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## 6. The New Totalitarians: Fascism and Nazism

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## 6. The New Totalitarians: Fascism and Nazism

### Abstract

In discussing the modern movements which threatened democracy, a distinction can be made between those which were anti-revolutionary and those which were counter-revolutionary. In practice, they often blur into one another. Differentiation between the two types does help to distinguish between those backward-looking elements which offered little more than mere negation of the democratic and radical movements of the preceding century, and those which used certain democratic devices against democracy itself. The Franco regime in Spain is essentially anti-revolutionary, except for the group running the single party, the Falange, which is counterrevolutionary. Latin American dictatorships generally belong in the first group, with Argentina's Peron an exception. [*excerpt*]

### Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Fascism, Nazism, Anti-Revolutionary, Counter-Revolutionary, Democracy, Liberalism, Nationalism

### Disciplines

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### Comments

This is a part of [Section XVIII: The Western World in the Twentieth Century: The Historical Setting](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

### More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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In discussing the modern movements which threatened democracy, a distinction can be made between those which were anti-revolutionary and those which were counterrevolutionary. In practice, they often blur into one another. Differentiation between the two types does help to distinguish between those backward-looking elements which offered little more than mere negation of the democratic and radical movements of the preceding century, and those which used certain democratic devices against democracy itself. The Franco regime in Spain is essentially antirevolutionary, except for the group running the single party, the Falange, which is counterrevolutionary. Latin American dictatorships generally belong in the first group, with Argentina's Peron an exception.

The antidemocratic movements drew their strength primarily from those elements which had fought against liberalism and democracy ever since the French Revolution: nobles, great landowners, clericals, the officer caste, the monarchy, and the civil service. They spoke in terms of political and social stability, the preservation of civilized values, defense of private property, and opposition to Bolshevism, socialism, democracy, and mob rule. Nationalism was by now sufficiently divorced from any necessary identification with democracy for them to claim to defend national dignity and honor.

Particularly in Roman Catholic Europe, antidemocratic groups often made contact with the counterrevolution through the concept of the corporate state. At the heart of this theory is the organic view of society which we have earlier seen at variance with individualism. Arguing that a person's productive role is the key to his status in society, the proponents of the corporate state contend that the state should be organized on this basis. Workers, managers, and owners in, for example, the metallurgical industry should have some common institutional framework (often called corporations) within which they should settle questions of mutual interest, thus counteracting the Marxist's class war and the liberal's individualism. The representative organs of the state should consist of delegates from such joint corporations rather than of spokesmen for geographical areas.

During the interwar years antidemocratic forces made headway in a number of states: for example, Marshal Jozef Pilsudski (1867-1935) and the subsequent "regime of colonels" in Poland,



Engelbert Dolfuss (1892-1934) in Austria and Antonio Salazar (1889 - ) in Portugal. Although such democratic institutions as were retained in these and similar regimes were allowed little power, the regimes were not totalitarian. They did not try to transform and control all aspects of national life, molding it to fit an ideology. Rather they allowed certain aspects of life, for example, the church, an autonomous existence.

The first attempt to go beyond the mere antirevolutionary program to a full-fledged counterrevolutionary totalitarianism was made in Italy. Although Italy was a victor in the war, her nationalists felt that they had not been adequately rewarded for their efforts, efforts all the more burdensome in what was essentially a poor and overpopulated country. Many citizens saw little hope for effective leadership in the short-lived ministries produced under parliamentary democracy. Political life was fragmented by the rivalry of numerous parties: antirevolutionary conservatives, liberal cliques, Socialists, and, to the horror of all property owners, Communists.

At first little attention was paid to the new Fascist party and its leader, an ex-socialist named Benito Mussolini (1883-1945). To the poor he offered bread and circuses: prosperity through a controlled economy and a public works program and, as spiritual fare, a diet of propaganda promising excitement and glory. To the disgruntled nationalist he promised a revived Roman Empire around the Mediterranean, Mare Nostrum (Our Sea). To property owners fearful of Communism he promised to guarantee private property. To those disgruntled with democracy he offered the leader principle, with one leader, Il Duce, and a single-party state. To disillusioned young men of the wartime and postwar generations, he offered participation in a movement which proclaimed itself to be in the forefront of history, an infallible movement which would resolve all doubts. To those in search of excitement, the party offered pageantry and a chance to enjoy the thrill of violence through membership in the black-shirted gangs of bully-boys.

