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The Importance of the Situational Element in East Central European Fascism

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1. Was Fascism a Synchronic-Epochal or a Generic-Diachronic Phenomenon?

The two research strategies on fascism represent different disciplinary perspectives. The first, which looks at fascism from the epochal point of view, as an ideology or set of movements in interwar and wartime Europe, reflects the way historians approach phenomena. It is in the nature of their discipline that they see things as embedded in a certain temporal context or conjuncture. When they uncover facts and put them together in a narrative, they are representing the "other country" of the past. The second, generic-diachronic strategy is more appropriate to the social sciences, including those that concern themselves with fascism, political science and sociology in particular. Here the analysis looks for common features, patterns, systems, rules, and definitions. Social scientists aim to distill their findings from the concrete empirical material. When they are successful, concrete facts are used only as examples to illustrate general principles.

Of course, the two strategies are complementary, mutually enhancing, and often indispensable to one another. Social scientists require narratives and documents on individual cases prepared by historians in order to survey the spectrum of cases of the phenomenon under investigation. And historians rely on research from the social sciences to identify questions they should be asking in their research. Thus these two strategies have a mutual dynamic. Naturally, this relationship does not exist in regard to fascism alone, but is the general division of labor in scholarship between the humanities and social sciences.

I am speaking here in terms of ideal types. There are sociologists, particularly historical sociologists, like Derek Sayer, who I believe are indistinguishable from historians. And historians like Geoffrey H. Eley (1983) and Ronald

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Grigor Suny can produce theoretical work about historical phenomena that is also excellent sociology and political science.

3. Are there Distinct East Central or Southeastern European Types of Fascism? If so, What Are their Specific Features?

Fascism was somewhat of a global phenomenon in the 1930s—certainly it existed in the Americas and influenced parts of Asia—but it was preeminently a European phenomenon. The center of the fascist movement was the center of Europe, the German-Italian axis. Beyond Italy and Germany, the historical region of East Central, alternatively called Eastern Europe, displayed the most important fascist movements (for my view on this region, see Himka 2002). Although there are many common features of the East Central European fascist parties, each of them had unique and salient characteristics.

One reason for the popularity of fascism in East Central Europe was the widespread dissatisfaction with the results of the Paris Peace Conference. Radical right politics were fuelled by territorial losses in Austria and Hungary, by unfulfilled territorial claims in the case of Lithuania, and by frustrated nationalisms among Croats, German minorities, Slovaks, and Galician Ukrainians. These were all nations that longed for a re-division of Europe, something that both Mussolini and especially Hitler championed. As a result, nationalist movements gravitated towards Italian Fascism and German National Socialism and adopted their ideological postulates and style. The situation was similar to that of insurgencies and anti-Western resistance movements in developing countries from the late 1950s until the late 1980s. They gravitated towards their potential allies, China and especially Russia, adopting communist ideology and rhetoric. Since the collapse of communism in Europe and the capitalist transformation of China, the leftist components in insurgencies have been largely reduced to vestigial rhetoric, and other ideologies, in particular Islamism, have become more prominent.

The importance of this situational element in East European fascism can be illustrated in the case of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). It came into being as a radical right nationalist organization in 1929 after the merger of a number of separate groups. The main component was the Ukrainian Military Organization, which began as an anti-Polish insurgency in the 1920s and even attracted some leftists. Many veterans of World War I and of the Polish-Ukrainian War belonged to it. But another group that dissolved itself into OUN in 1929 was a smaller, self-proclaimed Ukrainian fascist

organization. OUN quickly came under the influence of Italian fascism and of a Ukrainian nationalist, Dmytro Dontsov, whose doctrines were a variant of fascist ideology. As Hitler seemed to be gearing up for war against the Soviet Union, which Ukrainian nationalists considered their primary enemy, they moved much closer to National Socialism. In May 1939 the head of OUN wrote to Ribbentrop and declared that OUN was "ideologically closely related" to Italian fascism and German national socialism. OUN began to flaunt a much more ferocious anti-Semitism. In April 1941, the Bandera faction of OUN issued a program highlighting the organization's anti-democratic nature and its adherence to the *Füherprinzip*; it also introduced a fascist-style slogan and salute. OUN sent profuse declarations of belonging to the New Europe to all of Europe's fascist leaders in July 1941 (the subject of a forthcoming article by Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe in *Kritika* 2011).

When it became clear that Germany was to be defeated in its war against the Soviet Union, the Bandera faction of OUN began to distance itself from fascism, at least rhetorically (although they still murdered Poles and Jews in mass, see Snyder 2003: 166-77; Siemaszko and Siemaszko 2000; and Bruder 2007:218-19 on Jews). In its second issue in 1943, *Ideia i chyn* (Idea and Deed), the party's organ, published an article entitled "For a Correct Approach," which called for revising the organization's murderous policies toward national minorities and rethinking its relationship to fascism. "Out of fashion", wrote the author O. I. Stepaniv, "some people became enthusiastic about fascism and German national socialism, not reflecting whether these movements correspond to our nature and needs, or not". In particular, she felt adopting German racial doctrine was a political misstep that had tarnished the good name of the Ukrainians. In August of that year the Third Extraordinary Assembly of OUN revised the program again, this time pledging democracy and minority rights. Within the next few years the publicists of OUN's armed forces, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), were couching their propaganda in anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist rhetoric.

