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IAN KERSHAW
To Hell and Back
Europe, 1914-1949



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parliamentary democracy. Often, therefore, what materialized was uneasy survival where neither the counter-revolutionary Right nor the revolutionary Left was powerful enough to upturn a newly created democracy.

The major exception to the pattern of democratic survival, other than Primo's takeover of power through a coup in Spain, was Italy, the first country – and the only one during the post-war crisis – in which liberal democracy collapsed to be replaced by Fascism.

FASCISM VICTORIOUS

A pluralist parliamentary system of government had existed in Italy since Unification in 1861. To call it democratic, however, would be to stretch the meaning of the term. Resting on an extremely limited electorate, Italian politics were factional and corrupt, dominated by a small oligarchy of Liberal notables. Reform of the suffrage in 1912 almost tripled the size of the electorate, from under 3 million to nearly 8.5 million voters (most of them still illiterate). But little significant change to the government system followed. Then came the divisive and traumatic war, which Italy, after much wavering and secret negotiations, eventually entered in 1915 on the Allied side. Immediately after the war, in December 1918, all adult Italian males were given the vote – a reward to the soldiers – and the following year a new electoral law introduced proportional representation. The hope was to bolster support for the government. But the reform backfired massively.

Amid the post-war turmoil, the newly enfranchized population turned their backs on the old liberal politics and voted in large numbers for the newly founded Italian People's Party (*Partito Popolare Italiano*), representing Catholic interests, and the Socialist Party, which declared its aim to be 'the violent conquest of political power on behalf of the workers' and the establishment of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. The Socialists professed their allegiance to the Communist International (*Comintern*) that Lenin had founded in March 1919 in Moscow. At the election in November of that year they trebled their seats in the Chamber of Deputies, while the Populists almost

quadrupled theirs. Support for the Liberal establishment was strongest in poorer, largely agricultural southern Italy, where clientelist politics still prevailed. But the Liberals and their supporters were now in a minority in parliament. Party politics fragmented, Government became destabilized – there were six changes of government between 1919 and 1922 – and increasingly paralysed. Italy seemed on the verge of a red revolution.

Throughout 1919 and 1920, which came to be dubbed the *biennio rosso* ('the two Red years'), Italy experienced huge social and political conflict. In industrial cities there were large numbers of strikes (over 1,500 in each year), factory occupations, worker demonstrations, and looting of shops by crowds angry at price rises. In parts of rural Italy recently demobilized peasants seized land from large estates and more than a million agricultural labourers joined strikes. As disorder grew alarmingly, as the government was plainly unable to restore order, as fear of revolution and anxieties of the propertied classes about Socialism mounted, and as the fragmentation of party politics offered no way through the morass, political space opened up for a new political force. It was to be filled by the Fascists.

A number of small paramilitary movements prosaically calling themselves *fasci* – 'groups' (or, literally, 'bundles', the name deriving from the Latin term for the set of rods that had been the symbol of order in ancient Rome) – sprang up in the cities and towns of northern and central Italy amid the political disorder, attracting mainly lower-middle-class ex-servicemen (especially demobilized officers) and many students. There was no central organization. But what the various movements had in common was the relative youth of their members, their militant ultra-nationalism, their glorification of war, their violence, and their visceral dislike of what they saw as the discredited, divisive, weak and corrupt parliamentary politics of the Liberal establishment. Italy's heroic war effort, in their eyes, had been undermined by the political class. Italy could never be great under the leadership of the old notables. They should be swept away. What the Fascist militants offered was radical action to renew Italy. This was implicitly revolutionary in that it was directed towards violently and fundamentally changing the existing state. What exactly would replace it was left open.

Among the myriad *Fasci* was one founded in March 1919 by Benito Mussolini, a former editor of the official socialist newspaper, who had broken with the socialist Left when he fervently advocated intervention in the war in 1915. He viewed the war, in which he had fought and been wounded, as a heroic period in his own and Italy's past. The programme presented at the foundation of his *Fasci di Combattimento* in 1919 was little different to that of the other *Fasci*, and distinctly revolutionary in tone. Many of its proposals could have been advanced by the Left: universal suffrage; suppression of all noble titles; freedom of opinion; an educational system open to all; measures to improve public health; suppression of financial speculation; introduction of an eight-hour working day; workers to be organized in co-operatives and to share profits; the abolition of the political police, the Senate and the monarchy; and the foundation of a new Italian republic based upon autonomous regional administration and decentralized executive power. The aim was 'a radical transformation of the political and economic foundations of collective life'.

