

---

# Fascism as a Transnational Movement: The Case of Inter-War Alsace

---

SAMUEL HUSTON GOODFELLOW

## Abstract

*The idea of fascism spread quickly and transnationally in the inter-war era. Fascist groups identified themselves as sharing fundamental characteristics and ideas. At the same time, they distorted fascism for their own purposes, adapting it to their specific contexts. As a border region, Alsace provides a number of examples of fascist groups claiming solidarity with fascism, yet distinguishing themselves from each other. Looking at fascism as a transnational phenomenon provides insight into the evolution of fascist ideology and will help explain why it is so difficult to define.*

Fascism is commonly imagined either as a series of independent hyper-nationalist movements or as an international movement defined by a fairly rigid set of criteria. If it is viewed as a collection of separate national movements, then the connections between these become obscure. Yet the concept of an international movement, also known as ‘generic’ fascism, ‘universal’ fascism or ‘ideal’ fascism, makes it hard to explain the differences. Both of these approaches project a static vision of fascism that does not adequately account for changes over time or across borders. Fascism might, however, be better understood as a fundamentally transnational phenomenon that has evolved through different national circumstances. Fascism was, and is, obviously transnational; militants around the world expressed solidarity.<sup>1</sup> Equally clear is that the manifestations of fascism have varied considerably. The Romanian Corneliu

Westminster College, Fulton, MO 65251, USA; Sam.Goodfellow@westminster-mo.edu

<sup>1</sup> Anthony James Joes, *Fascism in the Contemporary World: Ideology, Evolution, Resurgence* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1978); Stein Uglevik Larsen et al., *Who Were the Fascists? Social Roots of European Fascism* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1980); and Stein Uglevik Larsen, ed., *Fascism Outside Europe: The European Impulse against Domestic Conditions in the Diffusion of Global Fascism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) address the spread of fascism around Europe and the world.

Codreanu, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler and Oswald Moseley had little in common. Fascists in different countries shaped the idea of fascism to their own purposes. The process of transnationally interpreting other fascist movements altered the collective meaning of fascism, opening up new ways to organise, implement and understand fascism. Conceptualising fascism as a transnational movement means embracing a degree of definitional fluidity and has the benefit of helping us to understand the connections and similarities across a wide range of movements.

The study of transnational trends tends not to take a global, all-encompassing view. Instead, it dwells on specific cases in which ideas, populations and events cross borders. Transnational is different from international, because it does not assume a global organisation, or even ideological unanimity, in the way the term international does. Transnational instead examines an accumulation of specific relationships across borders that can vary from relatively localised to global. Thus a transnational approach would focus more locally on the international flow of fascist ideas and practices and look for direct connections between fascist groups, remaining sensitive to the changes that take place in the process of transmission. Transnationalism would neither emphasise a single global fascism nor simply compare fascisms in different countries. The concept of transnational enables us to look at the diverse and specific ways that ideas, organisations and actors crossed borders and influenced each other without necessarily trying to create a procrustean bed into which all fascist movements must fit. It allows us to understand the differences within the context of shared ideas and practices. Transnationalism provides a means of explaining the mechanisms for the dispersion of the fascist idea and how the connecting ideas change.

Despite the voluminous literature on fascism, few scholars have written on its transnational aspect. Anthologies, comparative works and attempts to reveal a generic fascism have dominated the historiography. One exception is Frederico Finchelstein's *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919–1945*. He points out that so far most historians have been 'downplaying or ignoring the central cross-national aspect of fascism'.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Argentina, Finchelstein argues that the Argentinian *Nationalistas* borrowed and modified elements of the 'original fascist matrix'.<sup>3</sup> The large number of Italian emigrants in Argentina enabled this borrowing, which, in any event, did not lead to a perfect reproduction of Italian fascism in Argentina. Another recent work that points to the importance of the transnational connections of fascism is Dietrich Orlow's *The Lure of Fascism in Western Europe: German Nazis, Dutch and French Fascists, 1933–1939*. Orlow explores in depth the relationships between the Germans and their Dutch and French fascist counterparts and how they reacted to each other. Despite concluding that 'international fascism was a failure' because of the inherent ideological and structural imbalances between Nazi Germany and the Dutch and French, Orlow has depicted a part of the transnational aspect of fascism. It should not come as a surprise that

<sup>2</sup> Frederico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919–1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

fascists failed to create a consensus international ideology when different national manifestations adapted the original matrix to their own circumstances.

This article will look at the idea of transnational fascism in Alsace as seen primarily through the regional print media of the fascist parties during the 1930s. How did Alsatian fascists articulate the connection between external non-French fascist groups, most notably the Nazis, and themselves? Several factors recommend Alsace in the 1930s as a salient case study for describing fascism as a transnational movement. First, Alsace was intimately connected culturally, linguistically and politically with both Germany and France, which gave the region a profound transnational character. Especially since 1870, Alsatians had struggled to establish their identity. Alsatian identity and culture were contested both externally and internally. Germany and then France tried successively to convert Alsatians into exemplars of their respective nations. Although Alsatians generally thought of themselves as unique, they argued about whether they represented a dual culture, a cultural bridge between nations, or whether they should simply assimilate into either Germany or France.<sup>4</sup> Alsatians invoked nationalist and regional ideas at their convenience. Second, although German Nazism was obviously more successful than any of the French fascist movements, both countries had strong fascist movements in powerful and influential countries. Finally, as a border region with considerable significance to both Germany and France, Alsace had a wide range of active fascist movements that sometimes competed against each other and sometimes collaborated. German, French and local Alsatian fascists vied directly for support in the same region and thus were forced to respond to each other in ways that were more obvious than in Berlin or Paris. Thus, fascism in Alsace brought the different national variations together and disseminated ideas back to their capitals.

As a regional site of transnational interaction on the subject of fascism, Alsace in the 1930s demonstrates the complexity of the reception and transmission of ideas. The peculiarities of the region played a key role in determining the parameters of fascist ideology. Autonomism, the debate over cultural and national identity, and the geographical reality that in the event of war Alsace would again be right on the frontline of any military action were significant contextual issues. All of the fascist groups operating in Alsace were affected by these regional constraints. With the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, the representations of fascism across the spectrum frequently revolved around cultural identification with Germany and pacifism.<sup>5</sup> Each fascist group gravitated towards a definition or redefinition of fascism that suited its particular interests. The absence of a definitive fascist ideology and the fact that the definition of fascism evolved from pragmatic experience as much as ideological purity ensured a lively debate over fascism. Different groups chose to highlight different aspects. For

<sup>4</sup> See Christopher J. Fischer, *Alsace to the Alsatians? Visions and Divisions of Alsatian Regionalism, 1870–1939* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010) and Elizabeth Vlossak, *Marianne or Germania? Nationalizing Women in Alsace, 1870–1946* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), for excellent discussions of the complexity of Alsatian nationalism and regionalism during this period.

<sup>5</sup> Because of the importance of Nazism as the second generation of fascism, the terms fascism and Nazism will be considered in this paper as more or less interchangeable.

French fascist parties, fascism and Nazism represented a universal ideal that should be applied to France. The autonomists and separatists moderated criticism of Nazi Germany because they perceived the benefits of rejoining Germany as outweighing the dangers of fascism. The Bauernbund, a local peasant fascist group, persistently applauded fascism as a revival of peasant society. Despite the existence of common regional themes, the diversity of the fascist movements meant that no single consensus presentation of fascism emerged.

