The Age of Dictatorship: Europe 1918-1989 -
The little dictators
Transcript

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The name “Engelbert Dollfuss” does not trip lightly off the tongue of many people nowadays. But in the 1930s it was famous, even notorious, and for two reasons. The first was that he was largely responsible for the creation of a dictatorship in Austria in 1934. To some extent he was a reluctant dictator. Austria after the First World War was widely believed, not least by Austrians themselves, to be unviable. Most had wanted it to join with Germany, but this had been stopped by the victorious western Allies, despite its conformity with the principle of national self-determination, since it would have made Germany bigger even though she had lost the war. With a population of six and a half million, Austria was deeply divided between the capital, Vienna, where almost a third of the population lived, and the countryside. The Viennese middle classes and the farmers were deeply conservative and supported the Christian Social Party, a Catholic-oriented political movement which provided the national government, while the huge Viennese working class, together with workers in industrial areas such as the Erzberg in Styria, backed the Socialists, whose control of the Vienna city council produced many policies that annoyed the middle classes, including the building of massive social housing estates with provocative names like “the Karl Marx Court”, and taxes imposed on luxury goods such as horses and cars. In this deeply divided political system, tensions ran high, and frequently boiled over into political violence, most notably in the riots of 1927, when crowds burned down the Palace of Justice and 90 demonstrators were shot dead by the police.

The Depression that began in 1929 deepened these divisions still further, with the arrival of mass unemployment on the one hand, and a crisis in state finances on the other. This convinced the Christian Social government that the social policies of “Red Vienna” were a luxury the country could not afford. But they were popular, and the Socialists gained strength to the point where the government was left with a majority of only one. The arrival of the Nazi government in Germany in 1933 pushed the situation over the edge, outflanking the government on the far right by strengthening the hand of the minority who still wanted union with Germany, not least by providing them with massive financial and propaganda backing and encouraging them to destabilize the country by calculated acts of violence. And this is where Engelbert Dollfuss comes in. Prime Minister since 1931, and at 4 feet eleven inches tall the shortest head of government in Europe, he was popularly known as ‘mini-Metternich’. Dollfuss was in a difficult situation. For his government was not only opposed by the Social Democrats, it was also threatened by the paramilitary Heimwehr or Citizens’s Defence Leagues, who were subsidized by Mussolini and formed a permanent source of political disorder. In March 1933, as the situation in the Austrian Parliament became completely blocked, Dollfuss, encouraged by Mussolini, dissolved it, banning the Austrian Nazis and launching an attempt to disarm the paramilitary organization of the Socialists. Violent clashes led to a virtual civil war in Vienna in February 1934, in which more than 300 people were shot, mainly during an army siege of the Karl Marx Court. Dollfuss immediately banned the Socialists, whose leaders escaped to freedom in exile through the Vienna sewers subsequently made famous by Carol Reed’s film of Graham Greene’s novel The Third Man. Many Socialists were imprisoned, and the small Communist Party was also banned. But Dollfuss had also alienated the pro-Nazi far right, and in July 1934 the Austrian SS, encouraged secretly by Hitler, staged a coup in the course of which they invaded the Chancellery and shot Dollfuss dead as he tried to flee down a back staircase (this is the second reason why he is still remembered today). Unfortunately, however, the Austrian SA, the brown-shirted stormtroopers, failed to back the coup because the SS just a few weeks before had shot many of the SA leaders in Germany during the “Night of the Long Knives”. The Austrian army mainly stayed loyal, and the Justice Minister Kurt Schuschnigg took matters in hand, having the coup leaders arrested and shot. Order was restored. Or so it seemed.

Schuschnigg is perhaps a little better remembered than Dollfuss because of the way in which Hitler bullied him mercilessly in 1938, forcing him to bring Nazis into his cabinet, and even more the way in which he then turned round at the last minute and tried to resist the incorporation of Austria into the Third Reich, provoking the military invasion and the Anschluss in March 1938. But while most accounts of Schuschnigg in this final crisis portray him in a sympathetic light, it is too often forgotten that he too was a dictator, and that the plebiscite he announced in March 1938 on the independence of Austria was to be a rigged plebiscite, that characteristic device of 1930s dictatorships in Europe. Schuschnigg took over the ruling movement founded by his predecessor, uniting the Christian Socials and the Heimwehr into a proudly proclaimed “Fatherland Front”.

