

Editorial – Axis empires: towards a global history of fascist imperialism*

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For a short while, from late 1941 to early 1942, it appeared as though the Axis powers were on the brink of pushing the world towards a new order. In the midst of the Second World War, Japan, Italy, and Germany – the core members of the Axis – threatened the international political and ideological status quo as it had emerged from the First World War and, further, from the nineteenth century. The means for what was seen as a momentous, historical change were radical, fascist reforms at home, and imperial expansion abroad. The two were intertwined and they reinforced each other. And, as this special issue argues, this nexus was not a national phenomenon, but from its beginnings a transnational one, which shaped the interwar period and what unfolded afterwards. What defined the Axis alliance was the relationship between fascism and imperialism, a liminal space that brought the three regimes together, and which, during the Second World War, influenced the ways in which Japan, Italy, and Germany interacted and delineated their war aims.

Re-examining the Axis, its ideological and imperial nature, was the goal of a conference held at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich in 2015. Understanding ‘fascism’ broadly as the ideology and politics that emerged in Japan, Italy, and Germany, we sought to investigate the empires built by these countries in the context of a wider experience of imperialism during the global 1930s and 1940s. The main questions that we dealt with were: to what extent can we distinguish the empires of the Axis powers from liberal imperialism? To what extent did the three regimes find common ground regarding imperial questions, perhaps even radicalizing one another? What evidence is there of transfers of imperial strategies between fascist and non-fascist empires? Following up on our discussions and through the same set of questions, this special issue explores the usefulness of the concept of ‘fascist imperialism’ and, in so doing, re-evaluates the Axis in the context of global history.

In exploring the Axis as a transnational history of fascism and a global history of imperialism, the articles here propose a new reading of an alliance that has conventionally been

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treated within the purview of diplomatic history.¹ In the historiography of the Second World War, the Axis appears as the almost unwitting consequence of decisions taken in Tokyo, Rome, and Berlin since the early 1930s, which led the three countries into diplomatic isolation by the end of that decade. The Axis is also often seen as weak and inconsequential. The contributors to this issue do not deny that Great Power diplomacy was a crucial factor in the origins of the Axis. However, they do suggest that, through a global history approach, this narrative is far more complex. In this special issue the Axis appears as more than a diplomatic marriage of convenience, and less than a concerted alliance. It was a meeting of three fascist-minded regimes that fell into one another's arms through their recourse to imperial politics. These articles thus constitute the first major revisiting of the Axis since the political histories of the 1960s and 1970s.²

Axis imperialism has so far attracted relatively little attention. But this special issue aims to achieve more than just closing existing research gaps. In revisiting the history of the Axis powers in the context of fascist imperialism, we intend to bring together three intersecting historiographies. The first is transnational and global history. On the one hand, global history approaches are useful for discussing geopolitical constellations and world orders. After the Cold War the interest in world order returned, especially in the United States in the context of the rise of China.³ But there has been comparatively little discussion about competing concepts of world order during the 1930s and 1940s.⁴ At the same time, transnational history approaches have focused on non-state actors (or mid ranking officials), writers, ideologues, physicians, and the like, and have examined how they produced knowledge or practices across multiple national contexts. It is thus worth investigating whether there were actors who produced 'fascist knowledge' or 'practices' in a transnational context, regarding specific formulations of fascist racism, notions of the state and geopolitics, and technological expertise. As far as Japan, Italy, and Germany were concerned, were there circuits of knowledge among the Axis powers? If so, how did this knowledge circulate, and to what extent did it make a difference? By asking these questions, we will be able to consider whether in a transnational dimension fascism reveals itself differently from the way it appears when viewed in a national context.

