European Fascism and its aftermath

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Fascism took hold in Europe during a particularly turbulent period in history. In the aftermath of the First World War, a series of huge social and political changes hit the continent. The Russian Revolution in 1917 brought Communists to power for the first time, sparking not only a devastating civil war throughout the Russian Empire, but also years of political unrest across Europe. The collapse of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires after the war also precipitated various power struggles. Then, in the late 1920s, Europe was struck by one of the greatest economic crises the world has ever seen, which again resulted in widespread civil unrest. Life during this time was, as the aphorism goes, just one damn thing after another.

Attitudes towards diversity during this turbulent period – particularly racial, ethnic and religious diversity – were different depending on which part of the continent one considers. In most of the west, generally speaking, things were relatively simple. Western Europe was not as badly affected by the aforementioned crises as was Eastern Europe, where there was more scope for conflict between different groups fighting for power or scarce resources. Countries like Britain and France had single dominant cultures with long, stable histories: ethnic and religious minorities therefore tended not to court trouble and, since they rarely represented a significant threat to those who were in power, on the whole they were officially tolerated.  

In the east of the continent, by contrast, the relationship between different groups was rather more complicated. On the one hand, there was still a strong tradition of tolerance left over from the days of Europe’s great empires. Over the preceding centuries, in the absence of any meaningful national borders, a huge variety of ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic minorities had spread and intermingled, not only in the cities, but also across the countryside. In varying degrees, these different groups had learned, grudgingly, to accept life amongst and beside one another because under the imperial system there had been little choice but to do so. To modern eyes, this produced all kinds of cultural confusion. For example, Poland’s national poet, Adam Mickiewicz, was born in what would today be considered Belarus and was brought up speaking Lithuanian. His most celebrated poem, which Poles to this day regard as the most sublime expression of Polish national sentiment, actually begins with the words ‘Lithuania! My fatherland!’ But during the early decades of the twentieth century most Poles who learned this poem at school saw no contradiction between these multiple identities: indeed, it was quite common to regard oneself as, say, Polish by birth, Lithuanian by nationality, German by ethnicity and Jewish by
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religion. In other words, diversity was a concept so widely accepted that many people had internalised it (Davies 2005: 52–4).

On the other hand, the way that the empires had broken up after the First World War created situations where many such people felt forced to choose between these multiple identities, or at least to prioritise one above the rest. As the empires collapsed, the international community tried to parcel out territory along ethnic lines. Thus Czechs and Slovaks were granted their own homeland; areas mainly populated by Poles were assigned to Poland; the frontiers of Italy were expanded to include Italian-speaking minorities from neighbouring lands; and so on. While this redrawing of the map was born of good intentions, it had some unfortunate effects. One of these was the elevation in the popular mind of language and ethnicity as the most important markers of citizenship (Kamusella 2009: 51; Pearson 1983: 131f.). This immediately caused problems: if Czechoslovakia was a country for Czechs and Slovaks, what place was there for its 3.3 million German speakers, who together represented almost 24 per cent of the population? And what about the million or so Hungarians, Ruthenians, Poles and others – another seven per cent of the population? In the end, even the relationship between the Czechs and Slovaks proved very delicate, with the Slovaks very quickly complaining that the partnership was less than equal.

Such problems became commonplace in Eastern Europe during the 1920s and 30s. For example, the official name for Yugoslavia after the war was ‘The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes’, which was hardly reassuring for the state’s large Bosniak, German, Albanian, Hungarian, Romanian and Gypsy minorities. The ethnic melting pot in Yugoslavia was further complicated by class (many of the minorities resented becoming subjects of a Serbian king) and religion (since the country was home to a mix of Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Jews). Elsewhere, the Poles managed to forge a state for themselves out of the ruins of three empires – German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian – but inherited sizeable ethnic and religious minorities from each of them. The Ukrainians, meanwhile, ended up without a homeland at all, but found themselves split, rather unsatisfyingly, between Poland and the Soviet Union.

Attitudes towards ethnic diversity therefore underwent a period of radical change between the wars. The international community had treated diversity in Eastern Europe not as a normal and unavoidable part of life but as a problem that needed to be solved, and in doing so they had created an environment of ethnic winners and losers. The winners, who were never in a strong enough position to consider themselves entirely safe, strove to impose their own national identity on their new countries. Minority groups, meanwhile, became correspondingly indignant and resisted assimilation – sometimes violently. For example, arguments between rival ethnic groups in Yugoslavia rose to such a pitch that in 1928 a Serbian member of parliament shot several of his Croat opponents in the assembly chamber. A few years later, the Serbian king, Alexander I, was also assassinated – this time by one of his ethnic Bulgarian subjects who wanted an independent Macedonia.

