



The Age of Dictatorship Europe 1918-1989 – Mussolini

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28 September 2006

If you could go back to the late 1930s and ask an averagely intelligent and politically interested European whether democracy or dictatorship was the political system of the future, the answer you'd probably have got would have been dictatorship. Democracy, most people thought, had had its day. Everywhere you looked on the European Continent, you would see dictatorship in the ascendant. Europe's largest and most powerful country, Germany, had become a dictatorship in 1933, Italy in the mid-1920s, Russia in 1917, Spain in 1939. Most of Europe's smaller countries had turned to dictatorships as well. The Hungarian leader Admiral Horthy, already in power since 1919, declared himself regent for life in 1937, while the Romanian King Carol seized power in 1938. In Greece there was a military coup in 1936, leading to the abolition of the parliamentary system by General Metaxas, who was declared dictator for life two years later. But many European democracies had fallen already in the 1920s. In Lithuania the army seized power in 1926, destroying the country's democratic institutions; in Poland, Marshal Josef Pilsudski seized power the same year, and after his death the semi-authoritarian system he had inaugurated transmuted into a military dictatorship, under the so-called regime of the colonels. Also in 1926, a bad year for democracy, the military seized power in Portugal, leading within a few years to the long-lived dictatorship of Antonio Salazar. Even the few remaining democracies were clearly in trouble by the late 1930s. France was ever more deeply divided between right and left and had seemed to teeter on the brink of civil war in 1934; in 1940, disillusioned with the politics of parliamentary democracy, the right even welcomed defeat at the hands of the Germans as an opportunity for spiritual renewal under the dictatorship of the military hero Marshal Pétain. In Sweden, democracy survived, but only in the form of the seemingly permanent rule of the Social Democrats. In Britain, the normal alternation of government and opposition had broken down and a government of national unity was in power. Democracy in Norway, Denmark, Belgium and Holland proved incapable of putting up any serious resistance to the invasion of the Nazis in 1940, and disappeared too.

So discredited was parliamentary democracy in Europe by this time that even those who risked their lives to overthrow the dictators seldom wanted to restore it. The leading role in national resistance movements from June 1941, which marked the real starting point for most of them, was taken by the Communist Party, which looked to Stalin's dictatorship in Russia as a model for the future. Where they emerged, right-wing nationalist movements like the Chetniks in Serbia, seldom had much regard for civil rights and democratic freedoms. In Germany itself, the constitutional plans discussed by the resistance movement that led to the failed attempt to kill Hitler on 20 July 1944 focused on an authoritarian political system with strictly limited popular voting rights and civil freedoms rather than parliamentary democracy of the traditional kind. The alternative plans discussed by the idealistic Kreisau circle involved a similar departure from a parliamentary system, with the accent on semi-autonomous local communities. Parliamentary democracy, almost everyone seemed to agree, was dead.

And yet, not long before, it had seemed to be unstoppably in the ascendant. Europe's major states had all undergone a process of constitutional reform, the broadening of civil rights, and the increase of parliamentary power, in the decades before the outbreak of the First World War. The new states founded in the 1870s – the French Third Republic, the Kingdom of Italy, and the German Empire – all had parliamentary systems, in which an elected national assembly had a strong and in the first two cases an overwhelming influence of government. Even Tsarist Russia had set up a national parliament, the Duma, in the wake of the 1905 Revolution, and although its political powers and electoral base had been

progressively restricted as the Tsar regained the initiative, its influence was still substantial even in 1914. The spread of parliamentary democracy, often owing a great deal to the example of Britain, the dominant force in the world in the age of imperialism, seemed inevitable to many, part of the general progress and improvement of humankind. It was in this spirit of boundless optimism that the diplomats and politicians who met at Versailles to frame the peace settlement of 1919 carved out of the ruins of the old Europe, out of the Ottoman, Habsburg, German and Russian Empires, a series of new states - Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and so on – that were provided with parliamentary systems and would all, it was assumed, be functioning democracies.

