

# 1 On Fascist Lies

*I punched some of those precise liars in the face. The witnesses approved my relief, and fabricated other lies. I didn't believe them, but I didn't dare to ignore them.*

JORGE LUIS BORGES

The most famous fascist propagandist, the Nazi leader Joseph Goebbels, is often misquoted as saying that repeating lies was central to Nazism. This misquotation has led to an image of a fascism fully conscious of the extent of its deliberate falsehoods.<sup>1</sup> Is deception at the center of fascism? Do liars believe their own lies? Are they cognizant of falsity? When Goebbels said that Hitler knew everything, and that he was a “[t]he naturally creative instrument of divine destiny,”<sup>2</sup> did he actually have a reality-based notion of knowledge?

This is complicated. In fact, having once faked and then published news about an assassination attempt on himself, Goebbels then “published” it as fact in his diaries. In these diaries, not written for public consumption but published many years after his death, he also noted the “success” of his speeches after they were celebrated by the media he controlled.<sup>3</sup> Was Goebbels lying to

himself, or did he believe in a form of truth that transcended empirical demonstration? Did he want to fabricate a new reality? Of course, from a reality-based perspective, there is no difference between the fabrication of a lie and the belief in a magical idea of truth, an escape from veracity. By inventing an alternative reality, Goebbels was lying to himself, but this is not what he and most transnational fascists believed.

For fascists like Goebbels, knowledge was a matter of faith, and especially a deep faith in the myth of the fascist leader. The manipulation or the invention of facts was a key dimension of fascism, but so was a belief in a truth that transcended facts. Fascists did not see a contradiction between truth and propaganda.

Goebbels defined propaganda as “the art, not of lying or distorting, but of listening to ‘the soul of the people’ and ‘speaking to a person a language that this person understands.’” As Richard Evans, the historian, observes, “The Nazis acted on the premise that they, and they alone, through Hitler, had an inner knowledge and understanding of the German soul.”<sup>4</sup> The idea of a truth that emanated from the soul was the result of an act of faith in an absolute certainty that could not be corroborated.

When Adolf Hitler talked about big lies and big truths, this was symptomatic of his work to upend the world of true and fake. What this man understood as lies were facts that ran against his racist theory of the universe. His conception of the world rested on a notion of truth that did not need empirical verification. In other words, what is truth for most of us (the result of demonstrable causes and effects) was potentially fake for him. What most of us would see as lies or invented facts were for him superior forms of truth. Much like current populist media claims today, Hitler inverted reality by projecting onto his enemies his own dishonesty regarding the truth, falsely

stating that the Jews were liars, not him. The fascist liar acted as if he represented the truth. He accused Jews of engaging in “colossal distortion of the Truth.” But Hitler identified this real truth with the anti-Semitic myths that he believed and propagated.

The foremost connoisseurs of this truth regarding the possibilities in the use of falsehood and slander have always been the Jews; for after all, their whole existence is based on the great lie, to wit, that they are a religious community while actually they are a race—and what a race! One of the greatest minds of humanity has nailed them forever as such in an eternally correct phrase of fundamental truth: he called them ‘the great masters of the lie’. And anyone who does not recognize this or does not want to believe it will never in this world be able to help the truth to victory.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s, Hitler, the Argentine fascists, and many other fascists around the world saw truth embodied in anti-Semitic myths—what the German Jewish philosopher Ernst Cassirer called “myth according to plan.”<sup>6</sup> Fascists fantasized a new reality and then changed the actual one. Thus, they redrew the frontiers between myth and reality. Myth replaced reality with policies aimed at reshaping the world according to the lies racists believed. If anti-Semitic lies stated that Jews were inherently dirty and contagious and therefore ought to be killed, the Nazis created conditions in the ghettos and concentration camps where dirtiness and widespread disease became reality. Starved, tortured, and radically dehumanized Jewish inmates became what the Nazis had planned for them to become, and were accordingly killed.

