

The Axis Alliance in Global Perspective

Veranstalter: Universität Konstanz; European Institute, Columbia University

Datum, Ort: 07.06.2017–10.06.2017, Hegne

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What was the Axis all about? Departing from a shared commitment to multiply composed, entangled histories of the Axis powers, an international group of scholars met in early June under the auspices of the University of Konstanz and Columbia University's European Institute to ponder this question. In what follows I shall not provide a point-by-point synopsis of the papers but instead focus on seven salient, architectonic issues this stimulating workshop addressed.

1. The Axis' Distinctiveness

As convenors VICTORIA DE GRAZIA (New York) and SVEN REICHARDT (Konstanz) pointed out, the Axis responded to the triple crisis of liberal modernity, the post-Versailles system, and global monopoly capitalism in the wake of the Great Depression.

What are the threshold prerequisites for ascertaining the Axis' distinctiveness vis-à-vis the outside world? At least two basic questions kept cropping up throughout the meeting: First, what made the Axis distinctive if situated in a deeper history of alliances since 1815? What was specific about its inter-imperial setup when compared to its rivals, the Comintern and the Alliance, was there substantial entanglement between societies that matched diplomatic connectedness? The second theme concerned the specificity of the Axis in its interaction with the „liberal“ world it reviled. The frontiers between fascist states and coeval democratic regimes begin to look blurrier than previously assumed when it comes to corporatism, social engineering and neo-mercantilist biopolitics. KAI HIN BRIAN TSUI (Hong Kong) delivered an engrossing presentation about Guomintang re-education camps in which Communist inmates imbibed lessons about Roosevelt's New Deal. TSUI also gestured at another line of emulation, the axis' espousal of – however selective and situational – anti-colonialism

whose links to Comintern patterns merit further study. Looking at Italian settler colonialism in Africa, GIAN LUCA PODESTÀ (Milan) and MARTIN REMPE (Konstanz) debated to what extent this latecomer empire replicated policies of its British and French precursors in their overseas possessions. The discussion clarified that fascist colonialism was predicated on modernist utopias that were based on racist extermination. Finally, GEOFF ELEY (Ann Arbor) emphasised the connected and comparable nature of Allied and Axis war aims, noting that the democratic powers also fought for the consolidation of their imperial zones of domination, e.g. in the Pacific war theatre.

Apart from the Axis' relations with the regimes it opposed, what were its basic internal commonalities? First, all three fascist regimes were predicated on a vision of an authoritarian national revival that promised social cohesion. Fascist propagandists positioned the Axis as an anti-materialist power that would supersede both „Americanism“ and world communism whom they conflated. BEN MARTIN'S (Uppsala) study of Axis intercultural relations focused on the gatherings of the European Writers Union and the Great East Asian Writers Conference. Both chastised Soviet and liberal culture for their „superficiality, shallowness and bustle“, respectively reinventing European and East Asian culture as strongholds of spirituality against lacklustre, materialist „Americanism“ and „Bolshevism“. TSUI's Guomintang ideologues castigated Chinese students in Moscow as spoiled brats, a promiscuous *jeunesse dorée* whose lifestyle attested to cosmopolitan decadence. Second, violence in civil and international warfare, enacted in the form of paramilitary group experiences, loomed large as a fascist programme for the creation of social-national unity and as a means of conflict-resolution. JAVIER RODRIGO SANCHEZ (Barcelona) and AMADEO OSTI GUERAZZI (Rome) ably discussed these matters in relation to the Spanish civil war and to Italian and German counterinsurgency anti-partisan warfare. When it comes to diplomatic means of conflict-settlement however, the boundary between the strategies of crisis-resolution used by the liberal and the illiberal world orders is

not as neat as it may appear: CONSTANTIN IORDACHI (Budapest) used the Romanian-Bulgarian conflict over the Dobruja to flesh out small nations' chances of self-assertion within the Nazi *Neuordnung* of Europe. The final accord reached in this case strikingly resembled the ways of conflict settlement provided by the despised liberal international order: the redrawing of boundaries involved the displacement of populations as a mode of reasonable ethnicity-based realignment. A third frame of commonalities is provided by the field of inter-Axis emulation to which I will return in the following points.

