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0521477115 - Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and Contrasts

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INTRODUCTION: ITALY, GERMANY AND FASCISM

RICHARD BESSEL

Fascism is the plague of the twentieth century, and we are living
in the twentieth century.

Nikolai Ryabov, chairman of the Russian Central Election
Commission, 13 December 1993¹

In one of the last pieces he wrote, Tim Mason posed the question: ‘Whatever happened to “Fascism”?’ Typically for Tim Mason, he was not simply outlining an important historiographical problem; he also was making an impassioned plea – a plea that fascism as a general concept not be dropped from our vocabulary. It was an expression of his concern, reinforced at the Philadelphia conference on ‘Re-evaluating the “Third Reich”’ in April 1988 which he had attended, about ‘the decline of the “Fascist” paradigm’.² As he noted, general comparative questions framed within discussion of fascism no longer occupied centre stage in the study of Nazi Germany:

most of the interesting new work is concerned specifically with Germany, Nazism, and the Third Reich, especially with the relationship between institutional structures and policy-making, on the one hand, and with biological politics (racism and eugenics), on the other. The most extreme peculiarities of German Nazism have thus slowly and silently come to dominate our moral, political and

Throughout this book ‘fascism’ (and cognates) is used to refer to the phenomenon in the generic sense, while ‘Fascism’ (and cognates) is used to refer specifically to the Italian case.

¹ Quoted in *The Independent*, ‘Fascism stalks Russia’, by Andrew Higgins, 14 Dec. 1993, p. 1.

² Papers from this conference have been published in the valuable collection edited by Thomas Childers and Jane Caplan, *Reevaluating the Third Reich* (New York and London, 1993). Tim Mason’s article, ‘Whatever Happened to “Fascism”?’, first published in *Radical History Review*, no. 49 (Winter 1991), was republished as an appendix to the Childers and Caplan collection, pp. 253–62.

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professional concerns. When referred to at all at the Philadelphia conference, 'Fascism' seemed to have become old hat.³

For Tim Mason, this tendency carried the danger (as Jane Caplan put it) of 'a retreat from engagement with the most fundamental moral and political questions that could be asked of this period of history'.⁴ If historical research into this period were going to address such questions, it needed to be capable of generating general conclusions, and not just to describe events of a specific time and place.

Concern to reach general conclusions from the profoundly disturbing and destructive events which took place in Europe – and in Italy and Germany in particular – between 1918 and 1945 was precisely what had inspired earlier debates about 'fascism'. 'Fascism' as a subject of theoretical and comparative analysis was a product of a largely Marxist-inspired debate, in which the relations of capital, labour and the state, and questions of class, occupied centre stage. It had its origins in contemporary writings during the 1920s and 1930s, as Marxists and non-Marxists alike struggled to make sense of the threatening phenomena with which they were faced in interwar Europe; and it had formed a central theme in the historiography of twentieth-century Europe during the 1960s and 1970s. During the 1980s, however, it largely disappeared from view under a mass of individual studies of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany which largely neglected to make comparative glances across the Alps. Yet at the same time the opening up of new subjects of enquiry and the gaining of valuable new insights – not least from the work of historians of everyday life, researchers using oral evidence to understand working-class attitudes, feminist historians examining policies towards and the experiences of women, and military historians examining how the Fascist and Nazi regimes made war – provided potentially fruitful bases upon which to make new generalisations. New pieces of the jigsaw were uncovered in astounding quantity; the task was somehow to put them together to make a coherent picture.

At least so it seemed before the political earthquake which began with the breaching of the Berlin Wall. The events of the past few years – the ending of the Cold-War division of Europe, the reunification of Germany, the crumbling of the postwar political system in Italy, the collapse of Marxist–Leninist socialism in Europe – now give the history of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and of fascism generally, a different frame from what had seemed the case a decade ago. Of course, there had been

³ Mason, 'Whatever Happened to "Fascism"?', in Childers and Caplan (eds.), *Reevaluating the Third Reich*, p. 255.

⁴ Jane Caplan, 'In Memoriam: Tim Mason 1940–1990', *Radical History Review*, vol. 49 (Winter 1991), p. 87.

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rumblings of change before 1989: implicitly with the post-modernist and ‘linguistic turn’ among historians who cast growing doubts upon the explanatory power of a structural history of society which would capture the reality of a coherent past and ‘create a progressive imaginary’,⁵ and explicitly, for example, with the debates which were sparked by Martin Broszat’s plea for the ‘historicisation’ of German National Socialism.⁶ However, the profound political changes since 1989 have made it apparent that the postwar, post-fascist era in Europe is past, and it consequently is time to look at the phenomenon of fascism anew.

