

Capitalism's Boot Boys – fascism in historical context

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Introduction

Alfred Eichmann was a central organiser of the Holocaust. Captured after the Second World War, Eichmann escaped to Latin America where he vanished until a team of Israeli agents apprehended him outside Buenos Aires in 1960. At his trial for crimes against humanity, Eichmann presented himself as little more than a cog in a much larger Nazi machine. Defining himself as a loyal civil servant, Eichmann described his record as one of dutifully following orders from superior officers who alone determined the morality of his actions. The District Court of Jerusalem was not convinced, sentencing Eichmann to death for his actions.

But for the Jewish political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, Eichmann represented what she famously described as the 'banality of evil' – the supreme ordinariness of an ordinary man, made to do the most appalling things by a Totalitarian Regime.¹ Used by Arendt to describe Hitler's Nazi Regime but also Stalin's distortion of communism, totalitarianism defined a new form of overwhelming state power that eradicated all sense of individual identity along with any private activity outside the state's influence. According to Arendt, totalitarian regimes sought to reorder every

aspect of a person's life. They married terror tactics with modern surveillance techniques to subjugate entire populations, and in-so-doing, transformed people into willing accomplices in destructive drives towards world domination.² Ordinary people were shocked at the moral implications of these ideas, but they were quickly taken up by western ideologues for use during the Cold War.

Although Hitler and Stalin had been sworn enemies during World War II, Arendt's analysis allowed liberals to place them on the same side of the political divide. More importantly, it allowed the revolutionary potential of Marxism to be equated with the destructiveness of Stalinism, as the far right and the far left became equally abhorrent regimes counterposed to liberal democracy and capitalist economies.³ The fall of the Berlin Wall reinforced these ideas as liberals lauded bourgeois democracy as the 'End of History' and the final achievement of the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment.⁴

Yet within a generation, the Twin Towers had collapsed into the War on Terror while the illusions of bourgeois freedom foundered on deeply authoritarian responses to the Great Recession. The liberal center revealed itself as the liberal

extreme – the purveyors of Imperialism in the Middle East, of borders around the world's poorest people, and of endless austerity to stabilise the global economy. Neoliberal policies have also been chiefly responsible for the re-emergence of a far right that simultaneously feeds off the despair felt by people living under capitalism, while shielding the system from progressive alternatives on the left. Arendt's ideas were only ever superficially correct. She captured authoritarian similarities between Nazism and Stalinism but missed a far deeper truth about the historical roots of their respective ideologies – namely, that communism emerged as the revolutionary alternative to the exploitation of the capitalist system, while fascism emerged as its counter-revolutionary counterpart, deployed to rescue the system from its period of deepest crisis. One movement promised emancipation from below, the other instigated authoritarian oppression and murder from above.

Fascism brought the world exactly what it promised, moreover, while Stalinism was a disastrous degeneration of socialism, born of the failure of the western working classes to emulate the Bolshevik Revolution. Equating Stalinism with communism meant much of this history was obscured, but with the far right once again resurgent, it is vital to recover it; to explain the historical roots of fascism and to insist on socialism, as Marx understood

it - as revolution from below - as the only genuine hope in a world of racism, xenophobia, and capitalist destruction.

Capitalism, nation-states, and racism

Although fascism emerged during the dying days of World War One, its roots were in the fusion of nationalist-states and monopoly capitalism that characterised the final decades of the 19th century.⁵ Early bourgeois societies were characterised by small units of capital in competition with each other, but by the turn of the 20th century, capitalism was based on enormous corporations, each tied to their own particular state. Capital required the resources of the state (military, bureaucratic, cultural) in order to develop, and the early nature of the English Revolution (1640's) meant that the British bourgeoisie had a crucial head start over their continental rivals in the emerging capitalist economy.

Cromwell's Navigation Acts (1650's) helped Britain to become a major maritime power, while over the course of the next 150 years, the British state implemented policies at home and abroad to foster technical development and capital accumulation.⁶ Millions of peasants were thrown off their lands to create the wage labour necessary for capitalist expansion, while overseas, the British Navy gradually supplanted the Dutch and then the French

in the scramble for colonies that offered vital strategic advantages. Capitalism gave great dynamism to the British economy, but it also created internal divisions as peasants were thrown off their land and eventually herded into factories. To cope with this, the state developed a machinery of oppression built around the legal system, but it also sought the consensus of the masses through material reforms and a common identity.⁷

Here nationalism was to play the crucial role. In the early phase of capitalist development, nationalism was synonymous with calls for greater democracy and for the end of feudal privileges. Anxious to enlist artisans and yeoman farmers in their bid to overthrow the king, the bourgeoisie developed a set of natural rights packaged as the birthright of every Englishmen with property to protect. Progressive nationalism also underpinned the Rights of Man that served as a rallying call during the French Revolution and for the United Irishmen during the Rebellion of 1798.

