

**Dictators and Nationalism:  
European Dictators in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Honours Programme Course:  
National and Regional Identities in an Age of Globalization  
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## **Intro**

When we think of the negative aspects of nationalism, our thoughts automatically go to the extremes that are made possible under nationalism. One of the prime examples of ultranationalism is the use of nationalism by dictators. In Europe much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was influenced by the decisions of dictators. Their significance to recent European history is clear. What is less clear is how these dictators are related to nationalism. This paper will shed some light on this relationship by offering a historical analysis of four prominent European dictators. The analysis will focus on nationalist aspects in the lives of these dictators. It will then become clear to what extent and in what way nationalism is related to these dictators.

## **Theoretical framework**

Before it becomes possible to establish and analyze the links between European dictators and nationalism it is first important to define what a dictator is. From various definitions of the word dictator it follows that dictators have to meet certain characteristics to be qualified as such. One characteristic that all these definitions have in common is that a dictator holds absolute power. This broad definition leaves far too many dictators to discuss in this paper. Therefore a selection had to be made and Mussolini, Hitler, Franco and Tito were chosen.

The decision to focus on these dictators is not arbitrary. First of all this course is about nationalism and regionalism in Europe, so only European dictators will be discussed. Secondly, only dictators in the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be discussed. Nationalism as an ideology has only been in existence since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Before this people already organized themselves in groups based on the characteristics they had in common. However, the birth of nationalism as an ideology is placed by most historians in the French Revolution (Smith, 1998). Therefore it only makes sense to discuss nationalism as an ideology after this time. By the time the first of these four dictators seized power (Mussolini in 1926), it was clear what a political force nationalism could be.

There were of course other European dictators in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but these were chosen because of their influence on history. They were all alive at the same time, which makes it easier to compare them. Since these dictators lived less than seventy years ago it is expected that they still very much influence the nationalism in their countries up to this day.

On a side note, Stalin is not included in this paper as there is some ambivalence as to whether he really was a dictator in the first place. It may be that his image as dictator was actually constructed by historians who were too negatively influenced by communism to depict him truthfully. It is doubted by some historians whether he really held absolute power (e.g. Webb & Webb, 1935 for the earlier political period; Fitzpatrick, 1986; Rittersporn, 1991 for the later period).

The four dictators will now be discussed in chronological order of becoming dictator. For each dictator a short historical background about his life is given, with a focus on how he came to power and how he maintained his power. From this historical analysis the link between the dictator and nationalism will be established. It is not only interesting to see to what extent that particular dictator is linked to nationalism, but also in what way he is linked to nationalism.

## Benito Mussolini

*“We deny your internationalism, because it is a luxury which only the upper classes can afford; the working people are hopelessly bound to their native shores.”*

Address, June 21, 1921, to the Socialists in the Italian Chamber of Deputies.  
Mussolini's first speech as a member of parliament

Mussolini is credited as being one of the inventors of fascism and is probably known best for his role in the Second World War, where he supported fascist Nazi Germany. Fascism is an ideology that seems impossible to define precisely, yet consensus is that it is inherently linked to nationalism (see Payne, 1983; Griffiths, 2001 and Paxton, 2004). Because of this, much of Mussolini's life is characterized by nationalism.

The characteristics of fascism as Mussolini developed it were of course influenced by his life. His early political views were socialist. This seems strange as socialism is generally seen as an ideology incompatible with fascism. However, Mussolini did hold some unorthodox views as a socialist. Most importantly he was a follower of the works of Nietzsche. Nietzsche opposed egalitarianism and because of that also class conflict, which is normally considered to be one of main features of socialism. In fascism class conflict is also rejected in favour of class collaboration. Mussolini did adhere to other socialist principles, until his falling out with the Socialist Party during the First World War.

The war caused a rift within the Italian Socialist Party. Some members were against Italian intervention in the war based on the principle of internationalism and others held more nationalist views. Mussolini came to see the First World War as a potential war for revolution in which Italy could regain some of its former greatness by overthrowing its German and Austrian oppressors. Because of his interventionist views he was kicked out of the Socialist Party. This falling out with the Socialist Party eventually led to Mussolini distancing himself from socialism altogether. He created a *fasci* that was in favour of Italian intervention in the war. From here Italian fascism grew as an ideology.

Fascism relied on nationalism far more than socialism which from its Marxist origins had a non-national character. Marx described a class conflict that was characterized by workers from all over the world uniting against the other classes. Fascism on the other hand maintained that the classes should remain as they had been and even that classes were a sign of civilization. Members of each class should perform their respective duties for the benefit of the nation.

Another important feature of fascism is what Griffin (1991) describes as the palingenetic myth, or the myth of national rebirth. Mussolini's view was that Italy should restore the glory and territory it had enjoyed during Roman times (*romanità*). Essential to this rise to glory was territorial expansion. Mussolini justified this expansion with the concept of *spazio vitale*, similar to the German concept of *Lebensraum*. He used the Roman times to claim that the Italians had a claim to 'Mare Nostra' (the Mediterranean area) once again. Mussolini did believe that the Italian race was superior to other races, however this superiority was not based in biology but in cultural history. He saw the Italians as bringers of culture and education to other peoples.

