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No Pasaran!
An Interview on the History and Politics of Anti-fascism
with Mark Bray

Christopher Helali
Dartmouth College



Mark Bray is a political organizer and historian of human rights, terrorism, and political radicalism in Modern Europe. He earned his BA in Philosophy from Wesleyan University in 2005 and his PhD in History from Rutgers University in 2016. He is the author of *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist*

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Handbook (Melville House 2017), *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street* (Zero 2013), *The Anarchist Inquisition: Terrorism and Human Rights in Spain and France, 1890-1910* (forthcoming), and the co-editor of *Anarchist Education and the Modern School: A Francisco Ferrer Reader* (PM Press 2018). His work has appeared in *Foreign Policy*, *The Washington Post*, *Boston Review*, and numerous edited volumes. He was a lecturer at Dartmouth College.

Christopher Helali is a militant anti-fascist activist who has fought against far-right, neo-Nazi, and white supremacist groups for years. Chris was beaten, arrested, and detained for confronting members of the neo-Nazi political party Golden Dawn (Χρυσή Αυγή) on October 31st, 2016 at the squatted community of Prosfygika on Leoforos Alexandras in Athens, Greece. As a result, Chris was sentenced to four years in prison pending an ongoing appeals process in Greek courts. They are currently a graduate student in the MALS program with a concentration in Cultural Studies at Dartmouth College.

CH: To start, can you give us a working definition of what fascism is? When, where, and how did it emerge as an ideology and political force?

MB: Fascism officially started with Mussolini and his black shirts in the late 1910s in the immediate aftermath of World War I. But it had earlier precedence that you could point to of essentially ultra-nationalist popular politics. Part of the innovation of fascism is that, as opposed to earlier reactionary politics, fascists sought to mobilize popular politics for the right in a way that it had been mobilized, pretty much exclusively, from the left. So, fascism ultimately attempts to use these modern forms of political mobilization like popular politics, modern information technologies, newspapers, and the radio, in order to paradoxically attempt to return to what they consider to be traditional society. It is an attempt to use modern mechanisms to fight against “modernity.” It’s an attempt to return and to look back to an imagined past where fascists aim to elevate the nation, which they consider to be eternal, but certainly it’s not. [Fascists seek] to bridge the chasm of class conflict. In that way they often portray themselves as a third option between the Marxists and the capitalists which were both racialized as Jewish in Germany. [Fascists seek] to return to traditional gender roles, family roles, and so forth. In that sense although it is difficult to pinpoint a definition because fascists adopt and discard ideas at will, and in that sense, reject rationality and precise party platforms. You can consider it as an ultra-nationalist popular movement aiming to return to organic hierarchies through the mechanism of extreme violence that aims to do away with artificial, “effemine” bourgeois morals. After World War II it’s changed in many significant ways to the point where it’s not always entirely clear exactly who falls into the category, but I think simply because it’s not always clear doesn’t mean the threat isn’t real.

CH: Can you provide us with a short history of anti-fascism? What were the major historical events in anti-fascist resistance? How have they been incorporated into modern anti-fascist activism and movements?

MB: It’s important to clarify that anti-fascism has always developed in direct response to fascism. Whenever there has been a fascist threat those who are under attack, because fascism can’t really exist without in some ways being on the attack, have organized anti-fascist resistance whether they

called it that or not. Certainly if you look at the most famous historical moments of fascism, Mussolini's Blackshirts (*Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*) in Italy, they were confronted by the *Arditi del Popolo* (The People's Daring Ones) which was a workers militia of the different left parties in Italy. In Germany, the Nazi's were confronted by a wide variety of communist, socialist and anarchist organizations and militias. Certainly the Spanish Civil War is arguably the most important moment before World War II when anti-fascists from dozens of countries around the world journeyed to Spain to fight against Franco and his fascist allies. Then, of course, you have World War II. What people get confused about is they think the story ends at World War II but, in fact, fascists simply rebranded their politics, changed their symbols, changed their language after World War II but, in many cases, continued to threaten the same populations. In Britain, you get a continued anti-fascist resistance in the 40s, 50s, and 60s as fascists shifted their focus from demonizing Jews towards demonizing migrant populations from South Asia and the Caribbean.



