

Fascists among themselves: some observations on west European politics in the 1930s

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Historians have long found it difficult to deal with fascism as a generic, Europe-wide, political phenomenon. The historiographic pendulum has swung from including virtually every right-wing movement under the label of fascism to denying altogether that generic fascism ever existed. Neither approach is historically valid. The fascists did not see themselves as a species of Conservatives; they looked upon themselves as a unique, international political phenomenon. Moreover, many of their non-fascist contemporaries accepted this claim. Both were right and, for this reason, it is necessary to renew efforts to delineate the ideological and stylistic parameters of generic fascism. An important aid in understanding fascism as a generic phenomenon is the analysis of the relations between the German Nazis and French and Dutch fascists in the years from 1933 to 1939, a topic that has been little studied until now.

‘Whatever happened to Fascism?’ asked Tim Mason a decade ago in one of the last publications before his untimely death.¹ It was more than a rhetorical question. Rather, Mason was concerned that studies of fascism as a generic set of political ideas, organizations and leaders was increasingly replaced by an avalanche of specialized studies on the one hand, and, partly as a result of this development, a number of forceful arguments for abandoning the study of fascism from a generic and comparative perspective altogether. In addition, until the spectre of right-wing extremism under a variety of new guises raised its ugly head again a few years ago, most West Europeans adopted an attitude of ‘been there, done that’ about fascism. The countries of Western Europe had become so homogenized, bourgeoisified societies that, it appeared, had effectively marginalized right-wing extremism. Western Europe was a ‘rich, brilliant, and cultivated ... relatively

open and liberal' society, whose democratic political system had become part of the fabric of West European patriotism.² However, as Ze'ev Sternhell, the author of this assessment of contemporary West European societies, also noted, 'not long ago [Europe] was the most horrible place on the face of the earth. A lesson that should not be forgotten.' Indeed, politics in the 1930s were very different from politics at the beginning of the 21st century. Political democracy, especially parliamentary democracy, far from being universally celebrated, was widely criticized as a central problem of European political life. The 'crisis of democracy' was a buzzword even for many who supported democracy as a political system in principle. Others went much further, and insisted democracy was merely another word for anarchy.³

Fascists were in the forefront of those attacking democracy as a political and social system, and they played a major part in creating the 'crisis of democracy'. In the eyes of the fascists, democracy and the class that had created this political system, the bourgeoisie, was responsible for all that was wrong with Western Europe after the First World War: exacerbated class tensions, cowardice, selfishness, materialism, and above all 'decadence'. Decadence took a variety of forms – from American jazz to miscegenation – but at heart, the critics insisted, European societies between the wars lacked virility and idealism, but had a surfeit of materialism, egotism, and self-indulgence. Under the leadership of the bourgeoisie, those '*hommes des apéritifs*', Europe had become 'mad with scandals. Mad with egotism. Mad with rebellion against heaven'.⁴

Far from being marginalized, fascism in the 1930s was a viable part of the political spectrum in virtually all West European countries.⁵ Fascist theorists or organizations existed in all European countries (except perhaps for the Soviet Union) and the ideological and often the organizational lines between the fascists, who insisted democracy was at the root of Europe's political problems, and those who variously called themselves critics, reformers, or rejuvenators of democracy, were porous. By no means all of the 'reformers' of democracy rejected working together with the fascists and many regarded at least part of the fascist agenda as worthy of serious consideration.⁶

Was fascism, then, 'the idea of the 20th century', as Mussolini and a few scholars have argued?⁷ It is perhaps useful at this stage to compare the fascists' self-image of their role in history with the verdicts of contemporary critics and later scholars. The fascists thought of themselves as genuine revolutionaries, political visionaries who would create a completely new society and a new form of human being in Europe. Hitler, on several occasions, alluded to his self-appointed task of completing the bourgeois revolution by destroying the bourgeoisie. To accomplish this goal the fascists insisted they would radically alter the course that European history had taken since the French Revolution. That momentous event had led to the triumph of the bourgeoisie and the political and

economic systems of liberalism, democracy and capitalism. According to the fascists, by the 1930s that road had reached a dead end. The result was stagnation and self-indulgence or, even worse, the rule of Marxism and Bolshevism.⁸

Remarkably, contemporary political opponents of fascism accepted their rivals as genuine political revolutionaries. In a speech in Berlin in 1933, the young French sociologist Raymond Aron, a man with undoubted liberal and democratic credentials, attested that the 'totalitarian regimes are authentically revolutionary, [while] the democracies are essentially conservative.' Two years later the distinguished Marxist Richard Löwenthal, writing under his pseudonym Paul Sering, agreed that the fascist revolution was a true revolution because it changed the essential character of bourgeois society.⁹