Mussolini was later, however, to disavow what seemed concrete social and political aims, declaring that these had been not an expression of any doctrine but merely aspirations to be refined over time. Fascism, he stated, was 'not the nursling of a doctrine worked out beforehand with detailed elaboration; it was born of the need for action and it was itself from the beginning practical rather than theoretical.' This was a rationalization, almost twenty years after its beginnings, of the fundamental change that his own movement had undergone within no more than two years. For Mussolini, the supreme opportunist, the programme announced in Milan was there to be ignored, bypassed or adjusted as political needs determined. The 'socialism' of his movement was always subordinated to the aim of national rebirth, a vague but powerful notion that was capable of uniting, at least superficially, quite disparate interests. Principles meant nothing to him, power everything. So his movement turned from revolution to counter-revolution. Early backing for workers' strikes gave way by autumn 1920 to the deployment of Fascist paramilitary squads to break strikes in the interests of landowners and industrialists. The violence of the squads escalated sharply over the following months. Mussolini had recognized that he could not defeat

socialism and communism by trying to compete for the same base of support. To gain power, he needed the backing of those with money and influence. He had to win over the conservative establishment and the middle class, not just disaffected ex-servicemen and violent thugs.

Why Mussolini, at first only one of numerous Fascist leaders and regional chieftains, came to dominate the early Fascist movement owed less to his forceful and dynamic personality – all Fascist bosses had in some way to be forceful personalities – than to his use of the press and to the connections he forged with industrialists to maintain his newspaper, *Popolo d'Italia*. His brand of radicalism – the emphasis on national unity, authority and order, the readiness to impose order through violence against those who stood in its way (the socialist Left, revolutionaries, striking workers) – was not only compatible with the interests of the conservative ruling class, but directly served them. With order breaking down and the liberal state incapable of restoring it, the Fascists became an increasingly useful vehicle for Italy's political and economic elites.

By mid-1921 the government was assisting the Fascists with money and arms to combat growing disorder. The police were told not to intervene. In the May election, the Liberal Prime Minister, Giovanni Giolitti, incorporated Fascists alongside nationalists, liberals and agrarians in a 'national bloc' in the hope of taming them and weakening the opposition of the Socialist Party and Italian People's Party. The national bloc gained the most votes overall (though the Fascists themselves won only 35 seats out of 535). But the Socialists and People's Party were not sufficiently weakened. The chronic government instability continued. And the existing state system had only minority support in parliament. The Fascists, though electorally still small, were a growing force. From a mere 870 members at the end of 1919, they now numbered 200,000.

The breakthrough came not in the economically backward, overwhelmingly agricultural south, nor in the northern cities such as Milan, where Mussolini's movement had begun. It was in the more commercially developed countryside of central Italy, in Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, the Po Valley and Umbria, that Fascism gained strength. Landlords and leaseholders, facing socialist unions, agrarian co-operatives, and domination of local councils by the Socialists or

People's Party, would pay for lorry-loads of Fascist thugs, often transported in from local towns, to beat up their opponents, force them to drink castor oil, drive them from office, destroy their property and otherwise terrorize them – with the police standing by. Former 'red' provinces were turned within weeks into Fascist strongholds. Newly erected Fascist 'syndicates', the worker or peasant members 'encouraged' by the threat of terror to join, replaced the former socialist unions. By June 1922 the syndicates had half a million members, mainly peasants. Unruly agitation was transformed, to the liking of landowners and industrialists, into docile compliance.

The *squadristi* – paramilitary bands of thugs, usually a dozen or so strong – were controlled by powerful regional Fascist bosses. Mussolini, if the most important of the Fascist leaders, was far from dominating the movement. In fact, when he tried in 1921 to tone down the anti-socialist violence, to show his credentials to the governing elite as a patriotic 'moderate' seeking constructive national unity and even proposing to come to terms with the socialist unions, the regional Fascist bosses rebelled. Mussolini was forced to resign as leader and only reinstated after he had given in to the radicals and renounced any notion of pacification of the socialists. His national standing, control of the Fascist press, and links with industrialists and other powerful figures made the regional bosses, divided among themselves and mutually distrustful, willing to reinstate him. He returned the favour by demonstrative support for the squads, which took control in numerous northern towns over the following months. And in October 1921 he formally established Fascism as the National Fascist Party.

The organizational framework was widened to 2,300 local sections (each providing regular party subscriptions) over subsequent months, giving Mussolini an extended political base. The middle classes, increasingly disenchanted with weak liberal government, flocked into the party. By May 1922 the membership stood at over 300,000 – a 50 per cent increase in under six months. A disproportionate number of landowners, shopkeepers, clerical workers and, especially, students swelled the socially disparate movement, which generally had the sympathies of local elites, the police and judges.

