

Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini

Totalitarianism in the Twentieth Century

Fourth Edition



BRUCE F. PAULEY

WILEY Blackwell

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Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini

Totalitarianism in the Twentieth Century

FOURTH EDITION

Bruce F. Pauley

WILEY Blackwell

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*For my grandchildren
Alena, Ben, Will, and Reina Pauley.
May they live in a world
free from terror and environmental degradation.*

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Preface

Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini: Totalitarianism in the Twentieth Century is the product of a lifelong interest in totalitarianism which began with a trip to Prague in the fall of 1957. In those grim days the Czech capital was run by a Stalinist-style regime; an enormous statue of the dictator still towered over the Vlatava (Moldau) River. Even though Stalin had been dead since 1953 and the general secretary of the Soviet Communist party, Nikita Khrushchev, had launched his “de-Stalinization” campaign in 1956, the Czechoslovak government remained defiantly resistant to liberalization. Czechoslovakia had prospered between the world wars, but by 1957 it had become an economic basket case. Russian flags were all over the city and bookstores were filled with works by Russian poets and novelists as well as books related to the history of Communism. Whereas early twentieth-century Prague had been a mecca for foreign tourists, in 1957 the group I was with – American students from the Institute of European Studies in Vienna – were such a rarity that everywhere we went crowds of curious children, adults, and soldiers literally pressed their noses against the windows of our Volkswagen autobus. Prague was so devoid of vehicles that we could have practically camped out in the middle of the most important intersections.

That weekend in Prague so many years ago turned out to be the first of many trips to the countries that were part of the Eastern Bloc prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Documents, books, newspapers, and articles are the bread and butter of historical research and the reading of some 300 books was obviously indispensable in preparing *Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini*. However, like other historians, I have

found that there is no substitute for visiting sites where important historical events occurred, such as former Nazi concentration camps and numerous monuments and buildings associated with Mussolini's Italy. The same is true so far as witnessing the everyday life of societies whose regimes purported to be totalitarian. I have tried to capture some of these experiences in the illustrations contained in this book and more recently in my memoirs, *Pioneering History on Two Continents*.

"Totalitarianism" is one of the most controversial terms of the twentieth century. First used by Italy's democratic critics in the mid-1920s to describe the new Fascist regime, it gained currency in Anglo-Saxon countries during the 1930s in reference to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as well. It became extremely popular between the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939 and the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, a time when the two dictatorships were virtual allies. However, once the Soviets became enemies of the Nazis and especially after the American intervention into the war in December 1941, the term suddenly became a political embarrassment and disappeared from public discourse. With the beginning of the Cold War in the late 1940s and the 1950s, following the Soviet occupation of east central Europe, the term reached a new peak of popularity only to fall into disfavor during subsequent decades when relations between the Soviet Union and the West improved.

Fading memories of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Benito Mussolini made "totalitarianism" an anachronism at best, and a polemic at worst, loosely applied only to a country's most diabolical enemies. Scholars from the 1960s to the 1980s were particularly loath to use a term that could label them as unreconstructed cold warriors and preferred the term "authoritarian" to describe the Soviet Union of their day. Members of President Ronald Reagan's administration

were eager to revive the term after his election in 1980. The biggest catalysts for changed thinking, however, resulted from the opening of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet empire in eastern Europe in 1989 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself in 1991. Interestingly enough, those people who had actually lived in totalitarian states were not the least reluctant about using the term once they were finally free to do so.

Whatever they may be called, the dictatorships of Germany, the Soviet Union, and Italy were breakthroughs in the physical and intellectual control of their own populations, and the dictators of Communist Russia and Nazi Germany slaughtered more people than any other rulers in the history of the world, ancient or modern, with the probable exception of their fellow totalitarian ruler Mao Zedong in Communist China.

