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Michael Seidman, *Transatlantic Antifascisms: From the Spanish Civil War to the End of World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xi, 339 pp. Illustrations. £72.99. ISBN 978-1108417785.

Review by Christopher Bannister, University of Manchester.

Michael Seidman is perhaps best-known for his work on the Spanish Civil War, most notably 2002's *Republic of Egos* and 2011's *The Victorious Counterrevolution*. In the former, Seidman endeavoured to place individual Spaniards back into a narrative that he felt had been overwhelmed by grand conversations on political ideology and affiliation. *Republic of Egos* sought to engage with the major discussions in historiography and "demonstrate how individuals make history."^[1] His approach involved rigorous archival research and offered a social history of the Spanish Republic at war, presenting an image of the Republic populated not by homogenous blocs of anarchists, communists and socialists, but of individuals, each with unique and often apolitical experiences. *Republic of Egos* was well received upon publication and, while causing significant debate among scholars of the Spanish Civil War, has remained an indispensable source. In *The Victorious Counterrevolution* Seidman's focus shifted to the Republic's Francoist enemies, but his ambition to redefine debate on the Civil War remained. Seidman once again ensured individuals were honoured--examining the day-to-day nitty-gritty that the majority of the war's participants experienced--but he integrated this into broader economic arguments and, most innovatively, adopted a comparative approach. In placing the Spanish Civil War in comparison with its Russian and Chinese counterparts, Seidman reached a number of hitherto overlooked conclusions about the Spanish war and Franco's victory. *Transatlantic Antifascisms* sees Seidman face a different task. Here, he is not offering new perspectives on a longstanding, heated (and often over-heated) debate, but instead shaping a burgeoning one.^[2] However, while the task may differ, Seidman's desire to present an original and meticulously researched individualist interpretation of events remains.

Historiography on antifascism is growing, but considerations of its nature remain contentious. Moreover, in a twist not without irony, these debates follow those that typified the study of its animus. Just as Roger O. Paxton, Zeev Sternhall, Roger Griffin et al struggled to define exactly what characterised Fascism, so too have historians struggled to agree on what exactly makes an antifascist. Discussions on antifascism have often gone hand in hand with discussions of Communism and much of the literature on the topic has asserted that antifascism was rooted in the leftist movements that emerged following the end of the First World War. Both Enzo Traverso and Tim Kirk and Anthony McElligot (who Seidman cites) have convincingly argued that antifascism as a political stripe was a product of the left, intimately linked with the

revolutionary milieu that followed the First World War in Europe.[3] More recently, this interpretation has been complicated with the introduction of transnational perspectives that have sought to articulate the history of antifascism “from below,” but that still maintain a correlation between the left and antifascism.[4] More recently historiography has sought to further subvert this narrative by examining antifascist action that did not necessarily owe its origins to the revolutionary left or eschewed the diktats of its ideologues.[5]

Seidman offers the apotheosis to this turn in historiography; not only rejecting the implied synonymy between antifascism and the left but asserting that, by adopting a transatlantic approach, it is clear to see that there exists a strain of “counterrevolutionary” antifascism just as vital as its revolutionary counterpart. For Seidman, antifascism was just as likely to rise from Atlantic liberalism as from the Europe’s revolutionaries and he places Charles de Gaulle, Churchill and Roosevelt as exemplars of this (p. 4). *Transatlantic Antifascisms* focusses on the antifascist traditions of what would later be known as the “Western Democracies,” making as strident a case for counterrevolutionaries as other have for their leftist counterparts.

Key to this interpretation is Seidman’s own loose definition of antifascism. In defining Fascism’s opponents Seidman steers clear of offering an absolute *political* understanding and instead roots his definition in the period in question. In examining who his antifascists were, how they understood themselves and how their antifascism manifested itself, Seidman’s definition is a necessarily loose one, offering a straightforward “tripartite minimum” (p. 2) set of criteria. Seidman’s antifascists were united in a shared “rejection of uncompromising anti-Communism and anti-capitalism,” a common disdain for anti-Semitic conspiracies of a Jewish plutocracy, and a mutual recognition that state power was the only means by which to defeat fascism both at home and abroad. For Seidman, antifascists were by necessity drawn from across the political spectrum and antifascism was a unifying and motivating concept, but not an ideology in and of itself.

This definition is a slippery one, allowing for counterrevolutionaries, dedicated anti-communists and conservatives, for whom Seidman seemingly has significant sympathy, to be included as fully paid-up antifascists despite their arguably late arrival to the party. However, the case studies chosen by Seidman provide significant ballast to the idea that historical actors could assume the mantle of antifascism without it being a defining political identity. The rigorous documentation of those not on the Marxist left that chose to do this, those labelled “counterrevolutionary antifascists,” prove to be the book’s central focus.

