



FEDERICO FINCHELSTEIN

Transatlantic Fascism

IDEOLOGY, VIOLENCE, AND THE SACRED
IN ARGENTINA AND ITALY, 1919–1945

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Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in
Argentina and Italy, 1919–1945

FEDERICO FINCHELSTEIN

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Para Lauri y Gabriela

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This book is dedicated to *dos mujeres*: Laura, my wife and *compañera*, and Gabriela, our daughter.

Introduction

Pero, bajo la piedra pesada de los tiempos la flor va a darnos su escándalo.

—LEÓN GIECO

I met Perla Wasserman in 1994 when we were both first-year undergraduate students at the University of Buenos Aires. Our differences in age—she was sixty-nine, I was nineteen—were pronounced; our life experiences were even more different. I was born in Argentina some months before the last military dictatorship; Perla was born in Poland, but she had escaped to Argentina some years before the Holocaust. But what began as a simple acquaintanceship among two students in one of Latin America's largest public universities gradually evolved into an enduring friendship, one that I would recall years later when I was working on this book.

As someone who had been persecuted by the dictatorship in Argentina from 1976 to 1983, Perla was for me a larger-than-life figure. She and I shared classrooms for more than five years. Perla had a long and sad past behind her. Her daughter, Susana Margarita Martínez Wasserman, had been “disappeared” by the dictatorship, and Perla herself had been a political prisoner between 1975 and 1977. Susana was twenty-eight years old at the time and never returned, but Perla was ultimately released and became a Mother of Plaza de Mayo. As a member of Madres, the human rights organization constituted by a group of mothers of the disappeared, Perla found historical and personal meaning. I discovered, in the course of our conversations that her daughter Susana had been a history student at our university (this may

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have been a reason for the military to perceive her as an internal enemy). And much later, after Perla's departure, I understood that she was at the university to continue the studies that her daughter was not allowed to complete.

During those years, my conversations with Perla were mostly focused on the meaning of history. If anything, the return to democracy in Argentina along with the series of legal absolutions and presidential amnesties accorded to the military perpetrators of violence during the governments of presidents Raúl Alfonsín (1983–1989) and Carlos Menem (1989–1999), seemed to make it all the more significant for Perla to give public voice to her experiences. At the same time, the “pizza and champagne” lifestyle, the culture of “winners and losers” that had become widespread throughout Argentine society in the 1990s among the elite and nonelite alike, and the neoliberal reforms that accompanied them, threatened to deprive Perla of the vocabulary she needed to convey her own brutal brush with history to those of us in the next generations who did not have any immediate, first-hand political and conceptual experience with the dictatorship.

Perla worked as a cook, studied history, and was critically engaged in politics. When we discussed my interest in the development of Argentine fascism and nationalism in the 1930s, she underscored the subterranean links between it and the military dictatorship of the 1970s in ways that had eluded me. Perla's lived experience of history enabled her to appreciate the political and moral implications of my study far more lucidly than I did. Her uncanny ability to extract meaning from the past in order to illuminate the present was a lesson that remains with me to this day.

Even at this moment, when I am writing these lines, I can recall the vivid image of Perla's generous smile. It was in 1999, during the presentation of my first book in Buenos Aires. I remember her smiling in the first row of seats. She had arrived at the event with other Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and some veteran antifascists that she had invited as well. Later, she told me that these veterans did not agree with my professional (for them “nonpolitical”) approach to history, but she expressed her approval of my work and stressed the more significant dimensions of my project, exploring through the interpretative and disciplined scrutiny of sources, why, where, and how residues from the past become embedded in the present and shape our understanding of both.

Perla never finished her studies. She was just beginning to think about her senior thesis when she suddenly passed away on January 22, 2000. Unfortu-

nately, history almost never provides redemption. But from Perla I learned that history implies extracting meaning, including political meaning, from both collective and individual experiences. History can be the interpretation of human change over time in a given society. But history, as I have intimated, is also a critical and restrained attempt at disclosing the sources of signification that made this past real, sometimes too real, to its contemporaries and to us, its interpreters.

It is within this particular historiographical framework, in this specific but meaningful sense, that my understanding of history is inscribed. I am interested in the politics of Latin American authoritarianism and, more specifically, the history of Argentine fascism. I am a historian of fascism and definitely not a fascist historian. In a different dimension, I am an Argentine historian dealing with Argentine history and a public intellectual interested in the long-term ramifications of this history.¹ Having these two different identities at the same time is central to self-reflectivity; that is to say, to my understanding of my work and of history at large. Whereas many historians often identify with their subjects, if I had to choose an identity at all it would be clearly that of the victims of the Argentine fascists, who were also known as *nacionalistas*.

