

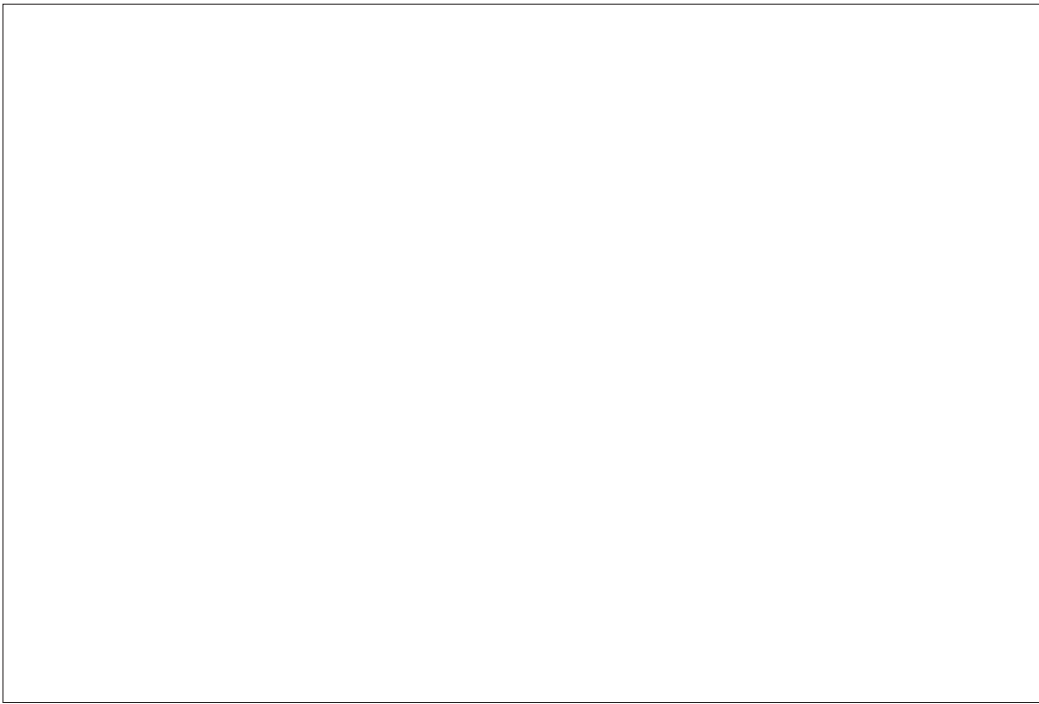
THE 'ERA OF THE DICTATORS' RECONSIDERED

Kenneth Thomson *reflects on major aspects of the 'era of the dictators' after the collapse of Soviet Communism and its satellite regimes*

In 1939, on the eve of the Second World War, almost the whole of continental Europe was ruled by dictatorships of various political hues. Even countries, like France, which resisted the trend had emergency powers, or were threatened like the Nordic and Benelux countries by extremist political parties. Britain too had her Fascists and Communists, and was preparing to fight a war in which her democratic government would have to exercise almost dictatorial powers if she was to survive. It might seem then as if the political future of Europe lay with the dictatorships of either Right or Left. The democratic liberalism which had seemed so triumphant at the Peace of Paris twenty years earlier was now in eclipse, at worst doomed to extinction by the dictatorial nations, at best existing by their favour. There are now no dictatorships in Europe, and liberal democracy, and its economic accompaniment, free market capitalism, prevails over the entire continent. The Right-wing Fascist version of dictatorship was largely defeated in 1945, and its

lingering remnants in Mediterranean countries extinguished themselves two decades later. The more intellectually formidable Left-wing version, Communism, suddenly, almost without warning, succumbed to the power of democratic capitalism. One party control of all life in the east European states has come to an end, even if some, like Romania, cannot be considered fully democratic. Lenin, the father of European dictatorship, has been dethroned, and his successors in one-party rule, Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini, discredited. Their mentors, Marx, Pareto, Nietzsche and Sorel, have been returned to their places in academic sociology, economics and philosophy, from which they were taken.