2. The Axis Economy

All Axis powers advertised economic nationalism as a scheme of social cohesion that should supersede class conflict and establish anti-cosmopolitan, autarkic communities of producers. Neomercantilist biopolitics undergirded this dream of autarky. The Axis powers' expansionist politics were designed to enlarge their constituent nations' „living space“ and to secure the cheap supply of elementary resources. Three crucial points of contestation surfaced: First, a chief issue was the economic rationality of the violent expropriation and redistribution fascists pursued in their domestic and occupied territories. On a subordinate level, competing factions within each of the Axis regimes grappled with the question where production should be concentrated: Should displaced forced labourers from the occupied territories be pressed into service in domestic industries in the imperial centre, or would they better serve as workforce of protected and subsidised factories in their native regions? Second, there was a tension between the enhancement of living conditions and the formulaic anti-materialism all Axis powers professed. Third, fascist internationalists envisaged an overarching self-sufficient sphere of „co-prosperity“ and world corporatism. As JANIS MIMURA's (Stony Brook) admirable paper on the economics and geopolitics of Axis trade showed, Japan's reticence to get out of the Chinese quagmire was motivated by Japanese functionaries' realisation that their place in a self-sufficient Axis bloc depended on the ability to control the resources of China. At the same time, MIMURA detected lingering liberal concep-

tions among her Japanese economists when it came to the lubricating quality of trade, which allegedly smoothed amicable relations between fascist nations. ROBERT CORBAN's (New York) stimulating presentation on Italian „Eurafrica“ demonstrated that grain motivated the Italian invasion in Ethiopia and that Italian Africa should serve as a cornerstone of a fascist world-corporatist order. The famishing of subject populations and the depletion of food resources transferred to racially superior homeland consumers were key aspects of Axis rule.

3. The Axis and Race

Race was a crucial ingredient of the Axis powers' programmes of national cohesion. It helped to paper over social differences and legitimized the redistribution of wealth into the pockets of racially qualified beneficiaries. Yet the question remains pressing to what extent such generalized statements really hold water. Some recent excellent work on grassroots youth organisations such as the Seinendan has demonstrated that fascist Japan can be defined as a nation empire which sought to co-opt young Taiwanese and Korean men via their espousal of Japanese nationalism.¹ Also, it seems that Nazi Germany's destruction of the European Jews has occluded the fact that frontiers of inclusion were much more malleable when it came to other „races“. DAVID MOTADEL (London) recovered a Berlin anti-colonial underground in which Muslim anticolonialists of different hues jostled cheek by jowl, illustrating his findings about the Third Reich's increasing pragmatism after 1943 when it made race categories remarkably negotiable. In a similar vein, PAOLO FONZI's (Berlin) study of Italian and German perceptions of occupied Greece pointed toward the elastic functional concept of „Levantinization“ as a mode of selective inclusion (marriageable subjects) and exclusion („Levantine“, „Slavonic“, or „Asiatic“ partisans and their supporters).

4. Axis Geopolitics

Geopolitics and the Axis reordering of space, real and imagined, loomed large as key

¹ See Sayaka Chatani, *Nation-Empire: Rural Youth Mobilization in Japan, Taiwan, and Korea 1895-1945*, PhD dissertation, Columbia University 2014.

