ISBN 978-88-255-4003-1
DOI 10.4399/97888255400318
pp. 197-206 (dicembre 2017)

The Relevance of Fascism and National Socialism

SHERI BERMAN

Abstract:

Donald Trump and the rising populist tide in Europe has led some to question whether democracy is facing a threat akin to that posed by fascism and National Socialism during the interwar period. Although conflating populism and fascism/National Socialism is problematic, these movements do share some important similarities: they both claim to speak in the "name of the people", they are both opposed to the "establishment" and traditional elites, and they are both illiberal. Alongside these similarities are also, however, crucial differences. Fascists and National Socialists were explicitly opposed to democracy and viewed violence as both a means and an end. Populists, on the other hand, often undermine democracy but are not explicitly anti-democratic and while often accepting violence, do not actively promote it. Moreover, fascists and National Socialists had a clear, if abhorrent, view of a new type of world and society they wanted to create. Populists are opposed to the reigning order but lack a clear vision of an alternative one. Equally important are the different contexts within which these movements arose: although the West is facing real problems today, we are not (yet at least) facing the type of crisis we did during the interwar years, and this shapes both the nature and impact of populism and fascism/National Socialism.

Keywords*: Fascism, National Socialism, Great Depression, Populism, Democracy.*

1. The Relevance of Fascism and National Socialism

Donald Trump and the rising populist tide in Europe has led some to question whether democracy is facing a threat akin to that posed by fascism and National Socialism during the interwar period.

Although conflating populism and fascism/National Socialism is problematic, these movements do share some important similarities[1].

[1] Sh. BERMAN, "Populism is not Fascism," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2016 and idem, "Donald Trump Isn't a Fascist," *VOX*, January 3, 2016.

Understanding, therefore, what enabled fascism and National Socialism to come to power should provide us with insights into the challenges facing democracy today as well as perhaps some lessons for those determined to defend it. Although fascism and National Socialism are often portrayed as movements of the irrational, close-minded and racist — people we might today refer to as "deplorables"— this view is fundamentally incorrect. In places like Italy and Germany Fascism and National Socialism garnered more and broader support than any other party not merely by appealing to prejudices and promoting "alternative" facts, but rather by offering real, if barbaric solutions to problems that bedevil modern societies to the present day. In particular, fascism and National Socialism promised to shield citizens from capitalism's harshest effects and protect national unity and identity in a world of rapid economic and social change.

2. The Rationale and Rise of Fascism and National Socialism

Although we associate fascism with the collapse of democracy in interwar Italy, Germany and elsewhere, its origins lie decades earlier, in the period of rapid and disorienting change that hit Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During these decades capitalism dramatically reshaped Western societies, destroying traditional communities, professions, and cultural norms. This was also, of course, a period of immense immigration, as peasants flocked from rural areas decimated by new agricultural technologies and the inflow of cheap agricultural products to cities and the citizens of poorer countries flocked to richer ones in search of better lives and opportunities. Then, as now, these changes frightened people and led to the rise of new political movements that aimed to capture and channel these fears. Right-wing nationalist movements were prominent among these, promising to protect citizens from the pernicious influence of foreigners and markets. Such movements arose in almost all Western countries, becoming disruptive forces in some and influencing policy making in some, pushing, for example, to limit immigration and expand protectionism, but they did not fundamentally challenge existing political orders or elites before 1914. Their appeals and policies alone, in other words, did not make them truly dangerous or revolutionary. It would take the First World War and its aftermath along with the fail-

ures and miscalculations of existing democratic institutions and elites to do that.

The First World War killed, maimed and traumatized millions of Europeans and physically and economic devastated much of Europe. By the war's end European leaders and publics understood that an entire civilization or way of life had come to an end. 1918 brought an end to the war, but not to the suffering. Europe's continental empires - the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman - collapsed during or after the war, creating a variety of new states entirely lacking in democratic experience and with mixed populations that had little interest in living together. In many of Europe's already existing states, the end of the war also led to a collapse of the "old regime" and a transition to democracy, but most of these countries lacked previous democratic experience and thus the habits, norms and institutions necessary for making democracy work.

