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“Liberal discourses on fascism, 1918-1940. A discourse analysis of the Flemish liberal association *Liberaal Vlaams Verbond*, contrasted with germanophone and francophone liberal discourses on fascism”

verfasst von / submitted by

Elias Degruyter MA

angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Priv. Doz. Dr. Johannes Koll



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“The belief in the unlimited possibilities of government in general is the deepest cause of criticism of the limited possibilities of existing governments.”

Moritz Julius Bonn in *Neue Freie Presse* (January 1926)

“We form the state but are not the state’s servants. We accept the authority that we ourselves have created and deem respectable, not one that imposes itself without proof of respectability.”

“Notes to the program of LVV,” *Het Volksbelang* (1 February 1928).

“The ideal of democracy is never realised. It is carried by individual people, all deficient, all unilaterally minded, all locked into their own limitations. [...] Democrats must develop the democrat in themselves.”

Rommert Casimir in *De Opbouw*, cited in *Het Volksbelang* (17 April 1937)

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Abstract

The interwar period in Europe (1918-1939) marked a crisis of democracy. Authoritarian rule presented an appealing solution to the problems of the state as fascist movements threatened to replace parliamentary regimes. This thesis examines how the Flemish liberal association *Liberaal Vlaams Verbond* (LVV) perceived and responded to fascism from 1922 to the German invasion of Belgium in 1940. In addition, it contrasts these reactions to other germanophone and francophone liberal discourses on fascism. The analysis of LVV's periodicals demonstrates, first, that fascism became a topic of discussion from 1925 onwards, and that it occasioned LVV to repeatedly reconfirm its liberal beliefs. Second, the thesis shows that LVV's response to fascism changed as its challenge to liberal democracy became more serious. On the one hand, LVV urged liberals to learn from their enemies to appeal to the masses. On the other hand, liberal democracy would only manage to survive if leaders and citizens alike restored a sense of responsibility. Thirdly and finally, it is observed that Flemish, germanophone and francophone liberals shared many ideas about fascism, among which was the association of fascism with communism. Future comparative source research could analyse to what extent these discourses developed in parallel, and through which channels the transnational exchange of ideas took place.

Abstract (German)

Die Zwischenkriegszeit in Europa (1918-1939) war von einer Krise der Demokratie geprägt. Die autoritäre Herrschaft stellte eine attraktive Lösung für die Probleme des Staates dar, da faschistische Bewegungen die parlamentarischen Regime zu ersetzen drohten. In dieser Masterarbeit wird untersucht, wie der flämische liberale Verband Liberaal Vlaams Verbond (LVV) den Faschismus von 1922 bis zum deutschen Einmarsch in Belgien 1940 wahrnahm und darauf reagierte. Darüber hinaus werden diese Reaktionen mit anderen deutsch- und französischsprachigen liberalen Diskursen über den Faschismus verglichen. Die Analyse der LVV-Zeitschriften zeigt erstens, dass der Faschismus ab 1925 zunehmend diskutiert wurde und dass er die LVV veranlasste, ihre liberalen Überzeugungen wiederholt zu bekräftigen. Zweitens wird festgestellt, dass sich die Reaktion der LVV auf den Faschismus in dem Maße änderte, in dem seine Herausforderung für die liberale Demokratie ernster wurde. Einerseits forderte die LVV die Liberalen auf, von ihren Feinden zu lernen, um die Massen anzusprechen. Andererseits würde die liberale Demokratie nur überleben, wenn sowohl die Führer als auch die Bürger ihr Verantwortungsbewusstsein wiederherstellten. Drittens und letztens ist festzustellen, dass flämische, deutschsprachige und französischsprachige Liberale viele Ansichten über den Faschismus und die von ihm geforderten Antworten teilten, nicht zuletzt die Verbindung von Faschismus und Kommunismus. Durch weitere vergleichende Quellenforschung könnte analysiert werden, inwieweit sich diese Diskurse parallel entwickelten und wie der Gedankenaustausch stattfand.

