly competed with the communist quest to do likewise but on different foundations. The core anti-fascist values were the inspiration and driving force in the anti-fascist struggle against fascism.

Benito Mussolini, who served as Prime Minister of Italy from 1922 until he was deposed in 1943 and as *Duce* of the Fascist Party from 1919 until his execution in 1945, boasted that he was creating a "totalitarian" state in Italy and, in an article co-authored with Giovanni Gentile for the *Enciclopedia Italiana* in 1932, wrote that "For Fascism, the State is absolute, individuals and groups relative" and, further, that "the Fascist conception of life stresses the importance of the State and accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the State." Accordingly, for Mussolini and Gentile, Fascism necessarily sought to shape "the whole life of a people."⁷ Although the fascists wanted to control society, whether in Germany or Italy or elsewhere, were especially concerned to control women, who were shunted into fascist women's organizations and told that their primary duty was to bear children and raise them for the nation.⁸ For many, the fascist doctrine was completely unacceptable and anti-fascist struggle was the only choice.

6 See Robert J. Alexander, *The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War*, Vols. 1 and 2 (London: Janus, 1999; reprinted 2007).

7 Benito Mussolini [and Giovanni Gentile], "The Doctrine of Fascism" (1932), trans. from Italian, at www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Germany/mussolini.htm, 3, 8.

8 See Kasper Braskén, David Featherstone, and Nigel Copsey, "Introduction: Towards a global history of anti-fascism", in Kasper Braskén, Nigel Copsey, and David Featherstone, eds., *Anti-Fascism in a Global Perspective: Transnational Networks, Exile Communities, and Radical Internationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021); Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992); and Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987).

The Conception of the Volume

The analysis of anti-fascism provides a mirror of the structure of social, political, ideological and philosophical dimensions of fascism (lower-cased when used generically). While Slovenia serves as the central focus of our volume, we also include chapters on other countries, including Denmark, Finland, Germany, and Slovakia. Slovenia is a particularly interesting case for at least two reasons: first, because of the activity of the communist-led Partisan movement, which took up the fight against Fascist and Nazi occupation of Slovenia (as part of their carving up of Yugoslavia in partnership with Hungary and Bulgaria); and second, because the division of conservative Catholics, between those prepared to collaborate with occupation authorities and those who rejected any such collaboration, played an important part in developments in wartime Slovenia. In this volume, looking at the story of anti-fascist resistance from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we note five significant developments since 1991:

The first development is that the Slovenian state won recognition as an international subject, thus asserting its statehood for the first time, only in 1991. As a result, it became as a subject of an entirely separate analysis of historical developments in the Slovenian area (separate from the Yugoslav context) only in the last 30 years, even if Slovenian historiography (as part of Yugoslav historiography) undoubtedly played an important role both in national (i.e., Slovenian) and in the Yugoslav context.

The second development is that it was only the introduction of democracy and the collapse of the one-party system that brought an end to the Communist Party's monopoly on "anti-fascism" in historiography, which had an impact on the historical analysis of anti-fascism after World War Two. What was problematic was not so much censorship of the contents of research—research was, as a rule, conducted in a scientifically correct manner and in accordance with professional rules—as "blank spots" in the form of the absence of studies and analyses of events that were not (allowed to be) covered. And that is precisely what our edited volume reveals: a pluralism of Slovenian anti-Fascism that goes "beyond the limits of the far left" (Nigel Copsey). The volume aims to

bring to light a number of overlooked anti-fascist actors, campaigns and organizations, which will significantly broaden our understanding of the “Slovenian response to Fascism.”

The third development acknowledged herein highlights is that, since 1991, a number of international archives (e.g., Soviet archives in Moscow, archives of the German Democratic Republic held in Berlin, and other archives across East Central Europe) have been opened. Newly accessed sources have revealed a wealth of hitherto unknown information, allowing researchers to reach new conclusions, which are presented in the chapters of this edited volume.

The fourth development, since 1991, is that Slovenia and other post-communist states abolished ideological and political censorship (thus bringing an end also to self-censorship). Censorship had been one of the pillars of communist rule. Communists marshalled “anti-fascism” to legitimize their ascent to power and later their retention of power itself, while the so-called “bourgeois parties” had less claim to a tradition of anti-fascism. However, it has to be pointed out that all states behind the Iron Curtain as well as socialist Yugoslavia and Albania affirmed, in their constitutions, the “primacy of the party,” legitimating their political monopoly in part by reference to their (variable) anti-fascist credentials. By emphasizing this argument, we do not want to deny the fact that in the interwar period it was European Communist Parties that developed the most radical anti-fascist movements and engaged in the most direct military actions.

