

Fight Against War and Fascism and the Origins of Antifascism in US Culture

Chris Vials

A seemingly insignificant, back-page story in *The London Times* from September 12, 1933 – no doubt digested and quickly forgotten by most of its readers – contained an important addition to the English language which illuminates both the politics and the cultural impact of the antifascist left. It was a report on a communist rally in Paris that had been organized as a show of solidarity for those accused of infamous Reichstag Fire in Germany. That March, the Nazi government initiated proceedings against four communists and one anarchist charged with the burning of the Reichstag. World media attention focused on this event, which, as Michael Tigar and John Mage have argued, was “*the political trial of its time*” (28). The *Times* article reported that several thousand people gathered in the streets of Paris in anticipation of a meeting featuring the famous criminal lawyer Vincent de Moro-Giafferi, who was to have defended the accused in Leipzig but who was barred from doing so at the last moment by the German government. The gathering outside the meeting hall turned into a rally, and after “The Internationale” was aired, “water carafes, chairs, and other convenient missiles from neighborhood cafes were hurled at the police.” Moro-Giafferi gave his address at the subsequent meeting, and after his speech those assembled passed a unanimous resolution. *The Times* quoted the resolution as follows: “Fifteen thousand citizens assembled at this meeting denounce the parody of justice which is being prepared at Leipzig. . . . They . . . denounce the quadruple crime which is being prepared in the name of *racism* and intolerance” [emphasis mine].

Sandwiched between other columns on page 12 of *The Times* that day, this piece would be an otherwise un-noteworthy artifact amidst the wash of international media coverage on the trial and its related events. Un-noteworthy, except that it contained the very first appearance of the word “racism” in the English language. That the word first emerged in a translation from the French is not a coincidence; according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the English term is likely derived from the French word *rascisme*,

first recorded in 1902. But in the English-language world, the first appearances of the term “racism” were all connected to fascism or antifascism, usually the latter. The first extended exposition of the word came from the German exile Magnus Hirschfeld, whose book *Racism* was published posthumously in 1938. Though written in German, its English translation was the first edition to appear in any language. Hirschfeld, who as a Jew, a socialist, and a homosexual, had been forced to flee Germany for France in 1933, viewed what he called “racism” to be the central feature of Nazi ideology. To trace the origins of Nazism, his book *Racism* provided an etymology of the term “race” within European languages. It was also the first English language publication to consider Nazi assertions on homosexuality in its interpretation of the Third Reich.

To be sure, the antifascist left of the 1930s did not generally use the word “racism” in its writings against Hitler and Mussolini, nor against what they saw as their American equivalents. The US Communist Party’s journal *Fight Against War and Fascism*, for example, critiqued the racial politics of fascism using terms established by an earlier generation of primarily African American activists, terms such as “race hate,” “white supremacy,” “color prejudice,” and “race dominance.”¹ As is known, the term “racism” did not come into general usage until the 1960s (Omi and Winant 69). And clearly, the antifascist left of the Depression decade did not invent what we would now call “anti-racism.” But the first appearances of the word point to new and influential ways of thinking about power generated by the antifascist left, the legacy of which has yet to be adequately explored.

It is a commonplace assumption that Marxist and other left-wing thinkers before the war shared a simplistic reading of their enemy, one that held fascists to be mere tools in the hands of capitalists. The left, these scholars assert, either misunderstood fascism as an ideological mask behind which lurked monopoly capital, or they narrowly saw it as capitalism in an advanced stage of decay.² But this view oversimplifies left-wing

¹ See Bernard Stern, “Nazi Race Theories.” April 1934: 12; John Wexley, “White Supremacy.” April 1934: 7; Harry Ward, “Fascism and Race Hate.” July 1934: 4; Guy Endore, “Haiti and U.S.A. Occupation,” January 1934: 13.

