

**DEAN  
KROUK**

**FASCISM  
& MODERNIST  
LITERATURE  
IN  
NORWAY**



*Fascism and Modernist Literature in Norway* illuminates the connections between literature and politics in interwar Europe. Focusing on the works of Nobel Prize-winning novelist Knut Hamsun and modernist poets Åsmund Sveen and Rolf Jacobsen—all of whom collaborated with the Nazi regime during the occupation of Norway in World War II—and on the writings of anti-fascist novelist and critic Sigurd Hoel, Dean Krouk reveals key aspects of the modernist literary imagination in Norway.

In their works, Hamsun, Sveen, and Jacobsen expressed their discontent with twentieth-century European modernity, which they perceived as overly rationalized or nihilistic. Krouk explains how fascism offered these writers a seductive utopian vision that intersected with the countercultural and avant-garde aspects of their literary works. In contrast, Hoel's critical analysis of Nazism and active opposition to it extended to a questioning of all patriarchal forms of authority. Krouk's readings of these writers serve as a timely reminder of the dangers of fascism and the value of clear-sighted intellectual engagement.

**DEAN KROUK** is assistant professor of Scandinavian studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"A welcome contribution to fascist studies that uses sophisticated theory to illuminate the profound affinity between developments in Norwegian modernism and currents within Quisling's movement that have so far baffled or been ignored by mainstream historians."

—**ROGER GRIFFIN**, *AUTHOR OF MODERNISM AND FASCISM: THE SENSE OF A BEGINNING UNDER MUSSOLINI AND HITLER*

"Important for those interested in understanding the intersection of modernism as a literary-cultural movement and fascist movements of all sorts."

—**MONIKA ŽAGAR**, *AUTHOR OF KNUT HAMSON: THE DARK SIDE OF LITERARY BRILLIANCE*

## NEW DIRECTIONS IN SCANDINAVIAN STUDIES



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS  
SEATTLE & LONDON  
WWW.WASHINGTON.EDU/UWPRESS

COVER DESIGN: Katrina Noble

ISBN 978-0-295-74228-1



# CRUCIAL FACTS & MODERN LITERATURE IN MORRIS



# Fascism and Modernist Literature in Norway

Dean Krouk

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS  
*Seattle and London*

THIS BOOK IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A COLLABORATIVE GRANT  
FROM THE ANDREW W. MELLON FOUNDATION.

Additional support was provided by the Office of the Vice  
Chancellor for Research and Graduate Education at the  
University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Department of  
Scandinavian Studies at the University of Washington.

© 2017 by the University of Washington Press  
21 20 19 18 17 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may  
be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any  
means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy,  
recording, or any information storage or retrieval  
system, without permission in writing from the  
publisher.

University of Washington Press  
[www.washington.edu/uwpress](http://www.washington.edu/uwpress)

Cataloging-in-Publication Data available from the  
Library of Congress.

The paper used in this publication is acid-free and  
meets the minimum requirements of American  
National Standard for Information Sciences—  
Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials,  
ANSI Z39.48-1984.∞

# NEW DIRECTIONS IN SCANDINAVIAN STUDIES

*TERJE LEIREN AND CHRISTINE INGEBRITSEN,*  
*SERIES EDITORS*

## NEW DIRECTIONS IN SCANDINAVIAN STUDIES

This series offers interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the Nordic region of Scandinavia and the Baltic States and their cultural connections in North America. By redefining the boundaries of Scandinavian studies to include the Baltic States and Scandinavian America, the series presents books that focus on the study of the culture, history, literature, and politics of the North.

