

## On *Strongmen*: An Interview with Ruth Ben-Ghiat

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Ruth Ben-Ghiat is Professor of History and Italian Studies at New York University. She is the author of several books on the cultural history and enduring legacy of Italian Fascism: *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (2001), which explores why Fascism found support among Italian intellectuals in the interwar period, and *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* (2015), an in-depth study of the feature and documentary films made during Mussolini's dictatorship about Italy's African and Balkan occupations. Most recently, she has published *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (2020), which examines how authoritarian leaders use corruption, violence, propaganda, and machismo to stay in power, and how resistance to them has unfolded over a century. Ben-Ghiat has established herself as a prominent public intellectual on questions of Fascism and authoritarianism, and is a regular contributor to CNN, *The New Yorker*, and *The Washington Post*. She is Advisor to the non-profit organization Protect Democracy. Additionally, she has her own Substack newsletter, *Lucid*, which features weekly essays and interviews on threats to democracy, abuses of power, and the strategies and tools to counteract them.

**Before we go into the book itself in more detail, could you tell us about the process that led you to write *Strongmen*? Was there a particular moment or event that inspired you to write this book, or was it more of a gradual process?**

I wrote *Strongmen* because I was alarmed at the authoritarian assault on the historical record, from Vladimir Putin banning mention of the Nazi-Soviet pact, to the Proud Boys wearing T-shirts that say 'Pinochet did nothing wrong.' As I write in the book, 'strongmen disappear people, and they also disappear fields of knowledge that conflict with their goals.' The whitewashing of history to remove memories of past violence is necessary to create the proper climate for persecution in the present. This is why the book goes into detail about violence, including torture methods. It was a way of preserving a historical record many are trying to erase. Since the book came out, these developments have accelerated. In Poland, laws seek to criminalize mention of Polish collaboration with the Holocaust, and historians who work on these

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issues have become targets of the government. In the United States, many states want to ban the study of racism, slavery, and exploitation from school and university curricula.

I also wrote the book in response to Donald Trump's presidential candidacy, which set off many alarm bells in me as a scholar of Fascism. The rallies, the loyalty oaths, the boasting about violence, the outreach to White supremacists, the crusade against the truth: all of it was familiar. My knowledge of the dynamics of leader cults allowed me to write op-eds starting in 2016 predicting Trump would have a leader cult and that the GOP (Grand Old Party i.e. the Republican Party) would follow him blindly no matter what he did, and more broadly that Trump must be seen as an authoritarian who was following a playbook that comes out of that history.

**In your book, you argue that in order for us to understand current manifestations of authoritarianism we need to look back to the 1920s. You claim that the 'authoritarian playbook' originates with Mussolini, and that subsequent strongmen have continued to adapt and develop it. What is the authoritarian playbook? Where did Mussolini draw inspiration from? Could you trace the genealogy of the authoritarian playbook a bit further back?**

I started my own authoritarian history with Mussolini and the 1920s because many of the circumstances that allowed Fascism and Communism to triumph required a level of development of mass society, mass communications, etc. Of course, 19th century personality cults had existed, as in pre-World War I Germany with Kaiser Wilhelm II, and you could certainly argue for the importance of Napoleon (a figure all the strongmen I write about worshipped) in forging the revolution-reactionary heroic individual model. But World War I was central to the development of modern authoritarianism and so I start with that.

The book elucidates a set of interlinked "tools of rule" authoritarians use to get to power and stay there. I focus on propaganda, violence, corruption, machismo, and the myth of national greatness. My aim was to show that these are interlinked: for example, personality cults that depict the leader as untouchable and a man above all other men feed into corruption, in that the leader's glamour for many lies precisely in his ability to get away with things that ordinary men cannot, whether in the bedroom or in politics. Political scientists and economists who discuss corruption and propaganda at length often don't take masculinity

seriously. My book is the first to integrate machismo and show its centrality. We might want to laugh at Mussolini or Putin posing bare-chested, but such displays of virility are actually a strategy of political legitimation and an important component of authoritarian rule.

I further show that strongmen experiment with these tools before they take office: you can spot a strongman in the making if he preaches violence as a way of testing elites and the populace (Duterte and Bolsonaro did this as candidates, as did Trump), and testing the system to see how much transgression would be accepted. Another testing strategy is targeting the press from the start of your candidacy: these men are corrupt - Berlusconi, Putin, and Trump were under investigation when they ran for office - and if information on their thievery comes out when they are heads of state they need the public to already believe the press is biased. Trump was particularly successful in making the press into a hate object. I follow how this playbook develops through the arc of rule - and what happens when the leader's rule is ending and people no longer believe his propaganda.

