**’The Ultimate Cross-Cultural Fertilizer’: The Irony of the ‘Transnational Local’ in Anglo-German Rural Revivalism**

**ABSTRACT**: This article analyses the transfer of ‘ruralist’ ideas between Germany and Britain, showing how connections can be made across time and space between fascist(ic) ideologies of landscape and rural belonging. Focusing mainly on two individuals who bridged the countries, Rolf Gardiner and Georg Götsch, I show that this key aspect of fascism—ironically, one which depended so much on images that glorified ‘local beauty’—drew on a store of ideas common to much of Europe at the time. Transnational history thus brings new understandings to fields even as well-researched as fascism, returning us to the truism that fascism constituted a modern movement with a combination of technocratic and scientistic as well as nostalgic and romantic elements. Indeed, the history of fascism forces us to reconsider what is meant by ‘modern’ in a transnational context, taking us beyond simple dualisms such as ‘reactionary’ and ‘avant-garde’ or ‘futurist’ and ‘nostalgic’.

**KEYWORDS**: Fascism, transnationalism, ruralism, modernity, Rolf Gardiner, Georg Götsch

**Introduction**

Transnational approaches to history have most recently been successfully applied to institutions that are obviously and self-consciously international(ist), such as the United Nations (UN) or the European Union (EU).[[1]](#endnote-1) Ideas that obviously and easily cross and defy boundaries, such as human rights and modern protest movements, are equally amenable to transnational analyses.[[2]](#endnote-2) But approaches which depart from traditional comparative methodologies (establishing lines of similarity and difference), offering instead explanations of how intertwined the world is, are just as applicable to ideas and movements that, on the face of it, appear strictly national in orientation. A good example is the history of eugenics, which has expanded outwards from the Anglo-American ‘core’ to encompass the whole globe, as historians increasingly recognise that national debates about ‘improving the quality of the race’ took place in the context of a transnational eugenics movement.[[3]](#endnote-3) An even better example is the history of fascism: although fascist movements glorify the idea of the homogeneous nation-state, and historians have tended to follow that self-image by highlighting the extent to which local fascisms were ‘exceptional’, in practice fascist ideas, style, ritual, institutions, behaviour – in short fascism as idea and action – were shared. This may seem surprising, but intellectually there was a good deal of commonality between fascistmovements. Although inpractice relations between rival ultra-nationalisms could be strained, to the point at which the attempt to create a ‘universal fascism’ to rival the communist international was defeated by too many internal contradictions, even the incipient existence of such a movement is itself revealing. Fascism, in other words, was a genuinely transnational movement such that the cross-border appeal of Italian Fascism and German Nazism ‘cannot be reduced to a camouflage of quests for predominance.’[[4]](#endnote-4) There were, in other words, genuine incentives to cooperation between fascist movements, not merely a forced maintenance of uneasily-friendly relations as different national movements jockeyed for power.

In Britain, fascism was regularly dismissed as a ‘foreign invention’, a ruse which helped in the fight to keep fascism out of power. And in German history, scholars still argue about the relationship between Nazism and fascism.[[5]](#endnote-5) In reality, in Britain fascism developed as much from indigenous political traditions (especially the Edwardian crises over Irish Home Rule, House of Lords reform and the policies of the ‘Diehard’ Lords) as it did from Italian and German influences. As the Anglo-Catholic editor of the *English Review*, Douglas Jerrold claimed, ‘the fact remains that the real inventors of fascism were not Signor Mussolini and Herr Hitler but Sir Edward Carson and Arthur Griffith.’[[6]](#endnote-6) Even in Germany, which tends to be treated as *sui generis*, intra-German developments were by no means isolated from those elsewhere in Europe or further afield. Indeed, the fact that several leading Nazis came from outside Germany – from Russian or Baltic German communities, for example[[7]](#endnote-7) – already points to an understanding of Nazism that transcends the nation-state framework.

An excellent example of the transnational dimension of fascism comes with the links between Italian and Argentine fascism. Federico Finchelstein shows, in his compelling study, how large-scale Italian immigration to Argentina in the late nineteenth century influenced Mussolini’s attitudes to Argentina: he saw it not only as a potential ally but assumed that it would point the way forward for the other Spanish-speaking Latin American countries. By funding certain sections of the Argentine press and political movements, Mussolini hoped to export fascist ideology to a country where he believed there was a natural constituency for it. He ‘thought that Italians abroad should be representatives of fascism.’[[8]](#endnote-8) But in attempting to create a community of Italians that encompassed those outside as well as those inside Italy, fascist transnationalism here ran up against the nationalising agenda of foreign states, in this case Argentina, whose nationalists – many of them of Italian origin – were irritated, to say the least, by Mussolini’s condescending assumption that they would look to Rome for guidance and leadership. Other scholars have followed Finchelstein’s lead and have started to show that ‘transnational fascism’ is by no means an illogical concept.[[9]](#endnote-9)

In this article, I analyse one aspect of this transnational fascism: the transfer of ‘ruralist’ ideas between Germany and Britain, and vice-versa. Rather than compare such movements, I will show how connections can be made across time and space between British and German fascist(ic) ideologies of landscape and rural belonging. Focusing mainly on two individuals who bridged the countries, Rolf Gardiner and Georg Götsch, who are central to the discussion of British ruralist ideas in Germany and vice-versa, I will show in this article that this key aspect of fascism drew on a store of ideas common to much of Europe at the time. Ironically, these ideas depended heavily on images that glorified ‘local beauty’, whether that be the village, the regional or the national landscape.[[10]](#endnote-10) Alon Confino, for example, shows how an ensemble of small-scale nature, such as brooks and hills, and local institutions, especially the church tower, provided a widespread, and non-specific evocation of the German *Heimat*.**[[11]](#endnote-11)** The same is true of postwar fascisms, which continued, and still continue to swoon over the greatness of the national landscape in exactly the same terms in every national context and by making use of the same stock of images that they all (without admitting it) share.

