The Wall in Fascism Studies

Wim van Meurs
History Department, Radboud University Nijmegen
Email: w.v.meurs@let.ru.nl

In hindsight, Gilbert Allerdyce’s emblematic 1979 article What Fascism Is Not marks the dawn of a new era in study of generic fascism rather than the abolition of the term ‘fascism’. The past three decades have witnessed a notable reinvigoration of fascism studies all over Europe. Some attempts at a working definition, e.g. by Robert Paxton, Stanley Payne or Roger Griffin, have gained fairly wide acceptance. Today, a mere decade away from the centennial of Mussolini’s seizure of power, fascism studies are by no means limited any longer to the study of the Italian and German varieties. In next to every West-European polity, the study of local fascist movements, factions and parties has become a veritable cottage industry for historians.

However, during the renaissance of “generic fascism”, its students have come to notice that the main experts in the field and the authors of comprehensive studies on European fascism have been strongly influenced by ‘their country of origin’. Roger Griffin’s outlook on fascism may have been shaped by his being British, and most definitely was by his original interest in Italian fascism. Such a ‘particularistic’ bias comes as no surprise in the case of experts writing about their own country, e.g. Wolfgang Wippermann on the Third Reich. The way insights from France permeate the work of Robert Paxton, or conclusions drawn from the Spanish affect Stanley Payne’s statements on generic fascism, however, is noteworthy. Apparently, generic fascism thrives on the in-depth knowledge and language competencies of national or area-studies experts rather than on the reductionism of generalists with some basic contextual information and a universal checklist of criteria.

Whereas Spain, the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, Austria and Belgium have long since been added to the repertoire of the students of generic fascism, the European periphery is typically mentioned in European overviews only in passing, as an afterthought. Paxton’s case for the rich insights to be gained from smaller or unsuccessful fascist movements all over Europe in his masterly The Anatomy of Fascism has been generally accepted. Nevertheless, only in the final third of his The History of Fascism does Payne draw attention
to Romania, Hungary, Croatia and minor fascisms in the Netherlands or Norway, only to move on quickly to fascism outside Europe. Similarly, Roger Griffin’s *Modernism and Fascism* uses the Iron Guard as a four-pages backstop after a lengthy discourse geared towards Italy and Nazi-Germany.

As the strength of generic-fascism studies lies in the diversity and in-depth analyses of the twenty-odd national cases in interwar Europe, the present status quo is more than regrettable. Insights from studies on smaller West-European and Scandinavian fascist movements are slow in reaching the inner circle of European fascism studies, partly due to language barriers and the sheer volume of academic production in the field. The often-quoted 1980 volume *Who Were the Fascists* by Stein Ugelvik Larsen is one of a handful of prominent contributions from the periphery to the European fascism debate that come to mind.

Since the fall of communism, however, a new and rich literature on fascism in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe has emerged. Studies on the Ustaše, the Iron Guard, the Latvian Pērkonkrusts or the Arrow Cross in Hungary as substantial fascist movements, as well as on the absence of comparable mass movements in Serbia, Bulgaria or Estonia have multiplied – in the respective national languages, but in English and German as well. As it turns out, young academic historians in the new and future member-states of the European Union prefer to keep their distance from the highly politicised and repetitive public debates on communist regime and the national past. Paradoxically, for serious historical research based on numerous unexplored archives and informed by the state of the art of “Western” theorising, the study of fascism has become a safe haven. Over the past decade or two, numerous dissertations and monographs have substantiated claims related to well-known research questions such as the relation between fascist movements and the national political establishment, modernist utopianism in fascist thinking, or the social and regional composition of fascist constituencies.

Although the Wall has long gone, interaction in European fascist studies remains a one-way street with researchers in the Eastern half of Europe avidly absorbing the results of half a century of unrestrained archival research and theorising on fascism in the other half of Europe. However, in terms of quality and the number of additional case studies they cover, recent studies from the eastern half of Europe deserve a much more prominent place in the community studying generic fascism in a truly European framework. Thus far an invisible wall has apparently stayed in place. Let’s tear down this wall!