Introduction

Research question

The interwar years marked the rise and decline of liberal democracy in Europe. Anti-liberal movements and regimes soon challenged the advancement of parliament and the introduction of universal (male) suffrage after the First World War. Conceived in Italy in the early 1920's, fascism spread across Europe and also confronted liberals in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. This thesis examines liberal discourses on fascism during the period 1918-1940. How did liberals in Europe perceive and describe fascism? Which threats did fascism pose, and which causes were identified for its success? How could fascism be opposed, and liberalism preserved?

Following a literature review, these questions are discussed in the two central chapters. The first offers a close reading of two periodicals published by the Flemish *Liberaal Vlaams Verbond* (LVV). LVV was the association of socially progressive liberals in Flanders. They were committed to the promotion of the rights of the Flemish in Belgium, and represented the left wing of liberalism in Belgium. LVV's journals *L.V.V. Maandblad van het Vlaams Liberaal Verbond* (1922-1924) and *Het Volksbelang* (1925-1940) offer a representative image of how these liberals perceived and responded to fascism in the 1920's and 1930's.

The second part of the thesis takes a broader geographical view. It offers a description of liberal thought about fascism among German, French and francophone Belgian liberal authors and journals. Drawing on secondary literature, this chapter discusses and summarises the main themes and motifs, which marked these discourses. This chapter does not claim to provide a comprehensive overview. Rather, it discusses a number of examples, which together form a relevant picture of different liberal responses to fascism.

Finally, the concluding chapter briefly demonstrates the extent to which these responses to fascism corresponded with, or differed from LVV's. By contrasting a local case to other Western European examples, this thesis thus aims to contribute to the intellectual history of liberalism during the interwar years, both on a local and a transnational level.

Method

The body of this thesis involves a discourse analysis of two consequent periodicals of LVV. Covering a period of 18 years, the source material represents Flemish liberal discourse in the interwar period. The analysis focuses on linguistic features such as vocabulary and qualifications, and looks at arguments. As such, the aim is not simply to examine how LVV responded to fascism, but what "fascism" and "fascist" was thought to mean in the first place. Which other terms was it associated with? How did these conceptions evolve, and with them the responses they triggered? To find out, the analysis looks for common interpretations and responses across time, sometimes spanning several years. When the source includes explicit references to other texts and publications, these will be mentioned, but not discussed in detail. The concluding chapter does some suggestions for further research in this respect.

Chapter two of the thesis is based on secondary literature, but has the same aim: examining how fascism was understood, and which responses such understanding occasioned. After a description per author or journal, the chapter collects and describes the different themes and motives that

circulated among them. As such, it offers an overview of the similarities and differences which marked liberal discourses in Germany, France, and francophone Belgium. The concluding chapter, finally, comments on the intersections with the Flemish liberal discourse.

Chapter 1: Literature review

The literature review describes the historical context and historiographical debates relevant to this thesis. It first draws the vulnerable condition of liberal democracy during the interwar years, both in Belgium and in Europe more generally. It then discusses some of the recent literature on the liberal response to fascism. Finally, the review concentrates on the Flemish liberals of LVV, and argues how this thesis will elaborate on its history.

1.1 Challenges to liberal democracy, 1918-1940

1.1.1 Belgium

The end of the First World War marked the beginning of mass democracy in various Western states. Belgium was one of the states which implemented democratic systems of government. Universal male suffrage was introduced in 1919, mainly in response to the war efforts of the socialist party and labourers more generally.¹ This caused the immediate rise of socialist representation in parliament, broke the dominant position of the Catholic party, and allowed several new parties to emerge. The advance of political democracy was coupled with the development of social democracy through new social legislation. These laws included the loosening of restrictions on strikes, the introduction of eight-hour working days and new regulations on compulsory legal pensions.

Despite unmistakable democratisation, parliamentary democracy quickly proved manifestly unstable and inefficient. A Belgian citizen living in 1933 had only experienced two years without a government crisis since the Great War.² Universal suffrage had ended the era of homogenous majorities in parliament, and coalition governments were much more prone to internal disagreement. This constantly led to premature government failure. A first culmination of these problems occurred in 1925, when persistent disagreement between the socialists and conservative Catholics caused an unprecedentedly long period of negotiations before a government was formed.³ The cabinet would resign after 11 months due to untenable pressure on the national budget and currency.