The reason for this optimism was not hard to find. The peacemakers of 1919 operated above all on the principle of national self-determination. Each people or nation would be given its own state. Political sovereignty would flow upwards from the people, who would create their own institutions and run their own affairs instead of being oppressed by foreign rule. Poland would be run by and for the Poles instead of being divided up between Austria, Germany and Russia; the South Slavs would at last have their own state instead of being subservient to the Habsburgs. The First World War was fought, after all, for peace, freedom and democracy, and there was a general expectation that with the departure of the old Empires, peace, freedom and democracy would reign supreme.

So what went wrong? Why did democracy give way so quickly and so comprehensively to dictatorship across Europe in the years following the Peace Settlement of 1919? Was dictatorship fundamentally more successful in dealing with the problems of the interwar years than democracy? Or were there other reasons for the triumph of authoritarianism? Were there long-term structural causes for the sudden rise of dictators, or was it all a matter of contingency and the particular circumstances of the time?

Dictatorship has more or less vanished from the European scene in our own time, but of course there are still dictators of one kind and another elsewhere in the world, and it's important to explore the age of European dictatorship among other things for what it might have to tell us about how to deal with dictators in the 21st century. It's important to know, for example, whether there are different kinds of dictators, or whether dictatorship follows the same basic pattern wherever it appears. Are all dictators for instance hell-bent on war and conquest? Do they all impose their will on the countries they rule in the same way, or to the same degree?

I'll be exploring these and other questions in four monthly lectures from now until shortly before Christmas. In this first lecture, I want to explore briefly some of the general reasons for the crisis of democracy in the 1920s and 1930s, before zooming in on one dictatorship in particular, the Fascist regime led by Benito Mussolini in Italy, which I'll take as an exemplary case for the collapse of parliamentarism and the rise of dictatorship in general and of a special kind of dictatorship in particular, namely Fascism.

In my second lecture I'll be turning to the Nazi dictatorship in Germany, which took a number of ideas and practices from the example of Fascist Italy. Hitler's rule is often seen as the paradigmatic dictatorship: whenever politicians want to express their disapproval of a dictator in our own time, they tend to compare him with Hitler. One of the central questions I'll ask in my second lecture, therefore, will be that of Nazi Germany's uniqueness.

In my third lecture I'll then broaden the focus again to look at the emergence of dictatorships in other European countries between the wars, with the aim of constructing a kind of typology of dictatorship. There were many so-called little dictators in interwar Europe, but they differed widely from one another, and it's important, I think, to ask why, and to look at the particular historical circumstances that brought these dictators to power and kept them there.

Finally, in my fourth lecture, I'll turn to Communist dictatorship, and ask how far the cult of personality survived the demise of Stalin, and how it could emerge from an ideology that emphasized the primacy of impersonal forces in history. I'll conclude with some general reflections, particularly on the aftermath of dictatorship and the re-establishment of parliamentary democracy in western Europe in 1945, in southern Europe in the 1970s, and in eastern Europe in the 1990s, and in doing so, I'll ask whether the experience of bringing about a transition from dictatorship to democracy, particularly in Germany after 1945, has anything to tell us about the success or failure of the efforts Britain and the USA are currently making to bring about this transition in Iraq.

I want to begin by looking at some of the reasons why democracy in so many European countries did not long survive the peace settlement of 1919. Four broad general factors, in my view, were at work here.

The first was the impossibility of any effective implementation of the policy of national self-determination. It was all very fine in principle to say that each nation should determine its own future, Germany for the Germans, Poland for the Poles, and so on, but in practice the idea simply didn't work. This was above all because there were no neat boundaries between different linguistic and national groups. There were for example German-speaking minorities in a whole variety of countries, some of them very large: three million Germans lived within the boundaries of Czechoslovakia, for instance, and hundreds of thousands more as far afield as Romania, the Volga, Hungary, and the Baltic states. In pre-1914 Hungary, the landed gentry had tended to be Hungarian while many of the peasants and labourers were Romanian, both national groups in other words inhabiting roughly the same areas. In many states there were in addition substantial minorities of Jews, and in Poland and Romania they differed sufficiently in language, culture and religion from the majority nationality to count as an official national minority. Some areas had also been disputed between different nations and states for decades, even centuries, such as Alsace-Lorraine, or Silesia.