It is tempting to dismiss the early twentieth century, when dictatorship was at its height, as an aberration. Who now is concerned about the politics of the Thirties, about Dollfuss and Franco, about the corporate state and Lebensraum, or about the class struggle? The politicians and the causes of those years are gone from the memory of modern Europe



Left, Adolf Hitler broadcasts to the German people on 31 January 1933

Bundesarchiv

Right, Mussolini poses for a sculpture in 1925

The Wiener Library

Previous page, spectacle and ritual: a view of the Nazi party rally at Nuremberg in 1934

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which has banished political extremism. We move easily from the liberalism of Mill to the communitarianism of Ezioni, without a glance at the discredited creeds of Fascism and Communism. What seems important now is to balance the claims of the individual and society in the brave new world of democratic capitalism.

But a deeper look at contemporary Europe makes such optimism superficial. There is the war in Bosnia and the instability of the rest of former Yugoslavia. They betray the presence of Europe of unsatisfied minorities, whose grievances can be readily persuaded into violence. There are the small residual fascist parties in Western Europe, and the survival in positions of power of former Communist leaders in the east. There are the weaknesses of capitalism, especially its tendency to create unemployment, the breeding ground for political extremism. There is the tacit racialism which underlies some European attitudes to immigrants. Democratic internationalism appears challenged by the nationalism freed from the restraints imposed by the Cold War.

Such a pessimistic appraisal is as valid as an optimistic one, and should lead us to look again at the early years of our century, particularly the Twenties and Thirties. These decades are too often labelled by historians as simply the inter-war years, taking their cue from Foch's percipient estimation of the Treaty of Versailles as providing a twenty years' armistice. Germany, having lost one bid for European domination, then attempted another under a more virulent regime. The politics of early twentieth-century Europe were decided by war and the drive to it, which ended in Germany's defeat in 1945.

Such a war-determined, German-centred view of modern European history overlooks much political activity which happened outside these parameters, and even decided them. For example the coming to power of Hitler was made easier by the existence of a similar dictatorship in Italy. The revolutions in Russia, though occurring in the context of German victories in the First World War, did not happen simply because of those victories. Russian politicians of whatever hue had their own agendas which they pursued regardless of Germany or anyone else. Once established Communism, if only in the negative sense of something to be

avoided, succeeded in imposing its image on all Europe. It is arguable that in 1939 the actions of Stalin, taken for his own reasons, were almost as important as those of Hitler.

A crude Hitler-centred view of the early twentieth-century has been made more sophisticated by the Great Power concepts of Paul Kennedy, which sees changing relations between a limited number of powers as basic to the political structure of Europe. In the early twentieth century the foremost powers were Germany, Britain and Russia, with the United States in the background. Germany's great economic strength had to be matched by commensurate political and military power, power which was successfully resisted by her neighbours.

However there is no inherent reason for great military power to produce a war, or great political commitment to result in dictatorship. To see Nazi aims in the Second World War as a simple desire to overthrow the Paris Peace Settlement of 1919 is greatly to simplify the nature of the creed. The fact that Germany has been for many years economically strong, while remaining peaceful and democratic, suggests that more complex forces than mere power were at work to make the Germany, and the Europe, of the 1930's. The very ubiquity of dictatorship in that decade should put us on our guard against an oversimplified view of its politics. There was no Hitler-led Fascist International, creating dictatorships from Portugal to Estonia. Even at its height in 1942 Hitler's power was not such that he could set up rulers at will. He accepted leaders like Horthy and Mussolini, though their actions were not always to his liking. Nazism as much reflected developments in Europe as determined them. It was Hitler's rival, Stalin, who kept tight control of Communists and their attempts to obtain political power, with the result that no lasting regime of the Left was established in Europe outside the Soviet Union.

Such a varied political situation demands a treatment of the early twentieth century as an era of dictators, mostly of the Right, and an understanding as to why this should be so. Only then will we be able to assess whether dictatorship has finally disappeared from Europe. At the time the dictatorships of Europe emphasised their differences, parading their rival ideologies of Right and Left, and their separate national and

Lloyd George was not intended to be permanent, and by the party system could not be so. Yet the use in the democracies of emergency powers to win the war had its effect on the establishment of dictatorship elsewhere. Kemal Ataturk and Mussolini, with less justification, claimed such powers from their respective parliaments. One of the curious features of the era of the dictators is the readiness of leaders and political parties, with no basic interest in democracy and constitutional legality, to use the forms of both, often in an apparently unnecessary manner. We talk of the end of the Weimar Republic and the establishment of the Third Reich, yet in form the Republic continued to exist under Hitler, and the Enabling Law was periodically renewed.

social aims. Yet it is now their similarities that seem more important. In assessing methods of control for example there appears not much difference between a Nazi concentration camp and a Soviet labour institution. The architecture of the dictatorial regimes is curiously similar, at once realistic and grandiose, and ultimately lifeless. The new Soviet man and the new German were essentially visions of a Platonism turned to evil.

