



Nathaniël
D.B. Kunkeler

MAKING FASCISM
IN SWEDEN AND
THE NETHERLANDS

Myth-Creation and
Respectability, 1931-40

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For Lucian

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Abbreviations

ARP	Anti-Revolutionaire Partij, Anti-Revolutionary Party
CHU	Christelijk-Historische Unie, Christian-Historical Union
DN	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> , The Daily News
DSF	<i>Den Svenske Folksocialisten</i> , The Swedish People's Socialist
DSN	<i>Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten</i> , The Swedish National Socialist
FA	Frontavdelning, Front Department
HGS	Hervormd-Gereformeerde Staatspartij, Reformed-Reformed State Party
IF	Instruktioner för Frontavdelningar, Instructions for Front Departments
LO	Landsorganisationen, Trade Union Confederation
Nenasu	Nederlandsche Nationaal-Socialistische Uitgeverij, Dutch National Socialist Publisher
NIFO	Nederlandsch Indische Fascisten Organisatie, Dutch Indies Fascist Organization
NJS	Nationale Jeugdstorm, National Youth Storm
NRC	<i>Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant</i> , New Rotterdammer Newspaper
NSAP	Nationalsocialistiska Arbetarpartiet, National Socialist Workers' Party
NSB	Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging, National Socialist Movement
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, National Socialist German Workers' Party
NSNAP	Nationaal-Socialistische Nederlandsche Arbeiderpartij, National Socialist Dutch Workers' Party
NU	Nordisk Ungdom, Nordic Youth
PNF	Partito Nazionale Fascista, National Fascist Party
<i>Porg</i>	Partiorganisationen, Party Organisation
RKSP	Romeins-Katholieke Staatspartij, Roman-Catholic State Party
SA	Stormavdelning, Storm Department/Section
SDAP	Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders Partij, Social-Democratic Workers' Party

SFKO	Sveriges Fascistiska Kamporganisation, Sweden's Fascist Combat Organisation
SGP	Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij, State Reformed Party
SNSP	Svenska Nationalsocialistiska Partiet, Swedish National Socialist Party
SNU	Sveriges Nationella Ungdomsförbund, Sweden's National Youth League
SS	Schutzstaffel, Protection Staff
SSS	Svensksocialistisk Samling, Swedish Socialist Union
SSAP	Svenska Socialdemokratiska Arbetarpartiet, Swedish Social-Democratic Workers' Party
TF	Tjänsteföreskrifter, Service Regulations
VC	Vaderlandsche Club, Fatherland Club
VoVa	<i>Volk en Vaderland</i> , People and Fatherland
WA	Weerbaarheidsafdeeling, Defence Department/Section

Introduction

In Sven Olov Lindholm's short book on the rise and struggle of Swedish fascism, *Svensk Frihetskamp* (Swedish Freedom Struggle), published in 1943, there is a collection of photographs from the early days of the party. The collection clearly shows Lindholm's predisposition towards modern political meeting and rally culture – something to which he would adhere also in later years, attending marches and demonstrations in the 1960s – with photographs showing uniformed rallies and attentive crowds surrounding party speakers. The images of uniformed guards flanking elevated speakers, ranks of men carrying national and swastika flags, and youth marching to snare drums all seem familiar iterations of the fascist performance repertoire, many of them a kind of Nuremberg in miniature. The emulative character of these aesthetics seems obvious enough, perhaps an attempt to reproduce the spectacles of Riefenstahl and Speer, endlessly reproduced images of fascism that colour perceptions of the Nazi regime to the present day.

Yet, I was more interested in not the spectacle itself, but the signs of failure to produce it, the signs of inadequacy, the incongruities. One photograph of a meeting in the early thirties in Vänersborg shows a small crowd in winter coats, surrounding a speaker against the backdrop of a mansion. While most listeners are facing the speaker, with their backs to the camera, a couple of people are standing away from the rest, looking other ways, or having conversations among themselves, evidently not paying heed to the fascist meeting that was happening. While a little scrutiny reveals two large flags on either side of the speaker, barely visible, the viewer of the photograph is perhaps more likely to see what appears to be a small pig, grazing in the foreground. If the appeal and success of fascism depended on Riefenstahl-esque spectacle, it seems no wonder that these fascists never took Sweden by storm. In my research I became increasingly intrigued by what appeared to me as the farcical elements of fascist culture, something often noted by contemporary opponents of fascism, but rarely mentioned by scholars.

While this farcical quality was in some way perhaps to be expected from minuscule fascist groups with few resources or competencies, it was in reality strikingly ubiquitous. The conservative German opponent of the Nazis, Otto Michael Knab, gave an account of the Nazi takeover of a small Bavarian town in his 1934 *Kleinstadt unterm Hakenkreuz* (Small town under the swastika). While the book reproduces much of the image of Nazis as violent thugs, 'die grossenteils ungeschulte Horde' (the largely

unschooled horde),¹ it is also notable for its humorous depiction of the Nazis. As the 'revolution' comes to the little town, the order is issued to raise the swastika banners all over town, but the brownshirts find themselves with too few banners. Unwilling to disregard the order, the local troops end up using a small square flag for the railway flagpole. 'And the little red cloth hastily climbed up, ten times higher than its own length. It must have been quite lonesome up there for the little emblem of the great revolution.'² This was more than the relatively banal and obvious insight that there was a large gap between the myth and reality of fascism, or how fascists saw themselves and how outsiders saw them. More importantly, repeating the performances that constructed that myth was not automatic, reflexive or trivial. And myth was not a static image or established narrative that was transferred or circulated; it was something at which one could succeed or fail, and thus something that was *done*.