If drawing a clear geographical line between people of differing nationalities was virtually impossible, then other principles inevitably came into play. There was, for example, historic right – the historic boundaries of Czechoslovakia coinciding with those of Bohemia and Moravia, for example, or Hungary defined as the lands of the crown of St Stephen. And there was strategic and economic necessity, most obviously in the case of Poland, which the peacemakers of 1919 considered required an outlet to the Baltic to avoid being landlocked: hence the famous 'Polish corridor', cutting a swathe of territory through lands that had for centuries belonged to Prussia and then to Germany. Finally there was a more basic principle, which is that the countries on the losing side in the First World War should not actually gain territory as a result of it. Thus for example with the break-up of the Habsburg monarchy, German-speaking Austria sought to join in with the new Weimar Republic in a single nation of German-speakers, a move encouraged by the German revolutionary government in 1918-19. But this would have resulted in Germany becoming bigger and more powerful than before the war, and so it was vetoed by the victorious western Allies. The result was an obvious violation of the principle of national self-determination, and it left the rump Austrian state with almost insurmountable problems, including the bloated former imperial capital of Vienna with a third of the population of the entire country, many of them civil servants suddenly deprived of employment. It was small wonder that most Austrians thought their country was unviable as an independent entity and had no commitment to its future. In a similar way, disputes about where to draw state boundaries were resolved in the case of Hungary almost always in favour of rival states such as Romania, since Hungary was considered to have been one of the key allies of Germany in the war.

All of this piled up massive national resentments in one country after another. Nationalists rallied round the cry for territorial revisions, combining this with the belief that parliamentary democracy, not least because it guaranteed the representation of national minorities, was useless as a means of securing the true interests of the majority population and unable to take decisive action to recover lost territory. Military mobilization and military discipline, nationalists began to argue, were needed to assert the nation's claims to territory that belonged to it by linguistic practice or cultural tradition or historic right. Extreme nationalists began to call for the restoration of a 'greater Hungary', a 'greater Poland' and so on, conquering and subjugating peoples of lesser or inferior nationality in the process. The formal end of the war in 1918 was followed immediately by a whole range of armed conflicts between different nationalities, as Russia invaded Poland, Romania invaded Hungary, and counter-revolutionary forces fought a bitter civil war against the Bolsheviks in Russia.

If dissatisfied and disgruntled nationalism provided one reason for the growing power of militaristic and authoritarian alternatives to democracy, then the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 provided another that was almost as influential. The parliamentary democracy ushered in by the fall of the Tsarist regime in the revolution of February 1917 failed to survive for more than a few months basically because it was able neither to prosecute the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary successfully nor to bring the war to an end by suing for peace. The war-weary and starving population of Russia's great cities opted in the end to support the only group who promised an end to the terrible conflict, namely the Bolsheviks. In the two years after they seized power, Lenin and the Bolsheviks reacted to attempts by adherents of the former Tsar to overthrow them by force by instituting a ruthless reign of terror against all their opponents of whatever political hue. Scores of thousands of liberals, conservatives, moderate socialists, anarchists, Tsarists and many others disappeared into the torture chambers of the Cheka, the Bolshevik secret police,

and the depths of the emerging prison camp system. Aristocrats, 'bourgeois', capitalists, former Tsarist officials and many others were executed simply because of who they were rather than what they were doing or what they believed in.

All of this struck fear into the hearts of European conservatives and liberals, the more so since Lenin's declared belief was that the Bolshevik revolution could only become permanently successful in Russia if it spread rapidly westwards to other countries that were more historically advanced. The more radical sectors of the anti-war part of the socialist labour movement in other countries quickly cemented their ties with the Russian Bolsheviks and set about fomenting revolution at home. By early 1919 Communist revolutions had broken out in Budapest and in Munich. These were defeated by force, resulting not surprisingly in the establishment of an authoritarian regime in Hungary and an ultra-conservative government in Bavaria that tolerated and indeed in some respects encouraged radical anti-parliamentary movements like Hitler's nascent National Socialists. By 1921 the Communist International, run from Moscow, was co-ordinating the revolutionary activities of radical leftists throughout Europe. From this time onwards, the spectre of Communism was never far from the mind of the European middle classes, and preventing the advent of Communism, with its overt threat of 'red terror', was held by many to justify the curtailment of civil liberties and the use of violence where parliamentary democracy seemed indifferent to, or incapable of dealing with, the Communist threat. Communism helped polarize politics by bringing forth violent and uncompromising ideologies of the right that believed the only way to combat force was by force. In this process, the ideas and practices of negotiation, give-and-take, compromise and conciliation that are so vital to the health of parliamentary democracy tended to be swept aside.

