Fascism and the Right in Europe, 1919-1945

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Despite spurious claims being made in some quarters about 'a new consensus', the history of fascism remains a bitterly contested area, even if, notwithstanding the Irving Trial, most contests occur in the seminar room rather than the courtroom.

Some historians continue to put forward theories of 'generic fascism' - although it is very rare that any two theorists, even if they belong to a single school like the British historians Roger Eatwell and Roger Griffin, actually agree on a single definition - whilst others such as MacGregor Knox dismiss it out of hand as a 'failed concept'. The debate over the usefulness of Marxist theories of fascism, a debate that dates back to the 1920s, also continues. On the one hand, some believe that the events of 1989-91 mean Marxist theories of fascism need no longer be taken seriously; as if the precise degree of insight into fascism or Nazism shown by figures such as Gramsci, Thalheimer or Trotsky could be mechanically derived from the ultimate fate of the USSR. Surely this is a crass and ill-considered position that would presumably imply that had Gorbachev's experiment succeeded, Gramsci's theories about interwar Italy would have been completely validated, patently a total non sequitur! On the other hand, contrary to the oft-repeated myth that the Marxist approach to the history of fascism died with Tim Mason, new works by upholders of variants of the Marxist position continue to appear. Even if sometimes, as in Gluckstein's treatment of the Holocaust, this approach is undermined by crude economism, one young Marxist historian has recently offered a very sophisticated defence of Marxist theories of fascism coupled with a fiery polemic against 'the new discipline of 'fascism studies'. Moreover, the controversy over whether historians should take a committed anti-fascist position has intensified in recent years. Some writers of a variety of political persuasions ranging from an SWPer like Renton to a proud Vietnam veteran like Knox, with Blinkhorn somewhere in the middle - continue to write from an avowedly anti-fascist position, whilst others such as De Felice, Nolte and Griffin (although the personal politics of the third member of this trio bear no resemblance to those of the two great paladins of continental revisionism) proclaim the need for 'objectivity' and are in turn, rightly or wrongly, denounced by
their opponents as being 'objectively' pro-fascist; anybody who mistakenly believes along with Francois Furet(5) that the defence of an anti-fascist position can be dismissed as the last refuge of the devious Marxist should read the spirited polemics of MacGregor Knox and Denis Mack Smith against De Felice's monumental biography of Mussolini.(6) The possibility of a complete depoliticisation of the historiography of fascism seems a very remote one in the near future both because of the insatiable media appetite for sensationalist publicists like Irving, Goldhagen and Finkelstein who, however varied their personal and political motivations, all thrive on extremely heated public debate, clearly preferring the tumult of the television studio to the quiet of the study, and because of the rather more profound and very disturbing political influence of the allegedly 'post-fascist' parties like Haider's FPO or Fini's Alleanza Nazionale now regarded as acceptable coalition partners by the mainstream right in the European Union.

