

# Editorial

For supporters of a liberal-democratic system, anti-Fascism is ultimately a matter of course. For, the Fascist movement in Italy, founded in 1919, with its anti-humanism, anti-parliamentarianism, anti-pluralism, anti-liberalism and anti-democratism, negated all those fundamental principles which characterised the constitutions both of the old liberal-democratic systems and of those which were newly established after World War I. If many of today's democrats find it difficult to use the flagword "anti-Fascism", this is most of all a result of anti-Fascism having been monopolized by a communist Left which combined the (even violent) combat against Fascism with their fight against liberal democracy (as a "bourgeois", "capitalist" system), in the context of which they sometimes even vilified the moderate Left as "social Fascism" and declared them the main enemy.<sup>1</sup> An overstretched concept of Fascism was one of the core elements of the ideology of power of the Soviet Union and its satellites, for whom anti-Fascism as a legitimating resource became the more important the more their promises (democracy, humanism, social equality) proved to be unfounded. At the same time, the way in which anti-Fascism was understood by Moscow-oriented Communism spread across the democratic constitutional states in the "West" not least by way of the generously funded media of those political parties which were members of Comintern and its successor organisations. This happened to such an extent that soon anti-Fascism seemed to unite with anti-capitalism and to be incongruent with anti-Communism. Today's militant "Antifa" partly draws upon these ideological bankruptcy assets of Real Existing Socialism, however its mobilising power in a number of European countries is most of all based on the success of right-wing extremist and right-wing populist parties as well as on the perceived weakness of state security services which are accused of being lax or even being tacit accomplices.<sup>2</sup> Where the "Antifa" takes violent action "against the Right", it does not only fuel escalating dynamics but also contributes to anti-fascist commitment being delegitimised.

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- 1 See Siegfried Bahne, „Sozialfaschismus“ in Deutschland. Zur Geschichte eines politischen Begriffs. In: *International Review of Social History*, 10 (1965), pp. 211–245. For a current historical outline of the term see: Jens Späth, *Antifaschismus. Begriff, Geschichte und Forschungsfeld in westeuropäischer Perspektive* (Version 1.0). In: *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte* from 4.2.2019 ([http://docupedia.de/zg/Spaeth\\_antifaschismus\\_v1\\_de\\_2019](http://docupedia.de/zg/Spaeth_antifaschismus_v1_de_2019), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14765/zzf.dok-1323>; 23.3.2021). On the problematic nature of the term see furthermore the contributions in the following volume: Manfred Agethen/Eckhard Jesse/Ehrhart Neubert (Eds.), *Der missbrauchte Antifaschismus. DDR-Staatsdoktrin und Lebenslüge der deutschen Linken*, Freiburg i. Brsg. 2002.
  - 2 On the international contexts see: Nigel Copsey, *Von Rom nach Charlottesville. Eine sehr kurze Geschichte des globalen Antifaschismus*. In: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 67 (2017) 42–43, pp. 29–34.

Today's wide-spread misuse becomes obvious for everybody who has a look at the beginnings of anti-Fascism. The focus of this special issue is on anti-Fascism in Italy in the first decade after the founding of the "fasci di combattimento" on Piazza di San Sepolcro in Milan (March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1919). A look at the early analyses and controversies among the opponents of this new political movement is helpful for grasping the shape of the phenomenon and determining its different features. The fluidity and diffuse nature of this changing movement, which brought powers of the most different kinds together, in the early years of its development explains essentially the diversity of its perception by the political competitors and their reactions.

*Giovanni de Ghantuz Cubbe*, political scientist at Mercator Forum Migration und Demokratie (MIDEM) of Technische Universität Dresden, sheds light on the complicated conditions for the development of Italian anti-Fascism in the first half of the 1920s as well as on the reasons for the far reaching change it experienced in 1924/25 (Matteotti Crisis). He shows the variety of the earliest reactions to Fascism and makes the wait-and-see attitude towards Fascism among wide parts of the Italian society the focus of attention. Many were convinced that this was a phenomenon that would soon be over. The contribution in this special issue shows: an appropriate understanding of early anti-Fascism is only possible if the initial variety and ambivalence (sometimes only for strategic reasons) of Fascism in its early years are taken into consideration.