Since the end of the Second World War, the historiography of fascism has become increasingly murky and contentious. A few scholars, such as Rainer Zitelmann, A. James Gregor, and Ze'ev Sternhell, insist with some vehemence that the fascists were social and political revolutionaries, whose primary goal was to destroy bourgeois society and establish a true national socialism.¹⁰ The majority of students of fascism not only reject this contention, but deny that fascism is entitled to any revolutionary attributes. Such renowned scholars as Karl Dietrich Bracher, Martin Broszat, and Henry Turner put fascism squarely in the counterrevolutionary, reactionary, anti-modernist camp.¹¹ Still others, such as Renzo de Felice, want to have it both ways: fascism was reactionary and conservative, but it was also a revolutionary phenomenon.¹²

A major reason for this unsatisfactory state of affairs is the difficulty of agreeing on an all-encompassing definition of fascism.¹³ Almost 20 years ago, Istvan Déak wrote rather wistfully that '[the] day still seems far off [when] someone will ... formulate a universally acceptable definition of fascism.'¹⁴ He was right, it has not happened yet. There are many reasons for the continuing difficulties in formulating a definition of fascism. They range from political polemics to debates over what aspects of fascism should be included under an umbrella definition and how seriously one needs to treat the avowals or denials of some extreme-Right organizations and leaders that they were fascist. To take but one example, the French Parti Populaire Français (PPF) continues to be difficult to categorize. The PPF certainly passed the test, the party looked, acted, and shouted like a fascist group, and its leaders did not dispute the fascist label, yet some later scholars have insisted neither the organization nor its ideology were completely or really fascist.¹⁵

Why the controversy and confusion? Part of the controversy revolves around the argument about the significance of an ideology as the key to who and what were the fascists. The 'ideological camp' argues that fascism had a viable and coherent set of political values that set it apart from the other dominant political ideologies of 20th century Europe, liberalism, conservatism, and Marxism. Those

adhering to this set of ideas were fascists, those who did not were not. The major proponent of this approach is Ze'ev Sternhell. But that author's equally passionate critics contend his approach is all wrong. By reducing fascism to a set of ideas, he is ignoring the importance of the organizational and stylistic aspects of the phenomenon. In addition, they insist, he is going far beyond the evidence. According to the critics, Sternhell has cast his net so wide that any intellectual critic of parliamentary democracy and liberalism finds himself categorized as a fascist.¹⁶

Some scholars contend that any definition of fascism must exclude organizations that existed in countries that were 'immune' to fascism. According to René Raymond and his students, this was especially true for France. According to this thesis, there was no 'native' French fascism. Whatever might have looked like fascism in France during the inter-war years was really a new manifestation of traditional French Bonapartism. French fascist organizations that deserve the name existed only during the Vichy years, when they were created by the occupying Nazis.¹⁷ For the Dutch (and Belgians), Herman v.d. Wusten has advanced a somewhat different immunity theory. According to Wusten, fascism remained marginalized in both Holland and Belgium because the Low Countries 'were thoroughly modern states situated in the capitalist core of Europe, where the chances for authoritarian nationalist victories ... were relatively small.'¹⁸

This statement is factually problematic, but it does raise another vexing quandary in the search for a definition of fascism, the question of fascism and modernization.¹⁹ The fascists themselves claimed they were 'modernizers', who linked political dictatorship with new forms of economic and social advancement. Their fascination with modern technology and interest in societal restructuring would seem to give verisimilitude to this claim, and some scholars agree that any definition of fascism must include the phenomenon's modern character.²⁰ Others, however, insist that whatever the fascists themselves might have claimed, since they rejected the Enlightenment and liberalism they were, by definition, anti-modern.²¹ A third group wants to have it both ways. Jeffrey Herf long ago classified Nazism as a form of 'reactionary modernism', and Renzo de Felice insists Nazism was reactionary but Italian Fascism was a modern phenomenon.²²

The relationship between conservatism and fascism represents another aspect of the definitional quagmire.²³ True, the ideological and organizational boundaries between fascism and conservatism were frequently quite fluid and it is an often repeated truism that no fascist ever came to power without the help of the conservatives, but it is equally correct – as true conservatives such as Alfred Hugenberg and Franz von Papen found out – that the fascists had no interest in a long-term, cooperative relationship with the conservatives. Despite their common points of attack and at times similar rhetoric, to speak of 'fascistoid'

conservatism is to distort the essential differences between the two political phenomena.²⁴

Some additional obstacles remain in the search for a definition of fascism: anti-Semitism and racism, and the link between fascism and the lower middle classes. Is it really possible to find an umbrella definition that covers both Nazism – for which anti-Semitism and racism were *sine qua nons*— and, for example, Dutch fascism, which embraced anti-Semitism and racism rather late in its organizational life and even then with a singular lack of passion? Then there is the problem of the social roots of fascism. The classic analyses, following Theodor Geiger's pioneering studies in the early 1930s, emphasized that fascism was a lower middle class phenomenon. Or, to put it in a slightly different way, if a political group was not dominated by lower middle class supporters and activists, it could not by definition be truly fascist. Recent studies, however, have demonstrated that this, too, was an overly simplistic conclusion. Fascism, to use Otto Kirchheim's phrase, was a catch-all phenomenon that attracted supporters from all societal groups, ranging from the upper ranks of the bourgeoisie and the nobility to industrial workers and members of the *Lumpenproletariat*.²⁵