As an Argentine, I believe that an understanding of fascism would help decipher the roots of Argentine political violence and its illiberal political culture in the last century. This century observed a radicalization of the split between a democratic-leaning civil society and an authoritarian political society, which, especially after 1930, rested heavily on its military control of the state. This disjuncture partly explains the political instability that has been the mark of Argentina's recent history. The unprecedented, even exceptional, state violence of the "dirty war" of the 1970s represents a historical turning point and defines Argentina's current collective memories.² But it would be difficult to understand this violence without taking into account the longstanding legacy of the Argentine idea of "Christianized fascism" and its open contestation of secular Argentina.³

And yet, as a nonfascist or even an antifascist, how can I understand fascism?

One, of course, does not need to be a fascist in order to understand fascism, but my point is that the act of emphasizing an antifascist reading of fascism, as many historians have done and continue to do, provides a very limited understanding of fascism; a reading that is often derogatory and always simplistic.⁴ On the other hand, there are some historians—some

quite established in the field—who tend to sympathize with fascism at large or with some fascist nacionalista intellectuals.⁵ These negative or sympathetic readings of fascism are inscribed within a broader Argentine history of dichotomous representations: namely, the idea of two Argentinas, one being truly “national,” the other a mere mimetic foreign commodity adopted by Argentines with false consciousnesses or worse.⁶ These negative or positive readings of fascism are devoid of contextual distance, but paradoxically they were also shared by many contemporary sources. There is a telling anecdote in this regard. Some Argentine writers—Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, and Ulises Petit de Murat—met in a Chinese restaurant in downtown Buenos Aires to discuss fascism and anti-fascism in the early 1940s. When confronted with Martínez Estrada’s ambiguous fascist leanings, Petit de Murat convincingly argued that for “us” the “matter is simple”: “On one side there are the decent people and on the other side there are the sons of bitches [*hijos de puta*].”⁷

I hope that readers of my work will agree with this position; I do, on a personal and political level. However, I do not think that this vision allows a nuanced historical understanding of fascism or political history at large. The point for me is not to establish whether fascism was good or not. Personally, I believe that it was a political catastrophe. Rather, I want to understand its ideological workings in their context and beyond, that is to say, in terms of its connections with the Argentine past and the present. Argentine anti-fascists saw fascism as a group of “*hijos de puta*” who had no ideology but only simple aims: to defend the status quo, to gain power, and so on. Similarly, for Italian antifascists, fascism was essentially a historical aberration. In other words, it was a reaction against modernity, a parenthetical regression into barbarism, and more generally a moral disease, as Benedetto Croce famously stated.⁸ For Croce and for many other antifascist historians, fascism was a bad joke: it had no culture, it was not a revolutionary phenomenon, and most important, it had no ideology.⁹

But fascism was not a joke for its victims. For them, fascism was a very serious matter. It tortured and killed people and destroyed political systems across the Atlantic and beyond. Fascism was a modern phenomenon, a political ideology that engaged democracy on its own terms in order to destroy it. The study of fascism provides a new meaning to standard ideas of modernity, modernization, and nation building.¹⁰ For fascists, fascism represented the “civilizing process”; that is, they believed fascism represented the “West” and stood against barbarism. Fascism was indeed a historically situ-

ated ideology like liberalism or Marxism. If we are to understand fascism on its own terms, self-understanding is a central reference point that should be combined with antifascist voices from the past as well as with interpretations from the present. My work lets the sources speak for themselves, but only to the extent that these voices provide a window into the fascist structures of meaning and meaning making. In other words, fascist self-understanding implies a particular kind of experienced subjectivity. It lies at the boundary between the fascist inner self and the external word. It is, in sum, a “subject in motion,” constantly putting forward an ideological formation located between “high theory” and practice.¹¹

To be sure, I am very critical—even suspicious—of my fascist sources, but if we are to understand the workings of fascist ideology, it is essential to see in what way the fascists saw themselves and how they related this vision to the external world. I focus on fascist patterns of signification, rather than using the sources to illustrate a personal theory of fascism. My stress on fascist self-understanding on both sides of the Atlantic provides a new interpretation of “fascism in motion.”¹² Fascism thus observed represents many things at the same time: a political religion, but also in the Argentine case the political arm of an established religion. It was a secular ideology, but also an ideology that presented itself as emanating from God. It was a historical movement with totalitarian views of Argentine and Latin American history. And finally it was a violent political culture that stressed torture, repression, political violence, and civil war.

