

1. Italy and Germany have both experienced fascist/Nazi rule. Is it possible to link this historical fact to the development of post-war extreme right in these two countries?

The modern extreme right phenomenon in Europe is found in many nations across the continent, with varying degrees of political success for each party coming from differences in ideology, policy and acceptance by the public and political institutions.

All of this is often put into the context of the extreme right that existed in Europe before the modern era, before World War II. This type of extreme right political thought and action was defined more so as fascism or Nazism, and was demonstrably more violent than any of the strands of extreme right thought present in Europe today.

Both Italy and Germany were the main Axis powers in World War II, both ruled by fascist parties whose actions induced World War II. Although there were nuances to both systems of fascism that set them apart, both these countries were clearly driven by a similar extreme right ideology. It is somewhat of a debate, though, whether extreme right parties in Italy, such as Alleanza Nazionale and Lega Nord, and Germany, NPD/DVU and Republikaner, share the same platform.

This essay will examine the link between the pre-war extreme right in Italy and Germany and the modern extreme right that exists in these parties, covering the ideology, policy, electoral success and public support in relation to each other to identify whether they are related to each other.

Ideology

The fascist/Nazi ideology is somewhat of a paradox, as while many could identify certain factors of the ideology and how it is put into practice, the variants found in both Italy and Germany before World War II are often considered rather incoherent and lacking in an ideological core that traditional ideologies, such as liberalism or conservatism, have.

In trying to create a defining trait of fascism over the years, many different features have been determined to be key. Older definitions, focussed on the style of such

parties: “the charismatic leader, the uniformed choreography of ‘aesthetic politics’, the territorial expansionism or Kafkaesque agencies of ministerial propaganda and state terror”. (Griffin, 2002, p. 18) These features certainly characterise modern views of what the fascist and Nazi parties of Italy and Germany were before World War II and have shaped the public’s modern consciousness of what fascism is.

This definition is problematic though, as it lacks a certain gravity that other ideological definitions have in identifying a “core” set of principles as is required by Heywood’s criteria for an ideology; although it can be set that these features can amount to an “adjacent” or “peripheral” part. (Heywood, 2012) Features such as a “charismatic leader” and “territorial expansionism” are more processes and vehicles to achieving ideological goals rather than being goals themselves.

Therefore a “new consensus” has emerged that seeks to explain fascism as “ultra-nationalism that aspires to bring about the renewal of a nation’s entire political culture”. (Griffin, 2002, p. 19) This palingenesis, or rebirth of the nation, is now one of the most common and accepted ways of framing the fascist ideology of pre-war parties and adequately describes the “core” of their beliefs and their goals. This takes the view that fascism is trying to embrace a mythic view of the nation that taps into the cultural and artistic views of the public to encourage them to join in building this new nation. (Griffin, 1991, pp. 33-35)

In terms of ideology, modern extreme right parties share some similarities in terms of ideological principles, but crucially advocate them in a different way and as such frame themselves a different grouping altogether.

According to Mudde’s definition of what he calls “populist radical right” parties, the three totems of their ideology are “nativism”, “authoritarianism” and “populism”. (cf. 2007) These essentially echo the fascist ideals of nationalism and having a strong state, showing the link between the two groupings on the right of the political spectrum.

However, the methods and the voracity with which the modern parties extol these values is not as strong. Modern extreme right parties in Italy and Germany “may be strongly nationalist but their form of nationalist is not expansionist or militaristic.” (Widfeldt, 2003, p. 285) Similarly, while they may be populist and often feature a

charismatic leader that rules strongly, such as Gianfranco Fini who lead the MSI and latterly Alleanza Nazionale in Italy between 1987 and 2009 and Udo Voigt of the NPD in Germany who was President of the party between 1996 and 2011, these leaderships do not have a personality “cult comparable to the one associated with the likes of Hitler and Mussolini”. (ibid.)

The strongest feature and ideological difference between fascism and the modern extreme right is that the Italian and German fascist regimes adhered to classical racism, something which most modern parties not only do not, but reject strongly. There is no “emphasis on a biologically defined racial hierarchy” (ibid.) but rather a much less severe xenophobia of immigration scepticism.

The Germany parties’ position on “minority rights” have a “stress on ‘integration’ with the “German Leit Kultur (defining culture)” rather than racism. (Dastidar, 2001, pp. 1006-07) This is more indicative of a less ethnopluralist position rather than a racial hierarchy that was present in the Nazi party of the inter-war years.

The position of the extreme right in Italy is largely the same, with former Lega Nord leader Umberto Bossi strongly stating that “multi-cultural society is like hell” (Eatwell, 1994, p. 313).