If, in this post-postwar context, Tim Mason’s call to take ‘Fascism’ seriously as a conceptual and comparative tool is not to be regarded as the cry of those somehow hoping to resurrect the intellectual world of the 1960s, then we need to look at the history of Europe during the first half of the twentieth century with new eyes. That history, of which the history of Fascism and Nazism forms a major part, no longer appears safely buried. This may be seen on a number of planes. The most obvious – and therefore perhaps easiest to misunderstand – is the political. Whether or not one regards the Republikaner in Germany, the Alleanza Nazionale in Italy, or the Front national in France as ‘fascist’ parties, their growth and, most notably in Italy, the fact that they have become serious players on the national political stage indicate that important changes in historical and political consciousness have taken place in Europe over the past decade. And were that not enough, the spectre of the Russian Liberal Democratic Party and its leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, to say nothing of figures even further to the Right, and the parallels often drawn between pre-Nazi Germany and post-Communist Russia (or ‘Weimar Russia’, as it sometimes has been labelled), should make us question whether the fascist ghost was entirely laid to rest in 1945 as so many had hoped.

We no longer can assume – as many silently had done hitherto – that post-fascist, Cold-War Europe was a permanent fixture, separating us irrevocably from the doubts, dangers, hopes and horrors unleashed by two world wars. The unspoken assumption that Europeans had learned the lessons of history, that after the catastrophes of the first half of the

⁵ See the special issue on ‘German Histories: Challenges in Theory, Practice, Technique’, *Central European History*, vol. 22, no. 3/4 (1989), especially the introductory article by Michael Geyer and Konrad H. Jarausch, ‘The Future of the German Past: Transatlantic Reflections for the 1990s’.

⁶ The key text is Martin Broszat’s essay, first published in *Merkur*, no. 39 in 1985, ‘Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus’, reprinted in Hermann Graml and Klaus-Dietmar Henke (eds.), *Nach Hitler. Der schwierige Umgang mit unserer Geschichte. Beiträge von Martin Broszat* (Munich, 1986), pp. 159–73. The clearest discussion of the historiographical issues involved may be found in Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (3rd edn, London, 1993), pp. 180–96.

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century the heirs of the Enlightenment (whether liberal or Marxist) finally had triumphed, has been shattered. Europeans face the disturbing possibility that their twentieth century is ending where it began: in Sarajevo.

This, it would seem, might offer some basis for looking comparatively at Fascism and Nazism in a new light. The end of the Cold War has both liberated us from old politically motivated and essentially unproductive Cold-War paradigms (for example, by allowing us to look anew at theories of totalitarianism without being weighted down by Cold-War baggage) and given the theme of fascism a new urgency and relevance. And, to be sure, there were from the start good reasons why the two phenomena deserved comparison. After all, both were radical ideological and political negations of the Enlightenment; both came to power in countries deeply shaken by economic, political and psychological crises in the wake of the First World War; both were militantly opposed to parliamentary democracy; both aggressively assaulted the Left; both glorified the role of violence in politics and war; and both led their respective countries to ruin.

However, the challenges posed by the terrible violence unleashed by German National Socialism, which really had no parallel in the history of Fascist Italy, and the centrality to Nazism of race and the Nazis' monstrous attempt to racially restructure Europe through campaigns of war and mass murder, inevitably raise the question: can Italian Fascism and German National Socialism meaningfully be compared at all? Many observers, when faced with the enormity of Nazi crimes, have effectively denied that Nazi Germany can be compared with anything, and suggest that to make such comparisons amounts at best to a fundamental misunderstanding of the essence of Nazism and at worst to a dereliction of the historian's moral duty. A particularly fluent and uncompromising view of the singularity of the Nazi project has been presented by Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippenmann, who conclude their book *The Racial State* with an unequivocal assertion of the 'extreme peculiarities of German Nazism':

The main object of social policy remained the creation of a hierarchical racial new order. Everything else was subordinate to this goal, including the regime's conduct of foreign affairs and the war. In the eyes of the regime's racial politicians, the Second World War was above all a racial war, to be pursued with immense brutality until the end, that is until the concentration camps were liberated by invading Allied armies. All of these points draw attention to the specific and singular character of the Third Reich. It was not a form of regression to past times, although the regime frequently instru-

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mentalised various ahistorical myths to convey the idea of historical normalcy. Its objects were novel and *sui generis*: to realise an ideal future world, without 'lesser races', without the sick, and without those who they decreed had no place in the 'national community'. The Third Reich was intended to be a racial rather than a class society. This fact in itself makes existing theories, whether based upon modernisation, totalitarianism, or global theories of Fascism, poor heuristic devices for a greater understanding of what was a singular regime without precedent or parallel.⁷

If the essence of Nazism was about race and racialist politics, and if the attempt to murder the entire Jewish population of Europe was 'novel and *sui generis*', an act of singular barbarity, what value can there be in a comparative approach to fascism? Is the attempt to draw comparisons between Italian Fascism and German National Socialism therefore condemned to be limited to matters of secondary importance and concern, matters which ultimately may deflect us from understanding the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century?