*Small States in International Relations* edited by  
Christine Ingebritsen, Iver B. Neumann, Sieglinde Gstohl, and Jessica Beyer

*Danish Cookbooks: Domesticity and National Identity, 1616-1901*  
Carol Gold

*Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia: Fiction, Film, and Social Change*  
Andrew Nestingen

*Selected Plays of Marcus Thrane* translated and introduced by  
Terje I. Leiren

*Munch's Ibsen: A Painter's Visions of a Playwright*  
Joan Templeton

*Knut Hamsun: The Dark Side of Literary Brilliance*  
Monika Žagar

*Nordic Exposures: Scandinavian Identities  
in Classical Hollywood Cinema*  
Arne Lunde

*Icons of Danish Modernity: Georg Brandes and Asta Nielsen*  
Julie K. Allen

*Danish Folktales, Legends, and Other Stories*  
Timothy R. Tangherlini

*The Power of Song: Nonviolent National Culture  
in the Baltic Singing Revolution*  
Guntis Šmidchens

*Fascism and Modernist Literature in Norway*  
Dean Krouk

*Christian Krohg's Naturalism*  
Øystein Sjøstad

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their generous encouragement and assistance with this project, I owe debts of gratitude to colleagues, students, family members, and friends from Norway to California to the Upper Midwest. In its early stages, the project benefited tremendously from the constructive support and feedback of Mark Sandberg, Linda Rugg, Karin Sanders, Dorothy Hale, Amanda Doxtater, Laura Horak, and Anna Jörngården. For much of the long stretch of research and writing, Allen Young was an invaluable reader and source of encouragement. Other scholars, friends, and colleagues I wish to thank for their various forms of help and support at some stage of the project include Tone Selboe, Henning Howlid Wærp, Monika Žagar, Olivia Gunn, Ellen Rees, Peter Sjølyst-Jackson, Leif Høghaug and Hilde Nyeggen Martinsen, Claudia Berguson, Margaret O'Leary, Kari Lie Dorer, Christine Hærter Piñero, Sarah Wells, and Maria Vendetti. In addition, I would like to thank my colleagues in the Department of German, Nordic, and Slavic at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, as well as the editors and anonymous reviewers at the University of Washington Press, the Modern Language Initiative, and the New Directions in Scandinavian Studies Series.

Support for this research was provided by the University of Wisconsin–Madison Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Graduate Education with funding from the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation. The writing of this book was also conducted with generous support from the University of California–Berkeley, the American Scandinavian Foundation, St. Olaf College, the University of Oslo, the Norwegian Researchers and Teachers Association of North America (NORTANA), and the University of Wisconsin–Madison College of Letters and Sciences and Center for European



Studies. Earlier versions of small sections of this book, as well as related writings, have appeared in *Knut Hamsun: Transgression and Worlding* (Tapir Academic Press, 2011) and “*Der vårgras brydder*”: *Nye lesninger av Åsmund Sveens diktning* (Oplandske Press, 2010).

My greatest gratitude is reserved for my parents, Marianne and Steven Krouk, whose devotion and support for educational pursuits from the earliest years were decisive for my academic and personal growth. The entire Krouk family is a continuous source of inspiration. I also wish to thank Jonathan Hart for his gracious support and encouragement over the years. My sister Leah, my niece Sofie, and my brother-in-law Courtney have all been wonderful presences in my life during the completion of this book, as has Nick Szczech—thank you all.

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	3
1. Norwegian Modernism and Fascist Utopianism	9
2. Blind Forces of Life: Knut Hamsun's <i>Mysteries</i>	25
3. Wild Spring: Åsmund Sveen's Homoerotic Vitalism and Nazi Collaboration	47
4. Modernist Ragnarok: Rolf Jacobsen's Poetic and Political Anti-Nihilism	81
5. Unconscious Nazism: Sigurd Hoel's Psychoanalytic Antifascism	115
Conclusion	133
Notes	139
Bibliography	159
Index	171