The Fascists gradually gained ground, but never, in free elections, a majority. Yet so paralyzed was Italian parliamentary government that a threat of violence in 1922 brought Mussolini the premiership without violating the letter of the constitution. He then proceeded to replace parliamentary democracy with the institutions of the single-party corporate state.

This experiment aroused much admiration abroad, especially among conservatives. They approved of its anti-Communism. They were taken in by its carefully staged displays of power and prosperity which seemed to show that under Fascism Italy had pulled herself up by her boot straps. "Mussolini made the trains run on time at last" became the standard cliché of those believing that Fascist discipline was what Italy had needed.



The Fascist party took its name from the fascis, the ax surrounded by a bundle of sticks which was borne as a symbol of authority in ancient Rome. As the first of the non-Communist totalitarian movements to achieve office, it provided the generic term "fascist" to cover German Nazism as well. Actually, Mussolini's bombast failed to make up for the fact that the regime was never in a position to make its control of Italian life total. Beneath its ideological and institutional facade the regime was a huge swindle, a hunting ground for opportunists. To see modern fascism at its best, and worst, it is necessary to turn northward to Germany.

In 1918, the defeated German army, in the hope of wheedling better terms from the Allies, engineered the abdication of the Kaiser and the proclamation of a republic. Thus, ironically, the dream of the German radicals of 1848 was realized, but by one of the least democratic elements in Germany. A convention which met at Weimar, the home of Goethe, drew up a democratic constitution under which the republic operated until 1933.

From the first the unfortunate Weimar republic labored against heavy odds. In the eyes of German nationalists, it represented defeat and the hated peace treaty which its government had been forced to accept. Property owners feared that it would open the way to Socialism and Communism. In their turn, the large Communist party labored diligently to overthrow it. Conservatives longed for some more traditional regime, perhaps a monarchy. The army, secretly and illegally expanding, would defend the republic only against the Communists. Fragmentation of national life was reflected in the multiplicity of parties, which in its turn so weakened parliamentary government as to undermine the prestige of the republic.

This spectacle of political instability, national humiliation, inflation, social chaos, and economic depression readied a number of people to "escape from freedom" to some totalitarian movement. Isolated individuals who had lost their bearings amidst violent change, they were all too ready to believe that everything respectable was fraudulent, stupid, and doomed. At once cynical and gullible, they rejected the data of common experience and accepted the most outrageous explanations that their misery was the result of secret conspiracy by classes, races, or states. To such people, the amorality of totalitarian movements seemed a brave gesture against alleged bourgeois respectability; in the kingdom of the one-eyed, only the blind could be king. The totalitarians' confident claim to be on the side of history promised a welcome certainty; their appeal to the judgment of history conveniently postponed assessment of results to the dim future. Their emphasis on sheer action suggested a way to achieve identity through self-expression: "You are what you do." Consequently, the last years of the Weimar republic witnessed the alarming growth of the extremist parties, Communism and Nazism, parties avowedly antagonistic but possessing certain totalitarian characteristics in common.

*By Eric Brown*  
*I have the offer of an escape from freedom, something to do so no document was to think*  
*Italians never gave wholehearted support to the regime. Italy didn't have the resources.*



The Nazi party was only one of many extremist and nationalistic groups which sprang up in Germany immediately after the war. Long regarded by the major parties as merely a part of the lunatic fringe, it attracted at first only a small band of misfits, adventurers, and failures, among them the man who soon became its leader, Adolf Hitler (1889-1945). The son of a petty civil servant, Hitler came from a provincial town in German Austria. His self-proclaimed architectural talents failed to obtain recognition in Vienna, where he eked out a precarious existence on the fringes of society, alone and bitter in the great city. He entered the German army in 1914, became a corporal, and was decorated for bravery. His new-found sense of comradeship and satisfaction through merger in a larger movement was rudely shattered by Germany's defeat, a catastrophe that he could explain only by assuming the treachery of those behind the front. Once again down and out, he served briefly as a secret agent for the German army.