It was in this context that fascism began to take hold in Europe. Fascist and other far right movements proved adept at harnessing the indignant nationalism of ethnic groups who felt they had been wronged by their rivals. They portrayed the nation – whichever nation that might be – as a single, homogeneous group with historic rights to a particular homeland and way of life. Anyone whose loyalty to this national group might be compromised was to be excluded. In practice this meant that all other political systems were to be eschewed in favour of a fascist totalitarian state; all other ethnic or racial groups were to be shunned in favour of those who were ethnically ‘pure’; and in some places, such as Catholic Croatia, religion was also seen as a fundamental part of one’s nationality. In addition, most fascists embraced the notions of social Darwinism and eugenics, whereby disabled and other supposedly ‘inferior’ humans would be purged from the race. Fascist attitudes towards women and homosexuals was also non-inclusive,
the former being relegated to the role of child-bearing, and the latter being criminalised. The sum of all these beliefs meant that diversity was almost always regarded as a kind of national sickness which needed to be purged from the state. The ultimate goal of fascism, particularly in Germany, was to create a political, racial, ethnic, religious, sexual and genetic monoculture.5

Perhaps the most disturbing feature of fascist ideology was its promotion of the legitimacy of violence to achieve this aim. Violence was often considered to be little more than the expression of a perpetual struggle that was entirely natural in human affairs. It was also considered a driver of social change: since only the fittest could survive in a violent world, it was the quickest and most effective way of purging society of weak and degenerate elements (Bessell 2004: 1; Davies and Lynch 2002: 114; Griffin 1991: 104f.). ‘War alone’, claimed Mussolini, ‘keys up all human energies to their maximum tension and sets the seal of nobility on those peoples who have the courage to face it.’ (Mussolini 2000: 53).

The Nazis in Germany were particularly wedded to this notion. They used violent methods against political targets long before they came to power, and mythologised this violence as a noble struggle ever afterwards. Once they had seized power in Germany they turned their sights on their racial and genetic ‘inferiors’, both through eugenics programmes and through the persecution of racial minorities, particularly of Jews and Gypsies.

Almost inevitably, this internal violence was eventually also directed externally. The ultimate test of the German nation was to engage it in a trial of strength against all the nations around it. Thus they embarked on the military conquest of Poland, which marked the beginning of the Second World War in Europe. This was followed by the invasion of Denmark, Norway, the Low Countries, France and eventually the Soviet Union. The Italian fascists followed suit, and launched an invasion of Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece. Ion Antonescu’s far right Romanian regime also enthusiastically entered the conflict against the Soviet Union in order to win back ‘historic’ Romanian territory in modern-day Moldova and Ukraine.

Wherever the fascists went, they imposed their ideology upon the territories they invaded. Puppet nationalist and fascist governments were installed across Europe, and fascist policies – particularly regarding race – were pursued everywhere. The most obvious example of this was the universal rounding up of Jews and Gypsies for export to the Nazi extermination camps, but other races were treated almost as badly. In their plan to cleanse Eastern Europe, Nazi officials hoped to expel 80 per cent of the Polish population from their lands, followed by 64 per cent of the Ukrainian population and 75 per cent of Belarusians. Some high ranking Nazis openly talked of bringing about the deaths of between 20 and 30 million Poles and Slavs through starvation. It was hoped such policies would free up territory, which could then be repopulated by ethnically ‘pure’ Germans (Tooze 2007: 366, 467, 479f.). The Second World War was therefore never merely a conflict over territory. It was also a war of race and ethnicity. Some of the defining events of the war had nothing to do with winning and maintaining physical ground, but with imposing one’s own ethnic stamp on ground already held.

It is important to note that while the Nazis were the main protagonists of ethnic cleansing throughout Europe, local nationalists and ultra-nationalists learned from their methods. In wartime Ukraine, for example, local people were recruited to help round up and exterminate Jews. Once this moral line had been crossed there was no reason why it could not be crossed again. For ultra-nationalists, who had long been campaigning for a ‘Ukraine for Ukrainians’, the final solution to their ‘Jewish problem’ would serve equally well when dealing with their ‘Polish problem’. From 1943 onwards, therefore, Ukrainian partisans in the regions of Volhynia and Galicia embarked on a savage campaign of ethnic cleansing against Poles. Whole villages were targetted, and their entire populations – men, women and children – were rounded up and slaughtered. According to Polish sources, around 70,000 Poles were massacred this way,
and hundreds of thousands were encouraged to flee the region. Unsurprisingly this produced a backlash, and groups of enraged Poles began to commit reprisal atrocities against Ukrainian villages (Snyder 2003: 205; Statiev 2010: 87f.).