Making matters worse, rather than being a period of peace and reconstruction, the postwar era turned out to be characterized by an unending stream of social and economic problems. At the war's end new democracies had to reconstruct economies distorted and disrupted by the war; reintegrate millions of soldiers back into society; and, in places like Germany and Austria, respond to the humiliation of a lost war and a punitive peace. Lawlessness and societal violence also quickly became endemic in much of Europe with democratic governments losing control of the streets and parts of their territories. Despite these and other problems, fascists and National Socialists remained marginal forces during the immediate postwar period. In Italy, for example, fascists received almost no votes in the country's first postwar election and in Germany Hitler's 1923 Beer Hall putsch was a flop that ended with him and many of his co-conspirators in jail.

As the interwar period wore on, however, problems mounted and democratic institutions and elites proved unable or unwilling to deal with them. In Italy, for example, the postwar period brought high inflation and unemployment; strikes, factory occupations, land seizures and other forms of social unrest; and violence between left- and right-wing militias. Italy was also a "new" nation (formed in the 1860s), plagued by a wide variety of societal divisions which were deepened and exacerbated by the war and its aftermath. The Liberal-led governments that ruled Italy were unable to solve these problems. The Liberals' natural constituencies - businessmen, landowners, members

of the middle class - therefore gradually abandoned them and democracy more generally. The country's two largest opposition parties meanwhile - the socialist PSI and the Catholic PPI - also offered little in response to these problems. The PSI encouraged, at least rhetorically, economic turmoil and social unrest, disparaged democracy, and claimed to be interested in the needs of the working class, rather than Italians more generally. Making matters worse, the PSI's radical wing split off in 1921 to form the communist PCI, injecting a force into the Italian political system even less interested in solving the country's economic and social problems.

And the other major opposition party, the Catholic PPI, was also focused on defending the interests of a narrow slice of Italian society (religious Catholics) and unable provide coherent solutions to the country's broader economic and social problems.

Into this situation Mussolini and his National Fascist Party (PNF) stepped, taking advantage of the unresponsiveness and ineptitude of existing institutions, parties and elites and offering a mixture of "national" and "social" policies that could appeal to almost all groups dissatisfied with the status-quo. Fascists promised to restore order, protect private property and promote prosperity, but also to shield society from economic crises and dislocation and implement of a wide variety of social welfare measures. The PNF also stressed that wealth entailed responsibilities as well as privileges and should be administered in accordance with "the nation's supreme interest." The PNF pledged to overcome the divisions that plagued Italy and foster national unity by prioritizing the interests of the nation over those of any particular class, region or group. These appeals enabled the PNF to garner support from almost all socioeconomic groups and become Italy's first true "people's party."

After coming to power the PNF attempted to unify Italians by creating a variety of organizations designed to tie people to the state and bring them together in a multiplicity of activities, including recreational circles, student and youth groups, sports, and excursions. The desire to strengthen (a fascist) national identity also lay behind the regime's involvement in cultural production, including architectural projects, art exhibitions, and film and radio productions. As Paul Corner, a well-known scholar of fascist Italy, has noted the regime mobilized Italians "on a scale never seen before. People participated massively in fascist sponsored activities […]. By March 1940 the PNF

had more than 3.5 million enrolled and around 20 million Italians - little short of half the population - involved in its various capillary organizatons [...]. The message conveyed through the varied activities was that the paternal party was interested in you and was on your side - a total political novelty for large parts of the population, effectively excluded from any form of political socialization before the advent of the regime."[2]

The regime also insisted that the state had the right to intervene broadly in the economy. As one Fascist put it: "there cannot be any single economic interests which are above the general economic interests of the State, no individual, economic initiatives which do not fall under the supervision and regulation of the State, no relationships of the various classes of the nation which are not the concern of the state."[3] Indeed, the regime developed "a control over the economy that was unequalled outside the Soviet Union."[4] These and other policies seem to have kept fascism very popular until the late 1930s when Mussolini through his lot in with Hitler, got involved in the Second World War and turned the regime towards a more overtly "racialist" understanding of fascism[5].

Although fascism and National Socialism differed in important ways, most notably perhaps in the innate anti-Semitism and racism of the latter, their rationale and rise shared important similarities.

Like Italy, Germany was plagued by economic and social turmoil during the interwar period. Even before the war was over Germany experienced almost civil war-like conditions in parts of the country. The young Weimar Republic was then saddled with a punitive peace, exacerbating the country's already desperate economic situation and inflaming German nationalists. The country also experienced violent left and right wing uprisings, political assassinations, foreign invasion

---

[2] P. CORNER, *The Fascist Party*, pp. 128-129, 132.

