

Anti-Fascism 101

Book review

Cody Constructor

2018

a review of

Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook by Mark Bray. Melville House Books 2017

It's hard to shake the feeling that we haven't all wandered into a particularly demented time warp in the last year or so since that Nazi-sympathizer, Donald Trump, bumbled and ranted his way into the White House.

In the days after the orange one's election, hate crimes surged and, the word fascism became one of the most searched on the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary. It's abundantly clear that the sinister band of Klansmen, neo-Nazis and alt-right hipsters that descended on Charlottesville, Virginia this past summer for a Unite The Right rally that left one anti-fascist woman murdered and 35 others injured, certainly seem to think they're having a moment right now. And, it certainly seems like we've reached a point where it might be a good idea to treat the rise of fascism as a serious threat in the United States.

The problem is many people don't really have a good grasp on what exactly fascism is, while others seem to see today's khaki-clad, Tiki-torch-wielding, white nationalists as no more than a diversion. Not surprisingly, many liberal commentators are willing to brand anti-fascists as the bad guys, instead of, you know, the actual Nazis.

The timing couldn't be better for a helpful guide to aid movement activists and others understand what's going on. I'm happy to say that Mark Bray's new book does just that, mixing scholarship with a pragmatic dedication to stamping out fascists by learning from the lessons of the past.

Antifa is actually several books in one: a primer on key concepts, a pre- and post-WWII history of the antifascist movement, an analysis of historical lessons for antifas, and a pointed discussion of some of the key conversations people are having right now about antifa today.

As a political philosophy, fascism is a rather elusive concept to try and nail down, partly because it is irrational and self-contradictory and also because it's taken so many different forms since its emergence in the early 20th Century.

For the purposes of his book, Bray relies on historian Robert Paxton's definition of fascism as "a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion."

Bray prefers to focus on militant anti-fascism, which lies at "the intersection of Pan-socialist and direct action strategy," as opposed to a history of anti-racist or anti-fascist legislation. He takes a big picture approach to the fight at hand, situating the battle against fascism as one facet of the broader struggle against white supremacy and authoritarianism.

The first section of the book traces the emergence and early years of fascism, describing the birth of Mussolini's Blackshirts in Italy following WWI, Hitler's National Socialist movement and related developments. These are contrasted with the various anti-fascist movements of the time, including the Italian *Arditi del Popolo*, a force of roughly 20,000 people dedicated to defending Italian cities and towns against Mussolini's violent attacks on leftists and unionists.

One particularly excellent section discusses the "Battle of Cable Street," where residents of London's Jewish East End neighborhood physically blocked a planned march by Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, despite efforts by the Communist Party of Great Britain to redirect demonstrators to a rally for the Spanish Republic. I would have liked to have read more about Jewish organizing against fascist sympathizers in the U.S. during the 1930s and '40s, but unfortunately that's not a topic the author focuses on.

Where the book really shines, however, is looking at anti-fascist organizing following WWII. Bray remarks that *Antifa* is the most comprehensive book out there on transnational antifascism in this period. Highlights of this include sections on: the 43 group, a militant anti-fascist organization that disrupted and even infiltrated British fascist groups in the postwar period; militant resistance to Golden Dawn's recent rise in Greece; tactics to disrupt neo-Nazi skinhead organizing; and responding to fascist electoral campaigns like LePen's National Front in France in 2002.

Much of the writing draws on a series of one-on-one interviews Bray conducted with a variety of anti-fascist organizers, mainly from the U.S. and Europe. This gives these veteran antifas a chance to reflect on lessons learned in a way that is applicable to the pressing needs of today.

Later in the book, Bray goes on the offensive, derailing liberal media attacks on antifa, specifically the smear that the antifa movement poses a greater threat to free speech than fascists and is obsessed with violence.

On the first point, he rightly points out that fascist ideas have thrived in an atmosphere of open debate in the past, and on numerous occasions rational discourse has not been enough to neutralize the ability of them to organize and achieve political power—a and that when the tables are turned fascists don't hesitate to crack down on others right to express themselves. He also notes that most antifas do value the free and open exchange of ideas but "draw the line at those who use that freedom to promote genocide or question people's humanity." In the end, he comes out prioritizing the "political project of destroying fascism," over concerns about the free speech rights of fascists.

As for the topic of violence, Bray notes that physically fighting the right is only a small part of anti-fascist organizing (which also includes creating propaganda, coalition-building, pressuring venues to shut down fascist events and other tactics) and that street-fighting and other confrontations often emerge out of a literal need for self-defense. He also poses the question, when is the right time to physically confront fascists? Bray argues that we shouldn't view the debate about confronting fascists violently or nonviolently in binary terms, but rather weigh our actions pragmatically in service of specific goals.

My one concern about the antifa movement right now is the tendency for some people to over-romanticize the struggle. Getting caught up in the drama of the moment can lead to a with-us-or-against-us attitude that mythologizes whatever we happen to be doing right now while discouraging movement building and the realization of long-term goals.

The best insurance against that is cultivating a state of mind where we try to think about the big picture and learn from the lessons of the past. *Antifa*, with its wealth of research and one-on-one interviews with antifascist activists is a wonderful resource to do just that. Anyone involved or interested in getting involved in the anti-fascist struggle should get their hands on a copy of Bray's book and read it!

Cody Constructor is an activist and writer based in Detroit who is down to fight fascists whenever the need arises.

Related: see "Antifa Author Mark Bray Meets the Professors," FE #400, Spring, 2018.

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