Finally, there is the thorny issue of the fascist aesthetic, or to use a less artistic term, the fascist style. For most people, fascism means thousands of disciplined and uniformed Nazis marching at the annual party congresses in Nuremberg. Or Italian children in Ballila uniforms parading past il Duce in his fanciful militia outfit. But was this style of politics uniquely fascist and therefore an essential part of the phenomenon's definitional criteria? In general, the 1920s–1930s was a far more 'uniformed' and march-happy era than our own. The German Social Democratic *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold* wore rudimentary uniforms and organized numerous marches in its vain attempt to save the Weimar Republic. The Dutch Social Democrats, for their part, campaigned for their *Plan van de Arbeid* with uniforms, flags and specially-composed marching songs. Was the fascist aesthetic, then, like the colourful manifestations of other political groups, simply tactics, living propaganda to integrate the activists into the movement and attract the attention of potential supporters? Yet it is dangerous to downplay the essentially different nature of the fascist style of politics. The fascists themselves thought their style was not only unique, but a key element in their attempt to create the *homo fascista* of the new age. We should probably take Peter Reichel's complaint seriously that we know far too little about the aesthetics of fascism.²⁶

Faced with this phalanx of formidable theoretical controversies and unanswered questions, many researchers fled to 'nominalism' as the only answer to the problems of finding an acceptable definition of fascism. Proponents of this approach argue that the various extreme-Right ideologies and organizations do not have enough in common to put them in the same political basket. There never was 'a fascism', only a multiplicity of fascisms, each of which needed to be studied

as a unique phenomenon in the context of its specific and unique national contexts. From this perspective, the Nazis were German National Socialists, and the Italian Fascists just that, Italian Fascists. The two phenomena had nothing in common.²⁷

In contrast, others attempted to make fascism part of various forms of 'universalism'. Opponents of fascism, especially those on the left side of the political spectrum, applied the fascist label to all of their political opponents, sometimes modifying the category with qualifiers such as 'neo', 'crypto' or 'quasi'.²⁸ This may have been effective politics, but it was certainly poor analysis. So was inappropriate universalism when used by overly enthusiastic supporters of fascism. Writing in the 1920s, the Dutch Catholic essayist Em. Verviers described Leo XIII and Pius X as the 'two greatest fascist Popes',²⁹ a classification that both the Holy Fathers and serious analysts of fascism would reject out of hand.

Totalitarianism, which enjoyed its greatest vogue as an analytical concept during the Cold War, is another form of mega-universalism.³⁰ True, the term had a certain historic verisimilitude, since the fascists themselves often spoke of their ambition to create a 'total' state and a 'total' society. But in the end, the proponents of totalitarianism were less interested in fitting the fascists' self-image into an analytical concept than in achieving a political goal, finding a label that fits both Soviet Communism and fascism or, more specifically, Russian Stalinism and German Nazism. Both were 'enemies of the West' and, consequently, the struggle against the Soviet Union after 1945 was a seamless continuation of the battle against Hitler and Nazism in the Second World War. However, putting Communism and fascism into the same political box was never an uncontroversial fit, and for good reasons. Despite some superficial similarities, Soviet Communism and fascism were essentially different political phenomena, both theoretically and in practice.

It will come as no surprise to the reader that at this stage I should like to enter a plea for looking upon fascism as a generic phenomenon. I think there are a number of compelling reasons for such an approach to the study of fascism. One is historic: the fascists looked upon themselves as adherents of a set of ideas and organizational principles that would forge the future of all of Europe.³¹ To be sure, virtually all fascists would eventually recognize that hyper-nationalism and fascist internationalism were incompatible,³² but for most this insight did not come until the Second World War. In the 1930s, literally thousands all across Europe thought of fascism as a 'pan-European' movement.³³ So did prominent fascist leaders. Even the Nazis, who are often cited as the least generically-minded group of fascists, thought of their movement as part of a Europe-wide phenomenon. Joseph Goebbels wrote that Nazism and fascism were 'parallel phenomena' and expressed his 'firm conviction ... that this political direction will at one time dominate all of Europe'. In a similar vein, Hitler, in a 1930 article, demanded the 'fascicization of the European states.'³⁴

The Dutch and French fascists were even more internationally minded. In fact, the French fascists were perhaps the most enthusiastic ‘Europeans’ among the fascists. Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, in many ways the poster child of French fascism, shortly before his suicide in August 1944, wrote of his disappointment in Nazism because in the end his German heroes had never developed a ‘*European* [sic] policy’.³⁵ Four years earlier Robert Brasillach, Drieu’s fellow fascist intellectual, had written lyrically about the *uomo fascista*, ‘a new type of human being’ who was born in Italy but now manifested itself all across Europe from Portugal to ‘the flat lands and canals of Holland.’ Nazi Germany would lead the way: ‘Germany, attuned [*attentive*] to the new times awaited her hour and without hesitating prepared the future.’³⁶

