

= Book Review =
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The wreckage of WM-21 Falcon F.261 close reconnaissance aircraft. The plane crashed on 24 April 1941, Croatia, Borovo.

Fortepan / Csaba Varga dr.

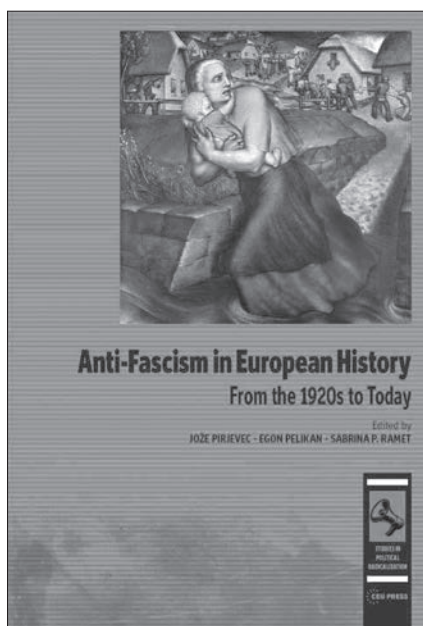
/// Nándor Pócs

=== **Regional Perspectives on a World Phenomenon**

/// A BOOKREVIEW ON

Pirjevec, Jože, Egon Pelikan, and Sabrina P. Ramet, eds.
Anti-Fascism in European History: From the 1920s to Today.

Central European University Press, 2023. pp. 300.



The last global idea was probably anti-fascism. It has been the founding idea of many international organizations, of which the United Nations is the most important. Today, this idea's proponents may perhaps be a little disappointed and despondent. Although, after Rwanda and Srebrenica, even the most optimistic cannot honestly believe that the UN can truly prevent wars and genocide, and these practical failures may indeed reflect on the idea, the idea itself remains one of man's greatest historical achievements. Now more than ever, that there must be a global organization above national institutions and authorities, subordinate to higher considerations; it must protect people who are considered aliens by national communities and who are

thus excluded from their rights as citizens, and it must also protect countries threatened by those stronger than themselves. One of the main ideological components of anti-fascism, drawn from the experience of the Second World War, was thus the assumption of *universal citizenship*, which was never easy to put into practice and is not easy now. As our resources dwindle and the number of places in the world

where we can live a decent life diminishes, the organizations that make citizenship rights universally available to all are becoming less and less important. We are increasingly unwilling to share the basic legal conditions for access to prosperity—namely, citizenship—with *anyone*. And this means that all around the world, the light of anti-fascism is, inevitably, flickering out.

Alarmed acknowledgement of this crisis is also reflected in the foreword to *Anti-Fascism in European History: From the 1920s to Today*, published in 2023. The reordering of the world, to which this global consensus seems to be falling victim, has prompted some scholars to explore the diversity of anti-fascism—its passive and active forms, and its common language across national borders—in a major volume of studies. Beyond this, the basic aim of the volume is not to capture the global essence of anti-fascism. As such, it reflects trends in Central and Eastern European anti-fascism research over the last thirty years, which aim to understand national, non-communist anti-fascists; a field of research that should be treated with caution in a region prone to chauvinist populism, but which is nevertheless of the utmost importance. The fact that the subject has not fallen into the wrong hands is assured by the editors, who are also well versed in international academic research. Perhaps the best known of these is Sabrina Petra Ramet, who, although a US citizen, after completing her military service spent decades in the South Slav states and wrote several books, mainly on the break-up of socialist Yugoslavia. Jože Pirjevec is a researcher of Slovenian-Italian relations: a historian whose life is the main research agenda. Pirjevec was born with an Italian name in 1940 and was himself, along with his family, a victim of the harsh Italianization of Slovenians in Trieste and the Trieste area. Like Pirjevec, Egon Pelikan, head of the Institute of History at the Research Centre in Koper, is researching the history of Slovenes in Italy, mainly publishing on church history.