[3] E.g. M. PALMIERI, *The Philosophy of Fascism*, excerpts reprinted in Cohen, ed., *Communism, Fascism, Democracy*, 381. Also, D. PELS, "Facism and the Primacy of the Political," *Telos*, 10, Winter 1998, and Z. STERNHELL, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[4] M. CLARK, *Modern Italy* (New York: Longman, 1984), 271; R. SARTI, *Fascism and the Industrial Leadership in Italy,* 124; J. WHITTAN, *Fascist Italy* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995), 65.

[5] P. CORNER, "The Fascist Party and Christopher Duggan", *Fascist Voices* (N.Y.: Oxford, 2013).

and the Great Inflation. Germany was also a “new” nation (formed in 1871) plagued by deep social and political divisions. Although the Republic survived, one crucial indication that many Germans had lost faith in its ability to solve these problems is that support for center and liberal parties had evaporated by the late 1920s.

And then the Great Depression hit. What proved so catastrophic about the Depression was not merely the suffering it caused - although that was immense - but the way German governments and other political actors responded to it. The Conservative governments of the era responded to the Depression primarily with austerity and this was supported by the main opposition party, the socialist SPD, partially because many within the party believed a better future would only come with capitalism’s collapse and that little could be done in the interim to make capitalism work better.

This situation created a golden opportunity for a movement offering simple and attractive solutions to contemporary problems. By the early 1930s Hitler’s National Socialist party (NSDAP) was doing just that. The NSDAP pledged to serve the entire German people (which did not, of course, include Jews and other “undesireables”) and create a true “people’s community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*) that would overcome the country’s long-standing divisions. The party promised to use all the powers of the state to fight the Depression and openly contrasted its activism with the meekness and austerity offered by the government and the SPD. These appeals helped the NSDAP become by far the largest party, and the one with the broadest socioeconomic base, by the 1932 elections. And with no other political force able to unite a majority against him, in January 1933 Hitler became Chancellor.

After quickly eviscerating what remained of democracy, the NSDAP began work-creation and infrastructure-building programs, including highway, canal, house, railway, and other types of construction projects, exhorting business to take on extra workers, and doling out credit.

Germany’s economy rebounded and unemployment figures improved almost miraculously: when Hitler came to power in 1933, almost 6 million Germans were unemployed, by the end of 1934, this number had dropped to 2.4 million, and by 1938 the country enjoyed essentially full employment.

Indeed, by the end of the 1930s government controls touched every sphere of economic life: decisions about what and how much to produce, levels and nature of investment, wages, prices, and the uses to which private property could be put, were taken out of the hands of business and placed under the purview of the state[6] and public spending as a share of the gross national product (GNP) had grown spectacularly[7]. Even though the German economy remained capitalist and private property was not fundamentally threatened (unless its possessor was Jewish), "the scope and depth of state intervention in Nazi Germany had no peacetime precedent or parallel in any capitalist economy, Fascist Italy included."[8] The Nazis also supported an extensive welfare state (only for "ethnically pure" Germans) that included free access to higher education, help for families and child support, pensions, health insurance and a wide array of publically supported entertainment and vacation options. This transformed relationship between state and economy reflected the Nazi's insistence that all spheres of life had to be subordinated to the "national interest" ("*Gemeinnutz geht vor Eigennutz*")[9]. The Nazis, according to Hitler, con-

---

[6] As several observers have noted:

…there is no question that, compared to other strata, the industrial community enjoyed a preeminent and protected position under Nazi rule and was less exposed to … terror. It is also true that the Nazis allowed that community a considerable measure of self-management as long as it kept to the straight and narrow and painstakingly strove to achieve the prescribed objectives. However, to describe this state of affairs as a "coalition of equal partners" is a gross exaggeration" A. BARKAI, *Nazi Economics* (N.Y.: Berg, 1990), 16–17.

[7] For comparision, the comprable figures for Great Britain and the United States were 23 percent and 10 percent respectively. See W. LAQUEUR, *Fascism: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 67, and R.J OVERY, *The Nazi Economic Recovery*, 35.