In historical terms, fascism can be defined as an ideology, a movement, and a regime. Emilio Gentile, who is perhaps the most insightful Italian historian of fascism, presents fascism as a modern revolutionary phenomenon that was nationalist and revolutionary, antiliberal and anti-Marxist. Gentile also presents fascism as being typically organized in a militaristic party that had a totalitarian conception of state politics, an activist and anti-theoretical ideology, and a focus on virility and antihedonistic mythical foundations. Gentile also argues that a defining feature of fascism was its character as a secular religion, which affirms the primacy of the nation understood as an organic and ethnically homogenous community. Moreover, this nation was to be hierarchically organized in a corporatist state¹³ with a warmongering vocation, which searches for a politics of national expansion, potency, and conquest. Fascism, in short, was not merely a reactionary ideology; rather, it aimed at creating a new order and a new civilization.¹⁴

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Gentile's approach to fascism is advantageous in its attentiveness to the fascist definition of fascism. Gentile chooses not to select one defining aspect (for example, radical nationalism, totalitarianism, statism, or national rebirth) but provides a fascist catalogue that should work as a starting point for any research on the subject. My work builds on Gentile's in this respect and hence addresses his conception of fascism. Argentine *nacionalismo* fits this definition. But beyond its conception, fascism in history becomes a much more complicated subject—one that has to be understood as a global ideology undergoing constant transformation. Beyond national contexts and restricted theories, fascism then becomes a traveling political universe, a radical nationalism affected and, to some extent, constituted by transnational patterns. In terms of the big picture, fascism exists as both its classic form, as represented by Mussolini's fascist ideology, and its varied reformulations on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. As opposed to standard binary notions of fascism and religion, fascism in its Argentine version was actually conceived as an instrument of the sacred, namely, an instrument of God that Argentine fascists put forward with the aim of modernizing the nation. But before this actually happened in the Southern Cone, Italian fascism was created in Europe. In Italy, fascism was born a radical nationalism that could at the same time be an ideology "for export." It would be limited to understand Argentine fascism, or for that matter any fascism, without understanding the first fascism of all: Mussolini's fascism. This book, in short, unfolds a transnational itinerary.

Whereas comparative works generally study different national cases, the new trend of transnational and transatlantic studies tends to focus on cross-territorial exchanges. Transnational history has been highly resisted by many historians, particularly Latin Americanists in the United States and, less so, those in Latin America. One general criticism of transnational studies, particularly those focusing on the so-called national periods, is that they do not sufficiently stress the specific national contexts, and consequently do not exhaustively engage national archival reservoirs, that shaped these cross-territorial exchanges in the first place. A second criticism implies that transnational history is just another name for comparative history. Whereas the latter objection is easily rebutted by the fact that traditional comparative studies did not address exchange across political borders as transnational studies do, the former criticism is a more serious accusation that needs to be addressed.¹⁵ This book, the first historical study of transatlantic fascism,

might be read as an answer to this objection. My aim is to transcend the artificial boundaries between comparative and transnational histories by focusing on their varied strengths, connections, and commonalities. I will analyze two national ideologies and their transnational relations.

My previous book on Argentine fascism is, in part, inscribed in this historiographical trend.¹⁶ Rather than reducing intellectual history to yet another branch of the “new cultural history,” my aim here is to provoke a dialogue between intellectual history and social and cultural concerns as well as to link it with political history and the study of international relations.¹⁷ All these perspectives are central to the comparative intellectual study of fascist ideology as an ideology whose artifacts are “frontier texts.”¹⁸ These texts cannot be clearly classified (or reduced) by disciplinary or sub-disciplinary borders and distinctions.

My work addresses the relation between structural and ever changing elements of fascist ideology. I stress both how fascists depicted themselves and how they understood themselves.¹⁹ Ideas played a central role in fascism, particularly in the enactment of fascist ideology. Fascism was often seen—and indeed it presented itself to the world—as an aesthetic movement, but, more important, it always considered itself a political movement that had a distinctive political subjectivity situated between theory and practice. I focus on this generally ignored aspect of the historiography, specifically with respect to Argentine and Italian fascism.