Yet nationalism could also become a force for reaction once the European ruling classes shaped it for their own ends. Here nationalism worked to bind rulers and ruled together regardless of their material differences and allowed the inhabitants of imperialist powers to feel themselves superior to those in the colonies. To understand the lure of this imperialist nationalism, Otto Bauer likened it to a

‘Community of Destiny’.⁸ This refers to the fellow feeling that grows from the constant immersion in a way of life; to the ongoing participation in a socio-cultural milieu that helps to create meaning and attachment among human beings, regardless of their objective relations with each other. Rulers and ruled each feel themselves part of the same national community; “they live in the same town, read the same posters on the walls, the same newspapers, take part in the same political and sporting events and occasionally speak to each other, or, at least, both speak to the same individuals, the various intermediaries between capitalists and workers”.⁹

This immersion in the lived experience of the nation is formalised and further reinforced by the state in a thousand different ways. It creates a common identity around a flag and an anthem; it creates a loyalty to what Benedict Anderson calls ‘imagined communities’ and strives to ensure that “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail...the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship”.¹⁰ Part of its success lies in an ability to project this comradeship back into a mystical past and deep into a sacred soil, tying the nation into the long durée of ‘time’ and ‘space’, and through this, naturalising what are historically contingent and continually evolving social relationships. Imperialist nationalism also creates essentialist boundaries around its native community by

defining it against 'The Other' – those internal enemies, external rivals, and external 'inferiors' to be competed against, removed, dominated, or civilised. It creates cross-class solidarity within the nation, pits this against those outside the nation and creates such deep attachments that men and women have been willing to kill and die for their own 'imagined community'.¹¹ Such are the attributes of ruling class nationalism, which were considerably sharpened by imperialist rivalries in the later 19th century. By this time, Britain was the centre of a vast sprawling empire, taking in around 20 per cent of the world's population and 25 per cent of its landmass. As other capitalist states sought to emulate Britain's 'success', it created nationalist-state competition, along with deep forms of European racism, as the advanced capitalist countries began to dominate the entire world. Indeed, it was this confluence of capitalist power and imperial domination that helped to spawn the racism associated with fascism in the 20th century. Benedict Anderson captures its roots in the following way:

Colonial racism was a major element in that conception of 'Empire' which attempted to weld dynastic legitimacy and national community. It did so by generalising a principle of *innate, inherited superiority* on which its own domestic position was (however shakily) based.... conveying the idea that if, say, English lords were naturally superior to other

Englishmen, no matter: *these other English men were no less superior than the subjected natives.* (Emphasis added).¹²

Marx equally understood the contribution of nationalist chauvinism to the ruling classes, noting how racism against Irish workers allowed their English counterparts to feel themselves part of the ruling nation while simultaneously making English workers tools of the English bourgeoisie 'and thus strengthening the domination over themselves as well'.¹³ This aspect of nationalism has played the same reactionary role time and again throughout capitalist history, but to understand how it could be radicalised into the fascism of the 1920's, it is important to lay out the historical forces that led to the latter's creation.

These include:

- (1) The development of mass working class politics in the latter part of the 19th century. This created a class with the interests and the capacity to overthrow the national state and the capitalist economy. Without mass movements on the left there would have been less need for one supported by the elites on the right.
- (2) The development of colonialism and imperialism as the most powerful monopoly capitalist-states carved up

- the world and used racism and xenophobia as their justification.
- (3) The sheer brutality of the First World War which threw all the resources of the state into slaughtering the citizens of other nations while forging bonds of nationalist identity at home.
- (4) The collapse of capitalist institutions (liberal democracy and the profit system) in the aftermath of the war which threw people's lives into turmoil and radicalised large sections of the population - with industrial workers generally radicalising left; peasants and the middle classes generally radicalising right.
- And,
- (5) The possibility of socialist revolution as the industrial working class looked set to overthrow the capitalist system in Europe at the end of the war. Bolshevism was the antithesis of fascism creating fears in the ruling class and hatreds among the middle classes torn apart by war and capitalist economic crises.

Fascism was the brutal offspring of this brutalising system, as sections of the masses, saturated by imperialism, brutalised by war and in despair at recurrent capitalist economic crises, rose to

smash 'internal enemies' and restore their nations to their former glories. Fascism was not created by the ruling classes of Europe, but it did serve their interests particularly well, perceiving international socialism as the biggest threat to national recovery and acting as a mass right counter-revolution to the potential for socialism from below. Fascism was the logical outworking of an exploitative system that had convulsed itself in imperialist war, convulsed itself again in counter-revolution and was to convulse itself for a third time in an even bloodier conflict that culminated in the Holocaust. Understanding this reactionary historical role is key to understanding the nature of fascism as a movement and an ideology today.

The conditions for imperialist war

For most of the 19th century, Germany lacked the kind of unified state that would allow rapid capitalist development. The democratic revolutions of 1848 might have brought the bourgeoisie to power, but as Engels was to explain – the German bourgeoisie feared the militancy of the working class more than they desired a state of their own, siding with the forces of reaction during the revolution, while biding their time for a more favorable environment.¹⁴ This environment duly presented itself when the traditional Junker elites around Otto Von Bismarck succeeded in unifying the German state in a series of wars from 1864-1871.