This was meant to be a popular mass organization along fascist lines, replete with propaganda actions, slogans, banners and all the rest of it. This was the only legal political organization, and during the next few years it set up a range of subsidiary organizations including a blue-uniformed Storm Corps and a youth movement. The 1934 Constitution established a Corporate State along the lines suggested in the Papal Encyclical Quadragesimo Anno of 1931, replacing parliament with four advisory Councils (a Council of State, a Provincial Council, a Cultural Council, and an Economic Council, all effectively appointed rather than elected), and there was a Federal Diet with 59 members selected by the Councils and also given only the power to approve laws, not to initiate them.

All of this looked very much like fascism with a Catholic twist, and has with good reason been given the label “clerico-fascism”. But in fact it entirely lacked the populist dynamism of a genuine fascist movement, and it had no real drive to create a “new type of human being” along the lines proclaimed by Hitler and Mussolini. This was mainly because those who backed it were the deeply conservative Catholic middle classes of Vienna and the farming community of the Austrian countryside. Schuschnigg declared that his regime was based on sound
Heimwehr military revolt in 1936, backed by the Germans and Italians, only partially succeeded and led to a three-year civil war. Against the general European trend, of course; in Spain it was a dictatorship that paid the price of failing to deal with regionalism and tradition, and alienated the army, fighting to maintain the Spanish Empire in North Africa. A movement and a paramilitary organization, the Portuguese Legion, which used the fascist salute. In Portugal too, the Blue Shirts, whom Salazar succeeded in completely marginalizing.

Salazar, a university professor, made himself indispensable by balancing the budget and successfully managing debt, and minimal economic growth. It was only when the Finance Minister installed by the military, Antonio Dollfuss, was removed, that the institutions of democratic politics were formally abolished and replaced by a Corporate State, the first to be established in Europe. Salazar became Prime Minister in 1932, and his new constitution of 1933 reduced to a rubber-stamp, and a National Union, like the Fatherland Front in Austria, was created to provide support, unlike Dollfuss’s seizure of power in Austria; the democratic regime had been the most unstable and ineffective in Europe, and the Portuguese economy was still in 1926 plagued by massive inflation, a huge public debt, and minimal economic growth. It was only when the Finance Minister installed by the military, Antonio Dollfuss, was removed, that the institutions of democratic politics were formally abolished and replaced by a Corporate State, the first to be established in Europe. Salazar became Prime Minister in 1932, and his new constitution of the following year banned political parties, turned the Upper House into a Corporative Chamber, and proclaimed the government’s right to override individual rights in the interests of the ‘common good’. Parliament was thus reduced to a rubber-stamp, and a National Union, like the Fatherland Front in Austria, was created to provide candidates in elections and ministers for the government. This was in other words the Italian model, inspired by Mussolini; and in 1936 Salazar took on board some key elements of fascist style, creating a national youth movement and a paramilitary organization, the Portuguese Legion, which used the fascist salute. In Portugal too, the government adhered to Catholic values and rejected Nazi-style extreme fascism, represented here by the Blue Shirts, whom Salazar succeeded in completely marginalizing.

Unlike Austria, Portugal was not threatened from outside, and nobody much bothered about its affairs. The same cannot be said of neighbouring Spain, where the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera, established in 1923, had collapsed in 1930, inaugurating a period of renewed democratic politics. This went against the general European trend, of course; in Spain it was a dictatorship that paid the price of failing to deal with economic crisis, not a democracy. But the Spanish Republic founded in 1931 was deeply divided by class, regionalism and tradition, and alienated the army, fighting to maintain the Spanish Empire in North Africa. A military revolt in 1936, backed by the Germans and Italians, only partially succeeded and led to a three-year civil war. The clerico-fascist regime in Austria failed altogether to overcome the deep divisions that were tearing society apart; most former Socialists remained hostile to it, and the Nazis continued their campaign of violence, now underground. The regime alienated workers by replacing the luxury taxes in Vienna with a tax on bicycles and removing labour legislation. The economy did not recover. Schuschnigg did manage to curb the ambition of the leader of the Heimwehr, Prince Stahremberg, dismissing him in 1936 and dissolving the Heimwehr shortly afterwards; to add insult to injury, drawing attention to the Prince’s much-publicized and colourful love-life, he appointed him patron of the Mothers’ Aid Work of the Fatherland Front. By banning both the Socialists and the Heimwehr Schuschnigg had destroyed the two most powerful paramilitary organizations in Austria and left himself without any armed forces apart from the dubiously loyal Austrian army. Many ex-Heimwehr men and a few ex-Socialists joined the Nazis and when Hitler decided to intervene, he had nothing to stop him with. As German troops marched into Austria in 1938, few Austrians mourned the passing of their state. It was only towards the end of the war that the majority began to think of themselves as Austrians rather than Germans, not only because German rule had proved in the end to be oppressive, but also because the Allies were now inclined to regard Austria as Hitler’s first victim rather than his earliest collaborator; since, as in 1918, it was inconceivable that Germany should end the war having gained Austria.