All of the totalitarian dictators are remarkable both for what they intentionally accomplished and for what they achieved despite themselves. Mussolini greatly enlarged Italy's colonial empire but wound up losing it all. He concentrated more power in his own hands than any of his predecessors; but in the process he created such revulsion that a postwar constitution established a premiership so weak that Italy has experienced a new government head on average once a year since the end of World War II. No one since Alexander the Great changed so large a portion of the world as much in just 12 years as Hitler did. He wanted to build a great continental empire but managed instead to lose a quarter of Germany's pre-1937 territory and to leave his country, as well as the continent, divided. He carried the concepts of nationalism, racism, and dictatorship to unheard of heights, but in so doing created a backlash that thoroughly discredited all three ideas, most of all his favorite doctrine of racism. Lenin and Stalin wanted to eliminate deeply ingrained Russian habits of slackness and

inefficiency, as well as their country's economic backwardness. They succeeded instead in discouraging creativity, polluting the environment, and leaving the Soviet Union still far behind its rivals in the West.

In the pantheon of historical monsters, Adolf Hitler has long held pride of place for most students of history. His evil reputation is well deserved, but his placement in a special category apart from Stalin is probably due to the far greater documentation of his crimes than to the objective facts, as well as the fact that Stalin was allied with the West during World War II. The total collapse of Nazi Germany, the postwar Nuremberg Trials, and early access to Nazi archives have provided historians with a bonanza of raw historical materials that even now have by no means been fully exhausted. The Soviet Union, however, remained comparatively sealed off to Western historians until its downfall in 1991; its archives are now revealing contents far uglier than even the most ardent anti-Communists had once imagined. Fascist Italy, by comparison, has often received almost benevolent treatment from historians, when they have considered it at all. Mussolini and Italian Fascism have frequently been depicted as either slightly comical or relatively harmless. This reputation is undeserved. That the Fascists inflicted only moderate destruction on foreign states can be attributed to Italy's lack of human and natural resources and the backward state of its economy, not to a tolerant leader or even to a peace-loving population. Losing wars is seldom popular, and Italy began losing almost as soon as it entered World War II.

All of the dictatorships, but again especially those of the Soviet Union and Germany, succeeded in deporting, imprisoning, and killing their most productive workers and intellectuals, thus contributing to their own ultimate demise. Hitler eliminated by one means or another most of

the half a million Jews who had lived in Germany when he came to power in 1933, even though the Jewish community had produced half the country's Nobel Prize winners. The destruction of the German Jewish community was merely the beginning of the Holocaust which eventually claimed the lives of 5 to 6 million European Jews and nearly as many non-Jews. Stalin actually managed to outdo Hitler to become by far the biggest mass murderer in history, being responsible for the death of around 20 million people, not counting the soldiers and civilians killed in World War II. Unlike Hitler's victims, all of them were citizens of his own country and were killed in peacetime; often they were his nation's most productive inhabitants. All of these deaths, one should hasten to add, represent only those people whose murder can be directly attributed to the three dictators. They do not include the tens of millions of soldiers and civilians who died as a result of Hitler's launching of World War II or Stalin's disastrous military strategy and tactics.

This book does not purport to be a complete history of Europe's three twentieth-century totalitarian dictatorships. Such a work would require many volumes and, if based on original research, would be far beyond the capacity of any one historian. My goal in these pages is much more modest, but nevertheless important. It is to evaluate some of the many theories historians have proposed as to why the totalitarian movements arose and seized power, how they utilized their unprecedented authority, and why they ultimately failed. For well over half a century, the subject has produced endless controversies, only a few of which can be alluded to herein.

The destructiveness and indeed self-destructiveness of the regimes is patently obvious. If any system of government deserves to be called evil, it is surely totalitarianism. And yet, if totalitarianism had been nothing more than terror

and nihilism, one would be at a loss to explain its popularity with a substantial part of the subject populations. There is no question that short-term apparent achievements usually disguised long-term baneful goals. But to be fair to those people who lived under totalitarianism, students of history must be ever mindful that they did not enjoy the benefit of hindsight. To understand totalitarianism, or indeed any historical subject, one must begin at the beginning, not at the end.

When *Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini* was first published in 1997 readers had the luxury of believing that totalitarianism was purely a product of the twentieth century and a never-to-be-repeated phenomenon. The people of the United States and Canada could also imagine that mass murder and terror were things that occurred only on other continents and certainly not in North America. The suicide attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, the Taliban regime and its al-Qaeda allies in Afghanistan, as well as recent revelations about North Korea, have shattered these illusions. What the world has learned since September 11, 2001 is that totalitarianism and terror are still realities and cannot be relegated to the status of historical curiosities with no relevance to the present.