In their search for a truth that did not coincide with the experienced world, fascists resorted to making metaphors reality. There

was nothing true about fascist ideological falsehoods, but their adherents nonetheless wanted to make these lies real enough. They conceived what they saw and did not like as *untruth*. Mussolini argued that a core task of fascism was to deny the lies of the democratic system. He also opposed the truth of fascism to the “lie” of democracy. The principle of incarnation was central to il Duce’s mythical opposition between democratic “lies” and fascist “truth.” He believed in a form of truth that transcended democratic common sense because it was transcendental. He recalled, “At a certain moment in my life I risked being unpopular with the masses to announce to them what I thought was the new truth, a holy truth [*la verità santa*].”<sup>7</sup>

For Mussolini, reality had to follow mythical imperatives. Too bad if people were not initially convinced; their disbelief also needed to be challenged. The mythical framework of fascism was rooted in the fascist myth of the nation. This myth, he declared, “we wish to translate into a complete reality.” Myth could change reality; reality, however, could not represent an obstacle to myth. This sacred truth of fascism was equally defined by the imposition of peculiar boundaries between fascist truths and the fake nature of the enemy. On the other side, there were the lies of the enemy. Across European borders, people were enchanted by “the obsession of the Russian Myth”—Bolshevism—but Mussolini considered that these rival myths were false insofar as they opposed the absolute forms of Truth rooted in extreme nationalism, and of course his own leadership, which he had identified with myth.<sup>8</sup> To that myth, the Duce said, “we subordinate all the rest.”<sup>9</sup>

In their modernization of myth, fascists turned it from a matter of personal belief to a primary form of political identification. In this reformulation, true politics was the projection of an ancient

and violent inner self that overcame the artifices of reason when it was applied to politics. This operation allowed them to define as true everything that conformed to their own ideological aims, postulates, and desires.

This mythic dimension of fascism was antidemocratic. Democracy has historically rested on notions of truth as the opposite of lies, mistaken beliefs, and erroneous information.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, fascists presented a radical notion of truth in dictatorship. As the historian Robert Paxton explained, for fascists, “the truth was whatever permitted the new fascist man (and woman) to dominate others, and whatever made the chosen people triumph. Fascism rested not upon the truth of its doctrine but upon the leader’s mystical union with the historic destiny of his people, a notion related to romanticist ideas of national historic flowering and of individual artistic or spiritual genius, though fascism otherwise denied romanticism’s exaltation of unfettered personal creativity.”<sup>11</sup>

Fascists’ metaphorical unification of people, nation, and leader rested on seeing myth as the ultimate form of truth. But there were many political precedents. This uncanny status of truth and lies in fascism is a recurring dimension of the long history of the relationship between truth and politics. For the philosopher Hannah Arendt, if the history of politics always demonstrates a tense relationship with truth, the fascist resolution of this tension implies the destruction of politics. Organized lying defines fascism. Only facts (and lies) prescribed by the leadership could be accepted as truth.

The distortion of truth in the name of promoting an alternate reality is a phenomenon common in fascist history. The Spanish fascist dictator Francisco Franco famously denied his role in one of his greatest war crimes: the gruesome bombing of Guernica that left hundreds dead. Though the bombing was a well-documented act of the

fascist government, Franco claimed that “the Reds” had “destroyed Guernica” in order to spread “propaganda” and lies about him.<sup>12</sup> In doing so, he co-opted the very notion of truth, claiming that the lies were not his but those of his political enemies.