² For a few examples, see Larry Ceplair’s *Under the Shadow of War: Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Marxists, 1918-1939*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, p. 4; John Diggins, *Mussolini: the View from America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1972, p. 219; and C.M. Wilson, “A New Look at the Problem of ‘Japanese Fascism.’” *Re-appraisals of Fascism*. Ed. H.A. Turner. New York: New Viewpoints, 1975; Roger Eatwell, “Conceptualizing the Right: Marxism’s Central Errors.” Roger Eatwell, ed. *The Nature of*

analyses of fascism. Often, these scholars base their claims strictly upon the major statements of Comintern policy, or on the assertions of the most prominent international communists such as Karl Radek or Georgi Dimitrov. But if one looks beyond the Congresses of the Communist International and into the broader culture of the global, antifascist movement of the left at mid-century, one often finds an analysis that takes the non-economic dimensions of fascism much more seriously than one might expect.

While fascism was still a living, mass movement, it threatened the very existence of the left. To counter this new threat, its left-wing opponents developed new explanatory models that dispensed with orthodox economic reductionism and did away with teleological notions of their own inevitable victory. Antifascism necessitated an analytical language that could articulate the relationship between race, class, gender, sexuality and nationalism, and, indeed, antifascists did not always meet this challenge. But with surprising frequency, they did – even before the birth of the Popular Front in 1935. The more nuanced strands of mid-century antifascism they created went on to influence contemporary cultural studies by way of Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School.

In this essay, I will examine the US Communist Party's influential magazine *Fight Against War and Fascism*, in print from 1933 to 1939. Examining this source sheds new light on the antifascist left in two main ways. First, it illuminates the broader, global social movement that gave us the word "racism," and that also helped to create the Adornos, Marcuses, and Gramscis familiar to many contemporary intellectuals. Second, an examination of *Fight Against War and Fascism* (hereafter abbreviated as *Fight*) helps to show how this international movement played out in the United States; as such, it can serve as a new and productive site to examine how global discourses cross national boundaries, impacting US political identities. Re-visiting this history is especially prescient at the current moment. The recent attempts by the American far-right to re-

the Right: American and European Politics and Political Thought Since 1789. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989: 18-31. Ian Kershaw wonderfully summarizes this tendency amongst historians in *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*. Third Edition. London: Edward Arnold, 1993: 43-47. Though he is critical of Marxist approaches as well, he notes their internal diversity, and calls "liberal-bourgeois historiography" to task for oversimplifying Marxist positions.

define the language of antifascism are unprecedented in their relentlessness.³ Right-wing confluences of Obama and Hitler might not win many adherents in and of themselves, but they trivialize the history of US antifascism nonetheless, threatening not only to sever it from its international roots, but also to eclipse the movement that produced it from memory.

The monthly magazine *Fight Against War and Fascism* (generally abbreviated as *Fight*) was the journal of the American League Against War and Fascism, one of the more successful “front” groups of the Communist Party U.S.A (CPUSA). Founded in the fall of 1933 and modeled after the putatively non-sectarian Amsterdam-Pleyel movement in France and Holland, the League had 20,000 dues-paying members at its peak. But its influence went well beyond its regular membership. As a “front” organization, the majority of its Presiding Committee were communists, but its membership was not “controlled” by the party. There were 1023 organizations affiliated with the League comprising a combined membership of 7 million people (these included the American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the American Friends Service Committee). The governor of Minnesota made a speech at one of its rallies in 1937, and several other cabinet members in the Roosevelt administration spoke at other League events or lent their names as sponsors. At its convention in Washington D.C. in January 1939, the League received a letter of welcome from Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes (Ceplair 187-188; Ottanelli 173-174). Thus statements made by those participating in League events or publications should not be narrowly construed as statements of the Communist Party, but as reflections of a broader left-liberal coalition.

