

## Fascism and Nazism: The Similarities and Differences Examined

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### Abstract

Fascism was a system of government that reigned in Europe between the First and Second World Wars. It was a far-right form of government which was characterized by extreme nationalism, racial discrimination, promotion of violence and war, gender discrimination against women, and an unapologetic hatred for socialism. The most notorious regimes that practiced fascism were Benito Mussolini in Italy and Adolf Hitler of Germany (as Nazism). Although, there were other fascist regimes and movements in Spain, Croatia, Hungary, and Britain and so on, none of them was as vibrant, feared and influential as Mussolini and Hitler. There has been a strong and ceaseless debate among historians about whether fascism as practiced in Italy under Mussolini could be described as the same with the Nazism practiced in Germany under Hitler. This research examined the similarities and differences, if any, between Mussolini's fascism and Hitler's Nazism with considerable study of the assertions of scholars on the debate.

**Keywords:** *Fascism, Nazism, Similarities, Differences.*

### Introduction

Fascism was an extreme right-wing form of government that existed after the First World War majorly in Italy under Benito Mussolini and in Germany under Adolf Hitler (as Nazism). Fascism is a concept that has contentiously defied definition. Attempts at defining or explaining it has led to scholars describing what it is not rather than what it is.<sup>1</sup> The Marxist schools of thought see it as a product of capitalism and a manifestation of its decline. Some others describe it as a bunch of nonsense based upon "an ill-sorted hodge-podge of ideas".<sup>2</sup> Another group of historians such as Griffin, Eatwell acknowledges the ideological content of fascism describing it as nationalistic response to the ideological internationalism of Marxism, by linking with other ideological traditions of the 19th century - romantic irrationalism, social Darwinism, Hegelian

exultation of the state, Nietzschian ideas, sorelian conception of the role of myth, imagery of the great man and the genius-turned explicitly antidemocratic. It is anti-liberal, anti-parliamentarian, anti-marxist and particularly anti-communist, not committed to a conservative continuity, a clerical, partly anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist, Romanization of the peasants, artisans and the soldiers.<sup>3</sup> There has been contentious debate among historians as to the similarities and differences between Italian fascism and German Nazism. Richard Thurlow sees "no Siamese twins"<sup>4</sup> in the two, while Zeev Sternhell emphasises the 'racism' of Nazism and the 'State' focus of fascism. But some historians emphasise the similarities. For instance, Roger Eatwell describes the two as a "holistic national 'Third Way'<sup>5</sup> while Roger Griffin argues on

<sup>1</sup> J. Linz, *The Crisis of Democracy After the First World War*, in R. Griffin, ed., *International Fascism; Theories, Causes and the New Consensus*, (Arnold, London, 1998), p.179

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, H. Trevor-Roper, 'The Phenomenon of Fascism' in S. Woolf, ed., *European Fascism*, (London, 1970) p. 19; K. Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, 2014), p. 51; and R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, (Routledge London, 1996), p. 74

<sup>3</sup> J. Linz, *The Crisis*, p.178

<sup>4</sup> R. Thurlow, *Fascism and Nazism – No Siamese Twin, Patterns of Prejudice, Vol. 14, Issue 1, 1980*, (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0031322X.1980.9969545?journalCode=rpop20>) p. 1 Accessed on 5/4/2017

<sup>5</sup> R. Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, (Pimlico London, 2003), p. 79

'generic' fascism characterized "polygenetic ultra-nationalism and national rebirth".<sup>6</sup> This study attempts to examine the various views and it finds out that fascism and Nazism are similar except that Nazism was built on the foundation of racism which is not the case in Italy.