In my research on the Dutch National Socialist Movement, more such incongruities struck me. The party leader himself, Anton Mussert, was emblematic: a short, stocky man with a background in civil engineering, typically dressed in a grey suit and hat, married to his aunt, he was a very far cry from the fascist ideal of masculinity. On early party photographs, the small suited man and his entourage make a strikingly bourgeois impression next to the black-uniformed paramilitary that surround them. Evidently, there were other projects at stake here, not least the appeal to respectability, with efforts to both live up to established expectations of fascism, but also construct an independent fascist image, creating distance between the national movement and regimes abroad. As a movement, without the support of a regime, but with foreign regimes as a reference point, fascists had a tall task harmonizing multiple, simultaneous projects, which often seemed at odds with each other.



In the early 1930s, a new wave of rightist organizations hit Europe, in the shadow of the established Fascist regime in Italy and the rise of Hitler's Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist Workers' Party, NSDAP) in Germany. The small liberal democracies of the continent were no exception. In December 1931, the civil engineer Anton Mussert (1894–1946) founded the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging (National Socialist Movement, NSB) in the Netherlands. Mid-January 1933, a young Swedish soldier, Sven Olov Lindholm (1903–98), broke away from the Swedish National Socialist Party, and founded a new fascist organization, Nationalsocialistiska Arbetarepartiet (National Socialist Workers' Party, NSAP). Sweden and the Netherlands were no strangers to fascists, which had already caused noise in the previous decade, but these movements caused more of a stir in public life than their predecessors. Lindholm's NSAP never managed to enter parliament, failing to collect more than 0.7 per cent of the national vote (1936), but quickly established itself as the largest and loudest of Sweden's fascist groups, with circa 12,000 members. Mussert's NSB on the other hand grew rapidly in its first years (up to about 50,000 members), and attained a highly unexpected 7.94 per cent of the vote in the 1935 provincial elections, breaking the mould for newly formed parties and focusing Dutch political debate on fascism for most of the 1930s. While some have seen these parties

as a parenthesis in the political life of stable democratic regimes, no countries were immune to this new phenomenon in European politics. The appeal of their political myths was a crucial part of that.

Historical literature has dealt extensively with the themes of myth, spectacle and aesthetics in fascism, and this book shares some of that literature's concerns about the function and impact of fascist myths, but it is not interested in analysing or defining fascism through its mythology. The principal query is about the processes at work behind fascist myths, how myths were actually produced in practice, here termed *mythopoeia*, i.e. myth-making. While myths have often been explained as a form of propaganda, *mythopoeia* highlights limitations to political myth, revealing it as a pragmatic project that required resources, technologies, competencies and money, connecting arguably nebulous fantasy to matters of organization, finance and infrastructure. After all, as has long since been noted, ultimately the means of cultural production are unarguably material.³ By drawing attention to the link between fascist myths and their production, other functions of myths within the party are revealed, as the role played by different sections of the party organizations and the cadres is foregrounded. Thus *mythopoeia* can explain the influences behind the shaping and changing of fascist myth over time, how it repeatedly mobilized fascist activists, and helped maintain party loyalty through long years of struggle. Consequently it also delineates the integral place of the *mythopoeic* process in the structure of fascist activism, while painting a diachronic picture of fascist myth.

The second concern of this book is to ground the analysis of fascist *mythopoeia* in the context of a cultural-political struggle over the semantic meaning of 'fascism' and 'national socialism'. In the words of David D. Roberts:

The word 'fascism' was new in 1919, and no one knew what it meant; no one knew how whatever it denoted would develop. So even to say that 'they' – The Italians, the Fascists – 'invented' fascism is misleading. It was not something that could be invented. It simply emerged contingently from its contingent birth. It was through that contingent process that what came to be called fascism, first just in Italy, but then gradually more widely, came into the world.⁴

The point to emphasize here is that fascism from its inception was very much an empty signifier, and that through the production of myths about fascism, fascists were contributing to a public discourse about the meaning of this new political phenomenon of the interwar period.⁵ Thus *mythopoeia* was a process in argument with liberals, conservatives and socialists especially, in which fascists actively tried to construct fascism for the public as a transcendently fantastical force. But non-fascist outsiders were not politically blank slates, without any prior notions of their own about fascism, particularly not in Sweden and the Netherlands which were in many ways entangled with Germany,⁶ not least culturally and economically.⁷ Fascists had to confront competing discourses about fascism's meaning, conflicting ideological hermeneutics that mediated the reception of fascist discourse and performance.⁸ The themes of contested interpretations, competing discourses and challenges to what 'fascism' signified, make this book a cultural history about the political struggle for meaning in

two different societies, connected by one of the crucial signifiers of interwar European politics.⁹ The centrality of myth pushes analysis towards the assignment of meaning through narratives, 'an arena in which meaning takes form, in which individuals connect to the public and social world, and in which change therefore becomes possible.'¹⁰ The research into myth is in the area of cultural history – the exploration of the generation of meaning and the structuring of the symbolic order¹¹ – while the focus on the process of myth-making, mythopoeia, draws attention to the practical and material dimensions of cultural production.

