

# **What factors explain the development of Authoritarian regimes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?**

## **Chapter 1, Section 2 - From Lynch, M. (2013). Origins and Development of Authoritarian and Single-Party States. London: Hodder Education**

### **The impact of the First World War, 1914–18**

Historians suggest that it was no accident that the twentieth century saw a spate of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. The phenomenon was in large part a reaction to the destructive impact of the First World War that ended in 1918. Prior to that war, liberalism, a political movement which contained a central belief in human progress, had made considerable strides in Europe. There was a common conviction that the improvement in social conditions and the spread of education, which had followed the recognition by European governments of the need to tackle physical and intellectual deprivation, heralded a time of improvement for the world's peoples. The 1914–18 conflict shattered such dreams. In the face of the appalling devastation of the war, liberals found it difficult to sustain their concept of ordered human progress. For some persuasive radical thinkers, it was a short step from this to a conviction that discipline and control from above were more likely to create order and national well-being than was cumbersome democracy.

Adding weight to this view was the plentiful evidence of the benefits of state authority. Every nation in the First World War had undergone a large and rapid extension of centralized control over politics, society and the economy. It was arguable that without this centralization, no European nation would have survived. The lessons for national regeneration post-war were obvious. In times of crisis, democratic procedures were too inefficient to meet the needs of the state.

Significant groups, who were to become influential, concluded that social and political ideals were impossible to achieve by moderate, evolutionary means. Progress did not occur spontaneously, ran the argument; it had to be imposed. Strong governments had to be prepared to make the sweeping, even violent, changes that were needed.

Such views were particularly strongly held among certain sections in the relatively new states of Germany and Italy where democratic traditions were weak or non-existent. Scorning what they regarded as the ineffectual methods of democracy, certain groups of nationalists in those countries developed an extreme form of anti-democratic politics, believing that only by such means could their nation achieve its destiny. Nowhere was this more evident than in Germany where a significant number of the population had a searing sense of bitterness at their defeat in the First World War in 1918. It was such bitterness that the National Socialists, or Nazis, relied upon, directing their attack at the German government, which, they asserted, had cravenly accepted a humiliating, dictated peace.

### **The triumph of democracy?**

What sometimes confuses the analysis is that the First World War was still regarded by some as a triumph of democracy since this is what the victorious Allies claimed they represented. But that was a late development. At the start of the war in 1914, democracy had not been one of the Allies' declared aims; their only certain objective had been to defeat the enemy, the Central Powers. Moreover, the idea of one of the Allies, Tsarist Russia, as a champion of democracy defied common sense. It is true that as the war dragged on Britain and France claimed to be fighting for civilized values against German decadence, but what eventually gave the Allies their democratic image was the entry of the USA into the war in 1917 with the express purpose, as stated by its President Woodrow Wilson, 'to make the world safe for democracy'. It was this that enabled the Allies to claim retrospectively that that had been their purpose all along.

### **Self-determination**

The peace settlement that followed the military collapse of the Central Powers was supposedly based on the principle of self-determination. Yet, powerful though self-determination was as an idea, it did not always imply democracy since it was applied in a very selective way. Although it was meant to recognize legitimate national aspirations, the principle was not extended to the defeated nations. Indeed, it was used as a justification for dismembering the German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires and creating new states out of the remnants, a process that left Germany, and other parts of Europe, with a deep sense of grievance. Self-determination was also regarded with grave suspicion by the imperial powers that survived the war, Britain and France: they saw the principle as a threat to their continued hold over their colonies.

### **The impact of economic crises**

Anti-democratic arguments might have had less influence had there been a general recovery from the economic effects of the First World War, but, apart from occasional, short-lived economic booms in the 1920s, the post-war trend was unremittingly grim, reaching its nadir in the Great Depression of the 1930s. In the atmosphere of despair and recrimination that the economic hardships created, fragile democratic structures collapsed. Nor should it be thought that the dictatorships of the period were always imposed on an unwilling people. The success of Italian fascism starting in the 1920s and German Nazism in the 1930s in taking over the state was related to the genuine popularity of their regimes. The conversion of the middle classes, the traditional supporters of constitutionalism, to the support of the extreme Right was a clear sign that those seeking order and security no longer believed that these could be guaranteed by the processes of democracy.

### **Inter-war dictatorships**

Between 1919 and 1939, when the Second World War began in Europe, many states came under the control of regimes which abandoned any pretensions to liberal-democracy. Russia (the Soviet Union after 1922), Italy, Turkey, Germany, Spain and Portugal, as well as many central and eastern European states, adopted dictatorships or became increasingly authoritarian and placed crippling limits on democratic institutions.