## I.

Between 1871 and 1945 France and Germany alternated possession of the region four times. As a border region, Alsace had a high symbolic value after World War I for both French and German nationalists, including fascists. At the same time, Alsace had its own long and distinguished regional history and identity. Linguistically, culturally and economically, Alsace served as a bridge between France and Germany. In the inter-war era of nationalism, Alsatians struggled to reconcile the three identities.

When France reclaimed Alsace from Germany in 1918, General Joseph Joffre promised Alsatians ‘respect for your Alsatian liberties, for your traditions, for your beliefs, and for your customs’.<sup>6</sup> Crowds cheering French soldiers quickly gave way to uncertainty and anxiety in the face of an aggressive French policy of assimilation. The French immediately established triage commissions designed to separate the French and the Alsatians from the nearly 500,000 Germans who had settled in the region.<sup>7</sup> Another irritant was the imposition of the ‘*méthode directe*’ or full immersion in French in the schools, which adversely affected the educational trajectory of many students who were already in school.<sup>8</sup> Less obvious was the economic strain of shifting from being part of the German economy to integrating with French markets. As a result of these factors, Alsatians were somewhat ambivalent about France. What tipped the region from ambivalence to outright hostility was the 1924 election, which ushered in the *Cartel des Gauches*. The new prime minister, Edouard Herriot, promised to introduce into Alsace and Lorraine the entire republican legislation.<sup>9</sup> Alsace, like Germany, still did not separate church and state, as France had done since 1905, so Herriot’s threat to end the funding of the churches seemed like a direct attack on religious education (confessional schools) and local culture. Alsatians reacted strongly in what came to be called the ‘*Alsatian malaise*’.<sup>10</sup> Massive public protests took place and almost all the Alsatian deputies to the National Assembly objected.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Paul Schall, *Elsaß gestern, heute und morgen?* (Filderstadt-Bernhausen: Erwin von Steinbach Stiftung, 1976), 154.

<sup>7</sup> David Allen Harvey, ‘Lost Children or Enemy Aliens? Classifying the Population of Alsace after the First World War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 34, 4 (1999), 537–54.

<sup>8</sup> Edouard Helsey, *Notre Alsace: L’enquête du ‘Journal’ et le Procès de Colmar* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1927), 53–4; Joseph Rossé et al., *Das Elsaß von 1870 bis 1932* (Colmar: Alsatia Verlag, 1932), vol. 4, 528–9.

<sup>9</sup> Rossé et al., *Das Elsaß*, vol. 4, 422.

<sup>10</sup> Geneviève Baas, *Le malaise alsacien* (Strasbourg, 1972).

Regional dissatisfaction with French rule coalesced primarily around the issue of how to promote Alsatian rights. The autonomists on the one side sought separation from France and possibly reunion with Germany. A new political party was founded in 1927, the Independent Regional Party for Alsace-Lorraine (Unabhängige Landespartei für Elsaß-Lothringen), that overtly advocated separation from France. The pro-French factions, commonly referred to as assimilationists, supported regionalism within France. The Action Française, for example, subtitled its local newspaper *La Province d'Alsace: Organe du régionalisme français* and expended considerable energy trying to reconcile regionalism with French nationalism.<sup>11</sup> Apparently unnatural electoral alliances emerged when the communists and the clerical conservatives in the Popular Republican Union (Union Populaire Républicaine, UPR) joined forces in favour of autonomism. Each political party split on the issue of Alsatian regional or national identity. Hoping to resolve the issue, in 1928 the French government chose to put twenty-two autonomists on trial for working with Germans to separate Alsace from France. This manoeuvre only made things worse. Two of the defendants were elected to the National Assembly, and when they were found guilty and their mandates invalidated, the Alsatians obstinately elected two other defendants.<sup>12</sup>

In this identity-charged political climate multiple varieties of fascism competed in the same space, often for the same constituency. As it turned out, German and French fascists had a strong presence as the most assertive exponents of national identity. Alsace was also home to a strong regional fascist movement, the Alsatian Bauernbund, which applied fascist ideology on a more regional basis.<sup>13</sup> By 1938 fascist parties of all stripes in Alsace comprised around forty thousand activists.<sup>14</sup> The German Nazi movement channelled its influence through several local movements, the Alsatian communists, the Landespartei, the Jungmannschaft, the Bauernbund, and, more moderately, the autonomist wing of the UPR. By the 1930s, a number of French fascist groups clamoured for attention. These included the Francistes, the Parti Populaire Français, the Solidarité Française, and the Croix de Feu/Parti Social Français.<sup>15</sup> To understand the significance of these numbers, bear in mind that half

<sup>11</sup> *La Province d'Alsace* began publication in 1930.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Bankwitz, *Alsatian Autonomist Leaders, 1919–1947* (Lawrence, KS.: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978); *Der Komplott-Prozess von Colmar vom 1.–24. Mai 1928* (Gesammelte Verhandlungsberichte, 4th edn, Colmar, 1928).

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Goodfellow, 'Fascism and Regionalism in Interwar Alsace', *National Identities*, 12, 2 (June 2010), 133–46.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika and the Cross of Lorraine: Fascisms in Interwar Alsace* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999), 5. This figure includes about 15,000 pro-Nazi activists spread across a number of groups, as well as a sizeable number who belonged to the Croix de Feu/Parti Social Français. It does not include passive support.

<sup>15</sup> The extensive debate over whether the Croix de Feu/Parti Social Français was fascist or not is not central to this argument. It is included as fascist here because many contemporaries and even many members thought of it as fascist. For more information on the debate, see William Irvine, 'Fascism in France and the Strange Case of the Croix de Feu', *Journal of Modern History*, 63, 2 (June 1991), 271–95; Sean Kennedy, *Reconciling France Against Democracy: The Croix de Feu and the Parti Social Français, 1927–1945* (Toronto: MacGill Queens Press, 2007).

of the population of 1.2 million were women and did not vote. The region's largest mainstream party, the UPR, only had about 14,000 members.

During the 1930s Alsace hosted a heightened and more pointed discussion of the role of fascism, and the issue of autonomism, although still present, tailed off. Fascist groups such as the Légions and the Faisceau had admittedly earlier discussed the application of Italian fascism to France and Alsace. The rise of Nazism, however, shifted the terms of the debate in a more radical direction and, for Alsace, represented a far more immediate problem because of its geographical and cultural proximity to Germany. For Alsatians the 1930s were more about the role of fascism/Nazism and the deep cultural and political divide between those who were for and those who were against. The question of fascism incorporated the earlier issue of autonomism, particularly influencing how local fascists articulated fascist ideology by asking how deeply committed Alsatians were to Germany, even a Nazi Germany.

The newspaper culture in the inter-war era was extensive and was a powerful vehicle for the transmission of ideas. For news and information its only competitors were radio and movie news shorts. Alsace's population of 1,204,968 million in 1930 sustained thirty-one dailies and a raft of weeklies and monthlies.<sup>16</sup> Papers or journals were either oriented around a theme or hobby such as sports, serviced a local community, or had an explicit connection with a political party. Sometimes a paper did all three. Few, if any, papers took the neutral position that their role was simply to report the facts without bias. As a result, individual reading of the news was generally mediated by political editors, who almost always cast events in politically charged terms.