themes of the conference. As a product of the age of high imperialism, the significance of geopolitics extended widely beyond the Axis powers. As BIANCA GAUDENZI (Konstanz) remarked it would be crucial to ask whether there were distinct methods of geopolitics as a fascist science, to clarify to what extent a German model of geopolitics was adopted by the Axis partners, and to ponder whether geopolitics possessed a special relevance at the interstices of science and politics in the Axis regimes. SVEN REICHARDT stressed the Axis' powers objective of building a new world order of *Groß-* and *Lebensräume* that would turn the lopsided Versailles system into shambles. He also observed that the racial and economic spaces Axis administrators imagined in pursuing this aim were far from congruent. At the same time, the discussion of geopolitics highlighted the contradictions inherent in the selective anti-imperialism the Axis powers pursued alongside their imperial projects. Cultural and spatial projections did not match the outcomes academic and political actors expected. ARNAB DUTTA's (Göttingen) study of Bengali traveller's reports on Italy and Germany included reflections on how they situated themselves vis-à-vis the Axis imperial regimes in comparison to the empire they experienced at home. Bengalis very favourably juxtaposed the absence of segregation in Italy to British racism, whereas, as DILEK BARLAS (Istanbul) added, Arab commentators regarded Italy as a colonial power whose rule was more brutal and arbitrary than Britain's. Excellent examples of inter-Axis emulation that came up during the conference were Libya's function as a model for the German colonizing of Eastern Europe and JANIS MIMURA's reflections on Abyssinia and Manchukuo as pendants and interconnected imperial outliers.

5. The Axis Payoff

What made cooperation within and collaboration with the Axis attractive, wherein did the „Axis payoff“ consist? While the actual multi-level cooperation between the Axis powers remained under-explored, it became clear during the conference that many Axis collaborators pursued agendas of their own, they were not always mere stooges repro-

ducing spoon-fed messages, but oftentimes fellow-travellers who used rivalries within and sometimes across regimes. KELLY ANN HAMMOND's (Fayetteville, Arkansas) superb paper recovered Chinese Muslims' social and cultural wiggle room under Japanese occupation. The Japanese empire's professed Pan-Asianism with its Muslim-Shinto accord was grist to their mill, Chinese Muslims used the opportunity to go on the Hajj but remained lukewarm, wary allies. The unpredictabilities, exigencies and lethal contingencies of war determined choices, as in the case of collaborators recruited across the Axis regimes from POW camps.

6. The Axis Model

There was no readymade Axis model designed for global „diffusion“ and recycling. Selected elements were deracinated, truncated and tweaked while being readjusted. Emulators of the Axis separated grain from chaff. They adopted authoritarian leadership but either dissociated themselves from fascism, as in the case of Getúlio Vargas's Brazil presented by JOÃO FABIO BERTONHA (Maringá), or, if fascist pacesetters like Franco's Spain, nevertheless sought to retain an independent position, in Franco's case emphasising neutrality in Europe, belligerence toward the Soviets and non-involvement in the US-Japanese war (Rodrigo Sanchez).

7. Axis Legacies after World War II

Some recent studies amplify the „anti-liberal“ origins of Europeanization, and indeed colonial Eurafrica emerged clearly as a model for European unification via the African detour. Another intriguing aspect stressed by PETER WIEN (University Park, Maryland) concerns colonial settler repatriates who became electoral pillars of fascist parties after 1945 such as the Front National and the MSI in Italy. KELLY ANN HAMMOND's nuanced detection of anti-communist hangovers among Japan's former Chinese Muslim allies highlighted how the Axis effect shaped the Cold War.

On a final, more general note the conference initiated a sustained reappraisal of the Axis' place in the deeper histories of imperialism and everyday life. DANIEL HEDINGER (Munich) delivered a forceful call for the metic-

ulous study of the Axis as an inter-imperial system, an approach whose fecundity his recent special issue of the „Journal of Global History“ brilliantly demonstrates.² As VICTORIA DE GRAZIA pointed out, religion as an Axis factor was surprisingly absent from the conference despite its crucial significance, e.g. in the guise of Latinate Catholicism which had to be accommodated with neopagan Nazism once the latter was hailed as the saviour of Catholics from materialist liberalism. GEOFF ELEY’s final statement emphasised that the Axis powers emerged as latecomers who entered the fray of imperial rivalry, eager to secure the survival and prosperity of their respective core nations. These newcomers could only carve out their places on the globe by bold, fully militarized war making at the expense of the established empires, thereby they created new heterogeneous macro-polities. Processing experiences of World War I and of domestic civil wars, they radicalized, racialized and accelerated previous forms of violence and propaganda. Eley also highlighted the problems of conceptual slippage between „propaganda“, „cultural“ politics and „ideology“. Sketching future directions of research, Eley stressed the need to connect the grand-scale release and circulation of ideas with the complicated and messy production of political subjectivities among Axis subjects for many of whom the freedom to choose where and how to live dwindled with every day of the war.