Finally, apart from making a contribution to transnational history, showing how it can bring new understandings to fields even as well-trodden as fascism (if I can be excused that metaphor in this context), I also want to make a theoretical contribution to ‘fascism studies’. My emphasis on ruralist ideology does not so much stand as a contrast to the recent emphasis on ‘modernism’ as return us to the truism that fascism constituted a modern movement with a combination of technocratic and scientistic as well as nostalgic and romantic elements.[[12]](#endnote-12) The fact that some fascist ideologues devoted themselves to the rural does not automatically mean that such thinking was reactionary or anti-modern; just so, a focus on technology does not indicate that romantic fantasies were not at work. Rather, fascism forces us to reconsider what is meant by ‘modern’ in a transnational context, taking us beyond simple dualisms such as ‘reactionary’ and ‘avant-garde’ or ‘futurist’ and ‘nostalgic’. The transnational exchange of ruralist ideas, though they might appear simply romantic, contributed to the ‘modern’ nature of fascism insofar as such characteristics of ‘rural revivalism’ were symptoms of a modernity that had, in Alun Howkins’ words, ‘discovered’ the countryside.[[13]](#endnote-13) That is to say, only under the sociological conditions of modernity, when the rural way of life could be perceived as something other than the norm, was the rural ideologised and operationalised as a problem for modern politics and culture. Finally, by discussing individuals who do not unequivocally fall into the camp of ‘fascism’, if only because they rejected the label themselves – in particular, Gardiner – I want to suggest that the construction of fascism on a transnational level needs to be understood as an ongoing conversation, and as a process emerging out of existing ideas. Fascism did not just appear one day fully formed; it coalesced around the rejection of older ideas, the radicalization of others, and the response of a particular generation to the crises going on around them in Europe. The focus in this article will be on the stage in that process which sees fascist ideas developing in a transnational context. This is no coincidence, for after they were formed, fascist movements were then far more likely to identify themselves – openly at least – as solely national in orientation and to deny any links with similar movements abroad, indeed, even to reject the idea that there were any such similarities.

**Gardiner and Götsch**

Arnd Bauerkämper notes that, along with links between leading fascists and their official representatives, ‘scholars and writers favouring fascism as a solution to the perceived cultural crisis interacted in transnational networks.’[[14]](#endnote-14) Insofar as transnational history is interested in the movements, flows and circulations of people, technology or ideas, we can see that fascist intellectuals certainly engaged in what historians would now regard as transnational networks. What distinguishes this claim about transnationalism from a comparative approach is the argument that the nature of fascism was shaped and constructed by these movements.[[15]](#endnote-15)

For example, Nazism was shaped to some degree by Hitler’s admiration for Mussolini and the former’s deliberate courting of the latter. In return, Italian Fascism was reshaped by its interaction with Nazism, especially as, in the mid-1930s, international fascist movements reoriented themselves towards Germany as Nazism became the dominant movement. Italian Fascism was at the same time shaped by the impact on it of Italians abroad, whom Mussolini wooed, thinking he could bring them under his control, but with the result that, to some extent at least, they changed the focus and aims of the party in Rome. In what follows, I will illustrate how this circulation and recirculation of ideas helped to shape the fascist response to nature and conservation, with specific reference to Anglo-German transfers of ideas. As with Hofmeyr’s argument, I will suggest here that such transfers did not simply involve the sharing of ideas, or the visits of friendly representatives of movements with similar ideologies across national boundaries. Rather, I argue that fascist and proto-fascist groups and parties themselves were shaped – and should therefore be defined by – these movements of ideas. I do not want to assert that this was always and everywhere true of fascist movements, which remained first and foremost national responses to perceptions of international crisis. But the ‘age of fascism’ was an epoch, not a geographically-confined phenomenon, precisely because this perception of crisis and the need for renewal was widely experienced. The result was that fascism represented a contradiction in itself: a movementpromising national regeneration and national glory in a context of many movements all offering the same thing, indeed developing their *Weltkritik* on the basis of a shared understanding of crisis.The demand to protect nature, for example, which was a key component of fascist thought, seems ironic given the immense environmental destruction brought about by World War II.**[[16]](#endnote-16)** The existence of many movements demanding national glory was, one might surmise, bound to end in conflict, yet the emergence of the phenomenon indicates the presence of what historians would now call transnationalism.

Two examples illustrate how issues of nature protection and rural revivalism were bound up with potentially violent racist thinking, in these cases demonstrating how conservation and antisemitism went hand in hand. In 1939, an article was published in the journal *Naturschutzparke*, the journal of the Conservation Association in Germany, entitled ‘Jews and Nature Conservation’. Its author, Heinrich Wilckens, the chairman of the association, argued that ‘the Jew’ had no connection to the land and that Jews therefore had no conception of protecting the land:

Since he sought to subjugate the world as he wanders restlessly, he has never gained an innermost relationship to the earth on which he lived as a parasite. The ground and earth lack meaning for him unless he can turn them into movables. Land has no significance for him, but its mortgage does; an animal has no significance, but its market value does. … Judaism and German nature are irreconcilable concepts. And only after warding off the final remnants of the Jewish subversive spirit can we entirely understand the great thought of nature conservation as well.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In the same year, Franz Schattenfroh published a book entitled *Wille und Rasse* (Will and Race) which argued that ‘the Jew’ was ‘an outsider of nature, who no longer understands nature and is no longer understood by nature [*der die Natur und den die Natur nicht mehr versteht*]’ and who was therefore ‘inassimilable’.[[18]](#endnote-18) Such statements are easily multiplied.

