

# Understanding Fascism: Daniel Guérin's *Brown Plague*

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**M**OST OF the ways in which fascism is often said to have distinguished itself were not in fact unique. The movement was opportunist – that had happened before. It was based on a leadership cult – that has been common. It opposed the values of the French revolution. Its propaganda was nationalistic and inegalitarian. It employed violence against its opponents. All of these characteristics represent merely the loose change of history. They were hardly unique in interwar Italy or Germany, and have not been rare since. The best definition of the uniqueness of fascism is rather a historical one. Fascism brought to modern, industrial Europe the practice of genocide. This combination matters. Since the industrial revolution, few developed capitalist countries have gone to war with another, and none except Germany has attempted to butcher such a large number of its own people.

Fascism is most often defined today in relationship to genocide. The word fascism itself is inseparable from the fate of the Jews in Germany. The War and the Holocaust do not seem to retreat into the past, in the way that we might expect from phrases such as “to consign [an event] to history”. They remain in present-day focus. Yet if fascism was primarily a form of state terrorism against minorities, which were not minorities (women, workers), and if fascism was only a preparation for war and genocide – then why did anyone support it at the time, and why has anyone tried to revive it since? We can formulate the same question differently, and in terms that were of interest to the writer whose work forms the subject of this paper. How far was fascism a radical or even revolutionary movement? How far did it take the spontaneous demands of German people, and reproduce them in new ways? And to what extent did it provide the people with answers that were hostile to their own?

This article is an account of Daniel Guérin's book *The Brown Plague: Travels in Late Weimar and Early Nazi Germany*. The book is a first-hand account of two tours through Germany, in 1932 and 1933.<sup>1</sup> A brief note is required on the text,

which went through various forms. Following Guérin's first visit, in 1932, he published a series of articles in various left-wing newspapers. Again, following his second 1933 visit, Guérin wrote up his experiences for the Socialist Party press. These 1933 articles were then published as a short book of less than 100 pages in 1933,<sup>2</sup> and again in 1945.<sup>3</sup> The 1965 French edition includes the text of the 1945 book, and also a first half, based on the 1932 articles, rewritten in memoir form.<sup>4</sup> Although there were some later changes, these are relatively few. The book conforms to the original reports written by Guérin, in his journal and for the left press.

At the time of writing, then, Daniel Guérin was twenty-eight years old. He was someone who had travelled widely, through the Mediterranean and through Germany. Guérin's closest allies were among a generation of former syndicalists who had adopted Trotskyism, and were now members of the left wing of the Socialist Party. He saw that Germany possessed both the largest working-class movement in Europe, and also the most exciting cultural, artistic and sexual scene. For Guérin, of course, such a combination could hardly be coincidental. Like many socialists, he subscribed to the idea that the working class was naturally internationalist, a class of people who identified their interests with those of the oppressed all over the world. The first surprise of his book is a surprise in the author's own mind. The Germany that Daniel Guérin expected to find – certainly, in 1932 – was a country on the verge of a Communist revolution. The first pages of *The Brown Plague* record that “everyone” had indeed, “taken sides”.<sup>5</sup> But this polarisation was one in which the final victory of the far right represented at least an equal possibility to that of the left.

Guérin's first sights of Germany conveyed this dual message. “At the edge of the Black Forest, I was overflowing with an optimism not yet shaken by the vicissitudes of the social struggle.” Germany, he tells his readers, “I had admired unceasingly since my childhood.” The conflict between classes was here at its height. “Here the

hour would sound when then the formidable bloc of wage earners would have it out once and for all with the mercenaries of big capital." Yet before Guérin could record a single meaningful conversation, nature itself gave reasons for doubt. "The seeds of a mortal illness was already corrupting this flesh, so resplendent in appearance. Birds flew low in a heavy sky, as if before a storm. The farther I would plunge into the heart of this country, the more disillusioned I would become."<sup>6</sup>

Twenty miles across the French border, Guérin and his single companion spent an evening at a youth hostel. The common was full of young German men, aged between fifteen and twenty. "Legs were deeply tanned", Guérin recorded, "muscles taught and hard." The visitors' book filled with the competing slogans of left and right. One eighteen year old took on to explain the contest: "You see, we're pitted against each other. Our passions are so white-hot that occasionally we kill each other, but *deep down we want the same thing* ... a new world, radically different from today's, a world that no longer destroys coffee and wheat while millions go hungry, *a new system*. But some *believe adamantly* that Hitler will provide this, while others believe it will be Stalin. That's the only difference between us."<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Guérin's other, better-known study, *Fascism and Big Business*, *The Brown Plague* is no work of finished theory. It presents an argument in development, it acknowledges moments of disbelief in its author's own head. This indeed is a large part of its charm – the feeling that the writer keeps no secrets. Yet if the book was to end just there, a few pages in, then it is likely that many readers would emerge with a real sense of surprise. What was Guérin arguing, that fascism was indeed an authentic mass movement, with popular support, as its advocates maintained?