These viewpoints clearly mark the extreme right as xenophobic but do not go as far as racism, and as such this makes them different to fascist parties and ultimately more palatable to the electorate as well.

However, despite a general rejection of racism there still remains an element of anti-semitism in the German DVU. While its campaigning materials are lacking “a statement of principles, thematic brochures and a paper of its own” (Backes & Mudde, 2000, p. 462) the works of their former leader serve as a basis of analysis. These weekly pieces are described as “tabloid journalism” but also that they were:

“drenched with more or less openly antisemitic articles, ranging from short stories about corrupt Jewish businessmen to allegations that Jews started the second world war or that Israel uses the Holocaust to extort money from Germany.” (ibid.)

Therefore, while it cannot be inferred that the entire DVU or other parties in Germany are anti-Semitic to the degree the Nazis were, it can be shown that there still remains a residual effect from the ideology on the modern extreme right there.

Another key difference, especially in the Italian context, is the rejection of corporatist values that were unique to Italian fascism but are virtually non-existent in modern incarnations of the right in the country.

Although there was still “loyalty to political and economic corporatism” (Ignazi, 2003, p. 41) within the MSI before their entrance into Government in 1995, this focus largely disappeared within the party while it took forward its’ agenda as a party of Government – which was more focussed on ‘traditional’ extreme right values.

Therefore it can be said that while the party no longer directly follows the fascist principles of the pre-war regime that it still lives with the legacy of supporting corporatism in the past. This can be considered either as part of the party’s aim to distance itself with ending “the era of fascism” or simply to make itself more electable, in the same terms as Kitschelt’s “winning formula” for extreme right parties. (1995)

Griffin, in comparing modern extreme right parties to those of the pre-World War II era, said that the old definition of fascism and its’ style “makes contemporary fascism dwindle to practically microscopic insignificance” (Griffin, 2002, p. 18)

Therefore, a clear ideological gap can be seen between the old fascist regimes of Italy and Germany and the extreme right parties that exist in the countries today.

Policies

Closely linked to the ideologies of the parties are the policies that they seek to implement, and here is where the true link between the old fascist parties and the modern extreme right can truly be examined.

It is a widely considered concept that today’s extreme right parties are a “continuation of the inter-war fascist and Nazi movements” (Widfeldt, 2003, p. 284). These links are differently developed in different countries in Europe, with some parties being far more open, or rather less objected to, their parties’ predecessors.

Italy contains perhaps the most prominent example, with the “Alleanza Nazionale, which was formed under the name Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) in 1946, as a successor of Mussolini’s fascist party.” (ibid.) Although they later rejected fascist values, saying “the era of fascism” was over in 1995, it still remains a modern example of a party in a previously fascist-controlled country that retains an element of the ideology, with “an overwhelming majority (62%) agreed with the item [at the 1995 Alleanza Nazionale congress] which states that ‘notwithstanding some questionable choices, fascism was a good regime’” (Ignazi, 2003, p. 46). “Less direct, but traceable, links” are also observed in Germany, through the National Democrats or NPD. (ibid.)

These make it clear that there is at least some form of congruence in party membership for both the pre-war fascist and Nazi parties with the modern extreme right parties in Italy and Germany.

However, despite policies that may be unpalatable to the general public the way in which these are packaged can make a big impact and significantly improve the chances of extreme right parties, and this has been the case in Italy and Germany in both the pre-war era and now. There are major differences in rhetoric, owing to the different ideologies and the now ingrained rejection of traditional fascist propaganda, but modern extreme right parties are similarly effective in getting their message across.

Studies of extreme right party manifestos in Italy and Germany have identified a much ‘softer’ approach in trying to win public support, with focus being placed away from the traditional, and controversial, cores of immigration scepticism and xenophobia.

In 1996, the MSI-Alleanza Nazionale top five values as determined by their prevalence in their election manifesto were: social harmony, market regulation, democracy, positive traditional values and law & order. For Lega Nord, the values were: positive decentralisation, government-administrative efficiency, market regulation, social harmony and economic orthodoxy. (Cole, 2005, p. 213)

These values, apart from law & order which only places fifth in MSI-AN’s manifesto priorities, could widely be seen as those of a more moderate right-wing party; the

focus seems to be much more on economic frugality and almost *anti*-authoritarianism rather than traditional extreme right values.

Analysis of the Republikaner party's 1994 manifesto is broadly similar, although it places law & order second, which is more in line with policy expectations, but very surprisingly includes environmental protection in third. (ibid. p. 214) This represents a very wide policy platform, but again not one that would be commonly associated with the extreme right and certainly not with old fascism.