I conceive my approach as a continuation, and sometimes a complement, to the perspectives that I have just synthesized. Comparative contextual research on fascism is not extensively undertaken in fascist history. Most historians still tend to disregard theory when analyzing fascism and focus on specific national cases, downplaying or ignoring the central cross-national aspect of fascism. This is particularly problematic when dealing with Latin America. Mainstream historians of fascism tend to argue that fascism was not a reality in Latin America. For them the reason is simple: fascism is a modern complex phenomenon, and Latin America (like Asian and African societies) was simply unlike Europe during the fascist era.²⁰

There are deeper currents behind these stereotypical notions of Latin America as reproduced by Europeanists. Many of the stereotypes about fascism in Latin America were originally “created” by the “imperial eyes” of European and North American antifascist travelers.²¹ These travelers saw Latin Americans as lacking agency and presented South American territo-

ries as passive topographies of fascism or, as one of them put it, “jungles of fascism.”²² According to this view, Latin Americans were easy targets—puppets, even—of the European fascist empires. They were, in other words, colonial subjects of fascist imperialism. But global circuits of knowledge production were not abstract; they were moving and changing realities that involved people, ideas, and identities.²³ The Latin American translation of European fascist imperialism was a process of appropriation and reinvention. Decentering Europe is a healthy exercise when one is confronted with traditional stereotypes about the “non-Western other” and the West.²⁴ But what is the West? Latin America and Spain, for example, were, for centuries and until very recently, part of an intertwined intellectual world of exchanges, of dialogical “gazes across the Atlantic.”²⁵ And Latin American mores and intellectual traditions “have as much of a claim to Europe as does the United States.”²⁶

In sharp contrast to stereotypical images of “third world” societies presented in mainstream fascist historiography, a few interpreters have demonstrated the possibility of thinking about fascism outside Europe and specifically in Latin America.²⁷ But whereas Chilean, Brazilian, and Mexican fascisms were suppressed in the late 1930s, leaving an indistinct legacy, Argentine fascism thrived during the 1930s and 1940s, when the proportion of fascist sympathizers in the population was at its highest, and it continues to be a political and intellectual force.

Generally speaking, historians of Argentina find themselves in a position of “inferiority” with respect to their Argentine fascist sources. Argentine fascists knew more about European fascisms than their historians currently do. My work presents precisely this Argentine fascist “knowledge” about the universal experience of fascism. My aim is to provide readers with an understanding of fascist connections across the Atlantic; with the help of Argentine, North American, French, and Italian archival materials, I try thus to overcome the obstacles that have limited other historians’ understanding of fascism.

My work demonstrates that Argentine fascism was different from European fascisms. But this is not my main point. My aim is a more ambitious one. I want to emphasize the global connections that were essential for fascist ideology to travel (or replicate itself, so to speak) from one side of the ocean to the other. As an ideology, fascism is transnational (and often trans-textual), and not necessarily European or Italian, as some Italian fascists in the past, as well as several contemporary historians, claim. One of my

primary aims is to denaturalize standard notions of what is Latin American and what is European. These categories are used by intellectuals working in the northern hemisphere either to demonstrate the derivative nature of Latin American thought and practice with respect to European sources or to affirm the rather dubious notion of an essentially detached form of Latin Americanness devoid of any external “European” connotations. Neither representation really works for my historical subject. My aim is to study how different fascist theories of fascism changed over time and how fascism, when set in motion, resists standard geohistoriographical categories.

Moreover, I show the similarities and differences between the fascist movements across the Atlantic and follow up by arguing that Argentine fascism was not an inferior version of fascism. Argentine fascism was in tune with both “European” and “Latin American” realities of a country like Argentina. With almost half its population of Italian origin and enjoying remarkably high standards of living,²⁸ Argentina in the first half of the twentieth century was often presented on both sides of the Atlantic as a natural receptacle for fascism. As we will see, Mussolini himself certainly thought in these terms, and he targeted Argentina as the most important country for fascist imperialism in Latin America.

There are some excellent academic studies on the Italian community’s relationship with fascist Italy.²⁹ But surprisingly there are no books specifically on the relations between Argentine nacionalistas and Italian fascism. In addition, the spectacular Nazi emigration to Argentina after 1945 has created a historiographical imbalance. Many historians believe that Nazis were the predominant force vis-à-vis nacionalismo.³⁰ This is an image that needs to be corrected. As this work will show, the diffusion of fascist propaganda preceded the Nazi initiative—in this respect the longevity of the Italian fascist regime had a role to play—and in the nacionalista universe Italian fascism was perceived as having a greater influence than its Nazi ideological cousin. To be sure, as many Italians complained, the Nazis had more means and poured more money into the nacionalista universe, but in matters of belief this did not count. In short, from the historical point of view of the nacionalista sources, Italian fascism was always more important for the Argentines than German Nazism. This link did not, however mean that nacionalista ideology was derivative. Nacionalistas actually regarded Italian fascism in the same way that the Nazis—and indeed Hitler himself—did at the beginning of the Nazi movement. Until the Nazi seizure of power in 1933,

they perceived Italian fascism as the original matrix of a worldwide extremist movement.³¹ Argentina itself was a major player in international politics, a longstanding contender with the United States in the western hemisphere. And last but not least, Argentina was the last country to go to war against the Axis powers. Literally, Argentina entered the war just before the war was over.