The Netherlands and Sweden provide the comparison to understand the significance of fascist mythopoeia in this context of public discourse about fascism. As two (supposedly) stable liberal democracies, both of which remained neutral during the First World War, they raise interesting questions about the operations of fascist movements and the dissemination of fascist myth within their borders. Swedish and Dutch fascists did not typically have a background of war experience, nor did the national political and legal cultures permit extensive violence, which did so much to shape the experience of Italian *squadristi* and the German SA. Carrying arms risked an effective ban of the party organization. Political uniforms were prohibited in 1933 – earlier than most countries¹² – and paramilitaries soon followed. In other words much of the organizational, experiential and aesthetic structures that shaped fascist myth-making in other countries was missing or limited here. At the same time public discourse about fascism was heavily influenced by the examples of the Italian and German dictatorships, which in the 1930s gained a largely negative image in the small democracies, which felt threatened by their German neighbour in particular (more so in the Netherlands than Sweden).

This was unpromising ground for fascist movements, yet nevertheless many movements did emerge throughout the interwar years, persistent in the face of repeated failures to break through. This provides an opportunity to answer questions about how fascist organizations retained a loyal following for decades, and sustained fanatical activism under discouraging conditions. It also elucidates the barely understood connection between fascism's international image as propagated by the fascist regimes and their enemies, and indigenous fascist movements' efforts to construct their own image of fascism, in a trying and ambivalent relationship with their counterparts in other countries. This was an 'era of fascism', in which much of the continent seemed to contemporaries to be turning fascist;¹³ the situation of self-defined fascists in these democratic countries provides a fertile ground in which to study the cultural construction of fascism in Europe. How did established international ideas of fascism put pressure on smaller national movements to conform in their myth-making, while their own liberal democracies forced them to adhere to the norms of political respectability? Did their mythopoeic efforts shape the public perception of fascism at all, and how was it tied to the development of fascist subjectivities? And could Swedish and Dutch fascists really manage and afford the apparatus required to create a convincing mythic construction of fascism for themselves and their constituencies? How did their diminutive size, legal limitations and international context shape mythopoeic processes?

Respectability

Respectability denotes the quality of being deemed acceptable, adhering to broad social-political standards, being considered a legitimate option within the political field. Respectability is conformity to political and social standards. These standards are contextual. Respectability can mean very different things in different historical contexts, as we will see further on. What respectability – sometimes understood politically, sometimes socially, especially at the grassroots level – entails at times varied strikingly between the Netherlands and Sweden, while there were also obvious common features to the two mass democracies: shared political values that defined respectability which included non-violence; organization and discipline; and political professionalism. It also included strong social dimensions, but context sensitive ones: class, both in terms of bourgeois values, and support from the working classes was key to (national) socialist groups.¹⁴ This is also reflected in Knab's work, and his contempt for the *Unanständigkeit* of the local Nazis. Others were very particular to the nation: loyalty to the monarchy was an important mark of respectability in Swedish bourgeois circles, but almost indispensable was the Netherlands' Orangism, the veneration for the royal House of Orange. While religion played a comparatively minor role in Sweden through the Lutheran Church,¹⁵ Christianity was central to the political discourse of the Netherlands, which was dominated by confessional parties in government during the Interbellum. Gender was another ubiquitous, if frequently covert, aspect of respectability. The heavily gendered nature of fascism shone through strongly in its mythopoeia: masculinity was at the forefront of the myth of the fascist, while also crucial in its appeal to respectability with conservative gender values. George Mosse argued in *The Image of Man* that 'fascism merely expanded and embellished aspects of masculinity that had always been present', but was obsessively occupied with heroic expressions of manliness, expressed in physical combat and sacrifice – qualities often at odds with daily life and peaceful society.¹⁶ Needless to say, this left very little space for women within these myths, and a dilemma for their role within the movements' mythopoeic projects.

Respectability, no less than myth, was something to be constructed, and indeed could be an integral element of fascist myth. As such it was not only constructed discursively, through emphasis on the legitimacy of the fascist cause, nationalist values, respect for law and order, or reference to national history. Rather, it was also performative, and as such was constructed through style, habit, behaviour, dress and props. As such, the standards of respectability could harmonize with fascist mythopoeia. But respectability also carried with it the imprint of convention, normality, politics-as-usual – bourgeois prose a far cry from the iambic pentameter in which fascist myth fancied to write itself. Adherence to hegemonic notions of legitimacy enshrined in respectability was thus not a strategic given in fascist mythopoeia. The overarching role of respectability in this book is thus to highlight the specific and variable social-political contexts, in the form of national standards of respectability, within which fascist mythopoeia worked, to bring out the organizational paradoxes and dilemmas this generated, and understand the strategic responses fascist parties formulated to solve them.

