



## **Fascist Warfare: A Concept to Understand Fascism and Total War in the First Half of the Twentieth Century**

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Organising Committee: Javier Rodrigo, David Alegre and Miguel Alonso

The main aim of this conference is to debate about the existence, or not, of a specific way of making war typical of fascism, that is to say, of the concept *fascist warfare*. Or, in other words, to reflect not only on its applicability, but also on its possible analytical and interpretative implications that its development would have both for the study of war in the twentieth century and for the study of fascism. For debating this issue we aim to count on the presence of scholars who have worked fascist regimes in times of war, mainly connected with two main elements: on the one hand, combat experience of the troops (mobilisation, violence, behaviour at the front, discipline, etc.) and, on the other hand, occupation policies (shootings, deportations, antipartisan policy, requisitions, economic exploitation, relations with civil population, etc.) Thus, we aim to tackle how war was set out in the ideological/conceptual level, hence including the sphere of mentalities, and how this war was waged in the frontlines and the rearguard, therefore paying attention to praxis.

Due to the dimensions planned for this conference, we will focus mainly on four cases of study, Germany, Italy, Spain and Croatia. This way, we are seeking to obtain a picture as complete and rich as possible in cases of study on which to build our debate, fundamentally with the aim of obtaining functional conclusions both at the theoretical and empirical levels, and above all to obtain a comparative and transnational perspective of the problem tackled, something we consider essential. Equally, and absolutely involved in the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Spanish Civil War, this comparative and transnational perspective will allow us to connect the Spanish case with the nucleus of European fascisms and their war experiences, delving into this converging way that must be, and is, one of the main workhorses of Spanish historiography.

### **Proposal's development**

Some years ago, in 2007, Alan Kramer published his monography *Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* about the development of total war in the conflict of 1914-1918 and how this influenced in the subsequent ultranationalist, violent, eliminationist and genocidal drift that defined the first half of the twentieth century, with its epitome in the Second World War. In his analysis, Kramer indicated a very interesting question regarding the specificity of the kind of war implemented by fascist regimes during the thirties and the forties, characterized by its genocidal nature and opened, according to him, with the colonial war launched by Italy in Abyssinia in 1935. Indeed, Kramer underlined that the specificity of this particular way of waging war typical of fascism would

define itself by the final elimination of the «distinction between combatants and non-combatants», pointing how in the six years of this conflict between 350.000 and 760.000 Ethiopians were killed, victims of an asymmetric war based on the overwhelming use of air force, chemical weapons and politics of collective terror against any sign of real or imagined resistance. Somewhat, and with all the technical and tactical differences one may suggest, the principles followed in the Italian war in Abyssinia were an advance or, if you want, a particular interpretation of the same principles that would inspire the German *Blitzkrieg* since 1939, based on the maximization of firepower in a certain point or area [*Schwerpunkt*] aiming to completely subdue the enemy –civil or military, armed or not– by its physical destruction or by its paralysis due to the chaos provoked. Actually, those same principles were applied by the German High Command against the various resistances which found a wide range of opportunities and a reason of being within the collapse motivated by the German and Italian occupations throughout the European continent, especially in the Balkans and in the vast Eastern territories. In all likelihood, the tactical and strategical approach of the type of war waged by the rebel side in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), based on the frontal collision and the material and human attrition in operation areas particularly chosen or imposed by the enemy, as the examples of the battles of Belchite, Brunete, Teruel or the Ebro prove, could also, somehow, have place here. Indeed, this approach was taken to its final consequences, that is to say, to the defeat by consumption of one of the parts involved in the conflict, the Republican side.

Even though Kramer's hypothesis looks like more as the result of an intuition or as the suggestion of a possible research line than as the empirical verification of a fact, we understand that it contains a very intriguing analytical and interpretative potential that could serve to explain some questions related to the relationship between fascism and war. But, also and no for that less important, between the military/army and fascist worlds. Thereby, did a particular way of making war by fascism, that is to say, a true *fascist warfare*, exist? Is it possible to differentiate violence and combat practices, as well as occupation policies typical of fascist regimes? Which is the explicative potential of the concept *fascist warfare*, in the case of being operational? In sum, can this concept be functional and sustainable based on what we analyse on the ground level? It is here where we place the question we want to tackle with this conference. Ultimately, facing such a complex question could leave us with the doubt of if this fascist way of war is not, until certain point, a constant in History, that is to say, if the characteristics we attribute to this *fascist warfare* couldn't be extrapolated to a myriad of other conflicts beyond the chronological boundaries of the interwar period, even going back in time. Nonetheless, despite the difficulties inherent to the concept, the issue appears enough intriguing and full of possibilities for us to take over Kramer's suggestion. Therefore, we expose hereafter some of the questions and reflections that we would like to debate within this conference, although only as suggestions.