*The Brown Plague* addresses such concerns, but it does not do so directly. Rather it treats the energy and unruliness of the new Nazi converts through the social situation in which they found themselves. Poverty is a common feature of Guérin's book. It can be seen through the large numbers of vagabonds, tramping almost aimlessly, no longer looking for work. It expresses itself in the unemployment which talkative German youths assume to be the common experience of their French counterparts. It expressed itself differently, from class to class.

Beside a river, Guérin meets an unemployed shoemaker and his unemployed dyer friend. "Today, they had nothing to clothe themselves with but patched-up vests under which they were bare-chested; laughing, they showed us their worn-out boots." The pair had already walked through countless small towns. Their papers were stamped many times over with the details of their travelling. "A hellish cycle", Guérin records, "It would end only when they enrolled in the Brown-

shirts or were taken on by an armaments factory." If this pair would adopt fascism in the future then they would do so unwillingly, Guérin argued, out of economic constraint and not free choice.<sup>8</sup>

A second description, following almost immediately afterwards, might appear to be the same sort of story. Entering a rural home to buy eggs and milk, Guérin found himself face to face with images of Hitler torn from picture-magazines, "'Our saviour', proclaimed the father, with an opaque certainty. They spread out before me a pile of Hitlerite tracts amassed during the last electoral campaign. They came in all shapes, sizes and colours. The son declared in a rough voice which neither allowed nor even could imagine contradiction [and referring to the last elections]: 'The National Socialist list won an absolute majority here'.<sup>9</sup> Yet for all the superficial similarities between these two incidents, there was a clear difference. These peasants that Guérin met had chosen fascism spontaneously. They felt that it conformed closely to their interests. In all this they were different from the unruly but demoralised artisans who showed Guérin their worn-out boots.

One theme of *The Brown Plague* is the difference between plebeians and proletarians. We find it illustrated in Guérin's pen-portrait of one Nazi leader. "Outfitted in boots and belt, with a black tie over his brown shirt, he was stubby-legged, bald, slightly obese with a protruding lower lip. Gregor Strasser looked more grotesque than soldierlike. In 'civilian life' he was a pharmacist, and the panoply in which he was rigged out failed to camouflage his vulgar petit-bourgeois bearing."<sup>10</sup> The point appeared again in Guérin's account of one of the last meetings of the free Reichstag, from September 1932. The Centre Party's representatives Guérin described as "prelates", the Conservative Party "hunched-up barons". Compared to either, the Nazis were drawn from a poorer layer, "young men – good-looking, insolent fellows". Hermann Göring, meanwhile, was "elegant and impertinent". He was the representative of an entire class – not the rich, nor the industrialists, but people of small property who still bore scars from the years of inflation. "Soon, the Third Reich would be born out of the disunity of the proletariat *and* a compromise between the old and new 'gentlemen'. On September 12, this was already in the air."<sup>11</sup>

The Nazi delegates were "provocative, plebeian, turbulent".<sup>12</sup> The adjectives we might associate with energy and movement, but not healthy movement, rather urgency or hyperactivity. We can contrast them to the "solid" proletarians of Kuhle Wampe, the camp made famous in Brecht's film of the same name. Guérin spent time also among the disciplined industrial workers of Stuttgart, "Families out for a walk, lovers out on the town, women on their doorsteps, toddlers in

the gutters, friendly cyclists.” Again, the Communists of Red Wedding struck Guérin as “serious”.<sup>13</sup>

Guérin was drawing his audience’s attention to a difference between two types. The Nazis, he argued, were often men and often young. They were people with property, but without real social status. They belonged to the rural areas and the small towns, rather than to the cities or the factories. By and large, they had still failed to win support among the old bastions of the German left, the cities that remained socialists, or the Communist enclaves such as Wedding. There were exceptions of course that Guérin reported, and anyway he did not treat consciousness as a simple “thing” that could be ticked off from class, but rather as a process, a pattern of shared and unique experiences and competing loyalties.

Why was Guérin so adamant in arguing that the working class remained aloof from fascism? One sceptical answer would be that he had to argue this. Guérin was, after all, a socialist. Fascism was the enemy; it meant, in his contemporary Victor Serge’s phrase, “the attack of the police force, of the executives of the army, safe troops, of some colonial troops ... against the organisations of the working class.”<sup>14</sup> Daniel Guérin believed that the proletariat had a special role to play in bringing about the transition away from capitalism. This class had to be represented as being uniquely immune to the threat of fascism. For the sake of the morale of his French comrades, Guérin had to assume this was true, whether it actually was or not.