The comparative method is particularly valuable here, as the two broadly similar democracies help identify the common effects of democratic conditions on fascist movements, while the fascist movements in question were different enough in character, and trajectory, to pinpoint what was unique. Sweden and the Netherlands shared enough characteristics to set them apart from other European states in this regard: neutrality during the First World War, constitutional monarchy, lasting parliamentary democracy during the interwar period, cultural ties to Germany and so forth. But at the same time the fascist movements in question turned out quite differently, with Dutch fascists managing to acquire a significant following in the 1930s, and with very different political cultures. While fascism as a regime has been researched a great deal, there is tremendous analytical potential in studying fascist movements under trying and unpromising conditions, even (or especially) if they 'failed'. The Swedish National Socialist Workers' Party and the Dutch National Socialist Movement are – still under-researched – movements which can provide insights into the conditions of success and failure for fascism in Europe, the efficacy and limitations of fascist myth and organization, and the dynamics of mythopoeia within party culture and public discourse.

Fascism in Europe

The emergence of Mussolini and the *fascisti* in Italy in Milan in March 1919, and their rapid rise to power in 1922 through campaigns of violence and intimidation, as well as parliamentary politics, brought international attention to the notion of *fascismo*. The Fascists, their image rooted in *arditi* trench bravado and D'Annunzian theatrics, were doubtlessly a peculiar product of Italy's ambivalent role as victor in the First World War, and the country's own national circumstances including the *Biennio Rosso* (Two Red Years, 1919–20). But this did not prevent the world at large, as far afield as America and Asia, from taking notice of Mussolini's unusual new approach to politics, and perhaps especially state power and the suppression of socialism. Soon men and women everywhere across Europe and beyond saw something relatable in the Italian *fascisti* – something that, *mutatis mutandis*, could be applied in their own countries.

In the Netherlands, as in many other countries, the so-called March on Rome in October 1922 proved to be the decisive moment in persuading people that Fascism could be relevant and indeed desirable in their own country. At the end of 1922, a group of Catholic intellectuals around Emile Verviers (1888–1968) and the journal *Katholieke Staatkunde* (Catholic Political Science) hailed the Fascists as a new force to combat the dissolution threatening 'life in our time'.¹⁷ The chief source of Verviers's ideas was the Integralism and anti-modernist crusade of Pope Pius X, not least his 1907 encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*.¹⁸ Fascism however provided a new inspiration for Verviers and his ilk, perhaps because as Catholics they were already predisposed to look to Italy for inspiration, and less likely to think of politics as limited by national borders.¹⁹ In Sweden one of the first politicians to take note of the Italian Fascists and Mussolini in particular was Elof Eriksson. Eriksson (1883–1965) was a leading figure of *Bondeförbundet* (Agrarian League), and key organizer of the famous Farmers' March in February 1914, which rallied behind the King's militarist

position.²⁰ After losing his position as editor of the highly conservative *Södertälje Tidning* (Södertälje Newspaper) in 1925, Eriksson, who also had contact with German Nazi luminaries such as Julius Streicher and Erich Ludendorff, founded his own periodical, the long-running *Nationen* (The Nation). The highly anti-Semitic *Nationen* wrote strongly in favour of Fascist Italy, and supported various fascist groups throughout the interwar period.²¹

In 1919 Europe was a place where all countries, including old and new states, had to adjust to the realities of a war-torn continent and rapidly transforming political systems. Aside from the enormous costs of the war itself, there was also political fallout in the form of social upheaval and revolution, especially in central- and eastern Europe, although no country was unaffected. The First World War saw the end of several imperial dynasties that had ruled Europe for centuries. The epicentre was Russia. The Russian revolutions of 1917 saw the rise of the Bolsheviks to prominence, and the ensuing brutal civil war across Russia and its former imperial domains created a fearful new enemy of the Right. With the outbreak of the Finnish Civil War in January 1918 it became apparent that Bolshevik revolution might not be a purely Russian phenomenon, and counter-revolutionaries quickly portrayed it as a contagion.²² Some countries like Germany and Hungary saw actual revolution, with native communists seizing power regionally or nationally, leading to bloody suppression by counter-revolutionary paramilitaries in the former, and a brief national soviet government in the latter, followed by a bloody counter-revolution in what became known as the White Terror. But there was no close correlation between the actual size of revolutionary threat and the fear of it, and the Right made the most of playing up these fears. Italian Fascists exaggerated the threat of revolution even as the power of the Left and the trade unions in Italy was declining.²³

The neutral countries of Europe were inextricably entangled in the earth-shattering developments that were transforming the political makeup of the continent, even if they did not directly experience the violence of war, lost a generation of young men or had to deal with demobilized veterans, which some historians argued was responsible for the brutalization of interwar European politics.²⁴ It has become a cliché to describe the governments of north-western Europe as peaceful and stable democracies, even as peace-loving islands, mentally and culturally isolated from the rest of the continent.²⁵ Sweden and the Netherlands did not escape the socio-economic disruption of the war, and they reacted to the political developments in its wake as transnational phenomena that could occur at home.²⁶ In the Netherlands the leader of the Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders Partij (Social Democratic Workers' Party, SDAP) Troelstra called for a proletarian revolution in 1918, but received little support, instead triggering the formation of rightist counter-revolutionary militias, albeit without the bloodshed seen in central Europe.²⁷ In Sweden the Social Democrats responded to the revolution in Germany that ended the Kaiser's reign and put a socialist government in place, with demonstrations in Stockholm that put pressure on the government to advance franchise reforms. Rightists, again fearing revolution, formed militias in Stockholm, also looking to the Finnish White *skyddskår* (protection corps) as a model. It was thus no surprise that the likes of Emile Verviers and Elof Eriksson saw something recognizable and useful in Mussolini's Fascists.

