

# The Nature of Fascism

**F**ascism has repeatedly defied definition. It clearly lacked the ideological core associated with Marxism (a term synonymous with communism) but, nevertheless, ideological elements were clearly present, at least in its German manifestation. Fascism possessed a chameleon-like quality, which led it to take on a different form in each European country — partly through lack of ideological coherence and partly through nationalist characteristics. Its left-wing elements have led it to be regarded as a form of socialism or even — as Paul Johnson has put it — a Marxist heresy.

This article discusses the historical background which produced Fascism in its various European forms, with particular reference to Germany and Italy; it concludes with an attempt at an explicable and comprehensive definition.

## Origins and scope

The term Fascism derives either from the Italian word *'fascio'*, meaning a group or gang, or from the Latin word *'fasces'*, which means a bundle of rods and symbolised the 'binding together' of all groups in society — which Fascism supposedly exemplified. It may be that Fascism owes its origins to both words.

The term applies to those movements which arose, primarily in Europe, between 1919 and 1945. Whilst Fascism is clearly still with us, the word itself, in political terms, is used exclusively as a term of abuse. None of the contemporary extreme right-wing parties would refer to themselves as 'fascist'. The countries most affected were Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Romania and the wartime puppet state of Croatia.

Only in Germany and Italy did the Fascists come to power on their own terms; in France and Croatia they managed it solely because of the German military successes of 1940–1, which led to the occupation of those two countries and the establishment of puppet states. Austria became part of the German Reich in 1938. In Spain, the Fascists played an active part in the Spanish civil war, but were in fact simply one element in a counter-revolutionary coalition led by the conservative, General Franco. After the war the power of the Spanish Fascists was effectively curtailed, though they were given a sham, ceremonial role — the insignia of power, without the reality.

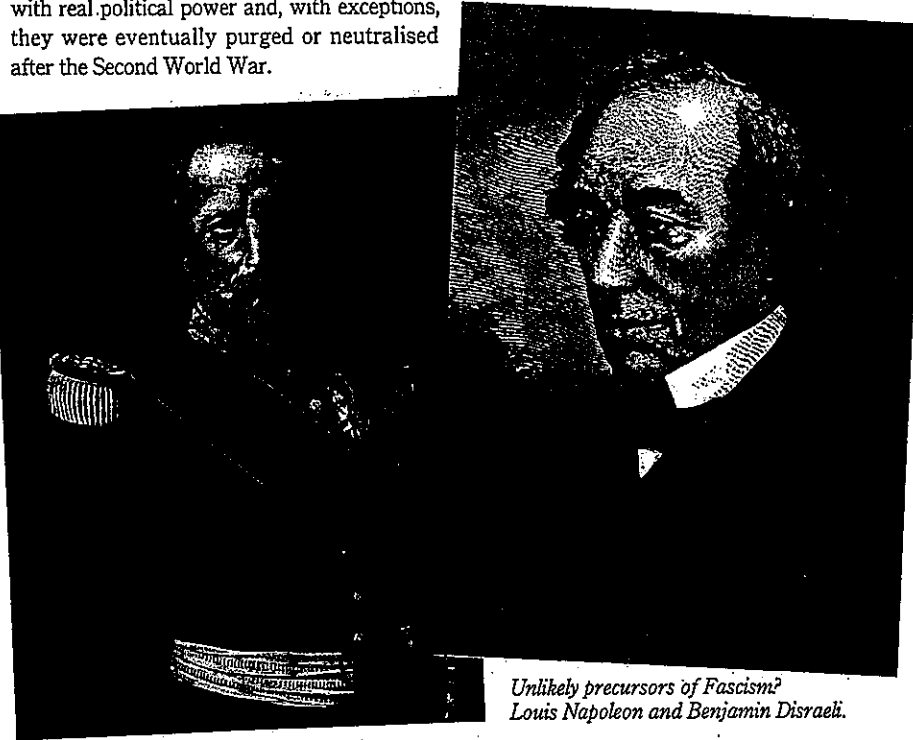
Various Fascist paramilitary groups were formed in the inter-war period. In Germany there was the SA; in Italy, Mussolini's blackshirts; in

The different manifestations of Fascism make it difficult to define accurately and succinctly. Here *Roderick Gordon* gets to grips with the concept.

France, the Croix de Feu and the Cagoulards; in Croatia, the Ustase; In Hungary, the Arrow Cross; in Romania, the Iron Guard; and in Spain, the Falange. These groups were often semi-independent and constituted the spearhead of the movement in the 1920s and early 1930s. In most cases their violent energies were incompatible with real political power and, with exceptions, they were eventually purged or neutralised after the Second World War.

power of the state; the anti-semitism of Gougenot de Mousseaux and the Comte de Gobineau; the 'master race' theories of Houston Stewart Chamberlain; and the worship of violence expressed in the writings of Alfred Sorel, which linked up with theories about 'the law of the jungle' and 'the survival of the fittest'.

In addition, by the end of the nineteenth century, national unification had been achieved in Germany and Italy and, by 1890, Bismarck's diplomatic system had collapsed as a peace-preserving policy. Europe was, more clearly than before, divided into competitive national states, with burgeoning industries and rapidly-expanding populations establishing the basis for much more numerous and well-equipped armed forces.



*Unlikely precursors of Fascism? Louis Napoleon and Benjamin Disraeli.*

## Historical roots

The historical roots of Fascism have been disputed, but certain nineteenth-century precursors can tentatively be identified: the Young England movement of Benjamin Disraeli, with its reactionary nostalgia for the mediaeval past combined with sympathy for Chartism; the Second Empire of Napoleon III, with its repressive dictatorship mitigated by slum-clearance programmes and the establishment of parks and popular amenities; Hegel's deification of the

This helped to create a new form of aggressive nationalism, seen in Germany and the Balkans, and a collective imperialism which led to the 'Scramble for Africa'. It led also in part to the division of Europe by 1907 into the Central Powers (Germany, Turkey and Austria-Hungary) and the Triple Entente (Britain, France and Russia). This nationalism was the breeding ground for the emergence of Fascism; and the great catalyst for this emergence was, of course, the First World War — and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.



Mussolini took his theatrical gestures from the Italian nationalist and poet, Gabriele d'Annunzio.



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At this stage, Fascism was most credibly seen as a means of gaining power, not as a coherent ideology. It later made valiant attempts to remedy this deficiency, particularly in the writings of Alberto Gentile, who was responsible for the *Enciclopedia Italiana* which attempted to map out the ideology of Italian fascism. Here ideas were put forward which suggested that individual liberty did not exist, except as a way of bolstering the power of the state; that there should be unions for both employers and workers, known as corporations, to counter the weakening effects of class conflict; and that there should be subordination of all elites to the purposes of the state.