**What was it about Italy in the 1920s that allowed this new form of authoritarianism to emerge? Why did it fall on such fertile ground? And how has the authoritarian playbook managed to persist and reinvent itself so successfully over the past century? In your book you focus on the strongmen themselves and say relatively little about their supporters. What is it that makes people receptive to the authoritarian playbook across cultural, historical, and geographical boundaries?**

Italy had all of the conditions that, as it would turn out, are crucial to the appeal of strongmen and the ascent of right-wing authoritarianism in a country: extreme polarization, a very strong left (with a new Communist party), an authoritarian religious institution that could collaborate (the Vatican and the Fascists teamed up to defeat a new progressive Christian party that got a lot of votes in 1921, the Popular Party), millions of men who felt their authority was waning (due to injuries, traumas of the war, to changes in gender roles during the war and due to modernity, etc), a threatened empire (in 1917 an anti-colonial Tripolitanian Republic, inside Italian occupied-Libya, was recognized by the League of Nations), and an individual (Mussolini) expert at reading where the culture was going; expert at slogans, public speaking, seduction.

The core of my book is individuating the tools of authoritarianism (propaganda, corruption, violence, the myth of national greatness, masculinity) that endure although every illiberal state of course has its variations. I actually devote a lot of space to followers, both elite collaborators and the voices of ordinary devotees. I repeatedly argue that the strongman cannot triumph without his enablers, both elite and grassroots. Elites make and break strongmen, I argue.

**When reading your book I was struck by the link between the authoritarian playbook and memory politics. You don't frame it in terms of cultural or political memory, but you do emphasize how today's strongmen 'copy', 'echo' or 'recycle' the rhetoric and actions of their autocratic predecessors, thereby seeking to rehabilitate them in the public imagination. Could you perhaps comment on the memory political dimensions of the authoritarian playbook and how authoritarian movements work with and against the dominant memory culture of their times?**

In my chapter on 'A Greater Nation,' I talk about the three temporal dimensions of authoritarianism. Utopia, the desire for a pristine and perfect community, links to the leader's promise to obtain what his people feel the country lacks or has been deprived of. Whether this is modernity and international prestige, or the right to expansion, it always involves a glowing future that redeems a bleak present. Mussolini was unusual in starting time over by declaring 1922, his first year in power, as Year One of the Fascist Era. But his promise to "transform Italy so it will be unrecognizable to itself and to foreigners within ten years" was not atypical.

Nostalgia for better times is also part of the equation, since the ruler's vow is to make the country great *again*. This involves the fantasy of returning to an age when male authority was secure and women, people of color, and workers knew their places. These leaders might invoke a lost imperial grandeur: the Spanish and Roman Empires for Franco and Mussolini, Imperial Russia and the Soviet Empire for Putin, and the Ottoman Empire for Erdogan. Strongmen may also cite law and order governments of the national past to justify degrading democracy, as Bolsonaro does with Brazil's military dictatorship. As in Hitler's "Aryan civilization," these imperial fantasies often have a racial dimension. Today, rightists in Italy, Hungary, and Brazil invoke allegiance to "Christendom,"

harkening back to the Middle Ages, to defend a white European heritage seen as besieged by migrants or indigenous peoples.

Strongmen also create new memories associated with their own political religions. Martyrs are important for the new liturgy: Horst Wessel played that role for the Nazis. The Italian Fascists honored martyrs killed for their beliefs. Erdogan has renamed important landmarks around his foundational moment: the coup attempt of 2016. The Bosphorus Bridge is now the Martyrs' Bridge, for example.

Of course, this means that political heroes and secular saints connected to the opposition must be removed from memory (and often from life). In Pinochet's Chile, the military junta sponsored an *operación limpieza*, ("operation cleanup"), which sought to cancel the legacy of the immensely popular president, Allende, whom the junta had removed, and of the public culture connected with the left. Soldiers and civilian volunteer brigades destroyed statues and painted over murals, including work by Chilean artist Roberto Matta, and Fascist-style bonfires blazed with books taken from libraries and the shops and homes of those who had been imprisoned or killed.

We are witnessing a version of this unfolding in the United States today. Trump created his own version of a sacred community, with his fervent religious backers (Evangelical and nondenominational Christians, Orthodox Jews) who believe that he was placed in office by divine will. 'God wanted Donald Trump to become President,' said former White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders in 2019.