Attitudes to what this fascism actually entailed quickly developed from 1919 to 1925 however. Once the wave of revolution and civil war had died down, commentators became more sceptical of Mussolini's and other fascists' claims to be restoring or maintaining order, and fascism started to become associated with hooliganism, bullying and violence. But no sooner had the notion become established as a controversial new form of rightist politics, than a new breed of right-wing radicals emerged in Germany. Strongly rooted in the counter-revolutionary movement and paramilitary *Freikorps*, the National Socialists were taken over by Adolf Hitler who took inspiration from Mussolini and the Fascists in shaping the little Bavarian party into something more substantial.²⁸ It would take until 1929 before the Nazis started to take on the contours of a popular national party, but already in the first half of the twenties did National Socialism start to make itself felt outside of Germany as a Germanic form of fascism, contributing to the spread of anti-Semitism and race on the agenda of the European radical right. While commentators and adherents tried to distinguish between fascism and national socialism, they were evidently related, and regularly conflated with each other. Eventually, to some the terms were completely interchangeable, whereas to others they even were opposed.²⁹ They sprang forth from similar contexts, and influenced each other, according to the relative prominence of one over the other as times changed, with major turning points being Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933, and the establishment of the Rome-Berlin Axis in October 1936.

Fascist groups that followed in the wake of Mussolini's 1922 March on Rome could hardly help but understand themselves as part of a European or even a global political development. Typically they positioned themselves in a camp alongside the new Right authoritarian regimes that emerged bit by bit in the interwar period; authoritarian states like in Portugal, Spain, Hungary etc. were often understood to be simply fascist regardless of the reality of their complicated relationship to that term. Simultaneously fascist movements liked to insist on their own national(ist) character. The embrace of various notions of a European or global fascism served to highlight the movements' part in an emergent new era. At the same time, what the self-styled fascists and national socialists of interwar Europe had in common, they also shared with other rightists, as there were no clear ideological dividing lines in the European Right. The two cases discussed here underline the messiness and contradictions of transnational fascism. While ostensibly sharing the same ideology, the Swedish NSAP/SSS abhorred the Dutch NSB for most of the 1930s for its rejection of anti-Semitism, while the NSB's attitude to the NSAP, after a visit to Sweden in 1937, was patronizing at best. Fascism, national socialism and other forms of right-wing politics were messily entangled, and there was no consistency in contemporary opinion as to where one ended and the other began, as ideas, aesthetics, programmes and political repertoires were freely transferred, changed, adopted and adapted as they circulated not just Europe but the world.³⁰

Myth and interwar European mass politics

This transfer and circulation of an exciting new political repertoire were helped along by the rapid development of European mass democracy, and its underlying

mass culture. One of the things that appeared particularly striking in association with fascist politics was doubtless the place of myth, though it is very important to note this was hardly unique to interwar fascism, or even the Right. Myths are here understood as moral narratives that are not strictly fictional, but ahistorical, with strong connotations of the fantastical,³¹ or in a simpler sense 'an image which can inspire men, perhaps with 'some element of truth in it, but it is twisted into a vision that conforms to the desired ideal.'³² Myths had been exploited politically before, but in the new era of mass politics brought on by technological modernity, acquired new forms and significance. Cultural pessimists of the preceding decades, commenting on the explosive growth of print journalism and new technologies of mass production, appeared to be proven right.³³ The 'masses' had acquired an ominous significance in European political culture already since the late nineteenth century, but it was the 1920s which really brought their political relevance to the fore.³⁴ 'The new politics drew the masses into rituals which connected to myths and symbols, which dramatized politics in spectacular ways.'³⁵

From the perspective of the new political parties, Left or Right, mythic narratives could turn the inchoate masses into unified communities, create a sense of belonging and re-impose social order on a fractured society, through participation in ritual.³⁶ Myth occupied a peculiarly prominent place in the politics of interwar Europe. In this period socialist parties made currency out of the myth of the class struggle and ultimate redemption through the working classes. Marx's concept of Revolution was a mobilizing political myth, as was argued by the influential George Sorel, while he himself preferred the General Strike as a motivating myth that captured the essence of socialism.³⁷ After all, Sorel informs us, 'we do nothing great without the help of warmly coloured and sharply defined images which absorb the whole of our attention.'³⁸ Per Albin Hansson, the Swedish Social Democratic prime minister, also made a contribution with his myth of *folkhemmet* (the people's home). Rather than the postwar settlement leading to the firm establishment of rationalistic and moderate forms of democratic politics, interwar mass politics saw the rise of new political possibilities and profound uncertainties.³⁹ With new forms of politics on the Left and Right, myths seemed to underpin much of the appeal of emergent mass movements.⁴⁰ In the Netherlands, the cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) observed this troubling development in general terms, and noted that by 1935 it was not limited to just the fascist dictatorships.

