

St. Andrew's School

Levinson Lecture: Southern Fascism?

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[Prev](#) [Next](#)



**Marilyn Levinson, Glenda
Gilmore, David Levinson,
Emily Pressman, Lindsay
Brown**

The 2009 Levinson Lecture brought Professor Glenda Gilmore of Yale University to explore elements of the civil rights struggle in the American South during the Great Depression. Professor Gilmore spent the day in history classes at St. Andrew's and was impressed with the quality of questions posed by the students.

For her lecture, Gilmore offered insights into the segregation policies and white supremacist movements that arose in the South in the early 20th Century, noting in particular the similarities with the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Europe. Economic devastation combined with racial tensions to give rise to groups such as the American Order of Fascisti, known as the "Black Shirts," The group was formed in Atlanta, Georgia, already familiar with tactics of violent organizations like the Ku Klux Klan.

The Black Shirts actively linked racism and employment economics, warning that blacks took jobs from whites in the city, and advocating the relocation of blacks to rural areas. When rallies and mild intervention with employers failed to achieve their desired outcomes, they used violence and intimidation to chase black workers from jobs.

The methods of the Black Shirts met with some resistance from portions of white society, but the resistance was not necessarily noble. Many preferred simply to use the legal means of racial discrimination, found in the segregation policies of the southern cities and states. Whites making rules instead of threats seemed far less likely to capture undesirable attention.

At the same time, media stories in the 1930s of Fascism and Nazism sweeping Europe were not well received by white American society. They could not fully comprehend the events occurring across the Atlantic Ocean and dismissed the ideology as fanatical. Their disdain for the European racism was in juxtaposition to their own prejudices and systemic discrimination of blacks. In fact, blacks in America had lived under segregation and legal oppression for more than three decades before Hitler ever came to power and began his organized persecution of Jewish citizens.

Many scholars would have expected a holocaust to occur in the American South before ever entertaining the notion that one would occur in Europe, especially given that skin color was far more visible than different religious background. The decades of violent lynchings in America were far worse than anything that had been reported in Europe up to that point. The Philadelphia Tribune wrote in 1933 that "To be a Jew in Germany is hell....To be a Negro in America is twice as bad." As history unfolded, that perception would sadly change for the worse in Europe, and civil rights would only begin to be recognized in America three decades later.

Following her remarks, Gilmore greeted students in the Gahagan Room and signed copies of two of her books, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* and *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. Professor Gilmore's lecture marks the seventh year of the Levinson History Lecture at St. Andrew's. Endowed by David N. '53 and Marilyn Levinson, and their son Micah '05, the lecture series brings notable historians and political experts to share their work with the students.

[« Back](#)