Such an environment provided fertile grounds for anti-democratic ideas. Between 1918 and 1925 critiques of democracy and parliament gained popularity among the French speaking Catholic intelligentsia.⁴ The conservative wing of the Catholic party considered democracy and its liberal values of freedom, individualism and equality as principally irreconcilable with Catholicism. Just like the Reformation and the French Revolution, democracy was a new step in a “genealogy of evil”.⁵ Yet the French speaking Catholic right was not alone in its desire for a new order. Associations of disappointed war veterans, often French speaking and anti-Flemish, sympathized with Italian fascism, and rejected parliament and political parties. A Flemish war veteran and MP for the Flemish nationalist party, Joris Van Severen, for example, reformed his local party branch into a Catholic, anti-liberal, militaristic movement.⁶

¹ Gita Deneckere et al., *Een geschiedenis van België* (Gent: Academia Press, 2014), 215-17.

² Emmanuel Gerard, *De Katholieke Partij in crisis. Partijpolitiek leven in België (1918-1940)* (Leuven: Kritak, 1985), 386.

³ Gerard, *De Katholieke Partij*, 118-31.

⁴ Emmanuel Gerard, *De schaduw van het interbellum. België van euforie tot crisis, 1918-1939* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2017), 133.

⁵ Els Witte, Alain Meynen en Dirk Luyten, *Politieke geschiedenis van België* (Antwerpen: Manteau, 2016), 186.

⁶ Gerard, *De schaduw*, 133-37.

Mass unemployment and loss of purchasing power hit Belgium in the second half of the 1930's.⁷ While the diffusion of anti-liberal ideas in the 1920's was limited, the economic crisis amplified demands for a "Réforme de l'Etat."⁸ Inspired by experiments and successes in Italy and Germany, a new political order was advocated from a wide range of ideological positions. The Catholic Party widely discussed such concepts as state reform, corporatism, democracy and dictatorship in its publications and congresses. The Catholic conception of the "restoration of the social order" was embedded in a general critique of such liberal values as rationalism and individualism.⁹ Instead, the new order should be based on respect for authority and traditional forms of community, like family and corporation. In the words of the general secretary of the Christian labour union: "We look for a new balance between the authority that was disregarded, and the freedom that was abused [...]."¹⁰

In the second half of the 1930's, fascism became a concrete threat for the Belgian political regime. The fascist party Rex, established by dissident Catholic party members, unexpectedly won 21 seats in parliament in 1936.¹¹ Catholic voters also turned towards the party of the anti-Belgian nationalists, which equally evolved in an anti-democratic direction. In response, the Catholic Party shifted to the extreme right as well, resulting in a global shift towards the right in Belgian politics. This contributed to even more government crises between 1936 and 1939, which again played into the hands of the critics of democracy.

1.1.2 Europe

These dynamics were not unique for Belgium. In the rest of Europe too, political democracy advanced progressively in the aftermath of the First World War. The new states that emerged adopted written constitutions and universal suffrage. Countries with longer democratic traditions, such as Great Britain, also expanded voting rights. Women won the vote in the United States, Germany and most new states in Europe. In the Soviet Union women could vote after the revolution of 1917. Pre-war socialists gained strength in most European countries, resulting in the extension of social democracy. Social legislation strengthened the welfare state, which had begun to emerge in various European countries in the late nineteenth century.¹²

Simultaneously, fear of socialism occasioned a countermovement which empowered fascist leaders. Mussolini's first government in 1922 was a coalition government with three other political parties. It would not have materialized without the support of the liberals.¹³ The Duce replaced democracy with authority; individual and collective rights made way for violence and discipline. Outside Italy, doubts erupted about the universality of democracy. While the democratic regimes in Western and Northern Europe remained in place during the 1920's, none of them escaped the swelling critique of parliamentarism.