As a representative of the agrarian elites, Bismarck was an unlikely architect of a bourgeois revolution, but his introduction of ‘capitalism from above’ was designed to allow the conservative elite to sustain their role in the political sphere while harnessing the power of a capitalist economy to compete militarily with the British Empire. The results were astonishing. Over the course of forty years, Germany went from a motley collection of 38 states to the most advanced capitalist economy in the world. Using state power in a more aggressive way than their rivals in Britain and America, the German ruling class created great conglomerates of capital in the chemicals industry, in coal and in steel. They brought finance capital into close alignment with productive capital and invested in the latest technologies to drive an economic expansion rarely seen before or since.¹⁵ German steel production was roughly equivalent to that of France in 1880, but by 1910, it had outstripped its neighbour by a factor of 4:1. German coal production increased sevenfold between 1870 and 1913, a period in which British production increased less than two and a half times.¹⁶

The sheer scale of this achievement helped to create a more unified ruling class, but it simultaneously created two constraints to continued capitalist expansion – a hostile international environment dominated by the British Empire and a labour movement that had grown in lockstep with

industrialisation. German capitalist expansion was bound to upset the traditional European balance of power as it rose to become the preeminent economy, but without the colonial advantages held by the British or the French. The elites in all of the major imperial powers understood the importance of colonies for capitalist investment, cheap raw materials, markets for end-products and reservoirs of cheap labour.¹⁷

Indeed, in the context of a deep recession in the 1870s, it was investment in the colonies that allowed the major capitalist states to stabilise their system domestically even as it brought them into conflict internationally. The various elites also craved the strategic advantage of geographic locations like the Suez Canal, making it certain that the German ruling class would look to secure the same advantages as their Imperial rivals.

The problem, however, was that they sought to achieve colonial expansion in a world that had already been carved up. Thus, as Leon Trotsky explains, “Germany squeezed into the heart of Europe was faced – at a time when the whole world had already been divided up – with the necessity of conquering foreign markets and redividing colonies that had already been divided”.¹⁸



Workers during a miners strike in Germany in 1905.

The challenge posed by the workers movement was no less serious. Although it had come into being relatively late, the pace of German industrialisation meant that by the outbreak of World War One, the German workers movement was among the strongest in the world. Founded in 1875, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was initially committed to revolutionary Marxism, but its theoretical radicalism was belied by a reformist politics that relied on working successfully within the institutions of capitalism.¹⁹ By training a layer of

working-class cadres the SPD showed that it was strong enough to wrest concessions from an expanding capitalism around the turn of the century – recruiting vast numbers in the process and becoming the template for workers parties across the continent.²⁰ The party won 35 per cent of the vote in the 1912 elections for example, making it the most popular party in the German state. The SPD was also deeply embedded in the warp and woof of working-class life, with more than a million members, 90 daily newspapers, 11,000 members on local councils and more than

“100,000 working in its various offshoots or affiliated bodies”.²¹

In addition, the SPD founded the Free Trade Unions (ADGB) which grew from 237,000 members in 1892 to 2.6 million members in 1912.²² Bauer’s ‘Community of Destiny’ certainly applied to the lived experience of Germany’s industrial workers, who found themselves faced with the same daily challenges, routines, and experiences in their workplaces and communities. Forged in the struggles for living wages and political representation, German workers became highly class conscious with traditions and identities that operated in tension with the wider nationalism of their rulers.

52

They were also a mobilised minority fighting for trade union recognition and for the popular vote. The German ruling class thus faced a formidable foe that was formally committed to revolution, but there were two weaknesses in the wider working-class movement that had not yet become fully apparent. The first was the danger of reformism, as the very success of the SPD within capitalism increased the dangers of conservatism when faced with the threat of a nationalist war against an external enemy.

With such a large layer of full-time staff, the SPD had a lot to gain from a stabilised capitalism and a lot to risk in a revolution.

The second problem was the persistence of a large petty bourgeois (small employers’ craftsmen, artisans) class along with a mass of rural and Catholic peasants who were to prove more conservative than the industrial workers in the urban centres. As Gluckstein explains, “there continued to be a mass of artisans, craftsmen and others still working in close proximity to their employers.... [and] the continuing existence of a broad middle-class milieu should not be ignored”.²³ This is because the layer of peasants and petty bourgeoisie could move left but they could also move right. These classes made up the core support for nationalism in the period before the war and of the fascist counter-revolution after it.

War and its aftermath

A European war promised a solution to both of these dilemmas for the German ruling class. Success in a major military campaign would allow German resources to expand, while the wave of patriotism unleashed by the conflict would discipline workers and force the SPD into line. To make sure the masses played their allotted role, the state created a wartime propaganda unit known as the Fatherland Front which aimed to produce pro-war hysteria around the values of national honour and military prestige.²⁴ Nationalism was rife in the early days of the conflict and in the face of pressure from the state, the SPD duly voted for war credits, justified

by the need to maintain unity at home and a worker's movement that was neither banned by the authorities nor smashed by external armies. The German elites had begun to break the power of their worker's representatives, but their second objective of winning the war was to prove far more difficult.

Britain, Russia and France had more than twice the population of Germany and Austria-Hungary, far greater access to natural resources and close contact with the USA which entered the war in April 1917. Germany initially had success in France but on both the Western and the Eastern fronts the war quickly got bogged down in the horrors of trench warfare. The barbarity of the war was unlike anything these men had ever experienced.