“¡No Pasarán!: El fascismo quiere conquistar Madrid. Madrid será la tumba del fascismo.” “They Shall Not Pass!: Fascism wants to conquer Madrid. Madrid will be the tomb of fascism.” Photographer: Mikhail Efimovich Koltsov (USSR). Country: Second Spanish Republic. Date: 1936-1937. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain CC0.

The Battle of Lewisham, for example, in 1977 in England was an example where an immigrant neighborhood defended itself against the National Front (NF). In Germany in the late 80s and early 90s there was a neo-Nazi resurgence around the fall of the Berlin wall that triggered an anti-fascist resurgence in response. Some of those anti-fascist groups were formed predominately or entirely by Turkish migrants who saw no other option to survive but to defend themselves. In the United States, Anti-Racist Action (ARA) was formed in the 80s and 90s, developing hundreds of chapters around the country. Today, the Torch Network is a descendant of that. This is all a focus on explicitly anti-fascist organizing and groups who use that term. But, if we think of fascism as one manifestation of European imperialism then you can think of anti-fascism as one of the many manifestations of anti-imperialism that have existed around the world. Most have not called themselves anti-fascist but they are no less relevant to the conversation.

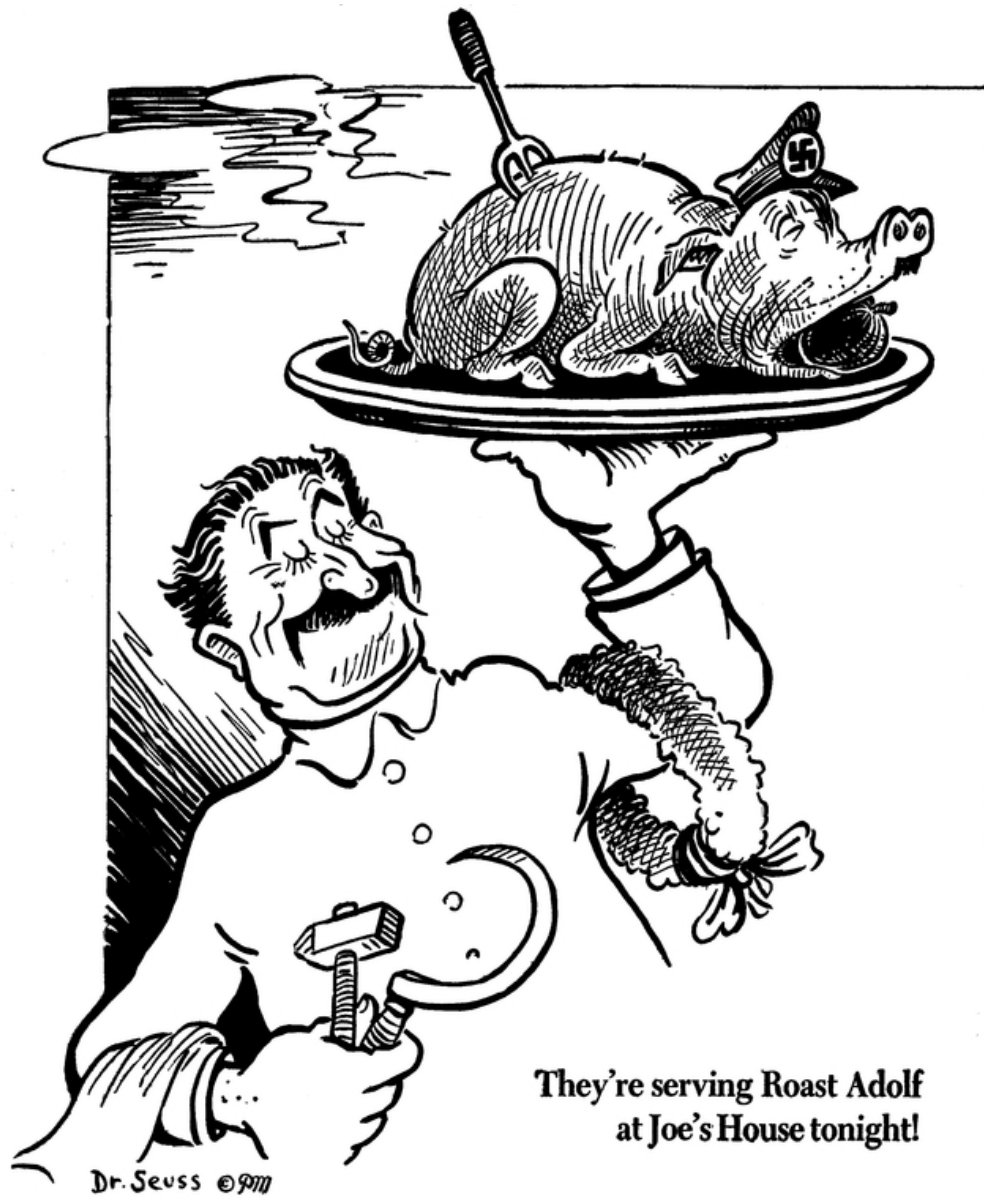
CH: The term fascism is used broadly, as you mention in your book, and used to refer to cops and political systems that do not self identify as fascist. Is this use of the term fascism helpful and useful? The right wing also appeals to the history and language of fascism to attack left wing ideologies. How can we understand this?