Remarkably, after many years of dominance by the nominalist historiographic school, the focus of scholarship has recently shifted to the study of fascism as a generic phenomenon. Not only did this new wave heed Raymond Grew’s generation-old plea for more comparative studies,³⁷ but the recent scholarship is quite free from the political instrumentalization that had permeated many of the analyses of the 1960s and 1970s. The study of generic fascism was not really helped by focusing on the relative guilt of fascism A as compared to fascism B. This sort of approach made Nazism, if it was not described as a *sui generis* altogether, the model of the worst, most guilty of all fascisms, and the others, by definition, somehow less evil. However, as Ian Kershaw has pointed out, ‘[Nazism’s] similarities with other brands of fascism are profound, not peripheral. Nazism’s features place the phenomenon squarely within the European-wide context of radical anti-Socialist, national-integrationist movements’.³⁸ Martin Broszat’s call for the ‘historicization’ of Nazism echoes this conclusion. The fears expressed by some that ‘historicization’ would lead to apologia and trivialization of Nazism has turned out to be misplaced and exaggerated.³⁹

Much of the credit for breaking a pathway for renewed interest in the study of generic fascism goes to the French-Israeli scholar Ze’ev Sternhell. In a series of publications, notably his monograph, *Neither Left nor Right*, Sternhell attempted to represent fascism as a Europe-wide set of political and social ideas. He summarized his central thesis as follows: ‘Fascism, like liberalism, socialism, and communism, was a universal category with regional and cultural variants.’⁴⁰ As noted earlier, few critics accepted Sternhell’s additional arguments about the centrality of French intellectuals in the development of European fascism, but in the wake of Sternhell’s tour de force, an increasing number of scholars began to treat fascism again as a generic phenomenon that had both functional and developmental aspects that needed to be studied on a cross-national basis.⁴¹ As Francesco Germinarano put it, Sternhell created a ‘*choc salutaire*’.⁴²

But was not all this a case of *déjà vu*? After all, an earlier generation of scholars had tried their hand at ‘defining’ generic fascism.⁴³ The results, as we now know,

were not entirely satisfactory. In their effort to find an irreducible list of minimum characteristics that applied to all fascisms, they ended up with the so-called ‘antis’, a series of resentments against the dominant societal forces of the 20th century. The list is familiar. It included opposition to Marxism, liberalism and freemasonry, democracy, a variety of ethnic minorities. Taken together, the critics contended, these ‘antis’ were not an ideology or a political programme, but simply a list of irrational resentments, an ‘*Appell an den inneren Schweinehund*’, as the German Social Democratic leader Kurt Schumacher put it.⁴⁴

What sets the new ‘genericists’ apart from the earlier group, is their recognition that there were indeed ‘positive’ sides to fascism. Positive not in the sense of laudable, but ‘as a distinctive set of ambitions’ for transforming and moulding societal life.⁴⁵ But what did fascism stand for ‘positively’? Fascists themselves pointed first to their celebration of the nation. All fascists were hyper-nationalists, looking upon the nation as the key unit of historical dynamics. The nation as a ‘living organism’ was far more than the individuals who made up this collective entity. In fact, fascists did not think much about the inhabitants of their exalted nations. What Jeannine Verdès-Leroux wrote about the French right-wing extremists was no less true for all other fascists: ‘They constantly exalted France and equally constantly mistrusted the French’.⁴⁶ This was especially so if the nation was languishing under a democratic political system and permeated by the ‘decadence’ fascists so abhorred. Fascists celebrated not the present, but the mythical future nation. In Roger Griffin’s memorable phrase, fascists were ‘palingenetic nationalists’, insisting that only under their leadership could the nation be reborn as a new and perfect society.⁴⁷

Racism, but not necessarily anti-Semitism, was another ‘positive’ characteristic of fascism. On the face of it, this statement seems surprising and even absurd. Nominalism in fascist studies found much of its support in the seemingly vast gap between the Italian Fascists (as well as some other groups, like the Dutch) and the German Nazis. The Italians, the argument went, were never really racists or anti-Semites; the Nazis were nothing but racists and anti-Semites. (From this perspective, Mussolini’s anti-Semitic legislation in the later 1930s was a function of the Axis, not Fascist ideology.)