Four years of industrialised slaughter ensued, as an entire generation butchered each other at the behest of their superiors. Reflecting on the depravity of the conflict, Chris Harman writes, "the millions of men at the various fronts were undergoing experiences for which nothing in life had prepared them. They soon discovered that the war was not a pleasant jaunt to Berlin or Paris, or some great adventure. It was mud, boredom, bad food and the horror of death all around them".²⁵

The Great War also brought misery to the wider European population, forced to support a war-effort that meant only hunger, fear and social dislocation for the

vast majority. By 1917, the diet of the average German worker provided just 1,333 calories -a third less than the minimum required for long term survival. An estimated 750,000 Germans died of malnutrition for a war that was becoming increasingly unwinnable.²⁶ In Russia, meanwhile, a combination of hunger and war weariness brought thousands of women onto the streets of Petrograd for International Women's Day in 1917. Russia had experienced some of the same dynamics as the German economy, but at a much lower level of development. Like Germany, there had been intensive industrialisation in a small number of urban centres in the decades before the war.²⁷

This created a class of highly organised coal and steel workers vital to the Russian war effort, but who were also the core support for the socialists becoming increasingly influential since the 1905 Revolution.²⁸ Within days, bitterness at war and the ongoing shortages brought these workers into the struggle as the movement radicalised and won support from soldiers and sailors. By November, the Bolsheviks had been lifted into power by Russian workers who supported Lenin's calls for 'Peace, Land and Bread' but also, increasingly, the Bolshevik aspiration for a worldwide socialist revolution.²⁹ For many onlookers, the Russian example seemed the best hope to escape the horrors of war and exploitation, but the leaders of the

revolution knew they had to spread it, if they were to have any success at breaking the power of reaction at home.

Russia had even greater layers of peasants than Germany, who would need strong material incentives to move towards socialism. This meant spreading the revolution into the industrial heartlands of Europe, but first, the Bolsheviks had to get Russia out of the war. They did this through the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk which ceded important industrial resources to the Germans who, in turn, took the Russian withdrawal as their final chance to win the war on the Western Front. In these final days of the war, as Kenneth Barkin, points out:

54

The military, agrarian, and industrial elites who ruled Germany considered themselves involved in two wars simultaneously, one against the Triple Entente and the other against the aspirations of the German people for full political emancipation. The latter conflict dictated victory at all costs on the military front. Defeat or a compromise peace on the battlefield would inevitably lead to democratisation because it would lead to a loss of legitimacy for the elite that had demanded so many sacrifices from the many millions of workers, farmers, and artisans while denying them effective political power.³⁰

By July, the German military offensive had failed and by November the army was disintegrating with workers and soldiers in revolt all over Germany.³¹ Huge demonstrations broke out as soldiers and workers took control of Hamburg, Hanover, Cologne, Leipzig, Dresden, and scores of other smaller towns.³² In Munich, industrial workers declared a 'Bavarian Free state' while in Berlin, Karl Liebknecht proclaimed a Socialist Republic and the start of a world revolution from the balcony of the imperial palace. In Austro-Hungary much the same pattern was unfolding, as the old imperial ruling class collapsed, and the army deserted.³³ In March 1919, a communist government took power in Budapest promising a Bolshevik revolution, while in April, revolutionaries led unemployed workers in a bid to storm the Austrian parliament.³⁴ For a brief moment, as Chris Harman explains, "it was not absurd to conceive of the revolution in Hungary linking with Russia to the east, and through Austria with soviet Bavaria to the west, overturning the entire set up in the former German and Austro-Hungarian empires".³⁵

There was also revolutionary activity in Finland where an Independent Workers Republic was declared in 1918 and across Northern Italy where a wave of strikes involving hundreds of thousands of industrial workers brought the state to the brink of revolution in a series of factory occupations. Industrial workers had not

been able to stop the war in 1914, but they had successfully ended it in the period between 1918 and 1920. Socialist revolution was a genuine possibility in Germany at different stages between 1918 and 1923. It was also on the cards in Hungary during 1919, while in Italy, the bosses fretted as workers took over the industrial heartlands during the two red years. The chance for a better world was becoming a reality, but it was this chance that fascism rose to smash into the ground.

Fascism emerges in Italy

Fascism was born on 23 March 1919, when around 100 people met in the Milan Industrial and Commercial Alliance to “declare war on socialism because it has opposed [Italian] nationalism”.³⁶ The leader of the new movement was Benito Mussolini, an ex-Socialist who became an ultra-nationalist in the context of the war. Mussolini broke with the left over their refusal to back Italy’s war effort and he now seethed with anger against militant workers who were weakening Italy internally and the victorious nations who refused to grant territories promised to Italy after the war. Italy had some of the same economic dynamics as Russia and Germany.