Seidman’s opening chapters discuss the practical limitations of “revolutionary antifascism” in Spain during the Civil War and in France under the Popular Front. The “counterrevolutionaries” are the subjects of the subsequent three chapters, examining the variant French, British and American expressions of antifascism. Chapter seven examines how each of these forms of antifascism interacted with one another and their Soviet counterpart in ensuring the defeat of fascism. Chapter eight is the most redolent of Seidman’s previous work, bringing together strong empirical data and individual narratives to examine the role that working (and not working) contributed to the antifascist cause. The final chapter documents the points of divergence between the different stripes of antifascism even before the war’s end pointing to the fundamental differences that would ultimately define European (and world) history following the end of the antifascist struggle.

Republic of Egos established Seidman as an historian who embraces granular details and individual testimonies. His time spent in the archives of Madrid, Ávila, Salamanca and Barcelona resulted in a work that provided numerous illuminating vignettes to accompany his arguments. This rigour is present in *Transatlantic Antifascisms*, particularly when Seidman focusses on “Working and Not Working” in chapter eight. In this chapter, Seidman permits himself to indulge in his previous preoccupation with the individual, to complicate the Manichean struggle against the fascist menace with the everyday, and his work is the better for it. He achieves this through the examination of the myriad labour grievances that existed during the conflict. Tellingly, he relates that regardless of whether labour disruption undermined the fascist or antifascist cause, it was, more often than not rooted in material concerns, not ideological ones. Yet the success of chapter eight consequently feeds into one of the major criticisms of the work overall: its predominant focus on elite actors, to the detriment of more interesting narratives that existed in the transatlantic context.[6] The aforementioned chapter aside, the book is preoccupied with the broader approaches taken by Roosevelt, Churchill, de Gaulle and their various functionaries. This approach permits for the broader concepts of counterrevolutionary antifascism to be conveyed but means that interesting questions regarding the apparently “top-down,” directed nature of counterrevolutionary antifascism (and its relationship with the seemingly “bottom-up” nature of revolutionary antifascism) go under-investigated. Chapter eight offers us a glimpse into workers’ lives, but there is little to go on in terms of how workers understood their activity as “counterrevolutionary” or how their own individualist concerns were interpreted by the leaders of counterrevolutionary antifascism.

A further oversight, and linked to the one above, is the omission of a focus on the concept of “transatlantic fascism.” While antifascism in the period studied was necessarily concerned with European affairs, ties were growing across the Atlantic between the fascist powers and their nascent North and South American acolytes. An examination of the parallel development of fascism and anti-fascism across the Atlantic would have borne some interesting conclusions, particularly in chapter seven when Seidman turns his attention to domestic antifascism in the United States. It is here that the omission of Latin America from the discussion becomes a larger issue. While a necessary casualty of Seidman’s narrow focus, the Latin American perspective would have provided further transatlantic ballast to the “counterrevolutionary” narrative. Andrés Bisso, who published alongside Seidman in 2016 *Rethinking Antifascism*, has offered a clear case study for how Argentine antifascism had a distinctly counterrevolutionary bent in the form of *Acción Argentina*. [7] Consequently, Seidman’s omission of Federico Finchelstein’s similarly titled *Transatlantic Fascisms* from his bibliography may seem a superficial criticism, but consideration of a work that focusses on the links between Italian Fascism and its Argentine imitators, could have proved illuminating.

Overall, the book makes a significant contribution to the study of antifascism. As with his previous works, Seidman does not shy away from challenging some of the dominant trends within the relevant historiography and the field is the better for it. There are some shortcomings, namely the fact that the “transatlantic” nature of antifascism studied is not its primary focus and the work could, and perhaps should, have been named “counterrevolutionary antifascism.” Nevertheless, this work will prove to be indispensable for historians of antifascism.

NOTES

[1] Michael Seidman, *Republic of Egos: A Social History of the Spanish Civil War*, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 5.

[2] The Spanish Second Republic and Civil War remain a topic of much controversy, as the pages of the *Journal of Contemporary History* will attest.

[3] Enzo Traverso, *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914–1945*, (London: Verso, 2016); Tim Kirk and Anthony McElligot, *Opposing Fascism: Community, Authority and Resistance in Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[4] Hugo García, “Transnational History: A New Paradigm for Anti-Fascist Studies?” *Contemporary European History*, 25: 4 (2016): 563–572.

[5] Hugo García et al, *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics, 1922 to the Present*, (New York: Berghahn, 2016); Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz, *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).

[6] This argument is made comprehensively in David Featherstone’s review in *International Review of Social History*, 63: 3 (2018): 542–545.

[7] Andrés Bisso, *Acción Argentina: un antifascismo nacional en tiempos de Guerra Mundial*, (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2005).

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