Such similarities point to general factors in early twentieth-century Europe leading to the spread of dictatorship, which it is the task of the historian to reveal. The most important general cause of dictatorship in Europe was the First World War, its course, its character and its results. After the war much ink was spilt trying to understand its causes, and to weigh blame for the conflict, but these causes had been left behind in the Europe of the war and its aftermath. Once started the war assumed a character of its own entirely new to Europe, though there had been hints in the American Civil War what a general industry-led war would be like. The war proceeded to create and devour armies of millions, to require military and economic organisation of nations on an unprecedented scale, and to test existing governmental structures to the limit. It was as if Jacobin France had been reborn all over Europe, and only those regimes prepared to emulate it in spirit, if not in all its actions, survived. It is not surprising that some structures of government collapsed under the strain and that others had to appear to alter their nature in order to meet the challenge.

'If only we'd had a Lloyd George', Germans in the Twenties were said to have murmured as they looked around for a suitable figure, until to their ultimate misfortune they found one. Lloyd George, helped to establish by his successful prosecution of the war, rather than by his actual powers in government, some of the ideal of the personal dictator. He appeared as the leader with great organising ability, yet with the power to move millions, one who represented the people of his country. In Europe Lloyd George stood for the successful populism which inspired most, though not all, dictators.

It was convenient for continental dictators to forget that in the British mind, and in its constitution, the 'dictatorship' of

The reasons lie in the First World War's forcing of the process of political change. The trend to democracy and the rule of law was apparent all over Europe, but these could take several different forms. It might mean the strengthening of existing parliaments by an extension of the franchise; it might mean the establishment of Presidential regimes supported by mass popular vote. It might mean the rule of many parties or of one party. Both the presidential and the one party interpretation of democracy could interpret the rule of law as what was willed for the good of the people.

The example of such an interpretation of democracy and law was set by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the immediate product of the War as a process of political change. The ready use of planning and terror by the Bolsheviks, after Jacobin France, offered an example to other leaders to be imitated or avoided, in varying degrees. Fascists did not want to adopt Communist beliefs, but they were prepared to use some of their methods. They readily accepted the view that law reflects a particular good, in the Communist case of social class, in the Fascist, of nation or race. This assault upon the universal moral standards which underlay nineteenth-century Europe has been perhaps the feature of dictatorship responsible for its gravest evils.

From this interpretation of democracy as one party, or one leader rule, with law subordinate to it, arose the totalitarianism, which we now think of as typifying dictatorship. The term has been criticised by Schapiro in his study of the subject, as inappropriate if applied too widely. Yet in popular usage it well conveys the monstrous element in the three major dictatorships. 'Totalitarian' certainly indicates the subordination of economic affairs in each society to the will of the government, reflecting another legacy of the First World War, the example of the strict control of the economy practised in Germany under Rathenau. Whatever the differences between Left and Right wing dictatorship, in this rejection of the international capitalist order of the Western democracies they were at one.

According to Schapiro, Hitler drawing on national German traditions, might well have preferred to use the word authoritarian to describe his regime leaving the description,

totalitarian, to this Italian rival and ally. This may be historically correct, but the term, authoritarian, has been employed in another fashion, namely to describe the lesser European dictatorships which for the most part maintained constitutional legality and avoided the excesses of the regimes of the larger powers. The spread of such authoritarian rule throughout Europe owed much to a Right-wing republicanism often Catholic in inspiration.

The breakdown of the multinational empires in 1918 freed a Catholic political philosophy, disliking elements of liberal democracy and opposed to Marxist socialism, but with a strong sense of community and respect for traditional institutions like the Church and family. As Catholicism was often the religion of unrepresented groups, like the Poles and Slovaks, in the old empires, such political views thrived amongst them when these groups after 1918 obtained independence, or at least recognition. It became natural for the new small states of the Twenties to look to the Church for inspiration once their imperial overlords had gone. Such Catholic social thinking found expression in the regimes of Seipel in Austria and Horthy in Hungary, it spread into the Iberian states and Poland, and finally influenced Vichy France. It makes far more sense now to regard Franco as a national leader drawing on this Catholic authoritarianism, rather than as a representative of international Fascism.