As the name of the editors suggests, the book's geographical focus is the South Slavic region, especially the Slovene-inhabited areas. Although the volume contains studies on Slovak, German, and even Finnish and Danish aspects that are fascinating in their own right, these only help to contextualize the subject. Thus, it is primarily the Slovenian anti-fascist movements that provide a comprehensive picture. The studies in the first chapter, which present historical anti-fascism—i.e., the anti-fascist struggle of Slovenes under Italian and Nazi rule—become multi-layered stories when read in conjunction with the writings of Božo Repe and Vida Rožac Darovec, which examine the history of Slovene anti-fascist memorials and, in particular, their post-Yugoslav reception. Although Slovenian anti-fascism never became a cultural meme similar to the French or Italian (or more recently Polish and Ukrainian) resistance, nor was it as widespread as these movements, the TIGR movement, which is also frequently mentioned in the volume, was a pioneer of European anti-fascism. The Slovenian (and partly Croatian) movement, which fought for the liberation of Trieste, Istria, Gorizia, and Rijeka (or more precisely, their

annexation to Yugoslavia), was liberal, Christian socialist and church-based. As it did not reject violent forms of resistance, many political assassinations can be attributed to its name. The TIGR is a good example of the fact that, contrary to popular belief, Balkan anti-fascism was not exclusively leftist or communist.

The editorial foreword and the afterword by the British fascism expert Nigel Copsey, to which I would like to add some reflections, are based on the idea that, like fascism, anti-fascism is also a diverse phenomenon. Indeed, just as several rival fascisms could coexist within one country—see, for example, the Croatian Ustaša and the Yugoslav ORJUNA—this was also the case with the forces of anti-fascism. Such was the situation in Volhynia around 1943, when local Czechs, Ukrainians, and Poles, organized into ethnically and politically divided units, fought brutal battles not only against the Germans but also against each other and the Soviets. Yet, in the face of more and more recent research, the overarching concepts that form the subject of these studies seem to be falling apart. Simultaneously, such regionally focused research almost immediately raises the question of how smaller groups were connected to the larger ones. To resolve this, of course, we need to know: who is an anti-fascist, and what is anti-fascism?

Theoretically, we can attempt to answer this question in two ways. One is to treat anti-fascism in a reactive and non-autonomous sense: i.e., to include only those among the anti-fascists whom historical fascism has named as its enemies. The formula thus seems simple, based on the definitions of fascism by Roger Griffin and Emilio Gentile, quoted in the preface: the modern left with Marxist roots (social democrats, communists) and, of course, the Jews. They are natural-born, *ab ovo* anti-fascists, since by their existence and worldview they are inherently opposed to the class-denying and/or racist outlook of fascism. Fascism treated them as enemies even when it was temporarily forced to make tactical concessions to them. The other methodology is based on the autonomous nature of anti-fascism, i.e., its transcendence of historical fascism. According to this perspective, there must be something in anti-fascism that links Marxist-rooted anti-fascism with the bourgeois and ecclesiastical anti-fascists whom communist practice otherwise sought to annihilate. This would imply that anti-fascism was not a tactical-reactive ideology, but an autonomous idea rooted in the Enlightenment, which was able to transcend the most fundamental contradictions of modernity: namely, the opposition between socialism and capitalism, and between the scientific and the religious worldviews. If we accept this, then we also claim that anti-fascism existed not only after fascism, but before it, perhaps even from time immemorial. Thus this idea, rooted in human universality, was ultimately unleashed by none other than fascism, based on the irrational cult of death.