What mixed these ingredients into a brew that was to prove deadly to democratic political systems was a third factor in the rise of dictatorships in interwar Europe, namely economic crisis and collapse. As new states emerged, so they quickly erected tariff walls to protect their own industry and agriculture against foreign competition. In the absence of the kind of international financial and economic institutions that so boosted world trade and industry after 1945 – GATT, the World Bank, the IMF, the Bretton Woods Agreement, and so on – national economic egotism ruled the day. This did nothing to help European economies recover from the war. Four years and more of increasingly intense military conflict had placed huge burdens on the economies of the belligerent powers, which they had naturally hoped to recoup by acquiring territory or enforcing reparations payments on the losers. Most countries simply printed money, or launched massive war loan programmes, to finance increased war and munitions production, and after 1918 they paid the price. While those countries that had fought on the winning side were able to recoup at least some of their losses by imposing long-term reparations payments on the losers, principally Germany, countries that were on the losing side plunged into a maelstrom of inflation that rapidly got out of control. Already within two or three years of the end of the war, prices stood at 14,000 times their prewar level in Austria, 23,000 times in Hungary, two and a half million times in Poland, and 4,000 million times in Russia. Most dramatic of all was the inflation in Germany, where successive governments were unwilling to raise taxes to cover deficits because they would have been accused by nationalist opponents of taxing the people to pay reparations. By December 1922 a US dollar cost 7,000 German marks, as against 4 marks before the war. French and Belgian troops occupied the industrial district of the Ruhr the next month to extract payments of coal due under the reparations schedule, and the government in Berlin ordered Germans to withhold co-operation, crippling production. By August 1923 a dollar cost 4,621,000 marks, by December more than four million million, or 4 followed by 12 zeros. Already on 29 July 1923 the Berlin correspondent of the Daily Mail was reporting that "a copy of the Daily Mail purchased on the streets of the capital city cost 35,000 marks yesterday but today it cost 60,000 marks." Inflation did not necessarily impoverish the middle classes – people with mortgages and fixed debts gained massively, for instance – but it did divide them deeply and left them with a terrible and neurotic sense of insecurity and disorientation.

And the cure, which involved pegging currencies to the Gold Standard, was almost as bad as the sickness. European economies, particularly the German, were resurrected not least on the basis of a massive influx of short-term loans from America, and when the Wall Street crash came in October 1929 these loans were precipitately withdrawn, forcing European banks to pull in their own loans to industry, and industry to cut back by laying off workers. In 1930-31 the two biggest Austrian banks collapsed, to be followed in 1931 by the Danat Bank in Germany. By mid-1932 over a third of the workforce in Germany was unemployed. The Depression had a comparable impact in other central European countries such as Hungary. Everywhere, there were millions of unemployed workers, the middle classes lost their jobs or their investments, and small farmers and peasants were hit by a catastrophic fall in demand. Nationalists blamed the collapse on

the supposedly baleful influence of minorities like the Jews, or on outsiders and foreigners, or on the effects of the peace settlement of 1919.

These influences might not have been so fatal to democracy had it not been for a fourth factor that became operative after the end of the war, namely the cult of violence, a product of the increasing ruthlessness and destructive energy of the war itself. The First World War hardened millions of men to the idea of employing force to achieve their political goals. For many, violence became a way of life, and when the war was over, what seemed to them the indecisiveness and excessive love of compromise of the political elites appeared as something to be brushed roughly aside in the interests of the nation. The younger generation of men who had just missed the fighting sought in many cases to prove themselves by being even more violent and uncompromising than their elders. Soldiers were in many cases unable to adjust to the peacetime world. Politics became war pursued by other means. In a whole range of countries, paramilitary groups sprang up, representing every political tendency from far right to far left, from proto-Nazi Free Corps to Communist Red Front-Fighters. Uniforms were everywhere. In a very real sense, European societies never fully demobilized after 1918. When people in the 1920s spoke of 'peacetime' they meant not the years they were living through, but the years before the outbreak of the First World War.

