

Editorial Foreword

Welcome to the fascism issue. We live in dangerous times, teetering on the edge of political and ecological crises. The essays joined here unpack the diverse but interlocking histories of mid-twentieth-century fascism—in Italy, Germany, Spain, England, and Siberia. Several of them also analyze present-day fascist revivals among right-wing youth. These activists resurrect fascist icons of the past, file off the rot, and polish them for new venues, events, and forms of display. For decades discredited and disavowed, or at least hidden from view, fascist leaders are again transformed into exemplars, political models to imitate and emulate. Alongside fascism, *exemplarity* is the key term linking these essays, drawing on the foundational work of Caroline Humphrey—author of the essay that leads this set.¹ Nearly a quarter-century ago, she demonstrated that (to quote from Paolo Heywood’s contribution here), “Ethics and morality in Mongolia inhere primarily in the relationship between persons and exemplars and precedents, rather than in rules or customs.” The essays here show how fascists past and present construct their ideas of proper action by nurturing imagined linkages between themselves and their exemplary leaders, refashioned as not only heroes of the past but also as guides toward aspired-to futures.

MORAL EXEMPLARITY AND THE ICONS OF FASCISM Caroline Humphrey’s “The Slippages of Exemplary Action: The Case of Ataman Semenov” considers exemplarity from the point of view of the subject. How does one hone and cultivate one’s own identity as exemplar? Humphrey shows how the process entails, first, selection and prioritization of certain virtues vis-à-vis other possibilities, and second, techniques of communicating that exemplary virtuosity to others. Yet the exemplar’s very success contains fractures, including the cultural specificity that necessarily limits the exemplar’s potential reach, and the enmity of rivals caused by virtue of being cast into dramatic relief in the thick of political turmoil. The exemplar focuses devotion, then, but for that very reason may simultaneously become a target.

In “The Fallen Soldier as Fascist Exemplar: Military Cemeteries and Dead Heroes in Mussolini’s Italy,” **Hannah Malone** interrogates the role of morality in the making of Italian Fascism. Its heroes were exemplars of moral strength, often

¹ A significant number of the essays published here, including that authored by Humphrey, were first presented at the “Fascist Exemplars, Past and Present” workshop, convened by Adam Reed and Paolo Heywood, and held at the University of Cambridge in July of 2019.

drawn from a cast of soldiers felled in World War I. Their bones were made into something like relics of the religion of the fatherland, gathered in ossuaries built under Mussolini. The remains of the dead of the First World War were intended to inspire and mobilize living soldiers massing for future calls to arms and prepare them for their own apotheosis as heroes destined to die a “good death.”

Adam Reed’s contribution, “Sympathy for Oswald Mosley: Politics of Reading and Historical Resemblance in the Moral Imagination of an English Literary Society,” revisits Henry Williamson’s chronicles of a character inspired by Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists. Reed explores the literary rendering of exemplarity. Even more, the essay ponders the readerly engagement with the character of Mosley, both individually and in the shared exchanges of literary societies. Reed spars with Martha Nussbaum, who argued that reading and talking about reading are key to the making and maintenance of the moral imagination, as readers build attachments and sympathies for literary characters but also form judgments about them. Reed critically explores the limits of such readerly sympathy through a character obviously modeled on Mosley.

ORDINARY FASCISM In “Ordinary Exemplars: Cultivating ‘the Everyday’ in the Birthplace of Fascism,” **Paolo Heywood** examines how “ordinariness” comes to be exemplified as virtue. He compares the status of ordinariness in historical and present-day Predappio, where Mussolini was born and buried. He shows that Predappio was mobilized by the Fascist regime as an exemplar of an ordinary Italian town, and thus rendered extraordinary. In this way, Mussolini’s own “ordinary” rural upbringing was made propaganda for his extraordinary and exemplary leadership. In contemporary Predappio, by contrast, ordinariness is what locals seek to project to disrupt associations of their town with the extraordinary Fascist heritage that remains as Mussolini’s trace. Crucially, Heywood urges scholars to think carefully about how “the ordinary” is produced and invoked to serve wildly varying ends.

Stephen Gundle interrogates the biographies of Mussolini written in the 1920s and after his death. In “Mussolini between Hero Worship and Demystification: Exemplary Anecdotes, *Petite Histoire*, and the Problem of Humanization,” he explores the gap between the legendary Mussolini of the earlier period and the demystifications of the second. Surprisingly, though, both periods relied on ordinary, humanizing stories, *petite histoire*, applied variously to make the dictator more saleable, approachable, or forgivable (not evil but merely fallible). Many of these minor stories depicted Mussolini’s sex life, allowing him to shapeshift between roles as political and gender exemplar in Italians’ moral imaginary.

FASCIST REVIVALS, NEOFASCISM, AND THE YOUTH In “‘Tomorrow belongs to us’: Pathways to Activism in Italian Far-Right Youth Communities,” **Agnieszka Pasięka** opens an ethnographic window onto far-right youth movements in Italy. She uses the life-stories of three different activists to explore the social milieus in which far-right movements thrive. Pasięka interprets the

different ways in which relations between ideas, beliefs, and practices are enacted, and how historical exemplars are activated as models for the present. Pasiëka's work gives much-needed nuance to the study of far-right activists, moving beyond description of its leaders and most theatrical public events to show the kinds of community, ways of speaking, and shared concerns that inform the lives of everyday Italian neo-fascists. But she also makes clear the idiosyncratic paths these actors take to arrive at their positions.

Nitzan Shoshan leads us to contemporary National Socialists in Germany, to see how well Hitler and his National Socialism hold up as exemplars for young far-right nationalists today. In "Hitler, for Example: Registers of National Socialist Exemplarity in Contemporary Germany," Shoshan demonstrates that Hitler continues to be animated, albeit mostly via "negative exemplarity." Hitler is deployed as a marker of depravity in relation to which more palatable models, like Rudolf Hess, gain new legitimacy as Führer-substitutes. The use of Hitler as negative limit makes room to stage a new cast of ordinary moral exemplars, from loving grandfathers to fallen soldier-heroes. Shoshan shows how moral exemplarity cuts in different directions in the lives of today's European nationalists.

And then Franco. The essay of **Francisco Ferrándiz**, "Francisco Franco Is Back: The Contested Reemergence of a Fascist Moral Exemplar," revisits the Spanish Civil War. Based on his ethnographic work on the exhumations of mass graves, Ferrándiz traces Franco's bending arc of moral exemplarity through time—from providential leader drawing on quasi-saints from the medieval past, to, in the twenty-first century, being a negative exemplar as war criminal. Still, as Ferrándiz describes, Franco continues to gain new admirers, a process accelerated by his exhumation in 2019. With the dismantling of his honorable grave, the treatment of his bodily remains became a lightning rod for debate, and a site of what Ferrándiz calls "necro-exemplarity."

PLAGUE NARRATIVES **Michael Meng**'s timely review essay contemplates different genres for writing about plagues, from Thucydides to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, to Daniel Defoe writing on the plague of 1655, to Mary Shelley and on to Frank Snowden in the present. He asks what we are doing when we talk and write about death. And what does it mean to be aware of our death? Among other things, Meng follows Spinoza to propose that thinking through death is a form of recognizing the finite individual who, conscious of itself *as* finite, cannot seem to do other than write narratives of death and, ideally, come to recognize it as morally neutral, fully natural, and not to be feared.