In this same sense, Nazis did not distinguish between observable facts and ideologically driven “truths.” The most radical outcome of totalitarian dictatorship emerged when “mass leaders seize[d] the power to fit reality to their lies.”<sup>13</sup> Some years later, in her controversial study of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt provided a major inquiry into the reasoning of one planner of the Holocaust who epitomized this phenomenon of “extreme contempt for fact as such.” Arendt equated Eichmann’s subscription to lies with an entire society “shielded against reality and factuality by exactly the same means, the same self-deception, lies, and stupidity that had now become engrained in Eichmann’s mentality.”<sup>14</sup>

Arendt missed an important dimension of the Eichmann trial: the perspective of the truth as presented by the victims.<sup>15</sup> Also missing in Arendt’s portrayal of Eichmann is the man’s deep ideological dedication, even fanaticism. Even at the moment of his death, Eichmann ceremoniously stated, “Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I shall not forget them.”<sup>16</sup> Arendt identifies this moment as one of “grotesque silliness,” an elation as Eichmann sensed the relevance of his own death. But for Arendt this realization suggested a formulaic representation of the moment rather than its ideological understanding. She identified Eichmann’s last words with “clichés” and the banality of evil. Other historians have preferred to emphasize how this choice of last words, and more generally his Nazi past and crimes, was the result of Eichmann’s deep commitment to what he regarded as the

essential ideological truth of Nazism.<sup>17</sup> Eichmann saw his life and death as a memory that went beyond his multicentric transatlantic itinerary, from Berlin to Buenos Aires and from Buenos Aires to Jerusalem.

Many years before Eichmann met justice in Jerusalem, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges imagined a similar Nazi death in a story published in Buenos Aires in 1946. After the defeat of Nazism, Borges's fictional killer, Otto Dietrich zur Linde, reflects on the meaning of fascism, the past and the present. Zur Linde had lived the sublime moment of war, but for him it was in defeat that the definitive truth would be fully revealed: in "the great days and nights of a happy war. In the very air we breathed there was a feeling not unlike love. As though the sea were suddenly nearby, there was wonder and an exultation in the blood." But truth had not been found in this exaltation. It was not in the sublime moment of victory but in the flavor of the "excrement" of defeat that Nazis like himself found a truth that transcended factual explanations.

I thought I was emptying the cup of anger, but in the excrements I encountered an unexpected flavor, the mysterious and almost terrible flavor of happiness. I essayed several explanations, but none seemed adequate. I thought: I am pleased with defeat, because secretly I know I am guilty, and only punishment can redeem me. I thought: I am pleased with defeat because it is an end and I am very tired. I thought: I am pleased with defeat because it has occurred, because it is irrevocably united to all those events which are, which were, and which will be, because to censure or to deplore a single real occurrence is to blaspheme the universe. I played with these explanations, until I found the true one.

After discarding facts and lived experience, zur Linde circularly identified truth with the Nazi faith. For zur Linde, subdirector of the Tarnowitz concentration camp, the true “explanation” of fascism rested on the affirmation of the devotion to violence. This was a faith—not needing corroboration—that would establish “heaven” on earth: “The world was dying of Judaism, and of that disease of Judaism that is the faith of Jesus; we taught it violence and the faith in the sword.”<sup>18</sup>

As Borges playfully suggested in the quotation that serves as the epigraph of this chapter, one should recognize lies as such, but one cannot afford to ignore them when analyzing the acts of violence they inspire. Even if it is clear to us that, like Borges’s imaginary Nazi narrator, Eichmann was deceiving himself in Jerusalem, this is not how fascists explained and lived their actions. The fascists’ way of understanding their role in history in mythical terms demands a historical explanation. Arendt was keen to point to the function and role of these lies in the totalitarian system without analyzing why fascists believed in them in the first place. She was not that interested in the rationale for their motives. Arendt argued, “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.”<sup>19</sup> But as important as this “ideal” general subject is, in this book my focus is on those who were convinced. In other words, Arendt was dealing with ideal types, and I look at actual, historically documented figures, empirically grounding my arguments in the history of fascism. Historians of fascism also need to understand how fascists justified their lies.

Why did fascists believe their lies to be the truth? As many anti-fascists noted at the time, the fascist history of dictatorship was founded on lies. The mythical imaginary the fascists put forward as reality could never be corroborated because it was based on fantasies of total domination in the past and present. Thus, this book presents the history of lies in fascism.