

1 Introduction

The historiography of the twentieth century is obsessed with fascism, Communism's competitor for the most brutal and spectacular political movement of the twentieth century. Compared with its enemy, antifascism has received little attention. Publications about fascism outnumber antifascism thirtyfold. A WorldCat keyword search revealed 59,000 titles for fascism and 2,000 for antifascism. Yet in almost all Western countries – except, of course, Italy, Germany, and Spain – fascism was a failure, and antifascism an obvious success, which became perhaps the most powerful Western ideology of the twentieth century. Surprisingly, no historian or social scientist has attempted to define the nature, types, and history of antifascisms in the Atlantic world. This book is an attempt to fill those gaps by analyzing antifascisms in Spain, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States from 1936 to 1945.

Fascism may have been the major political innovation of the twentieth century, but antifascism was even more flexible and dynamic. The more antifascism encompassed a broad range of opinion, the more successful it became. It sought consensus, not synthesis. If fascism was built on its ability to profit from the supposed atomization or anomie of modern populations, antifascism reaped an even greater yield from those characteristics. Although fascists were successful in creating one of the first “catch-all” cross-class movements, antifascists easily trumped them in the Atlantic world. Antifascism's extremely disparate nature has rendered it an appealing but slippery topic.

Fascism's early successes aroused fears in both revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries and thus provoked a powerful alliance against it. The explanation that “a faltering liberal order” accounted for the success of fascism is qualified by the examination of a victorious antifascism in the Atlantic democracies.¹ Historians and social scientists have ignored the ideological, religious, and racial inclusiveness of antifascism since many have identified antifascism as an ecumenical movement which was primarily, if not exclusively, a movement of the left or, at least, “democratic.”² The left has identified antifascism with its own progressive

2 Introduction

orientation and regarded conservative antifascism as an oxymoron. Resistance to fascism was supposedly inseparable from the revolutionary politics which followed World War I.³ Antifascism is assumed to be the province of major politicians and intellectuals of the left.

My own definition differs and proposes a tripartite minimum. First, antifascism makes working or fighting against fascism the top priority. Thus, antifascists rejected uncompromising anti-Communism and anti-capitalism. They recognized the need to collaborate with Communists and capitalists, even though conservative antifascists completely opposed the Soviet model and revolutionary antifascists the liberal one. Antifascists chose to fight a multi-front war against the Axis, not the Soviet Union or the Western Allies. Both sets of anti-appeasers knew that you could remain particular about your friends, but not about your allies. Second, antifascism refused conspiratorial theories which blamed Jewish and plutocratic plotting for negative social, economic, and political developments, particularly preparations for an antifascist war. Antifascists rejected this form of scapegoating anti-Semitism, even if they shared other varieties. In direct contrast to the German National Socialists, most of them did not regard the Jewish issue as central. Third, antifascists refused pacifism and believed that state power was necessary to stop both domestic fascisms and the Axis war machine. Risking their own empires, they were willing to fight a long and global war to halt the spread of fascism. Antifascism meant concrete sacrifice, not merely hostile attitudes, to defeat fascism.⁴

Like fascism, antifascism adopted distinct forms in different periods. Two basic types of antifascism emerged from 1936 to 1945. The first was the revolutionary antifascism promoted during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and often dominant in countries, like Spain, with a weak bourgeoisie. Revolutionary antifascism identified capitalism and fascism and was uninterested in the considerable differences between Italian and German fascisms or between fascist and authoritarian regimes. The revolutionary antifascism of the Spanish conflict encouraged the end of pacifism among sectors of the left, but because of the Spanish Republic's disrespect for private property and its violent anticlericalism it did not prefigure – as many have argued – the antifascist alliance of World War II. Revolutionary antifascism resurfaced in Eastern Europe with the Hitler-Stalin pact (August 1939–June 1941), when it influenced the behavior of the American, British, and French Communist parties, which condemned the war as “imperialist” and treated all belligerents as real or potential “fascists.” Like the appeasers in the 1930s, Communists in this period generally preferred pacifism to antifascism. Revolutionary antifascism also revived at the end of World War II when it became the official

Introduction

3

ideology of the incipient Soviet bloc and helped to lend it legitimacy against a new adversary – the “fascist” West. As in the Republican zone during the Spanish Civil War, revolutionary antifascism in the new “popular democracies” labeled as “fascist” any opposition – including workers’ strikes, revolts, and refusals to work – against Communist-supported governments.