Despite its failure on so many levels, Austrian clerico-fascism was far more than mere conservative authoritarianism, but also of course a good deal less than Nazism or even Italian fascism. Dollfuss and Schuschnigg were caught between Mussolini and Hitler, represented in Austria, roughly speaking, by the Heimwehr on the one hand and the Nazis on the other. Some of the factors favouring dictatorship which I mentioned in my introductory lecture were certainly operating here – economic instability, dissatisfaction with the 1919 Peace Settlement, fear of the left – but we are now in the 1930s and the influence of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, in this case pulling in opposite directions, was now making itself felt too. It can be seen in a number of other countries too.

I mentioned in my first lecture that a number of democracies fell to military coups in the 1920s, and some of these took on fascist trappings in the following decade. In Portugal, the coup of 1926 had broad popular support, unlike Dollfuss’s seizure of power in Austria; the democratic regime had been the most unstable and ineffective in Europe, and the Portuguese economy was still in 1926 plagued by massive inflation, a huge public debt, and minimal economic growth. It was only when the Finance Minister installed by the military, Antonio Salazar, a university professor, made himself indispensable by balancing the budget and successfully managing the economy, that the institutions of democratic politics were formally abolished and replaced by a Corporate State, the first to be established in Europe. Salazar became Prime Minister in 1932, and his new constitution of the following year banned political parties, turned the Upper House into a Corporative Chamber, and proclaimed the government’s right to override individual rights in the interests of the ‘common good’. Parliament was thus reduced to a rubber-stamp, and a National Union, like the Fatherland Front in Austria, was created to provide candidates in elections and ministers for the government. This was in other words the Italian model, inspired by Mussolini; and in 1936 Salazar took on board some key elements of fascist style, creating a national youth movement and a paramilitary organization, the Portuguese Legion, which used the fascist salute. In Portugal too, the government adhered to Catholic values and rejected Nazi-style extreme fascism, represented here by the Blue Shirts, whom Salazar succeeded in completely marginalizing.

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war, in which hundreds of thousands were killed before the Republic was defeated. Here too the military leader, General Francisco Franco, warded off a genuinely fascist threat, in the shape of the Falangists. The Falangists were incorporated into the Franco regime in April 1937 along with other right-wing movements like the Carlists, and the regime took on many of the trappings of fascism, including not only uniforms, salutes, and so on but also the Corporatist programme of the Falangists. Even fascism in Spain, however, was strongly Catholic, and was relatively easily tamed by a regime that like its counterparts in Austria and Portugal proclaimed that its principal mission was to uphold Catholic values.

The Franco regime in Spain came into being not least because Spanish nationalists felt that the democratic system was unable to prevent the break-up of the country under the centrifugal forces of Catalan and Basque nationalism, and a similar dynamic can be seen in the case of Yugoslavia, an artificial creation of the 1919 Peace Settlement where the majority Serbs installed a dictatorship under King Alexander in 1929 in order to control national minorities, notably the Croat and Slovenes. A different kind of nationalism was evident in Greece, where there had been a civil war in 1916-17 followed by a series of generally disastrous attempts to gain territory from Turkey by force. The priority of gaining territory put the military effectively in control, and there was a brief military government in 1926, followed by another one ten years later, under General Ioannis Metaxas. Here too you can see the influence of Mussolini and Hitler, indirectly, as role models: Metaxas proclaimed a corporate state and a planned economy, dissolved all political parties, and formed a national youth movement. In 1938 Metaxas declared himself dictator for life, and proclaimed a “New State” that would revive the glories of the Ancient Greek past. He introduced the fascist salute and set up a system of concentration camps in which he placed the regime’s opponents; it was only Greece’s invasion by the Germans shortly after Metaxas’s death (from natural causes) in 1941 that brought his regime to an end.

What is really interesting about these southern European countries is perhaps less the fact that they fell under the control of right-wing authoritarian governments that took on many of the trappings of fascism, than the fact that they stayed under the sway of dictatorships well into the 1970s. Yugoslavia perhaps was a special case, since it was ruled after 1945 by a Communist regime, albeit one that declared its independence from the Soviet bloc (the same may be said, in a very different way, of Albania). Democracy was, it is true, restored in Greece after a bitter civil war in which the communists, who had led the resistance to German occupation, were defeated, but it remained as unstable as before the war, and as much prone to nationalist ambition. In 1967 a left-wing government was overthrown in a violent military coup, inaugurating the so-called “regime of the colonels”, who earned a good deal of ridicule by measures such as the banning of Ancient Greek plays as politically subversive. But the regime was also violently repressive, banning any opposition and setting up detention centres where critics and opponents were systematically and sadistically tortured.