III

All these influences were at work in different ways in the case I want to turn to in the second half of this lecture, that of Italy. Superficially perhaps, this might appear not to have been the case, since Italy, having judiciously switched from the German/Austrian/Italian Triple Alliance to join the Entente Powers in 1915 ended the war on the winning side. But Italy finished none the less with what has been described as the mentality of a defeated nation. On one famous occasion during a peace conference in the late 19th century a Russian Foreign Minister quipped that since the Italians had turned up to demand more territory, he supposed they must have lost another battle. At the peace conference in 1919, however, when the Italians turned up having actually managed to win a battle or two, against the Austro-Hungarians, the rewards appeared meager. The Italians expected to make territorial gains in Dalmatia, but unfortunately the newly created state of Yugoslavia was technically on the same side as Italy, as was Greece, which blocked Italian ambitions in Asia Minor. Only in the Alpine region was Italian territory significantly extended. Altogether Italy grew in size by 9,000 square miles. This was not a bad result. But it caused consternation among Italian nationalists, who had been promised a good deal more by the government. Their rage focused on the Adriatic port of Fiume, part of Yugoslavia, and when the extreme nationalist poet Gabriele D'Annunzio gathered a motley force of ex-soldiers and invaded the town, public opinion forced the government to give its tacit support and provide the occupied territory with supplies. Only when the occupation descended into violence did the Italian state send in the army to force a withdrawal. The whole episode rapidly turned into a propagandistic, nationalist myth, and D'Annunzio became a hero.

What made the general situation in Italy worse was the fact that the country had been plunged into economic crisis immediately after the end of the war. War industries collapsed and big companies like FIAT cut production and shed workers while trying to adjust to peacetime conditions. Inflation, did not reach German proportions, but it still got out of control, with wholesale prices increasing sixfold between 1913 and 1920. The government was frightened of becoming unpopular and failed to act decisively, but even a modest increase in taxation, especially of war-profits, was bitterly resented by the middle classes, many of whom – especially civil servants – were already suffering badly from the effects of the inflation.

By the end of 1919 there were two million unemployed. Since the turn of the century, northern Italy had been industrializing rapidly, and as wages lagged behind prices, workers turned to socialism. The advent of universal male suffrage and proportional representation in 1918-19 gave them the vote and created a large socialist bloc in the Italian parliament. In 1921 the socialists split as the left broke away to form a new Communist Party. Already by this time, there had been massive strikes in industrial areas, with union membership booming and public services breaking down under the impact of labour stoppages. In September 1920 400,000 workers expelled the managers from their factories and shipyards, hoisted the red flag, and paid themselves with money taken from the factory safes. The occupation ended in compromise brokered by the government, but it left a legacy of fear among the middle classes. In a similar way, returning soldiers occupied land in southern Italy, dividing up large estates into peasant holdings, while sharecroppers and landless labourers in northern and central Italy, spurred on by poor harvests in 1919 and 1920, struck successfully for higher wages, using violence against landowners who opposed them. The rural poor flocked to the socialists, who promised to collectivize agriculture, and voted in socialist

councils to rural districts and small municipalities all over the centre and the south.

What made these escalating economic and social antagonisms into a disaster for Italian democracy was the fundamental inability of the liberal political system to deal with the new era of mass politics. Italian politicians had got used since the 1860s to forming governments by wheeling and dealing between different factions, which was fine when things were going smoothly, the factions were agreed on the basic principles of politics, and the franchise was limited to the propertied classes, but at a time of crisis it scarcely made for decisive action. With the advent of the mass vote, the liberal and moderate conservative factions lost their dominance of parliament and were squeezed between the socialists and the Catholic Popular Party. Only in the south, where electoral manipulation was the order of the day, did the liberals survive as a serious electoral force. The government parties – a motley collection of moderate factions of one kind and another – were too deeply divided, not least by the legacy of quarrels over which side, if any, to back in the First World War, to provide effective solutions to Italy's multiple crises, and with the rise of the socialists and the Catholic Popular Party they found it impossible to put together a parliamentary majority. The way was open therefore to a more authoritarian approach, and this was personified by the man who was to be Italy's leader for the next two decades: Benito Mussolini.