In the wealthier north, industrialisation had created the layer of workers responsible for the two red years of 1919 and 1920, but there was also a mass of peasants and petty bourgeois layers who

could be pulled left or right. Unlike Russia, however, there were no organized revolutionary party to take the industrial struggle into full revolt, and as the bosses and conservatives regrouped, they began to place their faith in Mussolini as a political adventurer who could build what the conservatives could not – a mass movement on the right that would take on the left on the streets. Mussolini would rely on the same combination of conservative army veterans and petty bourgeois layers as Hitler in Germany, but he initially stood in the 1919 election on a left-nationalist programme. This failed spectacularly and his movement was only saved when it turned to a new tactic – smashing the left through street violence and breaking the power of organised workers.

The nationalist war veterans who made up the hard-core of Mussolini’s *Squadristo Units* hated the left for its internationalism and pacificism. The landowners of the Po Valley hated them for organising landless labourers to achieve better working conditions, while the Northern industrialists hated them for their role in the wave of strikes and occupations. Squadristo began as a confluence of these three hatreds, as the failure of the workers to put through their revolution gave Mussolini his chance at revenge.

With financial backing from the landlords, and acquiescence from the local police, “Black shirted *Squadristi* mounted nightly expeditions to sack and burn Labour



Mussolini's Squadristi on parade.

Exchanges and local Socialist Offices and to beat and intimidate socialist organisers".³⁷

56 Hardened by the brutality of the war, their aim was to smash the left politically at the same time as proving themselves useful to those conservative forces who funded and protected them. This meant building a mass movement on the ultra-nationalist right to counter the workers movement. And, as they smashed their way through the Italian countryside the movement grew in numbers and Mussolini grew in political ambition. From 120 squads in October 1920, the fascists had 2,300 by November 1921, having spent the first half of the year destroying 17 newspapers and printing works, 59 Socialist Headquarters, 119 Chambers of Labour, 151 Socialist Clubs, and 151 Cultural Organisations.³⁸ By this stage, the *Squadristi* had more than proven their worth to the Italian elites who began to offer Mussolini more serious backing.

Big business provided substantial extra funds throughout 1921, but so did the government of Giovanni Giolitti, which secretly issued a circular advising 60,000 demobilised officers that they would be paid 80 per cent of their army wages if they agreed to join the fasci.³⁹ Giolitti also offered Mussolini invaluable political legitimacy, including fascists on a coalition ticket that gave the Blackshirts 35 parliamentary seats in elections of March 1921.

Fascist propaganda depicts Mussolini as the all-conquering general who seized power in a March on Rome, but in truth the existing elites worked in lockstep with him from the start. Mussolini's fascist gangs needed police protection to build up their terror while his mass movement needed vital funds that came from members of the establishment. Robert Paxton argues that the traditional elites could have stopped Mussolini right up to his 'March on Rome' in 1922, and the fact that Mussolini sharded this assessment is revealed by the fact that he avoided marching alongside his troops – preferring to arrive on the train from Milan in case he was arrested. In the end, Mussolini took power constitutionally as the king offered him the office of prime minister and despite his early socialism and his continual use of left demagoguery, Mussolini quickly repaid his conservative partners with an all-out assault on the trade unions and an ongoing partnership with the industrialists and the Catholic Church.⁴⁰

The idea of a totalizing fascist revolution that smashed the Italian bourgeois state is also a myth, as Paxton explains below:

Long after his regime had settled into routine, Mussolini still liked to refer to the “Fascist revolution”, but he meant a revolution against socialism and flabby liberalism. A new way of organizing mass assent while leaving property intact...The anti-socialism... became central...the anti-capitalist idealism became watered down and we must not let its conspicuous presence in early texts confuse us about what Fascism later became in action.⁴¹

If Mussolini was a fascist innovator, he was not alone. Across the continent ultra-nationalists were organising to attack the left in order to avert what they viewed as a disastrous national decline. In Finland, the nascent workers republic was crushed with the help of nationalist troops, while in Hungary the short-lived communist government was drowned in blood by a combination of the Romanian Army, conservatives led by Admiral Horthy and proto-fascists led by Captain Gyula Gömbös. Gömbös later became the Hungarian Prime Minister, but he cut his teeth by organising “a mass base for a militant movement of national renovation” that was deeply anti-communist and anti-

Semitic.⁴² This was an important portend to the Nazis in Germany.

Nazi Germany

Although fascism reached its ultimate barbarity in Nazi Germany, it was a relatively marginal force in the early days of the German Revolution. Like Mussolini, Hitler established a paramilitary force (the SA) that attacked communists in the streets, but there were two essential differences between Germany and Italy at this early stage. The first was the greater importance of social democracy in the Weimar Republic which had compromised with the authorities during the war and now worked alongside them to undermine the German Revolution.⁴³

Linked to this, was a partnership between the SPD leadership and the military command to create a paramilitary style force *within the army itself*.⁴⁴ These Freikorps officers were under the control of the state, and they allowed the traditional elites to re-establish order without the scores of micro-fascist groups, as they rampaged through Germany attacking socialists and destroying resistance to the state.