Martin Blinkhorn's splendid new book has to be seen in the context of the debates referred to above, even if the majority of its potential readership - undergraduates reading History or Politics and Sixth Formers studying the 'Great Dictators' course at A level - are by and large oblivious to the wider historiographical, political and moral controversies, and would turn to this book, like any of Longman's Seminar Studies in History, purely in search of a short and accessible synthesis that could be used to write an essay or get through an exam. In passing, it has to be observed that even such an instrumental use of Blinkhorn would be heartily welcomed by those of us who frequently have to endure the regurgitation of the uninspiring works of Stephen J Lee by those lazy undergraduates who believe that this Stakhanovite writer of textbooks is at the cutting edge of research into fascism. Blinkhorn, as a distinguished scholar whose work has generally focused on the European Right in both its fascist and non-fascist variants,(7) is very aware of the wider context in which he is writing and whilst self-consciously presenting himself an historian, as opposed to a political scientist or any kind of theorist, a position he underlines by entitling one section of Chapter 7 'A Historian's View ' (pp.107-12), is not hesitant about engaging with all aspects of 'fascism studies'! Blinkhorn's statement that 'To insist that fascism deserves to take its place as a twentieth -century revolutionary set of ideas raises as many questions as it answers concerning the applicability of those ideas and their centrality to the fascist experience as a whole' (p.103) may not have been quite as blunt as Renton's comment on Eatwell and Griffin that 'Theirs are flawed histories inextricably linked to the definitions of fascism offered by fascists themselves',(8) but the more measured tone of such a critique by a fellow liberal, and one not uninterested in fascist ideas and their intellectual origins (clearly but concisely explained in Chapter 22 'Foretastes of Fascism in pre-1914 Europe', pp.8-16), will probably be far more wounding than the more predictable direct assault from the far left which Griffin might dismiss as the dying gasps of the dinosaurs. However, one feels that Blinkhorn would -like many of us faced with editors concerned with the British libel laws - have been a little less restrained about A.J. Gregor and his 'series of works treated with suspicion by many fellow academics' (p.102), had he been aware that Gregor, to use Renton's words, 'wrote for Mosley's fascist journal the European'.(9) If Blinkhorn has grave reservations about theories that focus too exclusively on fascist ideology (including those of George Mosse and Zeev Sternhell as well as the figures mentioned above), he is, if anything, even more dismissive about the 'totalitarianism' theory whose revival he unflatteringly links to Nolte's recent and notorious work Der europäische Bürgerkrieg, 1917-1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus, Berlin, 1989 (the only non-English language title mentioned in Blinkhorn's extensive bibliography, which makes the sad but realistic assumption that British undergraduates studying European history know no European languages), when he might equally well have mentioned the rather less contentious Emilio Gentile, whose work may trigger scholarly debate but is hardly at the centre of political discussion, even in his native Italy, and whom Blinkhorn criticises elsewhere in the text on other grounds. Blinkhorn argues that 'totalitarianism' never sought to explain fully the origins and complexities of fascism and the rest of the political extreme right and certainly does not do so. It has little to say about fascist ideas, fascism's social base, its road to power or the great majority of fascist movements that enjoyed no success” (p.101), before going on to undermine 'totalitarianism's' explanatory power still further by emphasising that in Fascist Italy 'totalitarianism was a dream' and that the Third Reich was not a 'fully realized totalitarian regime' (p.101). Although Blinkhorn's position is very clearly that of a left liberal, not a Marxist, he is rather more sympathetic to Marxist theories of fascism than he is to the 'totalitarianism'
approach or to the approach that focuses too exclusively on fascist ideas, concluding 'We would be unwise, therefore, to jettison Marxist analyses of fascism, even if there is much about fascism they can not tell us' (p.96).

Although Blinkhorn emphasises that 'the main purpose of this book has been to consider fascism in its heyday' (p.112), he is far more forthright about the 'post-fascists' than the majority of British commentators, both academic and journalistic, arguing in a section entitled 'Neo-fascism and post-fascism; Some Turn-of-the-Century Reflections' (pp.112-114): 'The possibility cannot be ruled out, even if the prospect may not be an immediate one, that European democracy in the early twenty-first century may begin to find itself being challenged or undermined by an extreme right infected by at least some elements of post-fascist nostalgia or fascist-style ethno-racial prejudice' (p.114). It is precisely because Blinkhorn's historical work has so often focused on the complex relationship between fascists and conservatives in Europe before 1945 that he is far less willing that the average political scientist to assume that the apparent transition from the neo-fascist to the non-fascist right of an organisation like Alleanza Nationale is necessarily either sincere or irreversible.