Despite the successes of the League as a vehicle for coalition-building, the organization was abruptly terminated by the Party leadership in August 1939 after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union (often

³ Conservatives in the 1930s sometimes painted Franklin Roosevelt as a “dictator” akin to Mussolini or Stalin (for a typical example, see “Speaking of Dictators,” *LIFE*, 18 April, 1938 (16-17)). And during the Cold War, there was a sustained attempt, by figures ranging from J. Edgar Hoover to Arthur Schlesinger Jr., to conflate fascism and communism under the headings of “totalitarianism” and “Red fascism.” But fascism itself was always generally understood as a right-wing movement. When it was conflated with the left-wing movement of communism, the argument was usually that their programs were different, but their “methods” were the same. Only recently, following the publication of Jonah Goldberg’s *Liberal Fascism* (2007), has the American right tried to revise history so radically as to actually claim that fascism was a left-wing, even liberal, movement.

referred to as “the Hitler-Stalin Pact”). Antifascism continued to flourish in US culture after 1939, but the CPUSA could no longer be considered its vanguard. After Pearl Harbor, the Party moved in more conservative directions, withholding support from labor strikes and the African American Double V campaign while lending its sanction to the Japanese American internment. The Party’s wartime behavior, the sense of betrayal felt by many “fellow-travelers” in the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Khrushchev’s later revelations in 1956 of the monstrous nature of the Stalin regime – and, most significantly, Cold War anticommunism – have worked to produce an amnesia that obscures the political contributions of journals like *Fight*.

As a number of scholars have argued, while communists outside the USSR were tragically blind to the horrors transpiring in the Soviet Union in 1930s, the politics and coalitions they helped to create within their home countries were not reducible to this blindness. What journals like *Fight* reveal are the ways in which US-based communists and non-communists worked together, for a time, to forge a democratic language that confronted hierarchies of race, class, and empire, and in a manner that did not neatly follow any “party line” directed from Moscow.⁴ Organized around antiracism, antifascism, and the creation of an equitable economy to replace laissez-faire capitalism, the left-liberal movements of the 1930s formed a “force from below” that pressured Roosevelt and Congress to adopt some of the more dramatic legislation of the New Deal, including the Wagner Act (1935), the Social Security Act (1935), and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938).⁵ Indeed, many of American liberalism’s greatest institutional triumphs would have been unthinkable without the organizing and activism of radicals.

⁴ Within studies of the 1930s and 1940s left in the US, there is virtual consensus that US communists did not faithfully adhere to any Moscow-driven line. See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: the Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 4-21; Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), (particularly chapters 6-7); Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in US Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), (chapter 2); and Chris Vials, *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and US Culture, 1935-1947* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009) (Introduction).

⁵ Liberal historian Robert McElvaine notes that toward the end of Roosevelt’s first term, he was faced with a choice to alienate either business or the left. In 1935, he firmly yoked his political future to the latter in order to “calm the thunder on the left” and coast to victory in the 1936 election (262). Though he never broke with the southern elite, the rest of his tenure in office was marked with a more leftward tilt. See *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984).

While it lasted, the broad-based, democratic appeal of the League was reflected in its magazine, which, especially after the shift to the Popular Front line in 1935, featured articles from a wide range of non-communists, including liberal clergy, academics, journalists, federal government officials, and even Christian missionaries. It is important to note that only a small percentage of the articles in *Fight* were devoted to general, theoretical explications of fascism, and such abstract articles that did appear were published primarily in the first few years of the magazine. Most pieces covered what its writers saw as specific manifestations of their avowed enemy. These included far-away developments like introduction of the Nuremberg Laws in Germany, the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy, the shifting front lines in Spain, and Japanese advances in China. But fascism was also linked to historical dynamics closer to home, like the growth of the ROTC on college campuses, lynching and anti-labor violence in California and the South, the marginalization of women within the labor movement, US imperialism in Cuba, Haiti, and the Philippines, and more. Indeed, the sheer range of issues covered by *Fight* suggests an incredibly broad definition of fascism, so broad that the term is at risk of losing its meaning.