When Hitler tried to emulate Mussolini in the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 he was quickly arrested and thrown into jail. But

the authorities remained sympathetic to his worldview and conceived his movement as a patriotic counterweight to the socialists and communists. Hitler's Nazis' traded on the idea of a national disgrace perpetuated by November Criminals who had stabbed Germany in the back at the end of the war and sold her out at the Treaty of Versailles.⁴⁵ He also tapped into a deep vein of anti-Semitism in German folk ideology, blaming a combination of Jewry and Bolshevism for all of the problems besetting Germany.⁴⁶

58

The Jews were responsible for corrupting the vitality of the German race while the communists were responsible for destroying the inner unity of the people. Indeed, the Nazis often equated the two, perceiving Jewish Bolshevism as the ultimate threat to national recovery.⁴⁷ On the brink of taking power in 1932, Hitler wrote that "it was solely to save Germany from the oppression of Marxism that I founded and organised a movement".⁴⁸ These ideas continued to attract supporters throughout the 1920s, with the party growing from around 2,000 to 20,000 members, but in a country the size of Germany, this was still far from a mass movement. The economy had also recovered strongly in the latter part of the 1920s, ensuring that Hitler had neither the mass movement nor the necessary conservative support to take power in the state.

As late as 1928, the Nazis got just 2.8 per cent in a national election, but by 1932

they were getting between 11 million and 13 million votes (37 per cent) and fast becoming the most popular movement in Germany. Their paramilitary wing was also growing rapidly, reaching 100,000 by 1930 and 400,000 by 1932.⁴⁹ What had changed? The most important catalyst for the Nazis' success was the Great Depression triggered by the Wall Street Crash in October 1929. Germany was ill-prepared for the turmoil that followed, as a third of the workforce lost their jobs and industrial output collapsed by 40 per cent.⁵⁰

Liberal democracy had no tradition in Germany either and as the economy collapsed so did support for the Weimar Republic established after World War One. German voters quickly polarised left and right, and it was at this stage that weaknesses in the workers movement came back to haunt the proletariat. One part of this weakness has already been referenced, as the SPD had long-since succumbed to reformist conservatism. Loyal to the Weimar Republic to the bitter end, the SPD leaders steadfastly refused to meet the growing threat of the Nazis' with mass opposition on the streets. They conceived the Nazis as little more than criminal thugs and placed their faith in the constitution to protect them, even as the Nazis took power on the streets, and then used their control of the state to outlaw the SPD.

The other weakness stemmed from the failure of the German Revolution and the subsequent degeneration of the Russian Revolution into Stalinism. At the outbreak of the First World War revolutionaries in Russia and in Serbia had remained true to the revolutionary tradition of Marx and Engels, but the pressures of war coupled with the failure of revolutions in western Europe meant that by the early 1930's Russian socialism had degenerated into a form of State Capitalism. Stalin's 'Socialism in One County' was an imperialist strategy dressed up as socialism and it meant that the Russian State was now actively operating against the interests of workers in Europe.

The German Communist Party (KPD) still had a better sense of the dangers posed by Nazism than the SPD, but under the direction of an ultra-left directive from Stalin, they defined social democrats as social fascists – as twins of the genuine fascists about to smash them into oblivion – and refused to work with the SPD in a united front.⁵¹

These tactical disasters meant that the two wings of the workers movement never came together with the unions to offer real leadership to the workers movement. Instead, they allowed Hitler to build his movement, if not completely unopposed, then in a far more favourable environment. And this, in turn, had important ramifications for the petty bourgeoisie,

who increasingly saw the Nazis as the only movement that could protect them from the proletariat below them and those Jewish bankers who squeezed them from above.⁵²

Like Mussolini, Hitler skilfully used left demagoguery to build his mass support. He promised a national movement that would go beyond the contradictions of capitalism and contested the connection of socialism with Marxist theory – declaring Marxism a distortion of the true social movement rooted in the national community.

Hitler consistently presented the Nazis as the only catch-all party in the Weimar Republic and the only national movement able to solve the economic crisis, but in reality, the party's membership was heavily skewed towards rural workers and the petty bourgeoisie and away from the industrial working classes in the major urban centres. As Paxton explains "fascist parties were largely middle class to the point where fascism was perceived as the very embodiment of lower middle class resentments".⁵³

Hitler's blend of nationalism and anti-Semitism did appeal to some German workers – particularly in smaller towns and rural areas – but the industrial working class never abandoned the SPD and the KPD in large numbers. Indeed, it was the ongoing strength of the organised labour movement that convinced sections of the German ruling class that the Nazis could

become a useful implement to smash the left and contest the international constraints imposed on them by the Treaty of Versailles.⁵⁴ Without ever having won an electoral majority they therefore invited Hitler to become German Chancellor at the end of January 1933, thus inaugurating the darkest period in the history of humanity.

The Nazis in power

Fascist states represented the most destructive political force ever created. Within a generation of coming to power, somewhere between 55 and 70 million people had been killed, including more than 18 million civilians murdered by the Nazis in the Holocaust and in Operation Barbarossa.⁵⁵ Death on this scale demands an explanation. It demands an understanding of how fascist movements could prosecute wars of destruction on such a massive scale. How they could turn whole societies into killing machines and turn these machines on the peoples of the world. Mainstream analysis explains this in terms of the totalitarian argument made at the outset.⁵⁶

According to this narrative, fascism was a completely new and revolutionary movement that went beyond the control of traditional conservatives by radicalising into a totalitarian state. The Italian king handed power to Mussolini, only to watch him ban all of his political rivals, close the free press, and ban non-fascist trade unions. Hindenburg made Hitler

Chancellor, only to watch him do the very same things – banning political opposition, outlawing non-fascist trade unions, and taking control of the press after a fire at the Reichstag. There are important truths in this narrative, of course, as Hitler and Mussolini did ban party political opposition and smash organisations of the working class.