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- 1 On the Japanese–German relationship, see Theo Sommer, *Deutschland und Japan zwischen den Mächten 1935–1940*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1962; Gerhard Krebs, *Japans Deutschlandpolitik 1935–1941: eine Studie zur Vorgeschichte des Pazifischen Krieges*, Hamburg: Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, 1984; Akira Kudō and Nobuno Tajima, eds., *Nichi-Doku kankeishi, 1890–1945 (2) Sijiku keisei no tagenteki rikigaku (History of the Japanese–German relationship, 1890–1945. 2: the multi-dimensional dynamics of the creation of the Axis)*, Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 2008; Masaki Miyake, *Nichi-Doku-I sangoku dōmei no kenkyū (Studies on the Japanese–German–Italian Alliance)*, Tokyo: Nansōsha, 1975. On the German–Italian relationship, see Lutz Klinkhammer, Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, and Thomas Schlemmer, eds., *‘Die Achse’ im Krieg: Politik, Ideologie und Kriegsführung 1939–1945*, Munich: Schöningh, 2010. On the historiography of the Axis, see also Daniel Hedinger, ‘A global conspiracy? The Berlin–Tokyo–Rome Axis on trial and its impact on the historiography of the Second World War’, *Modern European History*, 14, 4, 2016, pp. 500–21.
 - 2 Sommer, *Deutschland und Japan*; Miyake, *Nichi-Doku-I sangoku dōmei no kenkyū*; Manfred Funke, *Sanktionen und Kanonen: Hitler, Mussolini und der internationale Abessinienkonflikt 1934–36*, Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1971; Johanna M. Meskill, *Hitler and Japan: the hollow alliance*, New York: Atherton Press, 1966.
 - 3 Henry Kissinger, *World order: reflections on the character of nations and the course of history*, New York: Penguin Press, 2014. For theoretical considerations on world orders, see Jürgen Osterhammel, ‘Weltordnungskonzepte’, in Jost Dülffer and Wilfried Loth, eds., *Dimensionen internationaler Geschichte*, Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012, pp. 409–28.
 - 4 Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, ‘Introduction’, in Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, eds., *Competing visions of world order: global moments and movements, 1880s–1930s*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 1–25.

The second historiographical stream is fascist studies. Comparative in its approach, it has nonetheless long been addressed from a European vantage point. Furthermore, expansionism was often not considered a generic attribute of fascist ideology and practice.⁵ Yet, in our reading, fascist imperialism not only concerned power politics, world order, and territorial expansion, but also had an ideological dimension that was at the core of the doctrine.⁶ By approaching the history of fascism from a trans-imperial perspective, the following articles alter our understanding of the nature of fascism in the interwar years. Thus, they are a contribution to a global history of fascism, and answer recent calls for just such an approach.⁷

The third historiographical strand we address is the new imperial history. A vast body of literature has highlighted the importance of the colonial experience for the development of politics, society, and culture in various imperial metropolises.⁸ Historians have seen the processes of empire-building as crucial for the shaping of fields as diverse as medicine, gender roles, art, literature, and national identities. In recent works on Japan, Italy, and Germany, historians have also found fascism in the empire and, conversely, the empire in fascism. Japan's empire in Manchuria, for example, bore the hallmarks of fascism in population resettlement, the reorganization of the economy, and technocracy.⁹ Recent works on Nazi Germany have adopted the paradigm of empire to explain Hitler's goal in eastern Europe, and the genocidal policies pursued there.¹⁰ In Italian historiography, too, it has been suggested that the empire in Libya and Ethiopia mattered more than had previously been assumed.¹¹ So the imperial history on Japan has rediscovered fascism; and the history of fascism in Europe has unearthed imperialism. The following articles aim to bring these trends together. They show that imperial