The Alsatian press had unique characteristics that contributed to the transnational distribution of fascist ideas. Perhaps most significant is the fact that much of the Alsatian press was in German or at least bilingual, not French. Even some of the most pro-French papers were published in German. Thus the Action Française paper, *La Province d'Alsace*, the Croix de Feu paper, *Le Flambeau*, and *Le Franciste* were published locally in German, despite their strong French nationalism. The *Dernières Nouvelles*, a moderate daily affiliated with the radicals, even produced a French and a German edition, giving it the largest circulation of any local paper. Editors reasoned that the only way to reach the Alsatian audience was to use German—a sound conclusion given that only about one sixth of the population used French regularly.<sup>17</sup> Most in the region spoke Alsatian dialect, a variant of German, and for nearly fifty years, of course, Alsatians had been educated in German.

As mentioned earlier, a specifically separatist movement, the Unabhängige Landespartei, held its first meeting in 1927. The Landespartei tilted towards separatism, which assumed that Alsace would never be free under French rule and was often a code word for rejoining Germany. Direct espousal of a return

<sup>16</sup> Rossé et al., *Das Elsaß*, vol. 4, 37; Archives départementales du Bas-Rhin (BR) AL98, 1085, Presse, Organisation de la Presse, 'Liste des Principaux correspondants et rédacteurs à Paris de la presse Alsacienne et Lorraine', 'Etat des principaux journaux, hebdomadaires et périodiques mensuel paraissant en Alsace et en Lorraine, avec leur nuance et leur triage'.

<sup>17</sup> Rossé et al., *Das Elsaß*, vol. 4, Table 95.

to Germany would have led to the party's prohibition. Over the course of the 1930s, the Landespartei embraced Nazism. Beginning in 1929, the Landespartei published its own paper, the *Elsaß-Lothringer Zeitung* (*ELZ*), which played a key role not only in advocating German culture, but also in shaping and defining fascism in the region. It began publication in 1929, just at the time that the Nazi party in Germany started its rise.

For many, the *ELZ* was clearly fascist, even Nazi. The conservative pro-French Catholic paper, *Elsässer Bote*, told its readers that it 'openly adopts Hitler's ideas'.<sup>18</sup> Several police reports describe meetings with Germans and speculate about the finances of the paper.<sup>19</sup> The police strongly suspected that the Germans were directly subsidising the publication of the *ELZ* and carefully monitored the paper's views. Clearly elements of the Landespartei were pro-Nazi from the beginning, but this did not mean, however, that unanimity reigned within the party. A few founding members opposed Nazism, and those who did support Nazism did not all do so for the same reasons or with the same degree of commitment.<sup>20</sup>

Not surprisingly, the paper expressed a favourable view of fascism. It cited Benito Mussolini's statement that fascism is 'Italian in its particular form—universalist in spirit'. Nor did the editors seem opposed to Mussolini's hope for a 'fascist Europe . . . that would solve the modern problems of the state of the twentieth century in a fascist way'. Instead they described this as one of 'the most important speeches that the Duce has ever given'.<sup>21</sup> The *ELZ*'s emphasis reveals the editors' interest in seeing themselves as part of a European-wide movement. Another article, written by an Italian fascist, explained approvingly that Italian 'fascism had done away with parties', which for the *ELZ* implied that the struggle for Alsatian autonomy was also part of a wider movement for a new political system.<sup>22</sup> The editors of the *ELZ* considered the elimination of parties positive, since they saw political parties as responsible for the corruption and dislocation of modern society. For the autonomists, fascism's universality gave them additional authority to oppose France. The French government was not only imposing a sort of colonial hegemony on Alsace, it was, at its very core, contaminated and corrupted. Alsace could claim to be German not just for standard cultural reasons, but because it was part of a broader universal movement. More generally, the *ELZ*'s emphasis on the universality of fascism presented it as the powerful and inevitable political ideology of the future. Alsatians should understand that fascism was their destiny and they should be prepared to participate. Significantly,

<sup>18</sup> BR, AL98, 1087, Strasbourg, 23. Feb. 1933, signé Mallet, le Contrôleur général à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur, citing Haeggi, 'Hitler vor dem Toren! Hitlern der Autonomismus'. *Elsässischer Bote*.

<sup>19</sup> BR, AL98, 1087, 29. Nov. 1933, le Contrôleur Général à M. le Directeur de la Sureté Générale; BR, AL98, 1087, Strasbourg, 24. Sept. 1932, Le Dir. Des Services Gén. de Police d'Alsace et Lorraine à M. le Conseiller d'État.

<sup>20</sup> Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika*, Chapter 6.

<sup>21</sup> 'Im IX Jahre faschistischer Zeitrechnung', *Elsaß-Lothringer Zeitung*, 5 Nov. 1930, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Dr Guido Bortolotto-Rom, 'Faschismus gegen Parlamentarismus', *Elsaß-Lothringer Zeitung*, 31 Oct. 1932.



as the Nazi movement waxed in Germany, the implication was clear that Germany held the brightest future.

When it came to explaining the Nazis to the Alsatian public, the *ELZ* was pro-Nazi from the beginning. Following the September 1930 election in Germany, which saw the NSDAP vote jump considerably, Paul Schall, the editor and future Nazi, wrote an apparently neutral article on Hitler. The National Socialists merely 'wanted the national and social renewal of Germany', Schall wrote.<sup>23</sup> In the same vein, contributors later complained about those who wanted Germany to be a 'second-class nation'.<sup>24</sup> Stated in this way, even the nationalist French could or should be able to empathise with the Nazis for having the same general goals. It is also worth noting that Schall never used the term 'Nazi', preferring instead the more formal and respectful term 'National Socialist'. This article went well beyond advocating that Alsace should be part of Germany. It suggested that liberal democratic ideology, such as dominated France's government, was weak. By contrast, Schall argued that Germany was stronger with Hitler on the rise and the Landespartei 'should march with progress and adopt the new ideas which have uplifted Germany and which, even in France, are beginning to have followers among certain milieus', referring to the proliferation of French fascist groups.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, it presented the renewal of national strength in Germany as the future. If someone shared their view (and not everyone did) that fascism was the future, that liberal democracy was corrupt, and that Alsace needed to be part of a stronger nation, then the Landespartei was for them. To a significant extent, the idea of fascism was tailored to fit the needs of the party, not the other way around.

In the inter-war world the Right believed there was a 'crisis of democracy' that required urgent rectification. For many fascists, Germany had an attractive approach. Following the German elections on 5 March 1933, the *ELZ* declared that the National Socialism movement was 'now legitimised like Fascism in Italy'.<sup>26</sup> Germany was not the only country struggling with how to reform government. France, according to the *ELZ*, also recognised 'that democracy at this time does not encompass the total life and death interests of the nation'.<sup>27</sup> This article specifically cited André Tardieu and Georges Valois somewhat favourably as 'prophets of state reform', another small example of cross-national bonding.<sup>28</sup>

For the writers of the *ELZ*, fascism and Nazism had a particular meaning. Alsatians considered themselves to be culturally German, so any political activity had to be measured against the strict yardstick of reunification with Germany. Autonomists such as Paul Schall were no longer the autonomists of the 1920s; they were too extreme and attracted diminishing support. The Landespartei had already begun to

<sup>23</sup> Paul Schall, 'Hitler und die Nationalsozialisten', *Elsaß-Lothringer Zeitung*, 17 Sept. 1930, 2.