So it has come to this in the civilized world. But do not believe that the degeneration of judgement is limited to the countries in which extreme nationalism has been victorious. Whoever looks around can repeatedly observe how, with developed persons, often youths, a certain indifference has come about to the reality of the figures that have entered their intellectual world. The categories of fiction and history ... are no longer clearly separated. It is no longer of interest if the intellectual material can be verified. The rise of the idea *mythus* is the most important example of this. One accepts an illusion, in which the elements of wish and fantasy are consciously permitted ...⁴¹

While not unique to fascism, ‘the most self-consciously visual of all political forms,’⁴² fascists were the most open in their reliance on myth, and did so most visibly when they came to power in Italy and Germany.⁴³ Benito Mussolini openly proclaimed the value and use of myth in his own politics.⁴⁴ Adolf Hitler, echoing French crowd psychologist Gustave le Bon, affirmed the ‘feminine’ masses could be easily manipulated through simplistic narratives of good and evil, love and hate.⁴⁵ While fascists also offered more or less feasible political programmes to the public and appealed to constituencies’ material interests and sense of respectability, they constructed a myth of not just the utopian fascist community, but of themselves. This was a myth that aimed to transcend daily politics, and represented fascism in fantastical terms, as a crusade against evil and chaos.

The fascist myth of fascism functioned as both identity and propaganda, as it mobilized members and attracted followers.⁴⁶ Fascist myth was highly performative in character, and expressed aesthetically: mass rallies, visually striking propaganda, fantastical sloganeering, and moving rituals. Fascist performances were a political theatre with a penchant for spectacle, a ‘hothouse fusion of violence, myth, and aesthetics’ – and served to construct a fascism that was dynamic, disciplined and impressive.⁴⁷ On this plane fascism was not a historically contingent political movement, but a history-making force destined to transform the eternal nation.⁴⁸ There was very little or nothing that was universal in self-styled fascists’ party programmes across Europe, and as some attempts at international collaboration showed, like the 1934 Montreux conference, little basis for theoretical agreement.⁴⁹ But fascist myths were some of the most recognizable and shared elements among these right-wing movements and organizations, grounded in aesthetics and symbols that could happily transfer across borders.

Historiography of fascism

Scholars were left with the tricky task of defining fascism, a phenomenon that evoked lurid spectacles and horrendous violence, while emphasizing action over theory, and clearly could not be taken at face value. This task proved not altogether unappealing, as the veritable cottage industry that grew up around it shows.⁵⁰ While scholars in the eastern half of Cold War Europe had a solid Marxist framework with which to analyse fascism,⁵¹ Western historians were more challenged trying to pin down the nature of this political force which clearly was of momentous importance for contemporary history, but lacked an obvious theoretical basis. The early historiography of fascism and scholars’ attempts to define it has been covered extensively and many times before, so I will refrain from rehashing that material here. I will instead give a very brief overview of this literature insofar as it is relevant to this book’s thesis, before focusing on the cultural dimensions of the problem and the current research trends.⁵²

One early attempt at a definition came in 1963 from the conservative German historian Ernst Nolte, whose *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche* (Fascism in Its Epoch, also published as *The Three Faces of Fascism*) showed fascism as being characteristic of the European interwar period, intellectually rooted in the nineteenth-century

reaction against traditional politics, and Nietzsche's rejection of Judaeo-Christian *resentiment*. Nolte saw fascism as a *European* phenomenon, and highlighted three different variants (German Nazism, Italian Fascism and the French Action Française) to elucidate its character as a form of nationalist anti-Marxism.⁵³ This was effectively a variant of the genus-species model of fascism, which had started in fascist discourse already in the 1920s, but with a long life stretching into the twenty-first century. Nolte's proposal found no lasting traction however, as most scholars rejected his attempt to tether fascism to contemporary Marxism – especially in terms of terror methods and totalitarianism – and the following decades produced any number of alternative suggestions. More recently, among prominent contributions, Stanley Payne's *History of Fascism* which gave a veritable checklist of features fascism(s) possessed, with a strong place for anti-conservatism, anti-liberalism and anti-Marxism, while Robert O. Paxton's *The Anatomy of Fascism* used a diachronic model of different phases of fascism, with movement through to regime characteristics. Michael Mann's sociological approach produced a less than elegant definition of fascism as a form of para-militarism with a commitment to nation-statism, while even David D. Roberts has not been able to resist an attempt at definition in *Fascist Interactions*, in spite of trying to see fascism as 'an aggregate historical phenomenon' best understood as 'a unique, contingent sequence constituting a single, if obviously multifaceted, event'.⁵⁴

It would be altogether unfair to suggest, as some have done, that the range of definitions and approaches to the problem over the past century has been unproductive and unhelpful. It can certainly be confusing, and the lay reader looking for a simple explanation of a widely used term is liable to be disappointed, but the various definitions and characterizations are reflective of different methodologies and approaches, many of which have in turn shed much light on the history of the European Right in this era. Yet it was not without reason that Gilbert Allardyce, in a much-noted 1979 article – 'What Fascism Is Not' – regretted the continued academic use of fascism as a concept, without the possibility of agreeing on a definition. The sheer variation of possible groups and personalities that could be included under the fascist umbrella tended to make definitions reductive, and the attempt to find the single aspect that unites them all a wild goose chase, if indeed there is a goose (not Allardyce's metaphor).⁵⁵

