

Ángel Alcalde

War Veterans and Fascism in Interwar Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

The topic of war veterans and the development of interwar European fascism remains a significant object of enquiry in fascist studies, with this journal even devoting a recent special issue to discuss it.¹ Since the First World War and the various intertwined conflicts immediately before and after were a key cause of the crisis of the liberal *ancien régime* (or 'bourgeois Europe', as Charles Maier termed it), Ángel Alcalde's latest monograph certainly is of interest within the field.

Alcalde has been prolific in the brief period since receiving his doctorate from the European Universities Institute in Florence in 2015, publishing articles on a range of topics relating to transnational networks, veterans, and fascism. *War Veterans and Fascism in Interwar Europe*, however, is his main authored book to date.

The main thrust of the book is Alcalde's attempt to test the commonly held notions about war veterans and interwar fascism. On the one hand, there is the trope of the brutalized war veterans as the vanguard of the revolutionary fascist order; on the other hand, there is powerful image of veterans as victims of the senselessness of modern war, who gravitated towards pacifism. As Alcalde shows through detailed empirical case studies, particularly of Italy, but also Germany, and to a lesser, extent, France, neither of these two commonly held views is entirely correct. Other groups, such as the youth that were just too young to participate in these epoch-defining wars, are often equally, if not more significant for the mass mobilization of fascist parties and movements. Over time, however, fascist movements return to the image of the war veteran as the ideal fascist man, for example after the Spanish Civil War (a crucible of internationalized fascism) or in Axis-occupied countries during the Second World War. While Alcalde's conclusions are based on thorough and detailed readings of an impressive source base, many of these insights are not entirely new.

The more innovative aspect of Alcalde's study is in his use of transnational fascism as a theoretical framework, whereby, he claims, we can reveal the interplay between veterans' organizations, fascist political actors, and their

1 'Special Issue: War Veterans and Fascism in Interwar Europe,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 6, no. 1 (2017), <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/22116257/6/1>.

various networks domestically and across borders. This, in turn, can help us to gain new understandings into the ways in which fascism developed and spread in interwar Europe.

One difficulty, however, is that Alcalde never adequately defines what he means by transnational fascism in his book. Although the term has been gaining prominence in fascist studies over the past decade, it is still by no means uncontested, or even self-evident. At times, it has been used in not very rigorous ways, as a shorthand for various regimes simply borrowing accoutrements of fascism, which for me, as a comparativist who thinks ideology is important, simply stretches a fuzzy definition of fascism to the point of near meaninglessness. As such, I wish Alcalde had devoted more time and effort not to only defining transnational fascism, but also to clarifying why it is so central to his study, when models based on theories of comparison, social networks, or diffusion of ideas could just as well achieve similar results. This shortcoming is even more apparent when one knows there are good theoretical discussions of transnational fascism out there,² including by Alcalde himself.³

Since the study is framed using the concept of transnational fascism, Alcalde refers to developments in a number of countries throughout his book. The main case studies are Italy and Germany, with Spain and France offering less developed examples. Other countries make limited appearances as well, such as Britain, and there is a passing reference to Piłsudski's Poland – albeit it is ambiguous to what extent Alcalde considers this regime fascist. While the inclusion of the traditional 'core' fascist countries of Italy and Germany is unsurprising, the inclusion or omission of others is less self-evident. The relatively abundant literature on French fascism and veterans may explain, in part, this choice; the choice of Spain, a non-belligerent in World War I, is not as clear-cut. Why does he consider the Moroccan Rif War, with the so-called Disaster of Annual (1921), to produce veterans for inclusion in his study, while the veterans of contemporary conflicts elsewhere in Europe, such as former *Freikorps* combatants, are largely marginalized in his narrative? Whole swathes of Europe

2 E.g. Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, 'Introduction,' in *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945*, ed. Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2017), 1–38.

3 Ángel Alcalde, 'Towards Transnational Fascism: German Perceptions of Mussolini's Fascists and the Early NSDAP,' *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19, no. 2 (2018): 176–195, doi:10.1080/21567689.2018.1449109.

where emancipatory wars and infected civil strife broke out, in territories ranging from Ireland to Russia and Turkey, are left out entirely.