On closer examination, however, this argument turns out to be spurious. It is true that various fascisms had placed different values or priorities on racism, and it is equally true that by no means all fascists were anti-Semites, but all fascists constructed some form of ethnic, racial or cultural ‘out-group’ that had to be suppressed before the ‘palingenetic’ nation could prosper. The out-groups differed and overlapped: Bolsheviks (often turned into ‘Asiatic Bolsheviks’) and democrats for all fascists, Jews and Freemasons for the Nazis, liberals for the Dutch fascists, Protestants and Freemasons for the French. Moreover, all fascists were European imperialists, a concept that included the belief that the European

colonizers were culturally and ‘racially’ superior to the indigenous peoples they conquered and colonized. In this sense it did not particularly matter if the empire was to be maintained (as was the case for the Dutch East Indies and the French possessions in Asia and Africa), or attained (as would be true for the Nazis’ *Lebensraum* in Eastern Europe, or the Italian Fascists’ dream of the Mediterranean as an Italian lake).⁴⁸ As imperialists, the Italian Fascists, no less than other right-wing extremist groups, believed in a hierarchy of races and cultures, classifying them as ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’, and assigning them greater or lesser rights to national fulfilment.⁴⁹ The war against Ethiopia was, at least in part, a campaign to demonstrate the superiority of the white race, and Italian rule in Ethiopia clearly discriminated against the black inhabitants of the country.⁵⁰

Perhaps the most influential and, for potential supporters, the most attractive ‘positive’ feature of fascism was the concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. This German – and specifically Nazi – word is difficult to translate (Paul Brooker’s rendering as ‘fraternal society’⁵¹ misses some of the emotional overtones), for this reason the German term is preferable. It is possible, however, to describe what the fascists meant by the *Volksgemeinschaft*, and why it had such a widespread appeal.⁵² In much of Europe, the 1920s and 1930s were years of chronic social tension and economic hardship. The extreme-Left proposed to solve society’s problems by means of the proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat, but the extreme-Right insisted it could create a future society in which the segments of the national in-group would not be levelled or abolished, but would live in perpetual harmony. It is important to keep in mind that the concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* applied only to members of the in-group as defined by the fascists. The out-groups, whoever they were, would remain outside the *Volksgemeinschaft* and would not be able to participate in its benefits. For the members of the in-group, however, the fascists promised to square the circle. Under the leadership of the fascists, the members of the national in-group would subordinate their individual desires and ambitions to the well being of the greater whole. (‘You are nothing, your nation is everything’ was Joseph Goebbels’ pithy phrase.) At the same time, the fascist society would not be a social dictatorship of one class over the others. Rather, the classes would maintain their individual identity, yet work harmoniously together to advance the national good. According to the fascists, their concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* would simultaneously overcome the selfishness of liberal individualism and avoid the class dictatorship postulated by the Marxists. The fascists also claimed the *Volksgemeinschaft* would bring about political harmony. They would do this by turning the notion of a political dictatorship on its head. Instead of the ‘dictatorship’ of many parties, fascism with its one, true ‘people’s party’ would create a genuine ‘people’s state’ (*volks-staat*) as an early Dutch fascist put it.⁵³

Many Europeans responded to the concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (not all

of them fascists), but it had an especially strong appeal for the youthful, male members of what Robert Wohl has called 'the generation of 1914'.⁵⁴ In the belligerent countries of the First World War, such as Germany and France, veterans were disproportionately over-represented among fascist activists. In countries that had been neutral in the First World War, such as The Netherlands, fascism was attractive to the same generational cohort, although here the activists often substituted their colonial military experience for the missing engagement on the battlefields of Europe. One reason for the attractiveness of the *Volksgemeinschaft* among this group was the conviction that, during their military experience, the veterans had already experienced the *Volksgemeinschaft* in action. The myth proposed that, at the battlefield, millions of soldiers shed their individual and class identities and willingly sacrificed their health and lives so that the nation might live and be victorious. At the same time, the wartime *Volksgemeinschaft* was a violent experience, highlighting the contention that physical force was needed to overcome the internal and external out-groups.⁵⁵

The attempt to continue or recreate the wartime *Volksgemeinschaft* to a great extent shaped the fascists' specific 'style' of politics. What to later generations seemed like a senseless and rather silly militarization of politics with its omnipresent uniforms and incessant marches, to the fascists was both means and end towards creating the *Volksgemeinschaft*. To the fascist activists, the men (and they were mostly men) who put on coloured shirts had cast off their individual beings and become (or become again) part of a greater and nobler whole.⁵⁶ The fascist 'style' certainly reinforced the activists commitment to their cause. Yvonne Karow's description of the Nazis' Nuremberg party congresses as a 'closed [*geschlossene*] *Volksgemeinschaft*' is a particularly felicitous characterization of this annual highlight of the fascist style.⁵⁷ Indeed, there is now considerable evidence that, for many fascists, their 'style' assumed a religious character. Militarized politics became a substitute religion with all of the characteristics of a religion except for individual salvation after death.⁵⁸ As for potential supporters, the sight of disciplined and uniformed political soldiers, who often also engaged in violence, impressed them with fascism's power and determination.