The First World War had a brutalising effect on European society and created a whole generation of ex-soldiers who had difficulty in adjusting to peace-time conditions. In many cases they were filled with a nostalgia for the solidarity of the trenches, with its simple imperatives, uncontaminated by politics or ideology. This partly helps to explain why, in its early stages, Fascism tended to be non-ideological, in marked contrast to the intellectual complexity of Marxism. At the beginning, the movement favoured 'direct action', untrammelled by the limitations of parliamentary democracy or Marxist ideology.

The power vacuum created in Eastern and Central Europe by the demise of the Austro-Hungarian empire after the Great War was filled by inherently weak 'successor' states, which had uncertain identities and volatile populations such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. All these states seemed extremely vulnerable to the threat of a 'Red tide' rolling out from the Soviet Union — an ostensibly expansionist Marxist state, which fomented revolution in Germany and Hungary in 1919 and fought against the Poles in 1919–20. Anti-communism was thus the one great unifying factor for Fascists which, during the Second World War, found expression in the multinational divisions of the German *Waffen-SS* (including formations from Spain, France, Belgium, Denmark and Holland) which fought against the Soviets.

### Born in crisis

In the inter-war years it was those countries which had felt themselves most humiliated by their involvement in the First World War, which were most susceptible to Fascism: Germany, Italy and Austria. France was fatally weakened by its experience of the war and its Fascists sought a national resurgence. Romania was on the winning side, but had been destabilised by massive territorial acquisitions, which included millions of dissident Hungarians. Fascism is

thus, above all, the product of crisis.

However, this needs qualification. Acute economic crises were experienced in the USA and Britain, but Fascism made little headway. This was perhaps because of the strength of established institutions and political parties and the absence of powerful, rightist dissident groups. Fascist parties were small, like the British Union of Fascists, or largely of foreign membership, like the German-American Bund. In France and Spain, powerful right-wing groups existed; but the strength of established orthodox conservatism was sufficient to prevent domination by Fascists until, with the German victories of 1940, conservatism was fatally undermined.

### Fascism in Italy

Italy was the first country to become Fascist, in 1922, and it was here that the political style of Fascism was first developed, taking its inspiration from the Italian nationalist and poet, Gabriele d'Annunzio. In a brief and colourful political career, d'Annunzio had won fame and renown through the clever use of theatrical gestures such as the Roman salute, the parading of paramilitary groups, a demagogic style of political oratory and promotion of the cult of personality. At first, Fascism was seen as a movement for order, a disciplined response to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the spread of left-wing political and labour activism.

It was fear of the possible triumph of the revolutionary Left in Italy, which enabled Benito Mussolini to achieve the essential 'appeal to all classes' and to establish the vital compact with all the most powerful groups in Italian society: the Church, the monarchy, the landowners and the industrialists. The middle classes were equally afraid of Bolshevik disorder; and peasant proprietors felt threatened by left-wing attempts to collectivise Italian agriculture. Fascism even achieved some popularity amongst industrial workers because of its advocacy of syndicalism (government by unions).

While vigorous attempts were made to integrate these ideological elements into society, they were almost wholly unsuccessful. Italians were highly resistant to ideology. Mussolini, while adoring ideological rhetoric, was interested only in the preservation and extension of his own power — to which even Fascism itself seemed at times inimical. While an enormous number of ideological pronouncements issued from Mussolini's regime, their practical effect was superficial, though they were often expressed with great force, style and demagogic enthusiasm.

Although it preserved an appearance of respecting ideology, Fascism as a force became redundant in the 1930s and 1940s, undergoing a brief revival during Mussolini's rump government of Salò in 1944–5, when some of its left-wing elements were readopted.

### Fascism in Germany

The German brand of Fascism was named after the National Socialist party. Nazism was, initially, an attempt to create a nationalist movement which would appeal to the workers. Once Adolf Hitler became leader, it acquired a more powerful dynamic — though Nazism took much longer to achieve power (thirteen years) than Italian Fascism (three years). Also, a much more extensive participation in the democratic process was necessary (the 'cloak of legality').

In addition, the economic crisis of 1929–33 was much more serious in Germany, with six million unemployed at the height of the Depression. Though the same alliance with conservative forces was necessary, German Fascism was clearly radical and expansionist, like its Italian model; however, it had very marked ideological elements.

It must be stressed, though, that Nazi 'ideology' does not bear comparison with the intellectually clear concepts of Marxism, which result from sober analysis. Nazism more correctly represents a series of assertions, tending towards the irrational which, like Marxism, form a critique of the ills of human

society. The intellectual legacy of Nazism is derisory, consisting largely of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century*.

At the core of ideological Nazism lies anti-semitism as an explanation for the crisis of capitalism and the advance of communism, and the value of war as a means of purifying and strengthening the Aryan race, regarded as intrinsically superior to all others. As in Italy, Nazism achieved power as a result of a contract with the conservative elements in society and then proceeded to purge its radical wing.

Attempts were made to introduce an ideological agenda, but most elements in it were swamped by the all-encompassing war preparations. However, a profound commitment to anti-semitism remained, along with the concept of the 'survival of the fittest'. These ideas found expression in the 'Final Solution' of 1942-45 and the Euthanasia programme of 1939-42.

### The Fascist imitators

In the rest of Europe Fascism achieved only spurious success, chiefly associated with the conquests of the German army. The collaborationist regime established at Vichy in France, and which ruled the unoccupied part of the country between 1940 and 1944, gave birth to the genuinely Fascist *Milice* — which engaged in civil war with the Gaullists in 1944.

The Romanian Iron Guard (League of the Archangel Michael) was fundamentally a right-wing, nationalist, anti-communist and anti-semitic populist group; it was different from Fascism in that it believed in the primacy of peasant interests. Though influential in government, it never came to power, being destroyed in 1940 — with German connivance — to keep Romanian oil flowing.

Hungarian Fascism was rooted in numerous anti-semitic, right-radical groups. Inspired by revisionism arising from territorial losses written into the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, they influenced successive governments to ally Hungary with the Axis powers. The most successful was the Arrow Cross, which came to power (for two months) during the German occupation of Hungary.

In Spain the Falange appeared more significant than it really was, because of its amalgamation with a much larger grouping. Most Falangist leaders were killed or executed in the Spanish Civil War. After 1939 real power rested in the hands of Generalissimo Franco and the Spanish army — representing the traditional conservative Spain of Castile, Church, aristocracy and (the now absentee) monarchy. The Spanish Radical Right was used, and then cast aside, by the traditionalists who — unlike their Italian and German counterparts — manipulated their Faustian pact with the Fascists for their own benefit.

In Croatia, the German conquest of Yugoslavia allowed the pro-German Ustase to

attempt their own Final Solution against the Serbs, in which it is possible that nearly a million Serbs were murdered. Ireland also had its Blueshirts, Belgium its Rexists. Almost every country attempted an imitation of this 'fashionable wave of the future'. Nevertheless, success outside Germany and Italy was very limited — and appeared to be destroyed by 1945.