Neither the editors nor Copsey has taken a firm stance in favor of either methodology, so we can say that the volume, while raising important questions, remains methodologically and contextually truncated. Their uncertainty is, of course,

unsurprising. After all, it is hardly possible to claim that anti-fascism is the supreme universal ideal of the *innocents of modernity* without a tingle running down one's spine. Considering the last eighty years, it is not easy to give anti-fascism Christian epithets. We should write and speak about anti-fascism (or, even more difficult, *believe* in it) in such a way as to know that the idea is daily subverted and subordinated to tactical considerations. Of course, it is obvious that the actions of individual anti-fascist resisters should not necessarily be deduced from the power politics and trickery of the Soviet Union or its Western allies, and that the weight of all this cannot be compared, for example, with the unimaginable sacrifices made by the Soviet people. Still, anti-fascism can only be defined by taking into account its individual, local, and strategic aspects.

We know well that the anti-fascist people's front launched at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern—which suddenly required the communists, who had hitherto accused the Social Democrats of social fascism, to suspend the revolution—was a purely tactical move. The conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was also a tactical move, not to mention the fact that Soviet-style regimes have always exhibited certain features of historical fascism (collective stigmatization, imperialism, political violence, etc.), and in some cases have even rehabilitated the fascist past (see, for example, the example of Ceausescu's Romania, which partially rehabilitated the Iron Guard). These features remained so strong and durable that they were able to undermine the anti-fascist legitimacy of the entire socialist bloc. And as the Slovenian studies in this volume show, these fascist tendencies of Soviet-style regimes included systematic stigmatization and persecution of non-communist anti-fascists and a tendency to exclude them from the memory of the resistance. Catholics, monarchists, and social democrats, who here in Central Europe had fought against fascism and/or the fascist occupier in at least as great numbers as communists did, were tried and briefly imprisoned on charges of fascism after 1945. Indeed, the fact that non-Communist anti-fascists were not free to tell their own stories until the 1990s was precisely because of their former allies, the Communists. The situation was quite different on the western side of the Iron Curtain, where in the countries with the most significant anti-fascist traditions (i.e., France and Italy), communists were able to retain their organizations and were not erased from the memory of the resistance.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Copsey's epilogue, featuring a quote from Hemingway ("Are you a communist? No, I am an anti-fascist"), is most concerned with freeing the understanding of anti-fascism from the simplistic equation of anti-fascist = communist; indeed, otherwise we would not understand the universality of anti-fascism. Such simplifications, which still strongly dominate not only public but also academic discourse in East-Central Europe, are understandable considering the grievances suffered. However, if the only standard of anti-fascism is the communists' considerations of power politics, then we must say (as many do) that the

idea of anti-fascism failed along with the socialist experiment. This opens up the possibility of rehabilitating individuals and groups labeled as fascist, which would not be a heretical idea at all. But by rejecting the *universal* standard of anti-fascism, such simplifications necessarily open the way to so-called “revisionism”: the rehabilitation of obscure elements.

This volume is also largely about anti-fascists who fall outside the framework of Marxist-style anti-fascism. Their placement in the big picture is not easy because they were not first and foremost historical enemies of fascism, but of communism. The studies of Gianfranco Cresciani and Egon Pelikan make it quite clear that the Catholic groups that defended the rights of the Slovenian minorities in Gorizia opposed Italian fascism not necessarily because it was fascist, but because Mussolini’s regime (also) sought to assimilate Slovenes. In addition, the Slovenian Catholic clergy who remained in royal Yugoslavia after the First World War proved very cooperative during the Nazi occupation, so it can be said that it is not Catholicism alone that makes one anti-fascist. Nor, of course, do the authors mean to imply that Catholicism does not inevitably lead to anti-fascism, as this would not be true; see the joint study by Sabrina Petra Ramet and Christine M. Hassenstab on the White Rose movement in Munich. Hans and Sophie Scholl’s main intellectual sources were prominent Christian thinkers (St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, John Henry Newman), on whose basis the war against the tyrant was justified, although they rejected violent resistance. The question then is why such contradictions existed in attitudes towards fascism within the same communities of thought, and why some non-leftist anti-fascists ultimately chose the path of resistance while others chose passivity or cooperation? Comparative studies of regional anti-fascisms can play an important role in answering this question. This is one of the reasons why it is painful that none of the essays in this volume seek to present a broader picture of the anti-fascisms of the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe, or to compare them. At this point, it is perhaps not useless to mention the Hungarian situation, which in many aspects is exceptional.