Jan. 6, or "J6" as it is known by supporters, is Trump's foundational moment. It was an authoritarian leader cult rescue operation - a desperate act designed to disrupt the certification of Joe Biden's victory and keep Trump in office - but also (as Trump told his faithful at the rally that preceded the assault on the Capitol) the start of something new. Ashli Babbitt, a participant in the coup attempt who was killed by a policeman while she breached the Capitol, has become a martyr for the far right. Jan. 6 did not just radicalize the GOP, which accepted the failed coup attempt as a patriotic action, but it brought together known extremists (militia members, Proud Boys, sovereign sheriffs) and individuals working within the government (57 local and state GOP officials, active-duty and retired military and law enforcement).

Just as Mussolini honored his "first-hour fascists," who were individuals active during the 1919-1922 period, and who participated in the March on Rome, so will the subversives of Jan. 6 likely be honored as the founding members of the American autocracy to come.

**The rise of the extreme right, in particular the so-called “alt-right,” over the past decade has coincided with a real or perceived crisis of masculinity. In your book you show compellingly how important the manifestation of virility is for the authoritarian personality. Could one read your book as a contribution to the current debate on toxic masculinity?**

*Strongmen* adds to discussions of the authoritarian playbook by highlighting the importance of virility and how it works together with other tools of rule. The leader’s displays of machismo and his kinship with other male leaders are not just bluster, but a way of exercising power at home and conducting foreign policy. Virility enables his corruption, projecting the idea that he is above laws that weaker individuals must follow. It also translates into state policies that target women and LGBTQ+ populations, who are as much the strongman’s enemies as prosecutors and the press. Anti-colonial leaders like Mobutu and Ugandan President Idi Amin were as misogynist and anti-homosexual as their racist imperialist peers.

Virility, in the form of the leader’s dominance over women and other men, has pride of place in his plans for national transformation. Discrediting other national male icons whose status threatens his reputation is often a priority, as with Pinochet’s attempts to erase Allende’s legacy or Trump’s crusade to undo Obama’s. Control over female bodies in the name of population growth is another constant, as are persecutions of LGBTQ+ individuals seen as bearers of deviant and non-productive sexualities. Perceived demographic emergencies due to the decline of white births and the invasion of the country by non-whites, which inspired fascist policies, spur new authoritarian measures in Europe, Brazil, and America today.

I also write about the systems Mussolini and other leaders created to procure bodies for their sexual satisfaction. Far from being a private affair, the sex life of the strongman reveals how corruption, propaganda, violence, and virility work together and how personalist rulers use state resources to fulfill their desires. Gaddafi was unusual in establishing a bureaucracy dedicated to this project, but whenever the ruler has a sex addiction, as he and Mussolini did, it subtracts time and energy from governance – up to several hours a day in their cases.

Presented by their personality cults as the ideal blend of everyman and superman, authoritarians make ordinary men feel better about their own transgressions. These were probably not as lavishly bad as what

the leader was engaging in: hosting sex parties with underage women in attendance (Berlusconi), being spanked by porn stars (Trump), or keeping the twin sister of your wife as your mistress (Mobutu). The appeal of these leaders for many rests on their having the power to get away with things that ordinary men cannot, whether in the bedroom or in politics.

Gaining favor after periods of economic and political gain for women, the strongman seeks to reverse shifts in social norms that threaten patriarchy and the satisfaction of “natural” male desires. Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg’s 1930 call for ‘the emancipation of women from the women’s emancipation movement’ was typical. So was Berlusconi’s 2009 warning to Italian women that the state could not protect them from sexual assault, and his hint that their own attractiveness made them fair game: ‘We can’t deploy a big military force to avoid rapes. We’d have to have as many soldiers in the street as there are beautiful Italian women.’ For a century, women have been the strongman’s adversaries, along with prosecutors, journalists, and the political opposition. His machismo is not just empty posturing, but a strategy of political legitimation and an important component of authoritarian rule.

**You talk about how strongmen mobilize and manipulate negative emotions like hatred, anger, and fear. By contrast, you emphasize the role of positive affect – empathy, love, joy – in resisting authoritarianism. Could you say more about the role of emotions? For example, isn’t anger also necessary for resistance? And how do we address the evident enjoyment that belonging to a fascist collective gave and gives people? In other words, it seems that both positive and negative affects play an important role on both sides of this divide and in very complicated ways.**

I discuss the joy of belonging that strongmen shape and exploit, and how it’s based on excluding others, but also on the strongman knowing how to make people feel that hatred and violence are productive emotions, which cleanse the nation. They also use corruption to make it easier for people to lose their moral scruples. Hitler in 1933 and 1938 – times of a push in Jewish and other persecutions – passed measures to eradicate debt for private individuals. So as you helped to dispossess Jews, your own economic condition improved.