MB: Scholars have debated how to define fascism. It's a slippery political term in large part because fascists, in the course of relatively short periods of time, can adopt a wide variety of ideas at will and they don't care if they contradict themselves. Some historians have been so minimalist as to say only Mussolini and his followers were fascists. Others expand it more broadly and so forth. So what do you do if you fast forward a hundred years in time and look at how fascists sometimes don't call themselves fascists? How other groups can behave similarly even though they derive their traditions from other directions? The anti-fascists that I interviewed for my book took several different perspectives on this. For example, I spoke to a group in France that argued that every political party in France is to some extent fascist. They point to the rampant Islamophobia, for example, amongst all political parties in France. They argue that statist politics run a spectrum and that explicitly fascist groups are one end of the spectrum but that there is a lot more continuity with how the police treat migrants or treat leftists than one might think. Others try to draw a sharper distinction between fascist and far-right and center-right groups. I think that rhetorically there can be a danger in calling absolutely everyone a fascist. Not because its necessarily wrong to make arguments for authoritarian politics running a spectrum but it depends on what your goal is rhetorically. If your goal is to indict an entire system then that's fine. But if your goal is to try to organize around a specific threat posed by the far-right then I could see how in certain circumstances it could be counterproductive. It depends on what your goal is. I think more interesting is not the question so much of whether or not authoritarian states are fascist, so much as what the relationship is between states and the far-right. How in times of crisis, states and ruling classes turn to the far right to bail them out. They turn to extralegal forms of violence that can be fascists, or in the case of Colombia, it can be paramilitaries. That is the more interesting question. I don't call everything fascist myself. I think that states are purveyors of violence whether or not they come out of that

tradition. We don't need to call them fascist to make that case. Although I understand rhetorically why some would.

CH: In your book you speak about the debates surrounding freedom of speech and the common anti-fascist position of “no platform.” What does the freedom of speech debate entail? Does freedom of speech apply to fascists?