Much research suggests that Guérin’s insights were in fact accurate. The typical member of the NSDAP was indeed young and male. They tended to live in affluent, rather than poorer areas, rural areas rather than the cities. Districts with a long Socialist or Communist identity saw low Nazi votes, although so did the staunchest Catholic areas (a point largely missed by Guérin). By and large, leadership positions were indeed taken by civil servants or small owners. Parts of the Nazi Party were more proletarian. Conan Fischer has demonstrated that the SA won nearly half its support from unemployed workers.<sup>15</sup> But the more that workers had an opportunity to be judged as workers, the less interest they took in the NSDAP. The Nazis’ very worst election results, in the run-up to 1933, came not in constituency elections, but in the nominations for shop stewards, in the trade unions.

Indeed, on inspection, Guérin’s point turns out to have been not merely political, but sociological as well. It was based on a deeper argument than Radek’s idea of fascism “as the socialism of the petty bourgeoisie”.<sup>16</sup> Through the whole of *The Brown Plague*, Germany seems to be witnessing a process of de-socialisation. People who were used to defining themselves by their work, were now excluded from industrial employ-

ment. Where once there had been a class, there now was merely a people, and a poorer one at that. Here is Guérin’s account of one group of roamers: “They had the depraved and troubled faces of hoodlums and the most bizarre coverings on their heads: black or grey Chaplinesque bowlers, old women’s hats with the brims turned up in ‘Amazon’ fashion adorned with ostrich plumes and medals, plebeian navigator caps decorated with enormous edelweiss above the visor, handkerchiefs or scarves in screaming colours tied any which way around the neck, bare chests bursting out of open skin vests with broad stripes, arms scored with fantastic or lewd tattoos....”<sup>17</sup> The “plebeian” hats were hardly accidental. This was a class in decomposition, and tramping could form only a brief interlude.

Class was becoming less salient for the simple reason that the workers, tamed by unemployment, were winning no victories. In this context, the character of the trade unions was changing. Daniel Guérin was struck by the extraordinary wealth of the main trade union building in Dresden. The carpets were thick. A waiter offered menus at a price far beyond that of the average workers’ budget. “Suddenly the word *bonze*, the name Communists and Nazis commonly called the reformist leaders, took on its full meaning to me.” The bureaucrats were friendly and welcoming people. They were also fat, slow and privileged. “Red in the face, bloated and dull, confined to their cushy, tiny, bureaucratic and corporative world, they made me want to grab them by the collar and give them a good shaking ... the fascist peril was at the door. But the *bonzes* of Dresden treated themselves to a good time.”<sup>18</sup>

As the defeats became more urgent, so the cynicism of ordinary Germans grew. In Franconia, Guérin met a naturalist who advocated compulsory military service. “Since you seem to be so interested in the proletariat”, the German asked him, “would you really wish a Stalinist regime upon it.” It was the same in rural areas, where a farming woman thrust on Guérin a bundle of worthless notes. “All of our assets! Everything we saved during twenty years of working like slaves. Now it’s worth nothing.... The Social Democrats with *their* inflation have taken it all.” Even in Berlin, the unemployed exchanges saw opposed Socialist and Communist workers, who knew by heart each one of their rival parties’ betrayals, since 1914.<sup>19</sup> “As they waited for their rapidly approaching final defeat, the luckless workers of Germany were cast into extreme disarray and confusion.” People were cynical about voting, about campaigning, about everything. Guérin noted down comments he heard in the streets, “‘Why must I, a Social Democrat worker, consider my main enemy to be my Communist workmate?’ ‘Why must I, a Communist worker, often come to lethal blows with the Nazi worker who’s in line beside me at the unem-

ployment bureau?' Nobody, to tell the truth, knew the *why* of anything any longer."<sup>20</sup>

So although Guérin's account opens with details that might tend to suggest that the Nazi victory was inspired by a sort of youthful cross-class revolutionism, these elements become subordinated within the narrative that follows. Rather than portraying fascism as the product of a self-conscious revolutionary generation, confident, argumentative, literate, eager to feel their own power, and snatching at history, *The Brown Plague* makes almost exactly the opposite points. It sees fascism rather as the product of defeat, confusion and decay – not hope or freedom, at all. Guérin's explanation for the rise of fascism was in other words a cocktail: three-sevenths proletarian demoralisation, two-parts de-socialisation, one-seventh misdirected enthusiasm, and one last part confusion. This was a society in which ideas were being widely discussed, but it was also one in which they were barely understood. Hitler's triumph was unaccompanied by heroism, either on its part, or that of its opponents. Fascism was the product then of extreme bitterness, and a mutual failure – shared by both left-wing parties – to act together to stop it, in time.