<sup>24</sup> BR, AL98, 1087, Stras. 9. Juli 1933, signé Mallet, le Contrôleur Général à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur.

<sup>25</sup> Archives Nationales (AN), F7 13399, Alsace, 1932–3, Autonomisme Alsacien, Strasbourg, 16 Nov. 1933, from a speech on 29 Sept. 1933.

<sup>26</sup> 'Hitler's Wahlerfolg', *Elsaß-Lothringer Zeitung*, 7 March 1933.

<sup>27</sup> Erwin, 'Krise der Demokratie', *Elsaß-Lothringer Zeitung*, 10 March 1933.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Schall, 'Schwarz-weiss-rot und Hakenkreuz', *Elsaß-Lothringer Zeitung*, 27 April 1933, 1.



lose traction in public support by 1930 when only twenty people attended one of the monthly meetings.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile the Alsatian malaise had receded in response to the French government backing away from its persecution of autonomists and its earlier demand to secularise the region. This posed a problem for the autonomists who needed the population to be hostile to the French in order to support a return to Germany. Hitler's seizure of power in 1933 aggravated the loss of support because the Nazis were far from universally popular in Alsace. Additionally, a large number of German socialist, communist and Jewish refugees had arrived in Alsace following the Nazi seizure of power (*Machtergreifung*), and had made the unpleasant aspects of Nazism abundantly clear. Nevertheless, or perhaps consequently, the paper presented a moderate view of Nazism as a party that provided better representation and national renewal. The editors did not present Nazism as the party of violence or repression.

Indicative of the radicalisation of the Landespartei and the *ELZ* was the publication, in 1931, of a supplemental periodical, the *Jungmannschaft* (Young Men's Organisation), which became the name of a new and more extreme faction, a group within a group, opposed to collaboration with clerical or communist autonomists; it eventually became a youth group outfitted in brown shirts whose members saw themselves as an elite revolutionary group modelled on the *Sturm Abteilung* (SA) in Germany.<sup>30</sup> The *Jungmannschaft* was significantly more orthodox Nazi than the leadership of the Landespartei. *Gauleiter* Robert Wagner described the *Jungmannschaft* as 'nothing more than a camouflaged SA'.<sup>31</sup> Its head, Hermann Bickler, was not only sympathetic to the Nazi cause, he was a member of the party. As soon as Alsace was annexed to Germany in 1940, the Nazis appointed Bickler *Kreisleiter* (county executive) of Strasbourg with the rank of colonel in the SS.<sup>32</sup>

The combined experience of the Landespartei and the *Jungmannschaft* was highly transnational. Hermann Bickler was a French citizen and an Alsatian who believed he was ethnically German and who essentially founded a German Nazi organisation in France. As separatists, virtually all these French citizens wanted to belong to Germany. The Germans probably funded the *ELZ*, and the *Jungmannschaft* members attended Hitler Youth rallies across the border in an unofficial capacity.<sup>33</sup> Both groups portrayed fascism, and especially Nazism, as supplanting liberalism. The apparent potency of the Nazis supported deep criticism of the French government, which in turn advanced the interests of the autonomists.

Despite their antipathy to Germany, the French fascists shared many of the same views, albeit for different reasons. The Francistes, for example, built a sizeable

<sup>29</sup> AN, F7 13393, Stras., Apr. 5, 1930, Comm. Spé. à Préfet du B-R.

<sup>30</sup> AN, F7 13399, Alsace 1932–1933, Autonomisme Alsacien, Notes d'ensembles-rapports, Strasbourg, 12 Oct. 1933, Note sur la *Jungmannschaft*.

<sup>31</sup> National Archives, Washington D.C., T-501, Reel 186, 85070, frame 254, Chef der Zivilverwaltung, Straßburg, to Martin Bormann, 7 Jan. 1941. Wagner had jurisdiction over Alsace during the war.

<sup>32</sup> Bankwitz, *Alsatian Autonomist Leaders*, 90–3.

<sup>33</sup> BR, AL98, 1122, Aug. 12 1935, citing *La Dépeche de Strasbourg*, 11 Aug. 1935.

following in Alsace for a brief period between 1933 and 1936.<sup>34</sup> They were perhaps the most vigorous proponents of a universal fascist ideal, which was also reflected in their participation in the Montreux international fascist congress.<sup>35</sup> The leader of the Francistes, Marcel Bucard, was himself an example of the eternal search for the best way to implement the fascist idea. A serial fascist, he belonged to the Légions, the Faisceau, the Parti Social Français and the Croix de Feu, in addition to founding and heading the Francistes in 1933. Under his leadership, the Francistes generally refrained from sharp criticism of Hitler. Indeed, the local socialists were convinced that the Francistes were ‘in the pay of Hitler’.<sup>36</sup> Such an accusation may have been standard name-calling, but in this case, the Alsatian chapter of the Francistes had members who had been in the autonomist party, and at least one party member was convicted of spying for the Germans.<sup>37</sup> This sort of personal connection between French fascism and German Nazism might have been unique to a small group of Alsatians, but it nevertheless points to a significant transnational element lurking within the hyper-nationalist movements. Because the Alsatian chapter may well have diverged considerably from the national Franciste party line, it may have served as a transnational vehicle for the party by forcing it to consider uncomfortable and potentially anti-French concepts.

The Francistes deliberately profiled fascist leaders in other countries. Closer to hagiography than critical analysis, these profiles represented the values the party leaders thought were important. The implicit message was a common transnational agenda with fascists of all nations. In an article titled ‘*Faszismus überall!*’ the editors of *Le Franciste* argued that ‘national authoritarian government forms’ existed in countries as diverse as Germany, Yugoslavia, Greece and Brazil.<sup>38</sup> Some were not ‘ideal fascist governments’, nevertheless they were moving in the right direction. Genuine fascist movements existed ‘world-wide in all countries’ and they all shared the fundamental goals of ‘Peace, Justice and Order’. This theme recurs with some frequency. ‘Poland, Austria, and Hungary are also organised along fascist lines’, another article declares, although not perhaps as pure as they could be.<sup>39</sup> In a brief overview of Romania, the paper characterises its government as an ‘authoritarian regime’ or a transitional step towards a more fascist government. Cornelius Codreanu, however, was the model fascist.<sup>40</sup> The Francistes openly acknowledged a strong connection between right-wing and authoritarian governments and fascism, while at the same time distinguishing them from each other. The Francistes, vague about details, revealed

<sup>34</sup> See Alain Deniel, *Bucard et le francisme* (Paris: Jean Picolec, 1979); Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933–1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>35</sup> Michael Ledeen, *Universal Fascism: The Theory and Practice of the Fascist International, 1928–1936* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1972).

<sup>36</sup> BR, AL98, 1122 (Aug.–Sept. 1935), 1 Aug. 1935, citing *Der Republikaner*, 31 July 1935 and 12 Aug. 1935.