Did all this add up to a 'modern' political ideology? Few questions have aroused more long-standing and passionate debates than fascism's relationship to modernity and modernization. The positions of the scholarly contestants appear irreconcilable because there is plentiful evidence on both sides. Fascists were certainly 'modern' in their celebration of 20th century technology. At the same time, they were nostalgic for the pre-modern past. They often described that past as an ideal community (*Gemeinschaft*) that had been destroyed by Liberalism and turned into the soulless modern society (*Gesellschaft*). The truth is that the fascists wanted to have it both ways. As paligenetic utopians they wanted to modernize their societies, but they insisted that their form of modernization would create a

technologically advanced society that would replicate the supposed pre-modern harmonies.⁵⁹

While the new and more sophisticated emphasis of fascism as a generic phenomenon is welcome, there is one aspect of the history of fascism that has been curiously and unfortunately neglected. This concerns the ideological and organizational relations between various fascist groups and leaders in the movement phase of their development and a fascist regime that had achieved its power phase.⁶⁰ Martin Broszat suggested more than 20 years ago that examining such relations would contribute both to the needed historicization of fascism and to our understanding of the evolution of the Third Reich and the fascist movements in Western Europe, but his call has remained largely unanswered.⁶¹ More particularly, I should like to suggest that the ideological and organizational relations between the Third Reich and French and Dutch fascists in the years from 1933 to 1939 would be an important contribution to the study of generic fascism.

It is legitimate to ask, of course, why select these two West European fascisms and their relations with the Third Reich? As far as France is concerned, the pre-war history of French fascism in particular is still an under-researched topic,⁶² and the pre-war relations of French fascists to the Nazi regime especially so. Until the publication of Sternhell's *Neither Left nor Right* broke the logjam, Rémond's 'immune theory' was largely uncontested. In recent years, following Sternhell's lead, historians of contemporary French history have examined the troubled 1930s with renewed interest. As a result, the debate about the viability of the country's parliamentary democracy and the reality of the fascist threat has erupted with often bitter intensity. Increasingly, scholars have concluded that large numbers of Frenchmen sympathized with fascism even if they did not join extreme right-wing organizations, or called themselves fascist.⁶²

Rémond and his followers have not yielded gracefully. The historiographic controversy, which has led to bitter polemics and even a law suit in France, is by no means settled, but it is perhaps possible to draw some interim conclusions.⁶⁴ One is that while the fears (or hopes) expressed by many contemporary observers, that the political situation in France in the 1930s was comparable to that of the Weimar Republic, were clearly exaggerated, it was true that France was facing a serious systemic crisis.⁶⁵ There was a growing lack of political consensus, and the triumph of the Left in the legislative elections of May, 1936 undoubtedly deepened the country's polarization. At the time, Andre Siegfried wrote 'the country has a fever', and a later analyst, Pierre Laborie, spoke of France's 'spiritual confusion'.⁶⁶

It is in this atmosphere that fascist values 'were able to find a fertile ground'.⁶⁷ Typical fascist values were rejection of parliamentary democracy, militarism and its corollary, imperialism, and hatred of the bourgeoisie as the presumed cause

of the country's decadence. Anti-Semitism and the creation of a true *Volksgemeinschaft* in a future palingenetic French nation found widespread support in the country. Moreover, as had been true in Germany in the 1930s, the line between the moderate and extreme Right was not always clearly drawn. Fearful of 'Marxism' and 'Bolshevism' in any guise, many of the moderate right-wing groups did not hesitate to cooperate with organizations and individuals that endorsed fascist ideas and political styles.⁶⁸

The inclusion of The Netherlands in a comparative study of fascism may at first glance seem both surprising and inappropriate. Certainly, Holland was an unlikely nurturing ground for a successful, indigenous fascist movement. Neutral during the First World War, The Netherlands were spared the hardships of that conflict as well as many of the political, economic, and social dislocations that followed the war. During the 1920s, the country apparently was the very model of a well-functioning, modern pluralist society. Although the label *verzuijing* (pillarization) was not in general use until 1935, this specifically Dutch system of pluralist politics was already well established by the time of the First World War. In practice *verzuijing* meant that a small number of clearly defined interest groups in the country shared political power in an interactive system of mutual tolerance and an equitable assignment of the 'perks' of power. For the system to work, the *zuijen* had to remain largely self-contained social and political units; *inter-zuijen* contact was limited to the relations between the leaders of the recognized pillars.⁶⁹

Before the First World War, the recognized pillars were Protestants, Catholics and 'others'; the last category included mostly Liberals of various stripes. After the War, organized labour was accorded the status as a *zuil* as well, although the bourgeois pillars did not yet welcome labour as a national coalition partner; that had to wait until 1939. Each of the *zuijen* was represented by a specific political party, and since no political group could hope to win a majority of the popular vote, the 1920s and 1930s were characterized by a series of inter-party and, consequently, *inter-zuijen* coalitions.