Where did such ideas come from? Were they uniquely German? And did those who propounded them share their ideas not just with their national compatriots but with others, irrespective of their national identity?

As soon as one poses such questions, it is evident, merely on the basis of what historians already know, that fascist ideas exceeded national boundaries. What transnational lenses allow us to perceive are connections that are already known about, but which can be newly-conceptualized so that they bring to the fore the extent to which fascism developed across Europe (and more widely) on the basis of interconnectedness amongst its adherents. This new way of conceptualizing fascist movements should not prevent us from seeing the limits of such discourse and from recognising that their national specificities were key. If that were not so, then we would have to say that the process by which Nazism came to power in Germany in contrast to (say) the Iron Guard’s failure to do so in Romania was purely random. Local conditions matter. Nevertheless, domestic circumstances do not circumscribe the nature of fascism, as the example of rural revivalism shows. Taking the above quotations from Wilckens and Schattenfroh as end points, I will show that the process of generating a fascist attitude to the land and to farming took place over a long period between the wars and that this process involved contestation and negotiation over many ideas before an authentically ‘fascist’ understanding took shape. Along the way, many other individuals and groups, including romantic nostalgics, technocratic modernizers, and aristocratic revivalists entered the debate, indicating that the flavour of the final ideological brew could not be foreseen by analysing the individual ingredients that went into the mix. Another way of putting this is to say that individuals who cannot themselves be labeled ‘fascist’ in a straightforward way often contributed – sometimes willingly, sometimes inadvertently – to the process whereby fascism was generated. Whilst there is no necessary connection between green and brown ideologies, it would also be too hasty to assert that the concept of nature found in National Socialist thought has no connections at all to that found in green political thought.[[19]](#endnote-19)

For example, in the years before the Nazis came to power, the British youth leader Rolf Gardiner (1902-1971), who had spent time in Berlin as a child, organized many exchanges between German and British youth groups, including theatre, hiking and folk-dancing tours. These exchanges indicate that more was going on than a mere juxtaposition of ideas; rather, the explicit aim of such undertakings was to establish a joint Anglo-German response to the perceived crises of European civilization. There is considerable debate over whether Gardiner was a fascist or not, but this is not here the issue.[[20]](#endnote-20) More significant in this context is the fact that – whatever we name the political tendency under examination here – we see in Gardiner’s undertakings a genuinely transnational phenomenon. It is certainly clear that several of his close associates in the 1920s and 1930s, especially Georg Götsch (1895-1956), did become committed Nazis, as Gardiner well knew. Yet the ideas with which Gardiner was associated in the 1920s, such as nudism, hiking, gymnastics, work camps, and the folk revival, especially dancing, were for the most part considered to be progressive at that point in time. Gardiner was, somewhat improbably, friends with the leading British pacifist Max Plowman,[[21]](#endnote-21) and he praised too the *Arbeiterjugendbewegung* (workers’ youth movement) in the first issue of his journal *Youth* (1923) for their ‘true crusading ardour’. And by the time he started to write about rural conservation, it was long after he had become a real farmer, as Matthew Jefferies reminds us.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Gardiner’s importance in the context of transnational fascism rests on the links he cultivated from the 1920s onwards which placed him in a mediating position between the German and British youth movements, and on the basic idea of Northern European unity which underpinned all of his ideas and activities. These links cannot all, by any means, be labeled ‘fascist’, but their general tendency – towards rural revivalism and the regeneration of the national ‘stock’ on the basis of ‘manly’ or ‘vigorous’ values, and the idea of a common culture around the Baltic and North Seas – led many of those involved in Germany to make the transition from the interwar youth movements to fascism or Nazism quite smoothly.[[23]](#endnote-23) In histories of the German youth movements, the Bündische Jugend, Deutsche Freischar, or Wandervogel, Gardiner is one of the only non-Germans to be mentioned.[[24]](#endnote-24) He played a pivotal role in bridging the German and British youth movements and did so out of a belief that the two racially and culturally kindred northern nations had a special role to play in resisting the soulless regimentation of technocratic modernity and mindless consumerism represented respectively by the USSR and the USA.

Even though sections of the German youth and conservationist movements in the interwar years were anti-Nazi, and even if many of Gardiner’s friends and acquaintances left Germany in the 1930s, such as Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (1888-1973) and Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (1891-1961), his own sympathies for and presuppositions about Germany (as opposed to Nazism) led him to an apologetic position, even if not to full-fledged fascism. Most important, Gardiner’s reading as a young man included not only Oswald Spengler and Ludwig Wittgenstein, but also Ludwig Klages, noted as a vitalist thinker and a pioneer of modern German ecological thought, but equally significant for being a Nazi philosopher; and, even more influential on him, Richard Walther Darré (1895-1953), the Reich Farmers’ Leader (born, incidentally, in Argentina, and fluent in Spanish, English and French). Indeed, Gardiner’s writings are often reminiscent of Darré’s, the man who coined the term ‘blood and soil’. Gardiner’s invitation to the Reich Farmers’ Congress (*Bauerntag*) at Goslar in 1936 probably came from Darré; Gardiner and his close associate, the pro-Nazi Viscount Lymington, were Darré’s guests when they visited Germany in 1939 and, as Matthew Jefferies and Philip Coupland note, they remained in correspondence after the war.[[25]](#endnote-25) Gardiner, in other words, was shaped by British just as much as by German writers, but that is precisely the point: Gardiner was a transnational thinker and actor who saw no contradiction in cultivating links between German and British groups whose outlooks, especially as they radicalized in the 1930s, stressed the ‘special’ local particularities of each.