To get a sense of the distinctiveness of Guérin's argument, it is useful to contrast his approach briefly to ideas current in liberal historical scholarship. There are broadly three groups of British historians who engage with the history of fascism. The first group are British historians of fascism in Italy and Germany, including Ian Kershaw, Michael Burleigh and Richard Evans.<sup>21</sup> Little of what I have written would be of surprise to them. They operate within a literature shaped by original, German and Italian sources. While the exact detail of Guérin's analysis, and in particular his eye-witness accounts of the German left, would probably be unfamiliar and therefore of interest, there is no great sense in which their analyses differ markedly from *The Brown Plague's*. The second group are the British historians of British fascism, including Richard Thurlow, Tom Linehan and Julie Gottlieb. Their interest is variously in the relationship between British fascism and the British state, or between fascism and culture.<sup>22</sup> *The Brown Plague* passes them by. There is also, however, a third group, who are often the best-known outside the UK, writers such as Roger Griffin and Roger Eatwell, who have set themselves the task of defining a fascist core, a common set of values which manifested themselves in all fascisms over time.<sup>23</sup>

To give just a sense of the approach, I will quote from a recent paper by Roger Eatwell, arguing for what he termed "a fascist matrix". The following quote is chosen to be representative not just of one paper but of a whole style of literature.<sup>24</sup>

"At the heart of fascist thinking was the creation of a new elite of men, who would forge a

holistic nation and build a new third way state. However, there were notable differences among fascists about the new man, the nation and state. Fascism more than any other ideology has fuzzy edges, overlapping at times both the conservative right and even the left. Part of the problem involved in neatly delineating fascism stems from the fact that in practice it was at times opportunistic – and where it achieved power, it in turn attracted many opportunists. More fundamentally, fascism is elusive because it sought radical syntheses of ideas. This point was put well by Sir Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of fascists in the 1930s, when he wrote: 'In this new synthesis of Fascism ... we find that we take the great principle of stability supported by authority, by order, by discipline, which has been the attribute of the Right, and we marry it to the principle of progress, of dynamic change, which we take from the Left.' The point of the matrix is to highlight that instead of simply prioritising key words like 'new man', 'nation' or 'state', we need to ask how fascists conceived such terms, including what they were defined against. The matrix also shows that syntheses could produce conclusions which tended more to the left or more to the right – for example, in relation to the interests of workers versus employers."<sup>25</sup>

There are various themes here that I think are representative of an entire school. First, although this is mainly a matter of emphasis, there is the idea that fascism is best understood from the inside, or (as Eatwell puts it elsewhere in the same article) "empathetically". Second, there is a sense that fascism is to be defined primarily by its ideas, rather than by its historical practice. For the purposes of understanding fascism, events such as the Holocaust are relatively less important, more significant are the speeches in which fascist ideologues attempted to position their movement. Third, there is an argument that fascism was as much of the left as the right. If ideas are the only thing that matters then it follows that a vague promise that fascism might "do something" for the workers is more important than the historical relationship between the Italian or German regimes and the trade unionists that they jailed.

One of the features of this so-called "new consensus" in the study of fascism has been the argument that fascism was an authentic revolutionary movement, a revolutionary form of ultranationalism. If fascism's interwar opponents were unable to recognise this fact, then it follows that is because they were so blinded by ideology that they were incapable of recognising that which was in front of their nose. Let me quote Roger Griffin then, on Daniel Guérin and his co-thinkers:

"Ever since the March on Rome a high level of consensus had prevailed among Marxist political scientists, intellectuals, and activists which allowed them to see through the façade of Mussolini's regi-

me and discern both in it (and later in the Third Reich) no more than an exhibition of capitalism's ruthless survival instinct now that its foundations were starting to give way under the tectonic forces of history. Hence its desperate bids to conceal its terroristic counter-revolutionary purpose by masquerading as an 'alternative' revolutionary ideology to international socialism, or the efforts to camouflage its cynical destruction of working class power with spectacular displays of aestheticizing and anaesthetizing politics. They thus approached it not as a mysterious force, but as a predictable (and readily definable) exercise in the mystification of power relations."<sup>26</sup>

We have already explored the question of how revolutionary fascism actually was. What about the other arguments, that (for most left-wing writers) fascism was purely a form of mass display, a sort of glorified drug trip, and that its "mystery" was merely a desperate attempt to conceal its true counter-revolutionary purpose? Did Guérin hold these views? And if not, did he hold to the implied opposite claims – that fascism was an unpredictable and "authentic" revolutionary movement, that its "mystery" was not "anaesthetizing" but a serious attempt to transform all aspects of life?

