

# FASCISM

## ESSAYS ON EUROPE AND INDIA

Edited by  
**Jairus Banaji**



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B-957 Palam Vihar, GURGAON (Haryana) 122 017 India  
Phone: 91-124 2369023, +91 98681 26587, +91 98683 44843  
info@threeessays.com Website: www.threeessays.com  
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I must clear up once and for all a fundamental error: that we dead are somehow dead. We are full of protest and energy. Who wants to die? We speed through history, examining it. How can I escape the history that will kill us all?

Alexander Kluge, *Die Patriotin*



George Grosz, *Pandemonium* (1919)

## Preface

In the last three years before the Nazis took power in Germany their share of the vote expanded from some 6½% in the Reichstag elections of 1930 to over 17% in 1933. The combined vote share of the two leading Left parties remained more or less stable between 1930 and 1932 and fell slightly in 1933, but the tragic fact is that ‘the conflict within the Left was stronger than the will to offer joint resistance against the Right’ (Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, p. 103). This was not all, however. In Germany the Left failed not just because it was hopelessly divided against itself but because it failed to oppose antisemitism in a concerted and systematic way, and almost certainly underestimated the potential of fascism to capture a mass base. The exception to this was Arthur Rosenberg’s essay, written in exile in 1933, which argued both that fascism was more widely based than just the middle class or any particular section of it, and that ideology or an assortment of ideologies played a fundamental role in harnessing whole sectors of the civilian population to the Right. The groundwork for the eventual and rapid victory of the Nazis in the early thirties lay in the active existence of a powerful nationalist Right that was unreconciled to the German Republic (deeply hostile to democracy) and wedded

to authoritarian, racist and militaristic subcultures. Since these arguments are laid out in the essay itself and also summarised in the introduction to it below, this is not the place to rehearse them. But they have a major resonance for us in India where communal ideologies play a major role in shaping the politics of the extreme Right and, as the essays on India suggest, function as our counterpart of the nebulous common sense that was pivotal in the formation of a Nazi mass base. Kannan Srinivasan demonstrates the purely subaltern nature of Indian fascism in the classic period when the Nazis and Mussolini ruled Germany and Italy respectively and the Indian national movement overshadowed the more extreme versions of nationalism being forged by Savarkar and the Hindu Mahasabha. Sumit Sarkar's classic essay was published soon after the catastrophic events of December 1992/January 1993 which saw major and frontal assaults by the Sangh Parivar and its political allies, including mass pogroms against Muslims in Bombay. It was one of the first pieces of writing on the Indian Left to return to the category of fascism in order to understand the nature of the movement that had brought about those catastrophes. Dilip Simeon expands the perspective to show how the idea of a nation state with a homogeneous ethnic or religious community at its core is intrinsic to the fascist project, whichever part of the religious spectrum it comes from. The essays in this book are an attempt to situate Indian communalism in the wider frame of fascist political cultures and their role in creating/consolidating a mass base for the extreme Right, and of course of the debates about fascism which have grown considerably since the sixties.

Simeon also underlines the illusory nature of majorities and minorities. In the Indian version of fascism the Nazis' ethnic definition of nationhood is replaced by a religious one, and the 'mobilizing force of antisemitism' (Kershaw, *Hitler*, p. 138) by a manic obsession with Muslims and other religious minorities. If the German defeat in the First War was, as Sartre says, 'transcended as a revolt against the defeated fathers and as a wish for revenge among young Germans *through the practice of Nazism*'

(Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, t. 1, p. 667), in India it was the abject humiliation of being what seemed like a permanently colonised, dominated people that the Hindu Mahasabha sought to transcend by its targeting of ‘the’ Muslims and real Muslims. (See Srinivasan on Savarkar.) The targeting of minorities as a means of mobilising the ‘majority’ is a manipulation of seriality, both because ‘the’ Jew or ‘the’ Muslim does not exist except as a racial/religious stereotype and because the majority does not exist *except as seriality* and, in the action of the group on the series, as what Sartre calls the pure ‘illusion of totalised seriality’. (See the way Sartre analyses these relationships in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, p. 642ff.).

Mass mobilisations by the extreme right and state complicity in communal violence have *both* left Indian democracy profoundly battered over the last two decades especially. There is a slower version here of the collapse of Weimar democracy, one staggered over the fateful years since the gruesome mass crimes against the Sikhs in Delhi in 1984. Those crimes remain a shameful indictment of the extent to which state complicity in mass violence has become an endemic feature of India’s political system. Having said that, the pogroms against the Sikhs were not part of a conscious agenda to remould the nature of the Indian state. In India the Rosenberg perspective on fascism is best demonstrated by the pogroms that engulfed Gujarat in 2002 – a spate of organised ‘spontaneous’ violence that was *calculated* to generate mass support through communal mobilisation, with the violence concentrated in very specific constituencies. (This is shown by Dhartiwala and Biggs, *Politics & Society*, 40/4 (2012) pp. 483–516, e.g., ‘Violence was worst in districts or constituencies where the BJP faced the greatest electoral competition’, p. 501). The Chief Minister had actual or ‘constructive’ knowledge of the crimes being committed and would, in any international criminal jurisdiction, be facing trial for command responsibility for them. And as with Hitler’s growing acceptability in wider social circles after 1924, his sordid image has since been refurbished to transform a