- In Russia, the Bolshevik (Communist) Party, led by Vladimir Lenin, had seized power in 1917 and imposed what it called the dictatorship of the proletariat (see page 18).
- In Italy, Benito Mussolini led his Fascist Party to power in 1922 and ruled as dictator until being overthrown in 1943.
- In Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), although intent on avoiding the extremes of fascism and communism, attempted to turn his country into a modern secular state and resorted to increasingly dictatorial methods of control to do so.
- In Germany, Adolf Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party came to power in 1933.
- In Spain, Francisco Franco, having led his ultra-nationalist Falangist Party to victory in a civil war that ended in 1939, ruled as a Right-wing dictator until his death in 1975.
- In Portugal, António Salazar, as prime minister and then president, led his New State Party in a Right-wing dictatorship from 1932 to 1974.

Even where democracy appeared to operate, for example in some western European nations, it was arguable that appearance belied reality. That, indeed, was the charge that Lenin made. He defined liberal-democracy as a charade used by the propertied classes, who held power in such countries as Britain and France, to justify and perpetuate their rule over the people. He dismissed the supposedly free elections in those countries as shams which left the bourgeois power structure untouched.

Outside Europe during the same period, it was a very similar story of growing authoritarianism.

- The tendency towards dictatorship was clearly evident in Central and South America whose constitutional traditions were even weaker than in Europe.
- The areas of Africa sufficiently free of colonial control to shape their own systems exhibited a similar trend. Tribal traditions and cultures were essentially authoritarian.

- Imperialist Japan developed along authoritarian lines matching those of fascist Europe. Emperor Hirohito came under the controlling influence of an aggressive war party intent on shaping Japan into a military power capable of colonizing Asia by force.
- In China, the Guomindang (GMD) government was democratic in theory, but authoritarian in practice. Sun Yatsen declared 'On no account must we give more liberty to the individual. Let us secure liberty instead for the nation.' Under his successor Chiang Kai-shek, the Guomindang government became markedly authoritarian.
- There were even critics in the USA who argued that Roosevelt's New Deal was undemocratic since the state-directed methods it used smacked of either socialism or fascism.

### **The impact of the Second World War, 1939–45**

At the end of the Second World War, there was an understandable sympathy for the idea of the collective state. It had been through collective, even regimented, effort that the Allies had emerged victorious. In response to the national crisis that war brought, many countries resorted to authoritarian methods. Indeed, even in the supposedly liberal democracies, some form of authoritarianism had been the norm for all the states involved in the Second World War. Britain had introduced restrictions such as internment and DORA. The USA had also interned those of its citizens, such as Japanese-Americans, whom it regarded as a potential threat to the war effort. The great majority of the population accepted these restrictions as the price to be paid for national security and perhaps survival. These were not totalitarian states, since the measures were meant to be temporary, not permanent. Popular support is not required for a state to be authoritarian since central government can impose itself on the popular will, but it is possible for a state to be popular and authoritarian.

The acceptance of authoritarianism extended in some instances into the acceptance of totalitarianism. It was evident that one of the Allies, Stalin's USSR, did not conform to liberal-democratic standards, but such was the desire of the other Allies to win the war that this was ignored. The prodigious effort made by the Soviet people in defeating Germany was so impressive that many admirers in the Western countries concluded that without the totalitarian methods used by Stalin to direct the war effort, the USSR would have been defeated.

The Second World War also had a pronounced influence outside Europe in promoting centralized control:

- North Korea, freed from Japan's control in 1945, adopted a particularly extreme form of communism under its leader Kim Il-Sung.
- In China, in 1949, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party defeated their Nationalist (Guomindang) opponents and began to create a communist People's Republic of China under his leadership.
- Although the colonial powers in south-east Asia, principally France, Britain and the Netherlands, had eventually won the war against Japan, the struggle had exposed their military weakness and encouraged the growth of strong nationalist movements which demanded independence. The movements were invariably authoritarian in outlook and methods. A notable example was Indonesia where Sukarno led his independence movement to power in 1949 and for the next seventeen years governed the country according to the principle of 'Guided Democracy', a euphemism for dictatorial control which involved the destruction of all forms of opposition.

### **Conclusion**

The history of the twentieth century suggests that the military, social and economic uncertainties of the period were judged at critical times to require an all-powerful state to combat them. Internal and external enemies could be overcome only through effective government. Dictatorship, aided by modern technology, flourished in such an atmosphere. The absence or weakness of the traditions of democracy, the damaging of the liberal ethic by the two world wars, the mutual fears of Right and Left, the collapse of economic security, the ideal of the nation state: these factors combined to prepare or consolidate the ground for authoritarian regimes.

Of the seven authoritarian or totalitarian states examined in this book, the first chronologically were European states: the Soviet Union and Germany. Although the regimes that developed elsewhere did not directly copy them, they did, in a sense, create models for the development of modern dictatorships. They certainly provide the observer with a valuable set of reference points. Of particular note is that the two regimes theoretically represented the opposite ends of the Left–Right political spectrum. When the regimes studied or referred to in this text are placed on that spectrum, the following pattern emerges.



As a visual illustration, it suffers from the weakness of suggesting fixed placement, but it does provide a set of references which can then be debated as to their accuracy once you have studied your chosen regimes from the following chapters.