It was at this point that he made contact with the infant Nazi party, of which he became the seventh member. In 1923, the Nazis planned a Putsch (seizure of power by a sudden revolt) in Munich in collaboration with conservative and nationalist army officers. The revolt was readily crushed and Hitler received a short jail sentence, but the experience had its value. He had got in touch with important conservatives; he had shown himself to be a ruthless enemy of the republic; his trial gave him welcome publicity; and his imprisonment gave him the opportunity to summarize his ideas in a book, Mein Kampf (My Struggle). After his release, Hitler resumed his agitation with such success that the 1932 elections gave his party the largest number of seats of any party in the legislature.

Some credit for this success must be given to the help received from civil servants, army officers, and great industrialists who backed Nazism with money and influence. Most of them regarded Hitler and his movement with secret contempt, but they shared his nationalism, recognized his popular appeal, and hoped to use him to seize control of the republic. They assumed that he would be so dependent on their help and so impressed by their position that he would follow their lead. Therefore when, in 1933, parliamentary government came virtually to a standstill, with no other party able to form a ministry to handle the problems of the depression, they induced Marshal von Hindenburg, the senile president, to appoint Hitler chancellor (prime minister). The Weimar Republic was now dead.

Hitler's success was due not only to favorable times and outside support, but also to his skill as a propagandist. Two examples of his technique may be labeled the "big lie" and the "outrageous truth." The first was based on the assumption that, although small lies may be doubted on the basis of common sense and one's own experience, repetition of a really big lie will insure widespread belief. Most people will lack sufficient evidence from their limited world to rebut it and will assume that it would not be propounded if it were not true.

*Why Nazism in Germany? Service men coming home. (but same in other countries) many parties. A well established nationalism. People couldn't understand why the army had been defeated. A ignorance of the treaty was worse than the reality. Hitler was a good reason. Many besides Nazis who wanted rearmament*



The outrageous truth is just the reverse. It assumes that if a politician makes a statement completely repugnant to accepted standards, conventional people will disregard it on the common-sense grounds that no one could possibly mean it, while others will be attracted by its very audacity. For this reason Nazism was a conspiracy conducted in the open. In frequent pronouncements, especially in Mein Kampf, Hitler stated what he planned to do, and most of his opponents simply refused to believe him.

The efficacy of Hitler's propaganda was enhanced by the appeal of his program, a catch-all which offered something to everyone. This comes out clearly in the official title of the movement, National Socialist German Workers Party, Nazi being merely an abbreviation of the first syllables in German.

As nationalists, Nazis pledged themselves to put the interests of the nation over the interests of the individual, by their definition selfish. Only those individuals capable of contributing to the welfare of the nation were to be honored. Others were to be scorned, or exterminated. International movements operating within Germany -- Christianity, Freemasonry, world Jewry, international capitalism, socialism, Communism -- were to be curbed or crushed.

As nationalists, the Nazis promised to wipe out the shame of the Paris Peace Settlement. Germany was to be rearmed. All territory containing Germans was to be annexed. Territories necessary for the prosperity of Germany, as for example the grain-growing lands of the Russian Ukraine, were to be brought under German control. Other states permitted to exist were to be subject to German hegemony in a "New Order."

Nazism claimed to be a socialist party of the workers because it exalted society over the individual and because it favored the masses rather than the old privileged classes. It opposed individualism in capitalism as in all other forms. Contrariwise, it asserted its dedication to the concept of private property and its claim to be the only alternative to Communism. Marxist Socialism it denounced as a running mate of the latter.

Nazism claimed to be the only truly German party. It tirelessly hammered home the idea that Germany was the standard bearer of true culture. German freedom, the opportunity to be truly German, was the only genuine freedom. Only Germans were truly brave, loyal, thrifty, hard-working, creative, in short, truly virtuous. German art and literature were superior to others. Borrowing from certain writers of the preceding century, Nazis defined "Germanity" not merely in cultural but also in racist terms as something in the "blood and soil." Aryans (a classification not recognized by scientific anthropologists) were asserted to be the superior race, with its best representation being found in Germany. Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, and Dutch were considered tainted, but salvable. "Mongrel," or mixed races were considered contemptible. At the

*Hitler was a reject. Strong Communist movement. Nazism was a middle way between conservatism and Communism. Nazism and Comm. stressed for either the one or the other. Many nationalists went with him because he was winning. The extent to how much Hitler believed in this is hard to say. anti-intellectual.*



bottom of the scale in Europe were Slavs, gypsies, and, worst of all, Jews. The latter were accused of being both Communists and capitalists, traitorous members of an international conspiracy to rule the world. Self-styled experts even endeavored to prove that the ancient Greeks, whose cultural achievements might otherwise have been embarrassing, were Aryans.

