H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 1151

13 December 2022

Christian Goeschel. "Performing the New Order: The Tripartite Pact, 1940-1945." *Contemporary European History* (2022): 1-17. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322000340.

https://hdiplo.org/to/AR1151

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Masami Kimura | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

Review by Sarah Panzer, Missouri State University

Until recently, the concept of fascist diplomacy may have struck many as an oxymoron. After all, fascist regimes are historically not known for playing well with others, and the longstanding assumption among historians has been that this belligerence extended even to their presumptive allies. At best the Axis was an "alliance without allies."[1] At worst, it was a "long and uneasy engagement, maintained long past the hope of eventual union."[2] An ongoing historiographic re-evaluation of the relationships between fascist parties and regimes, however, has challenged the older paradigm and offered a new perspective on fascism as a global project to deconstruct and replace the liberal world order.[3]

In Christian Goeschel's most recent contribution to the field, he makes a persuasive case for taking tripartite diplomacy seriously as more than just the means by which Germany, Italy, and Japan hoped to construct a racialized new order, indeed as a mirror of fascist political sensibilities more generally. Whereas previous scholarship interpreted the lack of substantive military cooperation between the regimes as evidence of their disinterest in 'real' diplomacy, Goeschel argues that it was the performative displays of the alliance's power, "mass spectacles of unity and strength," which animated the alliance (2). Tripartite diplomacy may have been "carefully stage-managed political theatre," but that did not make it any less effective in binding together regimes that were collectively intent on restructuring the global political order (5). Goeschel thus constructs a compelling new interpretation of fascist diplomacy as the point of convergence between style and political substance, where the representative and the substantive mutually reinforced each other.

[1] Ernst L. Presseisen, *Germany and Japan: A Study in Totalitarian Diplomacy, 1933-1941* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1969), 281-320. See also, Gerhard Krebs and Bernd Martin, eds., *Formierung und Fall der Achse Berlin-Tōkyō* (Munich: Iudicium, 1994); Bernd Martin, *Deutschland und Japan im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Vom Angriff auf Pearl Harbour bis zur deutschen Kapitulation* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1969).

[2] Johanna Meskill, *Hitler and Japan: The Hollow Alliance* (New York: Atherton, 1966), 3.

[3] Hans-Joachim Bieber, *SS und Samurai: Deutsch-japanische Kulturbeziehungen, 1933-1945* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2014); Reto Hofmann, *The Fascist Effect: Japan and Italy, 1922-1952* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Ricky W. Law, *Transnational Nazism: Ideology and Culture in German-Japanese Relations, 1919-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Benjamin G. Martin, *The Nazi-Fascist New Order for European Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

In discussing the trajectory of the tripartite pact from its signing in 1940 to its suspension in 1945, Goeschel frames his analysis around the official performances staged by the three regimes celebrating the pact and what they represented about fascist politics and diplomacy. The article's first section thus understandably discusses the spectacle surrounding the signing of the pact, while the second and third analyze the performative staging of the alliance as a simulacrum of fascist mass politics. Ultimately, Goeschel argues that events marking the anniversary of the pact continued late into the war, even in the face of increasingly certain defeat, because the logic and momentum of tripartite diplomacy demanded that the three regimes continue to perform strength and unity until the bitter end.

The tripartite pact was a major victory for German Chancellor Adolf Hitler; not only did it commit Japan to an alliance with Germany, a development Hitler saw as strategically useful in discouraging US involvement with the war in Europe, it also symbolically clarified Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini's increasingly subordinate position vis-à-vis Germany. The ceremonial signing of the pact, held in Berlin in recognition of Germany's dominant role within the Axis, was an elaborately staged event performed as much for the benefit of foreign journalists as it was for the crowds lining the route to the Reich Chancellery. As Goeschel notes, the version of the pact signed by the foreign ministers of the three regimes was not printed in German, or even in French—the traditional language of diplomacy—but in English, and the ceremony was carefully choreographed for maximum dramatic impact as newsreel footage (8). Observers at the time commented upon the performativity of the spectacle, but the media campaign accompanying the pact's signing created its own political momentum and reinforced the underlying political project at the heart of the tripartite pact.