There are no easy answers to these questions. It is an historical fact that Nazi Germany committed crimes which are without parallel in modern European history, just as it is an historical fact that Nazism developed and succeeded in a country facing problems which, while they may have been extreme, paralleled those which had arisen elsewhere – not least in Italy. Furthermore, the assertion that a particular history or development was 'novel and *sui generis*' itself implies comparison, if only to establish that claims about similarities are misplaced; assertion of difference or singularity involves no less an element of comparison than does assertion of similarity or identity. Precisely herein lies the challenge of any attempt to compare and contrast Fascism and Nazism: to explain their histories while ignoring neither the points of genuine comparison nor the singularity of Nazi crimes. To focus on just one or the other would be to write only half a history, and thus would offer poor heuristic devices for understanding either of these destructive political phenomena.

This volume offers a modest attempt to deliver what its title promises: comparisons and contrasts between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. That is the rationale for the structure of the book – two essays on each of five key themes in the history of Fascism and Nazism – which forms an explicit attempt to offer bases for comparison. This is not to say that all, or even most, aspects of Italian Fascism had their parallels in

⁷ Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State. Germany 1933–1945* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 306–7.

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German National Socialism or vice versa; in many respects it is the contrasts between the two which are more striking. But framing the project as a whole is a concern to view Fascism and Nazism within a comparative perspective and to take seriously the challenge posed by Tim Mason with which this introduction began.

The concerns raised by Tim Mason shortly before his death provided the starting point for this volume in a double sense: on an intellectual plane, the contributors to this collection share the concern to understand and account for the destructive phenomena of Italian Fascism and German National Socialism in ways whose explanatory power is not limited to these specific times and places and thus remain, ultimately, antiquarian. On another, personal plane, this collection is testimony to the debt which we owe to Tim Mason. This book arises out of a conference on 'Fascism in Comparative Perspective' which was held in Tim Mason's memory in April 1993 at St Peter's College, Oxford, the college where he taught from 1971 until 1984.⁸ The structure of the conference, and consequently the structure of this volume, was shaped by the main themes in Mason's work: Crisis of Bourgeois Society, Fascism and Workers, Fascism and Women, Fascism and War, and Post-Fascist Societies and Modernisation. While obviously not offering a comprehensive treatment of the subject – something which no single volume could pretend to do – this book aims to present both a basis for informed discussion of what was specific to Italian Fascism and German Nazism as well as of what they had in common, and for an informed general comparative discussion of 'fascism'.

In the first pair of essays, which address what lay behind the collapse of democratic politics which preceded the Fascist or Nazi takeovers, Adrian Lyttelton (examining Italy) and Bernd Weisbrod (examining Germany) make different assessments of the 'crisis of bourgeois society' – and even the extent to which one usefully can deploy such a term. Both focus particularly on the role, and the widespread acceptance, of violence in politics as a key element in the breakdown of parliamentary government and of bourgeois society and in the success of the Fascist and Nazi movements. While Lyttelton is at pains to stress that a crisis *in* bourgeois society (of which the rejection of parliamentary government in favour of Fascist violence was a powerful symptom in Italy) is not the same thing as a crisis *of* bourgeois society, the argument is taken further in the German case: there, as Bernd Weisbrod sees it, the conventional morals of bourgeois society were shattered, and Hitler was able to destroy its last defences in a way that Mussolini never could.

⁸ For a report of the conference, see Eve Rosenhaft, 'Fascism in Comparative Perspective', *German History*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1994), pp. 197–202.