The late and unlamented Taliban regime in Afghanistan surpassed any of the regimes described in this book in the extent to which it attempted to control every facet of the lives of the Afghan people. Its Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice regulated daily life in ways undreamed of by Hitler, Stalin, or Mussolini. Laughter, music, and dancing, as well as modern inventions such as television were all prohibited. The total repression of women made the reactionary philosophy and policies of even Nazi Germany look downright progressive by comparison. If in some respects the fascists of Germany

and Italy wanted to return to the bucolic days of the nineteenth century when a woman's place was in the home, the Taliban wanted to return to the seventh century when Islamic women were presumably totally veiled and never seen in public. Whereas the totalitarian states of the twentieth century humiliated, imprisoned, and tortured their internal enemies out of the public's view, the Taliban conducted very public executions in a former soccer stadium. If both the Axis powers and even the Allies sometimes resorted to attacking civilians to achieve their goals during World War II, civilians were the primary victims of the al-Qaeda organization. If fascism and communism were secular religions that sometimes borrowed the terminology and rituals of traditional religions, the Taliban was openly and fanatically committed to the most extreme and reactionary form of Islam. Like new religions, the Taliban and the three totalitarian regimes discussed in this book were all utopian. All four regimes tried to create a new, and in their eyes perfect, society. Those who rejected this brave new world were dealt with as enemies who had to be suppressed for the common good.

This work has benefited enormously from classroom discussions I have had with students at the University of Central Florida over my 35-year career at that institution. Of my colleagues at UCF, Vladimir Solonari, who had the misfortune of growing to maturity in the Soviet Union, was especially helpful. My thanks also go to the late Charles F. Delzell, emeritus professor at Vanderbilt University, Professor Gilbert McArthur of the College of William and Mary, and George M. Kren of Kansas State University for reading the manuscript and offering excellent suggestions. Likewise, the interlibrary loan librarians at the University of Central Florida and at Windsor-Severance public library in Windsor, Colorado, did yeoman work in providing me

with some of the fifty books which I read in preparing this fourth edition of *Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini*. These books, now included among approximately 300 I have read for this work, have been particularly helpful in understanding Hitler's failed wartime policies and the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet empire as well as for the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself. However, they have also reconfirmed my thesis that the totalitarian regimes were reasonably successful only when they pursued pragmatic policies and courted disaster when they fully implemented their totalitarian ideals.

I would also like to extend my thanks to Gary Hollingsworth and Michelle Harm for allowing me to use copies of the Hollingsworth collection of Soviet posters. Institutions wishing to see this fascinating collection in its entirety should contact Hollingsworth Fine Arts at 407-422-4242. I gained valuable insights into East German totalitarianism at a 1993 summer seminar at Yale University sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and directed by the late Professor Henry Ashby Turner, Jr. A special debt of gratitude is owed to the late Keith Eubank, who invited me to write this book and who saved me from making many errors of fact and judgment. I alone, of course, remain responsible for any mistakes that may remain. My wife, Marianne, whom I met in a class on totalitarianism at the University of Rochester (NY) more than 50 years ago, once again patiently sacrificed many outings so that the writing of this book could be brought to a timely conclusion.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff at Wiley Blackwell for their help in the production of this fourth edition of *Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini*. The expertise, thoroughness, and quick responses to my questions by Georgina Coleby, Lindsay Bourgeois, Leah Morin, and Jacqueline Harvey are all very much appreciated. I especially want to thank

Andrew Davidson, the Senior History Editor at Wiley, for his continued interest in my book.

1

The Ideological Foundations

The dictators ... took their ideologies very seriously.

