

THE NATURE OF FASCISM
REVISITED

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For my son Filipe

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5 | Fascism, dictators, and charisma*

By the beginning of the Second World War, and particularly after the German invasion of Eastern Europe on 22 June 1941, Europe was strangled by various dictatorships: some fascist/Nazi dictatorships, some puppet, and a variety of semi-fascist or right-wing national and royalist authoritarian regimes.¹ There were only a very few of the smaller neutral states that kept democracy alive:² Ireland, led by a Catholic (but authoritarian) Fianna Fail government under Eamon de Valera; Iceland, which was occupied by ‘friendly’ British and American forces; Switzerland, which was under heavy pressure to restrict political freedoms so as not to not provoke invasion from Germany; and Sweden, which had to allow German troops and weapons pass through its territory. Finland was in a special position: as a consequence of its recent war against the Soviet Union (the Winter War of 1939–40), it was permitted to retain its largely democratic regime whilst simultaneously being allied to Germany and governed by the authoritarian president, Carl Mannerheim.

Democracy was attempted in three countries. Denmark, which was occupied but allowed to retain a semi-autonomous government, held restricted parliamentary elections in 1943. There were also elections in Sweden, although there fascists were interned and communists restricted. Switzerland also held free elections, although these were limited by the context of being surrounded externally by fascist dictatorships and its own domestic Nazi movement. The United Kingdom was the only free country in the sense of having no outside pressure steering its political system (although there

* With S. U. Larsen.

- 1 This chapter is based on the conclusion of A. C. Pinto, R. Eatwell and S. U. Larsen, eds, *Charisma and fascism in interwar Europe*, London, 2007, pp. 131–7.
- 2 R. Griffin, *The nature of fascism*, London, 1991; S. G. Payne, *A history of fascism*, Madison, WI, 1995; R. Paxton, *The anatomy of fascism*, London, 2004; M. Mann, *Fascists*, Cambridge, 2004.

was no general election during the war in Europe).³ Yet even here, the state had interned Oswald Mosley's fascists and placed several restrictions on the populace in terms of censorship and the control of opposing views and ideas.

Thus, democracy was limited even where it remained functioning. Perhaps it was not even the most popular political system to emerge with the Allied victory. Democracy proved unable to stop authoritarian movements from taking power, just as it had failed in its endeavor to make the extremist alternatives – whether of the left, right, or center – look irresponsible and unacceptable. That said, however, mass support for the breakdown of democracy has often been exaggerated.⁴ The Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm, designated the 20th century the age of extremism. Examining the difficulties that exist in present democratic systems, one Russian political scientist, Andrei Melville, has described the Russian democratic consolidation as a process of deinstitutionalization. With this concept he contends that what is now taking place is a process of the personalization of politics, which involves moving away from stable democratic norms (such as institutions that give citizens predictable procedures and political accountability) towards a regime that functions with improvised decision-making processes, short-termism and which depends on the president's individual maneuvers.

This situation could describe the main topic of this chapter, and which is succinctly described in Rainer Lepsius's essay on Germany.⁵ His emphasis on the 'charismatization' of political institutions illustrates how Hitler and his companions, through their implementation of the *Führerprinzip*, broke down most of the relevant democratic institutions, leaving decision-making to spontaneous acts by the Führer who ruled by so-called multi-central means that granted most of the lower level structures parallel institutions, making the entire system unpredictable and internally confusing. With the spread of this charismatic form of deinstitutionalization in mind, we could add to Hobsbawm's age of extremism that the 20th century was the age of charismatic rule.⁶ The beginning of the century was also marked by the rule of charismatic monarchs, emperors, and oligarchic strongmen who were elected