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However, when observing, as Weisbrod notes, that in Germany ‘the civilising mission of bourgeois society mutated into a racist project’, we should not assume that this was simply a sign of the uniqueness of Nazism. Instead, it is worth considering the intriguing suggestion by Adrian Lyttelton, which turns the commonly held assumption on its head: namely that it may have been Italian Fascism, rather than German Nazism, which, by virtue of its absence of racialist politics, was the exception among fascist movements.⁹

The historical and historiographical contrasts are particularly evident in the two contributions which focus on the position of workers in and the relationship of workers to the Fascist and Nazi regimes. This subject was at the centre of Tim Mason’s work, and should – at least from a Marxist perspective – offer ideal grounds for comparison. After all, both regimes took power in violent campaigns against a Left which saw itself as the political representative of the working class; both regimes left capitalist modes of production intact – even if capitalist producers were subject to increasing government regulation; and both regimes expended considerable energy in trying to counter the internationalist Marxist message and to integrate workers into the ‘national community’, if with varying degrees of success. It is here that the usefulness or otherwise of a ‘class-conflict’ paradigm most obviously presents itself – as questions, if not as answers: to what extent did workers continue to regard themselves as such and, consequently, resist the blandishments of regimes which, through combinations of bribery and repression,¹⁰ sought to eliminate class divisions and integrate workers into a ‘national community’?

The challenges posed by the two histories are very different – something which Tobias Abse addresses squarely in his contribution when he asserts that, in contradistinction to German workers under Nazism, Italian workers formed ‘a working class which broke with the regime, not one that followed – or appeared to follow – the dictator to the bitter end’. The challenges facing the historian examining what happened to German workers under Hitler are quite different to the challenges facing

⁹ In this context, it is worth considering the suggestion by Charles Maier, in his foreword to the book of the 1988 Philadelphia conference, that ‘if a new “biological” paradigm emerges, one extrapolated less from German particularity than Western pseudoscientific hierarchies, does not the new historiography on the Left allow for the rehabilitation of a new generic fascism based on eugenic categories or even dehumanized technocratic longings?’ See Charles S. Maier, ‘Foreword’, in Childers and Caplan (eds.), *Reevaluating the Third Reich*, p. xv.

¹⁰ On this theme, see Carola Sachse, Tilla Siegel, Hasso Spode and Wolfgang Spohn, *Angst, Belohnung, Zucht und Ordnung. Herrschaftsmechanismen im Nationalsozialismus* (Opladen, 1982), and especially Tim Mason’s introductory essay, ‘Die Bändigung der Arbeiterklasse im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland. Eine Einleitung’.

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the historian of Italian workers under Mussolini. Whereas Abse is able to trace the *tradizione sovversiva* among Italian workers, a tradition which Fascism could not destroy and which emerged with the mass strikes in Milan and Turin in March and April 1943, nothing comparable can be found in the behaviour of German workers during the Second World War. While Weimar Germany had had a big and well-organised trade-union movement and the largest Communist Party outside the Soviet Union, after 1933 German workers did not rise up to challenge the Nazi regime in the way that their Italian counterparts ultimately challenged the Fascists. Why? Answers may be found in the more advanced techniques employed by German employers and the Nazi regime to rationalise work and integrate workers, to vastly greater levels of repression, to the attraction of a racism which privileged German workers and gave them their little stake in the 'racial state', or to the fear of what was in store once the Russians arrived and took their revenge. More than that, however: in her contribution on the attitudes of workers in Nazi Germany Tilla Siegel emphasises not only the explicit postures towards (or against) the Nazi regime (which has generated an enormous literature over the past couple of decades), but also the social norms, values and rationalisations which governed workers' everyday behaviour and which – often obliquely – framed their relationships to the Nazi regime.

If the key contrast between the Fascist and Nazi regimes is the latter's fixation upon race and its determination to put racialist ideology into practice, then this contrast surfaces particularly clearly in the pair of essays which focus on women and their experiences. While Perry Willson presents a general overview of women in Fascist Italy, their role in the production process as well as their position as objects of the regime's pronatalist policies, Gabriele Czarnowski concentrates on Nazi policies towards marriage and the treatment of women in their reproductive role as objects of Nazi racial policy. To be sure, the Italian and German stories certainly have important parallels: Victoria de Grazia's observation that 'Mussolini's regime stood for returning women to home and hearth, restoring patriarchal authority, and confining female destiny to having babies' would not be out of place if applied to the Third Reich, and both Fascism and Nazism were 'integrally authoritarian and anti-feminist'.¹¹ However, there was a vital difference: whereas the Fascist regime was concerned to prevent women from experiencing emancipation and promoted pronatalist policies, the Nazi regime went some

¹¹ Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women. Italy 1922–1945* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1992), pp. 1, 3.

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terrible steps further, in – as Czarnowski makes clear – applying policies guided by a racial ideology, with terrible consequences.