The second type of antifascism was conservative and even counterrevolutionary. The lack of reflection on this sort of antifascism mirrors the general historiographical neglect of counterrevolutions. Another WorldCat keyword search shows *revolution* with 1,350,000 entries and *counterrevolution* with 6,000. The few important exceptions have neglected to study conservative antifascism as a variety of counterrevolution. The classic study described types of counterrevolutions but associated all of them with “monopolistic control of state and government by a *new political elite*,” a definition which hardly describes the transatlantic counterrevolutions after World War II.⁵ A recent text asserted that in countries where fascism failed to become a mass movement “mainstream conservatives” supposedly rejected “the main tenets of the French Revolution . . . [and] did not feel sufficiently threatened in the 1930s to call on fascism for help.”⁶ Yet the United States, the United Kingdom, and France all experienced “a sense of overwhelming crisis” which many felt “beyond the reach of traditional solutions,” but fascists never came close to taking power in these nations. Furthermore, “mainstream conservatives” actively created and participated in French and British antifascist movements. Instead of desiring “to keep the masses out of politics,” counterrevolutionary antifascists – such as Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle – wanted to win the masses over to conservative antifascism. Antifascism was not merely defensive and passive but often more dynamic than fascism itself and outlasted its enemy in a war of attrition.

The lack of discussion concerning the character of antifascism stands in sharp contrast to the constant debate over fascism’s revolutionary or counterrevolutionary nature. The conflation of the two forms of antifascism has muddled many analyses. A common imprecision – accepted by both fascists and antifascists – is that the Spanish Civil War was the first stage of World War II. Another issue is that the “counterrevolutionary” label is no more popular than “fascist.” Both labels are almost always considered insults, and at present no significant political movement calls itself fascist or counterrevolutionary. For example, the Americans labeled their attempt to turn back Communist revolution in Vietnam and elsewhere “counter-insurgency,” not counterrevolution. In a similar vein, counterrevolutionary antifascism never claimed to be

4 Introduction

continuing or restoring the old order but rather instituting a new and more hopeful period of history for which it – like other counterrevolutions – was willing to fight.⁷

Counterrevolution suggests the continuation of the Old Regime under pre-revolutionary social, political, and religious leadership. Successful counterrevolutions can integrate important revolutionary elements but must subordinate them to old-regime dominance. In this study, counterrevolution does not mean a return to the Old Regime – i.e., the period before the French Revolution of 1789 – but rather the continuation or restoration of the prewar old regimes. The antifascist counterrevolution continued or restored the old regimes of the Enlightenment-oriented Atlantic Revolutions of the eighteenth century. These revolutions moved toward political democracy and – unlike communist revolutions – guaranteed individual freedoms and private property rights within a reformist framework. Counterrevolutionary or restorationist antifascism rejected the violations of personal freedoms and the confiscations of property which occurred under both fascism and revolutionary antifascism. Conservative antifascists desired limits on state power and opposed the abolition of the distinction between public and private life, which was a key feature of the Nazi and Soviet revolutions.

Conservative antifascism was hostile to a metaphysical or political search for unity (*Volksgemeinschaft*). It did not collapse state into society. It excluded a *Führerprinzip*, exaltation of youth, militarization of politics, absolute male dominance, and the promotion of a political religion. Conservative antifascism rejected fascist attempts to impose cohesion and preferred traditional pluralism. In the 1930s and 1940s, its greater breadth and inclusiveness allowed it to surpass fascists by constructing coalitions in which working-class parties and trade unions allied with capitalists to achieve and maintain political power.

Counterrevolutionary antifascism defended – although not always by democratic means – the old regimes of liberal democracy. It could be labeled liberal antifascism, but the terms “counterrevolutionary,” “conservative,” and in the French case “restorationist antifascism” are preferred, because to defeat its domestic and foreign foes this form of antifascism used methods and gathered supporters that were not entirely liberal or democratic. Along with feminists, social democrats, and trade unionists, the proponents of counterrevolutionary antifascism comprised conservatives and traditionalists, who included antidemocratic racists in the American South and elsewhere. Its most consistent advocates were conservatives and imperialists (Churchill and de Gaulle) or social democrats (Franklin Roosevelt), not Communists (Joseph Stalin). After World War II in Europe where the victorious Atlantic powers dominated,

Introduction

5

counterrevolutionary antifascists either continued or reestablished conservative republics or constitutional monarchies based on the principles of the Enlightenment-influenced eighteenth-century revolutions. This transatlantic attempt to found a rehabilitated European order replaced the Axis alternative and eventually won a complete victory when Communism collapsed in 1989.