Fascism originated from the Italian word *fascio* (plural is *fasci*) meaning 'bundle'. Politically, it means 'Union' or 'League'. It was first adopted by a revolutionary syndicalist called 'fasciazionerevoluzionaria' in the late 1914. This was revived by Mussolini on 23rd March 1919 when he organised a group of World War One veterans who later called themselves 'fasci di Combattimento'.<sup>7</sup> It adopted as symbol some ancient Roman *fascis* - an axe bound in rods. Benito Mussolini was a World War One veteran who got injured in the war and returned home to continue his journalism. The movement was transformed into National Fascist Party. Like Mussolini, Adolf Hitler was a World War One veteran. He was a runner, which was a dangerous job but he did it enthusiastically. He joined the German Workers' Party which he changed to National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party) in April 1920. Both of them rose to the rank of NCO in the Army but ended up on the wrong end of the war as Germany was defeated while Italy was not able to gain any significant 'spoils of war'. They had a humble and socialist background and were both ardent admirers of Nietzsche, right-wing nationalist elite.<sup>8</sup> The outcome of the war was a serious frustration for both. However, they both seized the 'opportunity' within the despair and unemployment to stir up nationalistic feelings amongst the people of Italy and Germany.

Both Mussolini and Hitler were desperate to gain power. Mussolini was hungry for power and accepted whatever compromises he believes were necessary to achieve the goal. Some salient and similar issues had aided fascists to rise to power in both countries. There was serious discontent about the treaty of Versailles. Only Southern Tyrol and Trentino were seeded to Italy after the War.

<sup>6</sup>R. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, (Routledge London, 1996) p.74

<sup>7</sup>R. Eatwell, *Fascism*, p. 43

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44 and p. 115

The promises of territories in Turkey and Germany were not fulfilled. German territory was dismembered, and her colonies shared amongst the Allied Powers with heavy reparation of 33 billion dollars imposed on Germany. Germans and Italians resented the terms of the treaty blaming their incumbent governments for the problems. The economic crisis that followed the end of the War led to unprecedented unemployment and food shortage in both countries. Series of coalition government in Italy created political instability as policies were inconsistent while inflation soared amidst lack of basic necessities. The rising influence of communism with the Bolshevik revolution in Russia was also a factor in the rise of fascism and Nazism. Hatred for socialism, which ironically, Mussolini and Hitler once revered, motivated them to violently attack socialists. With all these problems King Vittorio Emanuele who was already dissatisfied with the performance of the post war governments invited Mussolini to form a new government by the end of 1922. Similarly, in Germany, President Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor in January 1933. The March on Rome claim by fascists was a fallacy and the Munich Putsch took Hitler to jail.<sup>9</sup> The promise of 'Risorgimento', that is, a regeneration of the fatherland, national renewal, new man, eternal Rome, super-individual reality by the fascists made fascism appealing to the people. Hitler also promised the restoration of the German Aryan race, recapture of German territories and obliteration of communism to gain the confidence of Germans.

One significant element that was critical to the success of fascism was the use of violence. It was almost legitimized by the regimes. Violence was used in attaining power and it was used to hold on to power. Mussolini believed that violence was necessary to acquire political goals. The fascist party in Italy created 'Squads' headed by 'Ras' who were local leaders with diverse backgrounds but with a common belief that 'politics now require the violent suppression of opposition'. The squad comprised of mostly men of action, not thinkers, who believed that they were nationalist and anti-socialists. Some joined because of the violence and criminal

<sup>9</sup> R. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, (Penguin London, 2004), p. 87

opportunities it offered.<sup>10</sup> They were transformed into State guards after Mussolini got to power and funded with state funds. 288 people were killed in 1920 with 172 socialist deaths.<sup>11</sup> The total casualty figures in Italy between 1920 and 1922 was between five to six hundred fascists and two thousand anti-fascists and non-fascists, followed by another one thousand of the later.<sup>12</sup> In Germany, there was no difference, the SA harassed opponents on the street mercilessly. There were 69 political murders during the March 5th, 1933 election campaign. While 103 people were killed and hundreds wounded prior to that. They setup wild concentration camps where 'enemies' were incarcerated and tortured in a microcosm of the holocaust that followed. Passmore claims that although before they came to power, the Nazis were far less violent than the fascists had been, they proved incalculably more violent afterwards.<sup>13</sup>

