

### **Anti-Fascism as a Transnational Phenomenon: New Perspectives of Research**

**Veranstalter:** Jens Späth, Fachbereich Geschichte, Universität des Saarlandes; Max-Weber-Stiftung

**Datum, Ort:** 13.10.2014–14.10.2014, Saarbrücken

**Bericht von:** Ilka Braun, Universität des Saarlandes

The conference „Anti-Fascism as a Transnational Phenomenon: New Perspectives of Research“ took place October 13-14, 2014 in Saarbrücken. It followed meetings in Geneva in 2012 („Antifascism as a Practice and as a Discourse“) as well as in Paris in 2013 („L'antifascisme en question, 1922-45“).

JENS SPÄTH (Saarbrücken) surveyed the difficulties of defining the term anti-fascism in his introductory remarks: be it as a political countermovement to Italian fascism or set as a broader term along the lines of a movement against dictatorship. These issues of terminology formed a central point during each debate. Common ground could be found in the fact that anti-fascism, just like fascism, always changes in the course of history. Thus, the conference sought to discuss these different forms of anti-fascism and to historicize them. All participants agreed on the benefits of focusing on transnational entanglements and processes of reception and appropriation in a multinational context when discussing anti-fascism.

KASPER BRASKEN (Turku / Berlin) started off the first section „Organizations and the Origins of Anti-Fascism“ with his paper on „The Origins of 'Antifascism': Transnational Movements against Nazism, Fascism and the 'White Terror' in Europe, 1923–1939“. He emphasized the advantages that a scrutiny of international anti-fascist organizations presents for a transnational take on anti-fascist movements, since these organizations, for example the International Red Aid or the International Workers Relief, actually worked on a transnational basis. A look at these organizations in the interwar period offers insight into the transformation process of the concepts of fascism and

anti-fascism, since they played an important role long before the international resistance against fascism gained significance in 1933.

In her paper on „The International Union of Seamen and Harbor Workers (ISH) 1930-1937: Interclubs, Resistance against Nazism and Transnational Aspects“, CONSTANCE MARGAIN (Le Havre / Potsdam) offered a case study of such an organizational perspective on anti-fascism. The ISH formed part of the Soviet Unions' strategy in spreading communism. Especially the Interclubs, the boarding houses seamen frequented in ports not only in the USSR but also in Hamburg, Rotterdam, Marseille and New York, although originally a Soviet instrument of spreading communist ideals, turned out to be perfect platforms of transnational anti-fascist activities, for example by organizing meetings and creating anti-fascist propaganda which could easily be spread to other ports and countries by the seamen.

HUGO GARCÍA (Madrid) talked about „Transnational History, a new Anti-Fascist Paradigm?“ He outlined the value as well as the limits of a transnational approach to anti-fascism as it has been promoted in the past years, and how that approach fits into the historiography of anti-fascism. Garcia pointed out that while a transnational approach offers important perspectives of shared cultures and symbols and aesthetics of anti-fascism across borders, national narratives still remain important since anti-fascism remains a diverse movement. However, using Spain as a case study, he illustrated the advantages of a transnational approach: First, the emergence of anti-fascism in Spain in the mid-1920s and 1930s could only be understood through external contexts. Second, the eventual popularization of a homegrown Spanish anti-fascism adopted many transnational elements.

SILVIA MADOTTO (Berlin) opened the second section „The Cultural and Social Sphere“ with her paper „Anti-Fascism as a Transnational Phenomenon: The Case of the Resistance at European Universities during the Second World War“. She shared her research on the resistance movements at the Universities of Padua, Berlin and Paris and the question of their transnational diffusion in the context of their countries' respective forms of fascist

---

dictatorship. She concluded that although the anti-fascist fight at the universities was motivated in different ways due to the differing preconditions of the nations, there was at least an asymmetric European dimension of anti-fascist resistance. This transnational dimension manifested itself in a feeling of international solidarity and diffusion of antifascist activities, e.g. the spreading of propaganda between faculty as well as students of the different universities and of actions of resistance, e.g. the rescue of refugees.

MECHTHILD GILZMER (Saarbrücken) offered her initial findings on „Transnational Anti-Fascism in French Detention Camps for Women (1939-1942)“ and the role that autobiographical texts, written by female internees like Dora Schaul, Gertrud Rast or Teresa Noce, can play in building a transnational European (anti-fascist) heritage. Seeking political asylum, women from various oppressing European regimes came to France during the 1930s. However, in 1939 the Vichy-Regime interned these in detention camps, considering them as dangerous. In these camps, there was a natural transnational diffusion of anti-fascist ideas and resistance activities. The women's interaction in the camps, their means of communication and their transnational postwar network all deserve more detailed investigation.