Counterrevolutionary antifascism assembled economic, political, and cultural leaders. Capitalists who distrusted statism allied with trade unionists who wanted welfarism; artists, intellectuals, and leftist politicians who feared potential fascist repression joined with religious traditionalists. Conservative antifascism easily appealed to large numbers who rejected fascism's elitism – whether racial or social. Antifascists achieved a perhaps shallower but broader consensus than fascists. The ultimate success of antifascism showed the relative narrowness and instability of the fascist coalition, which excluded large sectors of the left, liberals, and racial minorities. Fascism formed an exclusivist political religion which refused coexistence with other political convictions.⁸

Both counterrevolutionary and revolutionary antifascists came to see that violent expansionism was intrinsic to the fascist project. They ultimately rejected the generalized guilt which attributed the rise of Nazism to an allegedly unjust peace settlement and viewed ferocious fascist dynamism – not the Versailles Treaty – as the principal cause of conflict. Unlike their fascist enemies, they did not promise a quick victory but, as in World War I, an extended struggle against a potent enemy. During World War II, they responded to fascist aggression by developing a cult of heroism which relegated victims to a secondary position.

Antifascists did not always equate Nazi Germany with Fascist Italy until the latter joined Germany as an ally in 1940. Before Benito Mussolini's entry into World War II, conservative antifascists in the Atlantic world were much more anti-Nazi than anti-Fascist. They hoped – correctly until the fall of France – that the conservative forces of the Italian monarchy and military would keep Italy out of the conflict. Although ultimately unsuccessful, antifascists attempted to divide the two fascist powers, and they adopted a range of policies on the Spanish Civil War. Counterrevolutionary antifascists might regard the Spanish dictator, Francisco Franco, as a potential ally or friendly neutral. However, they did not overestimate the weight of Italy and Spain and were willing to battle Germany despite those two countries' alignment with the Axis. Conservative antifascists did not underestimate the strength of the democracies, nor were they resigned to the supposed authoritarian wave of the future. They recognized that Nazism was the most revolutionary, dangerous, and aggressive form of fascism. To crush it would leave the

6 Introduction

less radical Italian and Spanish fascisms vulnerable. Antifascists did not hold an uncompromising position on “totalitarianism,” thereby allowing them to ally with Communists and the Soviet Union.

A study of antifascism should include not only elites but also ordinary people who collaborated with fascism or resisted it in their everyday lives. During the German occupation, French workers engaged in sabotage, strikes, and slowdowns. Spanish, British, and American working-class organizations cooperated in their nations’ wartime antifascism, although not all wage earners followed their leaders and, like French workers, resisted work. However, the effectiveness of this resistance to wage labor was limited, and an examination of Spanish, French, American, and British defense workers’ strikes and refusals to work demonstrates that resistance to work was unable to defeat either fascist regimes or antifascist ones. In other words, state antifascism from above was essential to crush fascism on both domestic and foreign fronts. A history of antifascism needs to engage with recent social historical approaches, but the victory of antifascism cannot be explained solely by social history. Nonetheless, denials of labor suggest leisurely and irenic practices of a post-fascist civilization.