Guérin's second trip began in April 1933. He left alone this time not on foot but by bicycle. He kept his notes hidden in the frame. There were certain similarities between the accounts of the two journeys and certain differences. Let us note some of the similarities first. The chief similarities were stylistic. Meeting ordinary workers, Guérin describes them as "ardent and disciplined". The left is normally described in adjectives that imply stability, rank-and-file Nazis still in terms that imply unhealthy speed. There are the thin again (workers, the unemployed), and the fat. One immediate difference is that the trade union functionaries have ceased to exist, or if they remain they no longer give off such an impression of self-satisfaction. In Guérin's hierarchy of corpulence, the new NSDAP appointees have taken their place.

The most obvious difference the trips was that Guérin was travelling through Germany now after Hitler's victory, after the left had been destroyed. "A socialist today travelling beyond the Rhine today has the impression of exploring a city in ruins after an earthquake. Here, only a few months ago, were the headquarters of a political party, a trade union, a newspaper; over there was a workers' bookstore. Today, enormous swastika banners hang from these buildings. This used to be a Red street; they knew how to fight here. Today one only meets silent men."<sup>27</sup>

One person's defeat was of course a second person's victory. "The other Germany struts about in broad daylight with all its meanness, its evil instincts awakened, its brutality, and its stomping of boots." As before, Guérin explained Hitler's in part as a series of sociological characters brought

to life. "The Hitlerite wave is such an extraordinary phenomenon (in the proper sense of the term) that vengeful epithets aren't enough to explain it ... Certainly, the dregs of the population have found asylum in the Brown army. There, they wield truncheons and play with guns to their hearts' content. But behind them are the peasant masses suffering from their low wages; the entire middle class in decomposition ... and there are also broad working-class layers whose nerves have been wrecked by hunger and idleness; and most of all, youth, without bread, work or future." A trip to a youth hostel gave Guérin the chance to observe the new young, a different people to those he had met just eight months before – a generation without jokes or ribaldry. "Finally, there is a lull. Just to say something, I allude to the poverty, to the eight million unemployed. 'Not now!', interrupts one of the boys, about twelve years old, in a tone of surprise and reproach. And the others in chorus, more explicit: 'Hitler has promised that in four years there will be no unemployment'." This "mechanical, inevitable reply", Guérin would hear day after day, from people of all ages, even younger than twelve.<sup>28</sup>

When Guérin wanted to assess the extent that fascism was a movement of hope or of horror,<sup>29</sup> he tended to take examples from the lives of those that his readers would have accepted as revolutionaries. And yet his narrative suggests that more was at stake than simply the fate of the fallen Socialist comrades. It is easy to imagine a revolution without revolutionaries, even a revolution in which last year's revolutionaries had lost something of their former role. *The Brown Plague* describes a much more systematic form of counter-revolution. The Germany Guérin experienced was one where rank was respected, universally, where reports of spies were treated as fact – even if the details were fantastic. It was a world of uniforms, salutes. It was a world in which the very desire for self-emancipation had been crushed. The examples Guérin gives of Nazified society may appear familiar to us, but that is because we read them across a distance of seventy years. We have seen and heard Nazi Germany represented like this so many times that we almost forget that it was actually like that, or that Guérin was one of the first to report it in this way.

How then to make sense of the fascist claims that theirs was a revolutionary party? One way to read *The Brown Plague* is as a reflection on choice. Guérin's emphasis on fascist regularity, uniforms, and the unthinking acceptance of authority stemmed not just from the head, from his Marxist politics, but from his eyes. The author who had travelled in 1932, looking in part for companionship, returned to find that the very bodies of his friends were different, wrapped up, concealed. The Nazi voice, he heard from the speakers at public rallies, struck him as "curt, imperative".<sup>30</sup> In a

uniform, one is a soldier. Receiving an order, one has no right to refuse.