hardened RSS functionary into prime-ministerial material, thanks to the Washington-based PR and lobbyist firm APCO, hired at taxpayers' expense to obliterate the memory of 2002. The forces aiding this image makeover include major sycophants in India's business community, leaders of industry who have chosen to make Gujarat and Modi the platform for a regroupment around their authoritarian vision of a state fanatically committed to capitalism ('development') and brooking no interference from an effete and ostensibly corrupt bureaucracy; all this powerfully aided of course by the media with its own culture of sycophancy and unbelievable prostration in the face of power. Given all that has happened subsequently (*post* 2002) to contain and undermine the judicial system there and actively subvert the course of justice, to consolidate a mass base around hideous communal prejudices and around the ghettoisation of a whole community, also to win the support of industrial capital with lavish grants of land and unhindered access to the leader himself, the trajectory of the new fascism in India is almost certainly best studied in the context of Gujarat. At the heart of this story lies the issue of 'mass' support for deeply authoritarian political forces and cultures, of civilian compliance with communal persecution behind the semblance of democratic forms. The public culture of democracy is so radically hollowed out and degraded that in the end it yields a mere mask, a form of legitimisation, for a regime immersed in criminality.

A word finally about the reading list at the end of this book. The literature on fascism has grown by leaps and bounds and is so massive that any bibliography that doesn't call itself 'select' would be impossible to fathom. For example, in the LSE library in London the non-periodical literature that deals more or less directly with Nazism alone (shelfmarks DD240–DD256) straddles 8 stacks, each comprising 8 shelves with roughly 40 titles per shelf, i.e. over 2500 titles. Tim Mason, 'Whatever happened to "Fascism"?', *Radical History Review* 1991, was an early attempt to assess the impact of this humongous proliferation of scholarship on the more classic, left-dominated 'theories of fascism' litera-



ture that held the field in the sixties and seventies. And interestingly, racism and genocide were among the themes that Mason saw emerging in a big way, which Marxist theories had tended to ignore. Rosenberg is an exception to this, not in the sense that he lived to witness the full horrors of the Nazi genocide or its impact but because the racism that culminated in genocide was central to his narrative and to the way he explained the ‘mass’ element in the success of fascism. For Rosenberg, next to the more immediate complicity of the state in tolerating the activity of the fascist squads, it was ideology and its inert grip on the masses, that explained the apparent ease with which Nazism transformed itself into a mass movement in the late twenties. That ideological incubus (cf. Marx, ‘The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living’) was itself complex, an amalgam of the rabid nationalism of the late nineteenth century, the age-old antisemitism of Bloch’s ‘non-contemporaneous’ classes, the newer antisemitism of the white-collar groups, and of course the traumatic responses to the birth of democracy in 1918, following a war that literally traumatised millions of Europe’s citizens. The reading list mobilises some of this literature, e.g., Kauders’ excellent monograph on the rapid escalation of antisemitism after 1918, Claudia Koonz’s argument in *Mothers in the Fatherland* that through their normal routine commitments to domesticity German women contributed to the stability of the Nazi regime, or Ruth Birn’s devastating review of Goldhagen and his view that a genocidal racism was somehow innate in German culture and society, to which Goldhagen reacted with the threat of a defamation lawsuit! Not included there is Walter Benjamin’s classic ‘Artwork Essay’ (1936) that looked only obliquely at fascism but grasped a central feature of its control and manipulation of ‘technological art forms’, viz. that ‘mass movements present themselves more clearly to the camera than to the human eye. Cadres of hundreds of thousands are best captured in bird’s-eye view. And if that perspective is as accessible to the human eye as to the camera, the image that the human eye carries away from the

scene is not amenable to the kind of enlargement that the recorded image undergoes.’ (Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 279, n. 33).’ (See the brilliant discussion of these ideas in Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin. Overpowering Conformism*, pp. 162–67).

The first two chapters are reprinted from *Historical Materialism*, 20/1 (2012), pp. 133–89. I’m grateful to the editors of *Historical Materialism* for permission to reprint these from the pages of their excellent journal. Sumit Sarkar’s essay is reprinted from *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXXVIII/5, January 30, 1993. My thanks to him and to EPW for permission to publish it here. The chapter that concludes this collection is an expanded version of a lecture I gave at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, on 18 March 2013. It was the fifth lecture in the Walter Sisulu Memorial Lecture series. My thanks also to Asad Zaidi for agreeing to have this collection put together.

March 2013

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*Notes on contributors*

**Jairus Banaji** is associated with the Department of Development Studies, SOAS, University of London. His book *Theory as History* won the Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize for 2011.

**Sumit Sarkar** is a well-known historian of modern India. Until recently he was Professor of History at the University of Delhi. His books include *Modern India, 1885-1947*, *Writing Social History* and *Beyond Nationalist Frames*.

**Dilip Simeon** is a Delhi-based historian and writer. His publications include an academic monograph on the labour movement in Jharkhand and the novel *Revolution Highway*.

**Kannan Srinivasan** ([kannansrinivasan.org](http://kannansrinivasan.org)) is an Adjunct Research Fellow of the School of Political Inquiry at Monash University and was for many years a journalist.