A final aspect of the appeal of the Nazi program lay in its concept of the party, a concept related to that of contemporary Communism. It borrowed also from the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), although certain unfavorable features of his teaching had to be suppressed. Nietzsche had spoken of the regeneration of the world through a group of "supermen," a role, suitably modified, now assumed by the Nazis. Since the party claimed wisdom superior to that of any individual outside it, all opponents were to be "liquidated" (not killed, for that would dignify them with some shred of humanity). Freedom of speech, being merely a device to perpetuate error, was to end. For similar reasons, a like fate awaited other democratic institutions.

Membership in the party was to be a sign of superior status, the hallmark of good citizenship and racial purity. Party pageantry and uniforms were outward signs of the strength, unity, and glory of the movement. But all members of the party were not equal. The S. A. (Sturmabteilung, Storm Troopers or Brown Shirts) were a uniformed, paramilitary group, superior to the ordinary members. The S. S. (Schutzstaffel) were the black-shirted elite guard. Above them were the party magnates. Over all stood Der Fuehrer, the Leader, Adolf Hitler. Under the leader principle, all loyalty flowed upward to him; from him came all authority.

Once in power (in 1933), the Nazis set about establishing what Hitler called The Thousand Year Reich, the imperial successor to the Holy Roman and Hohenzollern Empires. All aspects of life were to be coordinated to that end.

Political coordination was attempted through the establishment of a total dictatorship. All other parties and their organs were outlawed. Opposition leaders were assassinated or railroaded to the living death of concentration camps. When a number of members of the S. A., many of them former Communists, pushed for the rapid introduction of many Communist economic and social policies, they were liquidated in 1934. Even the state became merely a tool of the party, and that not the most important. The legislature became a rubber stamp, its membership hand-picked. The only elections were plebiscites through which the voter was allowed to achieve a sense of participation in the regime by approving its policies. He was not allowed to choose between alternatives. The army was brought to heel. The civil service was purged. The legal system was altered in accord with the supposed primordial Germanic law of the Volk (the racial community), dispensing with rational proof and rights for

*By the end of the war, the S.S. included Oswald, Speer. Only thing they believed in - action!*



the accused. To assure that these and other aspects of coordination were accepted, all forms of communication were controlled by the propaganda machine of Dr. Joseph Paul Goebbels (1897 - 1945). Propaganda was reinforced by the systematic use of terror by the security forces under Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945).

Economic coordination was applied to all resources, including both labor and capital. Trade-unions, which had been strongly socialist, were replaced by a single comprehensive organization, the Labor Front. This new body provided recreational facilities, a stream of propaganda, and supervision over certain labor questions. Strikes and lockouts were outlawed for reflecting the unacceptable ideas of class war and self-interest. The new relationship between employer and employee was defined as one between leader and follower. State-appointed labor trustees were empowered to fix wages, act as referees in disputes, control conditions of employment, and even oust unsatisfactory employers. Eventually, labor conscription was introduced.

Clearly those capitalists who had hoped to use Hitler for their own purposes were riding a tiger from which they could not dismount. Although Aryan owners retained title to their property, its use was controlled by the state in pursuit of the latter's aims of rearmament and self-sufficiency. Firms were directed to increase exports, decrease imports, and use substitutes for scarce materials. Capital investment, dividends, and transfers of foreign exchange were all controlled.

Despite its success in ending unemployment through military conscription, rearmament, and public works, Nazi economic policies were formless, almost chaotic. The corporative features of early Nazi labor policy were soon abandoned in favor of sheer despotism. Such despotism was more consistent over men than over things. Hermann Goering (1893-1946), one of the Nazi magnates, built up a huge personal economic empire out of confiscated property. Businessmen found some room for their own initiative by playing off one official against another. Even the much-vaunted "guns instead of butter" program of austerity and rearmament was in reality one of "guns and butter," to the detriment of both programs. The essential cause of these inconsistencies in Nazi economic policies was that the Nazis, being sheer activists, refused to recognize any limitation on action from mere economic facts. Their much admired superhighways, for example, made little sense in a country short of oil, and slave-labor camps were patently inefficient producers.