Fascism and Modernist Literature  
in Norway





# Introduction

This book illuminates an underexplored area of twentieth-century European cultural history by examining the connections between fascism and Norwegian literature during the modernist period. It focuses on analyzing the writings—novels, poetry, essays—of several pro-fascist authors and one antifascist intellectual. Literary and cultural analysis of texts, films, and other media provides an enhanced understanding of the feelings and perceptions that drive political and ideological commitments. This is perhaps especially true in the case of fascism, which has often been understood as a “metapolitical phenomenon” that goes beyond ordinary party allegiances or typical categorical divisions of political thought.<sup>1</sup> While the specific forms and aesthetics taken by interwar fascism mostly belong to history, the affective and cultural dimensions of fascism are alive and well in the twenty-first century. The year 2016 gave the world stark reminders that the forces of ethnic and national belonging, racism, and misogyny continue to play a role in European and American politics, even after decades of neoliberal globalization and social progress. Contemporary parallels and resemblances to the 1930s need not pertain to the precise political forms on display but rather to the deep-seated nature of the affective narratives and myths. Racist and patriarchal narratives of unjust loss and proper belonging; myths of restored national greatness after liberal decline; political decisions motivated by inchoate anger, unresolved mourning, and smoldering resentment channeled into rage against minorities—all these metapolitical dimensions have been evident in the reactionary resurgence of our time.

Norwegian literature has had an extensive and complicated history of engagement with fascism, far-right nationalism, and Nazism. The final volume of Karl Ove Knausgård's autobiographical novel, *Min kamp* (*My Struggle*, 2009–11), devotes over four hundred pages to an essay titled “Navnet og tallet” (The Name and the Number). In a lengthy discussion of Hitler, Nazism, and the Holocaust, Knausgård takes the reader through a series of intense ethical, aesthetic, and philosophical reflections. Knausgård's interest in National Socialism in *Min kamp* is the tip of a literary-historical iceberg, which ultimately leads back to the interwar period and the five-year Nazi occupation of Norway during World War II. This larger context includes the Norwegian authors examined in this book, three of whom sympathized with fascism and Nazism in Norway: the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Knut Hamsun and the modernist poets Rolf Jacobsen and Åsmund Sveen. The fourth author, the cultural-radical novelist Sigurd Hoel, was persistently opposed to all forms of fascism. These four authors represent varying aspects of the modernist literary imagination in Norway, which includes disparate aesthetic and ideological features such as anti-realism, vitalism, anti-nihilism, and cultural radicalism, as I will explore in this book.

Beyond these four, there were numerous other literary or cultural figures in Norway who stridently opposed fascism, as well as a small but vocal minority that supported the ideology and the Nazi occupation. One important cultural collaborator during the war was the author and critic Finn Halvorsen, who was responsible for official theater productions during the occupation.<sup>2</sup> Cultural life in occupied Norway was subject to strict censorship and control—radios were banned, publishing houses and newspapers were eventually Nazi-fied. During the postwar legal purge known as *landssvikoppgjøret*, around 46,000 Norwegians were sentenced for treason. A total of sixteen Norwegian authors were sentenced for treason after the occupation ended.<sup>3</sup> Active and overt commitment to the fascist utopian promise of national rebirth was never anything close to a majority position in a young nation marked by strong adherence to democratic norms and, increasingly in the 1930s, the dominance of the social-democratic Arbeiderpartiet (Labour Party).

In addition to Sigurd Hoel, prominent literary figures on the side of opposition and resistance included the leftist, non-modernist poets Arnulf Øverland and Nordahl Grieg, who are justly remembered in Norway for their anti-Nazi publications and activities. Øverland's

1936 poem “Du må ikke sove” (You must not sleep) remains one of the interwar period’s signature political poems, while his 1945 collection *Vi overlever alt* (*We Will Survive*) includes clandestine resistance poetry as well as inspiring texts he wrote as a prisoner in the concentration camps Grini (in Bærum, Norway) and Sachsenhausen.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Grieg’s posthumous poetry collection *Friheten*, from 1945, contains much of his popular antifascist poetry. Grieg died in 1943 while serving as a war correspondent in an Allied aircraft raid over Berlin. Another literary voice of the resistance was the novelist and journalist Johan Borgen, who mocked the Nazi regime during the war under the pseudonym “Mumle Gåsegg” in the newspaper *Dagbladet*. Borgen was also imprisoned in Grini, and eventually he fled to Sweden later in the occupation. From a conservative political position, the neo-realist Catholic novelist Sigrid Undset was an early critic of Hitler and an outspoken voice of opposition from exile in Brooklyn during the Nazi occupation.<sup>5</sup>

