

Ángel ALCALDE: *War Veterans and Fascism in Interwar Europe*,
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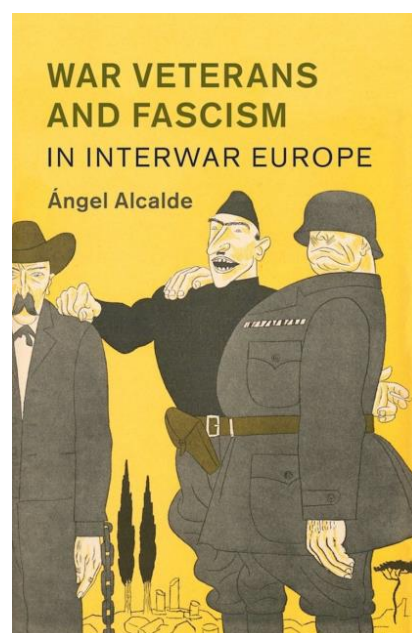
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The tangled paths of international veteran politics after the Great War

Fascism, whose ideology, politics and eventual fate, turned on war, drew on the legacy and the veterans of the Great War. Yet worldwide, seventy million soldiers were mobilized and their evolution as veterans was as varied as the impact of the war itself. Thus far, historians have looked at individual veterans and veteran movements in particular countries. A volume published in 2013 examined veteran internationalism in relation to inter-war attempts at reconciliation and peace.⁷ In this study, Ángel Alcalde examines the opposite theme, the relationship of veterans with Fascism.

Italy naturally has pride of place. For Fascism originated in radical Italian interventionism in the Great War, the rout at Caporetto and the power vacuum which the *mutilated victory* and the crisis of the liberal state opened up after the war. As elsewhere, veteran organizations were concerned most of all with practical matters while veteran experience and identity spanned a wide range of political positions. However, from the social warfare of the *biennio rosso* (1919-20) emerged the stereotype of the veteran as counter-revolutionary and paramilitary, inspired by the *arditi* (elite Italian shock troops in the war), an image that became associated with the right wing 'squads' which formed Fascism's own shock troops.

The main veterans' groups, such as the Associazione Nazionale Combattenti (ANC), remained more diverse and corporatist in their orientation. However, this 'symbolic appropriation' of the veteran as a right-wing nationalist enabled Mussolini to claim that Fascism spoke for all veterans. Once in power, the Fascists took over



⁷ Julia EICHENBERG and John Paul NEWMAN (eds.): *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

veteran politics (including the ANC), suppressing dissident currents or forcing them into exile. A conservative creed, *combattentismo*, reframed the veteran as the heroic servant of the state and nation who was given symbolic status in speeches and ceremonies along with practical benefits. It underwrote the Fascists' monopoly of the veterans and their appropriation of the meaning of the war. Alcalde's nuanced discussion of this process engages with some major theoretical debates. In particular, he rejects any general case about 'brutalization' due to the Great War other than the political use the Fascists chose to make out of a highly selective narrative of the conflict. The violence was a matter of political will and there was nothing automatic about its outcome, which also came from causes that had little to do with the war or veterans.

Not the least interesting aspect of this study is the comparative light it casts on the different role of veterans in Germany and France, and the connections between them. In victorious France with a dominant Republican and democratic political culture, nationalist veterans were a minority, though one open to Italian fascist influence. German nationalists drew on the early Italian fascist image of the veteran as radical paramilitary, but the major nationalist group, the Stahlhelm, had to contend with strong democratic veterans' bodies during the stable middle years of the Weimar Republic. Nonetheless, Alcalde argues convincingly that Hitler and the Nazis operated a similar symbolic appropriation of the veterans to that of Italian Fascists, even though veterans (as in Italy) were only one component of the Nazi movement and state. Most intriguingly of all, he sketches a Spanish comparison to show how, before the Civil War, the nationalist right lacked both a myth and a movement in relation to veterans, for which the *africanista* legend from the Moroccan War was merely a pale substitute.

In all this, Alcalde traces the tangled paths of international veteran politics in order to demonstrate how the Italian model was both transmitted to, and variously received by, the other three countries. The same tension emerges at the international level as at the national level between a diversity of veterans whose common interests lay in furthering their material interests (rehabilitation of the handicapped, pensions, protected employment etc.) and political divisions over the big issues of revising the peace settlement, reconciling with the former enemy and whether there could be any shared moral view of four grueling years of trench warfare. The conservative FIDAC (Fédération Interalliée des Anciens Combattants, the inter-allied body) gave Italian Fascists an ideal platform but was shunned by the Stahlhelm owing to its defense of the Versailles treaty. The centre-left CIAMAC (Confédération Interalliée des Associations de Mutilés et d'Anciens Combattants) included German republican veterans but was rejected by conservatives in France and elsewhere owing to its belief in pacifism and the League of Nations.

Yet as the crisis of the 1930s deepened, both the Fascists and the Nazis used veteran politics, and especially a new body, the Comitato Internazionale Permanente (Permanent International Committee), to advance the cause of peace and veteran brotherhood as a cover for exactly the reverse, the aggressive path pursued by both powers (with the backing of their state-sanctioned veterans' organizations) that led to a new world war. In the process, they completed the transition to a simplified veteran politics in which the surviving soldiers of the last war became the moral guarantors of the state in the new conflict. Imposed from above, this model also characterized Vichy France (in the shape of a new body of Great War veterans, the Légion Française des Combattants, supposedly providing the mass base for a state born of defeat in 1940) and also Franco's Spain, which finally had veterans of its own.

There is still much to be said about the encounter (both collision and collusion) between pacifist and Fascist veteran politics in the mid to late 1930s. In this, as in other ways, the veterans are symptomatic of a larger history in which the Great Depression magnified the legacy of the war rather than reducing it. But Ángel Alcalde's book will henceforth be indispensable reading for further work both on the veterans as such and also on the broader interwar memory of the Great War.