Spectacle was central to the practice of fascist diplomacy, just as it was to the carefully choreographed performance of fascist power domestically. Fascism's aestheticized approach to politics, which was first theorized by Walter Benjamin in 1935, has been a dominant theme in scholarship on the Axis regimes individually for some time now, and Goeschel is particularly persuasive in analyzing how fascist tactics of mass mobilization were adapted in order to legitimize and animate tripartite diplomacy.[4] In annual celebrations of the pact staged across the Italian, German, and Japanese empires, crowds were mobilized as essential 'supporting cast' for the various speeches, pronouncements, and statements of support delivered by fascist dignitaries. More than just providing a visually striking tableau, the "presence of the masses" was integral to the performance of fascist diplomacy in what it communicated about how the tripartite regimes sought to distinguish themselves from the "furtive bureaucratic diplomacy of the bygone age of liberal democracy… In tripartite diplomacy, crowds stood not only for the unity between leader and nation, but also for closed ranks between empire and leader" (11). This choice to frame the alliance as a performance of strength and unity—both within and between the tripartite regimes—was in the end a double-edged sword; in the absence of any

[4] Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt a.M.: Sukrkamp, 2006). See also, George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023); Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Alan Tansman, *The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism* (Berkeley: University of California Pess, 2009); Julia Adeney Thomas and Geoff Eley, eds., *Visualizing Fascism: The Twentieth-Century Rise of the Global Right* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

meaningful military coordination, the regimes were forced to keep up appearances long past the point that defeat became a certainty, lest they risk losing credibility and undermining the alliance.

Although framed as an analysis of tripartite diplomacy, Goeschel's article relies principally on German archives. This is not necessarily a fatal flaw with respect to his conclusions, especially given Germany's dominant role in constructing and maintaining the alliance, but it would be interesting to consider how the inclusion of more Italian and Japanese perspectives might offer a more nuanced understanding of how the pact was not just performed, but also translated for multiple audiences across the diverse spaces of the Axis empires.

A more substantive critique of Goeschel's analysis might be made, however, of his choice to focus exclusively on the more rigidly "stage-managed" performances of the alliance. Goeschel repeatedly cites Daniel Hedinger's work on the Axis, yet Hedinger argues that engagement between Germany, Italy, and Japan created the conditions for a process of "cumulative radicalization" within the alliance, as each regime observed the others in action and modeled new policies in response.[5] Goeschel's model of the alliance, by contrast, is somewhat static, an endless feedback loop in which repeated performances of the pact's anniversaries functioned mainly to preserve the "credibility" of the alliance as worthy of celebration (16). While this certainly may have been the case with regards to the official events commemorating the pact, given the significant planning and resources that they required, Goeschel's choice to exclusively focus on these carefully choreographed performances of unity naturally leads him to depict the alliance as endlessly replicating itself, rather than acknowledging the possibility that it might also have been evolving and adapting.

For all of these resources that were devoted to monopolizing media access within their borders, fascist states were never able to entirely control how their propaganda was received, even by their own citizens. An internal memorandum circulated within the Security Division of the SS in 1942, to give one example, raised concerns that German propaganda about Japanese victories in the Pacific had been too effective, with the unintended consequence that an "inferiority complex" had recently emerged among Germans vis-à-vis their allies.[6] Although the memorandum's author was discomforted by the realization that the German public had read far more into the regime's propaganda than intended, he concluded that this unexpected development could be exploited, albeit with some minor adjustments to the press coverage of the Pacific War moving forward. On the one hand this episode confirms Goeschel's basic argument regarding the innately performative nature of tripartite diplomacy, wherein the representative and the substantial were frequently indistinguishable from each other, and yet it also reminds us that the success of any performance depends more on its reception by its intended audience than on the skill of its actors. Although it is entirely understandable that Goeschel does not address the question of reception in the context of this particular article, one hopes that he or another historian will take up this challenge in the near future.

[5] Daniel Hedinger, *Die Achse Berlin-Rom-Tokio 1919-1946* (Munich: CH Beck, 2021), 13.

[6] "Die Sicht Japans in der Bevölkerung." Security Division Report (No. 306), August 6, 1942. Heinz Boberach, ed. *Meldungen aus dem Reich 1938-1945. Die geheimen Lageberichte des Sicherheitsdienstes des SS.* Vol. 11 (Herrsching: Pawlak Verlag, 1984), 4043.

In providing both a clear synthesis of the current "state of the field" and a persuasive re-evaluation of the performative essence of fascist diplomacy, Christian Goeschel's new article simultaneously maps the topic's historiographic trajectory and points to where it might be headed next. Clearly written and persuasively argued, it will be of interest to scholars working in a variety of fields, including global fascism, twentieth-century diplomatic history, and the Second World War

Sarah Panzer is Assistant Professor of Modern European History at Missouri State University. Her dissertation "The Prussians of the East: Samurai, Bushido, and Japanese Honor in the German Imagination, 1905-1945" (University of Chicago) won the 2015 Fritz Stern Dissertation Prize. Her recent publications include "The Archer and the Arrow: Zen Buddhism and the Politics of Religion in Nazi Germany," *Journal of Global History* (2022) and "Death-Defying: Voluntary Death as Honorable Ideal in the German-Japanese Alliance," *Central European History* (2022). She is currently finishing her first monograph, which examines the German-Japanese relationship during the first half of the twentieth century as an alternative or counter-modernity.