### Conclusion

In the inter-war period Fascism was a leader-dominated, dynamic, radical-reactionary movement, military in substance and form, which was predominantly a European phenomenon (although it had imitators all over the world, for example the Phalange in the Lebanon). It was nationalist, authoritarian, frequently (though not always) anti-semitic and against all the libertarian political tendencies which had developed since the French Revolution.



*Mein Kampf, made digestible for British readers in 18 weekly parts.*

Despite a superficial affinity with socialism — soon discarded — this made it anti-communist, anti-liberal, anti-democratic; it was against freedom of speech and the Press, the emancipation of women, the amelioration of punishments, the avoidance of war and the cultivation of humanitarianism. Thus, in the most profound sense, it was a reactionary movement, defined more by what it attacked than what it upheld (perhaps to compensate for its intellectual incoherence). It nakedly applauded violence, war and the instinct of the predator, and in this sense can be viewed as expressing the nihilistic human thirst for destruction, undertaken for its own sake.

In outward appearance it was a radical movement, employing all the weapons of the modern media (cinema, radio, photography, mass rallies) to achieve its goal. It was a mass movement depending on popular appeal — though not the popular vote. It favoured the paramilitary style of uniform for its members and sanctioned war and territorial expansion — together with the

selfish, narrow interests of its own state — as cardinal elements in foreign policy.

The leader was generally presented as an all-knowing superman, who must be unconditionally obeyed. In Germany it revived paganism, the use of torture and beheading as a means of execution. At its German core — among its fanatics — was a primitivism which idolised the savagery of the beast in the jungle. Thus, in some senses, it resembled a throwback to Europe's barbarian past.

In contrast to Bolshevism, it sought to appeal to all classes, the idea of the class struggle being replaced by the struggle against the 'racial enemy'. This was to result in the creation of a racial elite and a world in which all the weak human elements would have been destroyed. Its manifestations were different in different European countries — though it was universally anti-communist, authoritarian, nationalist, aggressive and against all the principles which underpinned modern political liberalism. Most of its rhetoric was employed in discrediting its opponents. Its ideology was incoherent and negative, and almost entirely lacking in intellectual substance.

Fascism was a response to crisis, both political and economic, and a reaction to the nineteenth-century triumph of liberalism. Its stance was applauded by those orthodox conservatives who had been defeated by liberalism and who felt threatened by revolutionary socialism. It was a temporary, evanescent phenomenon, a response to the economic chaos and dislocation caused by the First World War and the rise of the Left.

Its form was largely established in Italy, while most of its substance emerged from Germany with smaller accretions from Britain and Spain. It is the politics of last resort; of little appeal, unless a nation is besieged by negative influences — particularly national humiliation and economic distress — where both Left and Right have been weakened and traditional institutions, such as parliament or the monarchy, provide no credible brake to the onset of extremism.

Fascism is a double-headed monster: a peculiar combination that is radical in form, but reactionary in substance — and which may recur, if circumstances are bleak enough.

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# Why did the Weimar Republic Fail?

*What led the German people to become disillusioned with their 'perfect' Weimar constitution and turn instead to the Communist and Nazi parties?*

**T**he Weimar Republic takes its name from a small town in central Germany, famous for its cultural and literary associations. It was the meeting place of the Constituent Assembly elected in January 1919 to draft a republican, democratic constitution after the fall of the German Empire in November 1918. The Weimar period came to an end with the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor on 30 January 1933.

The ultimate failure of the Republic had such catastrophic consequences for Germany and the world that it has always overshadowed the history of the first German parliamentary democracy. It is therefore important to stress that Weimar's collapse was never inevitable, though in the final years of the Republic the chances of survival had become desperately slim. Some of the reasons for the failure lie further back in history — in the weakness of liberalism in Germany after the unsuccessful revolutions of 1848, followed by the successful unification of the country by Bismarck through force of arms. The principal causes for the failure have, however, to be sought in the years after 1918.

## Revolution

Many of Weimar's problems had their roots in the defeat and the revolution of 1918. These events came as a traumatic shock to most patriotic middle-class Germans. They were prepared to tolerate the new parliamentary democracy only as long as it seemed likely to bring Germany a more lenient peace. When the treaty of Versailles became public in May 1919, it was regarded by most of the German public as deeply humiliating and was accepted only under duress. Nationalist right-wing opinion swiftly turned against the new Republic. It accepted the notorious stab-in-the-back myth, namely that the German army had never been defeated on the battlefield, but had been betrayed by the politicians, mostly from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the main party of the working classes, who had been brought to power by the revolution.

This was a travesty of the facts. When in October 1918 the German High Command was compelled to seek an armistice, the imperial regime had become totally discredited and was swept away by the masses of workers and

soldiers yearning for peace. The leaders of the SPD, headed by Friedrich Ebert, later the first President of the Republic, took power reluctantly and did their best to protect the country from break-down and disintegration in very difficult circumstances not of their making.

They faced an early challenge from the Left, who wanted a more thorough-going revolution, using the spontaneously emerging workers' and soldiers' councils as the basis for a socialist society. For the extreme Left, represented mainly by the Spartakus League, the nucleus of the German Communist Party, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia was the model. For the moderate Left, as well as for the middle classes, the avoidance of 'Russian conditions' and chaos became a priority.

Ebert and his colleagues have been criticised for becoming obsessed with the threat from the Left and for relying too much on civil servants and military officers inherited from the previous regime. Historians now generally accept that a profound social upheaval was unlikely in an advanced industrial society such as Germany. A dictatorship of the proletariat based on workers' and soldiers' councils would have been a backward step in a country where male workers had had the vote for fifty years.

Historians are now also sceptical about the argument that the councils could have been used to democratise German society more thoroughly. It was, however, an error by the politicians in power in 1919, notably Ebert and the defence minister Gustav Noske, to rely on volunteer forces — the so-called *Freikorps* — to fight a counter-revolutionary civil war against the extreme Left. Sections of the working class became alienated from the Republic and this contributed to the deep division in the labour movement throughout the Weimar period. *Freikorps* members often joined the Nazi Stormtroopers. The habit of resolving political conflict by force became engrained and paramilitary formations again posed a threat to democracy in the closing years of the Republic.

## The political system

The foundations, many of them not very sound, had thus been laid for the new parliamentary democracy, even before the republican constitu-

The reluctant President — Friedrich Ebert.



...don came into force in August 1919. On paper, the Weimar Constitution was a perfect democratic instrument, containing, for example, provisions for the direct participation of the voters through referenda. It also included a section laying down individual rights, which was advanced for its time. It provided for the protection of the family, of motherhood and childhood, with equal rights for illegitimate children. And it contained a far-reaching charter for the rights of labour, including co-determination by workers in industry.

Historians now argue that expectations were aroused, which a country in the parlous economic state of defeated Germany would find it difficult to fulfil. The political system devised at Weimar has, in spite of its theoretical perfection, often been criticised in practice and is held to have contributed to the Republic's downfall.

