

Historiographical approaches to fascism



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As one of the recognized founders of the school of postmodernism, nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche proposed that what people really want is power and that living life is but a subsidiary goal. Individuals such as Hitler and Mussolini certainly embraced that concept of philosophy and became primary architects of two of the most notorious regimes in European history under the ideology of fascism. Generally historical treatment of fascism has emphasized the rejection of Enlightenment ideas and modernity, while emphasizing the importance of the state over the condition of the individual. This last point particularly has established a discourse between community and individual identity under the fascist auspices. During the Cold War, particular attention was paid to the causes of fascism and, since the end of the Cold War, more attention has been directed to the effects of fascism. The intent of this essay is to discuss the significant contributions of four major books to the historiography of fascism. These are Zeev Sternhell's *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, Claudia Koonz's *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics*, Victoria De Grazia's *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945*, and Kevin Passmore's *Women, Gender and Fascism in Europe, 1919-1945*.

One of the earliest landmarks of comparative theories discussing fascism was Ernst Nolte's *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism* (1965). In his work, Nolte surmised that fascism was the great anti-movement; it was anti-liberal, anti-socialist, anti-communist, anti-capitalist, and anti-bourgeois. Nolte posited that Action Française was the thesis, the Italian variety was the antithesis, and German National Socialism was a hybrid of the two. In particular, Nolte utilized a phenomenological

approach to fascism which historian Zeev Sternhell disagreed with. Sternhell argued that Nolte's single-minded focus on the ideas of Hitler, Mussolini, and French author Charles Maurras were the casual factors to fascism's rise is misleading to the central truth. Most objectionable of all, Sternhell takes issue with Nolte's ascribing the evil policies of National Socialism to the ideas of Hitler, thus giving the German nation a free pass. For instance, Nazism was passionate about issues regarding anti-Semitism, whereas the Italian version acquired this much later on and with less zealotry.

In *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (1989), Sternhell uses primary and secondary sources such as books, newspapers, magazines, and periodicals to suggest that fascism dates its roots back to the nineteenth-century French intellectual philosophy of George Sorel and also closely examines Italian fascism.

Sternhell posits that fascism in France holds no allegiance to an outside influence and minimizes the effects of World War One in fascism's rise during the inter-war years. He further insists that the French version of fascism was intellectually superior to the more successful German and Italian varieties.

By focusing on the specific tenets of fascist ideology, Sternhell is following in the footsteps of historian A. James Gregor, whose 1974 work, *The Fascist Persuasion in Radical Politics*, examined the intellectual traditions held at the time of Mussolini's political development. Gregor imparted that ideologists of fascism are never merely content to further their policies as mere beliefs, but also support their positions with logical and rational thought. Sternhell took this approach to the next level and traced the entire philosophical antecedent of fascism back to its original agency. Previous studies of fascism dismissed Mussolini's fascism as disruptive to the status quo with no positive

social value. Like Gregor, Sternhell points out that fascism identifies the individual with the collective and subsequently progresses to a dictatorial state.

Sternhell credits the nucleus of fascist ideology to the nationalism of Charles Maurras and the syndicalism of George Sorel. Both Frenchmen, he suggests that French fascism was head and shoulders above the Italian and German versions of fascism because it was purer, due to not having undergone compromise because of its incapacity to compete for power. Historian Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-1945* (1995), agrees with Sternhell in that nearly all the ideas found in fascism originated in France. Another unique study of the French fascist movement includes an essay by Robert Saucy entitled *Centrist Fascism: The Jeunesses Patriotes* (1981). In this effort, Saucy discusses the phenomena of the French fascist movement, the Jeunesses Patriotes, and the propaganda they espoused. However, historian David Roberts in his book, *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism* (1979), challenges that Sorelian influence had a limited influence on the Italian syndicalists and faults Sternhell for misreading the Italians' interpretation of the concepts of myth and violence. Sorel's original stance on myth was that it could only originate from below and not Sternhell's version that elites purposely facilitated it to manipulate the masses from above. According to Roberts, Sternhell gives violence more credit to the fascist modus operandi than was originally intended. Ignoring the warnings of fascist theorists such as Agostino Lanzillo, that the willingness to use violence in a necessitated moment is different than incorporating it as a permanent fixture, the Italian fascists adopted violence as a key component

of their program. Overall, Sternhells' work offers a thorough explanation of ideological elements within the fascist framework, but stops short of fully assessing any particular proportions that translated into actions within the Italian experience. Sternhell has earned his place in fascist historiography by identifying the intellectual innovation of the Italian movement while providing a cultural application of fascist ideology.