Definitions of Totalitarianism

Surprisingly, there has been a greater agreement among historians about how to define “totalitarianism” than there has been about whether the definition actually fits any of the states usually described as totalitarian. Advocates of the term stress: (1) the extraordinary powers of the leader; (2) the importance of an exclusionist ideology; (3) the existence of a single mass party; (4) a secret police prepared to use terror to eradicate all domestic opposition; (5) a monopoly of the communications media as well as over the educational systems; (6) a determination to change basic social, artistic, and literary values; and (7) an insistence that the welfare of the state be placed above the welfare of its citizens.

Much less agreement can be found among historians on the importance of purges to totalitarianism, the role of state economic planning, and the degree to which citizens of totalitarian states were able to maintain some sort of private life. Scholars who object to the term altogether note that even in the Soviet Union and Germany, where the governments were the most powerful, many individuals maintained private lives comparatively free of authoritarian controls. In the Soviet Union there were competing factions, interest groups, and bureaucratic networks that could defy government decrees. And industrial and military leaders in Germany, as well as the monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church in Italy, all retained considerable

autonomy. Proponents of the totalitarian concept assert that it was an ideal, which, like all ideals, could never be perfectly achieved.

The dichotomy between ideal and practice is an old one, and has been applied to any number of political, historical, and even artistic terms. Was the United States really a democracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when slavery was legal and women were denied the franchise? Has there ever been a perfect democracy, even in fifth-century bc Athens? Is there even a definition of "democracy" that would apply to all states claiming such status? For that matter, are there universally accepted definitions of "freedom" or "class"? Obviously, to insist on the perfect implementation of political ideals would make all classifications impossible.

The totalitarian dictators did not in fact control every facet of their respective countries' existence. They were, however, free to reach major decisions without consulting or by ignoring the advice of other individuals or institutions. They were not bound by any laws or customs and were unlikely to be affected by appeals to conscience, sentiment, or pity. They were not even restrained by official ideology because they alone decided what the ideology *du jour* should be; they did not hesitate to reverse previously held ideological positions however much they might deny it.

In many ways, totalitarianism was a secularized religion complete with charismatic leaders, sacred books (with old and new testaments), prophets, martyrs, saints, disciples, heretics, hymns, ceremonies, processions, and concepts of heaven and hell. True believers claimed to be in possession of the one revealed truth that could not be disputed on the basis of rational arguments. There were chosen people who belonged to the "right" class or race and nonbelievers and

nonfavored groups who had to be eradicated from the righteous community by instruments of inquisition. The young were to be thoroughly indoctrinated in the new “religion” so that it would be perpetuated indefinitely. It is no wonder, therefore, that many traditional religious leaders soon realized that they were competing with the totalitarian leaders and parties for the very soul of the people.

Comparisons between democratic and totalitarian ideals help in the understanding of both. Surprisingly, there are some superficial similarities. Totalitarian regimes, like democracies, claimed to rule on behalf of the governed but were “unhindered” by the “divisiveness” of parliamentary states. Hitler and Mussolini (though not Stalin) also resembled democratic leaders in wanting to be photographed mingling with the “masses.” They had elections, or at least plebiscites (in the case of Nazi Germany). Both systems even had constitutions. The similarities, however, are far more apparent than real. Totalitarian regimes were ultra-paternalistic. They decided what was in the best interests of their citizens, not the citizens themselves, whose willingness or ability to do the right thing was very much in doubt. Elections consisted only of unopposed candidates selected by the totalitarian party. Constitutions, if not ignored (as in the case of Nazi Germany), existed to protect the government, not to insure the rights of individuals against the government, as in democracies. Most important, democracies are characterized by an optimistic philosophy of human nature; in the tradition of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British and French enlightened philosophers, humans are thought to be by nature rational. As such they are capable of managing their own affairs with only minimal assistance from a government. Human progress for all nationalities, if not certain, is at least possible. Totalitarian philosophy,

however, holds that humans are by nature either too irrational or too ignorant to be entrusted with self-government.