Three features in particular have been attacked. One was the electoral system of strict proportional representation. The second was the existence of two authorities directly elected by the people: the *Reichstag* (national parliament) and the Presidency. Direct election made the President an unduly strong figure. His power was further enhanced by the third, much-criticised, provision — that under article 48 of the Constitution he could assume emergency powers and rule virtually without the *Reichstag*.

To all these criticisms there are counter-arguments. Proportional representation (PR) was not the main reason for Germany's multiplicity of parties. Its diversity, and the existence of two major religious denominations, had given rise to at least five main groupings in the nineteenth century and these survived the revolution of 1918 little changed. Government had therefore normally to be by coalition, but the parties — which in the imperial era had not been responsible for providing the national executive government — still found it difficult after 1918 to make the compromises necessary to ensure stable coalitions.

The large number of very small parties, often adduced as an argument for the absurdity of the system by those who opposed it, were usually not unduly significant. The Weimar PR system did, however, allow the volatility of the electorate to express itself without hindrance. Thus the Nazi party went from a marginal 2.6% of the vote and 12 seats in May 1928 to 18.3% and 107 seats in September 1930, making it the second largest party.

As for the Presidency, it was thought necessary to have a counterweight to the otherwise unchecked power of the parliament and to provide a focus of loyalty in place of the fallen monarchs. The presidential emergency powers were not, in themselves, unusual. When Ebert was President, they were used to resolve crises and restore normal parliamentary government; but from 1930 they were deliberately employed to by-pass the *Reichstag*. Thus, it was not the political and constitutional arrangements in themselves that were at fault, but the way in

which they were used in a country where large sections of the population had little regard for democracy and parliamentary government.

### Years of crisis 1919–24

The first few years of the Republic were a period of virtually uninterrupted crisis, culminating in 1923, when Germany almost disintegrated. Having first been threatened by overthrow from the Left, by 1920 the pendulum had already swung back so far in the direction of nationalist anti-republicanism that a coup from the Right was attempted — the Kapp *Putsch* of March 1920. It failed because the trade unions called a general strike and the senior civil servants, although by no means fully loyal to the Republic, did not cooperate with the plotters. The first *Reichstag* elections, held in June 1920, showed that the parties fully committed to parliamentary democracy now no longer had a majority. To say that Weimar was a republic without republicans is perhaps an exaggeration; but the supporters and opponents of democracy were at best finely balanced.

In the next few years the divisions were further embittered by the reparations problem (the payments imposed on Germany under the Versailles treaty) and, from the summer of 1922, the advent of hyper-inflation. The French occupation of the Ruhr in January 1923, in response to German failure to pay reparations in full, led to the total collapse of the German currency. Wages had to be paid with washing baskets full of bank notes, and the printing presses could not keep pace with the precipitous decline in the value of money.

Nationalist resentment reached fever pitch, but by September 1923 passive resistance to the French had broken down, for Germany was at the end of its tether. In October and November 1923 there were several attempts from the Right and the Left to overthrow the Republic — including Hitler's Beer Hall *Putsch* in Munich, an ignominious failure.

At the point of greatest danger, solutions to Germany's internal and external problems began to emerge. Gustav Stresemann, Chancellor for 100 crucial days from August to November 1923 and thereafter Foreign Minister until his death in October 1929, became the Republic's strong man. A new currency, the Rentenmark, was successfully introduced; and the Dawes Plan established a system of reparations payments, which the German economy could bear and the international community accept. These measures paved the way for the French evacuation of the Ruhr and the Locarno treaties, which permanently guaranteed Germany's western frontiers as agreed at Versailles and ruled out the use of force in any revision of its eastern borders.

### Years of stability 1924–29

From 1924 to 1929 Germany enjoyed greater stability and prosperity. Given the severity of the preceding crises, this highlights the resilience of the Weimar system. There were, however,

political and economic factors which put the permanence of the stability in doubt.

In national politics this was still a period of weak, frequently-shifting coalitions. The influence of the extreme Right was reduced, but Hitler's Nazi party, rebuilt from 1925 around him as *Führer* (leader), became a principal element within it. The more moderate nationalist Right, represented by the *Deutschnationale Volkspartei* (DNVP or German National party) and the *Stahlhelm*, an ex-soldiers' league in which many former *Freikorps* fighters had found refuge, still accepted the Republic with reluctance.

The uncertain attitude of many sections of the German people was symbolised by the election of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, Chief of the German Supreme Command for much of the First World War, as President of the Republic in succession to Ebert, who died in 1925. A 'substitute emperor', with little regard for parliamentary democracy, now held the highest republican office. This was to have fateful consequences after 1929, but for the moment it was widely felt that Hindenburg would help to reconcile national opposition to the republican system.

The decline of the liberal middle-class parties, including Stresemann's own party the *Deutsche*

A French soldier guards a German coal train, 1923



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*Volkspartei* (DVP), continued unabated. On the Left, the Communist party (KPD), drawing at least a quarter of the working class-vote, was firmly established as the rival of the SPD, making it difficult for the latter to enter into coalitions with the middle-class parties — a collaboration essential for republican stability. The leadership of the KPD was increasingly obedient to the policy laid down by Stalin in the interests of the Soviet Union.

The *Reichstag* election of May 1928 seemed to represent a high point for the Republic, with the SPD gaining nearly a third of the vote. There was, however, a great fragmentation in the middle spectrum of politics. The injustices caused by hyper-inflation hit this section of the population particularly hard, and left a deep resentment against Weimar and all its works. It was among such voters that the Nazis were to make large gains, when crisis struck again.

In the economic sphere, German living standards seemed to recover rapidly, reaching something like pre-war levels by 1928. In recent years, economic historians have generated much controversy about the nature of this recovery. Attention has been drawn to dependence on American loans, weak public finances, inadequate investment and high social costs, all of which made it difficult for German governments to cope with the world-wide slump that began in 1929.

### The Great Depression

The German economy began to falter, even before the Wall Street stock-market crash of October 1929 signalled a world-wide depression of unprecedented severity. Rising unemployment caused a heavy outflow of money from the national insurance system, the setting up of which in 1927 had been a striking achievement of the Republic. Disagreement between the parties on how to meet the budget deficit led to the collapse, in March 1930, of the last coalition firmly based on the *Reichstag*. Influential voices, drawing support from widespread and long-standing anti-democratic sentiment, began advocating reform of the political system in a more authoritarian direction, around the President.

When it seemed impossible to build a democratic coalition government, Hindenburg and his advisers prepared to appoint a Chancellor who would govern using the President's emergency decree powers under article 48 — which required merely the toleration, rather than the full consent, of the *Reichstag*. The most important among these advisers, who pressed this course on the 82-year-old President, was General Kurt von Schleicher, the Army's political voice. It was another element in Weimar's weakness that the officer corps of the small professional army (*Reichswehr*) permitted by the Versailles treaty gave only conditional loyalty to the Republic.