Let us consider a few quotations from Darré, for they provide obvious points of contact with Gardiner’s world view. In his classic short piece, ‘Blut und Boden’ (1936), Darré set out the basis of the organicist view, that specific nations are necessarily linked to specific pieces of territory:

Precisely this inner relationship of a people with its territory and with the order of its state produces the specificity of the state and provides it with its living character, that is to say, makes an organisational problem into a vibrant organism. It is thus no coincidence that a specific people lives on its own soil, nor what sort of state that people creates on its own territory.[[26]](#endnote-26)

This fundamental idea was already fleshed out some years before the Nazis came to power, at a time when Gardiner and many others were putting forward similar suggestions. Darré argued that the German’s natural occupation was as a peasant, i.e., as a free farmer. With his contempt for cities, his feeling for the organic wholeness of his work, and his sense of service, the peasant forms the basis of the German character and the German state: ‘Out of the Nordic peasantry grew that moral standard which measures the deeds of a free man according to other standards than egotism’, writes Darré. ‘It is the innermost need of the Nordic to place his life at the service of a cause and to develop inner moral principles for himself out of the necessities which determine this work.’[[27]](#endnote-27) The words are more or less interchangeable with Gardiner’s. Indeed, in an unpublished essay of 1934, Gardiner argued that the ‘German revolution is a revolution with a rural bias’, praised Darré’s attempt ‘to recreate a vigorous German peasantry through which a new and potent aristocracy might spring’, and argued enthusiastically that ‘nowhere but in Germany to-day is an attempt being made deliberately and courageously to stem the universal world tide of urbanization and industrialism.’[[28]](#endnote-28) He was equally explicit with respect to the necessity of looking to the soil for national revival in his 1943 book, *England Herself*: ‘The potential reserves of British character, the artisans descended from the old craftsmen families, the descendants of yeomen and peasants, sailors and fishermen, have not been tapped. It is from these’, Gardiner asserted, ‘that we must expect the leaders of the England to be.’[[29]](#endnote-29)

These sorts of statement, claiming that working the land builds the group which forms the backbone of the racial group, and that the peasantry’s most noteworthy characteristic is devotion to service, are very familiar to readers of Gardiner. They were central to the ideology of the English Array, the extreme-right, monarchist, ruralist political group to which he belonged. The Array, which began life as the English Mistery, was ideologically shaped largely by the disaffected Mason William Sanderson and, more tellingly, by the anti-feminist Nietzschean eugenicist Anthony Mario Ludovici, a man who was deeply enamoured of the Nazis and who travelled on several occasions to the Third Reich, and Viscount Lymington (later the Earl of Portsmouth), one of the British aristocracy’s most vociferous supporters of eugenics, rural revivalism and the Third Reich.[[30]](#endnote-30) But the notion of ‘service’ to which the English Array was dedicated derived not only from local sources. In a 1934 article on medieval German eastward expansion, Gardiner wrote that the ‘true spirit of Prussian discipline and service can only be comprehended by a realization of this accomplishment, the colonization of a realm dedicated to the Virgin Mary by a warrior order of priestly nobles.’ His description of the Teutonic Knights could be a vision of what the English Array was supposed to be (and which, needless to say, it was not): ‘There is something awe-inspiring about the noiseless determination of this masculine achievement. For these were men who knew the living secrets of human order and political skill, who manifested the principle of true aristocracy which is power based on self-denial and service.’[[31]](#endnote-31)

Indeed, Gardiner found this sense of service – and sought to recreate it – in his activities with the English and German youth movements. In folk dance, Gardiner saw the most profound sentiments of race and culture; he conceived of using it as the wellspring of a racial renewal in England. The Morris dance, in particular, would reconnect the English to a sense of authenticity that was to be found beneath ‘the apparently thin, transient veneer of modern industrial capitalism.’[[32]](#endnote-32) To that end, and to the chagrin of Cecil Sharp and the English Folk Dance Society, which regarded Gardiner as an ill-qualified dancer and a politically suspect upstart, he led Morris dancing tours in Britain and Germany between 1922 and 1938, arranged for German groups to visit Britain, and made music and dance the centerpiece of his vision. That medievalist vision, expressed most perfectly at his farm at Springhead in Dorset, was one which imbued the local with powers to bind racially and culturally-rooted people to the land. In doing so, Springhead would radiate these values outwards as a way of combatting the deleterious effects of cities and the modern art-forms: ballet (effete), dance bands (individualistic), movies (brash), and lower forms of culture: dog-racing, football (vulgar) which prevailed in them, all in thrall to money rather than national wellbeing. It is hardly surprising that there ‘was much about Gardiner’s thinking that resonated with the voelkisch mood of bourgeois German youth organizations in the 1920s.’[[33]](#endnote-33) After attending an English Array summer camp at Farleigh Wallop, Lymington’s estate in Hampshire, he glowingly reported that ‘I cannot describe this camp to you save in a few words, that was in form and spirit the English equivalent of the best Freischar Arbeitslager that I ever attended, although toned down to suit the humours of war-scarred Englishmen.’[[34]](#endnote-34)