- 3 The 1945 general election took place in July, after the surrender of Germany but before that of Japan.
- 4 D. Berg-Schlosser and J. Mitchell, eds, *Conditions of democracy in Europe 1919-1939: Systematic case studies*, London, 2000; N. Bermeo, *Ordinary people in extraordinary times: The citizen and the breakdown of democracy*, Princeton, NJ, 2003.
- 5 See M. R. Lepsius, 'The model of charismatic leadership and its applicability to the rule of Adolf Hitler' in Pinto, Eatwell, and Larsen, *Charisma and fascism*, pp. 37–52.
- 6 A. Schweitzer, *The age of charisma*, Chicago, IL, in 1984; A. C. Pinto, 'Elites, single-parties and political decision-making in fascist-era dictatorships', *Contemporary European History* 2, no 3, 2002, pp. 425–50.

from restricted caucus parties: a tradition that continued in a less obvious manner after 1945. This is without even mentioning the continuation of both Franco's and Salazar's regimes in Southern Europe. It is in this context that this chapter must be understood: as an analysis of how democratic rule was usurped through the charismatization of politics.

The two main and often contradictory impulses of early 20th-century Europe – identity and equality – were intensified, or at least ideologically stylized and simplified, by the charismatization of both the politics and the political systems of Europe. The dictators were the charismatic bearers of these two impulses, which were interpreted and often shaped into unrecognizable programs. The regimes themselves were also charismatized when their establishment was said to be a direct consequence of the need to fulfil the promises made by the new Führers. The basic structures of democracy, and even ideological support for democracy, were changed everywhere in interwar Europe, as even the non-dictatorial regimes sought to strengthen both external and internal security by placing restrictions on the exercise of some normal democratic freedoms as a result of the charismatization of politics. This is an aspect of charismatization that we must emphasize very strongly: no European regime escaped the effects of charismatization. We illustrate also how this resulted in the establishment of a seemingly contradictory connection between cause and effect; how the widely accepted values of identity and equality could be turned into a brutal reality of dictatorship and expansionist war by charismatic (and often elected) leaders.

Understanding the dynamics of charisma

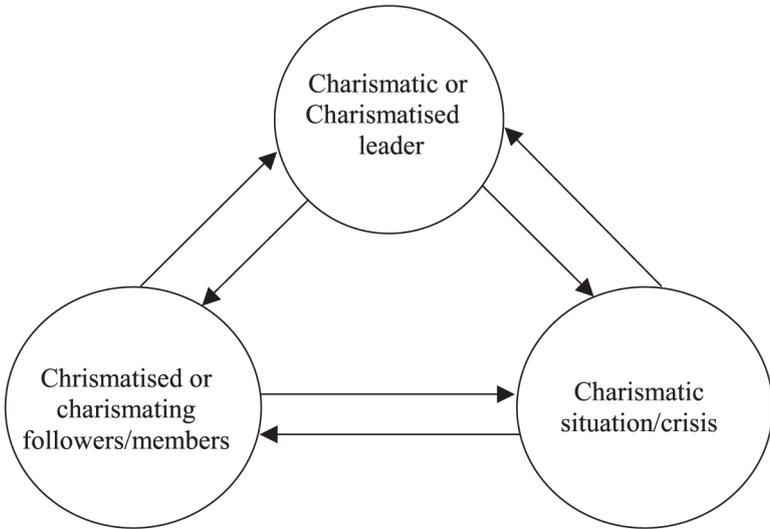
Through all the essays above, and particularly Roger Eatwell's text on the development of charismatic thinking,⁷ the authors have touched upon an important distinction between three aspects of the charismatic calling: the individual leader, the followers, and the triggering event.

In order to succeed, all dictators depended upon the interplay within these three fields. Firstly, the dictator needed to install himself as a charismatic figure. Then he needed to appeal to his followers as a charismatic leader. Finally, he needed to 'locate' or 'invent' an event that demanded an unusual 'response' or 'solution'. Every fascist dictator had to possess some individual ability that made them extraordinary.⁸ He needed followers to understand or appreciate

7 See R. Eatwell, 'The concept and theory of charismatic leadership', in Pinto, Eatwell and Larsen, *Charisma and fascism*, pp. 3–18.