The links between Argentina and Italy, Mussolini often said, were not the kind one found in standard diplomatic practices because they were “arterial links” of blood.³² From the very beginning, Italian fascism proclaimed itself to be a global ideology, extending naturally into Argentina. Italian fascism had colonial notions of Latin America that were inscribed in the broader context of Mussolini’s idea of fascist imperialist universality; for Mussolini, Argentina was not really a nation. This was a view that Argentine fascists did not accept. In fact, the Argentine nationalists never adopted the model that the Europeans put forward. Through a comparative exploration of fascist ideology across the Atlantic, I will show why and how the Italians nevertheless continued to sell fascism and how and why the Argentines refused to buy it.

My work addresses different layers of meaning that could also be described as national and transnational; that is, it opens a critical dialogue with at least seven interlocutors: (1) the history of fascism; (2) traditional Latin American historiographies on authoritarianism, nationalism, religion, and nation building that present Argentina as having a *Sonderweg* or special path of unchecked liberalism until 1945 and the emergence of Peronism; (3) the history of political violence; (4) the history of anti-Semitism; (5) the debates about the origins of Argentina’s unique brand of political violence that lead to the “dirty war” and the “desaparecidos” of the 1970s; (6) European and Latin American understandings of processes of secularization and desecularization; and (7) traditional approaches to intellectual and cultural processes in Europe and Latin America. This book attempts to bring theoretically oriented intellectual history and political history together and to go beyond traditional discussions about the “nature” of fascism. By grounding my research in archival and other hitherto unresearched materials from Europe and the Americas, I present fascist ideology as a global phenomenon. By tying these materials into a general analysis, I show the multifaceted, non-rational, and incoherent nature of fascist ideology as the fascists understood it—though for them, fascism was a coherent political ideology. Moreover,

this book will show why these dangerous ideas made sense to fascists. I do not expect, nor would I like, readers to make sense of fascist ideas, or the fascists' rationale for the way they understood their world; rather, I hope to help my readers understand fascist processes of meaning making, their global links, and the messianic political ramifications of these ideas in the present.

An intellectual and cultural history of fascism, and particularly its foreign policy, must include the history of fascist ideological propaganda.³³ This book tells the transatlantic dimension of this history. Chapter 1 deals with the different layers of fascist thinking with respect to Argentina and Latin America. It provides a historical and theoretical introduction to fascism and then deals with the Italian, and European, side of the fascists' transatlantic equation, namely, how fascism saw Latin America as a larger, and often poorer, version of Argentina. In the chapter, I analyze how this conflation affected fascist international relations and policy-making decisions for South America. In the following chapters I deal with how fascism was received in Argentina, particularly by the Argentine state and the mainstream press, as well as the Left, the Right, and the radical Right, which at times called itself Argentine fascism and more generally *nacionalismo*.³⁴ Chapter 2 deals with the more institutional side of the story by providing a new account of previously underresearched diplomatic materials. The chapter also analyzes the different layers of the Argentine reception of fascism and provides an introduction to the history of Argentine nationalism, from liberal democracy to the Uriburu dictatorship and beyond.

Chapter 3 addresses the actual politics of fascist propaganda in Argentina, as well as the *nacionalista* reformulation of the Italian fascist experience. In this chapter, I investigate how Mussolini's propaganda endeavors included the fascist rethinking of Argentine history, fascist transatlantic flights, and the extensive use of radio, cinema, cartoons, and bribes. But Argentines did not merely adopt this "fascism for export." Interpretative appropriation was central to this reception. I show how the *nacionalistas* developed an original appropriation of fascism, which they understood as a generic version of their own political movement. In other words, they saw European fascism as an example and not as a prefabricated model that simply needed to be assembled. The chapter also stresses the question of Argentine fascist self-understanding. I pay special attention to the different fascist efforts to create a political doctrine. Without the presence of a leader and a regime such as

those of fascist Italy, Argentine fascists had a greater intellectual autonomy in conceiving an ideological canon and defining their political culture in doctrinal and “sacred” terms.

Chapters 4 and 5 are concerned with the Argentine fascist or *nacionalista* conception of fascism as the political expression of the will of God. In chapter 4 I trace the origins of the particular attachment the Argentine *nacionalistas* had with the Catholic Church as it was informed by ongoing political discussions in Argentina and the world. Chapter 5 also deals chronologically with the contradictions and debates that the fascists encountered in their “sacred” journey of doctrinal and programmatic searching, including the questions of Nazism and the Spanish Civil War, imperialism and anti-imperialism, and the *nacionalista* creation of “the enemy.”