Counterrevolutionary antifascism grew rapidly in the late 1930s. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935 provoked Emperor Haile Selassie’s traditionalist antifascism, which anticipated that of European conservatives later in the decade (Figure 1.1). Both the venerable Ethiopian Empire and later the British Empire would defend their domains against an aggressive fascist imperialism. The United Kingdom offered the Christian emperor asylum in 1936 and in 1941 restored him to the throne, thus prefiguring its policies toward European and Asian antifascist monarchs at the end of World War II. Antifascists initiated global and often spontaneous grassroots protests opposing the Italian invasion. Demonstrations against the Ethiopian invasion were generally organized along ethnic and racial lines and included Black nationalists, radicals, and assorted anti-imperialists. Yet antifascism based on a combination of anti-imperialism, race, or religion – as Jewish movements against Nazism would also demonstrate – remained ineffective without the mobilizing capacity of powerful national states, all of whom (including the Soviet Union) permitted the Duce to conquer Abyssinia.⁹

The September 1938 Munich crisis, the subsequent German annexation of the Sudetenland, and the November 1938 *Reichspogromnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass) helped to turn an overwhelming majority of Britons and French against the Nazi regime, the most radical expression of fascism. The German invasion of the conservative republic of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 shattered most appeasers’ faith in the

Introduction

7

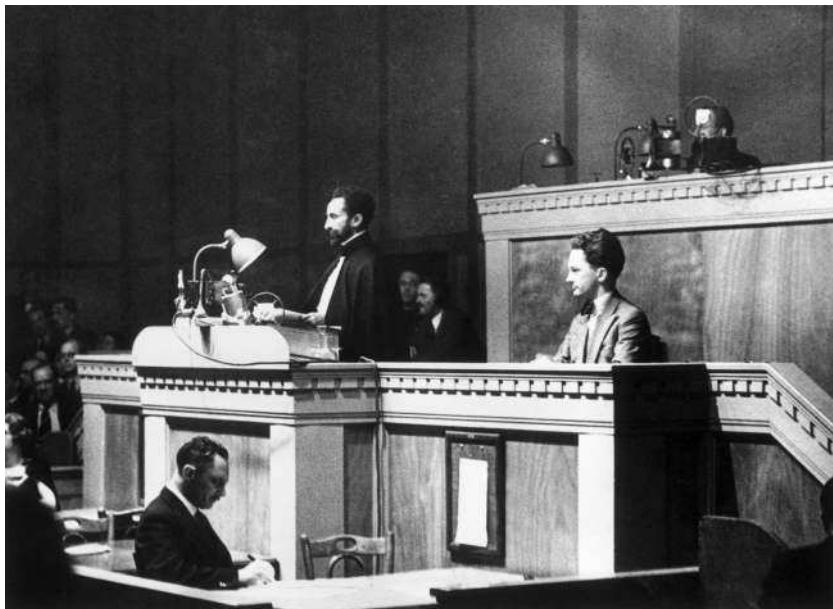


Figure 1.1 Ethiopian Emperor Selassie protests Italian invasion of his country at the League of Nations in 1936. Getty Images.

reasonable intentions of the Nazis and further undermined pacifism. The Spanish Civil War had divided leftist and rightist antifascists, but the leftist republic's collapse in April 1939 encouraged conservatives and Catholics to join counterrevolutionary antifascists who supported private property and respected traditional religion. Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939 demonstrated the anti-appeasers' calculation that Nazism was more dangerous than Communism.

In the United States, isolationist sentiment also eroded in the late 1930s but remained powerful in Congress, the Midwest, and among certain economic elites and ethnicities, including African-Americans. Like their appeasing counterparts in Great Britain and France, American isolationists based their arguments on pacifism, anti-Communism, or, to a lesser extent, anti-Semitism. As in Europe, fierce fascist expansionism discredited their reasoning and helped the Roosevelt administration to convince conservative Democrats and Republicans to aid the British, whom American public opinion favored because the United Kingdom was actually fighting fascism. Likewise, American and British opinion provided crucial support for de Gaulle's Free French when both

8 Introduction

Roosevelt and Churchill wanted to replace the French leader with someone more pliable. With the support of the Allied armies and the backing of much of the French bourgeoisie and army – including French generals who had fought against the Allies – the restorationist de Gaulle took power in France in 1944.¹⁰

The defeat of Nazi Germany in 1944–1945 led to the return of the conflict between revolutionary and counterrevolutionary antifascism. In Eastern Europe, in countries with weak bourgeoisies, the Soviets imposed many elements of their model. Revolutionary antifascists who had organized volunteers or fought in Spain – including Josip Broz Tito (Yugoslavia), Walter Ulbricht (DDR), and Klement Gottwald (Czechoslovakia) – became national leaders in the new “popular democracies.” A precedent for these regimes could be found in Republican Spain during its civil war, the subject of the next chapter.