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Review of Militant Anti-Fascism: A Hundred Years of Resistance

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M. Testa's (a pseudonym) *Militant Anti-Fascism: A Hundred Years of Resistance* is a rare thing, an historical overview of a dimension of European antifascism written specifically with activists in mind. It is a book that will both educate and in some instances inspire those who engage with it, and readers would do well to contemplate Militant Anti-Fascism in conjunction with Roger Griffin's justly acclaimed Fascism (1995) in the Oxford Readers series, which brings together key texts written by fascists themselves in a global survey charting fascism's development from its early twentieth-century origins up to the present day.[1] By reading these two overviews in conjunction, we are able to deepen our understanding of fascism's ideological make-up—laid out in Griffin's cogent Introduction—to gain a better grasp of what exactly it was that antifascist militants were seeking to resist. Griffin's definition of generic fascism as “a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism,”[2] likewise complements Testa’s brief outline of fascism’s key concepts (4-5) by giving us a synthetic ideological frame in which to consider Testa’s checklist of the shared ideas permeating the various fascisms highlighted in his anthology. Taken together, these books allow us to consider fascist regimes and movements in tandem with the understudied history of those engaged in militant antifascist resistance in Italy, France, Austria, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Ireland, Scotland, and England.[3]

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[1] Roger Griffin, *Oxford Readers: Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Part I of Militant Anti-Fascism charts the history of antifascist agitation from the formation of Mussolini’s pugilist squadristi in the immediate aftermath of the First World War through to resistance to Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists on the eve of World War Two. Each chapter draws on scholarly sources and period accounts to provide the reader with a condensed synopsis of resistance to fascism’s development in a single nation state or cluster of states, with added focus on those countries in which fascists first gained political power or were subject to more widespread opposition. For instance, the histories of fascism in Italy, Germany, Austria, and of the Span-ish Civil War and its aftermath are given greater attention than the cursory treatment of important fascist movements in France (37-39),[4] Hungary, Romania, and Poland (99-102). In Part II the chronological frame shifts to opposed to “non-violent middle-class tossers” (330-333). Once again recourse to non-violent resistance is subject to ridicule and slander. Chapter titles such as “England: ‘A Bloody Good Hiding’” and “AFA and Ireland: ‘Short, Sharp and Painful’” along with graphics of swastikas—clearly standing in for the fascist rank and file—being pulverized by muscular fists (103, 285) and a violent attack with a truncheon (241), as well as a full-page illustration of an all-male squad racing into battle with cudgels (320), serve to glorify violence rather than downplay it as an “unpleasant method.” In a leveling moment in which Testa describes the escalating tide of pitched battles between the BUF and their adversaries during the 1930’s, he acknowledges that “the increased violence attracted recruits to both sides” (128). Sometimes being unapologetic about violence can be unwittingly (or purposely, in the case of these graph-ics) combined with the heroizing and celebration of aggression as an irrational, mythological mobilizer for those eager to inflict a ‘bloody good hiding’.[10] Under such conditions, violence becomes fetishized. M. Testa, to his credit is fully aware of this potential risk; the rest of us would do well to follow his example.

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[2] See chapter two in Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 26-55; and Griffin, *Oxford Readers: Fascism*, 1-12.

[3] *Militant Anti-Fascism* has a North American counterpart– although one that subsumes antifascism within the broader frame of anti-racist actions from the 1980’s to the present– in Channon Clay, Lady, Kristin Schwartz and Michael Staudenmaier’s, *We Go Where They Go: The Story of Anti-Racist Action* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2023).

[4] On French fascism, see Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave, 1924-1933* (London: Yale University Press, 1986); Robert Soucy, French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-1939 (London: Yale University Press, 1995); and

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[10] Such heroizing occurs across the political spectrum, but it is especially prominent among fascist movements, and was readily deployed by fascists who embraced Georges Sorel’s anarchist syndicalist apologia *Reflections on Violence* (1908); see Mark Antliff, “Bad Anarchism: Aestheticized Mythmaking and the Legacy of Georges Sorel among the European Left,” *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*, No 2 (2011), 155-187; and Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism.*

the post-1945 era up to the present, but Testa also narrows the field of discussion to militant antifascist configurations and strategies in Ireland and Britain.[5] After World War Two, Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists was recast as the Union Movement, but following Mosley’s move in 1951 to Ireland and then to France, the UM went into a steep decline, only to be replaced by a series of interrelated fascist movements, such as the League of Empire Loyalists, the National Front, the British National Party, and the English Defense League. Part II provides us with a detailed recounting of militant resistance to such developments on the part of antifascist groups such as 43 Group, 62 Group, the Anti-Nazi League and Anti-Fascist Action. In the process M. Testa chronicles antifascist tactical actions to successfully disrupt fascist organizational meetings, their public demonstrations, and their pugilist campaigns in minority neighbourhoods. This history is then supplemented by the personal recollections of militant activist John Penny, who was a pivotal figure in this struggle and in the formation of antifascist combat “squads” in the greater Manchester region in the 1970s and 1980s (321-336).