The Chancellor whom Hindenburg appointed to govern, if necessary by decree, was Heinrich Brüning. When the *Reichstag* refused to accept his package of austerity measures, he reissued



The 'Hunger Chancellor', Heinrich Brüning.

them under Hindenburg's emergency powers and dissolved the *Reichstag*. The ensuing elections, in September 1930, produced the sensational Nazi breakthrough. Henceforth, Brüning could govern only by decree and only as long as the Social Democrats, fearing a Nazi take-over, refrained from voting against these decrees — even though they imposed growing hardship on their supporters.

Brüning, soon to be known as the 'Hunger Chancellor', ruthlessly cut government expenditure — including wages, salaries and welfare payments — regardless of the political consequences. He tried to make a virtue of necessity by using the rise of political extremism in Germany to bring about the end of reparations.

Recent historical debates have revolved around the question whether there was an alternative to Brüning's policy of strict deflation,

*General Hindenburg was a leading member of the officer corps, which gave only conditional loyalty to the Republic.*



which had the disastrous result of turning Hitler and the Nazis into an imminent threat. It is argued that, given the previous weaknesses of the German economy and the profound German fear of renewed inflation, he had little room for manoeuvre. The exceptional severity of the slump did not, in any case, become apparent until the late spring of 1931 and reflationary measures could not have become effective until well into 1932. By that time, Hindenburg and his advisers had become tired of underpinning the unpopular Brüning and he was dismissed in May 1932. There were now at least six million unemployed — a third of the labour force.

### The surrender of democracy

The misery caused by the slump enabled Hitler and the Nazi party to mobilize an enormous protest vote. The only sections of the electorate to remain immune to the Nazi appeal were the Roman Catholic voters traditionally supporting the Centre Party (*Zentrum*) and the working-class voters in the big cities normally voting SPD or KPD. The KPD, as totalitarian and anti-democratic as the Nazis, was gaining ground at the expense of the SPD, which remained committed to the Republic and democracy.

Modern historiography has produced highly sophisticated analyses of the social basis of the Nazi vote. Although the middle classes in non-Catholic areas were the chief source of Nazi support, Hitler's appeal cut across all classes — thus justifying to some extent the claim that Nazism was a movement and not a divisive party, like the others. A vote for Hitler was mainly a negative vote: anti-democratic and anti-Weimar, anti-liberal, anti-semitic. As one Nazi leader put it, 'Nazism is the opposite of everything that now exists.'

By 1932, if Nazi and Communist votes are added together (admittedly a purely theoretical calculation), it can be shown that a majority of the German electorate had turned against democracy. This made it very difficult to find a viable government that did not include Hitler, particularly if, as was the case with Hindenburg and his circle, any recourse to Left-wing parties was excluded. Influential groups such as the industrialists felt that only a stable government including the Nazis could pull Germany out of the slump — and they had always disliked the Republic as dominated by labour and the Left.

Few historians, however, now accept the Marxist argument that Hitler was merely the tool of capitalists. More importance is attached to the influence of the large landowners in the eastern provinces of Prussia, the *Junkers*, because of the direct access they had to Hindenburg — who was one of them. Rule by presidential decree had made the decisions and misjudgements of the small circle of men around the President crucial.

Personal factors cannot therefore be left out of account in explaining Hitler's accession to power. In the eight months between the fall of Brüning and the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor, Papen and Schleicher became



Chancellor (successively) and hoped to find a way of 'taming' Hitler and his movement. Although the Nazis suffered heavy losses in the second *Reichstag* elections of November 1932, which seemed to make Hitler's inclusion in government avoidable, they were still the largest party and controlled a huge, semi-revolutionary para-military force, the SA (*Sturmabteilung*). When the Hitler Cabinet was formed on 30 January 1933, it contained a majority of conservatives, led by Papen, and only three Nazis, including Hitler himself. Many observers thought that the 'taming' had been achieved.

This turned out to be an illusion. Hitler had learnt from the fiasco of the Beer Hall *Putsch* that revolution in a modern state could not be made at the barricades and that confrontation with the armed forces of the state had to be avoided. With his mass movement revitalised by his appointment as Chancellor, and with the power of the state legally surrendered into his hands, with breath-taking speed he was able to establish a dictatorship — the beginning of the far-reaching revolution he had always intended.

#### Further reading

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*Dr Edgar Feuchtwanger teaches modern history at the University of Southampton. From Weimar to Hitler is his most recent book. In addition to modern German history, he specialises in British political history of the Victorian and Edwardian age and has published several books in that field.*

The death-throes of democracy: Hitler swears in Nazi members of the Reichstag.



### The Rise and Fall of the Weimar Republic

- 1918 **November:** Revolution in Berlin; Emperor William II abdicates.  
 1919 **June:** Treaty of Versailles signed by German delegates.  
 1920 **March:** First right-wing nationalist coup: the Kapp *Putsch* fails.  
 1923 **January:** French troops occupy the Ruhr.  
**November:** 4,200 billion marks exchanged for one Rentenmark.  
 1925 **February:** Hitler refounds NSDAP after his release from prison.  
**May:** Hindenburg takes office as President.  
**October:** Locarno treaties signed.  
 1929 **October:** The Wall Street Crash; Stresemann dies.  
 1930 **March:** Brüning becomes Chancellor.  
**September:** Nazis become second largest party in *Reichstag* elections.  
 1932 **April:** Hindenburg, aged 84, beats Hitler in presidential election.  
**June:** Franz von Papen succeeds Brüning as Chancellor.  
**July:** *Reichstag* elections make Nazis the largest party.  
**November:** Nazis lose two million votes in *Reichstag* elections, but remain the largest party.  
**December:** Kurt von Schleicher succeeds Papen as Chancellor.  
 1933 **January:** Hitler is appointed Chancellor, with Papen as Vice-Chancellor.

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Paul Tweddle

# The War Aims of World War II

*In the first of two articles, Paul Tweddle examines the motives, the means and the opportunities of the principal European aggressors in the world's most damaging conflict.*

War has, since ancient times, been regarded as an integral part of governmental policy. When a government considers that certain aims and objectives are vital to the national interest, and fails to achieve them by diplomatic, economic or other peaceful means, it is likely to resort to making the threat of war or war itself. I want to examine some of the reasons why Germany in 1939, and Italy in 1940, resorted to war against Britain and France.

