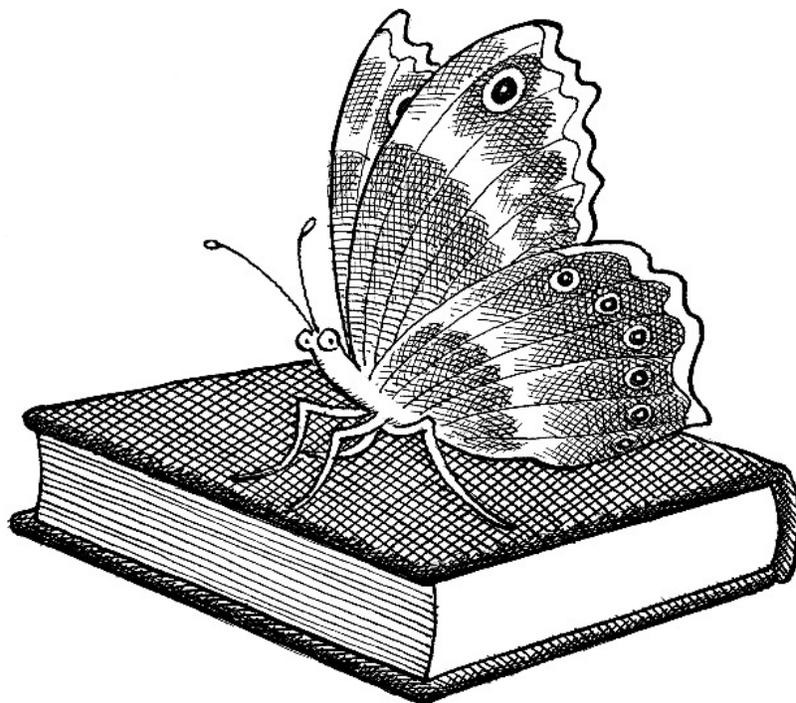


Gavriel D. Rosenfeld
THE FOURTH REICH
The specter of Nazism
from World War II to the
present
408pp. Cambridge
University Press. £22.



Past futures

MARCUS COLLA

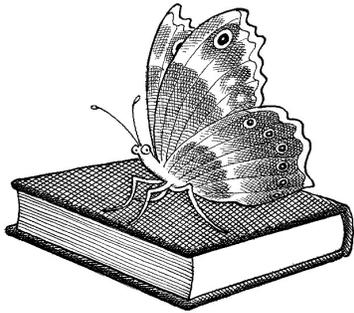
Gavriel D. Rosenfeld examines how the legacy of Nazism in the postwar world has materialized as the fear of a “Fourth Reich”. Sweeping across continents and surveying films, novels and comic books in addition to political movements, he traces the vast multitude of ways this idea has appeared up to the present day. He is fascinated by the idea of past futures: histories, like a Fourth Reich, that never came to pass but that were nevertheless widely understood as genuine possibilities. And he is an unapologetic champion of counterfactual history. Discussion often stops at forks in the historical road, as he pauses to weigh up the alternative paths that history might have taken.

His point, of course, is to stress that nothing in history is inevitable. But this book gives the sense that a Fourth Reich was a historical non-starter not because of contingency and luck, but because of the scattered quality of the term itself. Barely two individuals who used the term seem to have had the same thing in mind. And given the wide spectrum of voices and genres that Rosenfeld draws on, it is not hard to see why. The Fourth Reich’s global cast of characters – Victor Klemperer, Orson Welles, James Baldwin, Simon Wiesenthal and the Berlusconi press, to name just a few – make for an eclectic bunch, and their respective intents in employing the idea of a Fourth Reich are as diverse as one might expect. The term has served variously as a genuine political vision, a rhetorical insult, a

dystopian fantasy, a call for vigilance and, for many in the 1930s and 40s who dreamed of the end of Nazism, a simple shorthand for “whatever comes next”.

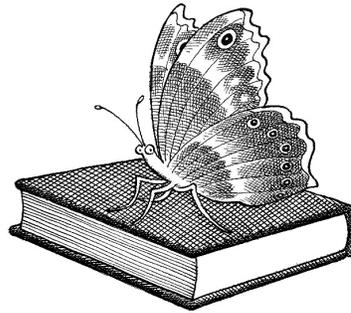
But the real value of this book lies in its insights into the distorting power of historical memory. The prospect of a Fourth Reich has continued to captivate the world not because conditions have always been ripe for a Nazi return to power, but because the magnitude of what happened between 1933 and 1945 has so completely colonized the horizons of our political imaginations. The historian Otto Friedrich’s observation that “those who cannot forget the past are condemned to misunderstand it” is not as well known as the cliché it inverts. But Rosenfeld’s intriguing study gives good reason to think perhaps it should be.

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