Completing the first day of the conference, REGULA LUDI (Zürich) gave a Public Lecture on „Anti-Fascism and the Semantics of Victimhood in European Reparations after 1945“. A prominent view on reparations after the Second World War contends that victims of the Nazi regime were granted reparations irrespective of their victim status. In contrast Ludi pointed to the more widely spread practice of anti-fascist reparations undertaken in countries under Soviet influence, where reparations were usually rewarded not to the „ordinary victim“, but to victims showing political conformity, but especially to „heroes“ of anti-fascism, (usually male) fighters against fascism who had been victimized because of their active resistance. This model of reparations that „ranked“ victims, although disputable, ended up being a model for German and French reparation efforts until the early 1950s as well. The anti-fascist measures of

reparations were closely connected with the general anti-fascist vision of postwar society.

The third section on „Transatlantic Anti-Fascism“ was opened by ANDREA ACLE-KREYSING (München / Leipzig) and her paper on „Shattered Dreams of Antifascist Unity: The German-speaking Exile in Mexico, Argentina and Bolivia (1937-1945)“. She introduced the communist movement „Freies Deutschland“ and the social-democratic „Das Andere Deutschland“, which were the German-speaking exiles' anti-fascists organizations in Latin America with the goal of an anti-fascist „Einheitsfront“, which never came to be due to the tensions between communists and social democrats involved. The organizations' efforts were also influenced by the context of their host countries. In Mexico, anti-fascism had become a governmental policy which provided a platform for communist exiles' international campaigns, while in Argentina, anti-fascist efforts came from the realms of society and were used to influence the local exile community as well as to oppose the fascist tendencies of those in power.

MICHAEL SEIDMAN (Wilmington) started his talk about „Atlantic Anti-Fascisms, 1936-1945“ by calling out the lack of definitions of anti-fascism – although it triumphed over fascism, which has been defined numerous times. He pointed out two basic forms of anti-fascism that emerged from 1936 to 1945, one being the revolutionary anti-fascism that was promoted during the Spanish Civil War, which would later on become the official ideology of the Soviet bloc in the fight against the „fascist“ West. Seidman introduced the second basic form as „counterrevolutionary anti-fascism“, whose supporters were usually conservatives and social democrats who sought to restore old regimes of liberal democracy or establish conservative republics and constitutional monarchies after the Second World War. This form of anti-fascism, though predominant among Western powers of postwar Europe, has not received much attention in historiography.

„Questioning the Break of 1945: Anti-Fascism after the Second World War“ was the title of the fourth section. ENRICO AC-

CIAI (Florence) offered a biographical approach on „Italian Anti-Fascism as a Transnational Movement“ by looking at former Italian veterans' (brigadisti) struggles in the Second World War and especially the postwar period. He described how veterans struggled when they were evacuated from Spain in 1938. While France was their preferred destination, as citizens of a fascist country, they were not welcome and only found refuge in French internment camps, although they were ready to help the French government fight fascism. Problems continued when they had to return to Italy. In the postwar period, veterans saw the fascist continuities in the new Italian state and found themselves marginalized. While the pre-1945 experiences of the veterans were dominated by transnational interrelations, their post-war experiences led them to find individual closure.

JENS SPÄTH (Saarbrücken) talked about „The 'Other Germany': German Social Democrats and Transnational Anti-Fascism around the Year 1945“. He emphasized the contribution of German social democrats who had spent the war period in exile to a transnational antifascist memory even after the Second World War. The transnational dimension of anti-fascism in times of exile was shown by the personal examples of social democrats such as Wilhelm Hoegner or Willy Brandt as well as by illustrating the significance of France in general and Paris in particular as a transnational melting pot of anti-fascist efforts, notably for Saar social democrats. Building on the social democrats' post-war efforts to build a transnational memory of their role in the antifascist fight, it can be stated that these were far more internationalist than has been acknowledged in historiography.

Continuing the efforts to analyze the importance of exiles in the shaping of postwar Germany, SCOTT KRAUSE (Chapel Hill) shared his paper „Manhattan Made. The Anti-Fascist Roots of Heroic West Berlin's Narrative in Exile, 1940-63“, in which he illustrated the importance of the transnational networks of anti-fascist exile politics formed in wartime Manhattan in becoming a foundation for building an „Outpost of Freedom“ narrative of West Berlin. In the postwar period,

exiles such as Ernst Reuter, Paul Hertz, Hans Hirschfeld and Willy Brandt became key persons in shaping West Berlin politics and building a democratic, anti-communist outpost, while at the same time renewing their own political relevance by changing from anti-fascist leftists to anti-totalitarian Cold War liberals.

In the last section of the conference about „More Recent Forms of Anti-Fascism in East and West, 1943-2000“, MARTIN PREVIŠIĆ (Zagreb) talked about „Yugoslav' Anti-Fascism – Driving Force of Balkan Anti-Fascism or Vehicle of Regional Dominance?“ He highlighted the Yugoslav partisan movement of the Communist party of Yugoslavia (CPY) as possibly the strongest European anti-fascist movement during the Second World War and as a driving force of a new united Yugoslavia. But its significance went beyond borders – during the war, the CPY sought to establish a collective body for the coordination of various Balkan anti-fascist movements, and after the war, the party's efforts even increased when they tried to politically control their Balkan neighbors by use of their old anti-fascist strengths, which would eventually lead to the Tito-Stalin-Split of 1948.