Racism was an issue that existed in both Italy and Germany but the way it played out in Germany has made many scholars doubt whether fascism and Nazism could be grouped together as 'fascist'. Eatwell asserts that racism (precisely anti-Semitism) was not a major feature of the early fascist movement. Anti-Semitic decrees were only introduced in 1938. For example, a Jew, Aldo Fenzi held a government post and a Seat in the Grand Council, and by mid-1930s about one in three adult Jew were members of PNF.<sup>14</sup> Anti-Semitism in Italy was far less virulent than that of the Nazis because 80% of Jews survived in Italy. The King, Catholic Church and armed forces were opposed to it. In fact, Mussolini had a Jewish mistress, Margareta and he ridiculed biological racism as merely a feeling. Passmore argues that racist laws in Italy were introduced as much in a spirit of competition as in emulation of Nazism. In corroborating this, Eatwell opines that Mussolini introduced anti-Semitism in an attempt to launch a "second revolution" of

reviving fascist radicalism as he gradually fell under the influence of Hitler.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to Italy, Sternhell, Passmore, Griffin and Thurlow claim that racialism (the Aryan race) was the guiding principle of Nazism.<sup>16</sup> Biological racism permeated all aspects of domestic and foreign policy of Nazism. Andrew Heywood corroborated this claim with the views of Joseph Gobineau who stated that "the Aryans of Germany were the 'master race' responsible for all creativity whether in art, music, literature, philosophy or political thoughts while other races could only utilise the initiatives of Aryans but the Jews were destroyers of culture".<sup>17</sup> And Hitler argued that the German nation must maintain the racial purity of the Aryan race in order to maintain the dominance over other races especially the Jews. This ideology informed the 'euthanasia programme' against 'the unfit' and the unprecedented terror against the Jews in what was regarded as 'Kristallnacht', the extermination of Jews and destruction of their properties in November 1939.

Furthermore, both fascist Italy and Nazi Germany emphasized allegiance to State and Party control but the degree varied. Eatwell presents it as a crucial difference where Italian fascism tended to worship the state, while Nazism often elevated the party above the state.<sup>18</sup> Paxton corroborated this assertion claiming that Mussolini waned up with the state because he was afraid of the local 'Ras' and their squadristi. Heywood also argues that fascism was an extreme form of Statism but Nazism did not venerate the state as it was only a "means (vessel) to an end". According to Passmore, the party in Italy was turned into an inflated parallel

<sup>10</sup>R. Eatwell, *Fascism*, p. 55

<sup>11</sup>C. Duggan, *Fascist Voices, An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy*, (Vintage, 2013), p. 43

<sup>12</sup>R. Paxton, *The Anatomy*, p. 95

<sup>13</sup>K. Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, 2014) p. 57

<sup>14</sup>R. Eatwell, *Fascism*, p. 85

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 86

<sup>16</sup>See, K. Passmore, *Fascism*, p. 108; R. Griffin, *The Nature*, p. 111; Z. Sternhell, 'Fascist Ideology' in W. Laqueur, ed., *Fascism: A Reader's Guide* (Harmondsworth, 1979), p.328

<sup>17</sup>A. Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, (<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=Sy8hDgAAQBAJ&pg=PA209&lpg=PA209&dq=andrew+heywood+fascism&source=bl&ots=G2ZMhAduP&sig=Egwmwjhl1rlj9sopIWI5lUtiQkc&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiC3tatxo3TAhUBDsAKHzr8CLOq6AEIRDah#v=onepage&q=andrew%20heywood%20fascism&f=false>), p.212, Accessed on 5/4/2017.