## GERMANY: 'A WOLF AMONG SHEEP'

### Motive

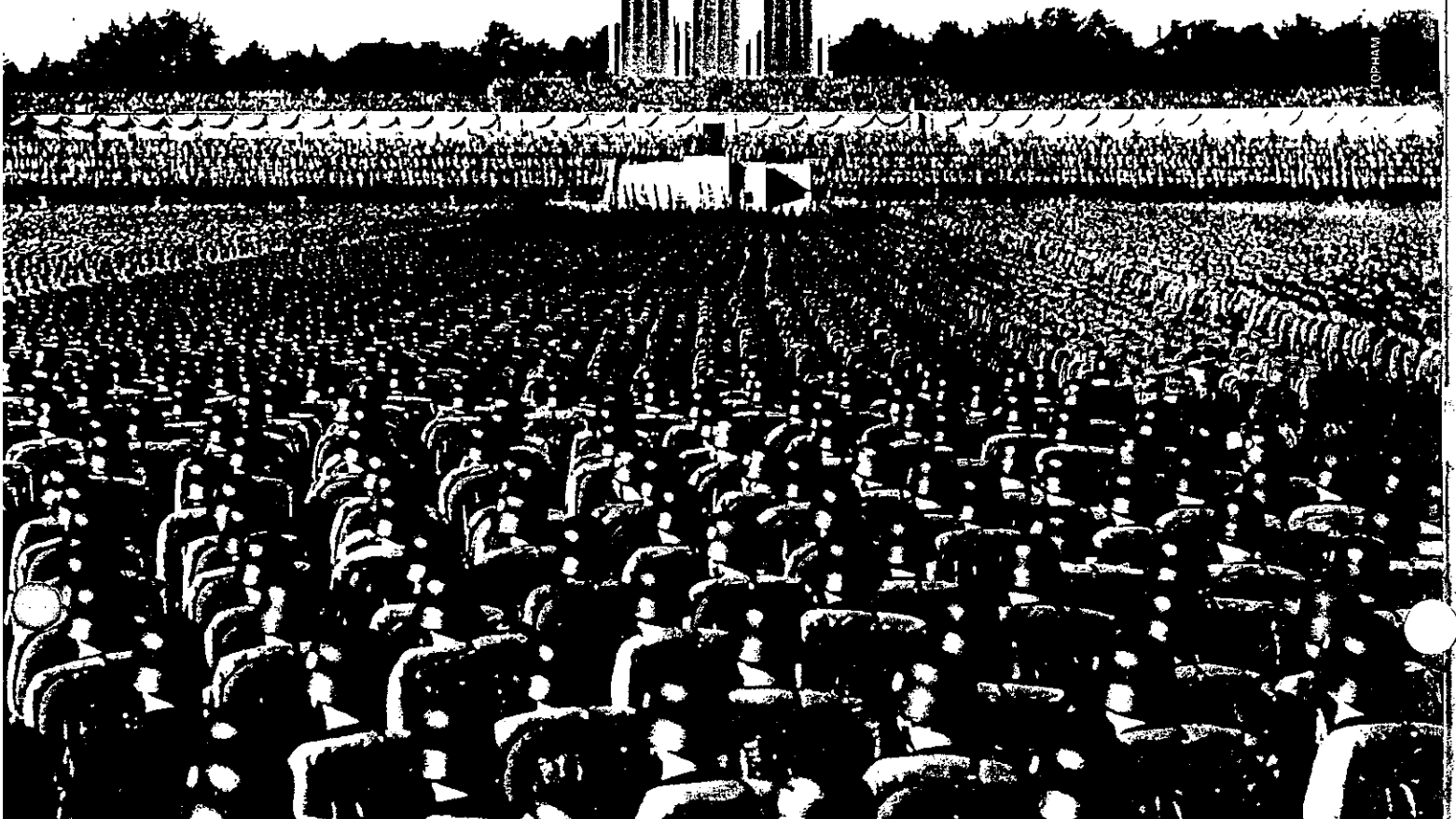
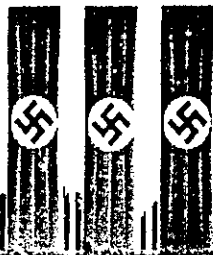
In March 1919, in the Fontainebleau Memorandum, Lloyd George stated:

I cannot imagine any greater cause for future war than that the German people, who have proved themselves one of the most powerful and vigorous races in the world, should be surrounded by a number of small states ... each containing large masses of Germans clamouring for reunion with their native land.

In the years immediately after the First World War, Germany was unable to do much about this situation; but with the arrival of Hitler as Chancellor in 1933, espousing a militant brand of Fascism, the *status quo* in Europe seemed certain to change.

To Hitler and many ordinary Germans, the priority was to reunite the fragmented German peoples and right the wrongs of the various peace treaties foisted upon Germany. This view was not without support outside Germany. Part and parcel of this was the long-held German desire for more land or 'living space' (*lebensraum*), which was seen as crucial to the nation's survival.

With the scramble for colonies now over, it became clear that the most lucrative area for this



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expansion would be around small or weak states in the East, such as Czechoslovakia and Poland and perhaps even the Soviet Union. Populated either ethnic Germans or by inferior non-German peoples, according to Nazi eugenic values, and supposedly dominated by pernicious Jewish influence, such countries were perceived as unnatural creations and unnecessary obstructions to rightful German expansion.

Against the background of Nazi ideology regarding racial superiority and a passionate hatred of Bolshevism (both present in Hitler's speeches from the earliest days), Hitler's frequent and dogmatic statements regarding the need for *lebensraum*, and his personal commitment to acquiring it, meant that neighbouring states would sooner or later be faced with a stark choice: either submit to German demands, or fight.

This, however, did not mean that Hitler considered war a desirable inevitability as long as he could attain his goals by going to the brink and not beyond it, he was happy to do so. Nevertheless, he prepared prudently for that eventuality and ensured he had the means to achieve his expansionist aims.

### Means

If war is to be a successful extension of foreign policy, a country must have the means to wage it effectively. Emasculated militarily by the restrictions of the Versailles Treaties, Germany needed methods of circumventing them. These were already in place by the late-1920s; Hitler accelerated this process and openly flouted the Treaty from 1935 onwards. By 1939 the *Wehrmacht* could muster some 103 divisions, backed by over 3,200 tanks — though only about 10% or so were of modern design. By the time the *Luftwaffe* 'came out' in March 1935, it already had almost 2,500 aircraft, and this had risen to 4,000 by 1939.

The *Kriegsmarine* was the weakest of the services, even though its existence had been formally acknowledged in the Anglo-German Naval Treaty of 1935. At the outbreak of war it could summon only a paltry 2 battle cruisers, 3 pocket battleships, 6 cruisers, 17 destroyers and 56 U-boats — of which only half were ocean-going. Two heavy battleships — the *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz* — were nearing completion and a large U-boat construction plan was underway. However, in spite of considerably increased production, the expansion of the *Kriegsmarine* was not due to much fruition until 1944, a little later than the schemes to refit the *Wehrmacht* and *Luftwaffe*.

The German armed forces in 1939, then, were not yet at peak efficiency and were experiencing serious growing pains. Yet, as a result of starting virtually from scratch, much of its equipment

was of a modern and effective nature. More importantly, its abilities were carefully harnessed to its expected application. The co-ordination of overwhelming ground and air power in a confined area and short period of time was not a new technique — but it was taken to new peaks of efficiency by Germany's well-motivated and skilful commanders.