Fascism and the Right in Europe 1919-1945 is the best short introduction to the history of European fascism and the authoritarian right in the years up to 1945 currently available. Whilst intended primarily as a basic undergraduate text, it frequently transcends the genre for which it was conceived, not only offering a succinct and well-informed summary of the secondary literature (and including on pp.119-43 an interesting sample of short extracts from primary material, largely from the fascists themselves) but also making an important contribution to all the debates about fascism that I have outlined above. Blinkhorn distances himself from the concept of a 'generic fascism' to some extent, putting forward 'a template' (pp.115-116) rather than 'yet another definition of fascism' (p.115), and the publication of his book coincided with that of two overlapping works by MacGregor Knox,(10) which treat the notion of a 'generic fascism' as dead and buried, despite their unusual willingness to make detailed comparisons between Italy and Germany on the basis of a variety of sources, including primary and not just secondary material.(11) Blinkhorn's book is bound to be read as an intelligent, qualified and nuanced defence of the notion of a family resemblance between Italian Fascism, German Nazism and a number of other European movements (and perhaps regimes, although he is a little more cautious here). Whilst Knox's recent remark that 'A concept that united Nazis, Action Française, the Rumanian Iron Guard and the Estonian Association of Freedom Fighters stretched belief' (12) is aimed at Nolte's early work 'Three Faces of Fascism', it could equally well have been addressed to Blinkhorn, who explores the French, Rumanian and Estonian instances alongside the German. It would be wrong, however, to counterpose Blinkhorn and Knox in too dramatic a fashion, appealing as this might be to the very belligerent Knox. Knox's central thesis is probably best summarised in his remark about Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany that 'In the end it is this identity of foreign and domestic policy that distinguished these two regimes from the other despotisms of the century of war and mass murder'.(13) Blinkhorn, in the course of his critique of 'totalitarianism' as a theory, emphasises 'the distinction between 'fascist' expansionism and the (I would argue) very different foreign policies pursued by the Soviet and other communist regimes (p.101) and elsewhere remarks of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: 'In these two cases at least, onlookers who believed and argued that 'fascism means war' were absolutely right' (p.42). In short, even if Knox might on occasion describe the Fascists and Nazis as 'revolutionaries', and in more bombastic moods seems to come close to the 'totalitarianism' model, in practice both historians draw a very clear distinction between the foreign policies of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany on the one hand and those of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes on the other. Moreover, Blinkhorn comes close to Knox's position, based on a closely argued comparison between the Italian and German dictatorships which acknowledges many parallels but utterly rejects any wider notion of 'generic fascism', when he observes that 'International aggressiveness is better regarded, therefore, as a common feature of (significantly enough, to be sure) the Italian, German and some other variants of fascism, related to the historical development and geopolitical positions of the countries concerned rather than as an integral feature of fascism itself' (p.111). One strongly suspects that Knox would take very vigorous exception to the phrase 'some other variants of fascism' as well as to the examples offered by Blinkhorn - 'Spanish Falangism and Hungarian National Socialism' - but to the outsider Blinkhorn's concessions on geopolitics and trends in national historical development seem much more substantial than the remaining differences, and perhaps bring Blinkhorn
closer to Knox than to Kallis, who manages to derive 'a generic definition of fascist expansionism' from a comparison of Italy and Germany that makes no significant reference to other fascist movements or regimes. (14)

Apart from their measure of congruence on foreign policy questions, it also seems worth underlining that both Blinkhorn and Knox see both the Italian Fascist and the German Nazi regimes taking power as a result of a compromise with old elites, that both see Mussolini as ultimately trapped by such a compromise and both see Hitler as escaping it, if only to lead his country to a doom of his own making, rather than anybody else's, although Blinkhorn qualifies this by claiming 'It would nonetheless be rash to conclude that...Nazi Germany's eventual defeat was inevitable and thus exposes weaknesses in Nazism itself' (p.76). Blinkhorn's formulation that 'Unlike Italian Fascism, which after all enjoyed power much longer, Nazism (i) refused to live with the compromise that brought it to power and (ii) demonstrated that it did not have to' (p.111) may be more explicitly theorised than Knox's assertions, in the context of a comparison with Fascist Italy, that 'the German regime after 1938 was by contrast irreversible from within short of a successful assassination of Hitler' (15) or 'what remained of the establishment had lost in 1938-40 all capacity to put the brakes on Hitler', but the gist of the argument is absolutely identical. (16)