But there is a general pattern that emerges from its writers' attempts to describe such seemingly divergent manifestations of their enemy. If a generic definition of fascism can be extrapolated from all the various articles of *Fight*, both before and after the shift to the Popular Front line in 1935, it would be the following: fascism is an explicitly right-wing form of nationalist violence latent in all capitalist societies. It relies upon and intensifies established ethno-racial divisions in order to create a repressive, homogenous, and (sometimes) patriarchal nation-state that ultimately safeguards private property and empire through revolutionary, new means. Capital, furthermore, was not always in control of this process: fascists used capitalists as much as capitalists used fascists. While this pre-Holocaust, pre-civil rights reading of the far-right did tend to privilege the economic, this did not necessarily mean that its analysis lacked nuance or efficacy. In their best incarnations, *Fight's* antifascism served as a language to link what is often held as divergent modes of power: that is, race, class, and sometimes gender.

When tracing the notion of fascism found in *Fight* and its relationship to the central decision-making bodies in the Communist International (Comintern), one must break its coverage down into two distinct time frames: (1) the period from 1933 to July 1935, when the Comintern line followed from its so-called “Third Period” analysis; and (2) from the summer of 1935 to the magazine’s termination in July 1939, when the Party followed its “Popular Front” policy. One must also take the tactical failures of the Communist movement vis-à-vis fascism very seriously. The position of the Enlarged Executive of the Communist International (the central body of “the Comintern”) during its “Third Period” (1928-1935) has rightly been critiqued as debilitating and sectarian. The Party leadership during this period described capitalism as entering a third period of development marked by bourgeois dictatorship and increasingly aggressive, imperial war. Fascism – one form of bourgeois dictatorship – emerged organically from the older bourgeois democracy, and was the means sought by a decaying capitalism to continue its rule during a time of crisis. What Polish Third Period theorist Dmitrii Manuilski called its “extreme nationalism” and “medieval garb” was only its “ideological shell” (160). Its public rituals, spectacles, and racial ideology, in other words, were only masks to conceal its true face, which was capitalism. The plan of action they deduced from this theory was particularly toxic. In February 1932, a year before Hitler’s seizure of power, German Communist leader Ernst Thälmann argued that since fascism is capitalism in disguise, the Party must attack it at the root by directing its energies against the Social Democrats (!), who, as “the moderate wing of fascism,” were capitalism’s main pillar of support (163-165).

As David Beetham has shown, the Third Period position contrasted with a much more complex analysis used by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) under Antonio Gramsci and Palmiro Togliatti in the late 1920s. Gramsci, Togliatti and others like Klara Zetkin maintained that fascism could serve to save capitalism in its time of crisis, but also argued that it possessed a certain autonomy from the capitalist interests with which it was allied, and had unique characteristics not always reducible to capitalism (2-10). Indeed, a contemporary reading of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (1925) or Mussolini’s *My Rise* (1928) leaves little doubt that one must take seriously fascism’s particular nationalist appeals to help account for its success (in short, these include a military model of citizenship, a cult

of the warrior, misogyny, an explicit rejection of parliamentary democracy, and, in the case of Hitler, an Aryan racial identity that fuses Jews and communists as internationalist threats to national homogeneity). And while more recent histories have confirmed the collaboration of big business with the regimes of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy at every turn, they also stressed that industrialists, financiers and large landowners were not actually directing the regimes in the main. Instead, fascist movements were driven largely by middle-class, right-wing “upstarts” with their own agenda of national renewal, one that sometimes created friction with the more established ruling classes.⁶ Other less reductive analyses in this vein emerged from dissenting Marxists during the Third Period and across the left more broadly by 1934, and these challenged both Comintern and Social Democratic orthodoxy. These included the work of August Thalheimer (founder of the Communist Party Opposition, or KPO) and Ignazio Silone, one of the founders of the PCI later expelled from the Party for his critiques of Stalin (25-39).