IV

Born in 1883, Mussolini was the son of a blacksmith, was educated in a Catholic seminary, and qualified as a teacher before fleeing to Switzerland to avoid military service. He survived partly by begging, and slept rough, but he also read political writers like Nietzsche, Sorel and Pareto, the theorist of rule by a new elite. Life in Switzerland being too hard for him, he returned to do his military service in 1904 and then became an organizer for the socialists, rising to be editor of a small magazine then, in 1912, of the main Italian socialist newspaper, *Avanti!*. Mussolini had an undoubted flair for rhetoric, the arresting phrase, the startling headline, and he made the paper a great success. However, he was impulsive, he was inconsistent, and he loved violence; indeed he had been expelled from school for stabbing a fellow-pupil. He gravitated towards the far left of the socialist movement, advocating violent revolution, and in 1914, when war broke out, he broke with the socialist party, which advocated non-intervention, and campaigned for Italy to join the western Allies, though the country was formally committed to fighting on the other side. Mussolini was sacked as editor of *Avanti!*, but he got money from the arms industry and later the French government to fund another paper, the *Popolo d'Italia*, which campaigned effectively for war and revolution. He accepted conscription, and for a time fought in the army on the Alpine front before he was wounded and invalided out.

The war was a key experience for Mussolini. Trench life, he noted in his diary of the time, was a natural and simple life. All the complexities of the civilian world disappeared. From this point on he saw his mission as carrying the war to Italy's internal enemies. These included above all the feeble parliamentarians who had for so many months blocked Italy's entry into the war and had now lost the peace, and the socialists and communists who were taking over the countryside and as he thought undermining the Italian economy and dividing Italian society by their labour militancy. Rather as ex-communist leaders such as Slobodan Milosevic were to do at the end of the century, Mussolini had moved from far left to far right, taking his hatred of parliamentary democracy and his love of violence with him.

In the course of the last year of the war and the first year of peace, far-right Italian nationalists founded a variety of small extremist groups. One of them was Mussolini's *Fasci di Combattimento*, established on 23 March 1919. None of them was very successful, but Mussolini had a head start because he had a newspaper, so he was in the national public eye. What changed the situation was the radicalization of the left in 1920-21, which provoked the rise of violent paramilitary groups made up from ex-soldiers, especially officers, and right-wing university students, encouraged and partly paid for by landowners, farmers, and industrialists, who roamed around beating up socialists, destroying their offices, and intimidating labour unions.

This movement, known as *squadrismo*, became a mass phenomenon, winning massive support in the countryside. Mussolini, through his newspaper, put himself at the head of it. Despite enormous difficulties in keeping it under control, he managed to channel at least some of its energies into a political party, founded in October 1921, the National Fascist Party. The Fascists organized strike-breakers into new trade unions which negotiated with landowners and employers, and Mussolini put on a show of moderation: he was the man who would tame the squads and channel their energies into the national cause. Thus he won increasing support from the middle classes, including many prominent liberals. Yet the violence of the

squads got a new lease of life after the creation of the Communist Party. In 1922 the squads used force to take over municipal administrations all over northern Italy. A Socialist general strike in the summer of 1922 played into Mussolini's hands. He threatened to march the squads on Rome unless he became Prime Minister. The liberals were in crisis, with only a caretaker government in office. The King and key members of the governing political elite, including the army, feared civil war, and gave in: Mussolini was duly appointed Prime Minister. The squads duly arrived in Rome, but though it featured heavily in Fascist propaganda later on, the 'March on Rome' was no seizure of power: Mussolini was appointed legally, and in the conventional way, in the hope of taming the squads and restoring peace and order.

If there was a Fascist seizure of power, then this was the beginning of it rather than the end. At first many commentators thought the new government would last no longer than a normal Italian government. There had after all been previous strong men in Italian politics, who had taken over at a moment of crisis and departed when it was over: General Pelloux after the Italian army's defeat in Ethiopia in 1896, for example, or the man on whom Mussolini in some ways modeled himself, Giuseppe Garibaldi, the hero of Italian unification, whose own march on Rome provided the example for the Fascists, and whose red-shirted paramilitaries were copied by the black-shirted squads of Fascism. And at first Mussolini seemed to be carrying out his brief of taming the squads. He formed a state-funded Fascist Militia to provide jobs for the squadristi and put them into some kind of order. Hundreds of thousands of nationalists and others jumped onto the Fascist bandwagon and joined the party. The political elite wanted stability and the liberals voted in favour of Mussolini's reform of the proportional representation system through a law giving the party with the biggest electoral support two-thirds of the seats in parliament provided it got more than 25 per cent of the votes cast. The Pope pressured the deputies of the large, Catholic People's Party into supporting the measure or abstaining, and it got through. In the elections of April 1924 the government list, mostly but not exclusively Fascist, duly won the election with two third of the votes anyway. The opposition was divided and ineffective and could do nothing.