8 Or as Willner would say: 'superhuman'. See A. R. Willner, *The spellbinders: Charismatic political leadership*, New Haven, CT, 1984.

Figure 5.1: The charismatic triangle



and to connect these qualities. Finally, there must be a situation or an event that required these unusual abilities, or which could call for the reconstruction of the regime in such a way as to allow the application of new solutions to problems. The charismatic triangle (see Figure 5.1) stresses the interplay between these poles.

The main reason for studying charismatic leadership is to find out how it varies within different contexts and different settings.⁹ The inner dynamic between how the charismatization of the event can instigate a charismatic following and then induce the dictator into a particular charismatic appeal from above, is thus a central focus of analysis. We also examine how the initial latent charismatic process came into being in the first place. When the charismatic dictator appears as a superhuman leader in different countries he is chosen by his followers because of their need to be led – because of his potential charismatic force – and only succeeds when the relevant event has happened, following which he is ready to present the calling to wider circles of followers. Roger Eatwell has shown how success in this respect is dependent on the existence of four individual traits in each of the charismatic leaders, and four internal factors that are specific to the relevant society.¹⁰ The idea of the charismatic triangle is to make explicit the dynamics of the interplay between the individual leader, the closed circles, and the triggering event

⁹ Eatwell, 'Concept and theory.'

¹⁰ Ibid.

that eventually gives the leader their success and leads to the breakdown of democratic order. Not every event can be a charismatic event, and not every individual can be a charismatic leader: it is the interplay at a precise moment that serves to resolve the issue, and this is not something that can be easily predicted.

In Germany there are several examples that can illustrate the dynamics of the charismatic triangle. If we examine the burning of the Reichstag in 1933, it is direct evidence of how Adolf Hitler charismatized a situation of internal threat to the German people from the communists and Jews by deliberately falsifying the news of how events happened. It was all orchestrated to make the Germans – and particularly Nazi Party supporters – believe in the need to have a great leader capable of protecting them. In Italy the charismatization of an event can be seen in how the Fascists exploited the Abyssinian crisis of 1935.¹¹ Italy's subsequent withdrawal from the League of Nations was used by the Fascists to broaden support for Benito Mussolini. In Portugal, António Salazar emerged as the country's savior, preventing inevitable economic collapse, while in neighboring Spain, Francisco Franco was the leader of the nationalist victory over 'communism'.

In Croatia, the glorification of the murders of King Alexander and the French minister of foreign affairs, Jean Louis Barthou, by the Ustasha in 1934, as well as the death penalty imposed on Ante Pavelić, were typical charismatic events that gave support to the leader. If we take examples from Larsen's essay on Vidkun Quisling's Norway, we can further illustrate the usefulness of the charismatic triangle model. Quisling was a charismatic leader from below, that is to say, he was made a Führer because many needed such a figure. However, he had to invent charismatic events, such as the 1935 Trotsky Affair and the 1939 decision to prolong parliament without recourse to fresh elections, in order to stimulate his followers and reactivate the charismatic bond.

Ideological legitimacy:

Adding a new ideal-type of legitimate rule or domination

From the beginning of this project, we accepted the implicit understanding among scholars studying fascist leaders that, since fascism was the single and most important inspiration for all these dictators, they would over time become increasingly similar in appearance and make similar strategic decisions. The ideology of fascism was thus a homogenizing force that lay behind them, and explains why they can be compared. However, Max Weber's writings

11 D. Musiedlak, *Mussolini*, Paris, 2005.

on charisma predated the age of ideology that began with the mass appeal of the 1917 Russian Revolution. In Weber's famous 1919 lecture on the vocation of politics, because of the inherent weaknesses of the regimes that plunged Europe into the First World War he expresses real support for the idea of some sort of rule by a strong man. At that moment, the full force of Marxist-Leninist (not to mention fascist) ideology had yet to be understood. Perhaps if he knew then what we know now he would have added ideology as a fourth item on his famous list of forms of political authority (traditional, legal, and charismatic).¹² Of these three, however, there is no doubt the question of charismatic rule has aroused much uncertainty and disagreement.¹³ This doubt does not concern its central role in identifying why people obey, but rather with the essence of the definition: what do we mean when we say that a leader has charisma; what is meant by the routinization of charisma; and what are we claiming when we talk of the charismatization of a regime?