Another way of understanding twentieth-century totalitarian dictatorships is to compare them with their nontotalitarian predecessors. Arbitrary, authoritarian, and brutal forms of government, which censor all forms of literature and minimize individual rights, are as old as civilization itself. The first Napoleonic regime in the early nineteenth century also resembled the totalitarian dictatorships in its charismatic leadership. But these other forms of despotism depended on the tolerance of the army, church, or business interests. Moreover, they allowed considerable freedom of expression so long as it did not threaten the regime. Their leaders were often constrained by customs or a sense of responsibility to God. The totalitarian dictatorships were not satisfied with the mere absence of opposition; they demanded positive support, especially from the shapers of public opinion: journalists, teachers, authors, and artists. The lack of rapid and mass forms of communications, together with high illiteracy rates, made it impossible for pre-twentieth-century regimes to control their subjects physically and intellectually. Finally, as alluded to above, earlier dictatorships usually lacked the religious zeal and desire to completely transform society.

The totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century had at their disposal mass-circulation newspapers, mass-produced posters, telegraph machines, telephones, automobiles, railroads, airplanes, cinemas, radios (and more recently television sets), and mandatory-attendance state schools. Orders from dictators could be transmitted to the lowliest government, party, and military officials instantly. No village was too remote to be outside the reach of the regime's instruments of propaganda.

Marxism - Leninism - Stalinism

Although most scholars believe that there were important common denominators between the regimes of Communist Russia, Fascist Italy, and Nazi Germany, none would argue that they were without major differences in their beliefs and practices.

The Soviet dictators - Lenin, Stalin, and their successors - like their fellow autocrats in Italy and Germany, claimed to follow an immutable and indeed scientific ideology. The works of the nineteenth-century German economic philosopher Karl Marx were supposed to be the foundation of communist ideology. In reality, first Lenin and then Stalin changed Marx's ideas almost beyond recognition (see [Plate 1](#)). Marx, especially in his famous work *Das Kapital*, argued that a class struggle had existed throughout history and would soon produce an international revolution of industrial workers. However, he had no blueprint for the future communist utopia beyond his belief that the means of production would be owned in common, thus preventing any further exploitation of one class by another. Even Lenin, prior to his seizure of power in the fall of 1917, had no practical plans for postrevolutionary government beyond vague concepts, such as the nationalization of industries, large-scale and communal farming, and central economic planning.

Lenin and also Stalin inherited from Marx unverifiable beliefs about the behavior of various social groups, which were given the status of scientific laws and were hence beyond dispute or public opinion. They also inherited from the master an unscrupulous attitude toward anyone whom they perceived to be impeding the development and consolidation of the revolution.

Lenin, unlike Marx and his more orthodox followers in Russia who were known as Mensheviks, was unwilling to wait for the Industrial Revolution to follow its natural course in Russia, which was by far the most economically backward of the major European states at the beginning of the twentieth century. By promising to turn over confiscated noble lands to peasants, Lenin believed that he could at least gain the temporary support of peasants – for whom Marx had had nothing but contempt – and thus bring about an early revolution. Nor did he believe that the proletariat was capable of organizing any kind of revolution on its own. It needed instead to be led by a small group of dedicated professional revolutionaries over which he would exercise dictatorial control. The party worked for the interests of the proletariat whether the latter recognized it or not. Thus, Lenin quickly abandoned Marx's idea of majority rule. His creed was out of step with contemporary developments in Marxism in western Europe, but very much in the tradition of Russian authoritarianism and secret conspiracy. Lenin's drastic alteration of Marxism was to have ominous consequences for the future. Unlike the regimes of Italy and Germany, which came to power by at least pseudo-constitutional means, in the Soviet Union the Communists were able to achieve power only through the use of force and were, with the partial exception of World War II, never certain of popular support.

Though intolerant of overt opposition, Lenin was at least willing to put up with discussions within the Bolshevik party, which he founded in 1903. Dissidents might be demoted, or even expelled from the party, but they were not killed. Stalin moved one step beyond Lenin. Under Stalin, meaningful discussion within what by then was called the Communist party soon came to an end. The use of terror was no longer confined to non-Communists, but was now also directed against those within the party itself.