Cultural coordination was somewhat more systematic. Professional associations, Boy Scouts, and other clubs were replaced by such Nazi bodies as the Hitler Youth. Women were ordered to restrict their activities to their traditional role in kitchen, nursery, and church. All education was perverted for propaganda purposes. The once-proud German universities



were purged of non-Aryans and disloyal professors, and much of their curriculum was reduced to racist nonsense. Books and music by such notable non-Aryans as Heine and Mendelssohn were burned. Non-objective art was labeled non-German, and suppressed. Many leaders of German culture, including the novelist Thomas Mann (1875-1955) and the physicist Albert Einstein (1879-1955), went into voluntary or involuntary exile. Like the "Exiles of '48" in the preceding century, they were a loss to Germany but a gain to other countries, especially the United States.

Cultural coordination placed churchmen in an agonizing dilemma. As patriotic Germans, they might feel proud of their fatherland's new strength. They believed that they owed obedience to Caesar in secular matters, but they were soon involved in disputes over Nazi efforts to control the churches' education, youth organizations, press, and clergy. The party fostered a German-Christian movement, wherein Christ was either depicted as an Aryan or left out altogether. Sporadic official support was given to a neopagan religion which revolved around a Wagnerian heaven or Thor, Wodin, and other gods of the ancient Germans. Actually, the Nazis were essentially antipathetic to all religion, however modified, as they were to all competitors.

Racial coordination was applied with utmost severity against the Jews, no matter how intimately they had been merged into German life. By the Nuremberg Laws and subsequent enactments, Jews were deprived of citizenship and expelled from business, government, and the professions. Marriage with non-Aryans was forbidden. Jewish-owned livestock was even segregated from Aryan-owned livestock. The latter provision was not long significant because Jewish property was confiscated and, under the austere leadership of Himmler, the party set about "solving the Jewish problem," as it was euphemistically put, by the systematic extermination of the Jews. Meanwhile there was much talk of the need for Lebensraum (living space) for the Aryan master race, to be won by conquest.

Nazi propaganda had some success outside Germany among four classes of sympathizers. Some were Germans living abroad, especially in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Danzig. Others were sheer opportunists who, for personal or national gain, allied themselves with what seemed to be the inevitable victor. Yet others were conservatives who believed that Nazism was the only alternative to Communism: "Better Hitler than Stalin." Some were attracted by Nazism's ideology. However, it never got far as a world movement. It was too self-centered to make concessions to the requirements of its friends abroad. Its nationalist and racist flavor made it much less exportable than Communism. That left only power as a magnetic force, and once the regime began to lose battles, it lost collaborators.

In Nazism's policy of coordination it is clearer what the regime was against than what it was for. The irrationality of



Nazi ideology and the shapelessness of the regime became more apparent during World War II. More and more the Fuehrer relied upon Himmler's S. S. and the regime of pure terror. Indeed, students of totalitarianism have suggested that this is one of its characteristics: as the real enemies of the regime become fewer, the terrorists organs of the regime become more pervasive. The S. S. set about absorbing the very functions of the state. It built up its own highly mechanized army. It completely short-circuited the legal system. It even lost some of its German character as it drafted non-Germans to be trained as the elite of the new civilization. When Germany's armies succumbed at the end of the war, the last feature of the regime to fall was the secret police. Then, in a supreme act of defiance, Hitler, Goebbels, and Himmler committed suicide amidst the ruins of the Thousand Year Reich.

Anyone seeking the essence of National Socialism will find it only in its deeds. Hitler produced no coherent body of political thought. Indeed, as an activist he scorned theory in favor of ideology. Everything he wrote or said was in a sense propaganda, not a statement of his version of objective truth. It is to transmit something of the flavor of this propaganda that the following selections have been chosen from Mein Kampf a semiautobiographical, pseudohistorical mishmash published in two volumes in 1924 and 1927. A copy of this, the bible of the movement, was given to every German bride after Hitler's accession to power.

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