<sup>18</sup>R. Eatwell, *Fascism...*, p. 146

bureaucracy and a party card became a prerequisite of advancement in the state service. While in Germany, the civil service was purged and the installation of the party and 'Schutzstaffel' became parallel administration as the personnel were recruited on the bases of ideology and service to the party.<sup>19</sup> Hitler emphasized this in *Mein Kampf* when he said "the State is only a means to an end. Above all, it must preserve the existence of the race. We must make a clear-cut distinction between the vessel and the contents. The State is only the vessel and the race is what it contains".<sup>20</sup>

One other similar feature of fascism and Nazism was the obsession with war and expansionism. Eat well argues that Mussolini supported war because he wanted to build bridges with the military leadership and to transform his country and capture the minds of the masses.<sup>21</sup> In the same vein, Passmore asserts that fascists had always seen the conquest of additional territory as the best means to resolve economic problems, and regarded war as intrinsically good for the nation.<sup>22</sup> The Italian invasion of Abyssinia (present Ethiopia) in 1935 is a testament to this. Mussolini believed that "war brings up to their highest tension all human energies and puts the stamp of nobility upon the people who have the courage to meet it. I do not believe in perpetual peace; I find it depressing and a negation of all the fundamental viruses of man". Like Mussolini, Hitler was passionately interested in expansionism. He had always regarded the acquisition of 'Lebensraum' and the elimination of race enemies and Bolshevism as essential to the establishment of a harmonious society.<sup>23</sup> War was used by both Hitler and Mussolini to mobilise the continued support and affection of the population. And the two regimes gave both financial and ideological support to other European fascist regimes and movements in 1930s. examples of such include General Franco of Spain, Marshall Petain in Vichy France, Ante Pavelic and the Ustasha in

Croatia, and Vidkun Quisling in Norway. Others include Leon Degrelle and the 'Rexist' party in Belgium, Ferenc Szalasi and the 'Arrow Cross' party in Hungary, Anton Mussert and the 'National Socialist Movement' in Holland, and Arnold Leese and the 'Imperial Fascist League' in Britain.

Furthermore, the romance between fascism and the Catholic Church was evident in both Italy and Germany. While the influence of the Catholic Church was strong in Italy, Hitler was less influenced. Eat well and Duggan assert that even though Mussolini was an atheist and anti-Catholic Church with preference for Islam,<sup>24</sup> The Vatican played a crucial role in the consolidation of fascism in Italy. Mussolini got the support of some openly fascist priests called 'Clerico-fascists'. In return, Mussolini adopted policies that were favorable to the Church like rescue of the Catholic bank of Rome, measures against abortion and contraception. Symbolically, Mussolini married Donna in the church ten years after the civil marriage. The relationship with the church was cemented in 1929 with the signing of the 'Lateran Pacts' which gave the Vatican sovereign independence, financial compensation for losses suffered as a consequence of the Unification of Italy.<sup>25</sup> In all, Mussolini benefitted more domestically and globally because his association with the church made him more popular and adored by the people. In Germany, it was not so rosy for the Church. Paxton and Eat well argue that Hitler and the Catholic Church signed a 'Concordat' in July 1933, which gave support to Nazism and full freedom to the Catholic Church but almost immediately, the Nazis began to go back on the agreement principally by harassing priests who were presumed hostile.<sup>26</sup> The Catholic Church responded with an overt attack on Nazism. The courtship between the Catholic Church and fascism was because Pope Pius XI had the conviction that communism was worse than Nazism.<sup>27</sup> However, it is not surprising that the relationship fell apart because

<sup>19</sup>K. Passmore, *Fascism...*, p. 64

<sup>20</sup>A. Heywood, *Political Ideology...*, p. 207

<sup>21</sup>R. Eatwell, *Fascism...*, p. 45

<sup>22</sup>K. Passmore, *Fascism*, p. 53

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66

<sup>24</sup> See, R. Eatwell, *Fascism*, 76; and C. Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, p. 81

<sup>25</sup>R. Eatwell, *Fascism*, p. 75

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 152

<sup>27</sup>R. Paxton, *The Anatomy*, p. 108

racism and Catholic doctrines cannot dwell together.