MB: If we think of free speech as a kind of right, then I think its useful to think of the following. When we talk about rights there is a difference between an abstract, analytical right and a right understood as being embodied in context and practice. This is a debate that liberals and socialists have had for two hundred years. A liberal might say “we are all equal under the law theoretically.” A socialist will say “as long as we have a stratified economic system we're not equal in practice.” I think that kind of framework can also be applied to this debate about free speech. You have civil libertarians who argue that the way you promote free speech is to essentially protect the right of any individual or group under any circumstances to express whatever they want without concern for what political ramifications that has. That kind of abstract interpretation is juxtaposed, in this case, with an anti-fascist argument which is avowedly political in its argument that if you want to really promote free speech you have to take into account who is encouraged to participate and who is discouraged to participate in any kind of context. So on a university campus, if you have white supremacist groups flyering, holding demonstrations and giving speeches about the inferiority of half of their classmates, the kind of anti-fascist argument, or my rendition of it, would be that actually in lived practice it means that speech is much less free because many people in the community don't feel comfortable to actually express themselves. They're threatened, they're harassed. The idea of no platform for fascism grew out of a recognition that the fascist menace was so destructive that you don't allow even the slightest gasp of air to grow. That you prevent the articulation of fascist politics because it's a lot easier and more effective to do so when it's small than when it grows. That's not just a historical consideration. One of the more stark recent examples can be found in Greece. The fascist Golden Dawn was a micro-party for several decades until it exploded in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. I met anti-fascists in Greece who lamented their own failure to take it more seriously earlier on. So that can happen at any time. That is the argument for no platform. It grows out of a recognition of what do these rights actually mean in practice, not just in theory.



"They're serving Roast Adolf at Joe's House tonight!" Artist: Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel). Country: USA.
Date: 12-24-1941. Source: Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego, La Jolla, 92093-0175
(<https://lib.ucsd.edu/sca>).

CH: There are many on the left who appeal to the socialist nation-states that were able to combat fascism and serve as powerful forces and symbols of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism such as Cuba and Vietnam. Can the nation-state be used as an anti-fascist force?

MB: Sure, it can. But of course that gets into the question of what we mean by anti-fascism and there are different schools of thought. The kind of popular front anti-fascism that was at the forefront of the Communist International's politics for at least part of the 1930s was very much that



Bundesarchiv, B 145 Bild-P046279
Foto: Weinrother, Carl | 1932

“Heraus zur Antifaschisten Aktion: Gegen Krieg, Hunger und Faschismus!” “Go Forth to Antifascist Action: Against War, Hunger and Fascism!” Communist Party of Germany (KPD) - *Liste* (List – for voting) 3. *Die Rote Fahne* “The Red Flag.” Karl Liebknecht-Haus in Berlin am Bülowplatz. Photographer: Carl Weinrother. Country: German Reich (Weimar Republic). Date: 1932. Source: Bundesarchiv, B 145 Bild-P046279 / Weinrother, Carl / CC-BY-SA 3.0.

school of thought that the Spanish Republic is to be defended. Subsequently, many saw, understandably so, the Soviet Union as the ultimate anti-fascist force. Obviously the Soviet Union bore the main brunt of militarily defeating Hitler. In the post-war context in Europe, for example, states not only in Eastern Europe but also in Western Europe essentially outlawed fascist and Nazi politics in many cases spurred on by socialist and communist political parties. States, whether in terms of military conflict or in terms of legislation, have at different times and in different places played significant roles in combating the far-right. As your question suggests if you extend the lens of what we consider to be fascism, or consider it to be a different shade of imperialism, then, of course, many different states have played anti-imperialist roles around the world. Of course there are debates over what exactly that means and the degree to which we should be critical of, or forgiving of, authoritarian tendencies in these different states. The tendency though that I focus on in the book is the militant anti-fascist tradition which certainly has included many people who uphold these states but also many people who are critical of using the state and the legal system as a motor for opposing the far-right. Rather, they argue for community self-defense and mobilization from below. I'm more sympathetic to the latter interpretation of anti-fascism but I recognize that different contexts historically have produced different outcomes.



Stamps (1965-1966) of the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (DDR) or German Democratic Republic (GDR) [East Germany] commemorating the antifascist struggle of the International Brigades which were set up by the Communist International to fight against Franco's fascist forces during the Spanish Civil War. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain CC0.