At a relatively early stage in the postwar search for a definition the cultural turn encouraged scholars to effectively take fascist claims about fascism seriously, a not entirely uncontroversial proposal. The cultural approach to fascism, which analyses fascism 'from the inside out', grappling with the world view it constructed through discourse, performance and aesthetics, had been gaining ground since the 1960s. George L. Mosse's *Nazi Culture* (1966), presenting a collection of original Nazi texts with commentary, was one such work, which tried to answer the question of how fascism impinged on the consciousness of its subjects.⁵⁶ 'Fascism considered as a cultural movement means seeing fascism as it saw itself, to attempt to understand the movement on its own terms.'⁵⁷ With the 1970s cultural turn in political history, such approaches became more common. Aesthetics and spectacle have occupied a privileged position in the cultural analysis of fascism, often understood as part and parcel of its appeal. Ernst Nolte had described it as a 'spellbinding of the senses by pageantry and parades'⁵⁸; Modris Eksteins saw Nazism as a 'beautiful lie' which through

kitsch spectacle and excitement sought to displace ethical considerations.⁵⁹ Gerhard Paul's study of Nazi propaganda photography stated Nazism was ideologically void, instead best understood as a movement of propaganda, using aesthetic appeals to the emotions against the dry language and rational discourse of democracy.⁶⁰ Works on the Nuremberg *Parteitage*, the spectacular choreography of Albert Speer, or the Nazi *Thingspiel*, have relied on similar narratives of a nihilistic fascism exploiting modern technology to aesthetically manipulate 'the masses'⁶¹; in Sweden Ingemar Karlsson and Arne Ruth described the Third Reich as turning society into a theatre, transforming citizens into a work of art, guising a spiritual vacuum and ethical monstrosity.⁶²

By the 1990s Mosse assessed there had been growing awareness in the historiography of the role of aesthetics in fascism's appeal, but noted there was more work to be done on the function aesthetics played in self-representation and fascist subjectivity.⁶³ While 1990s historians like Jeffrey T. Schnapp, in *Staging Fascism* (1996), asserted that 'fascism often amounted to little more than a complex of ethical principles, credos, myths, and aversions, held together by opportunism and rhetorical-aesthetic glue', they recognized in the process that the aesthetic-symbolic dimension of fascism played a crucial role in its self-definition.⁶⁴ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's *Fascist Spectacle* (1997) similarly saw fascist aesthetics as building the Italian regime's power and asserting its authority, but at the same time creating its own story and identity.⁶⁵ For Mabel Berezin theatre in Mussolini's Italy was a way of forging a fascist community,⁶⁶ and went further in *Making the Fascist Self* (1997), reconstructing how the regime used mass rituals to create a fascist identity, with the public spectacles as a point of access for participants into the fascist community, merging the public and private self through emotional force.⁶⁷ In 1993, Emilio Gentile's *Il culto del littorio* (The cult of the fasces) revived the concept of political religion to underscore the religious-liturgical dimensions of fascist rituals, proposing that they bestowed a religious aura, exciting faith and devotion by imputing divine meaning to political phenomena.⁶⁸ While Gentile popularized political religion in the historiography, religion was only one of several registers in which fascists performed, while, his critics argue, the distinction between the concept's actual analytical value and enticing metaphorical suggestiveness remains unclear.⁶⁹

Through the foregrounding of ritual, ceremonial or liturgical elements in fascism, which owed so much to the cultural turn's focus on rituals and symbols, as well as the 'discursive turn' of the 1980s,⁷⁰ historians were more prone to take political style and rhetoric seriously, and by extension the myths they conveyed. Alongside the spate of works on the cultural-aesthetic in fascism in the 1990s came Roger Griffin's *The Nature of Fascism* (1991), which foregrounded the matter of ideology again in the form of myth. His book argued for a heuristic ideal-type definition of fascism that would adequately capture what was new and unique about far-right movements, organizations and regimes of Europe between 1918 and 1945, and promote a fruitful analysis of fascist ideology in these terms. His minimalist definition of fascism as 'paligenetic ultranationalism' for short – an extreme nationalism driven by the myth of national rebirth – clearly captured the imagination of many students in the field, and eventually became a standard reference point in the historiography.⁷¹ Griffin argued for the 'primacy of culture' in fascism, reconceptualizing ideology through myth (paligenesis), a focus

on 'the underlying ideological matrix of fascist thought, policies and action, not on fascist "doctrine" itself'.⁷² The 'New Consensus' Griffin asserted seems illusory and remains contested, and it is debatable to what extent Griffin's paligenetic orientation has actually led to useful new research contributions in the field, but either way his work is symptomatic of the entrenchment of cultural approaches to fascism.⁷³