Our central concerns in starting this project were thus to decide on how a distinct ideological color or event determined what kind of charisma a particular leader exerted or will develop while being put at the head of a distinct fascist movement or regime. Did all fascist leaders behave in the same manner, and did they convey the same message to their national movements and audiences? More directly, can we claim that ideology (with its national characteristics) was the main determining force of the fascist leaders?

By asking this last question, we are well aware we are talking about an ideal type. We recognize that in every case the actual leadership types included different blends at different times of all three of Weber's ideal forms of domination, depending on the tasks and national traits before each dictator. Hitler used the greatness of the Reich as his traditional symbol, using legal and quasi-legal means to change the Weimar constitution when he needed to. He also used his talent for delivering theatrical speeches to achieve desired psychological effects, whilst sticking to the goals of Nazism as the ultimate end for him and his party. The many ideas that were embedded within Nazism – Blut und Boden, Kraft durch Freude, and the Nazi Party's early 21-point program – were necessarily intertwined with Hitler and his appearance as the German people's Führer. According to all public pronouncements, Hitler had a mission and an ideological program from which proceed: he was not simply seeking to further his own personal desire for power.

12 Eatwell, 'Concept and theory'.

13 W. J. Mommsen, *The political and social theory of Max Weber: Collected essays*, Cambridge, 1989; Willner, *Spellbinders*; R. van Dooren, *Messengers from the promised land: An interactive theory of political charisma*, Leiden, 1994; K. Pekonen, *Charismatic leadership and the role of image in modern politics: Charismatic effects and the problem of political presence – The case of Finland in the 1980s*, Jyväskylä, 1989.

Table 5.1: Forms of political legitimation

Legitimation of power	Basis in regime	Appearance of leader
Traditional authority	<i>Habit</i> : rule is legitimate because power is invested in traditional structures, such as a royal family, religious leader, etc., or because this is the only alternative.	Leaders carrying crosses, crowns, books of honor, and similar mythical marks of ancient traditions. Speaks on the necessity of traditional bonds as legitimizing power.
Legal authority	<i>Reference to a 'contract'</i> : people obey the laws and the rulers are anchored in some sort of informal or formal concession: constitution, law book, or unbroken legal institutions.	No specific appearance, but usually in formal institutions such as parliaments that identify the legal duties and authority.
Charismatic authority	<i>Superstition</i> : people obey the leader because they believe they possess extraordinary capabilities. The leader appears on special occasions wearing specific clothing and making use of special ceremonies, etc.	Führers appear at mass rallies or closed meetings bringing with them messianic messages through which they seek to convert audiences. The enthusiasm among the listeners and supporters also convince them of the truth of their calling.
Ideological authority	<i>Belief</i> : followers trust the goals and ends. People obey and support the leaders and the regime because they fulfill their inner thoughts of what is right. The leader is only an individual who expresses this will.	Leaders always refer to party programs and specific mythical signals when legitimizing decisions. Followers publicly adhere to ideological manifestos and oaths, and implement them as part of their daily life.