Conference Overview:

Opening remarks

Victoria de Grazia (Columbia University, New York)

Sven Reichardt (Universität Konstanz)

Panel I: The Axis Alliance and Geopolitics

Ben Martin (Uppsala Universitet)

Interpreting the Axis through the History of International Cultural Relations: Centers and Peripheries in the Global Geo-Politics of Culture

Constantin Iordachi (Central European University, Budapest)

From Public Diplomacy to Geopolitics: The Nazi „Neuordnung Europas“ and the

Romanian-Bulgarian conflict

Daniel Hedinger (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

Why we need a Global History of the Axis

Commentator: Bianca Gaudenzi (Universität Konstanz)

Panel II: The Axis Alliance - Europe and Asia

Ken Ishida (Chiba University)

The Foreign Policy Decision-Making in Comparison: Ultrationalist Japan and Fascist Italy

Kai Hin Brian Tsui (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University)

Political Conversion in Anticipation of Global War: Reforming Former Communists in Nationalist China, 1927-1937

Arnab Dutta (Universität Göttingen)

In search of an orderly Europe: Germanism and the Bengali travellers in the continental Europe, 1925-45

Commentator: Jürgen Osterhammel (Universität Konstanz)

Panel III: Eurafrica

Gian Luca Podestà (Bocconi Università, Milano)

Eurafrica. Vital Space, Demographic Planning and the Division of Labor in the Italian Empire

Robert Corban (Columbia University, New York)

A Monroe-Doctrin for Mussolini: Geopolitics and „Eurafrica“ in Fascist Italy, 1930-45.

Commentator: Martin Rempe (Universität Konstanz)

Keynote lecture

Geoff Eley (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)

What and When was the Second World War?

Panel IV: The Axis Alliance - Spain and Latin America

Javier Rodrigo Sanchez (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

² „Axis empires – towards a global history of fascist imperialism“, co-edited by Hedinger and Reto Hofmann, Journal of Global History 12 (2017).

Where Everything Started: the International Fascists Alliance in the Spanish Civil War

João Fabio Bertonha (Universidade Estadual de Maringá)

Between the Axis and the Allies. Cultural, geopolitical and ideological constraints in the Brazilian international relations during the 1930s

Commentator: Kirsten Mahlke (Universität Konstanz)

Panel V: The Axis Alliance and Economics

Janis Mimura (Stony Brook University, New York)

Axis Autarchy: The Economics and Geopolitics of Axis Trade

Commentator: Alexander Nützenadel (Humboldt Universität, Berlin)

Panel VI: Occupation Policy and Annihilation

Paolo Fonzi (Seconda Università di Napoli)
German and Italian Occupation Policies in Greece: Competition and Collaboration, 1941-44

Amedeo Osti Guerazzi (Istituto Storico Germanico di Roma)

Cultures of Total Annihilation: German, Italian and Japanese Counterinsurgency Strategies

Commentator: Wolfgang Seibel (Universität Konstanz)

Panel VII: The Axis Alliance and the Muslim World

David Motadel (London School of Economics)
Anticolonial Nationalists and Germany's War for a New World Order, 1939-45

Dilek Barlas (Koç University, Istanbul)
Italian Challenge in the Mediterranean to the International World Order in the 1930s: the Case of Turkey

Kelly Anne Hammond (University of Arkansas, Fayetteville)

Connections and Convergences: Sino-Muslims and the Axis Powers beyond occupied China

Commentator: Peter Wien (University of Maryland, College Park)

Roundtable

Victoria De Grazia (Columbia University, New York), Sven Reichardt (Universität Konstanz), Geoff Eley (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)

Moderator: Franz Fillafer (Universität Konstanz)

Tagungsbericht *The Axis Alliance in Global Perspective*. 07.06.2017–10.06.2017, Hegne, in: H-Soz-Kult 18.07.2017.