

SEIDMAN, MICHAEL. *Transatlantic Antifascisms. From the Spanish Civil War to the End of World War II*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017. xi, 339 pp. Ill. £69.99. (Paper: £21.99; E-book: \$23.00)

Michael Seidman's *Transatlantic Antifascisms* enters a rich and diverse field of historiographical study. The author's opening remark that there is a lack of work on antifascism is therefore surprising. He himself eschews any analysis of its complex origins as a grass-roots, pan-European phenomenon in the wake of the Great War. Like fascism itself, antifascism was born out of the ways in which that war had profoundly disrupted older forms of social and political hierarchy across the continent – just as accelerating processes of industrialization and urbanization would continue to do. Seidman chooses instead to begin *Transatlantic Antifascisms* much later, in 1936 in Spain, when military intervention by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy – intent on disrupting the European balance of power in order to displace the 'old empires' of Britain and France – made possible a full-scale battlefield war. From there Seidman's narrative runs through to 1945, telling the story of the gradually emerging pragmatic alliance of governing political establishments in Britain, France and the US with grass-roots antifascist movements in Europe. These latter, by dint of their origins and experience since the Great War, were largely anti-establishment in outlook. Hybrid and multi-form, notwithstanding their contradictions, they stood opposed to (indeed in the way of) the processes of brutal national rehierarchization sought by fascism. On the other side of the tense alliance, governing political establishments opposed something rather different: the accelerating – and status-quo disrupting – *territorial expansionism* of Europe's new fascist powers, and especially Nazi Germany's, as the most developed military-industrial complex of its day.

Seidman's choice of chronology and thematic focus evokes a sense of déjà vu. What he presents, notwithstanding the many idiosyncratic asides, is the stereotypical, top-down 'Western Allied' view of WWII in Europe: a conflict of 'nation against nation', decided on conventional battlefields by Allied armies and in which the continent-wide, multi-national and multi-ethnic armed resistance organisations emerging from antifascism's long and complicated history are still scripted as bit-actors. Seidman does not compute the glaring realities which disrupt this national narrative – the earlier widespread political sympathy afforded Mussolini and Hitler by European conservative public opinion; or the participation of many Germans in the struggle against fascism/Nazism both before and after 1933, inside antifascist political organisations, but also beyond them (for popular antifascism was also a structure of feeling), and both inside and outside Germany itself (German International Brigaders fighting fascism in the war in Spain being one case in point).

Instead, Seidman's account accepts as if naturally prevailing the very 'nations' whose societies and polities were exploding across Europe during these years. And throughout his book Seidman implicitly defines as antifascist all those who came to oppose the territorial expansion of Germany and Italy. The author thereby conceives of antifascism as merely old-world power politics with some new-fangled political window dressing. From here it is a short distance to coining the term 'counterrevolutionary antifascism' to describe (indiscriminately) the foreign and domestic war policies of the Western Allied governing establishments. This also allows the author, apparently without hesitation, to opine that 'the internment of Japanese-Americans was another example of US racist antifascism' (p.143). And it is this same empirically and conceptually truncated redefinition of antifascism which allows Seidman to argue in his chapter on the French Popular Front that there was an

‘antifascist deficit’ because prime minister Léon Blum and fellow reformists still had their attention focused on domestic structural change rather than channelling everything into rearmament (although in the end rearmament did consume the budget for social and economic reform).

Seidman appears then to accept that antifascism has no other historical meaning than as a broad descriptor for the ‘top down’ western alliance that fought WWII, and thus (for it comes to the same) that this war was just another conventional one against Germany for overseas territories and international influence. But we already have a plentiful, sea-changing historiography which has shown us in great empirical and conceptual depth how very different that war looked from inside occupied Europe, where the complex and kaleidoscopic forms of partisan warfare fought across the continent – that is to say, civil wars – were intimately bound up with the unfinished business of the Great War. Once again the question was electrically alive: what should life and politics look like now the socially feudal order seemed really to be dying? The brutal ‘solution’ proposed under Nazi tutelage to bring back hierarchy by colonising Europe’s own population would produce a conflagration which ended by engulfing not only the old continent, but through its empires, the entire world. There is a well-known genealogy leading from the Allies’ wartime mobilization of colonial populations deploying a discourse of freedom and self-determination, direct to the birth of anticolonial movements after 1945; but as the expanding historiography of antifascism (including under the impetus of transnational history) also makes clear, these connections and their larger political consequences globally, were also made through human contacts between anticolonial activists/thinkers and European antifascists and resistance fighters, before and during the war as well as afterwards in exile and diaspora.

That transnational methodology can be fruitful is axiomatic: but we should also remember that it was precisely older incarnations of antifascist historiography which, by analysing the ‘pan’ within a European frame, precisely in order to scrutinise fascism itself, were already performing key work of critical historical deconstruction of what were supposedly natural, unified and transparent ‘national’ categories. Yet it is precisely these undifferentiated national categories that Seidman clings to in his book – perverse though that seems, given the historiography we can access today.

Transatlantic Antifascisms looks mainly at history top-down, paying no attention to how multiple forms of anti-fascism were articulated or experienced ‘from below’. An apparent exception comes in chapter 8 where the author returns to the subject of his earlier book on workers in Popular Frontist Paris and Barcelona – what he refers to as their ‘refusals to work’- that is, the persistence of labour disputes; in this current book in the context of Britain, the US, and France during WWII. The author marshals rich and fascinating empirical material but demurs to offer much analysis, instead applying a gloss which, as in his earlier book, ignores key differences of chronology and place, just as it also ignores the complexities of bottom-up social dynamics, reducing these to an ill-defined and ahistorical ‘individualism’.

Overall in *Transatlantic Antifascisms*, Michael Seidman deploys a lens which is methodologically nationalist. This is doubly unfortunate for a historian focusing on interwar Europe, when antifascism first emerged to question and disrupt the functions/working of nationalism at a moment of profound continental dislocation. Indeed Seidman seems intent on having his nationalist optic entirely subsume the discussion of antifascism’s multiplicity, to render it invisible as a historical phenomenon, in spite of his book’s title (and in spite of the

coining of new terms). But whatever the authorial intent, the mode of writing is poorly attuned to exploring the intricacies of the period of European history which he has taken on: hermetic statements abound, sometimes odd *non sequiturs* too. Overall, the book does not sustain an argument capable of advancing historiographical debate. In this, then, it is ill-matched to its ostensible subject.