Fascism was a cross-regional civic religion in its most extreme form. In certain Catholic countries, fascism reoccupied places previously held by institutional religion, but it also let itself be invested by the “sacred.” This intertwining of the secular with the sacred is central to an understanding of Argentine fascism and is thoroughly explored in this book. Avoiding an oversimplified notion of secularization, I stress the complex interaction between secularizing processes and religious tradition and practice. I focus on the quasi-religious dimensions of fascism that overlapped with the Catholic “sacred.” This relation was not devoid of conflicts, but anti-Semitism, and with it anticommunism, provided both fascists and Catholics on the far right with a common intellectual battlefield on which to join forces, as well as a symbolic shared space for enacting fascist ideology. As a political religion Argentine fascism was embedded in Catholicism, as the fascists understood it. In this context they resorted to anti-Semitism as the best metaphor to represent the internal enemy. Finally, chapter 5 provides a transnational recapitulation of the topics raised in this book.

The epilogue deals with the strong political and ideological legacy of Argentine fascism and, more specifically, its central role in the birth of Peronism. Visions of political apocalypse were central to the many fascists who could reposition themselves as an early right wing of the Peronist movement. In addition, the epilogue briefly treats the political and conceptual legacy of Argentine fascism after Peronism, especially the *nacionalista* idea of the internal enemy, which represents the intellectual genealogy of the last military dictatorship (1976–1983).³⁵ The epilogue, like the book as a whole, highlights the essential differences between Argentine *nacionalismo* and Italian fascism. Paradoxically, in terms of Argentine fascist self-

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understanding these differences show the ideological possibility of fascism as a global ideology.

This historical process of global reformulation constitutes the kernel of my interpretation of fascism. In short, it shows how fascism was many things in different times and places and yet it remained a transnational political ideology with theoretical, national, and contextual variations.

Transnational Fascism

It was always a too little noted hallmark of fascist propaganda that it was not satisfied with lying but deliberately proposed to transform its lies into reality.

—HANNAH ARENDT, 1945

On April 16, 1939, Mussolini and his son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, met with Marshall Hermann Göring in Rome. The international context was fragile. England and France were extremely worried, and the smell of war was in the air. The Nazis seemed unsatisfied with the section of Czechoslovakia accorded to them as a gift in Munich in September of 1938. Italy, with its invasion of Albania and its presence in the Balearic Islands, was threatening the status quo in the Mediterranean. As was customary in Nazi-fascist conclaves, great matters were discussed: master plans for world domination, invasion of countries, and disquisitions about spheres of influence. As usual, Mussolini tried to stress the originality of fascism vis-à-vis Nazism. He emphasized his own sense of political imperatives, and when referring to the “political situation,” he declared that he “considered a general war to be unavoidable.” Mussolini also exaggerated the Italian military capacity. He knew his military assessments were incorrect, but when meeting with the Nazis he could not display any uncertainty.¹

At one point, the conversation reached an astonishing detachment from reality, at times typical of fascist rhetoric. Göring dismissed American peace negotiations and leadership, suggesting President Franklin D. Roosevelt suffered from a “mental disease.” Mussolini, in turn, mocked Roosevelt for his

supposed ignorance of geopolitical matters. The Duce refused to show the Nazis any weakness in his knowledge or determination, and, as opposed to Roosevelt's "ignorance," he claimed to know everything about everything. He felt compelled to confirm to the Nazis what for many years anyone could read on walls throughout Italy, or in Italian papers: "Mussolini is always right."²

But neither leader believed that the Americas could be ignored. Göring remarked that the United States was central to world opinion, particularly in the western hemisphere. Hopefully, he said, Roosevelt would not be re-elected and "things could become very different." As was true of the Mediterranean, the Nazis wanted Mussolini to believe that they recognized Latin America as an Italian sphere of influence. Göring told Mussolini that "by means of her good connections with South America, Italy could certainly successfully counteract American influence on that continent." Upon the mention of Latin America, Mussolini uncharacteristically betrayed a lacuna in his knowledge when he admitted "that, for some reason which he could not quite understand, Italy's relations with Argentina were not particularly good."³