Where the transnational ideological imperative on blood and soil is most evident is in the writings of the Array’s key members, best summed up by the words of Ludovici, the group’s ‘intellectual’, and Lymington, its leader. The former described Nazi Germany as proof of ‘what miracles can still be wrought with the ultra-civilised and often effete populations of modern Europe if only they are given a lofty purpose.’[[35]](#endnote-35) He spoke too of the connection between soil and race, claiming that ‘to protect the sound from extermination by the unsound, and to resist their being sacrificed for the latter – in fact, to assume towards humanity the very attitude which, to a farmer contemplating his animals and his crops is a commonplace of good husbandry, is to-day one of the most difficult and precarious of undertakings, particularly for the head of a State.’[[36]](#endnote-36) And the latter explicitly linked the soil and the race:

In loving service to the soil men see each season how death may be cheated and learn how they must always protect the sound seed from the weeds, and how close breeding makes fine types of stock. … if the best are to survive it must be by careful tending and protection from weeds and parasites. If only to relearn this ancient lesson, regeneration of the soil must come before national revival. Love for the living and unborn generations of the sound must come before pity for the misfits and the botched, and replace admiration for the nimble-witted parasite with well-lined pockets and no care for the future.[[37]](#endnote-37)

His book *Famine in England* (1938), a violent, pro-eugenics, anti-immigrant, ultra-right-wing polemic, concluded that: ‘It is blood and soil which rule at last; but if they fail only anarchy and slavery succeed. … If we serve our soil we can bring back the fertility of the strong breeds that will people the Empire with desired men and women who could hold it against the tides of yellow men and brown.’[[38]](#endnote-38) Here we see the ideas associated most famously with Darré being given full support in the British context. This is no coincidence; there are clear lines of transmission from Darré to Gardiner and Ludovici, both of whom read German and were familiar with the German political scene, and thence to Lymington. These connections then fed through into Gardiner’s Kinship in Husbandry, a group he founded during the war to combine the promotion of organic farming methods with political notions of racial and cultural purity. Although not all members of the Kinship were as radical as Lymington (Ludovici was not a member), who was saved from internment under Regulation 18B thanks only to his aristocratic status, most displayed clear sympathies towards Nazi Germany.[[39]](#endnote-39) Gardiner is more intriguing, though.

If Gardiner rediscovered the spirit of the *Arbeitslager* at the English work-camps, this was in no small measure down to the involvement of Germans, particularly Gardiner’s closest friend in the German youth movements, musician Georg Götsch. Götsch was one of the leaders of the *Altwandervogel* youth group, which ran *Arbeitslager* as a means of breaking down class and professional barriers between youngsters and contributing to the building of the new *Volksgemeinschaft*, or racial community. As Gardiner put it, by the end of the 1930s, many young men, ‘discontented with the dreary see-saw of Fascism-Communism and aware of the chaos of English leadership’, felt increasingly ‘drawn to the land, realizing that by doing practical work alongside skilled countrymen they would not only give service but gain much to offset the effete intellectualism of their own cultural background.’[[40]](#endnote-40)

Gardiner and Götsch organized a camp at Hermannsburg on the Lüneburg Heath in 1927 and an expedition of German students to Northumberland in the same year. Götsch noted in his report on the Northumberland trip that the expedition was ‘not an isolated event but part of a series involving many different groups of people connected by a common interest in activities affecting all the Germanic countries of Northern Europe.’[[41]](#endnote-41) The fact that the two men were thinking on very similar lines is evident in Götsch’s assertion that ‘Community life need not fall a prey to the danger of becoming the life of a herd, with its attendant barbarisation of thought, if the proper and rhythmic alternation of individual and group activity is preserved, and still further if it is balanced by the presence of men of different age.’[[42]](#endnote-42) When Götsch argued that Germany lacked an ‘appropriate form’ and needed to undertake ‘manly experiments’, he, like Gardiner, was advancing an incipient political philosophy that prized ‘authenticity’ and the ‘revival’ of deep-rooted traditions which would prevent the country from becoming ‘overwhelmed and choked in foreign jungles.’[[43]](#endnote-43)

Gardiner also helped to establish centres for the youth movement, such as the Boberhaus in Löwenberg (Silesia), the Musikheim in Frankfurt an der Oder, which Götsch directed until 1942, and the Meihof in the Netherlands. Götsch returned the favour, spending two days at Gardiner’s Gore Farm (Dorset) in July 1928 and filling Gardiner with enthusiasm for his project there.[[44]](#endnote-44) Götsch’s support for Gardiner meant that ‘German students and Freischar members would contribute to the physical and cultural developments both at Gore and Springhead in the coming years.’[[45]](#endnote-45)

The two men’s friendship flourished, with several exchanges in either direction. Soon Gardiner was discussing their meetings in almost mystical terms:

The [1930] expedition to the Ostmark was a fresh vindication of our activity; it marked a distinct advance in the coordination of English and Germans, cooperation being fuller and easier than during the summer school of 1929. On the English side there was at last a getting to grips with the implications of these tours, a dawning realization that they signify something more than a novel and exhilarating form of holiday, something even beyond a widening of personal experience, namely that they are potentially a training and preparation for the reconstructive tasks which confront our generation in England.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Gardiner shared Götsch’s passion for music, and believed that music and dance, as well as physical labour and intellectual discussion, were key to the camps’ success.[[47]](#endnote-47) Music was not merely decorative, but central to the process of national revival: ‘the resumption by masculine leadership and by state-building forces of the musical life of the people’ would provide the ‘way out from this decadence.’[[48]](#endnote-48) The work camps were indeed nothing less than ‘an answer of the European spirit to the mechanising and standardising of all social and economic process.’[[49]](#endnote-49) Gardiner and Götsch’s close collaboration raises some interesting questions for understanding the problem of ‘transnational fascism’.