The fifth development is that, in the aftermath of the introduction of political pluralism and the independence of the Republic of Slovenia in 1991, Slovenian historiography focused its research on the anti-Fascism of bourgeois parties. The chapters related to the Slovenian ethnic area shed light on the wide spectrum of anti-Fascist political groups and parties: anti-Fascist Slovenian organizations and groups in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, members of the Slovenian minority in Fascist Italy who were of liberal orientation (TIGR, Borba), anti-Fascist Slovenian clergy in Fascist Italy. Researchers have also investigated the role of women and individual intellectuals in the anti-Fascist movement.

“Active” and “Passive” Anti-Fascism

In addition to what has been mentioned above, Part One of the volume focuses on anti-Fascism in the Slovene ethnic area with special emphasis on the analysis of anti-Fascism of the Slovene minority in Italy and of anti-Fascism in the Slovenian-Italian borderland. The chapters included herein confirm the hypothesis that anti-Fascism *per se* is not a consistent ideology; on the contrary, it embraces a multiplicity of activities “against” authoritarian and totalitarian regimes in Europe.

Terminologically speaking, the definitions of “active” and “passive” anti-fascism⁹ could be regarded as slightly controversial as it is difficult to define the boundary between the two terms. If the anti-Fascism of the Slovenian clergy in Italy, which spread Slovenian books and opposed the Fascist cultural genocide, attempted through its clandestine organization (generously financed by the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), and could be labelled “passive anti-Fascism,” how can we then regard, for example, the collection of intelligence for the Yugoslav secret service, which was carried out by the same organization of the Slovenian clergy in Italy? We could argue that within the same anti-Fascist organization, one section acted “passively” and the other “actively” (see, for example, the chapter by Egon Pelikan).

While the Slovenian clergy in Julijska krajina (i.e. the Slovenian name of the region annexed by the Kingdom of Italy) organized itself in an anti-Fascist struggle, the Roman Catholic Church and the camp of Slovenian political Catholicism in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia collaborated with the occupier (in both organizational and military terms). That provoked numerous harsh conflicts between the Primorska clergy on the one hand and representatives of political Catholicism in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on the other.

When we write about “Slovenian responses to Fascism,” we therefore have in mind the wide spectrum of Slovenian anti-Fascism (of liberal, Catholic, social democratic, or communist provenance), as well as the role of women, intellectuals and clergy in the anti-Fascist struggle. Their engagement took place in a very small area with a Slovenian speaking

9 See Kasper Braskén, Nigel Copsey, and Johan A. Lundin, eds., *Anti-fascism in the Nordic Countries: New Perspectives, Comparisons and Transnational Connections* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

population of slightly more than a million. One could regard it as “a nook in the heart of Europe,” whose anti-Fascist contribution to the wider European context was disproportionately great. Its anti-Fascism was also “active”: one may also note that the nation whose population at the onset of World War Two hardly surpassed one million contributed as many as 536 volunteers to the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, of which 231 lost their lives.

The Chapters

This volume is organized into three sections, with Part One devoted to the anti-fascist defense of Slovenian culture and language in Slovene-inhabited regions of Fascist Italy and to outrage over the suppression of both the Slovenian language and, in the South Tyrol, the German language. Part Two focuses on the diversity of anti-fascism over space and time, and Part Three takes up the theme of anti-fascism as a legitimating ideology. These chapters are followed by an afterword by Nigel Copsey.

Part One opens with a chapter by Jože Pirjevec which reviews the pre-history of the complex Slavic-Romance, later Slovene-Italian, relations in the northern Adriatic leading up to the arrival of the communists in Yugoslavia toward the end of World War Two. As Pirjevec shows, interethnic friction around the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth centuries escalated, resulting after World War One in a series of conflicts initiated by the Fascists. At the end of the war, Italy annexed Slovene-inhabited regions which had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the interwar period (1918–1941), the Fascist regime banned the use of the Slovene language, changed place names in Venezia Giulia to Italian, and put pressure on Slovenes to give their children Italian names—all with the objective of perpetrating ethnocide.

This is followed by three chapters examining the relations between Italy’s Slovene minority and the Fascist state. Vesna Mikolič examines the speeches of four MPs from Trieste—two Slovenes and two Italians—identifying keywords and phrases harnessed by the Italian members to promote the Fascist agenda and by their Slovene counterparts to defend Slovenian values, including the Slovene language and culture. The different vocabularies could be seen as codes reflecting very different pro-

grams. For the Fascists, as Borut Klabjan shows, ethnic and cultural homogenization was the order of the day and entailed not just the ethnic and linguistic repression described by Mikolič but also the repression of political opponents, specifically the Social Democrats, Communists, and Catholic organizations. Marta Verginella brings the anti-Fascist activities of Slovene women in Venezia Giulia into the story. As she notes, there were three women's periodicals published in the Slovene language between 1922 and 1928: *Slovenka*, published in Gorizia between January 1922 and December 1923; *Jadranka* (Adriatic woman), published in Trieste between 1921 and 1923; and *Ženske svet* (Woman's world), published in Trieste from 1923 to 1928.