[8] A. BARKAI, *Nazi Economics*, 3. Also S. BERMAN, *The Primacy of Politics*, chapter 6; J.A. TOOZE, *The Wages of Destruction*; G. ALY, *Hitler's Beneficiaries* (N.Y.: Henry Holt, 2007); A. BARKAI, *Nazi Economics*; R. J. OVERY, *War and Economy in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); A. MILWARD, *The German Economy at War* (London: Athlone Press, 1965); T. MASON, "The Primacy of Politics," in S. J. WOOLF, ed., *The Nature of Fascism* (New York: Random House, 1958), idem, *Social Policy in the Third Reich* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 1993); I. KERSHAW, *The Nazi Dictatorship* (N.Y.: Routledge, 1993), chapter 3.

[9] Or, to put it another way, Hitler once said that "there was no need to nationalize German businesses, if the population itself could be nationalized," and this is precisely what the Nazis set out to do. J.A. Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, p. 134.

sidered the economy "merely a necessary servant in the life of our people and nationhood." I want everyone, Hitler continued, "to keep the property that he has acquired for himself … [but] the Third Reich will always retain its right to control the owners of property."[10]

The Nazis justified state control over the economy as part of their attempt to create a *Volksgemeinschaft* that would end the deep divisions that had long pervaded German society.

As perverse as it seems, the Nazis were committed to increasing social equality and mobility. As Hitler, for example, once noted, with the Third Reich "we have opened the way for every qualified individual – whatever his origins – to reach the top if he is qualified, dynamic, industrious and resolute."[11] The Nazis would, Hitler declared, finally create "a socially just state" that would "eradicate all [the social] barriers"[12] that had long divided Germans from each other. And indeed, during the Third Reich commitment to the cause (and racial background) replaced family status, wealth, education, etc. as the key determinant of how far one rose in the new order.

Largely for these reasons, up through 1939 most Germans' experience with the Nazi regime was probably positive. The Nazis had seemingly conquered the Depression and restored some semblance of economic and political stability. The Nazi welfare state "benefited probably around 95% of" all Germans and real possibilities for social advancement for hitherto low status individuals were opened up by the regime. In addition, as long as they could prove their ethnic "purity" and stayed away from overt shows of disloyalty, most Germans "did not experience National Socialism as a system of tyranny and terror but rather as a regime of social warmth, a sort of "warm and fuzzy" dictatorship (*wohlfühl-Diktatur*)."[13]

---

[10] A. BARKAI, *Nazi Economics*, 26–7.

[11] *Ibid.*, 238.

[12] G. ALY, *Hitler's Beneficiaries*, p. 13.

[13] G.ALY, "Die Wohlfühl-Diktator," *Der Spiegel*, October 2005, 56. Also, P. FRITZSCHE, *Life and Death*, chapters 1 and 2.

3. Conclusions

Although the violence and racism of fascism and National Socialism were pervasive, for most Italians, Germans and other Europeans these movements' appeal was based largely upon their willingness to respond to pressing economic and social problems head-on at a time when existing governments and other political actors were not. In particular, Fascists and National Socialists insisted that states could and should control capitalism and that national identities needed to be promoted and protected. The fascist and National Socialist solutions were, of course, worse than the problems and partially in response, New Deal Democrats in the United States and center and social democratic parties in Europe eventually also promised citizens that they would control capitalism and provide welfare states and other policies that would strengthen national solidarity - but without the loss of freedom and democracy that came with fascism and National Socialism.

During the last decades of the twentieth century this postwar order or compromise went into perhaps terminal decline, and neither Democrats in the U.S. nor social democratic parties in Europe had a convincing alternative at the ready. Voters therefore began abandoning these parties and many turned to the populist right. This trend began already in the 1970s in Europe in particular as the economic downturn of the decade combined with the cultural and social fallout from the 1960s began driving voters from traditional center-left and center-right parties.

However, as with fascism and National Socialism, it would take a crisis to turn many of new (left and right wing) parties into real threats to the reigning order. Such a crisis hit in the early twentyfirst century as a combination of economic slowdown, growing inequality, and in Europe in particular rising immigration and refugee flows created a perception that existing democratic institutions and elites were unwilling or unable to solve society's problems. Into this breach particularly right-wing populist parties stepped. Economically, these parties promise to increase government control of the economy and limit globalization. Socially, they promise to restore national solidarity and protect national identities, by expelling foreigners or severely limiting immigration and protecting traditional values and mores. For those who bemoan the rise of the populist right, the challenge is clear: you can't beat something with nothing and if other parties can't come up with

more viable and attractive solutions to the contemporary versions of capitalist society's long-standing problems than this rise will continue and the future of democracy will accordingly remain uncertain.