In the United States, the magazine *Fight* both echoed and challenged the Third Period line during its early days. One of the echoes could be found in a piece by William Spofford, an Episcopal priest. In September 1934, Spofford argued that “Fascism is capitalist dictatorship,” and attacked liberals in a manner reminiscent of the German KPD’s sectarian attacks on the Social Democrats. Attacking Roosevelt, he warned of the “economic Fascism of the New Deal” (to Spofford, the New Deal was “fascist” simply because the state intervened to protect the interests of capital). In the early issues of *Fight*, it is also easy to find reductionist racial analyses that articulated race as an epiphenomenal “smoke screen” thrown up by capitalists, or that viewed the relationship between race and class through the simplistic rubric of “divide and conquer.” In a piece from April 1934 entitled “Nazi Race Theories,” Bernhard Stern arguing that when the Nazis made claims about Aryan supremacy, they were intentionally masking their class interests. Stern writes: “These campaigns for racial purity . . . are to raise smoke screens to conceal the economic *cul-de-sac* in which Fascist Germany finds itself. They seek to distract the masses from the realization of their ever deepening economic exploitation at

⁶ For the best analysis of this dynamic, Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2004). See also, Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press).

the hands of large German capitalists” (12). Speaking about the U.S., another writer referred to anti-Asian exclusion legislation on the West Coast as “part of the general scheme of divide and rule” (Morgan 10).

But at the same time, it was clear that the theory of fascism provided by the Party was inadequate to many of the writers of *Fight* during the Third Period. Rather than simply echo its analysis, many contributors built upon the Party’s position, crafting their own language to articulate the increasingly violent world they saw unfolding around them. For instance, Joseph Gregg in a 1934 piece on “Fascism in the U.S.A” affirmed that fascism was an extension of ruling class power, yet defined it in a way that made social class only one of its components. “Everywhere,” he wrote, “[fascism] is based on the same narrow nationalism, anti-Marxism . . . racial hatred (against the Negro, Jew, the foreign born), religious antagonisms and war” (12). At other times, the sheer broadness of a writer’s notion of fascism came into conflict with the party’s position. In a March 1934 piece entitled “California Violence,” Ella Winter wrote that “Fascism means violence. Violence of club and pick-ax handles in strikes, clubbing and arrests on the picket line” (8). Emphasizing its racial brutality as much as its class violence, she spoke of the class and racial order in California as a “social system” rather than as “capitalism.” What Winter saw as “fascist” were the vigilante groups, assembled by ranchers and State officials, “to terrorize Filipino and Japanese, Mexican, Slav and American workers” (9).

More important, however, is the sheer amount of space *Fight* devoted to debunking the specifics of fascist nationalism and its racial theories. If anti-Semitism and nationalism were mere smoke screens, why dissect them in such detail? The magazine’s constant references to lynching, nativism, anti-Asian violence, the persecution of Jews, and other racial “diversions” underscores a simple truth: to analyze “the mask” at length was to take it seriously. It also suggests that a flawed, overly-reductionist theory of fascism did not always foreclose a more efficacious plan of action. That is, one could hold that fascism’s racial ideology was a mask for capitalism but still organize against the mask as such (practice, in this case, arguably exerted a reflective force back upon theory). It is important to note in this context that, contrary to the claims of a number of later scholars, many writers of *Fight* during the Third Period and after saw working and

middle class whites as *agents* of fascism's racial nationalism, undermining the notion that the left viewed the fascist movement as a mere capitalist conspiracy.⁷