The *Blitzkrieg*, as it became known, goes a long way to explaining German aims at the outbreak of war: a short, sharp strike, to achieve limited objectives. Germany simply was not prepared, economically, militarily or politically, for a long war or for global conquest. Nevertheless, Germany possessed the most formidable fighting forces in Europe.

Hans Frank was put in charge of Poland.

Heinrich Himmler was to take charge of the USSR.



### The march of Nazism

- January 1933** Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany.
- October 1936** The Rome-Berlin Axis comes into force.
- September 1938** Munich Summit meeting is held between Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain and Daladier, and Hitler gains the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia.
- March 1939** German troops enter Prague and annex Czechoslovakia.
- May 1939** The 'Pact of Steel' is signed between Germany and Italy.
- August 1939** A Non-Aggression Pact is signed with the USSR.
- 1 September 1939** Germany invades Poland.
- 28 September 1939** Hitler offers Britain and France peace terms.
- April 1940** Germany invades Norway.
- May 1940** Germany invades France and the Low Countries.
- June 1940** France surrenders at Compiègne.
- July 1940** Operation Sea Lion is prepared for the invasion of Britain.
- 12 October 1940** Hitler calls off Operation Sea Lion.
- 23 October 1940** Hitler meets General Franco at Hendaye.
- December 1940** Operation Barbarossa is prepared for the invasion of the USSR.
- April 1941** Hitler invades Yugoslavia.
- June 1941** Operation Barbarossa begins.

### Opportunity

In February 1945 Hitler commented ruefully: 'We ought to have gone to war in 1938. Although we were ourselves not fully prepared, we were better prepared than the enemy. September 1938 would have been the most favourable date. And what a chance we had to limit the conflict'. Yet in September 1938 Hitler did not have everything necessary for a successful war in place. Nor did he have to fight one, having so far achieved almost all his goals peacefully. Even his occupation of the Czech state in March 1939 produced no more reaction than harsh words and worthless guarantees of Poland's frontiers.

Thus, on 11 April 1939, Hitler gave orders for

Operation White to attack Poland on 1 September 1939 stating: 'The isolation of Poland will be all the more easily maintained, even after the outbreak of hostilities, if we succeed in starting the war with sudden heavy blows and in gaining rapid success.' Moreover, Hitler had by then secured two alliances which would enable him to achieve his aims: the Pact of Steel

with Italy, signed on 22 May 1939, and the remarkable *coup* of the Non-Aggression Pact with the USSR, signed on 23 August.

Certain that there was nothing Britain and France could do to save Poland, Hitler gambled that they would do what they had done before — nothing. So confident was he in this assumption, that he virtually stripped bare the forces on the German-French border to support the attack on Poland.

Essentially, Hitler was correct, as the *Blitzkrieg* turned into the *Sitzkrieg* — or 'phony war'. Only when it became apparent in the autumn of 1939 that the British and French would not come to terms and back down did serious planning begin for Operation Yellow, the invasion of France and the Low Countries, to be carried out in May 1940. Significantly, work on the plans for the invasion of Britain did not begin until the summer of 1940, when it became clear that Hitler's 'final appeal to common sense' speech, made in the *Reichstag* on 19 July 1940, had been rejected — despite Britain's defeat in Norway and the successful *Blitz* of its main ally, France.

Further serious reflection on the course of the war rapidly followed, with the signing of the Tripartite Pact between Germany, Italy and Japan on 27 September 1940. This formalised Japanese hopes to expand in the Far East, largely at the expense of Britain.

A series of negotiations between Hitler and Mussolini led to a conference at Hendaye on 23 October 1940 between Hitler and General Franco

of Spain. At this conference an abortive attempt was made to create a Mediterranean-wide Fascist alliance, in order to undermine Britain's position in the area. In the event, Italy's failure to finish off Greece and the British in North Africa led to a German deployment in late 1940 and early 1941.

Gambling that he had done enough to weaken and confine Britain, on 18 December 1940 Hitler produced Directive 21, stating that 'the German Armed Forces must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign, even before the conclusion of the war against England'. As with Norway before Operation Yellow, Yugoslavia and the Balkans provided a brief diversion before the full might of German forces hit the USSR in Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941.

As Hitler himself put it, this was a colossal attempt to solve the *lebensraum* problem for ever

and to absorb the 'incalculable wealth of raw materials' and a work-force of 'born slaves, who feel the need of a master'. The attack was not the rash gamble it has since seemed. Few in the West disagreed with Hitler's view that the USSR would not last more than a matter of weeks.

Here we can see highlighted some differences in Hitler's war aims. In the West, the campaign against Norway, France and the Low Countries, and Britain — and the campaign in North Africa and the Balkans — were largely *ad hoc* affairs, each leading to another in a roller-coaster ride of conquest. Little provision, for example, was made in advance for the government or economic exploitation of these occupied countries. In Poland, however, within a week of the end of the campaign on 5 October 1939, a sophisticated government was formed under Hans Frank, who systematically set about utilising and breaking

the Polish people and state.

Much the same pattern was followed in the USSR, with Himmler being appointed early in 1941 to investigate the best means of creating German settlements. He proclaimed that his interest in the Russian people extended only 'insofar as we need them as slaves for our culture'.

While undoubtedly eager to fulfil his promises on *lebensraum* and German racial superiority in the East, Hitler did not always have a free hand to act as he wished. The vagaries of international politics and the strategic demands of war, and Germany's ability to wage it, forced him to change, shape and adapt his aims as he went along. With success breeding success, Hitler rode his roller-coaster in masterful fashion and, by the end of 1941, had probably achieved more than he ever thought possible.

## ITALY: 'A SHEEP IN WOLF'S CLOTHING'

### Motive

Mussolini, the longest-serving of the Fascist dictators, was very 'up front' about the relationship between Fascism and war. In 1932 he wrote in the *Enciclopedia Italiana*: 'Fascism believes neither in the possibility nor the utility of perpetual peace. War alone brings up to their highest tension all human energies and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to meet it.' Never one to understate his case, Mussolini badly needed to provide substance to support his grandiose claims for

Italian greatness. Keen to impress other European powers, and his fellow countrymen, with the dynamism of Italian Fascism, in October 1935 Mussolini put his words into practice by attacking Abyssinia.

Emboldened by his moderate success there, and keen to impress also his new partner in the Rome-Berlin Axis, in November 1938 Mussolini announced to the Grand Council his immediate goals, which included the annexation of Albania, Tunis, Corsica and Nice. This was followed in February 1939 by his assertion that the main task

### The march of Fascism

**October 1922** Mussolini comes to power.

**October 1935** Italy invades Abyssinia.

**October 1936** The Rome-Berlin Axis comes into force.

**April 1939** Italy occupies Albania.

**May 1939** The 'Pact of Steel' is signed between Italy and Germany.

**September 1939** Mussolini announces non-belligerency at the outbreak of war.

**June 1940** Italy enters the war.

**September 1940** Italy invades Egypt.

**October 1940** Italy invades Albania.

**February 1941** Rommel arrives in Libya to take charge of the Axis forces in North Africa.

Mussolini reviews his troops near the Yugoslav frontier, November 1940.