Of course Franco, like many other such leader, was prepared to cooperate with Mussolini and Hitler when it suited him, just as they in their own countries were prepared to use Catholic support when it was offered. Essentially, however, Fascist and Nazi thought was godless drawing its inspiration from the anti-Christian elements in nineteenth-century thought. But the interplay during the era of the dictators between a Christian-based authoritarianism and a non-Christian totalitarianism deserves to be considered in more detail than it has been. Why did the non-Christian Hitler rather than the Catholic Brüning, Mussolini's early favourite, become leader of Germany?

The answers have their roots in the social and religious make-up of the country, as well in the undoubted inspirational gifts of Hitler, and are too complex to be considered here. But certainly to see Hitler's success simply in terms of a campaign against the Treaty of Versailles and the results of the Great Depression will not do. Brüning too was against these, as indeed were most Europeans by the early Thirties. Treaty revision was a main element of the rise of Italian Fascism, but it was merely a campaigning slogan for Nazism. Neither did such revisionism produce the Second World War, though it provided excuses for it. The opening of the war was occasioned not by an attempt to rectify the German frontier, but by a reassertion of German military power in an area forbidden to it by the Peace Treaties.

If only the Peace Settlement had been different then Europe would be able to live in peace and democracy. Such sentiments, often expressed in the Thirties, have found echoes in historians, common themes being that central Europe was Balkanised, while Germany still remained potentially a Great Power. Yet the Treaties simply recognised the basic political situation that existed in 1919. The Big Three in Paris could not dismember Germany; they could not recreate the multinational empires. By recognising the right to nationhood of the Slavs of Europe, Paris was acknowledging

reality. The failure of the peacemakers was to overestimate the durability and strength of the Allied coalition, that had produced the victory of 1918 and the eventual peace treaties. The effect of the American withdrawal into isolationism has perhaps been too well stressed, as the U.S.A. continued to exercise great financial influence in Europe during the Twenties. Less emphasised has been the effect of the challenge to the Settlement made by Kemal's Turkey. Yet the Turks divided the Allies and provided the first example of successful revisionism, the desire for which then gradually spread through the defeated or unsatisfied states. Much of the European appeal of Fascism lay in its espousal of such claims, some of which like those of Hungary were fulfilled in the Europe of 1942. Revisionism helps to explain how the Christian and non-Christian Right could cooperate.

Associated with revisionism were other factors not fully recognised at Paris. It was too readily assumed that the Slav leaders who had worked with the Allies, could after the war create viable, lasting states on their terms. What was not recognised was that disparate ethnic groups in these states might not be willing to work together for ever. Serbs and Croats, Czechs and Slovaks for example cooperated for a time, but it did not require much effort by Germany and Italy to prise them apart, creating more demands for settlement revision. It is no accident that now the dominant force of Communist ideology has been removed these divisions have appeared again. No historian of the early twentieth century can now ignore the full effect of its many ethnic groupings.

A feature of the time that deserves more stress is the appeal of the modernity of dictatorship, which has now run its course. To many, even in the surviving democracies, it seemed as if one-party dictatorship was the only form of government for the mass societies of the modern age. Constitutional monarchy appeared old-fashioned, and parliaments to be mere talking-shops. What was wanted were men with the power to shape the future, to create the strong economic and military societies which it was thought were needed. Germany had almost won the First World War by her control of her society, and Britain had followed and surpassed her. Mussolini could claim that he was carrying into peace the methods that had won the war. The Webbs were notoriously to write of Stalin's Russia as exemplifying a possible new civilisation, but many, even in Britain, were prepared to say the same about Italy and Germany.

Now that dictatorship has disappeared from Europe we can look at the time when it was at its strongest and most widespread dispassionately. But we should look widely and deeply, and not regard the time as merely an unfortunate interlude between the two great wars. If we wish for Europe to avoid a rebirth of dictatorship, or even of political parties advocating it, we should concern ourselves with questions of nationality and minorities, the relation of political problems to those of economics, and demands for strong government prepared to bend the rule of law and the democratic process to its will. To combat dictatorship demands understanding as well as vigilance.

Kenneth Thomson was formerly Head of History at Elthorne High School, Ealing. He has written on modern European History and recently completed a book, *Europe in the Era of the Dictators, 1917-41*.