Many interwar East Central European nationalists were drawn to fascism because of the political conjuncture, and they attempted to take their leave when that conjuncture fundamentally changed. But this was not true of all the fascisms of East Central Europe. Romania was an independent state that had had all of its territorial aspirations satisfied by the peace conference. Yet it too had a strong fascist movement in The Legion of the "Archangel Michael." Clearly, something else was at work here. And the conjunctural attraction of fascism was not limited to East Central Europe, as the case of Walloon nationalists in Belgium shows.

The case of Romania is important to consider because it indicates that fascism was a strong impulse throughout Europe even apart from the post-World War I geopolitical realities. Versailles may have motivated Germany's national socialists, but it did not have any meaning at all for Spain's Falange. Thus the conjunctural element in East Central European fascism should not be employed as some kind of "excuse" for particular movements. And in the case of OUN, abandoning fascist rhetoric could coexist easily with political intolerance, dictatorship, and the slaughter of national minorities.

The case of Romania also invites consideration as to whether some features of East Central European fascism were specific to the region. Three prominent features of the legionary movement were anti-Semitism, anticommunism, and self-discipline. Anti-Semitism was important in French and German fascist movements, but not in the Italian case. There was, however, no East Central European fascism that did not have a strong anti-Semitic component, though this came to the fore particularly during wartime, during the alliance with German National Socialists. In Romania it was a hallmark from the beginning of the movement in the 1920s and never abated. Perhaps it was because of the large number of Jews in the country that this proved so important, although of course this factor alone cannot explain the rise of anti-Semitism, which is a highly complex and multifaceted issue. Anti-Semitism was widespread in Polish nationalist groups, but the fascist Falanga was the most extreme and violent in its hatred for Jews. Again, this was a country with many Jews, particularly in Eastern Poland/Western Ukraine. OUN was anti-Semitic from the beginning as well, though the intensity of its anti-Semitism did not match that of the Romanian legionaries. Yet the strong Jewish presence in and of itself need not have produced fascism, and it is important to remember that German National Socialism, the most anti-Semitic fascist movement in interwar Europe, emerged in a country with only a relatively small Jewish population. In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote that it was important to take note of the difference between East Central European countries, where there were masses of Jews, many unassimilated, and West European countries, where there were few Jews, all of whom were assimilated (1975: 7-8, 28-29). But it is difficult to see how that played out, especially in relation to any specific cases of East Central European fascism.

Anti-communism was a factor of tremendous importance in Hungarian, Romanian, and Ukrainian fascism, a reflection of brief experiences with Bolshevism in the aftermath of World War I and their proximity to the Soviet Union. But it was not particularly germane to the Croatian *Ustaše*. Nor was anti-communism a characteristic exclusive to fascists in Hungary,

Romania, and Western Ukraine, where anti-communism was mainstream politics.

Eugen Weber's famous portrait of "the Men of the Archangel" dwelled on the legionaries' self-discipline as exemplified by their willingness to undertake public works projects and their hatred for corruption (1966: 101-126). OUN members abstained from drink and smoke and had a rigid code of behavior. All fascist movements demanded self-sacrifice and a particular conduct. Perhaps the perception of their own relative backwardness led some East European fascists to emphasize self-discipline, to rise above the corruption and dissolution that they saw around them. But this is little-explored territory. At this point, it is difficult for me to see enough coherence among the East Central European fascisms to warrant constituting them as a separate category.

5. Can One Speak of a Recrudescence of Fascism in Contemporary Europe, or We Deal here with an Essentially New Political Phenomenon?

Historians are fond of Heraclitus's observation that one cannot step into the same river twice. In Western Ukraine and in the Ukrainian overseas Diaspora, OUN has been revived, at least as a myth. When Viktor Yushchenko was president of Ukraine (2005-2010), he declared prominent OUN leaders to be heroes of Ukraine. A large statue of OUN leader Stepan Bandera stands in Lviv. The OUN heritage has been picked up by youth groups, by many in the public at large, and even by numerous intellectuals and journalists. But this is not the OUN of the 1930s and 1940s. There is nostalgia for fascists, but not necessarily nostalgia for fascism, although too often it bleeds into it. Those who embrace the heritage of OUN today usually deny that OUN was fascist, while simultaneously defending their fascist activities (e.g., collaboration with the Third Reich; murder of Jews, other national minorities, and communists; suppression of their political opponents; and cult of the leader). This nostalgic movement co-exists with, and sometimes overlaps with, genuine neo-fascist groups on the order of UNA-UNSO, headed by the son of the OUN's supreme military commander. (During one election in the 1990s, UNA-UNSO inscribed on its posters: "Vote for us and you will never have to vote again".).

Then there are the skinheads, who are not so bound to historic Ukrainian fascism, but are rather part of the violent racist lifestyle phenomenon that exists all over Europe and also in America. This typology can be extended to many of the movements in post-communist Europe (e.g., the resurging Tiso

cult in Slovakia is complemented by skinhead violence against the Roma population). To me as a historian, these look like distinct phenomena, and also distinct from the original fascism of the 1930s and 1940s. This is not to deny that they have many features in common and that they pose a real danger to national minorities, leftists, and democratic principles.

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