The irony of fascism that continues to surprise people is a massive support received from women despite the chauvinistic discrimination against them.<sup>28</sup> Mussolini regarded women as "incapable of synthesizing anything, of combining different ideas into higher form. He proclaimed that their natural role was caring for a new generation of warriors.<sup>29</sup> Several policies were introduced to push women back into home. There were restrictions on the use of contraception. Eatwell claims that taxes and subsidies were introduced to encourage marriage and having more children; taxes on bachelors, employment discrimination in favor of family men, 1938 law restricted females to 10% of the workforce.<sup>30</sup> Although women suffered employment discrimination during the interview war years due to economic recession and conservative reactions, but the policies under Mussolini was basically a fundamental ideological position. The discrimination against women under Hitler was also very deliberate. In the public sector, married women were often dismissed to make way for men. Although women employment increased during the Second World War, the vast majority of jobs taken were menial and poorly paid. Marriage was encouraged with a system of loans where over one million were given out to 'happy Aryan couples' between 1933 and 1938. The loans could be repaid by producing offspring, each one annulling a quarter of the debt. Family allowances and changes to income tax in favor of larger families were introduced.<sup>31</sup> Yet a lot of women still adored Hitler and Mussolini.

Both fascism and Nazism survived through dictatorship. Both hated opposition and eliminated all forms of dissenting views. Pass more claims that in January 1925, Mussolini declared total fascist regime which set in his dictatorship reign. At the end of the year political opposition was banned, freedom of the press ceased, and election of local

government ended.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Eat well claims that after the fourth attempt to assassinate Mussolini in 2 years, a series of exceptional decrees were passed in November 1926, which banned all remaining formal opposition and established a special tribunal for the defense of the state.<sup>33</sup> Griffin argues that the establishment of dictatorship in Germany was swift, starting with Emergency Decree which suspended the Weimer Constitution. And by July 1933, law against the Establishment of political parties was passed and Germany became officially a one-party state.

Even though Mussolini introduced the term and measures of 'totalitarian', Eat well and Griffin assert that the Nazis sought a far more totalitarian control of culture than the Italian fascism.<sup>34</sup> Hitler was more rigid and ruthless while using terror indiscriminately. After crushing the 'SA' (Night of the long knives), Hitler empowered the 'SS' and made the army swear personal oath of loyalty to him. There is a consensus on how totalitarian both regimes were. Eat well argues that in practice, Italian totalitarianism differed significantly from the academic model because many departments owed much to chance, or the specific political and economic needs of the moment. And considerable power remained in the hands of the King, the Catholic Church and business, though none of them ultimately could control the regime. In Germany, with the death of President Hindenburg, Hitler combined the roles of the Head of State and Chancellor. As domineering as Hitler was, Griffin asserts that the 'Total State' control was not as totalitarian as claimed. Hitler could actually be described as a 'weak dictator' as he was constraint by the system he created.<sup>35</sup> Although, both Hitler and Mussolini were immensely totalitarian, the extreme powers were shared with other institutions such as Catholic Church, King (in Italy) and Nazi party (in Germany).

One of the most noteworthy features that aided the sustainability of fascism and Nazism was the extensive use of propaganda