Therefore when taking a policy-orientated view of the modern extreme right parties in Italy and Germany, we see them more as a continuation of the trends across Western Europe in the aims of the party group rather than a continuation of the policies of fascists and Nazis that existed in these countries before World War II.

Electoral Success

Of course, before their authoritarian stranglehold on the political systems of their respective countries, both the fascists of Italy and the Nazis and Germany were elected into government by the people of their countries in "democratic" elections.

In Italy, Mussolini was appointed Prime Minister in 1922 after his March on Rome – where over 30,000 fascist supporters marched on the capital demanding the King install a fascist Government. While a compromise was reached that saw Mussolini appointed Prime Minister of a coalition Government, the enacted "Acerbo Law" meant that the winner of the next federal election (i.e. the party that wins the highest vote share) would automatically win two-thirds of the seats in Parliament.

Mussolini's National Fascist Party subsequently won the following Italian election in 1924 with "vote-stealing and intimidation" (De Grand, 1995, p. 26) helping them to win 65.7%, although interestingly failing "to carry either Milan or Turin", which are major cities in the north of the country.

The German Nazi party won the German Federal Election of March 1933 with 43.91% of the vote and winning the right to form a Government, which they did in coalition with the DNVP. While this was a democratic election in principle, and research into it showing that "the process by which this outcome occurred becomes amenable to relatively standard political science explanations" (King, et al., 2008, p.

988), a campaign of intimidation and violence by the Nazi party in the months preceding the election would certainly cause grounds to consider whether the election was either free or fair. After this election, the Nazi-led Government banned all other political parties as part of their radical overhaul of the state to meet their aims.

In sharp contrast with the elections of fascist and Nazi parties, the success of the extreme right in post-World War II Italy and Germany has been far more limited. The memories of the extraordinarily evil actions of both fascist and Nazi regimes in these countries and their impact upon Europe and the world has understandably created strong resentment and scepticism among the public of these countries towards the extreme right and has severely impacted upon these parties' electoral chances.

These cultural attitudes have meant that there can be clearly defined boundaries within the extreme right as to how to deal with their party grouping's past and how to carry forward their own message. Mudde noted that there was a "dichotomy" within extreme right parties whereby:

"the 'old' or 'extreme' parties are unsuccessful *because* of their ideological extremity or oldness, and, on the other hand, the 'new' or 'moderate' parties are successful *because* of the moderation or newness of their ideology".
(Mudde, 2007, p. 257)

However, in the case of Italy and Germany, there are some overlap between how political parties would be defined in these terms.

Mudde compares the Belgian Vlaams Belang/Blok with Italy's MSI/Alleanza Nazionale by saying that in some definitions they would be defined as an "old" or "extreme party" but by other's – notably Kitschelt – they would be defined as "welfare chauvinist". (ibid. pp. 258-59) Kitschelt's "winning formula" thesis suggested that extreme right parties would be most successful with an ideology that is economically true to their right-wing cause. Therefore, with the parties not adopting the ideologies that are determined to help them be successful, it can be shown that they are ideologically ill-prepared to succeed.

However, Mudde provides a counter-argument to this theory, saying that 'moderate' parties "have clearly not been successful in electoral terms" such as the German Republikaner party. (Mudde, 2007, p. 259)

In Italy, there has been significant recent electoral success for extreme right parties, with both the Lega Nord and MSI-Alleanza Nazionale being part of the ruling coalition between 1994 and 2003. Indeed, in the 1996 election these two parties received 25.8% of the vote combined. (Ignazi, 2003, p. 40) These parties can be considered more towards the “moderate” spectrum, with the ‘rebranding’ of the MSI into Alleanza Nazionale and its announcement that the “era of fascism” is over moving it into a less traditionally fascist ideology, and therefore challenge the view that an extreme right party descended from fascism cannot be successful.

In Germany, electoral success for extreme right parties has been far more limited. No current extreme right party, the Republikaner, DVU and NPD, has ever been represented in the German Bundestag, with successes in regional elections providing them with their only representative platforms.

The existence of a 5% threshold for entrance to the German Bundestag was introduced in 1953 as “a step towards the electoral representation of small parties” of the extreme right, which had collectively won 21 seats in the 1949 Bundestag election. (Backer, 2000) This has been a barrier to exclude small extreme parties from parliamentary representation, and with the fragmentation of the German extreme right into several parties this has proved effective. This has “made it easier for the mainstream parties...to keep the radical right from winning legislative seats” (Givens, 2005, p. 132) in combination with other factors such as the “coalition between the FDP and the Christian Democrats” which serve to discourage voting for extreme parties.