As with the Franco and Salazar regimes in the Iberian peninsula, the regime of the colonels in Greece was in effect allowed to stay in power by the reluctance of the USA and NATO to countenance any political destabilization at the height of the Cold War. After 1945, Franco and Salazar quickly dropped the accoutrements and symbols of fascism, and moderated their rhetoric and their policies. Franco agreed to allow NATO bases on Spanish soil in return for NATO’s tolerance of his continued grasp on power. The same in effect held good for Greece, where indeed the left was seen by NATO as a serious threat to the country’s allegiance to “western” values, given the strength of communism during the Second World War.

Not only the international situation during the Cold War but also the long postwar world economic boom helped keep these southern European dictators in power. All these countries enjoyed strong economies until 1973-4, when a massive rise in world oil prices, engineered by OPEC, brought the boom to an end. Very quickly, rising popular discontent began to destabilize the Greek, Portuguese and Spanish dictatorships. After the death of Salazar his regime was continued by Marcello Caetano, but it came to an end in 1974, ironically, in a coup led by left-wing army officers who no longer wanted to spend money, resources, energy and lives on maintaining Portugal’s costly overseas empire, where resistance movements were beginning to make continued colonial rule impossible. After a brief revolutionary interlude, a parliamentary democracy was introduced. The following year, Franco died, and following the restoration of the monarchy, which he had always envisaged to follow his departure from the scene, Spain made a phased transition to democracy under the skilled management of King Juan Carlos. The Greek dictatorship came to an end in 1974, destabilized not only by economic problems but also by its attempt to gain popular support by forcing the incorporation of Cyprus into Greece, a plan that went disastrously wrong and resulted in the occupation of the northern part of the island by the Turks.

The longevity of dictatorship in southern Europe deserves, I think, to be remembered. Europe did not become democratic in 1945. All these three countries had long histories of political instability, of coup and counter-coup, of one regime succeeding another; democratic traditions, though present, were weak; social and political divisions ran deep and spilled over easily into political violence; the economy was backward and industry underdeveloped. Correspondingly economic growth after 1945 stabilized these regimes in the medium term, but undermined them in the long run; new social groups emerged who wanted the restoration of democratic politics and civil freedoms. All three of course had already become major tourist destinations by 1970, so that one can perhaps say, at least to some extent, that here we have three dictatorships that were eventually destroyed by tourism.

III

How different was the situation in eastern Europe? Some of you may recognise that the title of this lecture is
taken from Antony Polonsky’s book of the same name, published in 1975. In explaining the collapse of democracy in interwar eastern Europe, Polonsky emphasizes, I think correctly, above all the region’s peculiar social structure. These were overwhelmingly agricultural lands dominated by landlords and peasants. Serfdom, unlike in western Europe, had only been abolished in the nineteenth century. The native middle classes were relatively weak. Industry was poorly developed. As Polonsky says, “the intermediary occupations of trading and money-lending were everywhere performed by groups which differed in language and religion from the majority: Jews and Germans in Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, Germans in the Czech lands, Greeks and Jews in Romania and to a lesser extent Bulgaria and Serbia.” In place of a solid native bourgeoisie there was an educated intelligentsia which shared with the aristocracy a disdain for trade and commerce and found more prestigious employment in the civil service and officer corps. These became the leading nationalists, often seeking to mobilize the peasantry against supposedly foreign elements in society. Peasant discontent played a role too, since post-serfdom land reform had everywhere failed to modernize agriculture or bring prosperity to small farmers. Everywhere therefore there were peasant parties, who were often hostile to the different national groups that dominated in urban society. Social and national antagonisms thus worked together to destabilize the new democratic systems introduced after the First World War in countries none of which had any noteworthy tradition of parliamentary politics or indeed national self-government.

Apart from these factors, Polonsky also stresses the importance of French influence in the region. Most of the new states had very democratic constitutions, based on the French Third Republic. The French concluded a whole network of alliances with them in the 1920s, trying to construct a barrier to any possible German attempt to expand eastwards again. Thus, as Polonsky says, “The challenge to the French system, first from Italy and then, in the 1930s, much more effectively from Germany, went along with an ideological offensive against liberal and democratic values. As more countries moved into the German sphere of influence, the tendency to adopt fascist or Nazi political models grew steadily stronger…fascism seemed to many the philosophy of the future – an efficient and orderly means of modernizing a backward country.”