But a crucial distinction must be made between the institutions of bourgeois democracy and the institutions of the bourgeoisie itself, most importantly their control of the capitalist economy, but also their influence over the civil service and the military. Fascists hated liberal democracy as an unreliable defender of the nation. They hated the cosmopolitanism of liberal ideology and despised democracy as a levelling force that permitted individual dissent from the nationalist priorities of the state.

Attacking what they perceived as the decadence and atomising aspects of bourgeois society, fascists claimed they were in the process of creating new men and women.⁵⁷ Men who were steeled by discipline and unquestionably loyal to their superiors whether in the workplace, the army, or the state. Women who understood their contribution to the nation and therefore took their role in childbearing and home making as a sacred duty.⁵⁸

Fascism was revolutionary in its use of state control and coercion, but it was counter-

revolutionary when it came to the ruling classes in Italy and Germany. For all their claims that they were initiating a third way between capitalism and socialism, fascist regimes represented an extremist class super-structure grafted onto the existing base of the capitalist economy; one that used the full coercive force of the state to smash the workers movement while partnering with traditional elites.⁵⁹ Indeed, Hitler began his assault on organised labour within months of coming into office. The first victims of Nazi terror were communists and trade unionists sent to concentration camps to be re-educated and failing this, to be executed. Using the Reichstag fire as his pretext, Hitler banned the SPD and the KPD in the Spring of 1933, dismantling all of their party infrastructure in the process (newspapers, social clubs etc). The trade union leaders hoped to escape this fate by keeping silent, but on the second of May 1933, “the combined forces of the state and the Nazi party smashed their way into every trade union office in Germany, assaulting officials and dragging many off to concentration camps. Half a century of work wiped out in 24 hours”.⁶⁰

In their place, the Nazis created fascist labour organisations that excluded the very tools that workers had always found effective – mass strikes and genuine collective bargaining. The atmosphere created in the German labour movement was one of forced deference mixed with

fear and despondency. Fascists were careful never to attack the mass of ordinary workers directly, but they expected loyalty and productivity in return, and were always ready to deploy violence against militants who got out of line. A working class deprived of its organisational capacity and demoralised through fear and isolation was exactly what the German (and Italian) industrialists had always wanted.

The Nazis might have made sections of big business uneasy with their rhetoric, but they never sought to alter German property relations nor the sense of deference and hierarchy necessary for a class society. Instead, they partnered with conservative elites who shared their hatred of Bolshevism and supported their nationalist desire to rebuild German power. Robert Paxton captures the differences between fascist rhetoric designed to build a mass base and their action once in power:

Early fascist movements flaunted their contempt for bourgeois values and for those who only wanted to earn money, filthy money. They attacked international finance capitalism as loudly as they attacked socialists. They even promised to expropriate department store owners in favour of patriotic artisans and large landowners in favour of peasants. Whenever fascist parties acquired power, however, they did nothing to carry out their anti-

capitalist threats. By contrast they enforced with the utmost violence and thoroughness their threats against socialism...Once in power fascist regimes banned strikes dissolved independent labour unions, lowered wage earners purchasing power and showered money on armaments industries to the immense satisfaction of employers.⁶¹

The Nazis and the owners of big business needed each other. Expansionary warfare required the productive know how of the capitalist classes, while this same drive represented a form of military Keynesianism, dragging Germany out of the Great Depression and posting record profits across the chemicals, the iron and steel and the fossil fuel industries.⁶²

The same was true of the German High Command which benefitted from the major investment undertaken in the military and remained loyal to Hitler from the moment he eliminated the SA as a competitor to the army in 1934, until the war was effectively lost in the summer of 1944. The fascist drive to dominate Europe was also supported by most German captains of industry, many of whom recognised the vast opportunities that would present themselves if the Nazis succeeded where the Kaiser had failed, in reordering European capitalism in the interests of Germany.⁶³ This is not to suggest that there

was never any dissent or that there was never any coercion. Nazis leaders had significant autonomy in the pursuit of their goals and individual capitalists risked having their property confiscated if they failed to deliver. Fear cascaded down from the top of Fascist societies, but we should never forget that the plans for global conquest dreamed up by the Nazi hierarchy were actually built in the factories of German industrialists and deployed by the High Command of the German Armed Forces. Rationalised slaughter on an industrial scale was not some aberration of the bourgeois enlightenment, it was the logical outworking's of a system based on nationalist competition brought to a horrific crescendo in world war and the Holocaust.