The core of Blinkhorn's book (pp. 31-93) consists of two chapters that look first at 'Fascist and Right-wing Movements, 1919-1939' and then at 'Fascist and Right-wing Regimes'. Whilst some may see an apparent parallel with Renzo De Felice's well-known distinction between fascism as a movement and fascism as a regime, Blinkhorn, unlike De Felice, could in no way be accused of idealising what was allegedly positive about the movement as distinct from the regime. Blinkhorn's coverage achieves an astonishingly encyclopaedic range, given the space constraints within which he is working, and makes some very shrewd observations about the fascist right, the non-fascist authoritarian right and the complex relationship between the two. He argues that while fascist movements of varying strengths could be found in a large number of European countries, only two fascist regimes had managed to come into being by 1939 - those of Mussolini and Hitler. He labels Fascist Italy between 1925 and 1943 'The Classic Case' (pp. 65-71) and the Third Reich 'The Extreme Case' (pp. 71-77). He argues that, 'with the exception of Fascist Italy and the Third Reich, none of the numerous anti-democratic regimes established in Europe between the world wars would be regarded as 'fascist' by most present-day authorities on fascism' (p.77). Whilst he believes that the Iberian dictatorships of Primo di Rivera, Salazar and Franco were all influenced to some extent by the Fascist regime in Italy, he does not regard any Spanish or Portuguese regime before 1939 as being fascist. His position in relation to the 1940s is slightly different, as he concedes 'in the case of the Franco regime, and bearing in mind the fluidity of the Italian Fascist regime itself, it is probably reasonable to suggest that the 1940s represented a 'fascist phase' than then gave way to something more conventionally authoritarian' (p.82), although he does not accept that the fascist label 'analytical validity' (p.82) for the Salazar regime in Portugal, even during this period. In his treatment of the regimes that emerged during the Second World War he emphasises that Hitler 'had no wish automatically to advance the political careers of the most raucous prewar fascists and nazis' (p.90), who were 'at first cold-shouldered in favour of safer alternatives' (p.90). It was only when Hitler started to lose the war that he 'sometimes found it expedient to concede indigenous fascists more power, or at least the shadow of power' (p.91). Blinkhorn sees Croatia as an exception to the general rule 'largely because early in the war the Italian Fascist regime was allowed by Germany to act as patron, and did so by more actively sponsoring a fascist regime than Hitler was disposed to do'. Interestingly, given the way NATO's role in recent events in the Balkans has implicitly turned Tudjman's odious revisionism into the dominant Western liberal orthodoxy as far as Croatia's genocidal wartime record is concerned, Blinkhorn courageously emphasises 'the Ustasa regime of Ante Pavelic, which later did become a German rather than an Italian satellite, earned its place in history chiefly as one of wartime Europe's bloodiest, waging deadly campaigns not only against Jews but also Serbs' (p.90). Perhaps the most appropriate note on which to conclude this review of an unashamedly anti-fascist history of fascism is with Blinkhorn's rejoinder to those who claim the Holocaust has distorted 'our understanding of fascism as a whole' (a viewpoint we shall undoubtedly hear frequently from Rome in the coming months). He rightly responds; 'Perhaps, however, it is not a case of distortion; for if we conclude that in the triumphs, nemesis, bestiality and shame of the Third Reich we are actually observing the direct - which is not to say inevitable -
outcome of important elements within fascism, our understanding could scarcely be more brutally enhanced.' (p. 88)

Notes

2. MacGregor Knox, Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Cambridge, 2000, p.56. Back to (2)
8. Renton, Fascism, op. cit, p.29. Back to (8)
9. Renton, Fascism, op. cit., p.27 - the references, which will no doubt be equally welcome to many long-standing critics of Gregor including Knox, who writes about Gregor in relation to fascism 'giving the concept all the rigor of india rubber while eliminating the single most powerful and dangerous regime commonly considered fascist' (Knox, Common Destiny, op. cit., p.56) are A. J. Gregor, 'Marxism as a Theory of History', European, 20 (1956), pp.146-62 and A.J. Gregor, 'National Socialism and Race', European, 23 (1957), pp.273-89. Back to (9)
11. Unlike Paul Brooker, The Faces of Fraternalism: Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan, Oxford 1991, and to a greater extent than Aristotle A. Kallis; Fascist Ideology; Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922-1945, London, 2000, which is on the border between history and political science. Back to (11)

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