Lenin and Stalin did resemble Marx in foreseeing a much greater role for the postrevolutionary state in the economic life of Russia than Mussolini in Italy or Hitler in Germany. To some degree they had little choice because the Russian bourgeoisie was so weak. Not only were all the factories and other means of industrial production owned by the state, but so too was all the agricultural land, which was cultivated in large collective farms. Uprooting 120 million peasants from their ancestral homes would require far more force than the relatively modest economic plans envisaged by Mussolini and Hitler. Indeed, it required a veritable civil war in which there were literally millions of casualties. It also required a bureaucracy and police apparatus far larger than those of the other two dictatorships. Excess was the very essence of what became Stalinism. At the height of the Stalinist terror in the 1930s, an estimated one in every eight Soviet men, women, and children was shot dead or sent to a labor camp, where many died.

Fascism and Nazism

Whereas the Soviet Communists saw their movement as an instrument of progress for all humanity, the Fascists and Nazis made little attempt to appeal to other nationalities, believing that alien races could never be assimilated. Superficially, the ideology of the Fascists in Italy was almost diametrically opposed to communism. In fact, both Fascists and Nazis (often generically lumped together as “fascists” with a small f) made anticommunism or anti-Marxism (to include social democratic parties) a major part of their programs. Here, chronology is important. By the time the Fascist and Nazi parties were born in 1919, the Communists had already seized power in Russia, were

engaged in a brutal civil war, and had attempted to carry their revolution deep into Poland.

Consequently, fascism in both Italy and Germany arose in an atmosphere of anticommunist hysteria. If the Communists were international in their outlook and appeal (though in practice they were frequently nationalistic), the fascists were militantly nationalistic. If the Communists favored the industrial working class and sought to destroy private property along with the middle and upper classes, the fascists (at least in Germany) called for a classless “people’s community” (in German, *Volksgemeinschaft*) and the protection of private property. If the Communists were outspoken atheists, the fascists, on the whole, pretended to be the defenders of Christianity. If Marxists, in theory, wished to emancipate women, fascists would protect them from the evils of politics and glorify their traditional role as homemakers and prolific mothers. Despite these apparently diametrically opposed views, however, the practices of communists and fascists turned out, in many cases, to be remarkably similar.

Fascism in both Italy and Germany was more than simply anticommunism. It was also passionately opposed to the liberal, democratic, parliamentary values of the Western democracies, which dated back to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Fascists believed that such values had exalted the rights of individuals at the expense of the community. In the words of a Nazi slogan, *Gemeinnutz geht vor Eigennutz* (“The common good comes before the good of the individual”). Although unwilling to go nearly as far as the communists in outlawing private property, fascists were equally intolerant of diversity and just as filled with hatred and resentment. Like the communists, they saw violence as unavoidable. The fascists promoted considerably more control of their economies than was acceptable in the West, at least prior

to World War II. Capitalists were allowed to prosper in the fascist states, but only if they cooperated with the aims of the political authorities.

The two fascist states, however, differed significantly from each other, as well as from Communist Russia and the democratic West. Mussolini was very much interested in pursuing old-fashioned colonialism in Africa and in creating a new, albeit smaller, Roman Empire around the Mediterranean in places like Albania, Greece, Tunisia, Nice, Malta, and Corsica. His glorification of warfare as an exalting and purifying experience found no echo in the Soviet Union and even went beyond the public pronouncements of Hitler, at least before World War II. In spite of his constant touting of the virtues of war, Mussolini was woefully inadequate in his preparations for combat. Hitler, for his part, professed a love of peace, until at least 1938, while accelerating the rearmament of Germany. Finally, fascism and Nazism differed sharply on the subject of race. Racism and anti-Semitism were not part of fascist ideology until 1938, and when they were finally introduced were unpopular with many Italians in spite of the many exceptions allowed by the law.

For Hitler, race was as central to an understanding of history as the class struggle was for Marxists. To him it was even more important than nationalism, although throughout the 1920s and 1930s he liked to pose as a traditional nationalist who wanted nothing more than to reunite all nearby ethnic Germans in his Third Reich. Hitler's philosophy borrowed heavily from nineteenth-century racists; he admitted a debt only to the anti-Semitic composer Richard Wagner. Hitler was anxious to show that his racist ideas were thoroughly grounded in German history but, unlike the Communists, neither he nor Mussolini claimed to have an infallible ideological founding father apart from themselves.