However, it is worth considering that the extreme right parties of Germany have been more successful in the former East of the country since unification than they have in the West. Despite unification of Germany being twenty-five years ago, there still remains many inequalities between the two sections of the country that permeate social and political culture. It is these inequalities that extreme right parties of Germany seek to exploit.

Betz defined the core demographic of extreme right parties as the “losers of modernisation” (cf. 1993) and it is the very same section of the electorate, more plentiful in the East than the West, that the extreme right parties of Germany are targeting. Ignazi refers to the DVU’s campaigns as an:

“appeal to a marginal and frustrated constituency (especially in the Eastern Länder) focused on the recasting of a popular, ethnically homogeneous (völkisch) community, disintegrated by liberal individualism, capitalist economy, and the process of globalization” (2003, p. 70)

These factors are why the extreme parties have had success in the regional elections of the Eastern part of the country and why the “extreme right potential” is said to be “average of 12 per cent in the West and 17 per cent in the East”. (Stöss and Niedermayer in Ignazi, 2003, p. 82)

Therefore there is a clear divide between the electoral methods and achievements of pre-war fascist and Nazi parties compared with the modern extreme right in Italy and Germany, with the current parties being far more democratic in their behaviour but also far less successful in their performances – although these successes vary in different regions.

Public Support

Extreme right parties are often seen to be successful because of the political circumstances in which the country finds itself rather than because of a particularly innate desire of the public to support them.

The economic depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s certainly were a key factor in the rise of the Italian Fascists and the German Nazis, along with fallout from World War I. This is what Jackman & Volpert called the “systemic political and economic conditions that create opportunities for political entrepreneurs to mobilize extremist political movements.” (1996, p. 505)

Similarly, modern extreme right parties are very much dependant on the prevailing political climate as to whether they will rise or fall in public support; “Major events such as unification in Germany and the Clean Hands Scandal in Italy have either diminished electoral prospects (Republikaner) or improved upon them (MSI-AN)”. (Cole, 2005, p. 208)

German regional elections in the 1990s saw the rise of the DVU, with “dissatisfaction with the economic and social results of [German] unification, and the impotence of all other parties to solve them” proving the perfect circumstances for the DVU to grow,

leading them to it obtaining “the highest vote percentage in state and national elections of all extreme right parties in postwar Germany” with 12.9% and 16 seats in the Saxony-Anhalt state parliament in the 1998 election. (Backes & Mudde, 2000, pp. 462-63)

Therefore the public in both Italy and Germany have once again proven to be receptive to voting for parties on the extreme right in difficult political and economic conditions, which does not necessarily equate the parties of each era with each other but more the political circumstances and the reaction of the public to them. This corresponds with a demand-side explanation of voting, as defined by Betz (1993) rather than a supply-side, as defined by Kitschelt (1995).

Another remnant of fascist and Nazi culture in Italy and Germany remains the public violence of some extreme right groups, commonly referred to as neo-fascist or neo-Nazis. These can be linked with the trouble of modernisation in these countries, with the particular German “violent mobilization by movements and groups and a (still latent) neo-Nazi revival” (Ignazi, 2003, p. 82) as a result of less than perfect integration of society after reunification.

While these actions are not explicitly supported by the extreme right parties, they have still provided the basis through which they are attacked by the mainstream and efforts have been made to declare them illegal by arguing that the actions of their supporters are threatening the constitution.

Attempts have been made to ban the NPD in Germany both in 2003, which was thrown out by the Constitutional Court as the Government’s “case rested largely on the statements and actions of NPD members who had been shown to be agents of the German intelligence services.” (Hooper, 2003) and as recently as 2013, with a case currently before the Constitutional Court.

These show an unpleasant cultural manifestation of fascist and Nazi actions in modern-day Italy and Germany, although the links to political parties are, on the whole, far from substantial and certainly much weaker than they were in the pre-World War II fascist and Nazi regimes.

Conclusion

While the ghost of the fascist era still hangs over both Italy and Germany, the modern extreme right parties in these countries are destined to bear little resemblance to the movements of the inter-war years.

They share little in common ideology, little in the way of policy and their electoral success has been far less complete.

While both historic fascist/Nazi and modern extreme right groupings contain a core of nationalist policies, the severity to which their beliefs are applied and professed is markedly different.

There may be a link in some regards between the “old” and “extreme” fascist and Nazi parties and the present day extreme right in Italy and Germany, but it is weak – especially when considered in context with the extreme right movement in a wider European context.

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