By 1934, the Communist International itself came to realize that one needed to take “the mask” of fascist ideology seriously in order to effectively combat it, formally announcing its Popular Front policy at its Seventh Congress in July-August 1935. As Georgi Dimitrov emphasized in his address to the Congress, fascism should no longer be seen as an expression of capitalism in general. Rather, it serves “the interests of the most reactionary circles of the bourgeoisie” (181). In a move that opened up the possibility of a coalition with liberals and reformists, fascism was no longer the inevitable expression of the system as a whole but of conservatives and the political right (accordingly, the writers of *Fight* after 1935 spoke less about the outrages of capitalism and FDR and more on those of Henry Ford, J.P. Morgan, U.S. Steel and Wall Street). Dimitrov cited the failure of the previous Social Democratic and Communist policies, which were based on “a narrow sectarian attitude” (184). He continued to refer to fascist ideology as a “mask,” but now the true face underneath the mask was not only capital but “unbridled chauvinism and annexationist war” as well as “rabid reaction” (181). And though its true face was now larger, he made clear that its nationalism needed to be attacked on its own terms. “Our comrades in Germany,” he noted, “failed to reckon with the wounded national sentiments and indignation of the masses at the Versailles Treaty” (184).

After mid-1935, one finds an increasingly interesting dialogue about fascism in the pages of *Fight*. While it generally retained its emphasis on social class, race was seldom viewed as epiphenomenal. In addition, its critique of imperialism continued apace, the nature of American nationalism was discussed in far more detail, and there was much more discussion on the gender politics of fascism. Contrary to an inference made by Paul Buhle, I should also stress here that the politics of anti-imperialism did not by any means drop out of the picture during the Popular Front period, at least as exhibited by *Fight*.⁸ By late 1937, its international coverage on “imperialism” was largely honed to

⁷ For a few examples, see Miriam Allen De Ford, “Silver Shirts.” May 1934: 2, 7; Harry Ward, “Churches and Fascism.” April 1934: 4.

⁸ Buhle writes that “antifascism as practiced seemed aimed at preservation of the Western democracies in a world of non-whites still largely oppressed by colonialism and neocolonialism. Communists seemed to place aside the anti-imperialist clarion call so obvious in early years” (55). See “Antifascism.”

China and Spain, but the devastating impact of US interests in Latin America were still exposed, and the British Empire was still discussed as a menace to world peace that must be reckoned with alongside Italy and Germany.

Langston Hughes' one-page short story "Conversation," published in the October 1936 issue, serves an example of the newer articulation of race and class during the Popular Front period. It never explicitly mentions the word "fascism," but the story's placement in a magazine devoted to this subject leaves no doubt about the connections its author is trying to make. The narrative is built around a dialogue between two white southerners. The two men meet on a street in Washington DC, and one brags to the other that he "shot four niggers" on a recent trip back home. They needed to be shot, he says, because all the whites "was acting like they was scared." The reason for the fear? The reds have been organizing African Americans and "settin' their minds against us white folks," instilling in them the belief that they should earn as much pay as whites. The federal government is also at fault for "spoiling" blacks by paying them the same amount relief as the whites. As the two continue their conversation, the killer adds, "I'm a hundred per cent American! And I reckon I can kill a nigger if I want to." The two then say their goodbyes and return to work (21).

While the story isn't Hughes' best literary endeavor, it does illustrate a reading of fascism that runs counter to the assumptions about communist antifascism held by many postwar scholars. "Conversation" does not project anti-Marxism and racial violence as a capitalist plot, but the inverse: it suggests that the southern, "fascist" fear of communists is driven by long-established racial anxieties *and* a desire to retain relative economic privileges. Further, the shooter's complaints about outside agitators – both the Reds and the federal government – locates fascism within a broader reactionary worldview, one that sees domestic discord as the result of external, "foreign" interference. He then checks that foreign threat not only through murder, but by announcing his "one hundred per cent" Americanism, restoring national honor and his rightful place in the nation through racial violence. The later is a decidedly fascist move, but also a gesture instantly recognizable to American readers. Though Hughes leaves the class position of these two

Encyclopedia of the American Left. Second Edition. Mary Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

whites indeterminate, the illustrations make it clear that disenfranchised whites are also agents of fascist racial violence. Four separate sketches on the page depict four different dialogues occurring: one between two businessmen, one between men of indeterminate social status, and the final two between decrepit farmers or sharecroppers. Visually, the page suggests this proto-fascist “conversation” is happening amongst whites of every social class.