This focus on certain cases, and not on others, is most likely due to Alcalde's historicist notions of what fascism was, namely something that emerged, and hence emanated, primarily from Italy. It did not develop simultaneously in slightly different contexts around Europe.⁴ Thus, when discussing the ideal type image of the fascist veteran, Alcalde posits unequivocally: 'If there was some form, even limited, of historical fusion between fascism and veterans, its foundations must be sought in Italy.'⁵ This precludes any possibility of what Roger Griffin calls a 'decentring' fascist studies;⁶ for Alcalde, Italy is thus the prime mover of the vast majority of all things fascist, even when later eclipsed by Nazi Germany. Manifestations of fascism on the European periphery, such as the British Union of Fascists or the Romanian Iron Guard that did not really embrace the myth of the fascist veteran, may offer interesting counterexamples, yet nevertheless still operated within the paradigm first defined by Italian Fascism.⁷ The same could also apply to French movements like *Croix de Feu*, which rejected Mussolini while copying elements of his Fascism.⁸

Perhaps if one's gaze is fixed almost exclusively on the more western and southern reaches of Europe, this interpretation appears tenable, even robust; but should one start to include more of what Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz termed the 'Shatterzone of Empires', the idea that there is a sole source for the myth of the fascist veteran – or indeed, for fascism itself – loses a lot of its certainty. Even if we are to focus on a small corner of northeastern Europe, we see examples that would cause problems for the narrative offered in Alcalde's book.

For example, Estonia gained independence in the chaotic aftermath of the collapse of the Tsarist regime in the First World War. As shown demonstratively by Andres Kasekamp, not only were veterans of the War of Independence active in radical politics already from 1920, the *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liit* [Estonian Veterans' League] was the main political organization that made

4 Cf. Alcalde, 'Towards Transnational Fascism,' 194.

5 Alcalde, *War Veterans*, 68.

6 Roger Griffin, 'Decentering Comparative Fascist Studies,' *Fascism* 4, no. 2 (2015): 103–118, doi:10.1163/22116257-00402003.

7 Alcalde, *War Veterans*, 216–217.

8 *Ibid.*, 222–223.

fascism mainstream in Estonia, and yet the transnational contacts between this fascism and Italian Fascism were 'negligible'.⁹

The situation in Finland is also instructive. As Oula Silvennoinen states,

A comparison of Finnish radical nationalist movements readily brings to view the similarities with proponents of early fascism in Italy and Germany. The fascist core comprised members of the more or less imagined Finnish community of *Frontkämpfer*, disappointed by the outcome of the civil war, yearning for a renewed showdown with both the internal enemy, communists, and the external enemy, the Soviet Union, and the fulfillment of irredentist dreams of Greater Finland.¹⁰

Those longing to complete the unrealised goal of a cleansing revolutionary war came from the ranks of those who fought in the German-backed *Jäger* units of the First World War or the White forces during the bloody Civil War in 1918. When it comes to transnational fascist entanglement, however, Henrik Ekberg suggests that the ideological roots of Finnish National Socialism lie not in German Hitlerism, but in the idea of the 'organic state' formulated by the Swede Rudolf Kjellén.¹¹

Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe warn against reducing transnational fascism to 'mere mimesis' or 'one-way emulation'.¹² While Alcalde does not do this outright, his treatment of the development of interwar European fascism, and the role of veterans in this process, skews heavily towards this thanks to his Italo-centric perspective. *War Veterans and Fascism in Interwar Europe* offers the reader thought-provoking insights, particularly in how it meticulously deconstructs the way that Italian Fascism was perceived at home and abroad as a political movement of war veterans, and in tracing various points of contact between fascists and veterans in a few countries over several phases of the rise of fascism in interwar Europe. Nevertheless, the reader hoping for a comprehensive look at the diverse entanglements between war

9 Andres Kasekamp, *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 68–69. See also: Andres Kasekamp, 'Fascism by Popular Initiative: The Rise and Fall of the Vaps Movement in Estonia,' *Fascism* 4, no. 2 (2015): 155–168, doi:10.1163/22116257-00402006.

10 Oula Silvennoinen, "'Home, Religion, Fatherland': Movements of the Radical Right in Finland,' *Fascism* 4, no. 2 (2015): 142, doi:10.1163/22116257-00402005.

11 Henrik Ekberg, *Führerns trogna följeslagare: Den finländska nazismen 1932–1944* (Espoo: Schildt, 1991), 53, 72.

12 Bauerkämper and Rossoliński-Liebe, 3.

veterans and fascism from across interwar Europe may find that the scope of this book is disappointingly narrower than the title suggests. A complementary view from the fascisms on the periphery would likely have led the author to modify some of his presumptions and conclusions.

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