EXILE AND INTERPRETATION:
REINVENTING EUROPEAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY IN THE AGE OF TYRANNY

Exile and Interpretation contextualizes ideologically and politically Hans Baron, Erich Auerbach, Leo Strauss and Karl Popper’s scholarship. These German-speaking Jewish intellectuals, who are not normally considered together, fled continental Europe with the rise of Nazism in the 1930s. For each, the political calamity of European fascism was simultaneously a profound intellectual crisis.

We choose these four refugee intellectuals not only because of their shared existential experience as exiled Jews, but, most importantly, because they exemplify how scholarship was often used polemically in the 1930s and 1940s to fight Nazism and fascism. We especially want to show how scholarship of an arcane character was enlisted in this struggle. We want to complement work that has been done, for instance, on Jacob Talmon or Hannah Arendt whose polemical intentions are more obvious or more well-known. Auerbach fought fascism through his rejection of Aryan philology, Baron by his repudiation of völkisch ideology of history, Strauss via his polemic against Hobbes’s historicism as the source of modern German political nihilism and Popper by attacking Plato’s metaphysical “essentialism” and historicism as the philosophical origin of fascism.

Our four exiles also radically transformed their respective fields of scholarly expertise. In philology, Auerbach invented the field of comparative literature with his book Mimesis. In history, Baron’s The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance led to the creation of the Atlantic Republican tradition of historiography. In the history of political thought, Strauss’s Natural Right and History and Popper’s The Open Society and Its Enemies transformed post-WWII political philosophy’s canon by controversially renarrating it as decline and deterioration rather than advancing enlightenment.

Hans Baron (1900-1988) claimed in his celebrated work, The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance, 1955, that “The method of interpreting great turning-points in the history of thought against their social or political background has yet not rendered its full service in the study of the Italian Renaissance.” In our chapter, “Hans Baron: Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Tyranny and Barbarism,” we claim that the method of interpreting great turning-points in the life and mind of this prominent historian of political thought against his social and political background renders important results regarding properly understanding Baron’s magnum opus and its unique mode of historical thought, namely the view that history progresses through a series of major crises.

Our goal therefore is to trace the development of Baron’s historical thought and imagination. During his life, two world wars and two German revolutions took place – the revolution of 1918-1919, which led to the creation of the Weimar Republic, and the Nazi revolution of 1933, which ushered in the establishment of the Third Reich. His was.
the “Age of Catastrophe” as Eric Hobsbawm termed the years from the First World War to the Second. We ask therefore how these crises and catastrophes influenced the writing of *The Crisis*. Further, we inquire how the crisis of German ideology -- as a triumph of völkisch ideology based on the concept of the Volk as an organic, ethnic community in biological terms, overt racism and militant anti-Semitism, all signaling a turning away from humanist and Enlightenment ideas and eventually leading to the crisis of German Jewry and to Baron’s own exilic displacement -- contributed to the making of *The Crisis*. No wonder that a deep sense of crisis pervaded Baron’s historical thought as well as his analysis and findings, making the themes of civic humanism and crisis-history as unique modes of historical thought hallmarks of *The Crisis*.

Our chapter on Erich Auerbach (1892-1957), “Erich Auerbach and the Crisis of German Philology: European Humanism in the Age of Tyranny and Aryan Philology,” argues that Auerbach’s main goal was the rejection of Aryan philology which eliminated the Old Testament from the Christian canon and hence from the very fabric of European culture and civilization. Auerbach was a humanist philologist who deployed philological study to resist Nazi barbarism by combating its racist philology. Accordingly, following the Nazi assumption of power in 1933 and, with it the triumph of Aryan philology, Auerbach began writing his famous essay “Figura,” published in 1938. In this essay, he strove to make the Old Testament inseparable from the New Testament. And later, beginning in 1942, which was the most crucial year of WWII, he started writing *Mimesis* where he made figural interpretation essential to any possible understanding of the history of Western humanist literature, culture and civilization.

With this broad ideological and philological context in mind, “Figura” should be considered not only a mere philological study but also, and more importantly, a crucial stage in Auerbach’s response to the crisis of German philology. More specifically, it marks his first sustained and systematic attack on Aryan philology, and *Mimesis*, in turn, is his affirmation against Aryan philology’s racist and völkisch views of the humanist, Judaeo-Christian foundations of European civilization. No wonder that Auerbach considered *figura* an Ansatzpunkt, a point of departure providing insight into very large literary or cultural movements – in this case the separation between classical and Christian forms of thought and attitudes. Yet, if *figura* is a philological Ansatzpunkt in general, it is also an Ansatzpunkt in Auerbach’s philological enterprise in particular, namely his struggle against Aryan philology. We can say therefore in Auerbach’s terms that the essay “Figura” is a *figura* of *Mimesis*, or conversely, that *Mimesis* is the fulfillment and realization of “Figura.”