But the victory was achieved by massive manipulation, intimidation and violence, not least in the south. The moderate socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti pointed this out in parliament in no uncertain terms. Shortly afterwards, he disappeared. It was clear that he had been murdered. The press accused Mussolini of ordering him to be killed – and they were of course right to do so. The opposition parties boycotted the parliament in protest. Outraged at the newspaper and opposition campaigns, the leaders of the squads forced Mussolini to act. He promised – in rather vague terms – strong and decisive action, thus satisfying both the squads' desire for toughness on the one hand, and the political and administrative elite's desire for order and stability on the other. Since they were boycotting parliament, the opposition parties could do little to stop the Fascists passing a series of laws putting the press in Fascist hands and establishing strict political censorship. Desperate radicals, losing hope in the opposition, launched four unconnected attempts on Mussolini's life in 1925-6 and these provided the pretext for the banning of all opposition parties, removing opposition deputies from parliament, and withdrawing passports from all Italian citizens. The police could now banish suspected oppositional elements to remote provinces in the south. The secret political police was expanded and by 1927 it was estimated that the police carried out 20,000 political raids every week. Special political tribunals were set up to try and imprison Communists and others, though the death penalty was seldom imposed (there were only 26 executions all the way up to 1943). By 1928 Italy was a Fascist state.

V

What Mussolini established was not entirely new. The Fascist state for example depended heavily on career civil servants, army officers and the like continuing in office. Local councils and elections were abolished, but the centrally appointed prefects could only run their districts through local elites, often leading landowners. The party and the squads were finally tamed, and tens of thousands of the most unruly elements were expelled in the late 1920s. The last ever party congress was held in 1925. The paramilitaries were brought under army control. Since Mussolini insisted on at least appearing to run everything himself – he soon held no fewer than eight government ministerial posts – and had little managerial ability, senior civil servants and other members of the old political elites held a great deal of power on a day-to-day basis. There was a Fascist Grand Council that acted as a sort of parallel cabinet, which was given formal powers in December 1928 to nominate the head of government should Mussolini die, to advise on relations with the Vatican, and to determine the succession to the throne. It consisted not of squad leaders but mostly of top office-holders and ministers, but it met very rarely. Still, it symbolized the way in which the party and the state had come together. It enabled Mussolini to conclude an agreement or

Concordat with the Pope, establishing his sovereignty over the Vatican City and reconciling the interests of church and state, which had been at loggerheads ever since Italian unification. Key institutions remained in place: the king, who had the formal power to dismiss Mussolini or appoint his successor, the army, the police, the legal system, even the parliament, which still had to pass laws.

Still, when all is said and done, Mussolini's regime was in many senses something new. In the first place, it really was a dictatorship, with a massive cult of personality growing up round the man who became known simply as 'the Leader', il Duce. Mussolini himself, as befitted a journalist, spent more time on rhetoric and presentation than on actual policymaking. His press office issued daily briefings to the papers, ensuring that they portrayed him consistently as a kind of superman, a world-class fencer, boxer, skier and tennis-player, a superb horseman, an experienced pilot, a dynamic man of action. He liked to be photographed stripped to the waist working in the fields, helping to bring in the harvest. Visitors to his office had to make their way across a vast space of empty marble floor before reaching his desk at the far end. The lights were left on in his office far into the night, long after he had in fact gone to bed, to persuade people that he worked round the clock for the good of Italy. Reporters were allowed to write about his mistresses and his illegitimate children because this underlined his virility, but they were not allowed to mention the fact that he was a grandfather, or report any of the road accidents he caused by driving his car faster than was advisable. Above all he was portrayed as wise, a great leader, a political and military genius. 'Mussolini is always right', said a popular slogan put onto innumerable walls all over the country. And since there was no-one to contradict him, Mussolini came to believe all of this himself, with ultimately fatal results.