By autumn 1922 Fascism had penetrated the social and political establishment and had acquired a strong basis of popular support. A

general strike called by the socialist unions in August had been an abject failure, but had increased the fear among the middle classes. In contrast to the evident weakness of the Left, a big rally of 40,000 Fascists in Naples on 24 October appeared a manifestation of strength. Mussolini was ready to swallow another of the initial demands of his movement, that Italy should become a republic, and now declared that he did not want to abolish the monarchy. He proclaimed the readiness of his movement to seize power, and demanded a new government with at least six Fascist ministers.

In fact, the 'March on Rome' on 28 October was nothing of the sort. The King, faced with the resignation of the government, was misinformed that 100,000 Fascist militia were marching unstoppably on Rome. Actually there were no more than 10,000 poorly armed 'blackshirts' who could easily have been repulsed by the army – had the army wanted to turn them back. When a last attempt to form a liberal government failed, the King invited Mussolini to become Prime Minister. Far from leading a march of triumphant Fascists into Rome, Mussolini arrived by train, dressed in a black shirt, black trousers and a bowler hat. He was constitutionally appointed, and the government he led was a broad coalition, including ministers from the Liberals, the Nationalists, the Democrats and the People's Party as well as Mussolini and three other Fascists. In mid-November the new government received a resounding vote of confidence from parliament. But given the chronic governmental instability of recent years, few expected it to last long.

That soon changed. Careerists now rushed to join the Fascist Party, which swelled to 783,000 members by the end of 1923 – well over double its membership at the time of the 'March on Rome'. Fascism was becoming institutionalized. Its initial *squadristi* core of brutal fighters and fanatical believers was being diluted by the intake of opportunists looking for jobs and advancement – including former nationalist rivals, many of them monarchists and conservatives. Mussolini still had no clear plans for a one-party dictatorship. But he was gaining in confidence and, compared with the traditional gerontocracy of party notables, he already cut a more dynamic figure. In November 1923 he engineered a vital change to the electoral system to give the leading party in an election two-thirds of the seats if it

polled more than a quarter of the votes. Ostensibly, the change was to ensure governmental stability. In practice, it guaranteed that, to stay in power, liberals and conservatives would have to support his government. In the election of April 1924 under the new allocation system, the national bloc, most of them Fascists, won two-thirds of the votes anyway, giving them 375 seats out of 535, thanks in no small part to a campaign of violence against their opponents. Opposition parties remained in existence. But the Socialists and People's Party had lost much of their former strength. Outside the working class, most Italians were, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, ready to accept Mussolini's leadership.

A dangerous flashpoint occurred in June 1924 when the Socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti, who had denounced the election result as fraudulent, disappeared and was later found dead – murdered, as all rightly presumed, by Fascists, almost certainly on the orders of Mussolini or leading members of his entourage. A first-rate political crisis ensued. The Socialists withdrew from parliament in protest – a move whose only effect was to strengthen the position of the government. Opposition remained divided and impotent. Mussolini, meanwhile, played the moderate. He made concessions to bring some nationalists, monarchists and rightist Liberals into government posts, and incorporated the Fascist militia into the armed forces. Fearful of any revival of socialism, the 'big battalions' – the King, the Church, the army and major industrialists – backed Mussolini. But the Fascist provincial bosses made their own support conditional upon their leader moving to a fully fledged Fascist regime. A new wave of violence emphasized the point.

As throughout his rise to power, Mussolini faced both ways, manoeuvring between conservatives who were needed to establish political control, and his Fascist radicals, unhappy at any steps towards moderation. Forced to accommodate his party bosses, while adamantly refusing during a speech in parliament in January 1925 to acknowledge his complicity in Matteotti's murder, Mussolini publicly accepted full responsibility for what had happened. Placating the radicals, he stated: 'If two irreconcilable elements are struggling with each other, the solution lies in force.' The principle was put into practice. Political opponents were arrested, opposition parties suppressed, the freedom

of the press was abolished and government left almost completely in the hands of the Fascists. The 'foundations of the totalitarian state were laid,' Mussolini later wrote. The Matteotti crisis might have broken Mussolini. It ended by strengthening him. Fascist power was secure.

Why did Fascism break through in Italy but nowhere else during the post-war crisis? Crucial to Mussolini's success were the existing, and rapidly worsening, crisis of legitimacy of the liberal state, the impact of the war, and the perceived revolutionary threat. Nowhere else apart from Spain was the crisis of legitimacy so profound in the immediate post-war years. And Spain had not participated in the war. The impact of the war in Italy, by contrast, can scarcely be exaggerated.

The Italian state, recently unified, but still for the most part economically backward and socially divided, rested upon a narrow base of oligarchic politics before the war. This could no longer be sustained after the war. Intense social and ideological divisions had been glaringly exposed by intervention and magnified by the calamitous losses during the conflict. Millions of Italians had been mobilized to fight. Many were now open to political mobilization. The belief that, in the eyes of countless thousands of ex-servicemen and many others, victory had been 'mutilated', that Italy had been cheated out of the promises of national glory and imperialist expansion, that the sacrifice had not been worth it, fed a vitriolic rejection of the existing state and its representatives.