Firstly, we strongly believe that the multiple connections or the essential interrelation between fascist experiences and military cultures of the different countries in which fascism settled down with some degree of power to influence things remains a very important issue to deal with. Generally, the analysis of primary sources and the comparative approach to different cases of study suggest that the confluence of interests, goals, worldviews and ethos between the military and the fascist worlds was something very

common all over Europe. Certainly, if we have something clear is that the relation between fascism and the army is not reducible to the common distinction between the conservative soldier who only owes to the observance of his duty based on certain corporative values, and the fascist militant who is driven radical and irrationally by an article of faith and certain essential ideological values, aiming to build a 'new world'. Rather, we believe that the boundary between these two worlds was much more permeable, being proof of it – although not the only one– the connection of many people serving in the army with fascism or the assumption of many of the military values by this very fascism when inspiring the aesthetics or when creating the identity and the basic principles of the various movements that emerged in Europe during the twenties, the thirties and the forties. Hence, what is beyond any doubt is that fascism and the army's world were not hermetic spheres and, somehow, we must explore in a deeper way the interconnections between these two worlds, both in times of peace and, above all, in times of war mobilisation, where contradictions and affinities emerged.

When weighing the different war contexts, which for obvious reasons have here a lot of interest, we shouldn't try to search for patterns or *modus operandi* which could be symmetrically equated. Instead of that, we should delve into the particularities of the scenarios in which wars were fought and of the agents that waged them, as well as in the reasons why some decisions were made and some others not. Contextual analysis is, thus, essential and will be through this methodological exercise how we may find this specific fascist warfare able to identify the different conflicts that mark the interwar period, from a First European Postwar and a Russian Civil War transformed into big social and political laboratories crossed by violence, until the final moments of the Second World War and the dramatic shakes of the Second European Postwar. In this sense, we can't equally tackle a conventional conflict fought against an external enemy, like the paradigmatic example of the German-Soviet War, and a civil war, where one of the main goals of both sides is to win for its cause some kind of social basis which could support its war effort and sabotage the enemy's one, something that drastically limits –but not eliminates– the possibilities inherent to the first kind of conflict. Thereby, we have to take into account the specific characteristics of each war, with its causes, goals and consequences; the strength, comparatively speaking, of the enemies fighting, which is essential to understand the approach and the very logic behind the practices implemented and the *modus operandi* of the troops at ground; the particular development of each conflict, and even seeing it retrospectively, paying attention to the basic questions in order to understand how the main agents proceeded, such as logistical and supply problems, that one of the contenders always have the initiative with constant victories with only little setbacks, or that the two contending sides are more or less balanced during a long period of time, etc. All of this should help us to value the different policies implemented in each context. At the end, for example, it is very difficult – or even impossible– to define a common pattern regarding the German procedure in each one of the areas and scenarios in which the Wehrmacht was involved during the Second World War or, even, between the various German units posted in different moments at the *Ostfront*. And the same happens if we focus on other conflicts like the antipartisan war developed by the Axis powers –included the NDH– in the Balkans between 1941 and 1945, where different conflicts, interests and political projects mixed and fed back themselves.

However, the question that guides ourselves here is what all these war experiences share, if they share something.

Indeed, the fascist warfare may be precisely that: a kind of conflict conceived as the propitiatory frame for implementing a specific radical political project of nation-state, homogenization and political-racial cleansing, with all its implications regarding displacement of populations, massive and/or selective murders, mobilisation of men, women and resources for the war, physical and economic exploitation, transformation of the space and mentalities, etc. Nevertheless, any war simply follows a pre-established plan, but their inner dynamics and internal logics tend to determine the different politics and priorities, mark the relation between the military and politics and, without any doubt, favour a synthesis between both spheres which, in many cases, could be backed by the existence of shared, until certain point, values and world views. And, in this sense, although we haven't disregarded the essential relationship between fascism and war, we may have ignored all the things that connect fascisms with interwar armies, up to the point that here we could find one of the crucial keys to understand two of the most important phenomena or realities of the twentieth century: the very fascism and total war. Perhaps, all of this may inevitably drive us to something that it's being pointed out from some historiographical traditions and areas, that is to say, the necessity of a wider, more complex and more dynamic understanding of what fascism was, perceiving it as the update of an ample social, political and cultural space identified with which we tend to name as counterrevolution.