The motto of the French Revolution had of course been liberty for all. The question then, was whose freedom? For the rich, it was the freedom to own property. For those left radicals, about whom Guérin himself would write later, the choice that mattered was the freedom to live without poverty, without hunger, without being reminded every day that your children would face the same obstacles as you.<sup>31</sup> The German Nazis set themselves against all aspects of 1789. They derided the promises of democracy, liberty, equality and fraternity as mere prattle. Their hostility towards democracy leads the British historian Richard Evans to write, “Most revolutions have ended, even if only temporarily, in the dictatorship of one man; but none apart from the Nazi revolution has ever been launched with this explicitly in mind.”<sup>32</sup> The point is well made, but insufficient. What I think Guérin sensed was that the hierachical instinct of fascism was still more profound. This movement did not merely want to end the principle of democracy, or even that of revolution; it wanted to go further and remove from most people’s lives all difference, all meaningful choice.

What then of fascist spectacle? To return to Griffin’s categories, Guérin did indeed find evidence of spectacle and mystification. But if we read his account as a whole, we encounter the material facts of everyday life, described not like giant billboards around which the Nazis feared to tread, but more as known anxieties, a warning note of caution deep in the heard of people who judged themselves convinced. “Eleven o’clock. There’s nothing left on the program announced in the *Beobachter*. Look at the dignified petit-bourgeois couple returning home. The swastika glows ostentatiously on their breasts. No doubt their fever’s still ablaze. But doubt is already at work on their subconscious. The man whispers into the ear of his wife, ‘All these festivities are very nice, but they don’t put bread on the table’.”<sup>33</sup>

Rather than dismiss the emotional power of propaganda, as some flimsy, *The Brown Plague* took seriously Hitler’s boast that he had stolen the symbols and songs of fascism from the old German left. Daniel Guérin gave examples of lyrics mutilated, “the blood red flag becoming “the *swastika* flag”, trade union halls annexed, Communist schools covered now in Nazi insignia, but still fulfilling some distorted version of their previous role. He even claimed – with perhaps less justice – that the tune of the *Horst Wessel Song* had been taken from the Communists.<sup>34</sup>

There was a relationship evidently between fascism spectacle and time. One way to understand it, as we have seen, would be from the perspective of Adolf Hitler and his supporters. “A new age was beginning; history was once more setting the mighty wheel in motion and apportioning lots

anew. We had come to a turning point in world history – that was his constant theme.... He saw himself as chosen for superhuman tasks, as the prophet of the rebirth of man in a new form. Humanity, he proclaimed, was in the throes of a vast metamorphosis.... The coming age was revealing itself in the first great human figures of a new type.”<sup>35</sup> If fascism was indeed a forward-looking movement, then why not see its “revolution” in the same way that Walter Benjamin spoke of Messianic time, as a revenge against the inevitability of the present, as “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past”?<sup>36</sup>

It was possible, rather, to oppose fascism while recognising its future-oriented dynamic. Daniel Guérin did not find anything of the past in fascism. Rather it struck him as a new and different form of politics, and one indeed which enjoyed widespread support. He employed natural metaphors. German fascism was a “plague”, he wrote, a “storm”, a “tide”, and on one occasion a “meteor”, “still advancing at a constant speed”.<sup>37</sup> Nazism was a movement that believed in profound change, and was future-centred, but in those sense alone did Guérin consider it revolutionary.

For if fascism was really about breaking away from ordinary time, then why was it so concerned with order, uniform and routine? Esther Leslie has recently reminded us of the figure of the Robot Cloth Flaw Detector. This machine was designed to test the wearing qualities of German cloth. It was found that the robot “soldier” could stand up and sit down precisely 97,000 times before the average German uniform showed the least signs of wear. “This flaw-detecting machine”, writes Leslie, “conjures up industrial modernity’s dream of efficiency, economy, prescribed movements, an administered society, where even the precise moment of failure ought to be predictable. Its corollary is administrators’ attempts to subdue material, be that fabric or human, in order to aim at an ideal realm of ideal forms, technically perfected.”<sup>38</sup> This, Leslie suggests, was the Nazi hierarchy’s attitude towards time: not its liberation, but its imprisonment in a world of perfectly administered stasis.

The fascist determination to control nature, also expressed itself in an obsessive ordering of human bodies. This was one part of Guérin’s rejection. While chemistry was the source of new fibres, and engineering the means to build the new machines, biology was charged with reconstructing the human, through race and eugenics. Many Nazis, Guérin observed, were embarrassed by the regime’s obsessive racism, and this “weak spot” was often easier than class or political issues to raise among Hitler’s supporters. Yet not all Germans thought the same. “You have to have heard these sons of the people who are not race theorists and who have never donned a brown short in order to grasp the wellsprings of their hatred.