A similar process occurred in Yugoslavia, where the Croatian Fascists murdered almost 600,000 Serbs, Muslims and Jews in an attempt to purge their entire country of racial, ethnic and religious minorities (Tomasevich 2001: 727f.). Other groups, particularly the Serbs, then retaliated in kind, sending the whole country into a spiral of ethnic cleansing whose echoes would be repeated half a century later. More localised massacres also occurred in other parts of Europe such as the Greek–Bulgarian borderlands. When taken together, these various instances of ethnic cleansing provide a terrifying picture. During the Second World War a vast number of people – perhaps ten million or more – were deliberately exterminated for no other reason than that they happened to belong to the wrong ethnic or racial group (Lowe 2012: 187).

Ironically, many of those who survived this huge culling managed to do so precisely because they had grown up in diverse communities. In the many thousands of memoirs and personal testimonies that have been published and collected since the Second World War, stories of people using their intimate knowledge of other cultures in order to escape death are common. Some Jews and Gypsies were able to disguise themselves as members of other racial or ethnic groups just by changing their clothes and behaviour. People who could easily switch between different languages managed to avoid being caught up in the ethnic cleansing by speaking fluently in the dialect of whichever nationalist militia they came across. In Yugoslavia and Poland/Ukraine, those of ‘suspicious’ ethnicity were often asked to recite certain Christian prayers, since these were rendered differently depending on whether one followed the Catholic, Uniate or Orthodox form of the religion. But once again, those from the most mixed communities often knew the prayers and rites of the neighbours they had grown up with, and were thus able to escape death.

The end of the Second World War in May 1945 sounded the official death knell for fascism in most parts of Europe, but it did not signal the end of the attack on diversity. Over the next two years the political climate across the whole of Europe – west as well as east – underwent a marked swing to the left. Buoyed by its many successes during the war, and its uncompromising stance against fascism, the Communist Party enjoyed a sudden and massive renaissance. By the middle of 1945, the Italian Communist Party had over two and a quarter million members – far more than any other political party. In the French and Czech elections of 1946 it was the Communists who won the highest percentage of votes: almost 29 per cent in France and 38 per cent in Czechoslovakia (Judt 2007: 79, 88; Rioux 1987: 110). In most of Eastern Europe, Communism was more or less imposed by the presence of the Red Army – but even so it was an enormously popular ideology among some sections of the population. The Romanian Communist Party, for example, increased from only 1,000 members in August 1944 to more than a million four years later; and membership of the Hungarian Communist Party swelled from 3,000 to half a million within the course of just a single year (Kontler 2002: 392; Tismaneanu 2003: 87).

In many respects, Europe’s Communists were every bit as intolerant of diversity as the fascists had been. In the countries where they held power, they denied the right of other political parties to exist, and strove to indoctrinate the entire population with a single, Stalinist ideology (Applebaum 2012: 319–51). They were intolerant of religion, and strove to convert religious institutions into further mouthpieces for the Communist message (ibid.: 286–92). They regarded class, rather than the nation, as society’s central battleground, and lionised working class people above all others. The aristocracy, capitalist businessmen, the middle classes, the intelligentsia – indeed any group who saw themselves as separate from the working masses – was regarded as inimical to the Communist cause. Like the fascists, they advocated radical methods to purge
society of these elements, and thought nothing of persecuting individuals who did not conform to government approved norms.

At first glance, ethnic diversity might seem to have been the one form of diversity to be immune from communist interference, since it was irrelevant to the class struggle. As the closing sentences of the Communist Manifesto make clear, Karl Marx had envisaged a brotherhood of all nations, united by their opposition to bourgeois and aristocratic values. However, the persecution of ethnic or racial minorities certainly did not stop when the communists took control of Eastern Europe after the war; in fact, in some regions it worsened.

There were several reasons for this. First, in the chaotic aftermath of the war, it was virtually impossible to prevent outbreaks of violence: all the normal structures of society had been swept away, and no matter how much the new authorities might want to impose a sense of order, they were not yet strong enough to do so.

Second, it was impossible to reverse the effects of fascist and far right ideology overnight. The European population had been subjected to years of fascist propaganda, and by 1945 racial hatreds had become deeply ingrained – particularly those hatreds that had pre-existed fascism, such as anti-ziganism and anti-semitism. When Jews returned to Poland after the war, for example, they were often attacked by people who had become used to assaulting Jews with impunity. Sometimes the violence was communal. The most infamous incident was the pogrom at Kielce in July 1946, where a mob attacked a Jewish community centre and killed 42 Jews. But there were dozens of similar episodes, not only in Poland, but also in Hungary and Slovakia. From 1946 Jews began to flee these countries out of fear that their former countrymen intended to finish off the job that Hitler had started. It is estimated that around 300,000 Jews fled Eastern Europe in the five years after the war (Bauer 1970: 318–20).