<sup>37</sup> Marcel Bucard, ‘Francismus und Autonomismus’, *Le Franciste*, Sept. 1935; BR, AL98, 1147 (March–April 1938), 9 April 1928, citing *Freie Presse*, 8 April 1938.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Faszismus überall’, *Le Franciste*, Feb. 1937.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Franzismus und Faszismus’, *Le Franciste*, April 1937, 1.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Faszismus in Rumänien’, *Le Franciste*, Feb. 1937.

as much through what they did not mention as through what they did. In this case, the Francistes made no mention of the religious elements of Codreanu's Iron Guard, instead dwelling on his arrest and torture on behalf of the cause.<sup>41</sup> In the same issue, readers of the *Franciste* learned that Canada also had a movement that participated in the world-wide struggle against 'putrid democracy' and 'parliamentarianism, freemasonry, big capital, and Marxism, which cannot be separated from Judaism'.<sup>42</sup> The Canadian National Socialist Party, led by Adrien Arcand and depicted as a 'strong fascist movement', represented the power of fascism as an international movement, present even in English-speaking countries. The greater the scope of fascism, the more persuasive it would be for individual Alsatians. The British fascist Oswald Mosley contributed an article on Bolshevism lauding the Germans for demonstrating that communism could be stopped.<sup>43</sup> Collectively, these articles suggested that joining the Francistes would place the average Alsatian in the centre of the most powerful current of contemporary history.

Bucard advocated an alliance between France, Italy and Germany.<sup>44</sup> Unlike the *ELZ*, the Francistes did not focus on the Nazi movement so much as the international movement. This reflected the national party's pro-French attitude without compromising their generally positive view of what the Nazi party represented. Furthermore, the idea of a triple alliance of France, Germany and Italy would constrain the extremes of Hitler's foreign policy. The idea of a peace enforced by strong nation states appealed to Alsatians who feared the return of war. Bucard, however, was unrealistic in thinking that the Germans might favour an international approach to fascism; they were interested in hegemony. The Nazi party generally had the view that it was the leader and could force fascist movements from around the world to conform to its model.<sup>45</sup> The gap between the reality of the Nazi party and its goals, and Bucard's depiction of a peaceful three-way alliance, reveals a great deal about how Bucard hoped to co-opt elements of the fascist matrix.

Another fascist organisation, the Alsatian Bauernbund, also epitomised the transnational relationships in the region. The Bauernbund, led by Joseph Bilger, started in the 1920s as a peasants' interest group/farmers' co-operative, but evolved into an unusual fascist organisation by the 1930s.<sup>46</sup> Connected to the autonomists, the French fascists, and eventually to the German Nazis, the Bauernbund was, among other things, a transnational nexus. Acutely concerned with the Alsatian *Heimat* while at the same time a convert to fascism, Bilger comfortably mixed and matched allegiances with a wide range of fascist movements. His contemporaries

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas M. Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and the Others: A History of Fascism in Hungary and Romania* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970) argues that Codreanu had a profoundly religious ideology. Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Journal de Prison* (Puisseaux: Pardès, 1986).

<sup>42</sup> 'Faszismus in Kanada', *Le Franciste*, Feb. 1937.

<sup>43</sup> Oswald Mosley, 'Die Welttaktik des Bolshevismus', *Le Franciste*, 1 Oct. 1937, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Marcel Bucard, 'Warum fürchten wir eigentlich Deutschland?' *Le Franciste*, Easter 1938.

<sup>45</sup> Ledeen, *Universal Fascism*, 84.

<sup>46</sup> See Samuel Goodfellow, 'Fascism and Regionalism in Inter-war Alsace', *National Identities*, 12, 2 (2010), 133–45 for general information on the Bauernbund. See also Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika*, 86–102.

found it difficult to categorise Bilger and the Bauernbund. One paper described the movement as oriented towards Joan of Arc, but evocative of the swastika.<sup>47</sup> The strongly French nationalist and germanophobic Action Française labelled the Bauernbund's programme as 'the exact copy of that of Walther Darré, the [Nazi] minister of Agriculture', around the same time that it hosted him at a Strasbourg banquet.<sup>48</sup> At one demonstration held together with the autonomists, Bilger was arrested. As he was led off, the autonomists sang German songs, and the peasants sang the 'Marseillaise' and chanted 'France for the French'.<sup>49</sup>

Symbolic of the mixed identity of the Bauernbund was the heading of its newspaper, the *Elsäss-Lothringische Bauernblatt (ELBB)*, which featured a drawing of the cross of Lorraine, a traditionally French nationalist image, next to a *Bundschuh*, an emblem taken from the local sixteenth-century peasant revolt.<sup>50</sup> The *Bundschuh* also appeared on party banners as a red shoe with a streaming lace on a green background. Whereas the cross of Lorraine evoked a conservative French nationalism with undertones of Joan of Arc, the *Bundschuh* was a singularly regional icon that also implied a cultural and religious connection with Germany. The *Bundschuh*, furthermore, tapped into a deeply traditional sensibility that was also revolutionary. Taken together the cross of Lorraine and the *Bundschuh* describe a local identity transnationally connected to both France and Germany. The Bauernbund, although locally successful, encountered limitations as a peasant movement and never quite fitted in with French organisations such as Henri Dorgères's Green Shirts and Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Français. Much of Bilger's ideology, particularly his anti-Semitism, was lifted from the Nazis, and during the war he worked officially with the Germans. By 1942, however, he had grown disillusioned with the prospects of regional autonomy under the Nazis, but had nowhere to turn. In the end, the Bauernbund was a regional fascist movement with about six thousand activists.<sup>51</sup>

Like the Francistes, the Bauernbund highlighted international fascists, although it was more selective. The Bauernbund had a particular affection for Léon Degrelle, leader of the Belgian Rex party. Part of this was a consequence of the geographical connection provided by the Rhine. In any event, Degrelle contributed several articles to the *ELBB*, including a commentary on the Spanish Civil War.<sup>52</sup> Bilger also foresaw a 'new Europe' that would 'be formed from the national awakening', citing Franco's success in Spain and the prospects for Rex in Belgium.<sup>53</sup> The Romanian Iron Guard represented the cutting edge of 'national renewal'.<sup>54</sup> Bilger's selectivity about who he publicised emphasised regional and peasant values over other issues. Unlike the

<sup>47</sup> BR, AL98, 1146, 15 Feb. 1938, citing *Der Republikaner*, 14–15 Feb. 1938.

<sup>48</sup> 'Une campagne contre l'Alsace nationale?' *L'Action Française*, 20 June 1938; *L'Action Française*, 7 June 1938.

<sup>49</sup> BR, AL98 (Dec. 1936), 29 Dec. 1936, citing *La Province d'Alsace*, 24 Dec. 1936.

<sup>50</sup> See any front page of the *Elsäss-Lothringisches Bauernblatt*.

<sup>51</sup> Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika*, 95.

<sup>52</sup> Léon Degrelle, 'Das Absolute', *Völk*, 2 Jan. 1939.

<sup>53</sup> J. B. [Joseph Bilger], 'Das neue Europa wird!' *Völk*, 1 March 1939.

<sup>54</sup> 'Die Front der Nationalen Erneuerung in Rumänien', *Völk*, Feb. 1939, 3.

Francistes, who saw Codreanu as a model for universal fascism, the Bauernbund found the Romanian movement attractive because its rural component mirrored the Bauernbund's own agricultural dissatisfaction.