This article is not the place to recapitulate the debate over whether Gardiner was a fascist. Suffice it to say that either a simple accusation or defence is inadequate to the task. The issue is made complex because Gardiner, as is natural, changed his mind over time, from saying that ‘every nation to-day requires a form of Fascism to rescue it from the pitfalls of its own self-sufficiency’ in 1932 to condemning fascism from 1933-34 onwards, especially Oswald Mosley’s BUF, as symptomatic of the mechanized soulless modernity he was trying to fight.[[50]](#endnote-50) But it is not this change of heart that is the most problematic issue. Rather, Gardiner’s real views are slippery, for although he condemned fascism, he continued to maintain the view that only a ‘Germanic revival’ could rescue ‘England’ from degeneration. Although he claimed that his vision meant something other than fascism, in retrospect we might wish not only to pay attention to Gardiner’s own statements but also to put them to work and set them in a meaningful context. That means an emphasis on the transnational. For irrespective of whether one regards Gardiner as a fascist or not (and by comparison with some of his colleagues in the English Array and other groups, such as Kinship in Husbandry, the epithet is less obviously applicable), the transnational nature of his efforts is clear; indeed, Gardiner epitomizes the concept of the transnational, for his work with Götsch (and many others) was founded on the concept of Northern European unity – not just the meeting of like-minded English and German groups but bringing them together to create something new from the amalgam.

At the same time as he was condemning fascism – a move which allowed him to save face during and after the war – Gardiner was espousing ideas about ‘Germany’ and the ‘Germanic’ which placed him on the radar of the security services in Britain and of the Nazis in Germany. The two-way relationship of the youth movement’s ideas is evident not only in Götsch’s impact on Gardiner, but vice-versa. Gardiner clearly thought that he was resisting ‘fascism’ when he advocated a rural revival, but his continued collaboration with Götsch throughout the war and beyond could not have occurred without his realizing that he was dealing with a man who had become a full-fledged Nazi. As Götsch wrote to Gardiner from Farleigh Wallop (Lymington’s estate) shortly before the outbreak of war, to explain his commitment to the Nazi regime: ‘There is young [sic] generation in Germany which is obviously willing to carry out on a large scale and bring into national reality, what my friends and myself searched for all our lives and tried out in preliminary activities in smaller groups.’[[51]](#endnote-51)

Gardiner was able to continue working with Götsch because his own views, for all his public condemnation of Nazism, had hardly changed. In April 1933, Gardiner wrote to Joseph Goebbels, not only offering his services in promoting Germanic values in England but suggesting to him that at the Musikheim he would find in Götsch ‘a true executor of the ideas of the National Socialist state.’ Whilst he would not have done anything so outré by the time war broke out, his advocacy of ‘renewing Germanic values in all countries around the North and Baltic Seas’ remained unchanged.[[52]](#endnote-52) In private, he was writing to colleagues to ask: ‘Is the attempt to destroy the Nazi regime, upon which our bellicose idealists are so furiously bent, worth the destruction of Christendom…?’ and to state, as late as the end of 1941: ‘you know how deeply I am committed to the task of Anglo-German reconciliation.’[[53]](#endnote-53) Similarly, if to an English audience he discussed the Musikheim as ‘something in the nature of a regional power-house aiming at the cultural recovery of eastern Germany’, in 1933 he described it to Goebbels as ‘a place of work where a popular [volksnahen] music, conscious of its responsibility, is cultivated through teaching and masterly craft, where all musical forms – the amateur play, the ballroom dances and men’s dances in the Germanic tradition (which we English proudly brought back to our German friends) – are sung and played with the clear political and social obligation of educating the German people.’[[54]](#endnote-54)

In 1941, and therefore long after Gardiner had publicly dissociated himself from any association with the Third Reich, he published an article on rural reconstruction in which the ambiguities of his thought become especially clear. Gardiner condemned Nazism, but he did so on the grounds that it had failed to live up to its promise, not that it was intrinsically bad. Reiterating his familiar call to focus on the local in order to counter the dangerous trends of mass industry and consumerism, Gardiner claimed that ‘National Socialist Germany set out to restore the experience of blood and soil to a rapidly urbanized nation. But the experience remained a doctrine and the blood and soil were sacrificed to the Baal of war.’[[55]](#endnote-55) In his 1943 book, *England Herself*, he set out his vision for the postwar world; it centred on the revival of lost leadership with a focus on the local. ‘Specific local and regional prosperity would be the focus of men’s thoughts, and absorb their energies’, he proposed, ‘instead of these latter being misspent on vapid political agitations. The *genius loci* would once more become the channel of divine power. For men would love their surroundings and call them home.’[[56]](#endnote-56) For all Gardiner’s explicit condemnation of Nazism – and we can be confident that he was sincere in this condemnation – it is clear that Gardiner had lost none of the enthusiasms which had led him initially to be sympathetic to it. His dream of racial regeneration founded on rural revivalism, with strong leadership based on service emerging organically out of a local setting, remained undimmed. And although he had less to say in public about the unity of Northern European countries linked by race, culture and tradition, this dream too survived the war as his private correspondence and unpublished writings show.