The final chapter in Part One is Egon Pelikan's investigation into the role played by the Vatican and Catholic clergy in confronting Fascism. He reveals how high-ranking papal legates made secret trips to inter-war Italy, presenting themselves alternatively as tourists or as butterfly hunters. They prepared reports for the Holy See about the status of Slovenes and Croats living in Venezia Giulia. The clergy violated Fascist laws by refunding, in secret, a Christian Social Organization to resume the work of two once-legal Slovene organizations suppressed by the Fascists. In addition, the Assembly of the Priests of St. Paul hoped to bring about the annexation of Primorska, taken by Italy after World War One, to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Part Two, devoted to the diversity of anti-fascism, opens with a chapter by Sabrina Ramet and Christine M. Hassenstab, which takes as its case study the anti-Nazi White Rose group in which Sophie and Hans Scholl were prominent. The chapter opens by emphasizing that "anti-fascism comes in various strains, whether inspired by liberalism, social democracy, communism, monarchism, anarchism, or, as in the case of the White Rose, Christian conservatism." The Scholls' Christian principles were intellectually grounded in their reading of the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Thomas Aquinas, Cardinal St. John Henry Newman, and Blaise Pascal, as well as other writers both Christian and non-Christian. Newman, for example, held that "it is never lawful to go against our conscience; ...conscience is the voice of God." Augustine defended the notion of a just war (translate as anti-fascist resistance), and Aquinas taught that human law is valid only if it conforms with Natural and Divine Law; he also specifically defended a right to rebel against a tyrant, while Pascal held that people had a duty to oppose tyranny. Basing them-

selves especially on Augustine and Aquinas, the Scholls rejected the idea that an assassination of Hitler might be justified because that would have entailed abandoning their commitment to nonviolence. The Scholls and other members of the White Rose wrote and distributed five anti-Nazi pamphlets; all of them were eventually arrested and executed.

The diversity of *fascism* is highlighted in Pontus Järnvstad's chapter on the Nordic countries. In particular, he cites Kjell Johanson's 1963 book, *Fascism, Nazism, Racism*, in which the author wrote that "even though the form of fascism varies over time and place, its content remains the same." Johanson drew upon Herbert Tingsten's writings in the 1930s that portrayed fascism as "essentially nationalistic and bourgeois." On this foundation, Johanson admitted that he had difficulty differentiating between fascism and imperialism; indeed, Great Britain was clearly imperialistic in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, but equally clearly it was not a fascist state. While Järnvstad points out that historians do not consider Franco's regime in Spain (1939–1975) or Salazar's regime in Portugal (1932–1968) to have been fascist, Johanson, in the second edition of his book, included these two regimes in his list of fascist regimes.

The next chapter in Part Two is contributed by Marek Syrný and Anton Hruboň, who analyze the roots, causes, and evolution of the anti-fascist tendencies in Slovak society beginning in 1938. The collaborationist Slovak state mixed "traditionalism, nationalism, Christianity, and an emphasis on family life," and happily deported Czechs and Jews, thinking that Slovaks or the Slovak state itself would inherit their economic holdings. Instead, "strategic enterprises such as ironworks, arms factories, the oil industry, and even wood processing plants...[came] under German control." Resistance began immediately in October 1938 but it was not clearly anti-fascist until later. There were, as is well known, two strands in Slovak anti-fascist resistance: a democratic strand seeking to reestablish Czechoslovakia under a pluralist constitution and a communist strand seeking to set up a one-party dictatorship in Czechoslovakia.

This is followed by Gianfranco Cresciani's study of the political career of Josip Vilfan, President of the Edinost Association, and an outspoken advocate of Slovene linguistic and cultural rights, against the Italian Fascist undertaking to suppress both the Slovene language and Slovene culture, assimilating Slovenes into the Italian nation. As Cresciani points out, Giovanni Gentile, serving at the time as Minister of

Public Education, abolished Slovene-language instruction in the schools in the newly annexed regions in the Italian northeast (Venezia Giulia). Cresciani protested vigorously against the suppression of Slovene-language instruction and met with Mussolini on four occasions, to register his opposition to the anti-Slovene policies of the Fascist regime. Vilfan left Italy in 1928, moving first to Vienna and later to Belgrade, where he died in 1955.