To my mind, Polonsky overestimates the effects of the French alliance system. The fact was that these countries were deeply divided amongst themselves, and a number of them had substantial claims on each other’s territory. Moreover, another key factor that Polonsky does not mention is fear of the Bolshevik colossus to the east, coupled with fear of revolution within, already experienced in the brief radical-communist regime of Béla Kún in Hungary immediately after the end of the war, which launched a huge campaign against religion and in favour of “Godlessness” and nationalized almost everything, including even barbers’ shops. These two factors, resentment against the Peace Settlement and fear of Communism, dominated Hungarian politics between 1919 and 1945. Hungary lost 71.5 per cent of its pre-war area in the Peace Settlement, mainly to Yugoslavia, Romania and Czechoslovakia. Since some of the territorial rulings were made for strategic rather than ethnic reasons, there were about three and a half million Hungarians living in other countries. What most Hungarians wanted was at least the incorporation of areas in which Hungarians were in the majority; many wanted a return to the prewar situation. In constitutional terms this desire was particularly strong. The brief reign of Béla Kún, who like a majority of the other revolutionary people’s commissars was a member of Budapest’s overwhelmingly Jewish intelligentsia, gave way to a virulent antisemitism – a force largely absent from the southern European dictatorships, where to some extent a paranoid hostility to Freemasonry took its place. Right-wing radicalism was further intensified by the presence of 300,000 Hungarian refugees from Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, and by the nationalism prevalent in the Hungarian army, most of whose officers were not part of the traditional Hungarian elites, who had regarded the army as anti-national at a time, up to 1918, when it had been run by the Habsburgs.

It was the conservative authoritarian nationalists who established power after the violent suppression of the communists in Budapest. Their leader was Miklós Horthy, who had been an admiral in the Habsburg navy, and after the failure of two attempts by the deposed Habsburg Emperor Charles to regain the throne, followed by his early death in 1922, Horthy was appointed Regent since the new claimant to the throne, the Archduke Otto, was only a child. Hungary was thus, as some contemporaries mockingly remarked, a kingdom without a king, run by an admiral without a navy. Horthy’s powers were in essence those of the Habsburg Emperor, which were considerable; he was irremovable, he could veto legislation and he could dissolve parliament; he could appoint the prime minister and the armed forces had to swear an oath of allegiance to him. On the other hand, there was a constitution, political parties were legal, and the government of István Bethlen managed to stabilize the currency and stimulate economic growth in the 1920s. As elsewhere, however, this came to an end with the Depression that hit in 1929; unemployment rocketed, the government fell apart, and a fascist-style government came to power in September 1932 under Gyula Gömbös, whose appointment was greeted by patriotic parades which he saluted, like Mussolini and Hitler, from a balcony. He created a “Movement for National Unity” and extended his control over many branches of the administration. Although Horthy imposed severe restrictions on his freedom of action, Gömbös got Mussolini’s backing for at least some of Hungary’s territorial claims. In 1936 he won an important election on a platform including land reform, and he declared that the time for transition to full fascism had arrived. Horthy drew from this however the conclusion that Gömbös was “not a gentleman” and was preparing to dismiss him when, conveniently, Gömbös died.

By this time, however, Germany was on the march, and the more successful Hitler’s foreign policy was, the greater the pressure in Hungary to join in. Moreover, Hitler had a lever in the presence of 600,000 ethnic Germans in Hungary, which he could potentially use to destabilize the country as he successfully used the ethnic Germans of the Sudetenland to destabilize Czechoslovakia. Horthy therefore allied Hungary with Germany in
1939 and by 1941 had won substantial amounts of territory from defeated nations such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Already in 1938 Horthy passed the First Jewish Law, imposing quotas on Jewish employment in various professions, and May 1939 saw a Second Jewish Law, lowering the quotas and banning Jews from the civil service, teaching, landowning, newspaper editing and more besides; and following the Nazi example, the definition of who was a Jew was racial rather than religious. However, this did little to stop the rise of the Arrow Cross, the Hungarian fascist movement, led by Ferenc Szalasi, who by the mid-1930s was spending a suspicious amount of time visiting Berlin. A mystical ideologue rather than a man of action, Szalasi developed the concept of “Hungarism” to describe his movement’s ideology, which involved creating a kind of Hungarian super-state in east-central Europe, where Magyars would rule benevolently over a whole swathe of national minority territories. By 1939 the Arrow Cross had a quarter of a million members in a country with a population of seven million and won 25 per cent of the vote, the largest of any non-government party, in a general election. But Horthy remained in control, and Szalasi was imprisoned until the German military victories in 1940 made it seem prudent to release him. Szalasi proved inept at practical politics, however, and it was not until the advancing Red Army pushed large numbers of German troops into Hungary that Hitler, pressing since early 1943 for Horthy to deliver up Hungary’s large Jewish minority to him for transportation to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, felt able to depose Horthy, who was trying to negotiate Hungary’s departure from the war. Acting under German pressure, the Hungarians had already deported 400,000 Jews to Auschwitz when, in October 1944 the Germans installed Szalasi as a puppet Prime Minister in an Arrow Cross dictatorship, which began to set up a one-party state and a corporate system of government at the same time as it was rapidly retreating before the advancing Red Army. Arrow Cross units conducted massacres of many of the country’s remaining Jews, and 50,000 more were deported, before Salasi was arrested, in Germany, early in 1945, and subsequently executed.