However, the picture of socio-political harmony was deceptive. In fact, precisely because The Netherlands seemed such an unlikely habitat for fascism, the strength of Dutch fascism demonstrates the ubiquity of the phenomenon. The Netherlands were not left untouched by the wave of anti-democratic sentiments that swept through Europe in the 1930s. The critics insisted that the Dutch socio-political system, like democracy in Germany and France, was essentially an arena for deals among the self-serving leaders of the established *zuijen* at the expense of the 'little people'.⁷⁰ In addition, the national, or rather the imperial, question became acute in the 1930s. Virtually all Dutch parties supported maintaining Holland's overseas empire, and a mutiny by Indonesian sailors on a Dutch warship at the beginning of 1933 shocked the nation, leading to

widespread accusations that the government was not acting forcefully enough to fulfil its imperial responsibilities.⁷¹

By the mid-1930s, fascism in Holland was a well-organized political force that threatened the fabric of Dutch political pluralism.⁷² Dutch fascism easily fits the generic mould. The Dutch fascists were militarists and imperialists, they were racists (although initially not anti-Semites), and they promised to bring a true *Volksgemeinschaft* to a country now dominated by materialism, decadence, and democracy. For the Dutch fascists, the primary problem in Dutch society was the lack of national unity. Democracy and *verzuiling* had divided the Dutch into political, economic, and religious segments that coexisted in the same territory, but did not form a national whole.

A study of the relations between the Third Reich and Dutch and French fascists contributes to our understanding of the fascist phenomenon in a number of ways. To begin with, it helps us to comprehend better the similarities and differences of West European fascism. Even more important, perhaps, such a focus allows us to see the evolution of West European fascism in a new light and, finally, it is a historically valid emphasis. As noted earlier, contrary to the views of the nominalists, fascists thought of themselves as an international phenomenon. Groups and individuals who laboured in the movement phase of their development looked with fascination (and often envy) upon a 'sister organization' that had reached its power phase. As a result, French and Dutch fascists exhibited an intense interest in all aspects of the evolving Third Reich.⁷³ The Nazis, for their part, were equally interested in the fate of fascism in France and Holland.

Not surprisingly, many of the Nazis' domestic policies spoke to French fascist concerns. The new German rulers eliminated from power the out-groups that the French fascists also identified as responsible for France's decadence and decline: Communists, democrats, Freemasons and, for many French fascists, Jews. At the same time, the French fascists' attitudes toward the Third Reich were neither unambivalent nor static. On the domestic front, the French extreme-Right liked much, but by no means all, of what the Third Reich was doing. French fascists enthusiastically welcomed the destruction of parliamentary democracy in Germany and the Nazis' suppression of Communism, but they distrusted Nazi neo-paganism, and claimed that the system of state-sponsored terror would not be needed in any future French fascist state. It comes as no surprise that the Nazis' foreign ambitions aroused widespread distrust and suspicion among the French fascists. True, some of them accepted Hitler's early line that destroying the Versailles settlement was the price that needed to be paid for Germany's willingness to guard the borders of Western civilization against the threat of Bolshevik expansionism. The appeal of the palingenetic myth came into place here as well: for these fascists, once fascism had come to power in France, Nazi

Germany and Fascist France would cooperate to build the Europe of young nations. But these were not the views of most of the French extreme-Right. Or rather, the majority kept their guard at least until the advent of the Popular Front, the Franco-Soviet Pact and the Spanish Civil War. Now Hitler's anti-Communist credentials loomed large, and the oft-repeated sentiment *Plutôt Hitler que Blum* was no longer limited to a lunatic fringe.

From the perspective of the Dutch fascists, the Nazis' destruction of liberalism, Marxism and democracy and their supposed creation of the *Volksgemeinschaft* in the Third Reich was a model for the future fascist state in the Netherlands. But the Dutch fascists, too, insisted they did not approve of everything the Nazis stood for. Initially, they were especially critical of the Nazis' church policies and the rapidly expanding system of state terror. In addition, unlike the Nazis and most of the French extreme-Right, the Dutch did not initially categorize either Jews or Freemasons as enemies of the new fascist Holland.

The Nazis' early foreign policy aims did not arouse scepticism among the Dutch extreme-Right. True, descriptions of the Dutch as estranged 'Low Germans' angered the Dutch fascists, who were no less hyper-nationalist than other fascist groups, but the Nazis' larger aims seemed to fit in well with the visions of the *Nationalsocialistische Beweging* (National Socialist Movement) (NSB) itself. The party's leaders distrusted French Continental hegemony because they saw France as the primary champion of the hated system of democracy. For this reason, the Nazis' avowed aim of breaking French hegemony was cheered on by the Dutch fascists. So was Hitler's supposed desire to improve relations with Great Britain. In fact, some of the Dutch fascist leaders hoped that a fascist Holland could play a mediating role bringing the two former enemies together.