When discussing the Nazis, Bilger focused on the relationship between Hitler and the German peasants. German farmers supported Hitler, Bilger wrote, because 'National Socialism wanted to build the Third Reich on the foundation of a completely healthy peasantry'.<sup>55</sup> 'The national-socialist revolution was above all a peasant revolution', the *ELBB* trumpeted.<sup>56</sup> As such, it was worthy of emulation. If only France would 'free itself from all party considerations', it too could become healthier and restore the cultural primacy of the farmer.<sup>57</sup> Clearly, whether one supported the Germans or not, the Nazi system was on the right track, and its example of peasant revolution should be extended to France. 'We . . . see before our very eyes the development of an experiment, the result of which will be in every respect interesting', Bilger explained as he applauded Walther Darré's organisation and the Nazi notion of corporatist representation.<sup>58</sup> Inspired by Germany, Bilger called for a spontaneous uprising of the *Volk* in favour of a 'corporatist [*berufständige*] seizure of power'.<sup>59</sup> Yet while frequently lauding the policies of the Nazis, the *Bauernblatt* explicitly encouraged them to be applied in France. The Bauernbund sought the ultimate unity of a French *Volksgemeinschaft* that could only be achieved by imitating the political co-ordination that was taking place in Germany.<sup>60</sup>

As was the case with the Francistes and the Landespartei, Bilger interpreted fascism through the lens of regionalism. In this way, fascism in Alsace, whether Francophile or Germanophile, took a direction different from that wanted by the centralising national parties. His touchstone was always rural Alsace. He admired the Nazis for their anti-Semitism and their elevation of the status of peasants, but he also found common cause with the French fascists. As a result, he never fully conformed to either French or German models. Furthermore, the Bauernbund almost always measured fascism by what it did for peasants. Although fascist parties often genuflected towards the agricultural community, they almost always found support from other social groups.

One other group merits attention. The communist autonomists, under the direction of Charles Hueber, drifted in the 1930s towards embracing Nazism.<sup>61</sup> Arriving at fascism via a circuitous left-wing path, by the 1930s the communist autonomists presented yet another local interpretation of fascism and Nazism. At the end of World War I Hueber affiliated himself with the French communists, after a

<sup>55</sup> Joseph Bilger, 'In Hitler's 3. Reich. Die Einigung aller deutsche Bauern!' *Elsässisches Bauernblatt*, 15 April 1933, 3.

<sup>56</sup> 'Neues aus Ausland', *Elsaß-Lothringisches Bauernblatt*, 19 Aug. 1933, 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Elsässisches Bauernblatt*, 18 March 1933, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Bilger, 'In Hitler's 3. Reich'.

<sup>59</sup> Joseph Bilger, 'Bauern revoltieren!', *Elsaß-Lothringisches Bauernblatt*, 24 June 1933, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph Bilger, 'Von der Standesgemeinschaft zur Volksgemeinschaft', *Elsaß-Lothringisches Bauernblatt*, 7 April 1934, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Samuel Goodfellow, 'From Communism to Nazism: The Transformation of the Alsatian Communists', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 27, 2 (April 1992), 231–58.

brief attempt to mimic the abortive revolutions in Germany. The Alsatian socialist and communist movement had evolved out of the German socialist movement, which had a much stronger political profile than the French socialist movement. This German connection drove the communist autonomists to split from the French communist party, creating the Kommunistische Partei Opposition (KPO) and, then in the mid-1930s, to refuse any collaboration with the left.

In 1935, the KPO became the Elsässische Arbeiter- und Bauernpartei (EABP), and finally in 1939 the remnants of the EABP joined the Landespartei, which by then was completely nazified. Driving the transformation of the party was the ongoing tension over the optimal way to effect revolution. Should the traditional Marxian view that class was the essential driving force prevail, or, in the case of Alsace, was the opportunity for identity politics likely to yield more results? In the 1920s, the French communist party supported the autonomists, and compromise between Hueber and the French communists was possible on the basis of a formula that embraced both class and identity. At the end of the 1920s, however, the preeminence of autonomism drove Hueber to ally himself with clerical conservative autonomists and form the KPO. As one party official pointed out, 'What would have happened if . . . we had followed to the letter the watchword: "class against class" imposed during the last world communist congress?'<sup>62</sup> In the short term, Hueber's strategy was successful and he became mayor of Strasbourg. Unfortunately, in the longer run, autonomism ceased to dominate Alsatian politics as it had earlier, causing a hemorrhaging of grass roots support. Another probable factor driving the turn towards Nazi Germany was financing, as Hueber received a great deal of funding from the Germans. Further, the large number of German left-wing refugees after 1933 created a tension within the KPO over the issue of Nazism. The Alsatians wanted to be part of Germany, while the refugees, many of them Jewish, emphasised the horror of the Nazi regime. For his trouble, the Nazis reinstated Hueber as mayor of Strasbourg until his death in 1943.

The EABP's construction of fascism was somewhat different from that of the other parties under discussion. Reluctant to embrace fascism because of its communist roots, the EABP was unable to avoid embracing it because of its pro-Germany stance. Thus the Francophile assimilationists were fascist by virtue of their imperialistic policies towards Alsace. French fascism was bad, not 'because it is fascism, but because it is *French* fascism'.<sup>63</sup> Anyone from any part of the political spectrum who advocated continued inclusion of Alsace into France was fascist. The stock communist view of fascism as a stage in the collapse of the bourgeois class did not show up in the EABP's literature. Nevertheless *Die Neue Welt* depicted fascism as bad, especially in the first half of the 1930s.<sup>64</sup> In fact, the editors argued that autonomism was a defence against fascism.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup> BR, D286.358, Strasbourg, 1 Dec. 1929, Rapport.

<sup>63</sup> 'Der autonomistische Parteitag und der Faschismus', *Die Neue Welt*, 3 May 1934 (italics in original).

<sup>64</sup> For example, 'Südtirol unter Mussolini's Diktatur', *Die Neue Welt*, 20 May 1931.

<sup>65</sup> 'Wenn wir einen Landtag hätten!' *Die Neue Welt*, 3 Feb. 1934.

The German Nazis, however, got a pass. Reporting on a meeting of the Landespartei, *Die Neue Welt* described the panel of speakers, which included Paul Schall and Hermann Bickler, as ‘opposed to all fascist efforts’.<sup>66</sup> At a time (1934) when the Landespartei was becoming deeply entangled with the Nazis, this selective blindness clearly indicated a passivity towards Nazism. Tension within the KPO bubbled over in 1934 when it was expelled from the Internationale Vereinigung Kommunistische Opposition (IVKO), an umbrella organisation linking independent international left-wing organisations. Fascism was still not viewed favourably at this time, as was the case with the *ELZ*, the Francistes and the Bauernbund. *Die Neue Welt* repeatedly characterised French fascists such as Marcel Bucard as fascist. One headline even accused the *Francistes* of working ‘hand in hand with Hitler’.<sup>67</sup>

After the KPO had morphed into the EABP in 1935, the paper continued to present fascism negatively. Now the measuring stick was war; if a political organisation enabled war, then it was fascist. ‘Fascism is War!’ read one headline.<sup>68</sup> Like the *Francistes*, EABP argued that fascism and Nazism represented peace. If it was against war, then it was anti-fascist. Significantly, the Nazis were not, in *Die Neue Welt*’s view, a threat to world peace. The real warmongers were none other than the same French nationalists who had always threatened Alsatian traditions. Autonomists were not ‘Hitler agents’, but the socialists, communists and radicals were, because they aggressively opposed Nazism.<sup>69</sup> Repeatedly, the EABP denied any ideological connection to Nazism. At the same time however, the paper printed a lengthy synopsis of Hitler’s Reichstag speech in February 1938 and reported favourably on the annexation (*Anschluss*) of Austria by Germany.<sup>70</sup> The contradictions are staggering and reflect the needs of Hueber and the EABP. Hueber was trying to hold on to his old communist constituency by painting fascism negatively, but he also was trying to accommodate Nazism. Unable to escape the consequences of deciding for identity politics over class analysis, Hueber continued to try to reconcile the irreconcilable.