But puppet dictatorships were not real dictatorships; most of them, like that of Vidkun Quisling in German-occupied Norway, had only the weakest of domestic roots; Szalasi indeed had more popular backing than almost all of them. What was interesting about Szalasi was his relationship with Horthy, whose regime more than most qualified as a conservative, authoritarian regime essentially uninterested in domestic reform or indeed in many of the basic elements of dictatorship such as the abolition of free elections and a parliamentary political system. There’s a clear parallel here in the position in Yugoslavia’s royal dictatorship under King Alexander, or more strikingly still in Romania, another country with a royal dictator. This was King Carol, who had gone into exile in the mid-1920s with his mistress Magda Lupescu, in an unexpected response to his father’s ultimatum to give up either his mistress or the throne. This in no way affected his standing in the country, rather the reverse: as Hugh Seton-Watson somewhat primly remarked in his contemporary survey of east-central European nations in the interwar years, “Bourgeois sexual morality is probably less esteemed in Romania than anywhere else on the Continent.” After the death of Carol’s father in 1927, there was a brief regency, then Carol returned in 1930. Like Horthy, Carol enjoyed wide-ranging political powers given him by the constitution. He presided over the cabinet and placed his nominees in key positions, while continuing his relationship with Madame Lupescu and amassing a large personal fortune along the way. Corruption and political stagnation, coupled with the immiseration of the peasantry in the throes of the Depression, spawned yet another radical fascist movement, the Iron Guard, sometimes known as the League of the Archangel Michael, led by Corneliu Codreanu, an extreme Romanian nationalist who believed that Romania despite all appearances, was being run by Jews. Codreanu won support in the countryside with a welfare programme and a policy of land reform, but he too was in the end a dreamer with no clear set of policies except to follow the lead of Nazi Germany.

The rise of the Iron Guard destabilized the political situation, and in November 1937 Carol decided to break the log-jam by establishing a royal dictatorship, introducing a new constitution early in 1938, abolishing direct elections and establishing a corporate state. The Iron Guard rose in a futile rebellion and was outlawed; in November Codreanu and the leadership were, in a phrase that had become familiar all over Europe by this time, “shot while trying to escape”. This did not save the royal dictatorship, however, and neither did Carol’s switching sides to the Germans after Hitler’s victories in the spring of 1940. Already by this time Carol’s regime had enacted severe anti-Jewish laws to try and placate both the Iron Guard’s supporters and the Germans; over a quarter of a million Jews were deprived of their citizenship and many were expelled from the professions. But Hitler had debts to pay to rival countries in the region for their support in 1939-40. Under German pressure, Romania ceded a third of its territory to Bulgaria, Hungary, and (as part of the Nazi-Soviet Pact) the Soviet Union. This completely destroyed whatever prestige Carol had left. A German-backed general, Ion Antonescu, forced Carol to abdicate, and established a dictatorship of his own, in co-operation with the Iron Guard, who responded by staging a series of bloody anti-Jewish pogroms; Antonescu persuaded the Germans that political stability was necessary to guarantee oil supplies (Romania was Germany's largest source of oil), and got their backing to crush the Iron Guard in a nationwide bloodbath. Antonescu objected to the Iron Guard because they were disorderly, not because they were antisemitic, and when he sent 14 divisions of Romanian troops to join the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, he coupled this with a violent expulsion of a large part of the Jewish population of Romania to the newly occupied territory of Transnistria, where they were shot in large numbers, or put into camps where conditions were so bad that between 250,000 and 350,000 died of hunger and disease. This genocidal policy was carried out virtually without any German prompting and qualified Romania as the most antisemitic regime in Europe after the Third Reich. From mid-1942 onwards, Antonescu began to moderate his policies, realizing that Germany was not going to win the war, but eventually he was deposed in another coup, in August 1944, before the Red Army moved in and established a Communist regime.