Without noting that Göring was referring to South America in general, Mussolini had shifted the topic of conversation to just one of its countries. This book addresses a number of different questions symptomatically present in Mussolini's musings about Argentina. Why were relations between fascism and Argentina "not particularly good"? Why did Mussolini believe that relations with Argentina should be different? Why did he care about this transnational problem when the discussion turned to the New World order? What was the "reason" that he could "not quite understand"? What was his vision of Latin America and the special place he reserved in it for Argentina? What do all these questions tell us about the transnational nature of fascism? This chapter and the following ones provide historical and theoretical answers to these questions. As I hope to demonstrate, Mussolini's vision, and the connections between Italian and Argentine fascism, provide a window onto the transnational and imperialist dimensions of fascist thinking on a global scale. This is the story I am going to tell. But first I provide a brief historical assessment of Italian fascism, and how it changed over time. What was fascism in its "classic" form? This chapter provides a brief analysis of the rise of fascism in Italy and Europe, and gives the reader an equally brief historical engagement with fascist theory. Last but not least, I discuss Italy's connections with Argentina and Latin America, which pre-

dated Mussolini's global ambitions and his desire to propagandize Argentina. In short, in this chapter I introduce the reader to fascism as a historical and theoretical international reality. By emphasizing the ambivalent transnational and national dimensions of fascism, I provide a necessary correction to the theoretically static and nationally limited presentation of fascism that the book as a whole calls into question.

Fascist Histories

Fascism is a political ideology that encompassed totalitarianism, state terrorism, imperialism, racism, and, in the German case, the most radical genocide of the last century: the Holocaust. Fascism in its many forms did not hesitate to kill its own citizens as well as its colonial subjects in its search for ideological and political closure. Millions of civilians perished on a global scale during the apogee of fascist ideologies in Europe and beyond. Like liberalism and Marxism, fascism assumed many national variations and political interpretations.

The word "fascism" derives from the Italian word *fascio* and refers to a political group (such as the group lead by Giuseppe Garibaldi during the times of Italian unification). "Fascism" also refers visually and historically to a Roman imperial symbol of authority. Its birthplace as a modern political ideology was northern Italy, the year was 1919, and its founder was Benito Mussolini. Thus, "fascism" as a term and as a political movement was born in the Italian peninsula. Its ideological origins, however, predate its name. The fact that fascism was born as a concept before its birth as a movement is central to any understanding of fascism. The ideology of radical nationalism that made it possible was part of a larger intellectual reaction to the Enlightenment.⁴ This tradition was both European and, in the Latin American case, "non-European" as well. To be sure, the original ideology behind fascism was born as a reaction to the progressive European revolutions of the long nineteenth century (from the French Revolution of 1789 to the American and Latin American revolutions of 1776 and the 1810s). The ideology of the anti-Enlightenment is the major root of the longstanding ideological tradition that created fascism. Its branches constituted a reaction against liberal politics. And yet fascism did not oppose the market economy and put forward a corporatist organization that aimed to be functional to capitalist accumulation. Equally important, fascism is a philosophy of political action that ascribes value to absolute violence in the political realm. This ascription

was boosted by one radical outcome of the Enlightenment: Soviet communism. The rise of Bolshevism in 1917 encountered global opposition as well as emulation. By presenting itself as the opposite of communism, fascism took advantage of this widespread rejection and fear of social revolution and at the same time incorporated some of its dimensions.⁵

A new age of total war ultimately provided the context of fascism more than the Soviet experiment did.⁶ In fact, it was with the First World War that the ideology of fascism emerged in the trenches. Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini openly stated that war constituted their most meaningful experience. After the war, these two former soldiers found violence and war to be political elements of the first order. When this ideology of violence fused with extreme right-wing nationalism and imperialism and non-Marxist leftist tendencies of revolutionary syndicalism, fascism as we know it today crystallized. This moment of crystallization was not exclusively Italian or European. In Argentina, former socialist intellectuals such as the poet Leopoldo Lugones soon understood the political implications of this fusion. Like Lugones, the Brazilian fascist Plinio Salgado saw fascism as the expression of a universal transnational ideology of the extreme Right. During the same period, young Hitler, a disenfranchised war hero, began to give political expression to his basic violent tendencies. And he did it from the new trenches of modern mass politics.⁷ Hitler first adopted, and then shaped, the ideology of a small German party of the extreme Right, soon to be called the National Socialist Party. Hitler early on recognized his debt to the thought and practice of Mussolini, but both leaders also shared a belief that the world as they knew it was in crisis. Both adopted fierce anticommunist and antiliberal stances.⁸ This antidemocratic modernism combined modern politics with technological innovation, aesthetic notions, and a discourse of war.

The modernity of fascism has preoccupied major thinkers over the course of the last century. Whereas Sigmund Freud saw fascism as the return of the repressed, namely, the mythical reformulation of death and violence as a source of political power, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* presented fascism as modernity's worst outcome.⁹ Overall, although I agree with Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis, their thesis is nonetheless limited to European developments and the "continental" frame of reference. In order to grasp the global and transnational dimensions of fascism it is, however, necessary first to understand its history, beginning with its national articulation, and second to relate this manifestation of fascism to intellectual exchanges across the Atlantic Ocean and beyond.