In the final chapter of Part Two, Klaus Tragbar raises the issue of moral dilemmas under fascist rule. Tragbar recounts the life of an accomplished German architect, Franz Josef Ehrlich, who was incarcerated first at Zwickau Penitentiary from 1934 to 1937 and subsequently in Buchenwald concentration camp until October 1939. At Buchenwald, he was assigned to work in the construction section and, although a convinced antifascist, he designed villas for SS officers, a casino for the camp Kommandant, and even a falconry for the concentration camp. Upon his release in October 1939, he was classified as unfit for military service because of his prison record. Nonetheless, by February 1943, he was assigned to Strafddivision 999, which was dispatched to the Peloponnese as a member thus of the occupation force. Although deployed as a member of a Nazi unit, he was also active—by his account—in local resistance and was in friendly contact with Greek anti-Nazi partisans. After the war, in the GDR, Ehrlich was recruited as a secret informant for East Germany's State Security (the Stasi). Given Ehrlich's collaboration with both the Nazis and the Communists, Tragbar judges that Ehrlich had no choice but to be useful to these regimes if he wanted to survive. Tragbar concludes, finally, that "even radiant anti-fascists can have their dark sides."

Part Three takes up the theme of anti-fascism as a legitimating ideology, looking at the examples of the German Democratic Republic, Socialist Yugoslavia, and transnational anti-fascist activities in and related to Denmark. Given the record of Nazi Germany's aggression, hate-mongering, atrocities, and perpetration of the Holocaust, East German communists considered it crucial to distance themselves from the Third Reich. In fact, a considerable number of German communists were imprisoned by the Nazi regime. But, in addition, the fact that German communists, some of them rising in the ranks of the GDR's ruling party, had joined the fight against General Franco during the Spanish Civil War, allowed the regime to promote the legend of their role as anti-fascists and

to build a case that East Germany was to be regarded as an anti-fascist state. In her contribution to this book, Catherine Plum looks at the role of school, rituals, commemorations, and namesake campaigns in passing on the official anti-fascist narrative to the younger generation.

Anti-fascism was also a central legitimating ideology in Socialist Yugoslavia, with memories of the role of the Partisans, led by communist Josip Broz Tito, constantly being revived in the daily press and in public forums. Anti-fascism was, in brief, what legitimated rule by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (later, League of Communists of Yugoslavia), as Božo Repe explains in chapter 13. But, in the 1980s, alongside the initially gradual but accelerating disintegration of the Yugoslav state, a revisionist reinterpretation of World War Two and the National Liberation Struggle led by the Partisans began to appear. After 1990, the history of anti-fascism and the Partisan struggle became an important feature in the political polarization in the Republic of Slovenia, with right-wing politicians quite ready to rehabilitate at least some Axis collaborators, such as members of the Home Guard. Even the Catholic Church became involved in this reinterpretation of the past, Repe points out, largely taking the side of the collaborationist Home Guard.

Like Repe, Vida Rožac Darovec is focused on conflicting memories about World War Two in Slovenia; as she writes, the conflicts erupted into heated public debates after the Republic gained its independence in 1991. While parties on the political left have stressed that the Partisan struggle contributed to the defeat of Nazism and Fascism, parties on the political right have dwelled on the extrajudicial mass killings by the Partisans perpetrated after the end of the war. The latter have even suggested that “Slovenes would have been better off not actively resisting the overpowering invader.”

Part Three continues with Kasper Braskén’s study of responses to Italian Fascism among members of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. He points to the conspicuous role played by the Comintern in backing anti-fascist activities in Denmark and notes that “Stalinist anti-fascism later became a crucial foundational myth for the repressive communist regimes of post-war Eastern Europe.” He argues specifically that, in the context of Denmark, anti-fascist practices changed over time, escalating from removing swastikas from public buildings to maritime sabotage. He also notes that, among Swedish conservative elements, there was initially some support for fascist anti-communism, but the

increasing levels of fascist terror, the decay of democratic rights, and the treatment of ethnic minorities in the Italian borderlands became pivotal issues that changed their assessment of fascism. The final chapter in Part Three is Jesper Jørgensen's study of transnational anti-fascist activities related to Denmark. These included participation in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War, arms smuggling to the embattled Spanish Republic, and sabotage of Axis shipping during 1937–38. The involvement of Danish maritime communists in these activities contributed to a legitimation of Soviet anti-fascist credentials and, as Jørgensen notes, "Stalinist anti-fascism later became the foundational myth for the repressive communist regimes of post-war Eastern Europe."

Viewed narrowly, as a response to the archetypal fascist regimes of the years 1922–1945, anti-fascism would seem to be a historical artefact, a past episode of heroism, integrity, and the defense of basic human rights. However, viewed more broadly, it is clear that there continue to be authoritarian regimes around the globe—regimes to which a reimagined anti-fascism may be the most fitting response.