Defining the Nazi state as totalitarian serves to eradicate the crucial differences between workers and employers within the regime, while letting the role of capitalist competition completely off the hook. It allows Western liberals to denounce Nazism as a unique evil that carried everyone in its wake, rather than what it actually was – a fusion of capital and political terror which smashed through the workers movement at home and waged war abroad in the interests of Germany's ruling classes. Equating Nazism with totalitarianism made sense for the bourgeoisie when their aim was to rehabilitate the German conservative elites as a bulwark against Stalinism in the

1940's, but it is dangerous and dishonest if one wants to understand the lessons of the past.⁶⁴ Fascism was not a unique evil dreamed up by psychopaths and imposed across society indiscriminately. It was a mass movement of utter despair that came into a world riven by capitalist war and compounded this despair many times over.

Conclusion

Fascism emerged as a nationalist mass movement against a potentially revolutionary left. Hitler and Mussolini viewed their regimes as popular movements against International Bolshevism, while Franco came to power in a counter-revolt against a left Republican government. For Hitler, Operation Barbarossa was a fight to the death for which he planned appropriately – always deploying at least 70 per cent of his forces on the Eastern Front and beginning his mass murder of civilians in the invasion of the USSR. While this aspect of the Second World War has not been airbrushed out of history, neither is it front and centre. Today, fascism is most associated with anti-Semitism for example, despite the fact that anti-Semitism was not a central characteristic of Italian fascism during the 1920's. The Holocaust has also become the defining symbol of mechanised slaughter, while the 27 million people killed in the USSR are far less prominent in official western narratives. What explains this? The most compelling explanation emerges when we remember that the hot war against the Nazis' was immediately

followed by a Cold War against the Stalinists.

During its rise, western leaders generally welcomed fascism as an effective counterweight against the threat of socialism from below. Winston Churchill famously described Mussolini as a 'Roman Genius' who had "established a centre of orientation from which countries which are engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle with socialism must not hesitate to be guided."⁶⁵ Ideas such as these were common among the European ruling classes until it became clear that their own interests were at risk from Hitler's expansionary agenda.

To put this slightly differently, Churchill never went to war to defeat fascism; he fought to protect the British Empire and to preserve the rule of his own class within Britain itself. Total warfare forced Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin into an uneasy alliance, but as the hot war ended, longstanding hostilities between Stalinism and the west were quickly re-asserted, as two imperialist blocs carved up Europe and set about dominating their own spheres of influence for the next four decades.

In this context, a reminder that Hitler and Mussolini had initially taken up the fight against socialism and that they were fellow travellers in wanting to smash the workers movement were not deemed politically expedient. Much better to frame Nazism around its hatred of the Jews and to sully socialism two-times over, once by equating

it with Stalinism and again by defining Stalinism and Nazism as two sides of the same authoritarian coin. For all of their supposed differences totalitarian regimes were essentially the same thing – the antithesis of western freedom and bourgeois democracy.

This strategy bestowed legitimacy on the west as the defender of the so-called Free World at the same time as it allowed the capitalist classes in the ex-fascist regimes to rehabilitate themselves. They may have been willing partners of fascism during the 1930's and 1940's but now they were willing partners in a bid to halt the spread of Stalinism in Europe. And this was what really mattered after the war.

capitalist system facing existential crisis. That it has once again reared its head is the most compelling indication that we need to smash capitalism itself if we want to get rid of its most reactionary elements.

64

The anti-communism so central to the fascist regimes thus remained central to the western regimes that emerged in Europe after the war. The official rhetoric was 'Never Again', but implicitly, important aspects of the fascist worldview were retained as the competitive state system was reconfigured for new enemies (The USSR, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam etc) and capitalist exploitation continued unabated. If Hiram W. Johnson is correct that truth is the first casualty of war, then the truth about fascism was lost in an ideological offensive that sought to protect the western elites from their previous pro-fascist sympathies and their current working classes. Fascism was a movement that arose from the logic of a global

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- ² Hannah Arendt. 1951. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York. Schocken Books.
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- ⁴ Most famously this was the thesis put forward by Francis Fukuyama in his *The End of History and the Last Man* published by Penguin Press in 1992.
- ⁵VI. Lenin. *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism, in Lenin's Selected Works*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, Vol One, pp. 667 -766.
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- ¹² Ibid, p.150.
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- ¹⁷ Rudolf Hilferding. 1981. *Finance Capital. A Study in the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development*. London. Routledge p.311.
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- ¹⁹ Chris Harman. 1997. *The Lost Revolution. Germany 1918 to 1923*. London Bookmarks p.16.
- ²⁰ Wolfgang Adendroth. 1973. *A Short History of the European Working Class*, New York. Monthly Review Press. p.43.
- ²¹ Chris Harman. 2008. *A People's History of the World*. London, Verso p.391.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Donny Gluckstein. 2012. *The Nazis, Capitalism, and the Working Class*. London, Pluto Press, pp.8-9.
- ²⁴ Robert Paxton. 2005. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. Penguin Books, p.27.
- ²⁵ Chris Harman. 2008. *A People's History of the World*. London, Verso. p. 411.
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- ⁵⁷ Robert Paxton. 2005. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. London, Penguin Books, p.124.
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- ⁵⁹ Donny Gluckstein. 2012. *The Nazis, Capitalism, and the Working Class*. London. Pluto Press. p.128.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid, p.126.
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