Leo Strauss (1899-73), like the three other Jewish intellectuals in our study used scholarship to fight fascism, especially once he left Germany in 1932. He fought fascism by constructing an extremely idiosyncratic history of Western political thought that seems to trace Europe’s abandonment of classical natural right (Plato and Aristotle) to the invention of historicism (the view that all truth was historically relative) by Machiavelli and Hobbes. Their invention, according to Strauss, eventually led like a slowly-gathering ideological storm to moral relativism, political nihilism and therefore ultimately to Hitler. According to Strauss, because historicism reduced morality to mere “arbitrary” preference, it led straight to the “madness” of fascism. But as we will show, the real culprits of this story for Strauss were not these philosophers alone. The more important and really
dangerous culprit behind the rise of historicism was the German Historical School of Goethe, Herder, Ranke, Weber, Troeltsch and Meinecke. By “history” in the title of his seminal 1953 *Natural Right and History*, Strauss has in mind the German Historical School and its contribution to the rise of fascism as much as he does Machiavelli and Hobbes. On Strauss’s account, then, Machiavelli originated historicism, Hobbes refined it philosophically and the German Historical School turned it into a perilous ideology that was quickly put crudely to use by Nazis to justify their actions. Strauss wanted to expose the fascist implications of this historiographical and philosophical tradition and make philosophy once again beneficial or safe for politics. And making philosophy safe for politics also made politics safe for philosophizing fearlessly like Socrates, which some scholars insist was Strauss’s real and greatest underlying ideological worry.

Strauss not only devoted his career to narrating an idiosyncratic history of Western political thought that he claimed exposed the philosophical sources of fascism. He also defended a highly controversial method of reading “exactly” or esoterically “between the lines,” which he famously articulated in his 1941 “Persecution and the Art of Writing” and in other wartime unpublished writings. We further suggest that this controversial hermeneutical strategy was crucial to his struggle against fascism because his polemical history of political thought depended upon it. One simply cannot make sense of Strauss’s famous and contentious hermeneutics without situating it within his anti-fascism and anti-historicism.

Karl Popper (1902-94), too, deployed an extremely idiosyncratic history of political thought to combat fascism. His *Poverty of Historicism* (1944-45) and his very unconventional but influential *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) were what he called his “war effort” against Hitler written from exile in New Zealand where he fled in 1937. As Popper confessed in 1946, *The Open Society* was a “fighting book,” which he decided to write the day he heard about Germany’s 1938 occupation of his Austrian homeland. Popper’s conception of historicism was quite different from Strauss’s. For Popper, historicism was the false and dangerous belief in historical inevitability. Plato purportedly invented historicism, inserting it like a Trojan horse into the heart of Western humanism. Whereas the *Poverty of Historicism* put forward the theory that fascism was based on historicist thinking, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* purported to provide historical evidence that this tradition began with Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle. Nazism, according to Popper, exploited our reverence for these classical Greeks and their alleged historical determinism to justify Hitler’s rise as Germany’s inevitable destiny.

Much like Baron, Auerbach and Strauss, then, Popper waged war on fascism through scholarship. He sought to combat it by exposing its deep historicist roots. We will also show that Popper defended, in *The Open Society* especially, an equally controversial hermeneutics that justified his blaming the classical Greeks for introducing historicism and fascism. As with Strauss, one cannot possibly understand Popper’s controversial hermeneutics and its integral connection to his history of political thought outside the context of his “war effort” against Hitler.
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III Hans Baron: Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Tyranny and Barbarism
In this chapter, we inquire how the crisis of German ideology -- the triumph of völkish ideology -- contributed to the making of Baron’s seminal *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, to his invention of the concept “civic humanism” and how a deep sense of general crisis pervaded his historical thought overall.

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V Karl Popper: The History of Political Thought as Anti-Fascist “War Effort”
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VI Conclusion: Jewish Identity and Historical Imagination
Our concluding chapter reiterates our study’s main conclusions, including especially our conviction that the seminal works of these prominent German-speaking intellectuals cannot possibly be understood properly without setting them in the interlocking contexts of anti-Semitism, anti-historicism and polemical combat against fascism.