Despite its negative rhetoric, the EABP clearly embraced real practising fascism, but it had a peculiar construction of the term. Hueber’s alliance with the Landespartei is unequivocal evidence of his turn to Nazism. Essentially, Hueber, like his more right-wing comrades in the Landespartei and the Jungmannschaft, wanted to return to Germany at all costs. He had an interesting time squaring the choice to join Nazi Germany with his Marxist background. His Nazism was idiosyncratic in that he embraced Nazism for the practical reasons of political finance and as the only route to retaining Alsace’s German identity. Hence the formulation that identified all those opposed to Alsatian autonomism as fascist. Hueber’s interpretation of fascism was a consequence of regional circumstances.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Ein bedeutsamer Kongress und eine eindrucksvolle Kündgebung’, *Die Neue Welt*, 25 April 1934.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Die französ. “Francisten” Hand in Hand mit Hitler?’ *Die Neue Welt*, 25 Aug. 1934.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Faschismus ist Krieg!’ *Die Neue Welt*, 8 April 1937.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Wegbereiter des Faschismus’, *Die Neue Welt*, 6 July 1938.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Hitler’s dreistündige Reichstagsrede’, *Die Neue Welt*, 22 Feb. 1938; ‘Oesterreichs Zugehörigkeit zu Deutschland’, *Die Neue Welt*, 18 March 1938.



## II.

Transnational fascism explains the ways in which fascist groups absorbed, reinterpreted and refined the fascist idea. Alsace is a particular case linking fascist groups across national borders and showing how, despite the variety of fascist organisations, the fascists found common cause with each other. Yet they themselves were not always clear about exactly what they shared with each other. Their general sense of commonality created, in a sense, the evolution of changes and variations as specific groups defined fascism as it applied to them. Thus, a sense of commonality and differentiation were simultaneously present. In the process of affirming the universality of fascism, fascists created differences. Arguably, the collapse of definitional clarity for fascism starts here.

One of the main outcomes of transnational fascism in this case was the depth and variety of connections across national borders and ethnic identities. Where one would expect only hostility between French and German fascist groups one often finds grudging respect, imitation and even acceptance. For most, national enmity was paramount, but to a surprising extent Alsatian fascists celebrated the fascist idea over national affiliation. The Bauernbund perhaps best exemplified this in the way that Bilger drew together Nazi, French fascist and autonomist strands to create a unique amalgamation. Joseph Bilger, however, was not an isolated example. The local chapter of the Francistes had ties with the pro-Nazi autonomists and both they and the Parti Social Français (PSF), a nationally based radical right-wing French party, displayed a radical form of racial anti-Semitism more reminiscent of the Nazis than the French versions. At another level, even when the Francistes were discussing the fascism of a national enemy, the rhetoric was generally favourable, often consisting of implicit or explicit statements that fascism as practised by others should be applied to Alsace or to France. All of these fascist groups perceived fascism as the zeitgeist of the future, as not restricted to one country, and as something it was desirable to emulate.

They did not all share precisely the same vision of fascism. In Alsace fascist movements supported Germany, France or Alsace. Some had a predominantly peasant constituency, others an urban working class membership. Some movements were more radical than others and some were closely allied with conservative right-wing organisations. Some local fascist organisations were virtually single-issue movements (for example, small anti-Semitic groups), while others such as the PSF sought to become a mass party. That these groups saw any sort of connection is amazing. In fact, although they believed they shared a basic world-view (*Weltanschauung*), each of these movements internalised fascism differently. Their interpretations of fascism hinged largely on the local context as well as on the particular context of each movement's constituency and goals. As we have seen, each group subtly differentiated itself from the others. The pro-Nazi autonomists presented Nazism as a form of ethnic belonging. For some of them, Nazism was the means to the end of returning to Germany. Joseph Bilger clearly took a more traditionalist view of fascism as a means of elevating the status of peasants. The Francistes stressed the universal aspects of fascism, perhaps a way of countering the success of Hitler. For

them, fascism was a universal movement that was locally and nationally flexible – a view not shared by the Nazis. The Alsatian communists around Hueber portrayed anything that constrained their German identity as fascist, simultaneously trying to deny it as a positive movement while functionally supporting the Nazis.

The barrage of articles from the fascist press defining what fascism meant influenced the non-fascist public as well as the initiated. Few Alsatians could avoid the concept that fascism was the wave of the future. Fewer still could ignore its presence in Germany. Within the broad parameters of the fascist movement, individuals had many alternatives. Fascism could be attractive in the eye of the beholder because the beholder could see it in the way he or she wanted. The different parties provided a plethora of options. Few ‘fascists’ agreed with every characteristic to be found on a generic list of fascist principles (a list that did not exist at the time). Even if they did, they did not endorse each point in equal measure. Individuals could be, and were, attracted to specific ideological points even if they were repelled by others. Dairy farmers, for example, might join the Bauernbund because of its connection to issues that mattered to them, even if they did not care one whit whether there was a fascist international. Arguably many people who joined or flirted with fascist movements were not necessarily fascist, but were persuaded that their particular issue or interest could best be dealt with through fascism.

This essay has focused on the transnational expression of fascist ideas, particularly the perception of international fascist groups, in the regional media. All of the groups had a concept of fascism as something that was international – that transcended national borders. Other more concrete transnational factors also played a role in Alsace and were significant in verifying the transnational nature of fascism in Alsace. Considerable interaction, for example, took place between the autonomists and the Germans during the 1930s. This took the form of funding, actual participation in Nazi party rallies by the Jungmannschaft, and informal contacts with friends, relatives, colleagues and supporters on the other side of the Rhine. Judging from the language and tone of his writings, Joseph Bilger was probably a regular reader of *Der Stürmer*, Julius Streicher’s anti-Semitic paper. Shared language facilitated the flow of ideas. Even the French fascists operating in Alsace knew German and seemed to have more immediate contact with German culture and politics than their Parisian comrades. Transnational ideas flowed through people, money and shared experiences. The focus on ideas, however, illuminates how the transnational interaction led to a shifting representation of fascism.

Border regions such as Alsace are inherently transnational, blurring as they do the line between nations. That does not make Alsace an exception; the transmission of ideas does not stop at the Vosges instead of the Rhine. The chapters of the French fascist groups were vocal and often expressed ideas that were at odds with their national leadership and more resonant with Nazism. The Francistes in Alsace, for example, were far more engaged with anti-Semitism than their national leader Bucard was. Their more radical position on such issues pressured the national leadership and helped shape the ideology. If nothing else, the local members established the idea of continuity with international fascism. For many French fascists, the invasion of France

in 1940 alienated them from the Nazi-led fascist New World Order, but allegiances before the war were not so clear-cut.