Perhaps the most dramatic shift visible in *Fight* during the Popular Front years is its increased attention to women’s concerns. To be sure, this aspect of the magazine did not come of out of the blue. One of the most striking things about *Fight* is the relatively large number of women authors it hosted from its inception. Indeed, the magazine featured more by-lines by women writers than perhaps any other Communist publication, apart from those explicitly devoted to “the woman question.” A short list of these contributors includes names both familiar and forgotten: Dorothy McConnell, Carmen Haider, Haru Matsui, Agnes Smedley, Josephine Herbst, Carmen de la Garza, Mary Elizabeth Pidgeon (of the Women’s Bureau of US Department of Labor), Anita Brenner, and Sylvia Townsend Warner. As Kate Weigland has argued in her book *Red Feminism*, a group of women working within communist circles in the 1940s and 1950s sustained a small but vibrant feminist movement, one that revolutionized feminism by conceptualizing the interdependence of race, gender, and class, transmitting “influential terminology, tactics, and concepts to the next generation of feminists” (3). The pages of *Fight* can be seen as a precursor of this later movement of the 1940s and 1950s. In its early days, *Fight*’s women writers wrote little about the gendered nature of fascism or its effect on women per se, but they did stress the critical nature of women’s contribution to the antifascist struggle.⁹ One notable exception was an article by Columbia professor Margaret Forsyth, who described how Hitler destroyed the women’s movement and drove women out of the professions in Germany. She concluded, “all Fascist countries regard women in the same light – as the breeder of men, and that alone” (9).

⁹ As C.A. Hathaway wrote, “Join together, women of America, United, you are an invincible barrier against War and Fascism.” “Women and the Next War.” June 1934: 5. See also Camille Drevet, “An Appeal to Women.” June 1934: 4; Annie Gray, “Women and War.” March 1934: 2.

During the Popular Front, many of the women writers in *Fight* used antifascism to show how “the woman question” was central to broader issues of democracy. The magazine began featuring articles about wage inequalities between men and women in the U.S. and emphasized the pivotal role of women in shaping the antifascist resistance struggle and China. In April 1937, the magazine began a proto-feminist column entitled “As to Women,” written by Dorothy McConnell, which theorized the relationship between antifascism and the women’s movement. In her opening column, she noted that fascists in South America, despite imposing legislation that denied women the right to their own personal property after marriage, were earning the allegiance of women in droves. This is because, she argued, they urged women to participate in their movement to a much greater degree than activists on the left. Contrasting fascist appeals for female participation with an American labor movement that consented to dramatic wage inequalities for men and women in union contracts, her piece reads as both an ethical prod and a warning (24). Echoing the same theme the following month, she noted how the carpenters’ unions rejected the very idea of admitting women into its ranks. She warned, “if the United States persists in making it hard for women to get jobs or to have the opportunities which they feel are their rights as citizens, they will welcome Fascist propaganda for women with joy. And then what will happen to the Carpenter’s Union?” (24). Such examples prompted her to write in 1938: “It has been the habit in the past to look on the women problem as a separate problem, the solution of which would benefit only the oppressed women involved. But in the situation that the world is in today the problem has taken on the wide aspects that it should have in the beginning” (24).

It should be noted that despite its broad-based appeal, the League’s notion of fascism never attained complete hegemony in US culture (arguably, no single idea of fascism ever did), but this does not mean it was without significant influence. A vast number of artists, writers, and filmmakers working in the U.S. were swept up in the left-liberal coalitions against fascism in the 1930s and 1940s, and their messages shaped the public mood through the radio programs, newspapers, magazines, popular novels, and Hollywood films they created.¹⁰ In addition to the culture industries, left-liberal

¹⁰ Two excellent studies of this field of cultural production are Alan Wald’s *The Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and Michael

antifascists permeated government service, including the staff of the Office of War Information, and they used their positions to help shape the official rhetoric of the war.¹¹ Clearly, *Fight* was not a lone voice in the wilderness.