**Conclusion**

Ignazio Silone’s 1934 novel, *Fontamara*, gives a more accurate portrayal of the Fascist regime’s treatment of the Italian peasants than does official propaganda. It also contains some penetrating observations about the people who became fascists and their motivations. When a large contingent of men arrive at the village and attack and rape the women who are there whilst the men are out working the fields in the Fucino, they are mostly comprised of ‘peasants, the landless kind, the kind that go out working for the landlords, earning little and living by sneaking and thieving. … Thieves and vagabonds entrusted with the task of defending order and property. Men without honour, without faith, impious, poor and yet enemies of the poor.’ The narrator’s husband confirms his wife’s impressions, stating that ‘poor folk’ made up their ranks, ‘but a special kind of poor folk; landless, not brought up to any trade, or knowing too many trades, which is the same thing.’ He adds that such people have ‘always been at the disposal of anyone who gives orders’; what is new about Fascism is ‘recruiting them into a special army, giving them a special uniform and special arms.’[[57]](#endnote-57)

What Gardiner and Götsch aspired to was of course something nobler. But the Italian example indicates the likely outcome of measures supposed to improve rural life. The difference between fascist ideas and fascist action was often, as has been noted many times, quite substantial, and dreams of reviving a race of yeoman were even less likely to succeed in the British context—where the vast majority of the population were already urban or suburban dwellers—than in Italy or France, where peasants still existed in the 1920s and 1930s.[[58]](#endnote-58) Gardiner may have been right to say that the Third Reich reneged on its promise to ‘protect Natural Beauty’, which is what the *Reichsnaturschutzgesetz* proposed to do, a goal which many in England applauded ‘whatever we may think or feel about Nazi political philosophy’[[59]](#endnote-59); but he was seduced by the promise, and remained convinced throughout his life that only a return to the soil could save England from the consequences of modernity.

The irony is that Gardiner’s argument about the virtues of the local as the locus of national rebirth was being replicated all over Europe in the interwar period, as rural revivalist groups, many of them turning to or being absorbed by fascist movements, demanded recognition of their own chosen ‘local genius’. If that clash of localisms was bound to end disastrously, it is nevertheless the case that in their formative stages, the blood and soil variety of localist philosophy that was such an important component of fascism was generated transnationally. Gardiner and Götsch exemplify the process. Following the Springhead Ring’s visit to the Kassel Music Festival in 1938, just days after Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich, Gardiner presented a vellum scroll to the Musikheim, inscribed with the following words: ‘The Springhead Ring gave this to the Musikheim, Frankfurt-an-der-Oder, in token of friendship between England and Germany, in remembrance of a common task and service, and in thanksgiving for release from the madness of impending war.’[[60]](#endnote-60) At the ceremony itself Gardiner presented Götsch, seated on the throne of ‘the *Ansager*, a sort of Chronos or King of the Masque’, with a bowl of earth from Springhead, to be ‘taken to the Musikheim where it will be interred on the German Day of Remembrance, November 9.’[[61]](#endnote-61) As David Matless noted of this ceremony: ‘English earth with English humus goes abroad to a place of affinity, the ultimate cross-cultural fertilizer.’[[62]](#endnote-62)