NIGEL COPSEY (Teesside University, Middlesbrough) closed the conference with his paper „Crossing Borders: Anti-Fascist Action (UK) and Transnational Anti-Fascist Militancy“. He presented the case study of Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), a militant organization formed in Britain in the mid-1980s. AFA established one of its branches in the Republic of Ireland, and although the country did not even have particularly much fascist activity, AFA Ireland has actually outlived AFA UK. Copsey also highlighted AFA's efforts to establish an international militant anti-fascist network in the 1990s in cooperation with the „Autonome Antifa“ in Göttingen. The network ended up comprising groups from six countries. They shared ideas, provided mutual support and tried to organize international conferences. These examples show that transnational anti-fascist efforts and activities extend well beyond 1945.

In summary, the conference suggests that the transnational turn in historiography has been applied successfully to the history of

---

anti-fascism. Concentrating on cultures, symbols, aesthetics and narratives it confirmed the value, the limits and the diversity of the term. These first steps in historicizing the phenomenon of anti-fascism have to be continued. The conference participants agreed that stimulating impulses could be to deepen the aspects of gender and visual culture as well as the discourse of victims and reparations, but also to extend research on Russia and Japan. By focusing on the transnational dimension, i.e. shared ideals, concepts, actions and reception processes, however, one must not overlook the differences and conflicts of anti-fascism. The stimulating idea to distinguish between a „revolutionary“ and a „counter-revolutionary“ anti-fascism, in particular, illuminated this problem. Another difficulty regarding the history of anti-fascism is that far too often the long-term perspective of the history of socialism in the 19th century and the division into socialism and communism at the beginning of the 20th century is neglected. A last concern regards the question how to include more recent forms of anti-fascism, neo-anti-fascism and the role of the internet into transnational historiography. One way to affront these challenges could be to rely more on biographical approaches – as has been done surprisingly often during the conference. This would also allow linking better the pre- and the post-war period.

#### **Conference Overview:**

Jens Späth (Universität des Saarlandes Saarbrücken)

Welcome and Introduction

#### *Section I: Organizations and the Origins of Anti-Fascism*

Kasper Braskén (Åbo Akademi University Turku/Freie Universität Berlin)

The Origins of 'Anti-Fascism': Transnational Movements against Nazism, Fascism and the 'White Terror' in Europe, 1923-1939

Constance Margain (Université du Havre/ZZF Potsdam)

The International Union of Seamen and Harbor Workers (ISH) 1930-1937: Interclubs, Resistance against Nazism and Transnational Aspects

Hugo García (Universidad Autónoma de

Madrid)

Transnational History, a New Anti-Fascist Paradigm?

#### *Section II: The Cultural and Social Sphere*

Silvia Madotto (Freie Universität Berlin)

Anti-Fascism as a Transnational Phenomenon: the Case of the Resistance at European Universities during the Second World War

Alexander Friedman (Universität Luxemburg)

Soviet Anti-Fascist Films of the 1930s and their reception in the USSR and abroad

Mechthild Gilzmer (Universität des Saarlandes Saarbrücken)

Transnational Anti-Fascism in French Detention Camps for Women (1939-1942)

#### *Public Lecture/Öffentlicher Abendvortrag*

Regula Ludi (Universität Zürich)

Antifaschismus und Opfersemantik im europäischen Entschädigungsdiskurs nach 1945

#### *Section III: Transatlantic Anti-Fascism*

Andrea Aclé-Kreysing (LMU München / Universität Leipzig)

Shattered Dreams of Anti-Fascist Unity: the German-Speaking Exile in Mexico, Argentina and Bolivia (1937-1945)

Michael Seidman (University of North Carolina at Wilmington)

Atlantic Anti-Fascisms, 1936-1945

#### *Section IV: Questioning the Break of 1945: Anti-Fascism after the Second World War*

Enrico Acciai (Università degli Studi della Tuscia Viterbo/European University Institute Florence)

Italian Anti-Fascism as a Transnational Movement: a Biographical Approach

Jens Späth (Universität des Saarlandes Saarbrücken)

Transnational Anti-Fascism around 1945: the case of German Social Democrats

Scott Krause (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

Manhattan Made: The Anti-Fascist Roots of Heroic West Berlin's Narrative in Exile, 1940-1963

#### *Section V: More Recent Forms of Anti-Fascism in East and West 1943-2000*

Martin Previšić (Sveučilište u Zagrebu)

'Yugoslav' Anti-Fascism – Driving Force of  
Balkan Anti-Fascism or Vehicle of Regional  
Dominance?

Nigel Copsey (Teesside University)

Crossing Borders: Anti-Fascist Action (UK)  
and Transnational Anti-Fascist Militancy

Tagungsbericht *Anti-Fascism as a Transnational  
Phenomenon: New Perspectives of Research*.  
13.10.2014–14.10.2014, Saarbrücken, in: H-  
Soz-Kult 04.02.2014.