Some historians have regarded Griffin's cultural-ideological focus as generalizing, too synchronic and ahistorical, as well as too idealistic, arguing notions like 'paligenesis' lacked any sense of power or connection to real world activism. Michael Mann asked in *Fascists* (2004), '[h]ow can a "myth" generate "internal cohesion" or "driving force"?' A myth cannot be an agent driving or integrating anything, since ideas are not free-floating. Without power organizations, ideas cannot actually *do* anything.⁷⁴ But Mann, like other historians, has not been willing to disregard the cultural and mythic elements of fascism altogether in his research, and acknowledged that fascists' own beliefs need to be taken into account, no matter how irrational.⁷⁵ In the more recent historiography, Sven Reichardt has developed a 'praxeological' or cultural-pragmatic analysis of fascism, which focuses on the 'thinking within action', i.e. how cultural-ideological forms are revealed through fascist action and behaviour, rather than analysing ideas about the world. This is a way of not getting at the ideas themselves, but at the significant energy and fanaticism that fascism managed to mobilize, through their ideas.⁷⁶ Fascist culture, in the broadest sense of the word, is here tied to social practice, using concepts like Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus* and corporeal repertoire. Repeated actions, habits and practices had a creative dimension: fascist praxis was in this sense discursive, and generative of meaning, hence an element in the struggle for meaning.⁷⁷ In his book *Fascistischer Kampfbünde* (Fascist Combat Groups, 2009), Reichardt shows how violence was used socially to construct a fascist community, and culturally to create symbolic meaning for fascism as a revolutionary, disciplined, anti-bourgeois force.⁷⁸ Rejecting an identifiable essence or nature of fascism, Reichardt understands fascists dynamically in their immediate context, through their actions and performances and the meanings they generate.

Now the role of myth often occupies the centre stage of fascism, and as more than just propaganda. Griffin has proposed that myths could be used to understand fascist mentalities or subjectivities, and by extension their actions, moving beyond instrumental interests or programmatic ideological goals.⁷⁹ This has been practised in cultural approaches to fascism before, but without focusing explicitly on myth.⁸⁰ However, the insistence on paligenetic myth over any other, no matter how supposedly 'heuristic', has outlived its usefulness. The same is true of the academic construction of a 'generic' fascism. David D. Roberts is correct when he argues that the use of *a priori* frameworks such as heuristic definitions restricts our understanding of what fascists actually said or thought – myth and activism are far more multivalent and complex than that.⁸¹ The use of definitions is unnecessary, if one recognizes that fascism, semiotically an empty signifier, was a historically contingent phenomenon which was and always remained a work-in-progress, open to interpretation and revision from all sides. Nietzsche's dictum, that whatever has a history cannot be defined, applies especially in this instance, where the focus is on tracing how contemporaries constructed fascism in the first place.⁸²

Historiography of Swedish and Dutch fascism

The state of research on Swedish fascism can, until recently, be characterized as dire. The electoral failure of indigenous fascist movements in Sweden during a period most notable for the entrenchment of Social Democratic hegemony has given scholars little impetus to look into the Swedish fascists which have been commonly regarded as fundamentally alien to Swedish history.⁸³ Indeed, the bulk of scholarship dealing with Swedish fascism has focused specifically on anti-fascist opinion.⁸⁴ It was only in 1970 that Eric Wärenstam produced the first historical work on Swedish fascism, *Fascismen och Nazismen i Sverige, 1920–1945* (Fascism and Nazism in Sweden, 1920–1945), and since then new works have been few and far between.⁸⁵ And while Wärenstam laid the foundations for future scholarship, doing a great deal of impressive original research and source-collecting for the book, it is too short for any in-depth analysis. Wärenstam's description of the developments and failures of the most prominent figures on the fascist scene in Sweden was a crucial start for the historiography, and his plotting of the key developments still shapes how historians view the period today, but his understanding of fascist ideology was at times incoherent and vague, and he did little to elucidate the organization and inner workings of the fascist parties. Wärenstam had no interest in contemporary cultural approaches to fascism, so that his work, while comprehensive, gives no insight into what it meant to be a fascist in interwar Sweden.

The 1990s saw a new attempt by Heléne Lööv to write a history of Swedish fascism in her more extensive *Nazismen i Sverige, 1924–1979* (Nazism in Sweden, 1924–1979), following on her PhD thesis *Hakkorset och Vasakärven* (The Swastika and the Wasa Sheaf), but as the chronology suggests she considered interwar fascism mostly as the predecessor of neo-fascism, which was attracting attention at the time.⁸⁶ Lööv's thesis tackled matters of organization more thoroughly than did Wärenstam, but her work grouped together the multiple fascist parties she studied, and analysed them synchronically. It took until the twenty-first century for a call to be made for more serious academic research into historical Swedish fascism, with a 2002 article by Lena Berggren in the *Journal of Contemporary History*, 'Swedish Fascism – Why Bother?' (also published in *Historisk Tidskrift* as 'Swedish interwar fascism – An uninteresting marginal phenomenon or important research subject?').⁸⁷ Berggren, whose previous work focused on the intellectual history of anti-Semitism in Sweden, denied that fascism was alien to Swedish history, and questioned the idea that Swedish fascists were merely emulating the German Nazi party. Instead she emphasized how key fascist ideas about race, nation and society were prevalent in Sweden and did not depend on any German influence, and how Swedish fascists sought to maintain independence from German Nazism. Moreover, Berggren argued that past scholarship has been excessively moralizing, keen to denote fascist mavericks as outsiders in a country devoted to benevolent neutrality. With this starting point she hoped that the number of scholars working in the field would increase, and improve on 'the as yet embryonic fascist studies in Sweden'.⁸⁸

As Berggren's angle suggests, she pursued the issue mainly through an intellectual history of fascism, as exemplified by one of her recent articles on Per Engdahl, a figurehead of Swedish fascism until the 1990s.⁸⁹ Klas Åmark's comprehensive 2011