Although according to Sternhell, France was the original birthplace of fascist ideology, it was one of the few countries that did not fall under the fascist structure prior to the Second World War. Of course, after the Germans successfully invaded, the country was annexed into two zones, one under Nazi control and the other under the Vichy pro-fascist regime. Events that took place in Vichy France during that era have also produced some important scholarship. In Robert O. Paxton's *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (1972), the author takes an in-depth analysis of the Vichy government and what provoked it to collaborate with Nazis and what legacy it left in its wake.

Following on the heels of a major conference that met at Rutgers University in April 1986 entitled *Gender in German History*, a new direction was steered in the course of women's studies. Although not strictly dedicated to the historiography of fascism, a book by Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (1987) hosts a duality of women's and cultural historiography that can readily be placed within the fascist historical scope. As the title suggests, Koonz looks at the role that women played during the interwar years within Germany and their experience under the rule of Hitler's Third Reich using primary and

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secondary sources such as books, interviews, periodicals, government archives, diaries, letters, radio transcripts, and film archives. Though not wholly original in subject, Koonz takes up where her predecessors leave off. For instance, Hans Peter Bleuel's *Sex and Society in Nazi Germany* (1973); Jill Stephenson's *Women in Nazi Society* (1975); and Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion Kaplan's, eds. *When Biology Becomes Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (1984), explore various issues dealing with the fascist state. Piggybacking off an earlier work with Renate Bridenthal *Beyond, Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women in Politics and Work* (1976), Koonz discusses the treatment of women as both an asset and liability to the leadership of both the Weimar Republic and Nazi regime. Koonz goes on to explore the proto-liberty of women under the Weimar government, followed by the post-1933 status of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish women including the role of female resisters against the Nazi authorities.

As a backdrop to the discussion, there exists a preeminent aura of misogyny and the sentimental appeal of motherhood and its importance in Nazi fascism. Opposite to that is the hostility to the modern and independent woman who is viewed as a threat to the state because of her refusal to adhere to the greater needs of the nation by producing children and attending to the care of husband and family. Prior to 1933, the Nazis ignored women's groups until it was realized that their support offered valuable leverage in gaining access into the Reichstag. By promoting motherhood, home, and family, the Nazi's acquired a greater attraction to the female constituency, thereby increasing their popularity. Although a limited number

of females were placed into positions of leadership of various Nazi organizations, they were not considered for positions of importance to the political or military functions of the regime. Additionally, Koonz recognizes the radicalization of the Nazi regime by including sections on the role of eugenics, genocide, and the deportation of the victims of the Nazis. One of the more startling aspects of the book is that Koonz posits that women played a supporting role in the Holocaust by providing a comfortable environment of warmth and love for their husbands who were staff members of the concentration camps. In providing this escape from the brutality of their work, Koonz offers that women were indirectly responsible for offenses committed by the Nazi regime. Koonz is not without her critics, though.

Historian Jill Stephenson takes Koonz to task on several accounts.

Stephenson charges that Koonz's effort is filled with factual shortcomings and omission of details. For instance, she calls Koonz out concerning an interview with a certain Nazi female leader by the name Gertrud Scholtz-Klink. Koonz states that she was shocked by Scholtz-Klink's complete lack of remorse over the crimes the Nazis committed, though in a previous released interview, Scholtz-Klink had already divulged that. In several instances, Stephenson points out discrepancies in Koonz's arguments and charges that in some cases inadequate support is provided to prove her intent. Therefore, Stephenson suggests that Koonz's goal was to reach a wider audience beyond the realm of academia and, in doing so, compromised her scholarly legitimacy. Another critic of Koonz is German historian Gisela Bock, who charges that Koonz failed to omit several factual errors within her book and rejects Koonz's assertion that all German women deserve a 'collective' guilt

for the crimes of their Nazi masters. The debate between these two historians reached an impasse due to the influence of poststructuralist linguistic theory that suggests gender identities were opposite and that gender theorists questioned the naturalness of gender identities. Regardless of conflicting opinions, the scholarship of gender and fascism moved forward.

In a vein similar to Koonz's effort, the study of women under the Italian brand of fascism was taken up by Victoria De Grazia in her book *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (1992). In an exhaustive effort utilizing primary and secondary sources such as books, press releases, magazine articles, letters, official archives, and diaries, De Grazia has produced a complete treatment of women during the years of Italian fascism. Although a substantial amount of material had been produced on fascism in Italy up to this time, the majority of it had yet to be translated to English or dealt specifically with women. De Grazia explores a large expanse of territory to illustrate how Italian authorities attempted to mobilize women into the public sphere. De Grazia asserts that, after Mussolini obtained power, he realized he needed women in order to further advance his fascist programs. Like the Nazi programs that encouraged women to procreate, Mussolini made childbirth one of his regime's top priorities in order to achieve his imperialist goals of foreign conquest. Creating incentive programs that rewarded young couples for having children – in the form of cash rewards, making available low-rate loans for housing, and awarding medals to mothers with the most children – were all designed to provide incentive for women to have more children. In order to discourage males

from avoiding their responsibility of the patriotic duty of fathering children, Mussolini put strict limitations on prostitution and imposed levies on single males who were reluctant to become fathers. In addition to these measures, the fascist state also cracked down on abortion and even mandated that birth control was illegal. Additional restrictions limited women to certain jobs and eliminated access to higher education beyond the primary level.