<sup>28</sup>R. Eatwell, *Fascism*, p. 135

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 82

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 82

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 162

<sup>32</sup>K. Passmore, *Fascism*, p. 51

<sup>33</sup>R. Eatwell, *Fascism*, p. 84

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 164

<sup>35</sup>R. Griffin, *The Nature*, p. 106

and leader-worship. Griffin, Eat well, Pass more, Paxton, Stern hell and others acknowledge the overwhelming use of propaganda in both states. Although a full propaganda ministry was not to be established until 1935 in Italy, El Duce (The leader, as Mussolini was called), had always demonstrated strong interest in style and manipulation. He was a master of crowd manipulation. He was often found being photographed with peasants at sporting events and revealing muscular torso at seaside and hailed as 'Mussolini-the-leader' and 'Man-of-the-people'. Eat well describes this as 'charismatic populism'.<sup>36</sup> Tullio Cianetti described "Mussolini as the 'new man' who will be the future leader of a great European democracy that will spread from Rome to Moscow via Berlin".<sup>37</sup> To achieve this, panoply of organizations like 'Ballila' were set up to indoctrinate young people particularly for boys of 8 to 14 years. Girls had 'Piccole Italiane'. Activities included drills and carrying toy guns while girls were allowed only bows and arrows. Eat well submits that "by 1930s, five million young people had been indoctrinated in a drive towards conformity and militarism".<sup>38</sup> The first new government department created by Hitler after assuming office was the ministry of public enlightenment and propaganda under the leadership of Joseph Goebbels. It was responsible for transforming Germans into Nazis. Eat well acknowledges that "Goebbels brilliantly choreographed funeral of Nazi activists who had been killed in clashes with the Left to appeal both to religious sentiments sacrifice and martyrdom and to a more pathologically war-oriented sense of brotherhood."<sup>39</sup> Hitler Youth (HY) organization was created in 1920 for indoctrination and by 1939; they had become about 7 million. Griffin concludes that "well-coordinated posters and leaflet campaigns, the invention of political rituals, and the holding of mass rallies were carefully designed not merely to impress Nazi slogan on the public but to generate the cumulative

sense that a vast movement was afoot heralding a new era in Germany's history".<sup>40</sup>

But was fascism a revolution? Historians have diverse views on this question. Eat well and Pass more is emphatic in their 'No' as the answer. Eat well asserts that there were a degree of compromises and pragmatism as such "there was no fascist or Nazi revolution".<sup>41</sup> Corroborating this is Passmore who submits that even though it destabilized existing power structure, fascism or Nazism was never revolutions. In a contrary view, Griffin concludes that even though polygenetic core ensured that it was not reactionary, but fascism was a revolution.<sup>42</sup> However, Paxton presents a pluralistic view. He claims that fascism was "revolution in it's radically war conceptions of citizenship, of the way individuals participated in the life of the community. But fascism was counter-revolutionary with respect to such traditional projects of the left as individual liberties, human rights, due process, and international peace".<sup>43</sup>

It is only too easy to conclude that fascism in practice was nothing more than a tool of reaction, or a vehicle for opportunism and nihilism. It compromises out of desperation for power: fascism as both 'law-abiding and law-breaking', 'aristocratic and democratic', 'conservative and progressive'. There was as much rivalry as emulation between Nazis and fascists. Many fascists felt quite critical of Nazism and many Nazis felt ambivalent towards Mussolini and his movement. The Nazis and fascists came to power lacking clear plans in many areas, created a new political consciousness, a nation united around a sense of German racial identity and Risorgimento respectively. Fascism (including Nazism) was less pluralistic, ambiguous, and basically spontaneous, slightly ideological, more inclusive than militarism, not liberalistic, pretentiously democracy, no freedom, less conservative, and more change oriented. None of the imitators of fascism were identical to the original. Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany virtually had similarities through

<sup>36</sup>R. Eatwell, *Fascism*, p. 73

<sup>37</sup>TullioCianetti was a fascist syndicalist and later minister under Mussolini. See, C. Duggan, *Fascist Voices*, p. 53

<sup>38</sup>R. Eatwell, *Fascism*, p.83

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 132

<sup>40</sup>R. Griffin, *The Nature*, p. 96

<sup>41</sup>R. Eatwell, *Fascism*, p. 167

<sup>42</sup>R. Griffin, *The Nature*, p. 111

<sup>43</sup>R. Paxton, *The Anatomy*, p. 147

and through. The difference is the degree of implementation of the features. Under Hitler, issues such as racialism, dictatorship,

totalitarianism, propaganda were extremely enforced, and even though in lesser degree, they also existed in Mussolini's Italy [1-10].

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