## Adolf Hitler

*“All propaganda has to be popular and has to accommodate itself to the comprehension of the least intelligent of those whom it seeks to reach.”*

Mein Kampf, p. 197

Like Mussolini, Hitler embraced fascism. He was even inspired by Mussolini and used him as his example for many of his political choices. The two men did differ in various aspects though. Hitler was influenced by nationalism from an earlier age than Mussolini. He was born in the empire of Austria-Hungary, but rejected his Austrian nationality. Instead he embraced his German background. His nationalism increased in the First World War, as did his belief in German superiority. He blamed the defeat of Germany on betrayal (Dolchstoßlegende) and the humiliating conditions Germany as loser had to accept motivated him to go into politics. He joined the nationalist Deutsche ArbeiterPartei (DAP), which later became even more nationalistic by changing its name to NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche ArbeiterPartei). Hitler became the most important man in this Nazi Party. His oratory skills helped him captivate the German masses with the nationalist message of restoring the crumbled state that Germany had become after the First World War.

Hitler's discourse was built around nationalism. He emphasized the palingenetic myth and how he as leader would guide Germany through this revolution. He used symbols from Germany's history to underline the importance of rebirth. An example would be the use of the colours red, black and white, the colours of imperial Germany. Both Hitler and Mussolini also stressed their link to dictators in antiquity by building neo-classical government buildings and using symbols from antiquity.

Hitler differed from Mussolini concerning the supremacy of the German race (as Übermenschen). Because of their supremacy they had a right to domination over weaker races, or so Hitler reasoned. According to him the German people had a right to their own nation. This form of nationalism based on race is called ethnonationalism. For Hitler one could only be part of the German race by blood. He vowed to unite all Germans within one state under his leadership (the famous ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer).

Hitler did not only emphasize how he would bring Germany back to its former greatness, but also how others obstructed Germany from reaching this greatness. He used scapegoats to blame the poor economic situation on and to blame Germany's defeat in First World War on. He also stressed that other nations had humiliated Germany by imposing the Treaty of Versailles on them. By creating scapegoats, Hitler maintained the image of Germany's greatness. For it were these scapegoats that were to blame, not Germany itself. We can see a similar reasoning here as in the Dolchstoßlegende at the end of the First World War.

The use of scapegoats and the use of ethnonationalism both served to create a strong national feeling by creating an in-group and an out-group. Hitler enhanced this feeling by using aggressive language against enemies he created. Of course he also famously deported enemies of the state and other unwanted people to concentration camps.

## Francisco Franco

*“We strive to form a single national front against the Judeo-Masonic lodges, against Moscow and the Marxist societies.”*

Statement in *El defensor de Córdoba* (24 July 1936), as cited by Javier Navarrete in Más Allá

Of these four dictators, Franco was in office the longest (he was in power for 39 years). He enjoined a successful military career in which he survived the infamous Rif Wars in Morocco. The saying at that time was that officers would either be promoted to general or would die (la caja – the box – or la faja – the general’s sash). Franco survived and true to the saying, became the youngest general in Europe. When Spain became a republic, Franco lost much of his standing as he was a monarchist. Similar to Hitler’s belief in the Dolchstoßlegende, he believed that the fall of the monarchy was caused by a conspiracy of Jews, freemasons and communists. Franco would oppose this conspiracy by becoming a staunch defender of Catholic Spain.

His rise to power was made possible by the Spanish Civil War. In Spain the gap between left and right in politics had increased since the republic was proclaimed. Franco remained impartial, but eventually joined the right winged nationalists in the Civil War against the Republicans. Franco’s talent for not committing too much to a certain side would prove essential. Because of this he could unite different factions within the nationalist front. With support from Germany and Italy he managed to win the Civil War and become dictator.

Although Franco opposed communism he cannot be considered as extremely right as either Mussolini or Hitler. He did embrace some forms of Fascism, but cannot truly be considered a fascist. Most of all Franco was a conservative, anti-revolutionary dictator. He did not share the same kind of idealism that Hitler and Mussolini had had, but was more of a pragmatist. Franco was probably at his most idealistic when it concerned Catholicism.

Franco created an image of Spain as it had been for ages: a Catholic monarchy. His enemies were those that tried to change Spain or destroy it (mostly communists, Jews and freemasons). Franco did try to create more unity within Spain, by making Castilian (Spanish) the only official language. All other languages and linguistic expressions were banned. Franco differed from Mussolini and Hitler by not wanting a revolution or a rebirth for Spain. He was content to maintain Spain as it had been, but with an emphasis on unity within Spain.