Third, there is much evidence to suggest that, in the immediate aftermath of the war at least, the Communist parties of Eastern Europe actually encouraged ethnic tension. Communist leaders recognised the strength of nationalist feeling in Eastern Europe, and rather than fighting it they tried to harness it. For example, Hungarian Communist leaders made anti-semitic speeches (despite many of them being Jewish themselves) because they recognised the potential for using Jewish stereotypes in their propaganda against capitalists and speculators (Pelle 1995: 206). Polish Communists encouraged the expulsion of ethnic minorities from their borderlands because it gave them the opportunity to play Father Christmas: all the land that was freed up as a consequence of these expulsions could then be parcelled out to grateful Polish peasants. The Soviet Union was glad to promote the wholesale displacement of ethnic minorities from one Eastern European country to another because communities of refugees were much easier to control than communities with established hierarchies and power structures. It is possible that even the massacre of certain groups was tolerated, because it sent an unequivocal message to those most likely to resist the Communists. The mass executions of some 50,000–60,000 Croatian nationalists in May and June 1945 certainly ripped the heart out of any potential Croatian separatist movement in Tito’s Yugoslavia (see Lowe 2012: 264f.).

But perhaps the greatest reason for the continued assault on ethnic diversity after 1945 was the continent-wide desire for revenge and retribution. Since so much of the war had been conducted along racial and ethnic lines, many people sought communal retribution against those communities they regarded as culpable. The Czechs, for example, blamed the Sudeten Germans for the dismemberment of their country and for the harsh treatment of Czechs during the war. According to the postwar Czech Justice Minister, Prokop Drtina, the Sudeten Germans were a ‘foreign ulcer in our body’, which had to be removed (Schieder 1960: 66f.; see also Staněk 1991: 59). Over the next two years, the Czech authorities expelled around three million Germans from the country, often with great violence. The rest of Eastern Europe followed suit.
Ethnic Germans were expelled from almost every country – 11,730,000 of them in total – in what would become the greatest forced migration in history.9

It was not only German populations that were expelled from various countries after the war. Throughout Eastern Europe ethnic minorities were now deemed a threat to national security, and many of these were also expelled from their homelands. Thus Ukrainians were expelled from Poland and vice versa, Romanians were expelled from Hungary and vice versa, Hungarians were expelled from Slovakia, Albanians from Greece and Italians from Yugoslavia. As a result of all this forced population movement, Eastern Europe became far less multicultural than it had been at any time in modern history. In the space of only one or two years, the proportion of national minorities across the eastern half of the continent more than halved (Pearson 1983: 229). Gone were the old imperial melting pots where Jews, Germans, Magyars, Slavs and dozens of other races and nationalities intermarried, squabbled and rubbed along together as best they could. In their place was a collection of monocultural nation-states, whose populations were more or less ethnically homogeneous. Eastern Europe had cleansed itself on a massive scale.

The ruthless pursuit of fascist fantasies before and during the war, and the postwar backlash against fascism, brought a new and disturbing contrast between the eastern and western halves of Europe. In much of Western Europe, which had managed to avoid some of the worst excesses of the war, diversity flourished. Many of those who had been displaced westwards between 1939 and 1945 chose to stay there afterwards, and immigration from all over the world was actively encouraged – at least on an official level – as workers of all races and creeds were invited to help rebuild war damage.

In Eastern Europe, by contrast, the cosmopolitanism that had existed for centuries was partly – and in many areas entirely – destroyed. Without free movement between countries, this lack of diversity remained until the fall of Communism more than 40 years later. But even when diversity returned, it was a diversity of a different kind. The old diversity of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires had been lost forever.

Notes

1 Despite this, minorities in the west were regularly on the receiving end of unofficial violence; see Panayi (1996).
2 Broadly speaking, national minorities focused their frustration against empire, not against each other; see Pearson (1983: 112–13). Different minorities also banded together in both left-wing movements and right-wing partnerships (ibid. 119–25; Mazower 2012: 48–54).
4 Census figures from 1930, quoted in Gyurgyik (1999: 38).
6 For higher estimates based on immigration statistics to Israel, see Proudfoot (1957: table 35).
7 Communists also wanted to shake off their image as a party of and for Jews see Kenez (2009: 156).
8 For the Soviet promotion of the expulsion of minorities between one country and another, see Snyder (2003: 186–7) and Janics (1982: 136–9).
9 German federal statistics quoted by De Zayas (2006: 156).

References