These dynamics are central to authoritarianism and they are why I added a chapter on corruption. Cooptation is the term political scientists use for the way authoritarians bind elites and other groups to them.

I considered it as a form of corruption, given the ethical compromises and changes in personal and professional practices that cooperating with amoral and violent individuals entail. Strongmen use corruption in tandem with other tools. Purges of the judiciary result in a justice system that exonerates crooks or doesn't prosecute them at all. Journalists and activists who might expose thievery are imprisoned or smeared through propaganda. Virility makes taking what you want, and getting away with it, into the measure of manhood. Authoritarians also create new patronage systems that offer jobs and opportunities for wealth, which help to overcome any moral hesitations some might have about collaborating. The core of the contract between the ruler and his enablers is the offer of power and economic gain in exchange for supporting his violent actions and his suppression of civil rights.

Corruption is a *process* as well as a set of practices, and the word's Latin and Old French origins imply a change of state due to decay. As implied by popular sayings like "one bad apple spoils the whole bunch," corruption has always been associated with contamination and degradation, whether of physical objects (like fruit and computer files) or the soul. This notion of corruption captures the operation of strongmen regimes. They turn the economy into an instrument of leader wealth creation, but also encourage changes in ethical and behavioral norms to make things that were illegal or immoral appear acceptable, whether election fraud, lying to the public, torture, or sexual assault.

Rulers who come into office with a criminal record, like Mussolini and Hitler, or under investigation, as was the case with Putin and Berlusconi, have a head start. They know that making the government a refuge for criminals who don't have to learn to be lawless hastens the "contagion effect". So does granting amnesties and pardons, which indebt individuals to the leader and make blackmailers, war criminals, and murderers available for service.

**The book is written for a general readership. What were some of the challenges — and rewards — of writing for the public? What advice do you have for scholars in interdisciplinary fields like perpetrator studies when it comes to making their research into authoritarianism and other urgent issues we are facing accessible and relevant for a more general public?**

I was able to write this book for the public because I had already been writing essays and op-eds for CNN, *the Atlantic*, and other outlets, and

giving many interviews to educate journalists and the public about the dangers at hand. So I had the right writing tone and style to take this on. Doing media work forces you to get to the point quickly, be clear about your arguments (and your intellectual priorities in the piece/interview).

Now I am doing more TV and there, in a segment of a few minutes, it's all more compressed. That forces you to always be thinking of the big picture, and my own style is to say terrifying things with a pleasant demeanor so people can absorb it. I would advise people to pitch op-eds (there's an organization called the Op-Ed Project that helps you) and see what happens. There is a lot of rejection, but we're used to that as academics!

### **What can we do to resist current and future strongmen?**

As I discuss in the 'Resistance' and 'Endings' chapters, nonviolent mass protest is key. So is unity of the opposition, and I give Chile in the 1980s as an example. Elites are the authoritarian's most important promoters and collaborators. They make, and break, the strongman. When elites defect (as happened at the end of the Gaddafi regime, for example) they can signal to others that the power arrangement that supported the leader is crumbling.

To resist strongmen, we also need to make it more difficult for foreign elites to prop up strongmen. From Hitler to Pinochet to Erdogan, mountains of foreign debt support the economic miracles authoritarians are said to perform. Deutsche Bank has funded authoritarian states from Hitler's Germany to Putin's Russia, as well as lending to businesses like the Trump Organization that are suspected of helping autocrats and their cronies to launder their money. Financial institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom, working with international law firms, allow strongmen to hide their illicit wealth in anonymous accounts and shell corporations abroad. So did the Swiss, whose vaults and banks, ruled by banking secrecy until 2018, store some of the money of Gaddafi, Mobutu, and other despots. Public relations and lobbying firms have also played a prominent role, advertising strongman states as productive and stable. Charm offensives helped to cover over the chaos and corruption. 'The more trouble the client was in, the better the party,' recalled an associate of Edward von Kloberg III, who represented Ceausescu, Iraqi President Sadaam Hussein, and Mobutu.

To ward off the rise of future strongmen, we must know the warning signs, As in other periods of history, in America today many do not

want to realize the gravity of the situation. They think “it can’t happen here,” or “it’s not so bad.” My history of the evolution of authoritarianism shows that today democracy often dies slowly, without one Reichstag Fire to point to. Jan. 6 was a trial run for a future anti-democratic action. I see clearly the trajectory America’s own descent into authoritarianism can take, and my own action has been to give hundreds of interviews to educate the public and the American media about the dangers we face here. And that’s a final reason I wrote the book: to equip the public with the skills to see the threat and call it out.

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