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of Italian policy was 'first of all to break the bars of the prison' which held Italy captive in the Mediterranean. This required increased influence in the Balkans, especially Greece, and the gaining access to both the Atlantic and Indian Oceans which could be achieved only at the expense of British and French territory in North Africa.

When Albania (virtually an Italian satellite for many years) was occupied in April 1939 and the Pact of Steel was signed with Germany in May, committing both nations to support the other in war, it looked as if Mussolini was well placed to carry out his avowed aims. Those who, like the foreign secretary, Ciano, held wiser counsel wondered whether Italy had the means to live up to its fine words and create a new Fascist Roman Empire.

### Means

Between 1935 and 1938 Italy spent 11.8% of its national income on rearmament — over twice that spent by Britain. Nevertheless, with much of the money squandered on inadequate weaponry and swallowed up by a largely inefficient economy, Italy remained woefully ill-prepared for a major conflict. In 1936 Mussolini boasted of having some eight million troops — or 'bayonets' as he graphically referred to them — ready to fight. But by 1940 he had only 10% of that number and even these were ill-trained and abysmally led.

Italy possessed only 1,500 light tanks and production was at a paltry 70 per month in 1939. In 1937 Mussolini had declared his air force to be so numerous as to blot out the sun! Yet by 1939 he had little more than 1,000 aircraft with which to do it — and most of these were either obsolete or obsolescent. Production of new aircraft remained low.

The navy was the best equipped of the services, boasting a large and modern fleet which posed a serious threat to British and French Mediterranean forces. There was, however, no systematic plan for its deployment and it lacked the air cover vital for success in the enclosed waters of the Mediterranean. Though Mussolini talked a good war — and succeeded in persuading Britain and France that Italy was more powerful than it really was — there was no way, even with himself becoming supreme commander of the armed forces on 30 May 1940, that Italy had the means to give him the power and international stature he craved.

### Opportunity

In both Abyssinia and Albania, Mussolini showed no hesitation in waging war when he felt confident to do so. Yet he showed a marked reluctance to go to the brink in Europe itself, playing, for example, a central role in the negotiations at Munich in 1938. When, however, the potential fruits of German aggressive action became apparent in Czechoslovakia in March 1939, Mussolini found it impossible to resist signing the Pact of Steel — an offensive pact, binding Italy to go to war if Germany did.

When 'push came to shove' in August 1939, it became clear to Mussolini and his general staff that war would be a catastrophe for Italy. Pleading that events had overtaken his preparations, on 26 August Mussolini presented Germany with an extensive and intentionally prohibitive shopping-list of requirements necessary for Italy to embark on an immediate war. Hitler had little option but to release Italy from its obligations under the Pact of Steel and urge Mussolini to support Germany in other ways. Even calling it 'non-belligerency', rather than neutrality, could not disguise Italy's impotence. As Ciano noted in his diary on 20 November 1939: 'For Mussolini, the idea of Hitler waging war and, worse still, winning it, is intolerable.'

From early in 1940, Mussolini began to state his determination to enter the war at the first advantageous moment. In May 1940, with Germany poised for victory over France, it looked as if he had found it. A German victory without Italian participation would be another hammer blow to Italian prestige and its position as a great power — and may even have placed Italy under threat of German domination. As a combatant ally — with only minor risk — the position would be far brighter.

Thus, on 10 June 1940, from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia, Mussolini announced his decision for war. 'According to the laws of Fascist morality, when one has a friend, one goes with him to the very end. We have done this ... with Germany, with her people, with [significantly] her victorious armed forces.' Ciano, still hesitant, wrote sadly in his diary, 'The adventure begins. May God help Italy.'

Indeed, someone needed to. Mussolini's great attack through the Alps against a beleaguered France made little headway before the armistice. In return, Mussolini received scant attention and reward — a few square miles of Alpine territory. Desperate to avoid missing out again, Mussolini even sent his biplanes to take part in the assault on Britain (with disastrous consequences) and on 13 September launched an assault on British positions in Egypt. On 28 October he invaded Greece from Albania. Both offensives rapidly broke down and, by the end of the year, the Italian forces were back where they had started.

Worse still, as the situation deteriorated, in February 1941 he was prevailed upon to accept General Rommel as commander in North Africa; and in April he had the rug pulled from under him, as the German machine swept through the Balkans with an ease that was embarrassing. While this ensured a Fascist victory, it also confirmed Italy's role as second fiddle and emphasised the extent to which Germany had taken over direction of the war — and indeed Italy itself.

Although wise enough to realise Italy's limitations and its inability to meet its stated aims in 1939, Mussolini found it impossible politically to resist becoming a combatant in 1940. However, he mistimed his intervention — which proved ineffective — and failed to gain a share of the spoils he so much wanted. More importantly, he

lacked the means to strike out successfully on his own in September 1940. Like the pelican in the children's nursery rhyme, Mussolini's 'eyes were bigger than his belly can' and, ultimately, he paid the price for it.

### Conclusion

Given the aggressive and volatile nature of Fascism in the 1930s, war was always on the cards. Both Hitler and Mussolini made many bold statements about their expansionist intentions and staked the prestige of their regimes on the fulfilment of these aspirations. German rearmament was given a major boost as soon as Hitler came to power and it rapidly became clear to those who had eyes to see that its function could only be to grab territory from its neighbours, by extortion or force.

The scale and format of the rearmament — suitable for brief and intense *Blitzkrieg* campaigns — reflects this quite precise aim. Moreover, a unique combination of circumstances, notably the policies of appeasement and general inertia in Britain and France, and the dislocation caused by the purges and Far Eastern border troubles in the USSR, allowed Germany considerable room for manoeuvre in Eastern Europe. Even the gamble of invading Poland in September 1939 paid off, with Britain and France offering no practical support to the beleaguered country.

Thereafter events were largely dictated by military necessity — and an opportunism, of sorts — in response to France's and, in particular, Britain's unexpected stubbornness. Though by no means at the peak of their projected strength in 1939–41, the German armed forces were more than a match for their opponents. For a long time, even after the long-awaited invasion of the USSR, it seemed that Hitler's gamble on war would pay off.

Dazzled by the potential spoils of war and the proven success of his ally, in 1940 Mussolini eventually found the lure of a great, glorious — and brief — war irresistible. Unlike Hitler, however, he lacked the means to achieve his aspirations. It rapidly became apparent that Mussolini, whatever he might claim, was totally incapable of matching, in the Mediterranean, Hitler's achievements in Northern Europe. In the event, the effort of keeping up with the German Joneses was simply to prove too costly for Italy and disastrous for the Fascist regime.

In 1939–40 the tide certainly seemed to be flowing in favour of the aggressors and it was with justifiably high hopes that they embarked on their respective Fascist crusades. Few would have bet at the time that they would be so disappointed with the outcome.

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