While the fascist authorities promoted the values of motherhood and family, it undermined these principles at the same time. In an attempt to inculcate Italian youth to the allegiance to the fatherland and il Duce, the fascists created youth brigades for children of all ages. These paramilitary organizations attempted to instill discipline and loyalty into the minds of the youth so that they would one day serve the state with little reservation. The intrusion of the state into the lives of the individual, particularly women, is the recurring theme in De Grazia's work. She digs deeper into the fascist apparatus by examining what effect it had on young girls who grew up during that period. In a familiar feel to an earlier study she produced, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (1981), De Grazia discusses the influence of state media and how ineffective it was compared to the powerful allure of American culture and the attraction of Hollywood films. Contrary to Mussolini's desire to see all Italian women healthy and full figured, young girls aspired to imitate the waif-like figure of Hollywood starlets. Sports is another issue that De Garzia profiles as well as the efforts the fascist state took to minimize women's participation in those activities. Also politics under the fascist regime was severely restricted for women as well. In most cases, women, much like in the case of the

Nationalist Socialists, were confined to efforts involving social work and charities.

Previous efforts to Victoria De Garzia's work on Italian fascism and women included such works as Alexander De Grand's essay *Women Under Italian Fascism* (1976). In it, he attempted to explore why fascism failed with the female audience. De Grand concluded that fascism best succeeded in those instances where it emphasized conservative social and cultural values. Further, he contended that, while women failed in exercising any political strength, they were able to assert themselves in the economic arena; and although fascism significantly slowed their progress, women still were able to enter the workforce in respectable numbers.

Following De Garzia's efforts, fascist studies in Italy related to the world of gender took off. For instance, Nancy Triolo's *Fascist Unionization and the Professionalization of Midwives in Italy: A Sicilian Case Study* (1994) looks at establishment of the first nationally recognized organization, the *Sindacato Nazionale Fascistá della Ostetriche*, for midwives under fascist rule.

Most of De Garzia's effort is acclaimed, though she is critiqued in some areas. For instance, the majority of her emphasis involves middle and upper class women, while lower-class women are marginally profiled. This may be due to the incomplete availability of recorded archival material surrounding this group of women. One of the features that I personally experienced in reading this book was the redundancy of some issues throughout the piece, but overall it proved to be very informative. As an addition to fascist historiography I feel that this is an excellent contribution.

For a final piece of consideration, we include editor and contributor Kevin Passmore's *Women, Gender and Fascism in Europe 1919-1945*. This collection of essays from a wide variety of both female and male historians discusses the incorporation and contribution of women into the various fascist movements in Europe during the inter-war years leading up to and including World War Two. Consideration is given to England, Latvia, France, Spain, Germany, Yugoslavia, Croatia, Serbia, Poland, Italy, and Hungary. Some movements were more successful in mobilizing women than others, though not all of them completely attempted to recruit them to begin with. Some organizations promised the hope of increased political participation and job opportunities to women if they joined up. Others highlighted the elevated status that women would receive under their particular group's banner, though motherhood seemed to rank as a national priority. While some of the contributions are detailed and informative, others are somewhat thin on in-depth information. Of course not every movement was entirely successful and many were short-lived to begin with. The one distinction that is clearly put forward is the differences between hard-core fascists and extreme-right organizations. The typical themes of agency, empowerment, the dissonance between feminism and liberation, and the dichotomy between the public and the private spheres are covered throughout these essays. Passmore provides a commendable overall analysis of the works and brings them all together in a comprehensive conclusion. For the most part, this collaborative effort provides even the most novice scholar a basic insight into the role of European women in fascist organizations during an unsettling period of history. Even for a short piece of enterprise, I believe this collection offers a respectable contribution to the historiography of fascism.

Other works dealing with fascist historiography also look at those areas that worked against the state. For instance, Jomarie Alano's *Armed With a Yellow Mimosa: Women's Defence and Assistance Groups in Italy, 1943-1945* (2003) examines the role of women who participated in resistance groups against the Italian fascists.

Of course, the major fascist powers were Germany and Italy, but fascism studies of other European countries have produced scholarship as well. Take, for instance, Bernt Hagtvet's *Who Were the Fascists? Social Roots of European Fascism* (1980) looks at the small part of fascism in inter-war Sweden and why it failed.