The sense that the ruling oligarchy had betrayed Italy's heroic war veterans provided an initial base for Fascism's core support. The emotional appeal to nationalist commitment, to national rebirth, and to the destruction of the weak and decadent liberal state held strong attractions to many in this atmosphere of resentment, disunity, disorder and socialist revolutionary threat. Big electoral gains for a Socialist Party preaching the need for a violent seizure of power by the workers, and the early growth of a Communist Party after its foundation in 1921, made the threat of revolution, so soon after the Bolshevik takeover in Russia, seem very real.

The post-war changes to the franchise had completely destabilized government. The fragmentation of politics in the centre and conservative Right, and the patent inability of the government to combat the

threat that the new strength of the Socialists, in the eyes of property-holders, posed, provided the political space in which Fascism could mobilize support. Extreme violence against perceived internal enemies extended this support, especially in the commercially developed areas of the countryside of northern and central Italy.

But for all its radicalism, Fascism could not have attained domination without the support of the ruling elites, who threw in their lot with Mussolini's movement. Mussolini did not seize power; he was invited to take it. Thereafter, the conservative, monarchist, military and Church elites, fearful of Socialism, were happy to back the methods of intimidation and manipulation that, by 1925, gave Fascism close to monopoly control of the state.

The European country where conditions seemed closest to those that encouraged the rise of Fascism in Italy was Germany. So why, when democracy collapsed in 'victorious' Italy, did it survive the post-war crisis in defeated Germany?

DEMOCRACY SURVIVES IN GERMANY

North of the Alps, Mussolini's 'March on Rome' had an immediate effect on the extreme radical Right in an increasingly troubled political scene in Germany. Since 1920 a racist-nationalist horthead with remarkable demagogic talents, Adolf Hitler, had been making a stir in Munich's beer halls, though scarcely beyond. In 1921 he had become leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), which in some ways, including the build-up of a violent paramilitary arm, resembled Mussolini's early Fascist Party. The Nazi Party (as the NSDAP became dubbed) differed little from that of similar extreme racist nationalist movements in Germany. But Hitler could draw the crowds like no other speaker. Although still small, his party had rapidly built a following, mainly in Bavaria – a state with considerable regional autonomy within the German federal system and since 1920 the bastion of nationalist opposition to what was portrayed as 'socialist' democracy in Prussia, by far the largest German state.

Hitler's movement had grown from 2,000 or so members in early 1921 to 20,000 by the autumn of 1922. And when one of his leading

acolytes announced to the roars of a big beer-hall audience a few days after the 'March on Rome' that 'Germany's Mussolini is called Adolf Hitler', it gave the nascent personality cult developing around the Nazi leader a substantial boost. As Germany descended into economic and political crisis in 1923, following the French occupation of the Ruhr, Hitler's power to mobilize the violently anti-government nationalist extremists was sufficient to propel him to a leading position in the maelstrom of Bavarian paramilitary politics that was developing into a force ready and prepared to move against the elected Reich government in Berlin. Democracy was gravely endangered.

The anti-democratic nationalist Right – conservative as well as radical – had, in fact, begun to recover remarkably quickly from the shock of defeat and revolution in November 1918. In the fear (exaggerated, as it turned out) of the revolution becoming radicalized along Bolshevik lines, the new Socialist interim government in Berlin had even before the Armistice struck a fateful deal with the leadership of the defeated army that allowed the officer corps to get a second wind. In essence, the revolutionary government had agreed to support the officer corps in return for backing for the government in combating Bolshevism. The split on the Left between those favouring parliamentary democracy and the minority that, looking to Moscow, had formed the German Communist Party and sought a root-and-branch Soviet-style revolution, would prove a lasting hindrance to the new democracy that emerged in 1919. The serious threat to democracy came, however, from the Right – temporarily undermined by the defeat and revolution, but subdued, not destroyed. By the spring of 1919, the revival of the anti-socialist, anti-democratic Right was already under way. Strong support came from the middle class and landholding peasantry, whose visceral detestation of Socialism and fear of Bolshevism was accentuated by the month-long attempt to impose a Soviet-style government in Bavaria in April 1919.

By March 1920 an extremist group within right-wing military circles, headed by Wolfgang Kapp, a founding member of the annexationist pro-war lobby organization, the Fatherland Party, and General Walther von Lüttwitz, the inspiration behind the paramilitary *Freikorps*, felt strong enough to try to overthrow the government. Within a week their putsch attempt proved a fiasco. Kapp, Lüttwitz