

On the NYR Daily this week

This week we published Ruth Ben-Ghiat's "Co-opt & Corrupt: How Trump Bent and Broke the GOP." A professor of history and Italian studies at New York University, Ben-Ghiat has turned a specialty in the cultural study of Italian fascism into an expertise in autocrats' techniques of power.

Her last book was a study of cinema during Italy's interwar colonial period; her new one, due in November, is titled *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present*. Ben-Ghiat has used insights gleaned from her research—she notes that Mussolini "used newsreels the way Trump uses Twitter"—in her work as a commentator for CNN, writing opinion pieces about the authoritarian tendencies she sees in the Trump presidency.

"The Mussolini–Trump similarities were a starting point," she explained to me via email this week. "I wanted to see what in authoritarianism stayed the same (the tactics of corruption of elites, fabrication of an alternate reality, use of machismo and violence) and what had changed (the media used to fabricate that reality, for instance), so we could better understand what we are facing today and how the lessons of history can help us combat assaults on democracy."

Her essay for the Daily follows that theme by examining the particular way Trump has deformed the Republican Party, turning it into an instrument of "personalist rule," as she puts it.

"Loyalty to the leader who has committed to neutralizing the (usually leftist) enemy is what matters most, along with the willingness to lie and commit crimes for him," she said. "That is far more important than expertise. One thing remains the same from Mussolini onward: being too competent or popular a public official is the fastest way to be demoted by an insecure autocrat."

Ben-Ghiat grew up in Pacific Palisades, California, a neighborhood north of Santa Monica that became home to a number of notable German-Jewish émigrés. Ben-Ghiat's parents were not among them, but both were immigrants. Her father was born in Jerusalem, in what was then Palestine (as a young man, during the British Mandate, he belonged to the Zionist paramilitary organization Haganah); her mother was from Scotland.

"Growing up with immigrant parents from two very different cultures made me realize from an early age that there was no 'one way' of doing things or thinking about the world," she told me. "It was normal to have multiple identities, to celebrate Christmas and Hanukkah, to go Teheran Market in Santa Monica for decent hummus and pita bread and then to the British expat store for Jelly Babies, and to travel eleven hours by plane to see the closest family members."

But neither fascism nor the Holocaust were discussed at home. "So my introduction to the destructive impact of authoritarian regimes on individuals and societies came first through personal channels," she explained. "Arnold Schoenberg's son, Larry, was my high school math teacher, and I felt the legacies of that past alive around me. I did my senior thesis at UCLA on the composer Otto Klemperer and his transition from Berlin to Southern California."

Over recent months, the Daily has run a series of articles—by Peter E. Gordon, Samuel Moyn, and Sarah Churchwell—that have all, in different ways, discussed whether comparisons with fascism are useful in American politics today. Although Ben-Ghiat’s article this week did not address the question, it is central to her concerns.

“I don’t call Trump a fascist because I think that’s too restrictive a word,” she said. “Trump is something broader. His role models are authoritarians like Russia’s Putin, Turkey’s Erdogan, and others who have domesticated democratic institutions, including the press and the judiciary. Trump also builds entirely on America’s own traditions of racial repression and mass incarceration.

“Only in doing research for Strongmen did I realize the extent to which the GOP had become an authoritarian party before Trump came along,” she went on. “All he did was coalesce and give presidential authority to the various anti-democratic forces and tendencies of our place and time.”

In a 2017 profile, the Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz called Ben-Ghiat “a leading figure in the media battle against Trump”—she’d covered the 2016 election as one of CNN’s resident historians, and “and having that platform of readers from all over the world spurred me on,” she said. She also serves as an adviser to Protect Democracy, a nonpartisan campaign group founded in 2017 mainly by former senior staff in the White House Counsel’s office. Other advisers include Anne Applebaum, Timothy Snyder, and John Dean.

Ben-Ghiat may be the only one of them, though, who unwinds by listening to electronic music—currently, she told me, Massive Attack, Hol Baumann, and Oneohtrix Point Never: “I especially depended on music to anchor me—at its most immersive, it can be a kind of containment field—when writing about abuse and violence.” Matt Seaton Editor, NYR Daily