For all of that we firmly believe that there isn't a clear distinction between the military goals and the political ones, as it has been usually highlighted. In actual fact, these areas never weren't conflicting between them, and the German and Spanish cases surely are the best example of it, but also the Italian for many reasons. Hence, we have come back to the point where it is essential for the research not only to identify and understand the great amount of war scenarios during the interwar period, but also the multiplicity of factors, agents and interests that intertwine in each one of those scenarios. In this sense, it is crucial to weigh the importance of the reality of war at ground level and in the small and local contexts –which precisely are where the whole environments can be interpreted–, but also to understand the individuals and the communities involved, as well as the propagandistic discourses and the official directives coming from the authorities, which beyond their formulation are implemented or, at least, they serve as a codification for the experiences lived. So that, we believe that the military has never excluded and won't ever exclude the political, despite the many occasions in which the soldier is depicted as a simple professional implementing his duty as ordered. And, thus, it has no sense for us to think that the case of fascism and its wars could have been different. Therefore, the main aim of this conference is to openly tackle all these questions, shedding light over the courses through which this mutual relation between fascism and the military/war passed. And, also, over the different ways in which it developed in order to, ultimately, debate on the existence of the concept *fascist warfare* and on its interpretative value.

Finally, this conference is also about setting up the ideal platforms for developing works, debates and reflections based on the principles of comparative and transnational history, the only way in which we can improve our knowledge of crucial and complex phe-

nomena like war and fascism, extensible as experiences to the whole European continent – and maybe further– during the interwar period.

### **Structure, functioning and panellists**

The conference will take place during two days, both in the morning and in the afternoon. We will invite 3 foreign scholars and a Spanish one, that is to say, one for each of the aforementioned cases of study. These scholars will make 4 lectures of 45 minutes tackling the different elements needed to establish the theoretical and factual limits of the proposed debate, that is, an analysis of mentalities, occupation policies, institutional machineries and combat experiences of the German, Italian, Spanish and Croatian fascisms during the thirties and the forties, as well as their multiple interrelations. Finally, beyond the lectures, a roundtable will take place in which the invited scholars will discuss, answering the questions posed both by a moderator and/or by the public, the limits, applicability and suitability of the concept *fascist warfare*, starting each from their own research experiences and from the elements tackled in the lectures.

Equally, we will open the conference to the selection of four or five papers among those proposals that we receive which will complement the issues tackled in the lectures, always on the basis of the debate around the concept *fascist warfare* and the different topics mentioned in the previous section. Besides, the organization will cover the expenses of travel and accommodation for the selected panellists. The papers will be grouped into the same discussion table in order to be debated altogether after being presented by one or two moderators. This way, we aim the debate to be the common base among all of them and what mark the nature of the session, rather than the mere and unconnected exposition of the papers. Therefore, this minimal selection of contributions will allow us to widen the discussion as well as the chronological and thematic boundaries defined in the lectures, making the conference a useful working platform able to produce the most feedback possible. And, also, we would be able to tackle both the questions and cases of study mentioned as well as other which could emerge during the debates and because of the different contributions and research experiences of the scholars attending the conference. Thus, our main goal is to provide a first approach to the concept *fascist warfare* and to weigh the possibilities of continuing working in this direction.

The deadline to send proposals is September, 30<sup>th</sup> 2017. The proposals can focus on different cases and chronologies from the ones posed by the four lecturers, therefore these can deal with cases beyond the limits of the interwar period and the Second World War. These should include a title; a brief summary of 100-150 words where the author should explain his/her main thesis or the key questions he/she would deal with during the presentation; five keywords; and finally an explanation of 800-1000 words where he/she briefly develops the contents posed in the summary together with the main sources used in order to defend his/her thesis, explaining at the same time his/her position regarding the effectiveness and sense of the concept fascist warfare, how his/her proposal fits in this debate, as well as what can offer and which are his/her motivations to take part in this kind of conference. All of that should also include a brief curriculum vitae of 200 words. Needless to say that we will value specially these proposals that include transnational and/or

comparative approaches, but also those which make original contributions from the thematic and methodological point of view. English will be the lingua franca of the conference in order to boost exchange and debate among the participants, in that sense we ask the proposers to send their proposals in that language or in both languages (English-Spanish; English-Catalan; English-German; English-Italian; etc.) The proposals should be sent to the following email addresses: [miguel.alonso.ibarra@gmail.com](mailto:miguel.alonso.ibarra@gmail.com) or [david.alegre.lorenz@gmail.com](mailto:david.alegre.lorenz@gmail.com)

Finally, we also consider convenient to channel the outcomes of this debate through a collective publication, where we will try to codify the conclusions of the conference and also to make known, nationally and internationally, different views of *fascist warfare* in a more complex, theoretical and elaborated way.

### Lecturers

- Croatian case
  - [Alexander Korb](#) (University of Leicester)
  
- German case
  - [Jeffrey Rutherford](#) (Wheeling Jesuit University)
  
- Italian case
  - [Amedeo Osti](#) (Deutsches Historisches Institut in Rom - Istituto Storico Germanico di Roma)
  
- Spanish case
  - [Javier Rodrigo](#) (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)