This propaganda suggests a second novel feature of Mussolini's dictatorship: its need to portray itself as resting on popular consent. To this end, Mussolini took over or set up a whole set of institutions, turning them to his own propagandistic purposes, trying to persuade the vast majority of Italians into enthusiastic support for his regime. 'The thoughts and wishes of the Duce', wrote one leading Fascist philosopher, 'must become the thoughts and wishes of the masses.' The growing importance of radio and cinema made them imperfect vehicles for Fascist indoctrination; schools and youth organizations were turned into institutions for the education of a new Fascist generation. Most important of all was the so-called Corporate State, which replaced trade unions with a new system of labour relations that promised a strong element of worker self-management while not undermining existing managerial authority. Class conflict, in other words, had been abolished. All Italians were working together for the common good. Strikes were outlawed but working hours were reduced to a 40-hour week maximum; real wages fell as a result, but this helped Italy escape the full impact of the world economic depression of the early 1930s. The most popular and successful Fascist institution was a mass leisure organization known as Dopolavoro, 'after work', which with the help of employers, and sometimes using old socialist and union facilities, provided sports, plays, holidays, concerts and much more for the masses.

There was a point to this beyond mere bread and circuses, however. Fascist rhetoric promised the creation of a 'new man', ready to fight for Italy and avenge the supposed humiliations of 1914-18. Fascist symbols owed a lot to the example of the Roman Empire – the Fasci were the bundles of rods that symbolized the authority of Roman officials, Fascist organizations were subdivided into legions, cohorts, centuries and so on, and the ultimate aim of the Fascist regime was to create a new Roman Empire in the Mediterranean. Once Fascism had conquered the enemy within, it was time to turn its attention outwards. In 1935 Mussolini conquered Ethiopia, bombing the feudal cavalry of Emperor Haile Selassie with poison gas. The ease with which he had avenged the humiliation of 1896 convinced him that further conquests were within his grasp, and he intervened in force in the Spanish Civil War on the Nationalist side. To prepare for war, he introduced a so-called 'reform of customs'. From 1938 Italians were banned from shaking hands and had to give a Roman salute instead. Civil servants had to wear uniforms. The army was made to march in the goose-step. Antisemitic legislation was introduced, alienating many who saw it as a repugnant attack on a small and generally well-liked minority.

'War alone', said the 1932 Doctrine of Fascism, 'brings up to their highest tension all human energies, and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to meet it.' But Mussolini was unable to persuade the Italian people that war was a good thing or that a new Roman Empire was desirable. His belief in the ability of sheer will-power to achieve results was disastrously misplaced. Although he did not join the war until 1940, when he was convinced that Germany would win, Mussolini led Italy to one terrible defeat after another, in Greece and then in North and East Africa. Morale was already low when over 200,000 Italian troops joined the German invasion of Russia, also, despite initial successes, ultimately a disastrous enterprise. In July 1943 Allied troops landed in Sicily and met little resistance. A meeting of the Fascist Grand Council was unavoidable. It voted through the end of the dictatorship. Mussolini was

dismissed by the King and soon afterwards, Italy left the war, prompting a German invasion in which Mussolini was briefly installed as head of a puppet regime in the north. Ex-soldiers fleeing German labour conscription, joined by peasants and small farmers, formed partisan units to resist the German occupation. On 28 April 1945 they caught up with Mussolini and his last mistress Clara Petacci and shot them both dead, hanging their bodies in public on the Piazzale Loreto in Milan.

Mussolini's ignominious end shouldn't draw attention away from the enormous influence of the Italian Fascist model on the rest of Europe up to the late 1930s. From 1938 onwards Mussolini became increasingly Hitler's pupil. But before that he had been his teacher. Hitler learned a great deal, indeed borrowed a great deal, from Italian Fascism. But German National Socialism was also very different from its Italian counterpart. In our own time, Hitler's Third Reich has come to stand in many ways as a symbol of the ultimate form and degree that any dictatorship can take. In my next lecture I'll examine how and why it came to power, how it worked, and how unique a form of dictatorship it turned out to be.

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