CH: Common praise is given to United States and United Kingdom military personnel who fought in World War II against Nazi Germany, Italy and Japan. Part of this praise, especially from some sections of the left, is about the anti-fascist nature of the war and how those who fought were anti-fascists themselves. How do you interpret this praise? Is it an accurate description of the allied forces in World War II? Do you see the Soviet Union, the partisans and the left-wing guerrilla forces as having an explicitly anti-fascist character in the war compared to the United States and United Kingdom?

MB: If we have an understanding of anti-fascism that is more than simply being on the other side of the battle lines from fascism, which I think we ought to, then characterizing the United Kingdom or the United States as being anti-fascist is misleading. They were only opposed to Hitler because he ended up on the other side of the conflict. There were many politicians and industrialists in those countries who were very positive about Hitler. If you look, for example, at the context around the Spanish Civil War most Western elites were much more concerned about the “red menace” than the “fascist menace.” Certainly though it's always important to distinguish between states and their populations. I'm sure there were plenty of soldiers in the British or American military who had strong anti-fascist convictions. I do know of examples of leftists who enlisted simply to fight Hitler. Turning to the other side of the continent the Soviet Union and the partisan forces, that were to varying degrees allied with it, had a much more explicitly anti-fascist political commitment. But as with any large human activity there were certainly plenty of people who fought out of patriotic sentiment, out of allegiance to their friends or to where they lived, or out of other various circumstances. Therefore you can't say that all the individuals necessarily shared that commitment. But I do think that what this all points to is the need to distinguish between anti-fascism understood simply as being on the other side of fascism and an ideological commitment. The last thing to add with that of course is the role of imperialism and anti-imperialism. The wave of decolonization that emerges after the war shows what the French, Dutch, British, and the Americans were doing around the world before and after the war which was akin to fascistic tyranny. That is the kind of unspoken irony in all this. Many of the same fighters who were fighting Hitler were on the wrong side of those struggles shortly thereafter.

CH: How are anti-fascist politics connected with other radical politics and movements?

MB: I would say for the most part anti-fascism is simply a kind of politics of self-defense whose importance rises and falls based on the threat being posed. So in different times, in different places, people who put their energy into it are almost always people who are also involved in other social struggles. I've spoken to some anti-fascists who described anti-fascism as a firefighting operation to try and put out the fire that is the immediate threat to the community. But that doesn't necessarily reflect the kind of long term constructive vision that most of these people have which is more commonly oriented around things like environmental justice, labor organizing or building social centers.

CH: What does anti-fascist organizing in the era of Trump look like? How has anti-fascist organizing changed post-Charlottesville?

MB: In roughly speaking the decade leading up to Trump's campaign, the profile of anti-fascist organizing in the United States among the radical left was pretty low. After the Anti-Racist Action Network ended in the early to mid 2000s, I spoke to a lot of anti-fascists who described similar stories about other leftists being like “why would you put your time into monitoring this small white supremacist group that has a dozen members when there are other more pressing issues to deal with?” Clearly Trump's campaign and the emergence of the alt-right shifted this equation for a lot of people and lamentably rejuvenated anti-fascism in its profile among radical left activities in response to the right wing threat. Starting in the late 2000s and then accelerating over the last couple of years, more and more of these groups have been more explicitly influenced by examples from Europe in terms of the language of calling themselves “Antifa” more often instead of Anti-Racist Action. They use the flag symbols and arrow symbols. If you look at Anti-Racist Action propaganda from the 1990s, you don't see those symbols which are now ubiquitous.



“Так будет с фашистским зверем!” “That's the way it will be with the fascist beast!” Artist: Alexei Alexeyevich Kokorekin. Country: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR/СССР). Date: 1944. Source: Public Domain CC0.

