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Conference Report



Paramilitarism in Fascism and the Radical Right

The Sixth Convention of the International Association of Comparative Fascist Studies (COMFAS)

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Abstract

The sixth annual convention of the International Association for Comparative Fascist Studies (COMFAS) took place from 6 to 8 October 2023 and this year was hosted by Central European University in Vienna. The event, organised by Antonio Costa Pinto alongside COMFAS Presidents Aristotle Kallis and Constantin Iordachi, fostered an important, constructive space to discuss research, both in formal panels and keynote sessions, as well as informally across the three days. The theme year was ‘Paramilitarism in Fascism and the Radical Right’, a field that allowed for a wide range of time periods and approaches to the topic to be explored.

Keywords

COMFAS – fascism – radical right – paramilitarism – conference report

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The sixth annual convention of the International Association for Comparative Fascist Studies (COMFAS) took place from 6 to 8 October 2023 and this year was hosted by Central European University (CEU) in Vienna. CEU were supposed to host the event in-person in September 2020 and so it was very positive development to be able to finally meet in person in Vienna. The event, organised by Antonio Costa Pinto alongside COMFAS presidents Aristotle Kallis and Constantin Iordachi, fostered an important, constructive space to discuss research, both in formal panels and keynote sessions, as well as informally across the three days.

The theme year was 'Paramilitarism in Fascism and the Radical Right', a field that allowed for a wide range of time periods and approaches to the topic to be explored. Andrea Pető's keynote lecture opened the conference, centring attention on the still under-discussed topic of gender studies and fascism. Her talk on gender and paramilitarism in the 1930s and today spanned issues including the importance of studying the significant numbers of women in the Hungarian Arrow Cross movement, and the ways memories of women are used to promote variants of illiberal memory politics in contemporary contexts by far-right parties.

While Professor Pető set the scene for the conference, panels ranged across many pertinent topics. Papers explored themes as varied as radicalised temporalities in fascist ideology, the emotional economies developed by fascists, contemporary terroristic forms of fascism as well as national and regional studies focusing attention on fascist paramilitarisms found in many European cases, as well as the US and India. Exploring the relevance of fascism studies to such global perspectives helped to raise important questions about the relationship between fascism to colonial and post-colonial contexts, and the global dynamics of fascism certainly ought to be an area for further research. Moreover, presenters included many talented PhD researchers as well as more established and high-profile scholars, too many to name in a short conference report. Papers were of a high quality, thoughtful, well presented and evidenced the wide range of research styles, methods and approaches in the field.

Sven Reichardt and Roger Griffin provided two further keynote addresses. Reichardt explored four key areas of the study of paramilitarism: cultural perspectives of paramilitarism, highlighting that propagandistic ideals could be quite distinct from the lived reality of fascist paramilitarism; the meaning of paramilitary groups in fascist states, which could find themselves in tension with fascist regimes; the transnational dimension of paramilitarism and fascism after the First World War; and the still understudied issue of masculinity and paramilitarism, again highlighting the need for more analysis from gender studies approaches. Griffin, meanwhile, focused on the ways fascism responds

to the existential issues posed by modernity, and paramilitary forms of politics can offer a sense of refuge and home, an alternate, fascist 'sacred canopy', to resolve these questions. This drew on some of his less well-known work on terrorism and more recent forms of political violence.

The conference also drew out the growing networks of fascism studies scholars. The NORFAS network (norfas.net), for example, presented an excellent panel of talks on Nordic contexts, highlighting the work of a thriving group of scholars. My own institution, the University of Northampton, sent a panel of doctoral students and academic staff to talk about the history of emotions in a range of post-1945 contexts, drawing on our Searchlight Archive collection of archival material spanning the 1960s–2000s. Other panels focused on book projects and area studies, such as fascism in Yugoslavia and less well studied fascist states. COMFAS is growing into a hub for a much wider set of scholarly communities that engage in aspects of fascism studies.

By its close, the conference had provided attendees with some lasting questions for future work, not only around gender but also the emotional dynamics of fascism, the global nature of fascist politics and the alternate temporalities that underpin fascism's dynamics. The conference also allowed space for discussion on the meaning of 'fascism' as a conceptual term, and its relevance as a valid mode of analysis for political movements that have come after 1945, and for groups outside of Europe. In closing the conference, while highlighting the vibrancy now found in the field, Constantin Iordachi and Aristotle Kallis rightly called for greater focus on more recent forms of fascism in future COMFAS conferences. Fascism studies remains under-institutionalised and needs to do more to develop its often-timely research areas. As such, COMFAS's annual convention continues to play a pivotal role in creating an arena for scholarly exchange, support, and development to achieve these ends.