In the postwar decades, Norwegian writers interpreted Nazism and related ideological problems in retrospective fictions. Some of these probed the psychology of treason and betrayal, such as Hoel’s *Møte ved milepelen* (*Meeting at the Milestone*, 1947), which I will discuss in the fifth chapter. Novels by Jens Bjørneboe addressed the medical experiments that took place in the Nazi camps (in *Før hanen galer*, 1952) and the problem of evil committed in the name of ideologies, in the trilogy *Bestialitetens historie* (*The History of Bestiality*, 1966–73).<sup>6</sup> The ongoing concern with the Nazi occupation in Norwegian culture includes fiction and film of recent decades, often centered on representations of war memories and stories of resistance and collaboration.

In addition, memory and study of the Holocaust now has an established institutional location in Oslo. Since 2005, the Center for Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities has been located in Villa Grande, the house where the fascist party leader and nominal head of government Vidkun Quisling resided during the Nazi occupation. The center’s website calls its choice of location a “symbolic act of reappropriation” and explains, “Once a house of shame it is now filled with activities in strong contrast to its former role.”<sup>7</sup> The opening of the center was one of the results of a national commission in the 1990s that led to restitution for Norwegian victims and survivors of the Holocaust. This process was a sign of the ways in which Scandinavian memory of World War II and the Holocaust has been changing



in recent decades. For a long time, the “master narrative” of the Norwegian nation in resistance to the Nazi occupation hardly mentioned the Norwegian Jews—a silence in both collective memory and historiography.<sup>8</sup> Although World War II has played a prominent role in Norwegian national memory and shaped Norwegian identity in the post-war era, addressing the exclusion of the Jews and Norway’s role in the Holocaust has been difficult.<sup>9</sup> The historians Bjarte Bruland and Mats Tangestuen connect this difficulty to the fact that nationalist memories of occupation and resistance, with clearly polarized good and evil actors—patriotic resistance heroes against Nazis and collaborators—were for a long time central to the representation of the war period.<sup>10</sup>

Another indication that official memory and historiography of this period have given way to greater nuance and greater recognition of the fate of Norwegian Jews came on International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2012, when Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg officially apologized for the Norwegian role in the Nazi genocide. He invoked the fate of the young diarist Ruth Maier, who was arrested and deported from Oslo harbor with over five hundred other Jews in November 1942.<sup>11</sup> Maier was an intimate friend of the important modernist poet Gunvor Hofmo, who preserved her diaries after the war.<sup>12</sup> She was killed at Auschwitz. Stoltenberg said in his speech:

What about the crimes against Ruth Maier and the other Jews? The murders were unquestionably carried out by the Nazis. But it was Norwegians who carried out the arrests. It was Norwegians who drove the trucks. And it happened in Norway. In the course of the war, 772 Norwegian Jews and Jewish refugees were arrested and deported. Only 34 survived. Without relieving the Nazis of their responsibility, it is time for us to acknowledge that Norwegian policemen and other Norwegians took part in the arrest and deportation of Jews. Today I feel it is fitting to express our deepest apologies that this could happen on Norwegian soil.<sup>13</sup>

In taking responsibility and apologizing for the actions of a small number of Norwegians, Stoltenberg emphasized the equal worth and equal rights of Jews and other minorities in Norway. His promise to counteract the views of contemporary extremists with “humanity and equality” echoed the speech he gave less than six months earlier, two days after the terrorist massacre by a far-right extremist on July 22, 2011, shook the country to its core.

The first chapter of this book will develop the intellectual-historical context needed to understand the complex relationship of literary