Other European fascist movements that never quite made it to maturity abound. In historian William Brustein's *The Political Geography of Belgian Fascism: The Case of Rexism* (1988), Brustein considers Belgian voters and the political landscape under which they operated, considering why the fascist Rexist movement succeeded in winning over 30 percent of the votes in Luxembourg against the nine percent in the Belgian countryside.

One of the primary weapons the fascists utilized in their elimination programs was manipulation of the laws. Like the Italians and Germans, the Vichy fascists also engineered their legal system in order to carry out their programs against undesirables. In Richard H. Weisburg's *Vichy Law and the Holocaust in France* (1996), the role of the French legal system is placed under examination in order to expose the culpability of French authorities in carrying out the mandate of the Nazi masters.

Fascism affected every clientele of society, particularly in Germany. Given the Nazi's staunch views on sexual mores there is a wealth of research that exists covering the persecution and draconian measures that were unleashed against various segments of society. In Andrew Hewitt's essay, *Wyndham Lewis: Fascism, Modernism, and the Politics of Homosexuality* (1993), the author examines the politics and life of British artist Wyndham Lewis who was an admirer of fascist ideology until he became disappointed with it after witnessing its policies in action against homosexuals in Berlin during the 1930s.

One signature feature of the fascist playbook was removal of the intelligentsia. Two of the many professions that threatened the fascist authorities were lawyers and teachers. In an essay by historian Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Crises of German Professions 1918-1933* (1985), he discusses how the Nazis attempted to ideologically reorient members of the educated middle-class.

As in Germany, the situation for the intelligentsia in Italy under the fascists was a question of value. Like Hitler, Mussolini saw both the value and threat that the educated class presented. In an earlier essay by Emiliana P. Noether, *Italian Intellectuals under Fascism* (1971), the author discusses the choices Mussolini faced when dealing with members of the Italian intelligentsia. Noether concluded that il Duce followed one of three routes. He manipulated those he could to his own purposes, persecute the most critical of them, or chose to simply ignore the ones he felt posed no serious threat.

One of the darker areas of the German fascist movement involved the extermination programs of the Nazi regime. This, of course, involved individuals who were willing to carry out these measures when ordered. On this note, historian Alf Lüdtke's essay, *The Appeal of Exterminating "Others": German Workers and the Limits of Resistance* (1992), looks at the personal narratives of the German blue-collar rank and file who were soldiers in the Eastern theater who carried extermination policies against Eastern peoples.

Resistance to the Nazi regime came from several sources. Those inside Germany especially risked everything since their avenues of escape were severely limited and reprisal was most certainly swift and usually lethal. In a collection of essays edited by Francis R. Nicosia and Lawrence D. Stokes, *Germans Against Nazism - Nonconformity, Opposition and Resistance in the Third Reich: Essays in Honour of Peter Hoffman* (1990), scholars look at the various forms of resistance that took place against the German authorities. These included all manners of disruption from misleading Gestapo authorities to help Jewish citizens escape from Nazi officials.

Like all major political movements, propaganda plays a major part in its ability to invoke a following and fascism is certainly no exception. In an essay by historian Charles Keserich, *The British Labour Press and Italian Fascism, 1922-25* (1975), he examines the relationship of the British left wing press and Italian fascism during the initial halcyon days of Mussolini's regime. Keserich posits that, during the early years of Mussolini's regime, the British Labour Press placed il Duce's government in a favorable light until Mussolini's takeover of the Greek island of Corfu and the start of his

imperialist aggression. After this incident the British left began a campaign of anti-fascist reporting.

One of the key elements in Hitler's arsenal was propaganda and, as a master-artist, he knew how to use his brush to achieve the optimal effect. In Davis Welch's *Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People's Community* (2002), the author looks at how effective propaganda was on the industrial working class and German youth. Welch concludes that, although the practices of the Nazi fascists were abhorrent, the idea of belonging to the Volksgemeinschaft, 'the true harmony of classes,' was an overall powerful attraction.

As a philosophy and a political concept, fascism has continued to arouse both interest and anger. Its legacy in application proved to generate some of the most violent episodes in history. Whether it's pure theoretical provisions were failed to be followed through correctly or its application was flawed to begin with, fascism will always be a subject of historical inquiry. From various directions of investigation, be it from below, from the top-down, or just on the fringe element, historical inquiry challenges the historian to consider all manner of source material and agency. These contributions mentioned here all lend something of value to the historical discussion. The human experience involves numerous dynamics and full consideration should always be weighed before the final decision is made to either include or reject them. A topic that arouses such a wide range of human emotion must be handled carefully in order to treat it analytically and fairly rather than simply politically or emotionally.