## Josip Broz Tito

*“We have spilt an ocean of blood for the brotherhood and unity of our peoples and we shall not allow anyone to touch or destroy it from within.”*

Tito (1975: 2)

Similar to Hitler, Tito (or Josip Broz as was his real name) was born in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. He was born in a Croatian region to a Slovenian mother and a Croatian father. During the First World War Josip Broz was captured by Russians and brought to Russia. Here he joined the communist forces. His main political ideology would remain communism throughout his life.

When he returned from Russia, his home region had become a part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. He joined the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which was outlawed later. In order to keep publishing communist messages Josip Broz had to use multiple false names. Of these Tito was the one that stuck. Tito's political career seemed over before it had really began, when the Axis forces invaded the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941. Yugoslavia was quickly overrun, but throughout the war Tito's Partisans continued to resist the invaders. Tito's Partisans were the most successful group to withstand the Axis forces within Yugoslavia. This resistance made Tito, as he was officially recognized by the Allies and was also considered to be the liberator of Yugoslavia by its people.

Of course Yugoslavia at that time could hardly be considered a nation yet. The name comes from the Slavic words 'jug' for south and 'slaveni' for Slavs, as a single state for all South Slavic peoples. Although the idea of a state for Slavic peoples is older, the first state to realize this idea was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, later renamed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929. With such a short history Tito built much of Yugoslavia's national history around their unity against the invaders during the Second World War. His discourse also shows an emphasis on the concept of 'Slavic brothers'. By using such discourses and oppressing ultranationalist movements in the federal states, Tito managed to maintain a unity within Yugoslavia. This unity was built around him and when he died, the Yugoslavian Federation began to fall apart.

Yugoslavia can be seen as a supranational entity, encompassing several separate nations. However, Yugoslavia can also be seen as a nation in its own right, different from other supranational entities like the European Union. Tito's emphasis on Yugoslavian nationalism played an important role in creating a national Yugoslavian identity. This also explains why Tito had a falling out with communism as it was expressed by the Soviet Union. As explained earlier in the paper pure Marxism is not compatible with nationalism. This caused a clash with Tito's nationalist discourse and it is probably because of this that he created his own, more nationalist, form of communism. The following quote by Tito himself illustrates this perfectly: "We study and take as an example the Soviet system, but we are developing socialism in our country in somewhat different forms. (...) No matter how much each of us loves the land of socialism, the USSR, he can in no case love his own country less." (Time Magazine, 1948).

## **Comparison & Conclusion**

The four dictators discussed in this paper were all related to nationalism. All four used nationalism and in the analysis it became clear that nationalism was a central topic to them. To all of them the use of nationalism was essential both for obtaining power and for staying in power. Although nationalism is essential for understanding how these dictators amassed their power and maintained it, it is not the sole explanation of their success. All dictators used violence both before and after they came into power to cripple the opposition. They also all manipulated elections to get into office.

This partly answers the question to what extent these dictators used nationalism. The way in which they used nationalism differs per dictator. Mussolini and Hitler were similar in their use of nationalism, because they both embraced fascism. For them nationalism was essential in different ways. Firstly the palingenetic myth, or myth of national rebirth served as their goal. Both Mussolini and Hitler were part of a revolution to overthrow the old order, so that they could re-establish their nation's greatness. For them all Italians respectively Germans were essential to this goal. The superiority of their people had a different basis though, as Mussolini claimed Italians were superior because of their culture, whereas Hitler claimed that Germans were of a superior race.

Franco and Tito used nationalism more as a means. They both were the embodiment and defender of their respective nations. This was also the case for Mussolini and Hitler, however Franco and Tito did not use a palingenetic myth. For Franco Spain was more of a continuation of the nation it had been for centuries. Tito's Yugoslavia had hardly been 'born' in the first place, so a rebirth of the nation with a reference to its better times was not possible. Franco and Tito also held less ideological and rigid views. Franco only used fascism as long as it helped him personally and when the Axis' power was on the decline he refrained from helping them. Tito similarly used communism to obtain support. When the USSR became a threat to his power he had no problem taking a more neutral stance.

Ultimately all these dictators used nationalism in a similar manner. Their nation served to create a group to which some people did and other people did not belong. In other words, they created an in-group and an out-group based on the nation. For Mussolini the division was made based on the cultural values Italians had. Hitler made the division between in- and out-group based on race. Franco mainly created an out-group: those that did not speak Spanish, were not Catholic, opposed the monarchy and embraced communism. Tito last of all stressed the bond that was created between the Slavic people during the Second World War. This war served as an illustration that the Slavic countries were weak on their own and therefore had to be united.

The underlying message for all four dictators was that the in-group had to work together to resist the threat of the out-group. Although the use of in- and out-group has existed long before nationalism existed as an ideology, nationalism does make this process far easier. It allows for the creation of large groups of people with almost automatic loyalty towards the nation and a hostile view towards other nations. This makes nationalism a very potent means for dictators.

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