There are different ways that it looks. There are smaller, more tightly knit groups. There are more publicly based formations like the General Defense Committees of the IWW. Redneck Revolt is an interesting new formation of a more public, anti-fascist group that aims to mobilize the working class and to create a gun culture of self-defense on the left. It's important to emphasize that there are many more people who organize against the far right who don't necessarily belong to a group or necessarily use that language coming out of all different movements like Black Lives Matter, immigrant rights movements, and student movements. Most of the people who showed up to Charlottesville to confront the far right weren't part of an antifa group although those who were played a very important role that day. There's a recognition more broadly that the old liberal notion that you can just ignore these groups and they will go away is being rejected. Anti-fascism has become an unfortunate staple of the left as long as this continues to be a threat. Different groups disagree about how to do it which is inevitable and not necessarily counterproductive. They do generally agree on the need to do something.

CH: Does anti-fascism necessitate certain political commitments? Are certain ideologies compatible with anti-fascism while others are not? For example, can one be an anti-fascist capitalist?

MB: Depends on who you ask. I do think its important both historically and in the present to distinguish between a minimalist definition of anti-fascism as simply being opposed to fascism and one that opposes it more ideologically because of its role in defending the capitalist order and promoting white supremacy. If you oppose fascism from that radical left perspective then anti-fascist politics entail a positive agenda in the opposite direction. That having been said, I think that there have been times and places, for example the Battle of Cable Street in 1936 or other examples of mass anti-fascist resistance, where you are going to get people showing up with no ideological commitments whatsoever or from a wide variety of perspectives. If you want to generate a successful mass anti-fascist resistance you need to be cognizant of the fact that people are going to come from a wide variety of perspectives including from capitalist perspectives because perhaps they are part of an ethnic group that is being targeted by fascists. As with any type of organizing it's important to try to look for bridges that can be built but without abandoning the radical politics at the core of why we oppose fascism. If anti-fascism is reduced to a simple "no to fascism," then the larger project of building a world where the appeals of fascism can't take hold can never advance. Ultimately as long as the fuel supply for fascism which includes economic desperation, white supremacy, and patriarchy exist, fascism will continue to flare up. In that way, to actually be anti-fascist in a broader sense you have to be committed to ending those sources of fascist domination. I think it's important to hold on to that but also to recognize the kind of lived contingency of politics.



“Woody Guthrie, half-length portrait, facing slightly left, holding guitar [This Machine Kills Fascists].” New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection. Photographer: Al Aumuller. Country: USA. Date: 1943. Source: LC-USZ62-113276

CH: For you, what does the future of anti-fascist resistance look like in the United States, in Europe and globally?

MB: Well hopefully it won't have much of a future at all because fascism will just wither up and die. More realistically, it's evident that there are some major transformations going on that have given rise to the current conflicts. Transformations around demographics, with the far-right fueling fears about the growing non-white populations of these different countries. The fact that at the current rate that religious demographics are going, Islam will be the main religion in Europe at a certain point in the

future. Of course, demographics never always go in a straight line. Those kinds of considerations freak out fascists and those sympathetic to the fascist argument that there is timeless, inherent, natural state of things which is white and Christian. Which has never been that way but that's how they imagine it. So demographic changes, economic dislocation and the failure of left political parties to put forward a sustainable, viable alternative to austerity and, in many cases, to support austerity [ex. SYRIZA – Greece], has created a vacuum that the far-right is trying to take advantage of. Anti-fascist resistance to it needs to take a variety of different forms depending on different contexts. I have a chapter in my book about the rise of “pin stripe Nazis” like Pegida [Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident - Germany] and successful political parties like the Front National [France] that attempt to hide or water down their fascist politics to gain popular appeal. It's clear that the way to organize anti-fascist resistance must be different if you are confronting a couple dozen neo-Nazi skinheads versus an established political party. Hopefully different layers of organizing and different kinds of assemblies, organizations and alliances can be established while at the same time not losing sight of creating alternatives that can win over people who are potentially sympathetic to the fascist message. If politics is reduced to a “no,” you won't ultimately win over the people you need to succeed. It has to also be accompanied with a “yes” to something else.



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