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- 5 For this, see Aristotle A. Kallis, *Fascist ideology: territory and expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922–1945*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 27–8.
 - 6 Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic fascism: ideology, violence, and the sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919–1945*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 33–4.
 - 7 Generally, see Tim Jacoby, 'Global fascism: geography, timing, support, and strategy', *Journal of Global History*, 11, 2016, pp. 451–72; Stein Ugelvik Larsen, 'Was there fascism outside Europe? Diffusion from Europe and domestic impulses', in Stein Ugelvik Larsen, ed., *Fascism outside Europe: the European impulse against domestic conditions in the diffusion of global fascism*, Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, 2001. For the Indian case, see Benjamin Zachariah, 'A voluntary *Gleichschaltung*? Perspectives from India towards a non-Eurocentric understanding of fascism', *Transcultural Studies*, 2, 2014, <http://heiuip.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/transcultural/article/view/15554/11390> (consulted 7 April 2017). For Argentina, see Finchelstein, *Transatlantic fascism*. On Axis fascism, see Reto Hofmann, *The fascist effect: Japan and Italy, 1915–1952*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015; Daniel Hedinger, 'Universal fascism and its global legacy: Italy's and Japan's entangled history in the early 1930s', *Fascism*, 2, 2, 2013, pp. 141–60. For fascist internationalism, see Madeleine Herren, 'Fascist internationalism', in Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, eds., *Internationalism: a twentieth-century history*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 191–212; Jens Steffek, 'Fascist internationalism', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 44, 1, 2015, pp. 3–22; and the classic work by Michael Arthur Ledeen, *Universal fascism: the theory and practice of the fascist international, 1928–1936*, New York: Fertig, 1972. For a transnational, European perspective, see Antonio Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis, eds., *Rethinking fascism and dictatorship in Europe*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
 - 8 Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A new imperial history: culture, identity, and modernity in Britain and the empire, 1660–1840*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; Ann Laura Stoler, 'Tense and tender ties: the politics of comparison in North American history and (post)colonial studies', *Journal of American History*, 88, 3, 2001, pp. 829–65.
 - 9 Janis Mimura, *Planning for empire: reform bureaucrats and the Japanese wartime state*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.
 - 10 Mark Mazower, *Hitler's empire: Nazi rule in occupied Europe*, London: Penguin Books, 2009. See also Shelley Baranowski, *Nazi empire: German colonialism and imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
 - 11 Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds., *Italian colonialism*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; Aram Mattioli and Asfa-Wossen Asserate, eds., *Der erste faschistische Vernichtungskrieg: die italienische Aggression gegen Äthiopien 1935–1941*, Cologne: SH-Verlag, 2006; Reto Hofmann, 'Imperial links: the Italian–Ethiopian war and Japanese New Order thinking, 1935–6', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 50, 2, 2015, pp. 215–33.

policies in the interwar years were much more part of transnational interactions and exchanges than has been argued in the existing literature.

The articles shed fresh light on the nature of the Axis, offering new empirical evidence of the encounters between Japan, Italy, and Germany, and proposing new conceptual reflections that help to locate the Axis in the wider history of fascism and imperialism. In particular, three main themes emerge. First, the articles point towards transfers between the Axis powers, transfers that could be of various kinds. In his study of German and Italian settlement policies, Patrick Bernhard shows that some of the masterminds of the Nazi empire in eastern Europe, including Heinrich Himmler, looked with keen interest at Fascist Italy's settlement policies in Libya. He argues that, in this instance of inter-imperial borrowing, Fascist Italy offered a 'blueprint' to the Nazis. He also shows that, while the Nazis took a broad look at international colonialism, they differentiated considerably between the various national experiences. French and British empire-building, for instance, did not receive the same attention as Italian and Japanese colonial projects. Rotem Kowner makes the case for the transfer of technologies between Japan and Germany. As the Second World War progressed, the two countries exchanged two key resources necessary to pursuing the war effort: rubber, supplied by the Japanese to the Germans, and submarine technology, provided by the Germans. Kowner demonstrates that these exchanges, in which the Italians were involved in a minor way, were more extensive than previously assumed, and coordinated at the highest levels. He also points to a specific region of interaction, the Indian Ocean, and especially the area around the Straits of Malacca and the Java Sea, which until now have received little scholarly attention.

Second, the articles uncover the importance of personal networks in the making of the Axis, as well as in its sustenance. As Kelly Hammond tells us in her account of the Axis attitude towards Muslims, the three regimes were aware of the importance of Muslim populations in the fight against the Allies, but it was often actors from below who took initiatives. As in Kowner's article, Hammond discusses vast, but rather neglected, regions in which inter-Axis cooperation took place. She also argues that, by examining intellectual currents circulating across Eurasia through Axis-facilitated connections, we gain a more nuanced understanding of global anti-colonial movements among Muslim populations from the Maghrib to Manila in the post-war era. While Axis propaganda reached out to Muslims through a rhetoric of anti-colonialism, a pilgrim such as the Chinese Muslim Tang Yicheng made use of ties to Tokyo and Rome to find his way to Mecca. Similarly, Bernhard's and Kowner's studies point to the role of what could be called Axis brokers: ideologues or state actors, who believed in closer collaboration among the three powers, whether out of expedience or belief. Thus, by examining the complex and ambivalent history in various regions of the world, these contributions show that the alliance should not be reduced to the sole interaction between the main powers. They also prove that the quality of the Axis alliance cannot solely be judged against the backdrop of military and political cooperation, but that there were deeper, ideological dimensions.