According to recent Hungarian research (Ákos Bartha), the groups involved in armed resistance and their leaders themselves shared the ethnicist-chauvinist ideological consensus of the Horthy regime, and a large portion of them were right-wing radicals. They did not oppose the Hungarian National Socialists (and especially the Arrow Cross Party) for being fascist and anti-Semitic, nor even for being willing to cooperate more closely with the Germans, but because they did not consider the latter to be Hungarians in sense of national character. They considered these National Socialists to be poorly assimilated pseudo-Hungarians—alien to Hungarian characteristics and using their Hungarianness only for political window-dressing—and thus they doubted the Hungarianness of the National Socialists using the same arguments they used against the Jews. These convictions were shared by the non-armed anti-fascists, including a significant part of the bourgeois and

populist intelligentsia, and it can be said that, with the exception of the communists and the social democrats (few of whom were involved in the resistance), the consensus among Hungarian anti-fascist forces was based mainly on the Hungarian National Socialists' supposed lack of Hungarianness. Therefore, this means that the Hungarian anti-fascists did not reject the repressive practices of fascism but rather the *alien* nature of its representatives. It follows that the image of legitimate power held by non-left anti-fascists was based on ethno-racial backgrounds, and not on various legal-philosophical-political abstractions.

The problems of alienness and Hungarian anti-fascism were so intertwined that the issue was even not settled after the Second World War. Although the Hungarian Communist Party did its best to present itself as the flagship of the Hungarian (armed) resistance and used this idea as one of its main tools for legitimation (in line with the tendencies described in the volume), as mentioned above, Hungarian anti-fascism had weak Marxist roots. The contradictions only really came to a head when, at the end of the 1940s, the so-called Muscovites—the circle of Mátyás Rákosi, Ernő Gerő, József Révai and Mihály Farkas—had come to the brink of power. As is well known, the term muscovite refers not only to uncritical imitators of the Stalinist model, but also to communists who were not in Hungary during the Second World War, but in Moscow. Thus, the rule of the Muscovites created narrative contradictions with the central party's efforts to make space for the communists in Hungarian historical memory through communist-dominated anti-fascism. As a result, once the communists had successfully defeated their political opponents and were able to exclude them from the pantheon of Hungarian resistance, legitimate Hungarian anti-fascism became *alien*. It is not a coincidence that the liberalization of the regime from the 1960s on was accompanied by the gradual return of previously excluded actors (even some extreme right-wing figures) to the official memory of the resistance, partly in order to augment the legitimacy of the system with autochthonous (i.e., non-alien) elements of Hungarian anti-fascism. The research, study, and inclusion of the autochthonous actors of Hungarian anti-fascism in the public sphere has continued ever since, and these have become so predominant that the history of left-wing resistance with Marxist roots is not researched today at all.

All in all, the case of the Hungarian anti-fascists also demonstrates that an understanding of anti-fascism's multifaceted nature does not necessarily lead us to a more precise definition of the characteristics of universal anti-fascism. Philosophy is probably the most appropriate tool for this. The search for an essence beyond class, blood, and national culture, though not easy, is not worth giving up. *Anti-Fascism in European History* is a regional experiment, which hopefully will be followed by others like it.



Prisoners of war (Serbian soldiers) marching from Baranyavár towards Pélmonoštor, with the sugar factory in the background, Croatia, 1941.

Fortepan / Tivadar Lissák

Keywords

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Members of the Kolinda ensemble, foreground:
Ágnes Zsigmondi, Ágnes Kamondy, Dóra Kováts, back-
ground: Iván Lantos, Péter Dabasi, János Balázs. 1976.

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