Hitler has invented nothing; he has simply listened, formulated, and guessed what an outlet anti-Semitism offers to the anti-capitalist sentiment of the masses.”<sup>39</sup>

What did the Germans want, the millions, those who worked? Below the Hamburg shipyards, Guérin found narrow streets covered in graffiti, “Death to Hitler”. In the trade union buildings, officials looked forward despondently to a future without work. Their posts had already been passed on to Nazi functionaries, turncoats, lecturers who understood nothing of the world of work.<sup>40</sup> The Brownshirts had been directed to form “revolutionary” cells in the workplaces; their leaders were busy making German safe for profit. “Incident follows upon incident: Cell delegates bang their fists on the boss’s desk demanding control over the business or the reduction of top salaries and high-ranking personnel. Others recall that Goebbels had promised to cancel the wage-slashing Brüning decrees once the Nazis were in power. But such resistance is ruthlessly broken, the ‘ringleaders’ thrown out of the factory, expelled, and replaced by safer elements. It is estimated that soon the NSBO will be rid of some 100,000 undesirables and will regain its character as a trusted faction.”<sup>41</sup>

Guérin’s final chapter opened with a dialogue between an imaginary optimist and a hypothetical pessimist. The former predicted that the Nazis would have difficulty in taming the German army. The latter insisted that whole classes of Germans would “support Hitler to the very end”. Fascism was essentially aggressive, Guérin warned his French readers, “If we let it go forward, it will annihilate us.” His was not a national appeal, but a class one – “if the working class continues to default, fascism will become generalized throughout the world”. The only chance for hope lay with the left – the need was there to build alternative movements, to persuade the workers and above all the young, that their best grounds for hope lay elsewhere.

Guérin’s journalism was published in the Socialist paper, *Le Populaire*. Much of the French left treated it initially with scepticism, but the more that independent reports tended to corroborate one another, the more people began to understand the threat. *The Brown Plague* was published in book form 1933. The following year saw the first of the great united anti-fascist demonstrations that would culminate in the election of the French Popular Front. After 1936, the French Prime Minister was Guérin’s old editor at *Le Populaire*, Léon Blum. Guérin absorbed himself in the rival ideas of the French syndicalists, Rosmer and Monatte, the Trotskyists and the Socialist Left of Marcel Pivert. Prior to 1939, he sided politically with the latter. Through 1938 and 1939, Trotsky composed increasingly urgent letters to his young ally, urging him to break all residual, emotional links with the

Socialists.<sup>42</sup> Daniel Guérin did side with the revolutionary left after 1940, on a long journey that would take him in his last decades to the politics of anarchism and gay liberation.

Returning to the arguments with which this paper opened, what are the most important insights to be gleaned from *The Brown Plague*? We will choose two. One theme of the book – more an anticipation, than a description of a process that had only just begun – was the inevitable destruction of the unruly, civilian SA. Daniel Guérin treated Hitler and fascism as if it was a movement that would reach its defining heights in the destruction of its own supporters. The only other Marxist to have treated this intra-fascist treachery as the key episode was the German socialist Ernst Bloch. His great masterpiece, *The Principle of Hope*, explains Hitler as the personification of the events of 1934, “The petit bourgeois in particular has traditionally been fond of the fist clenched in the pocket; this fist characteristically thumps the wrong man, since it prefers to lash out in the direction of least resistance. Hitler rose out of the Night of the Long Knives, he was called by the masters out of the dream of this night when he became useful to them. The Nazi dream of revenge is also subjectively bottled up, not rebellious; it is blind, not revolutionary rage.”<sup>43</sup>

Bloch’s last sentence is undoubtedly one with which Daniel Guérin would have concurred. In Leipzig, Guérin jotted down the words of a Brownshirt song, half Communist, half nationalist, with its promises to free the workers from Jewish rule, “I have never heard people sing with such a faith. Never have I seen, even among the Aissaouas of Islam, people so projected out of themselves. I am lost on my feet, motionless in the middle of this mass that would die without interrupting its song.” The appropriation of spectacle threatened to overstep its bounds. “Already the rumour is spreading that the Storm Trooper sections are getting impatient, even mutinous, I think to myself it will be necessary to satisfy this crowd – or else crush it, brutally.”<sup>44</sup>

For *The Brown Plague*, 1933 was a story of destructions. The first, and subsidiary, was the pending defeat of any Nazi “leftist” minority. The second, and decisive, was the prior destruction of the unequivocal Socialist militants of Red Wedding and elsewhere. The most important point, therefore, is Guérin’s practical advice – never to underestimate the potential of fascism to win converts even among the poor and dispossessed by posing as a revolutionary force to overturn society. It was not despite some adherence to a dry and “predictable” Marxism that Guérin could see the threat. Instead, it was precisely his determination that the workers should rule for themselves and in their own name that made him treat such shifts in popular consciousness with real seriousness and in 1932 and 1933, with alarm.