Third, the articles urge us to consider empires as spaces of Axis interaction and comparison. How does the framework constituted by imperialism and fascism help us to ask new questions about the Axis and its members? Louise Young rethinks the political and ideological concerns of Japanese imperialism in Manchuria, which, as she argues, can also be traced in Italy and Germany. She asks what set Japan, Germany, and Italy apart from other empires during the 'fascist moment' from the aftermath of the First World War to the defeat of the Axis powers in 1945. She builds a definition of fascism around four core elements drawn from the Japanese

case: the ideology of Asianism, hyper-militarism, red peril, and radical statism. Reto Hofmann offers a theoretical analysis of the Axis in the context of the wider relationship between the nation and capital since the late nineteenth century. He argues that fascist regimes subsumed imperialist strategies in order to revitalize the bond between nation and capital, which had entered a period of crisis in the interwar years. In this way, he relativizes the Axis claims that they were establishing a ‘new’ order, pointing out the affinities with older, liberal imperial practices. Daniel Hedinger’s contribution aims to re-evaluate the Axis alliance by stressing that it should be part of a global history of the Second World War. By discussing the interwar years from the viewpoint of trans-imperial cooperation and competition, we discover an imperial nexus that bound the Axis powers together. This nexus helped to align the geographically distant partners, which in turn led other powers to believe in the existence and strength of the alliance. By putting this imperial nexus at the centre of the analysis, Hedinger challenges more traditional readings of the alliance and, by extension, of the Second World War. The Axis then appears as not only far more complicated, dynamic, and diverse, but also stronger than was previously assumed.

As a whole, this special issue hopes to stimulate new debates about, and studies of, the Axis, as well as the relationship between imperialism and fascism. Future research may want to address, from a comparative perspective, aspects of the gender politics of the Axis powers, as well as their recourse to violence in the territories they occupied. Were Japan, Italy, and Germany distinctively exploitative and, if so, why? It is obvious that most deaths during the Second World War occurred in imperial conflict zones and in imperial contexts.¹² While Japan, Italy, and Germany formed the core of the Axis, other countries became allies, or aligned themselves with the Axis. To what extent can the arguments presented in this issue be extended to them? For instance, was there an imperial dimension to the Iron Guard regime in Romania? Or did the regimes in Spain and Portugal devise settlement policies that drew on Italian or German models? Furthermore, there has traditionally been a separation between the ‘western hemisphere’ and ‘Asia’.¹³ The results of such a separation were dichotomous narratives of the chief nature of the struggle: fascism against anti-fascism in Europe, and imperialism versus anti-colonialism and pan-Asianism in Asia.¹⁴ Lastly, with defeat in the Second World War, the Axis powers all lost their empires, shed fascism, and turned into trusted allies of the United States. The parallel transition of Japan, Italy, and Germany into stable post-war democracies and their development into prosperous liberal capitalist economies remain objects of future comparative enquiry.

12 Niall Ferguson, *The war of the world: twentieth-century conflict and the descent of the West*, New York: Penguin Books, 2006, p. lxxi. For eastern Europe, see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, 2010.

13 E.g. Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint, *Total war: the causes and courses of the Second World War*, London: Allen Lane, 1972.

14 On this dichotomy, see, for example, Yui Daizaburō, ‘Sekai sensō no naka ajia taihei sensō (The Asian-Pacific war in the Second World War)’, in Kurasawa Aiko *et al.*, eds., *Naze, ima ajia taihei sensō ka (Why now (speaking of the) Asian-Pacific war)*, Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2005, p. 244.