Royal dictatorships were indeed quite common in eastern Europe in this period; in 1935, for example, King Boris seized dictatorial powers in Bulgaria after a period of instability caused not least by the IMRO, the Internal
wartime destruction. And border disputes had encouraged violence, most notably in a major war with the Soviet Union. But these were not the only problems the new state faced. In Poland, for example, it proved difficult to weld together a state where national minorities made up a third of the population, divisions of which often erupted into violence.

Historically, Poland had been divided between Prussia, Austria, and Russia, and these divisions had left a deep sense of national and cultural identity among the various groups. When Poland achieved independence after World War I, it was a fragile state, still recovering from the ravages of the war. The Polish military played a significant role in the early years of the new state, with much of the early political and military leadership coming from the ranks of the army. This was particularly true in the early years of the interwar period, when the Polish military played a significant role in maintaining order and protecting the state from internal and external threats.

The army was deeply involved in the political process, with many officers holding key positions in the government. This was especially true in the interwar years, when the Polish military was the dominant force in domestic and foreign policy. In fact, the army was so prominent that it was often referred to as the “third arm” of the state, alongside the executive and legislative branches.

This heavy involvement in politics was not limited to Poland. In neighboring countries such as Latvia and Estonia, the army also played a significant role in the political process. In Latvia, for example, the military seized power in March 1934, inspired to do so by a veteran nationalist politician, Konstantin Päts. The army arrested and imprisoned many left-wing politicians, and after an abortive left-wing revolt in September 1937, the repression became even more severe.

In similar fashion, the supreme commander of the Latvian army, impatient with the failure of the constitutional government to solve the economic crisis of the Depression, dissolved parliament in May 1934 and banned all political parties. In charge was the existing civilian prime minister Karlis Ulmanis, but here again there was no real role for the army. As far as they thought necessary to maintain themselves in power; which means of course that they were indeed dictatorships, but of a strictly conservative kind. Finally, it was only really in the most fascist of these regimes that a cult of personality emerged, propagating the myth of the Duce, the Führer, or in Franco’s case the Caudillo. The royal dictators in a sense did not need to draw on this novel kind of legitimacy; they simply stressed their legitimation by tradition.

Royal dictatorships merged into a fourth and final variety that I want to talk about this evening, namely military dictatorships. I’ve already mentioned the military dictatorship that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974, and the Franco regime in Spain was also of course a military dictatorship, though one that made, either by choice or necessity, major compromises with fascism. The position of the army in any state where politics and society are deeply divided is a powerful one, of course, and in the conditions of Europe after the First World War, with nationalist resentments and the desire for territorial revision strong, veterans numerous and active, and the social prestige of the military at its height after the long conflict, it was more powerful than at most other times.

Everywhere, the army regarded itself as the principal bulwark of national unity – particularly clearly in Spain, for example – and senior officers felt that it was legitimate for them to intervene in politics when it seemed to be threatened. This was the case in Lithuania, for example, where a liberal government installed in 1926 had made what the army regarded as unwise concessions to national minorities and was beset by boundary disputes with Poland. Here too, fear of communism, uncomfortably close in the shape of the Soviet Union, also played a role.

The army seized power, arresting and imprisoning many left-wing politicians, and after an abortive left-wing revolt in September 1937, the repression became even more severe. As much later on in the regime of the colonels in Greece, there was no one outstanding personality; the first dictator, Augustinas Voldemaras, was ousted in September 1929 but democratic institutions were not reinstated and the regime continued as a military dictatorship until the Second World War.

In similar fashion, the supreme commander of the Latvian army, impatient with the failure of the constitutional government to solve the economic crisis of the Depression, dissolved parliament in May 1934 and banned all political parties. In charge was the existing civilian prime minister Karlis Ulmanis, but here again there was no real cult of personality, and in the interests of military discipline the fascists, known as the Perkonkrusts, were arrested and imprisoned along with the socialists on the left. In nearby Estonia, the spur to the establishment of a dictatorship was the depression, which seriously lowered the living standards of the country’s farming communities, a majority of the population; civil disorder rapidly increased, fomented by a veterans’ organization, and the army seized power in March 1934, inspired to do so by a veteran nationalist politician, Konstantin Päts, who had the veterans’ leaders arrested, and banned all political parties.