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**Notes**

1. See, for example, the *Journal of World History*, 19, 3 (2008), on the UN; Kaiser, Leucht and Rasmussen (eds.), *The History of the European Union*; Kaiser and Starie (eds.), *Transnational European Union*, on the EU. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Especially in the context of the Cold War and the developing opposition to communism after the Helsinki Process. See, for example, Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect*; Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bashford and Levine (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, esp. the essays in Part I: “Transnational Themes in the History of Eugenics.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Bauerkämper, *Der Faschismus in Europa 1918-1945*, 176; Bauerkämper, “Ambiguities of Transnationalism,” 45. See also Durham and Power (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Transnational Right*; and Bar-On, “Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite,” esp. 214-215, where Bar-On argues, rather contentiously, that the existence of pan-European SS brigades during World War II testifies to the existence of a “fascist international.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Eley, *Nazism as Fascism*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Jerrold, *The Necessity of Freedom*, 159. Similarly, the BUF activist James Drennan (aka W.E.D. Allen, formerly Conservative MP for West Belfast until he joined Mosley’s New Party in 1930) wrote that “The Ulster movement was, in fact, the first Fascist movement in Europe.” See Drennan, *B.U.F. Oswald Mosley and British Fascism*, 292. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See for example Kellogg, *The Russian Roots of Nazism*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism*, 38 and *passim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See especially Bauerkämper and Rossoliński-Liebe (eds.), *Fascism without Borders* and the articles in the special issue of the *Journal of Global History* 12, no. 2 (2017). For a more critical approach to transnationalism in this context, see Roberts, *Fascist Interactions*. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For the ways in which local landscapes could inform nationalist ideas in Germany, see for example, Lekan and Zeller, *Germany’s Nature*; Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor*; Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials*. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Confino, *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance*, 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*. Griffin makes a similar point (see esp. 255-258) and criticises those historians who focus only on Nazi technocratic visions or on Nazism’s romantic “anti-modernism.” See also the valuable comments in Zander, *Right Modern*, esp. 63-76. Zander’s claim that the mainstream of British fascism (especially the BUF) admired Italian Fascist schemes for land improvement and aimed to mechanize agriculture is well taken. However, despite his sensible conclusion (76) that fascism aimed at “finding a proper balance between industry and agriculture rather than attempting to be entirely techno-futuristic or entirely focused on a return to the idealised past”, by dismissing fascist rural nostalgia as a minority view he tends to reproduce the modernist/anti-modernist dichotomy that Griffin wants to overcome. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Howkins, “Discovery of Rural England.” [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Bauerkämper, “Ambiguities of Transnationalism,” 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Isabel Hofmeyr claims in “AHR Conversations: On Transnational History,” 1444, that the “claim of transnational methods is not simply that historical processes are made in different places but that they are constructed in the movement between places, sites, and regions.” [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Uekoetter, *The Green and the Brown*. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Cited in Neumann, “National Socialism, Holocaust, and Ecology,” 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Schattenfroh, *Wille und Rasse*, 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. As Piers Stephens claims in his critical analysis of Anna Bramwell: “Blood, Not Soil,” 174. Stephens is right to take on some of Bramwell’s more provocative claims, but the fact that mainstream contemporary green thinking has divorced itself from its far-right origins should not lead to a denial of those origins altogether. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See the essays in Jefferies and Tyldesley (eds.), *Rolf Gardiner: Folk, Nature and Culture in Interwar Britain*, especially Richard Griffiths, “The Dangers of Definition: Post-Facto Opinions on Rolf Gardiner’s Attitudes towards Nazi Germany,” and Dan Stone, “Rolf Gardiner: An Honorary Nazi?,” 137-149 and 151-168 respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Mike Tyldesley, “Rolf Gardiner and Pacifism: The Case of Max Plowman,” in *Rolf Gardiner*, edited by Jefferies and Tyldesley, 121-135. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. M. Jefferies, “Rolf Gardiner and German Naturism,” in *Rolf Gardiner*, edited by Jefferies and Tyldesley, 60; *Youth* cited on 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See Tyldesley, “The German Youth Movement and National Socialism,” 21-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. For example: Laqueur, *Young Germany*, 243. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Jefferies, “Rolf Gardiner and German Naturism,” 62; Coupland, *Farming, Fascism and Ecology*, 219-220.Gardiner’s report on the Goslar *Bauerntag* twelve years later presents an image of a man frightened by the “blind, irresistible forces [that] were being let loose” – a far cry from the sort of terms he used to describe Nazi Germany during the 1930s. See “The Bauerntag Congress,” in Best (ed.), *Water Springing from the Ground*, 126-127. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Darré, *Blut und Boden*, 2; offprint from *Odal: Monatsschrift für Blut und Boden*. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Darré, “The Peasantry as the Key to Understanding the Nordic Race,” 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Gardiner, “A Survey of Constructive Aspects of the New Germany. With Some Notes and Suggestions as to the Methods of Projection” (June 1934), 44, 43, Cambridge University Library, Rolf Gardiner Papers, RGP M3/7. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Gardiner, *England Herself*, 170-171. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. On the English Mistery, see Stone, *Breeding Superman*. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Gardiner, “German Eastward Policy and the Baltic States,” 324. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Simons, “‘Pilgrimages to Holy Places,’” 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Chase, “Review of Jefferies and Tyldesley,” 446. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. *The Springhead Ring News Sheet*, 23 (5 November 1938). *Arbeitslager* = voluntary work camps. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ludovici, “Hitler and the Third Reich,” 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ludovici, “Hitler and the Third Reich, Part III,” 234. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Lymington, *Famine in England*, 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Lymington, *Famine in England*, 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. On Kinship in Husbandry, see Moore-Colyer, “Back to Basics”; Moore-Colyer and Conford, “A ‘Secret Society’”?, 189-206. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Gardiner, *England Herself*, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ernst Buske and Georg Goetsch, “German Leaders’ Report,” Appendix II in *Britain and Germany*, edited by Gardiner and Rocholl, 259. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Buske and Goetsch, “German Leaders’ Report,” 266. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Georg Goetsch, “Germany between Russia and England,” in *Britain and Germany*, edited by Gardiner and Rocholl, 103-104. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Gardiner, diary, July 1928, cited in Moore-Colyer, “Rolf Gardiner, Farming and the English Landscape,” in *Rolf Gardiner*, edited by Jefferies and Tyldesley, 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Moore-Colyer, “Rolf Gardiner, Farming and the English Landscape,” 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Gardiner, “The Musikheim, Frankfurt an der Oder,” 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Jefferies, “Rolf Gardiner and German Naturism,” 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Gardiner, “Reflections on Music and Statecraft” (1933), in Best (ed.), *Water Springing from the Ground*, 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Gardiner, “The Triple Function of Work Camps and Work Service in Europe,” in Best (ed.), *Water Springing from the Ground*, 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Gardiner, *World without End*, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Götsch to Gardiner, 13 August 1939, RGP E2/4. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Gardiner to Goebbels, 25 April 1933, RGP A2/6, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Gardiner to Arthur Bryant, 8 October 1939 (Christendom); 30 December 1941 (reconciliation), King’s College London, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Bryant Papers, E19. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Gardiner, “Georg Goetsch and the Musikheim,” in Best (ed.), *Water Springing from the Ground*, 70; Gardiner to Goebbels, 25 April 1933, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Gardiner, “Rural Reconstruction,” 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Gardiner, *England Herself*, 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Silone, *Fontamara*, 91, 96. But see also Pennacchi, *The Mussolini Canal*, for a portrayal of rural fascism that focuses on a more prosperous peasant family. At one point (195), Pennacchi has Mussolini say: “Out of the towns with you, into the countryside … that’s what Fascism is all about.” [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. See Stone, ““Rural Revivalism and the Radical Right in France and Britain between the Wars.” [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Howard of Penrith, “Lessons from Other Countries,” 284. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Gardiner, “The Kassel Festival,” in Best (ed.), *Water Springing from the Ground*, 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Gardiner, “The Kassel Festival,” in Best (ed.), *Water Springing from the Ground*, 134, 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)