To some extent, the results of this cultural work can be measured quantitatively. Data from the Gallup Polls, begun in 1935, reveals that by the late 1930s, the broad public agreed with the Popular Front about *who* was friend and foe abroad. When asked in December 1938: “Who would you want to see win if war broke out between Russia and Germany?”, 83% said Russia and only 17% said Germany. That same year, by contrast, only 65% said they would support Britain and France if war broke out with Germany and Italy, with 32% favoring neither side (Gallup 112, 128-129). Similarly, 75% favored the Spanish loyalists throughout the late 1930s, and 74% favored the Chinese in the struggle with Japan by June 1939. The public rated the war between China and Japan – one of two main “causes” of the US antifascist left in the late 1930s – to be the most interesting foreign news event of 1937 (80, 92, 159).

All of this is no small feat considering that most American conservatives were enamored of Mussolini up until 1935, often saw Hitler as “saving” Germany from communism, and later favored Franco over the loyalists; or when one reflects that die-hard rightists such as Father Coughlin regularly defended Franco and Nazism as “defense mechanisms against communism” in his weekly radio program.¹² It’s clear that the public was listening to some voices over others. Since the onset of the Cold War, by contrast, the majority of the US public has rarely – if ever – diverged from its business classes in their assessment of who constitutes a “friend” and who an “enemy” abroad. The existence of this divergence in the 1930s can be counted as a huge marker of the left’s influence.

But while they agreed with the left that fascism was public enemy number one, the majority of the public differed drastically from the writers of *Fight* in their view of

Denning’s *The Cultural Front* (Verso, 1998). The author of this article is currently working on a book-length survey of the legacy of the antifascist left, tentatively titled *Dissonant Antifascism: The Political Left and the Idea of Fascism in US Culture*.

¹¹ See Alan Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (Yale University Press, 1978).

¹² On the US view of Mussolini, see John Diggins, *Mussolini: the View from America*. For a sample of a high-profile, conservative defense of Hitler, see F. Britten Austin, “Old Time Germany Looks at Hitler,” *Saturday Evening Post*. 5 August 1933: 10-11, 62-64.

what was to be done about it. *Fight* never advocated direct US military involvement against fascist powers. Instead, its writers tried to rally support around consumer boycotts, voluntary shipments of supplies to antifascist fighters in Ethiopia, Spain, and China, and amendments to the Neutrality Act of 1935 which would allow the US government to send aid to the resistance in those countries. Even this campaign of “aid short of war” was too much for most Americans, however. Sixty-four percent of those polled in February 1938 did not favor the shipment of arms to China; one year later, 79% did not want to amend the Neutrality Act to ship arms to the Spanish loyalists, and on September 3, 1939 – the day England and France declared war – 50% still said they didn’t favor sending supplies to the English or the French (Gallup 90, 138; *Public Opinion* 105). But on the more difficult questions posed by *Fight*, such as “What is fascism, and what would it look like in the US?” the pollsters are of no help.

While the precise legacy of left-wing antifascism amongst the US public is difficult to quantify, its ideas were pervasive and ubiquitous in American popular culture of the 1930s, 40s, and beyond. *Fight* occupied a significant place within a much larger network of antifascist cultural production. One cannot begin to recognize this influence, however, if one doesn’t look beyond the party lines and executive bodies of the Party and into the broader culture of the movement. When writers from various organizations stepped forward and used *Fight* as a platform to write about anti-labor violence, racism, jingoism, imperialism, and patriarchy – all under the heading of “fascism” – they illustrated how antifascism was for them a way to conceptually organize and connect all of the various struggles they both witnessed and participated in. Antifascism of the 1930s leaves us with a rich example of an earlier activism, one that attempted to link modes of power we still struggle to connect, and that the talk radio heirs of Father Coughlin are actively working to forever efface from memory.

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