Last, but by no means least, Poland was ruled by a military regime through most of the interwar years. Historic Poland had been partitioned between Austria, Prussia and Russia since the late 18th century, and it had been recreated in a new form by the 1919 Peace Settlement. Since the war was widely seen everywhere as a war for freedom, national self-determination and democracy, the new country had a democratic constitution, but it proved difficult to weld together a state where national minorities made up a third of the population, divisions of class and region, ran deep and unitary democratic political traditions were absent. By the mid-1920s there were 92 political parties, 32 of them with seats in parliament. The usual economic problems were compounded by wartime destruction. And border disputes had encouraged violence, most notably in a major war with the Soviet
Union in 1920. The armed forces’ leader in the war, Marshal Josef Pilsudski, frustrated by the impossibility of getting a coherent government together, staged a military coup in 1926. But contrary to expectations, he did not establish a dictatorship, simply revising the constitution to enable financial legislation to be enacted, in effect, by decree. Parliaments and elections continued. Pilsudski merely steered things from behind the scenes. In the mid-1930s, continuing political problems prompted his military subordinates - the “colonels” - to reform the constitution by strengthening the powers of the army commander and the president, and after Pilsudski’s death in 1935, they enacted antisemitic legislation that set strict limits on the participation of Poland’s 3 million Jews in universities, the professions and business. The colonels also outlawed ritual slaughter of animals and banned Sunday shopping, and started to discuss the idea of deporting all the country’s Jews to Madagascar. This was however a religious rather than a racial form of antisemitism, and it was linked to a nationalist policy of Polonization that affected other minorities too. Poland in the end, even in 1939, was a military dictatorship only in the most limited sense, better described as an authoritarian political system with continuing, more or less free elections and a functioning parliament.

If all of these countries fell to dictatorial regimes to a greater or lesser degree in the 1920s and 1930s, there was one that stood out as a beacon of democracy, and that was Czechoslovakia. It’s often helpful to look at the exception that proves the rule, so I want to conclude this lecture by asking why it was that the Czechs did not succumb to a dictatorship in this period. In some ways it seemed ripe for it. The state was a new and somewhat artificial creation, attempting to weld together two nations with varying linguistic, religious and social and economic identities and different political histories. The Czechs had belonged to the Austrian part of the Habsburg Empire, the Slovaks to the Hungarian part; the Czechs were industrialized, the Slovaks agricultural; the Czechs were mostly Protestant, the Slovaks Catholics. In addition there were major national minorities, most notably the ethnic Germans who lived in the border region of the Sudetenland. Yet the leaders of the new country in 1918, most notably the Slovak Tomas Masaryk, were committed democrats, and worked skillfully to reconcile national differences by offering concessions to the Germans and other national minorities. Bohemia, the western half of the state, had deep-rooted democratic and parliamentary traditions and its advanced economy, with strong industrial and trading interests, sustained a middle class with a real commitment to active party politics and the habit of compromise.

This relatively successful early development of the new state was undermined first by the depression, which caused widespread unemployment, especially among the German minority, who were heavily concentrated in the industrial areas along the country’s western borders, and the rise of Hitler, who financed and steered the Sudeten German National Front, led by Konrad Henlein, who was persuaded by the German Nazi leader to turn it into a violent German nationalist organization campaigning by every possible method, including widespread intimidation, to win over the German minority and get it to pressure for the ceding of the Sudetenland to Germany. A parallel Slovak nationalist movement emerged in the east, and concessions to both minorities failed to halt the march of nationalist extremism; in 1938 the crisis came to a head, Hitler threatened to invade on the pretext that the ethnic Germans in the Sudetenland were being maltreated by the Czechs, and the Czechoslovak government agreed to the country’s dismemberment, brokered by the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, a process completed by the creation of a Slovak puppet state and the Nazi invasion of the rest of the country in March 1939. Nevertheless, the Czech experience showed that until it was undermined from outside, the country had largely succeeded in retaining its democratic institutions in a stable political system in which there was no obvious prospect of a dictatorship emerging from within.

Czechoslovakia was the great exception. Here as in many other countries invaded and conquered by the Germans, democratic institutions were abolished and a ruthlessly exploitative Nazi dictatorship run in the interests of Germany and the Germans installed. In 1945 with the defeat of Hitler all this came to an end. But democracy was not restored everywhere. Not only in southern but also in eastern Europe, dictatorship continued; but it was dictatorship of a very different kind: communist dictatorship, and it’s to Stalin and Stalinism that I will turn in my last lecture, when I also want to consider what makes for a successful transition from dictatorship to democracy, a subject of some contemporary importance given the current attempts to bring it about in Iraq.

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