The fact that fascist squads had their belligerent counterpart in antifascist “Squadism” points to an underlying challenge in M. Testa’s book, the fact that he makes “no apologies for advocating the use of physical force as part of a political strategy”.[6] In his Introduction Testa defines three types of antifascism, “militant, state legislative, and liberal;” but he quickly synthesizes the latter two categories, noting

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Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art and Culture in France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007)

[5] Griffin’s concise Introduction to European fascisms in the post-war era is an important supplement to Testa’s text; see Griffin, *Oxford Readers*: Fascism, 311-316.

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that the state “in its bid for self-preservation” legislates against all forms of extra-judicial violence, whether left or right, and that “Liberal anti-fascism” is therefore part and parcel of this state apparatus. (5-6) Liberal antifascists reportedly even go so far as to betray their militant comrades in the name of their opposition to violence: “unfortunately many anti-fascists can testify to occasions when liberals have identified militants to the police, which have resulted in time-consuming court cases”[7]. In interwar Europe liberal governments tolerated the rise of fascist political parties as part of the democratic process, and in some cases even endorsed the politics of appeasement as a non-violent response to fascist state aggression on the eve of World War Two: Testa cites the French and British government’s ill-fated ‘Munich Agreement’ of 1938 with Nazi Germany, paving the way for Hitler’s eventual annexation of Czechoslovakia (6).[8]

What M. Testa leaves out of this equation is the long and signifi-cant history of radical movements that share his anarchist opposition to the state, but nevertheless reject the use of violence as a strategy in antistatist or antifascist struggles. Testa’s study of antifascism would have been more balanced had he folded the history of organisations like the War Resisters’ International into his account, or recognized cases of non-violent resistance that were motivated by anarchist pacifist precepts. In his book Testa acknowledges that “it is possible for different kinds of anti-fascists to work together successfully,” not-ing that “the massed and mainly peaceful blocking of fascist march routes by anti-fascists proved to be a very successful tactic against the English Defense League” (6).

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[7] On the Munich Agreement of 29 September, 1938 and its consequences, see Cyprian Blamires, ed. *World Fascism: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Volume One, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO), 161-163.

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Testa describes recourse to violence as only one among many options to be utilized by antifascists (7); thus, it is unfortunate that he excluded the complex history of anarchist non-violent opposition to fascism from his Introduction.[9] To equate non-violent strategies solely with Liberal antifascism is a false narrative. For Testa, recourse to violence alone constitutes the dividing line between those allied to the state, and those antifascists working outside of its parameters. But he also feels compelled to define fascist violence as qualitatively different from antifascist violence, despite their shared recourse to Squadism. For antifascists, violence “is not fetishized the way that fascism fetishizes violence;” instead antifascists engage in such violence “reluctantly as an unpleasant method to achieve a greater political goal.” Thus, they do not “seek it out in the manner of hooligans” and they recognize that “it would be much more preferable to rely on passive resistance,” were it not for the probability that such “flabby pacifism” (Testa borrows the insult from Trotsky) could fail to “inhibit fascist encroachment” (7).

In Testa’s estimation militant antifascists, in contrast to their fascist adversaries, engage in violence unenthusiastically out of strategic necessity and in the service of a noble cause, rather than relishing it as an activity central to the ethics of their politics. However, this claim to princi-pled purpose and self-disciplined restraint is regularly contradicted by the book’s narrative detailing of antifascist acts of horrific aggression (e.g. 253), and by the book’s illustrations. John Penny, reflecting on the burly, homosocial makeup of the antifascist Squads, recounted that “there were really no limits on our aggressive response,” in part because the movement recruited “working-class fighters completely used to heavy violence,” as

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[9] See for instance Devi Prasad, *War is a Crime Against Humanity: The Story of War Resisters’ International* (London: WRI, 2005); and Sebastien Kalicha, *Anarchisme non-violent et pacifism libertaire: une approche théoretique et historique* (Clamecy, France: Atelier de Creation Libertaire, 2020)