Fascism as a political movement was created in Italy by Mussolini, in Piazza San Sepolcro, Milan, on March 23, 1919, in front of about fifty followers, and it reached power there in 1922, ten years before Nazism. Italian fascism was the first successful fascist model, and other kindred movements of the radical Right, including Nazism, regarded it as such throughout the interwar period. Besides fascism and Nazism there were other movements and ideologies of the fascist variety in Europe. The historian Robert Paxton presents five stages of fascist development in the region: (1) the creation of movements, (2) their taking root in the political system, (3) their seizure of power, (4) the exercise of power, and (5) the long “duration,” during which the fascist regimes chose either radicalization or entropy.¹⁰ To be sure, only some fascist movements completed these five stages, but fascist movements were a reality in most countries on the European continent. Their success or failure was related to national and international currents. The Nazi occupation of France or Norway, for example, literally placed native fascists in a position of power. Spain would not have seen the emergence of a fascist regime without the military assistance that Hitler and Mussolini provided. Conversely, the apparent sustainability of the British and Russian political systems, the entry of the United States into the war, and the ultimate failure of the Nazi invasion of these countries saved these countries from fascism.

Military historians are right to point out this external evidence, but in all these cases, fascism would not have existed without an ideological synthesis as important as socialism or liberalism. Fascism was the product of an ideological concoction that combined a deformed version of socialism and a deformed version of liberal nationalism. Once socialists such as Benito Mussolini replaced notions of class struggle with ideas of national struggle, the road to fascist imperialism and war was open; Mussolini’s proletarian imperialism (he declared the fascist empire in 1936) was a result of exactly this fascist synthesis. Even in his socialist youth, when Mussolini opposed state-sanctioned imperialism, he nonetheless stressed the supposedly superior traits of Italian national spirituality. For Mussolini every language was the expression of the “need, the attitudes, and the spirituality of a given people.” (He claimed that “not even” the Zulus as a linguistic group should be denied their national pride.) Thus, even before his famous renunciation of socialism, Mussolini believed in the possibilities of nationalist politics as a transnational theory and practice adapted to the spirituality of every country.¹¹ Mussolini’s “internationalism” should be considered within the framework of his idea of specific nationalist needs. More than an institution or a state, “Italianness” for

Mussolini was an ethnic and linguistic identity, and it was this that he identified with; he had never identified with the politics of the Italian pre-fascist state, even in the socialist period of his life (when, according to his hagiographers, he had been a staunch patriot). He actually saw the liberal state as representing the established bourgeois order that he opposed. His opposition to the Italian colonial adventure in Libya in 1911–1912 propelled him to national attention within the Italian socialist movement, and, more important, the radicalism of his anti-imperialist position gave him national exposure—on the strength of that position, when he was just twenty-nine years old, he became editor of Italy’s most important socialist paper, *Avanti*.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Mussolini briefly hesitated but finally joined the tiny prowar camp of the Socialist Party and thereby isolated himself from the mainstream party as well as from almost all his socialist acquaintances. He told a party gathering, “You persecute me because you love me.” He was soon expelled from the party. By the end of 1914, he had founded a newspaper, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, which was subsidized by the French government in its effort to persuade Italy to enter the war on the Allied side. (The paper was also supported by Italian industrialists.) In 1915, Mussolini was thirty-two, already old in military terms, but he successfully lobbied to be sent to the front, where he rose to the rank of corporal. Mussolini killed some of his fellow soldiers when apparently mishandling a grenade thrower,¹² but then he was badly wounded, and when he returned to Milan, he presented himself as a war hero.

The self-proclaimed status of *Il Popolo d’Italia* as the organ of “producers” and “combatants” signaled the nationalistic sense of Mussolini’s new understanding of politics. The slogan of the paper was a quote from Napoleon: “The revolution is an idea that has found bayonets.” What kind of revolution did it refer to? This was of minimal importance to Mussolini. At the time, he considered it the revolution put forward by revolutionary syndicalism. But perhaps more important, he believed that bayonets, and violence, epitomized politics in general. He was ready to lead an ampler movement than socialism, and so, fascism was born.

The earliest fascists were a group of war veterans, former Milanese revolutionary syndicalists, socialists, republicans, futurists such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, anarchists, and even some liberals and Catholics. They represented a gray zone within the Italian political system. These groups did not necessarily share a strictly defined ideology, but they did hold the same messianic ideas about crisis, revolution, violence, war, and nation that Mus-