The Dutch fascists also harboured other illusions about the Nazis' foreign policy. Despite their incessant celebrations of the Dutch accomplishments in the 17th century – the golden century of Dutch history – even the most benighted Dutch fascists did not expect to play a role as a major European power in the 20th century. Rather, their hyper-nationalism was focused on the empire, especially the Dutch East Indies, that vast archipelago of islands that was to become Indonesia. Dutch control of this area was increasingly challenged by Japan, and since Germany had traditionally tilted toward China and against Japan in her Asian policies, an attitude Hitler initially continued, the Dutch fascists saw Nazi Germany as a natural diplomatic ally who would help to preserve the integrity of the Dutch empire.

Inter-fascist relations were not a one-way street. The Nazis were intensely interested in the fate of fascism in Holland and France, but the new German rulers were also deeply divided on how to deal with these 'related movements.' Some Nazi leaders welcomed the supposed decadence of a democratic France and Holland because this would weaken these countries and make it easier to subject them to German hegemony. From this perspective, strong fascist movements in

France and The Netherlands were not welcome developments. After all, would not a strong, fascist France pursue its own hegemonial ambitions in rivalry with the Third Reich? As for the Netherlands, the Dutch were clearly no threat to German foreign policy ambitions, but a fascist Holland might also be anxious to preserve its political and cultural independence rather than become a minor component of the 'Greater Germanic Reich'.

However, there were also 'collaborationists' among the Nazis. They welcomed the 'related movements' in Western Europe as pioneers of the new Europe that would be a vast alliance of fascist regimes led by Nazi Germany. From the vantage-point of the 'collaborationists', a fascist France and a fascist Holland would be natural allies of Germany. For this reason, one of the most enthusiastic Nazi 'collaborationists' insisted, even after the war, 'National Socialist Germany was no less anxious for cooperation with France than the Weimar Republic had been'.⁷⁴ In retrospect, it is clear that Hitler was always bent on military conquest of Europe, but during much of the 1930s Hitler's true intentions seemed more open to interpretation. The 'collaborationists' insisted they were carrying out Hitler's true goals, and since the *Führer* had not revealed his actual intentions, they could do so in the belief that they had Hitler's support for their activities.

When Hitler unleashed the Second World War, the conflict between 'collaborationists' and 'conquerors' in the Nazi camp was decided, and relations between the Nazis and the 'related movements' in France and The Netherlands were put on a new footing. For this reason it is useful to end a comparative study in 1939 rather than in 1945. After France and Holland were occupied by the Nazis, working together with the Nazis meant working with the enemy, an entirely different set of circumstances than in the years before 1939, when the relations between the Nazis and West European fascists were based upon freely-chosen decisions. Many of the pre-war French and Dutch fascists became collaborators, but others did not. The Nazis, too, found themselves in an entirely different role. Before 1939, at least the 'collaborationists' had not envisioned a military conquest of Western Europe. Now they were representatives of a military occupation, rather than allies seeking cooperation with indigenous fascists.

Another reason for concentrating on the 1930s is that, with the outbreak of the war, the historiographic focus of the study of fascism shifts profoundly. The question of guilt and blame moved to the foreground. To take only one example, before 1939, Robert Brasillach was a popular French writer who openly sympathized with fascism. This made him a controversial figure in France, but certainly not a negative or positive cult figure. After the war, however, Brasillach became both. For the Resistance he was the personification of literary treason; Brasillach was the only intellectual executed for this crime. That fate in turn sanctified him in the eyes of the extreme Right. The author quickly rose to the

status of poster martyr for the French extreme Right, a position he has continued to hold to this day.⁷⁵

Since right-wing extremism did not disappear after the Second World War, but remains a significant political factor in contemporary Europe, any study of fascism's 'classic' past must take care to avoid the pitfalls of instrumentalization. Those dangers are present on both sides. Attempts to make some of the fascists in the 1930s into intellectual forerunners of the European Union⁷⁶ are no more valid than claims that Jörg Haider is a contemporary reincarnation of Adolf Hitler.⁷⁷

Still, the study of classic fascism does offer some legitimate object lessons for our time. One of these is the relative success of efforts by non-fascist forces to marginalize fascism as a political phenomenon. In both The Netherlands and France, the anti-fascists attempted even before 1939 to weaken the indigenous fascisms by portraying its supporters as vassals of the Third Reich, who were working to establish a Nazi regime across the Rhine. Both the Dutch and French fascists vigorously denied the accusation, but the political results were decidedly different in Holland and France. In the Netherlands, the determined and united effort by the anti-fascist forces succeeded in containing and eventually marginalizing the Dutch fascists. The political influence of fascism in the Netherlands rose dramatically until 1935, but after that date, largely because of the effort by the pluralist forces to link Dutch indigenous fascism with Nazi Germany, the Dutch fascists were stopped. By 1937, the membership and votes of the largest Dutch fascist party had been halved. This certainly did not happen in France. French fascism remained organizationally splintered, but as a political force it continued to play a major role in undermining the viability of the Third Republic almost until the outbreak of the Second World War. Unlike Holland, France was a politically deeply divided country on the eve of the Second World War. Why one attempt at marginalization failed and the other succeeded is a question that remains relevant for contemporary European politics.

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