## Notes

1. D. Guérin, *Sur La Fascisme - I - La Peste Brune* (Paris: Maspero, 1965). It was published as with an accompanying volume, D. Guérin, *Sur Le Fascisme - II - Fascisme et Grand Capital* (Paris: Maspero, 1965). A new edition was published in 1969.
2. *La Peste Brune A Passé Par Là* (Paris: Librairie du Travail, 1933).
3. D. Guérin, *La Peste brune a passé par là: un Témoignage sur les debuts du régime Nazi* (Paris: Éditions Universelles, 1945).
4. The genesis of this later manuscript is discussed in D. Guérin, *The Brown Plague: Travels in Late Weimar and Early Nazi Germany* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), pp.43-6 and 77-80.
5. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, pp.49-50.
6. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.48.
7. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.50.
8. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.52.
9. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.53.
10. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.59.
11. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.65.
12. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.63.
13. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, pp.56, 68-70.
14. D. Renton, 'Three documents by Victor Serge, 1921-6', *What Next* 27, autumn 2003, pp.37-44.
15. C. Fischer, 'The SA of the NSDAP: Social Background and Ideology of the Rank and File in the Early 1930s', *Journal of Contemporary History* 17/4 (1982), pp.651-670.
16. Cited in M. Kitchen, *Fascism* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), p.2
17. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.65.
18. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.57.
19. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, pp.53, 55, 71.
20. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.72.
21. I. Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris 1889-1936* (London: Allen Lane, 1998); I. Kershaw, *Hitler: Nemesis 1936-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2000); R. J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London: Penguin, 2004); M. Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (London: Macmillan, 2000).
22. T. P. Linehan, *East London For Mosley: The British Union of Fascists in East London and South-West Essex 1933-1940* (London: Frank Cass, 1996); J. V. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000); R. C. Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999).
23. R. Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism', *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 4/2 (1992); R. Eatwell, *Fascism. A History* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995); R. Griffin (ed.), *International Fascism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1998).
24. For a systematic analysis of Griffin, Eatwell and their school, see the early chapters of D. Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice* (London: Pluto, 1999).
25. R. Eatwell, 'The Nature of Generic Fascism: The "Fascist Minimum" and the "Fascist Matrix"', in U. Backes (ed.), *Rechtsextreme Ideologien im 20 und 21 Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Bohlau Verlag, 2003).
26. R. Griffin, 'The Primacy of Culture: the Current Growth (or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies', *Journal of Contemporary History* 35/1 (2002).
27. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.85.
28. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.91.
29. The account in *The Brown Plague* can also be compared to the one which appears in Guérin's better-known but perhaps more schematic work, *Fascism and Big Business*, published in 1936. Here Guérin spoke of "fascist demagoguery", or "'anti-capitalist' capitalism". As in the earlier book, his general approach was to concentrate on the contradictions of fascist rhetoric. If anything, he tended to concentrate more in his later work on the refusal of fascism to deliver in government. He described how fascism, in opposition, left "a door ajar for the management of production by the workers". In power, by contrast, fascism offered workers the corporatism that they knew from social democracy, combined with political authoritarianism and the imprisonment of trade unionists. D. Guérin, *Fascism and Big Business* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), pp.88, 98.
30. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.102.
31. D. Guérin, *La Lutte de Classes sous la première République: Bourgeois et "bras nus" 1793-1797* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946).
32. Evans, *Coming*, p.461.
33. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.96.
34. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.101. The song it seems was based rather on an old sea shanty. There was a similar tune, which some left-wingers had used to sing in honour of the Battleship Potemkin, but this probably was not the root. More interesting would be the satirical uses to which the Horst Wessel song would be put in war, but that of course would come later. G. Broderich, 'Das Horst-Wessel-Lied: A Reappraisal', *International Folklore Review* 10 (1995), pp.100-27.
35. R. Griffin, 'Party Time: Nazism as a Temporal Revolution', *History Today* 49/4 (1999), pp.43-50.
36. R. Griffin, "'Awakening the dead": towards a higher synthesis in Marxist conceptualizations of fascism', paper presented to 'The Labour Movement and Fascism' conference, Leeds, November 2003.
37. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.87.
38. E. Leslie, 'Synthetic Chemistry and the Fate of History in the Third Reich', paper presented to the London Socialist Historians Group seminar 'New Approaches to Socialist History', June 2004; also E. Leslie, *Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).
39. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.111.
40. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, pp.122, 126.
41. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.130.
42. L. Trotsky, *On France* (New York: Pathfinder, 1979), pp.213, 246.
43. E. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), pp.30-1.
44. Guérin, *Brown Plague*, p.149.