

**Robert Gildea, Ismee Tames (ed.), *Fighters across frontiers. Transnational resistance in Europe, 1936-48*, Manchester (Manchester University Press) 2020, XXIII-352 p., 15 fig., 4 maps, ISBN 978-1-5261-5124-7, GBP 25,00.**

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»Fighters across frontiers« is the result of an international collective project which brought together more than twenty scholars specialising in the history of World War II in Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Romania, Russia, Greece and Palestine. The book's major aim is to reconsider, and indeed revise, the history of resistance in Europe in the period 1936-1948 by emphasising its transnational dimensions. To achieve this, transnational resistance is contextualised as involving individuals that were often already on the move before World War II, felt attracted to international ideologies and operated within a Europe that saw the shattering of state boundaries. Within this broader context, transnational resistance is subsequently conceptualised and operationalised through a focus on 1) the trajectories of individual resisters outside of their countries of origin; 2) their encounters with others; 3) changes in the resisters wrought by the experience of transnational resistance. The book spans the period from 1936, the start of the Spanish Civil War, up to 1948, when several participants were involved in the attempt to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine and the Cold War had begun. Geographically, it covers Europe as well as the Soviet Union and North-Africa. Throughout the book, the focus is firmly on individual trajectories that are often traced through archives in multiple countries as well as egodocuments. Uniquely, all ten chapters were written by groups of authors headed by one or more lead writers, and they are organised chronologically as well as thematically.

The first two chapters of »Fighters across frontiers« are devoted to the Spanish Civil War and explore transnational experiences in the International Brigades (through eight individual biographies), and the way in which »Spanish fighters« (former Interbrigadists as well as Spanish Republican fighters) functioned as a »matrix« for catalysing subsequent resistance during World War II in several European countries, with a special focus on France and Poland. Crucial in this story were also the internment camps that sprung up in France, Italy and Germany before the war and functioned as »crucibles of resistance«; here, various categories of foreign prisoners intermingled, exchanged their previous experiences, and formed new networks that would play a key role in fomenting and underpinning future resistance activity and movements. Former Interbrigadists were especially prominent in the French camps and many went on to play key roles in resistance movements as well as Nazi camp undergrounds. Subsequent chapters weave together



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connected as well as seemingly disparate phenomena, such as experiences in regular armies, the history of escape lines, Jews in various resistances, the British Special Operations Executive, guerillas in the Balkans and at the Eastern front and uprisings in Warsaw, Paris and Slovakia. Throughout the book the focus is on armed resistance, except for the chapter on escape lines, and along the way we encounter not only former Interbrigadists but prisoners of war, political prisoners, Spanish Republicans, and soldiers of a variety of backgrounds.

Inevitably, condensing a topic so vast in scope in a book of 250 pages means making choices, as it is impossible to discuss in-depth the specificities of all the case studies and of the individual trajectories that were chosen to illustrate these. The focus on the latter itself lends the book a crucial quality though sometimes makes it easy to lose sight of the bigger, aggregate context. This is well illustrated, to name but one example, by the chapter on the International Brigades, where one would wish for some more information on numbers of volunteers and nationalities, the various push and pull factors that determined their road to Spain, and pre-war migratory trajectories, before delving into the individual stories. On the other hand, it is precisely the elaboration of these stories that illuminate hitherto so often ignored but crucial aspects of the Brigades' history such as, for example, the role of women, of hospitals as sites of encounter, and of the often complex relations between various partaking nationalities.

The book's final chapter on afterlives and memories seeks to analyse the development and construction of the memory of transnational resistance in post-World War II Europe. As national resistance narratives were developed and Europe witnessed the onset of the Cold War, transnational experiences were initially excluded, if not actively expunged, from emerging national resistance narratives, until the post-1956 détente allowed for a resurgence that took different shapes in different national contexts but never truly broke through. Three points emerge in the conclusion: the importance of the International Brigades as foundational for the history of transnational resistance, the relevance of a number of different sites of encounter that nurtured it, and the transnational experiences which emerged as a result, and could involve personal reinvention or transformation as well as interpersonal misunderstandings and even conflict.

Both the final chapter and conclusion seek to extend the discussion about the nature of wartime resistance to the present day. As the authors point out when discussing the memory of transnational resistance, »There is now a memory war between a nationalist, anti-communist and essentialist narrative and a rival transnational, progressive narrative«, the latter dominant among scholars but not in the realm of politics and in society at large. As the editors subsequently also note in the conclusion, the book appears at a moment in time where nationalism is on the rise again. Yet they are remarkably modest, and perhaps somewhat too careful, when



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it comes to connecting the project's work to such broader societal developments and public debates.

The overarching scholarly aim, and result, of the book is a thorough reassessment of the still so often dominant national paradigm in resistance studies. As such the book offers an important corrective to those national resistance narratives in which the sacrifices of those deemed to be outside the perceived national framework played essential roles in its survival, only to be subsequently forgotten. More than only a response to dominant national constructions of resistance, the book should also be seen within the much broader context of recent scholarly work on the history of internationalisms, transnational militancy and war volunteering in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. »Fighters across frontiers«, in conclusion, is a ground-breaking book and each of its chapters offers important new insights into their respective topics. In fact, every chapter could form the basis for a separate study; the various trajectories taken by former Interbrigadists alone, to use this example again, merit much more work, given their importance for Europe's wartime resistance movements. »Fighters across frontiers«, then, will be a touchstone for future work on the histories of resistance, and the construction of its memory, in Europe and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance: Nir Arielli, Bruce Collins (ed.), *Transnational Soldiers. Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era*, Houndmills 2013; Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (ed.), *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History*, Cambridge 2016; Nir Arielli, *From Byron to Bin Laden: A History of Foreign War Volunteers*, Cambridge 2017; Holger Weiss (ed.), *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939*, Leiden 2017.



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