Viewing fascism as a transnational movement is about changing how we understand fascism from a static ideology to a dynamic and constantly changing one. The greatest frustration for scholars of fascism has consistently been the creation of an acceptable definition. The manifestations of fascism are so varied that no fascist movement conforms completely to a single model, unless the model reflects only the characteristics of one movement. Moreover, the boundaries between fascism and a wide range of conservative movements have been difficult to establish, as have those between fascism and some left-wing movements. The concept of transnational directs our attention to the specific connections between different fascist movements and can perhaps provide some insight into understanding the multitude of ways that fascism interacted with non-fascist ideas and movements. If the goal is ultimately to assess the fascist movement in its totality across borders and over time, then we must move beyond the two dominant explanations of international fascism: fascism as separate manifestations of hypernationalism and a group of explanations that we might lump together as 'generic fascism'.

As much as anything, the view that fascism was a series of discrete hyper-nationalist movements reflects the way that fascism has been researched. Many of the books dealing with 'international' fascism are essentially anthologies in which specialists describe the course of fascism country by country.<sup>71</sup> Traditionally, scholars have been limited by language, training and convention to researching national histories. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with this, the inadvertent consequence is a tendency to tilt our understanding of fascism towards seeing it as a series of atomised nationalist movements. Seen in isolation, most fascist movements are indeed hyper-nationalist and unique. Seen collectively, they are less so. Individual manifestations of fascism generally assumed the primacy of national identity. Looked at universally, however, fascism was not about any particular nationalism, but rather about the idiosyncratic way that different nations, political movements and even individuals interpreted the politics of identity in the light of their differing contexts and needs. If one tries to grasp fascism as a whole, it seems insufficient to argue that it is only a series of nationalist movements.

Alternatively, a number of scholars have chosen to step back and focus on the definition of fascism as a single, unchanging phenomenon. Mussolini laid the groundwork by arguing that 'fascism is a purely Italian phenomenon in its historical expression, but its doctrinal postulates have a universal character'.<sup>72</sup> The quest for an

<sup>71</sup> Eugen Weber, ed., *Varieties of Fascism* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1964); Larsen, *Who Were the Fascists?*; S. J. Woolf, ed., *Fascism in Europe* (New York: Methuen, 1981); Hans Rogger and Eugen Weber, eds, *The European Right: A Historical Profile* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965); and George Mosse, ed., *International Fascism: New Thoughts and New Approaches* (London: Sage, 1979) are examples of the excellent anthologies that exist.

<sup>72</sup> James Strachey Barnes, *The Universal Aspects of Fascism* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1929), xxvii, Mussolini's preface.

illusory Weberian ‘ideal fascism’ has been a central pursuit for a number of scholars.<sup>73</sup> Undoubtedly, assembling a working definition of the fascist ideal is useful in terms of providing a guideline or framework with which to debate who is and who is not fascist. Because of the opprobrium attached to fascism, determining who is evil and why has assumed primary importance. The issue is not whether each movement was fascist, or whether each movement fits some generic definition. Allardyce makes the point that ‘there is no such thing as fascism. There are only men and movements that we call by that name’.<sup>74</sup> Most of the literature already deals with definitional issues, and it is not clear that a great deal of progress has been made in that direction. Whether Generalissimo Francisco Franco was a fascist just like Mussolini or Hitler is not the right question. Similarly, the issue of whether countries such as France were ‘allergic’ to fascism is not relevant.<sup>75</sup> Despite an attempted fascist international in the early thirties, and despite the highly dogmatic nature of the various types of fascism, fascists failed to create a template for measuring the acceptability of their ideological confreres—indeed they had little interest in doing so, as their respective imperialist ambitions often collided. What matter are the mechanisms connecting ideologies and practices across borders. Transnationalism also helps answer the question of whether individuals and groups consciously saw some commonality with other fascist movements in other countries—even if they themselves were not what we would consider fascist.

A growing academic consensus diminishes the centrality of an absolute or generic fascism in favour of research on understanding the dynamism of a movement such as fascism. Michel Dobry, for example, attacks the way in which the historians who have argued that France was allergic to fascism have tainted the idea of an ‘authentic fascism’. As a result, they ‘miss what is truly specific’ about fascism. The obsession with definition, in Dobry’s view, has obscured the functional ‘blurring of boundaries’ which characterised the French Right in the 1930s.<sup>76</sup> Brian Jenkins notes that ‘the construction of detailed political and ideological typologies’ presents an overly rigid view of processes and movements that were fundamentally dynamic.<sup>77</sup> The articulation of an ideal fascism does not address the variability of interpretation by its proponents or the process of evolution. Beyond comparing and contrasting different national manifestations or recognising common traits, the idea of a fluid movement that evolved internationally has been hinted at, but not fully explored. The literature also fails to address how fascist ideas and strategies trickled into mainstream politics. Rather, the academic obsession with definition has nudged our understanding towards

<sup>73</sup> Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 8–12.

<sup>74</sup> Gilbert Allardyce, ‘What Fascism Is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept’, *American Historical Review*, 84, 2 (April 1979), 368.

<sup>75</sup> René Rémond, *The Right Wing in France: From 1815 to de Gaulle* (2nd edn, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969); Brian Jenkins, ‘Conclusion: Beyond the “Fascism Debate”’, in Jenkins, ed., *France in the Era of Fascism: Essays on the French Authoritarian Right* (New York: Berghahn, 2005).

<sup>76</sup> Michel Dobry, ‘February 1934 and the Discovery of French Society’s Allergy to the “Fascist Revolution”’, in Jenkins, *France in the Era of Fascism*, 132, 140.

<sup>77</sup> Jenkins, *France in the Era of Fascism*, 214.

a static sort of fascism, in which general principles are laid out somewhere and adhered to in varying degrees by different nations. The focus should not be based on whether, or how much, a fascist movement adheres to a template. Instead we should emphasise the evolution of differences and how international groups simultaneously drew together and distinguished themselves from each other. If fascism drew from every part of the political spectrum, then perhaps the most important task is to track the subtleties of difference, rather than the banalities of similarity.

**Le fascisme, mouvement transnational,  
et le cas de l'Alsace entre les deux  
guerres**

L'idée du fascisme se répandit rapidement et de façon transnationale pendant l'entre-deux-guerres. Les groupes fascistes s'identifiaient par certaines caractéristiques, certaines croyances fondamentales. Mais chaque groupe déformait aussi le fascisme à ses propres fins, en l'adaptant au contexte particulier. En Alsace, région frontalière, on observe plusieurs groupes se déclarant solidaires du fascisme et pourtant mutuellement distincts. En regardant le fascisme d'un œil transnational, on commence à percevoir l'évolution de l'idéologie fasciste, et on comprend mieux pourquoi le fascisme est si difficile à cerner.

**Faschismus als grenzüberschreitende  
Bewegung: Der Fall des Elsass in der  
Zwischenkriegszeit**

Die Idee des Faschismus breitete sich in der Zwischenkriegszeit rasch und grenzüberschreitend aus. Faschistische Gruppierungen in verschiedenen Ländern stellten fest, dass sie grundlegende Eigenschaften und wesentliches Gedankengut miteinander teilten. Zugleich formten sie den Faschismus für ihre eigenen Zwecke um und passten ihn an ihr jeweiliges Umfeld an. Als Grenzregion weist das Elsass eine Reihe von Beispielen für faschistische Gruppierungen auf, die sich mit dem Faschismus solidarisch erklärten und sich dennoch voneinander abgrenzten. Die Betrachtung des Faschismus als grenzüberschreitendes Phänomen vermittelt Einsichten in die Entwicklung der faschistischen Ideologie und erklärt, warum eine Definition äußerst schwierig ist.