An important role for the early ways of dealing with Fascism played the concept of totalitarianism which was introduced into the political debate indeed not by Mussolini (as it was believed for a long time) but by anti-Fascists as early as in 1923. Fascism researcher *Emilio Gentile*, who was teaching at University Rome I until his retirement, sheds light on the context of the anti-Fascist debate on the "sistema totalitario" of Fascism and shows why representatives of different anti-Fascist currents (Liberals, Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Socialists) understood the basic features of the Fascist movement even before the regime established itself (1925/26). In this context, a particular focus is on Liberal Giovanni Amendola who, although not being the first to use the adjective "totalitarian" (Christian Democrat Luigi Sturzo, in a foreword to a compilation of his political speeches written as early as at the end of 1922 and published in 1923, criticised a "totalitarian concept of the state"<sup>3</sup> which, he said, had started to spread in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), was the one to give it a more specific meaning, aiming at the Fascist movement, and to make it politically relevant in this sense.

The great variety of the earliest anti-Fascist reactions and interpretations becomes obvious if one has a look at the way in which selected representatives saw

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3 Quoted after the German edition: Luigi Sturzo, Einleitung „Staatsreform und politische Richtungen“. In: id., Über italienischen Faschismus und Totalitarismus. Ed. and introduced by Uwe Backes and Günther Heydemann in cooperation with Giovanni de Ghantuz Cubbe and Annett Zingler, Göttingen 2018, pp. 49–79, here 57.

themselves. Little known in Germany are Christian Democrat Francesco Luigi Ferrari and “Radical Liberal” Piero Gobetti. *Uwe Backes* (Hannah-Arendt-Institut) analyzes Ferrari’s anti-Fascism, by way of a biographical sketch based on his most important publications before and after his exile (1926). Doing so, Backes analyses most of all the comparative categories Ferrari used for his classification of Fascism. By determining the relation to the “liberal system” on the one hand and to the revolutionary Right on the other, he demonstrates the connection between anti-Fascism, anti-extremism and anti-totalitarianism. Crucial for Ferrari’s anti-Fascism is his rejection of the use of revolutionary violence as well as his orientation at fundamental values and rules, whose acceptance he and his political allies believed to be indispensable if inalienable civil rights and liberties should claim validity.

*Ersilia Alessandrone Perona*, former Director of “Istituto piemontese per la storia della Resistenza e della società contemporanea Giorgio Agosti”, dedicated her contribution to the anti-Fascism of Piero Gobetti. She sketches the course of his life as well as the reception of his ideas both by the contemporaries and in the present and determines the typical features of his “cultural anti-Fascism”, which were closely connected to ideas of a “liberal revolution” in Italy and determined his quarrel with the Fascist regime. On the other hand, however, Gobetti considered Fascism an exclusively Italian phenomenon and underestimated its European dimension. This was why he did not recognize Europe’s descent from a liberal to a fascist epoch.

The contribution by political scientist *Eckhard Jesse* (Emeritus, TU-Chemnitz) concludes the special issue – he draws a line from the beginnings of anti-Fascism to the present. At the heart of his considerations are the development in Germany as well as the debate on those kinds of anti-Fascism in history and in the present which are hardly congruent with liberal-democratic fundamental values. This explains his firm support of anti-extremism/anti-totalitarianism instead of anti-Fascism.

Like the two issues of the year 2020, the contributions to this special edition are freely accessible as open access publications at the V&R-eLibrary platform ([www.vr-elibrary.de](http://www.vr-elibrary.de)), and they are also available at V&R Webshop ([www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com](http://www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com)). By transforming the journal, the Hannah-Arendt-Institut and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht publishers jointly support the further developments in the realm of scientific publishing as well as the open access movement.

*Uwe Backes/Giovanni de Ghantuz Cubbe*