The idea of adding a fourth term to Weber's three ideal forms of political legitimacy extends our understanding of how the dictatorships could be established and accepted so easily in interwar Europe. All the dictatorships analyzed above based their rule and legitimized their power on the mix of traditional, legal (often quasi-legal), and charismatic domination; but they also had to give reasons justifying their proposals to effect regime change

from constitutional democracy to authoritarian rule. These reasons could include economic depression, military threat, fear of the containment of communist extremism from the Soviet Union, exalted fear of the Jews, fear of the unruly masses, and so on. All of these motives, however, are only negative appeals for security. Positive legitimation had to come from the meaning and content of the dictatorship: that is, in its goals and plans for the future. It is within this aspect that the idea of introducing ideology as the fourth type of legitimate domination lies. People would not die for Josef Stalin or Vladimir Lenin as they would for the regime, even if this ideology was interpreted and reinterpreted almost on the whim of the dictator. It is the political ideology that gives strength and reason to the regime, and which embodies the ideas of identity and equality. Ideology gives its followers the definitive reason for their individual support for the leader, as well as for their willingness to sacrifice themselves in order to fight for the cause.

Table 5.1 clarifies and simplifies these arguments, and illustrates the main differences between the four types of legitimate domination.

Today Europe is free of dictatorships. This is a rather recent development, and one we hope will be durable. The study of the fascist dictatorships provides us with an opportunity to remind ourselves this is a situation we should not take for granted, however. We must understand how the charismaticization of politics may carry a serious challenge to democracy with it. In a way, charismaticization is a direct contradiction of democracy, and those who today demand strong leadership would do well to remember that unlike institutionalized politics there is no limit to (or defined measure for) what personalized rule may lead to. The comparative analysis of fascist charismatic leadership therefore carries an important lesson for both civil society and future generations of politicians.

We have underlined how the complex logic of the evil politics of dictatorships may be understood as an unintended consequence of what we have called positive ideological impulses by pointing to the historical impact of liberalism and equality. In the end, we must remember that even good ideologies can advance bad politics.

This led us to a re-examination of Weber's basic ideal forms of political domination. Our conclusion is that the power of political leaders does not solely depend upon their being legitimized by traditional, legal, and charismatic means, but that the ideological platform to which they make systematic appeal is every bit as important, whether it be based on religious, national, ethnic, or left-right political ideology or ideologies. The followers of Hitler, Mussolini, Quisling, Pavelić, Corneliu Codreanu, Philippe Pétain, and so on, must, therefore, be understood in the context of the legitimizing role of

ideology.¹⁴ The content of the leader's messianic message added a great deal to the persuasive manner of his charisma.¹⁵ All of the dictators studied here relied on some ideological elements of fascism, even if some of them came closer to the Fascist/Nazi ideal type than others. When Miklós Horthy and Ion Antonescu sent their national armies into the Soviet Union in 1941, and while other fascist leaders elsewhere strongly supported efforts to recruit so-called volunteers for the Waffen SS, these decisions could only be legitimized by utilizing the ideological arguments of fascism.

We have attempted to use the charismatic triangle model as a tool with which to compare each of the dictatorships in terms of the importance in each case of the interplay between charisma from above, from below, or from the event. Given the few cases presented here and the limitations of space, we have had to be modest in drawing any firm conclusions. We hope, nonetheless, that this kind of effort might stimulate others (as well as ourselves) to broaden the scope of comparison and to apply a more open and flexible design when analyzing dictators (whether fascist or not) in the future.

In our opinion, it is important to distance ourselves from the often sterile approach of great man studies that is so often inherent in the biographies of individual fascist leaders. The interplay within and between the European dictatorships, and the context of their existence are always important, but these are precisely the points the biographical approach often overlooks. Our final message is that any study of charismatic fascist leaders has to be comparative, contextual, and based on the interplay of the three sources within the triangle of charismatic politics.

14 R. Eatwell, 'On defining the "fascist minimum": the centrality of ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1, no 3, 1996, pp. 303–19; E. Gentile, *The sacralization of politics in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge MA, 1996.

15 See M. Dobry, 'Hitler, charisma and structure: Reflections on historical methodology', Pinto, Eatwell, and Larsen, *Charisma and fascism*, pp. 19–33.