Perhaps the feature which Italian Fascism and German National Socialism most clearly shared was their affirmation, in theory and in practice, of violence and war. In this the left-wing opponents of fascism were absolutely right: fascism meant war. Violence and war undeniably were at the core of the Fascist and Nazi projects. Both ideologies and both regimes glorified war; both launched wars; and both met their ends in war. However, their military performance and the wars they pursued were very different. Both the similarities and the differences are examined in the pair of articles which focus on the Fascist and Nazi pursuit of war. MacGregor Knox takes an explicitly comparative approach in which he analyses the different war-fighting capabilities of the two countries and seeks to locate the reasons for these differences in their different traditions of military training, and in their different economic and political structures. Michael Geyer, on the other hand, focuses on the period when Nazi Germany became in effect incomparable: the years from 1938 to 1941, when Germany launched wars of incomparable violence – wars which set the Nazi regime apart from Fascist Italy. By taking this as his focus, Geyer critically examines one of the main theses expounded by Tim Mason, namely that of the ‘inner crisis’ and ‘crisis of social reproduction’, and probes the ways in which war and terror served as an ‘attractor’ for the ambitions of large segments of the German population.

The more time which elapses between the end of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, the more tempting – indeed necessary – it is to view the Fascist and Nazi periods not just in and of themselves but also as the pre-histories of what came afterwards. Both regimes contained considerable continuities with the parliamentary systems which preceded them, and both obviously created preconditions for the political, economic and social orders which succeeded them. How are we to place the histories of Italian Fascism and German Nazism into a longer-term perspective? To what extent did the experiences of the Fascist and Nazi regimes pave the way for the prosperous parliamentary democracies which developed in West Germany and Italy after 1945? To ask such questions, whether implicitly or explicitly, is to raise the issue of modernisation, and whether the Fascist and Nazi regimes – perhaps contrary to their aims – in effect served to modernise Italian and German societies. Such questions have never been easy to address. However, as Carl Levy and Mark Roseman demonstrate in their contributions to this volume, German reunification and the re-creation of the German nation-state on the one hand and the crumbling of the postwar political order of the Italian Republic on the other – processes both of which

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began at the end of the 1980s – have made the drawing of longer-term perspectives both more complicated and more pressing. For the first time since 1945 there is a unified German nation-state in the centre of Europe and an open admirer of Mussolini in the Italian government.

As both Levy and Roseman discuss in their essays, there has been a growing temptation in recent years to view the Fascist and Nazi dictatorships as ‘modernising’ – a temptation which is highly contentious and fraught with politically charged dangers of misunderstanding the phenomena being discussed.¹² To venture onto this historiographical terrain means unavoidably confronting the ‘moral, political and professional concerns’ which were at the core of Tim Mason’s work. Here the differences thrown up by the histories of the two regimes are striking; the total defeat suffered (achieved?) by Nazi Germany and the unparalleled crimes committed in its name, as well as the postwar division of the country, no doubt made it far more difficult either to regard neo-fascism as a respectable political force or to look to the Nazi past as a source of postwar success than has been the case with Italy, where the leader of the neo-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* managed to enter government coalition. The issue in Germany has not been so much *whether* to reject the Nazi past but *how* to reject it; in Italy, as Levy demonstrates, the issue has never been so clear, and recently it has become cloudier than ever. In both countries, however, there has been a growing appreciation that the Fascist and Nazi past cannot be bracketed out of the longer political or social-historical narrative. If the histories of Italy and Germany, or of twentieth-century Europe as a whole for that matter, are to be read as histories of ‘modernisation’, then the relationship of the processes of ‘modernisation’ to the Fascist and Nazi periods needs to be understood and explained.

Of course, drawing genuinely comparative conclusions is, and no doubt will remain, difficult and problematical. The histories we write, our historical knowledge, are dominated by national frameworks – framed by national constitutions, politics, economies, cultures and documentation. Furthermore, when attempting to compare and contrast modern Italian and modern German history we are building upon two national historiographies which, as Eve Rosenhaft observed in her report of the conference from which this book has emerged, ‘have pro-

¹² As, for example, A. James Gregor, *Italian Fascism and Developmental Dictatorship* (Princeton, 1979), and Rainer Zitelmann, ‘Die totalitäre Seite der Moderne’, in Michael Prinz and Rainer Zitelmann (eds.), *Nationalsozialismus und Modernisierung* (Darmstadt, 1991), pp. 1–20. For a strong critique of the idea that National Socialism was ‘modernising’, see Hans Mommsen, ‘Nationalsozialismus als vorgetäuschte Modernisierung’, in Walter H. Pehle (ed.), *Der historische Ort des Nationalsozialismus. Annäherungen* (Frankfurt/Main, 1990), pp. 31–46.