Like in Belgium, this was due to the observed incompetence of parliamentary rule. Party fragmentation and the pursuit of sectional self-interests paralyzed the formation of governments and precluded the survival of sustainable coalitions. In hardly any countries in Europe cabinets lasted more than a year on average. In Germany, such intellectuals as Sigmund Neumann, Moritz Bonn and

⁷ Deneckere et al., *Een geschiedenis van België*, 221-22.

⁸ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 18.

⁹ Gerard, *De Katholieke Partij*, 387.

¹⁰ Gerard, *De Katholieke Partij*, 388.

¹¹ Deneckere et al., *Een geschiedenis van België*, 224.

¹² R.R. Palmer, Joel Colton and Lloyd Kramer, *A History of Europe in the Modern World* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), 780.

¹³ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 13.

Hans Kelsen, all committed democrats, observed how democracy was failing to fend off, and possibly even worsened economic and political polarization.¹⁴

The experience with democratic deadlocks occasioned the delegation of legislative power to the executive branch of government. Countries such as Poland, Lithuania, Austria, Estonia and Spain revised their constitutions to strengthen the executive. And while some liberal democrats feared those reforms paved the way for dictatorship, other, “more pragmatic constitutionalists” backed such proposals precisely to save democracy from dismantlement.¹⁵ In Germany, Carl Schmitt originally advocated for constitutional emergency powers as a way to protect the constitution rather than install dictatorship.¹⁶ Moving to a presidential system of government, the Weimar Republic slid into authoritarianism and dictatorship even before Hitler’s takeover in 1933.

Democracy was left with few supporters. Such hardened anti-democrats and war veterans as the British Oswald Mosley, the Flemish Joris Van Severen, the Hungarian Ferenc Szálasi and Hitler himself reviled democracy as something bourgeois: “sluggish, materialistic, unexciting and incapable of arousing the sympathy of the masses.”¹⁷ Historian Mark Mazower notes how their attacks did not meet fierce opposition. On the contrary: expressionist and surrealist artists were obsessed with violence and advocated a “politics of confrontation.”¹⁸

Meanwhile, the European Left was divided between communists and social democrats. The first opposed parliament for its “bourgeois formalism”, the second tolerated rather than defended it.¹⁹ Catholics, Orthodox and nationalists, then, found that democracy advanced selfishness and failed to inspire civic consciousness and a sense of community. Many nationalists wished that authoritarian forms of government would install national unity in multi-ethnic states. By the 1930’s many intellectuals doubted whether democracy should ever have been expected to flourish in Europe.

1.2 Liberal responses to fascism

But how did liberals respond to the attacks on democracy, and to fascism in particular? Fascism in the 1920’s was a new and unknown phenomenon. In 1926, German legal scholar and member of the Social Democratic Party Hermann Heller did not classify fascism under a separate ideological category. Instead it was included in the chapter on democracy, in a section about Mussolini’s “personality dictatorship” and its “myth of the nation.”²⁰ Liberals in Germany were struggling to deal with the “new irrational and aestheticizing moment of the political.”²¹ The March on Rome, the invocation of myths, the level of performance, the cult of the leader and the use of violence all proved an intellectual and political challenge for liberal and social democratic intellectuals.²²

Historian Jens Hacke notes how the image of Mussolini’s regime strengthened anti-parliamentary tendencies in Europe. In many established democracies, the “phenomenon Mussolini” stimulated

¹⁴ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 16-8.

¹⁵ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 19.

¹⁶ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 19-20.

¹⁷ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 21.

¹⁸ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 21.

¹⁹ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 24.

²⁰ Herman Heller, *Die politischen Ideenkreise der Gegenwart* (1926), cited in Jens Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie. Zur politischen Theorie des Liberalismus in der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 131-32.

²¹ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 131.

²² Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 128-29.

not just an interest in fascism, but aroused sympathy too.²³ Liberal intellectuals were not an exception in this. In fact, fascism undermined the liberal convictions of many of them. Hacke describes how liberal journalists often displayed a mixture of criticism and admiration. The head editor of the *Berliner Tageblatt* Theodor Wolff and the popular author Emil Ludwig did not conceal the positive impressions Mussolini made on them. Many liberals apparently preferred authoritarian over democratic solutions for social problems. Mark Mazower has made the same observation. Technocrats, business managers and social engineers desired scientific and apolitical solutions to social problems which parliament seemed not capable of resolving.²⁴ They preferred authoritarian rule over communist dictatorship. Even John Maynard Keynes saw few positive arguments in favour of liberalism.

However, Hacke argues that many other liberals were highly critical of fascism, and discussed it extensively. His thesis opposes that of historian Wolfgang Schieder, who maintained that leftist liberals misinterpreted fascism as ordinary dictatorship and missed its systemic character.²⁵ According to Hacke, liberal commentators actively examined what fascism could teach about the crisis of parliamentary democracy. They looked for explanations for the popular aversion from rational, democratic, parliamentary politics, and the predilection for violence, intolerance and nationalism.²⁶ This observation is confirmed by various contributions in the edited volume of Michel Grunewald, Oliver Dard and Uwe Puschner.²⁷ Many liberals demonstrated willingness for self-reflection and determination to uphold their values.

1.3 The Flemish liberals of the *Liberaal Vlaams Verbond*

To understand the position and orientation of LVV, it is relevant to sketch the situation of political liberalism in Belgium. Liberalism in Belgium during the interwar period was a francophone matter. The Liberal Party advocated the protection of freedoms, the interests of the bourgeoisie, and Belgian patriotism, which represented a francophone identity. According to historian Emmanuel Gerard, the Liberal Party had a “mentality” rather than a program.²⁸ Its support base was to be found among personal relations, the *salons* and notables. In the provinces it was supported by big industrialists, in the cities small bourgeoisie and civil servants were more important. This explains why liberals in the cities were generally more democratic than their provincial counterparts.²⁹

The Liberal Party was small and, in those years, never improved on its position as third largest party. Yet it almost continuously participated in government. It was not a mass party like that of the socialists and the Catholics, and its labour union and health service organisation were small. It was elite-based, meaning the power to make decisions was concentrated among the parliamentary

²³ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 132.

²⁴ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 23.

²⁵ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 137.

²⁶ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 138.

²⁷ Michel Grunewald, Olivier Dard and Uwe Puschner, “Liberale, modérés und Proeuropäer über den Nationalsozialismus,” in *Confrontations au national-socialisme en Europe francophone et germanophone / Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus im deutsch- und französischsprachigen Europa (1919-1949)*, eds. Michel Grunewald, Olivier Dard and Uwe Puschner (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2018), II: 26-7.

²⁸ Emmanuel Gerard, “Omstreden democratie,” in *De jaren '30 in België. De massa in verleiding*, eds. Ronny Gobyn and Winston Spriet (Brussel: ASLK, 1994), 89; also see E.H. Kossmann, *The Low Countries, 1780-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 608.

²⁹ Emmanuel Gerard, *De Schaduw van het interbellum. België van euforie tot crisis, 1918-1939* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2017), 159-60.

personel, ministers and ex-ministers. The yearly council of the *Landsraad*, which hosted all recognised liberal organisations in Belgium, including LVV, had little power.³⁰

Despite its small size, the party was fragmented. It included social conservatives and progressives, and French-minded as well as Flemish-minded militants. Yet the conservative, French-minded side was so dominant that the impact of other strands was negligible.³¹ The Party's attitude towards the Flemish was antagonistic, which in part resulted from the collaboration of Flemish liberals with the German occupier during the First World War. Not few Flemish liberals got involved in the Activist movement, which demanded radical political reforms and was willing to cooperate with the Germans. Historian Adriaan Verhulst also points to other, more structural factors. For example, there was the oligarchical character of the party's leadership, which was predominantly francophone and set in Brussels. Another element was the francophone character of the liberal "associations," even in Ghent and Antwerp. Because of this, even Flemish party representatives were often francophone and French-minded.³²

It is in this context the marginal role of the *Liberaal Vlaams Verbond* should be seen. Despite its marginal position, LVV clung to its principles and continued its advocacy of Flemish rights.³³ The association had been established in 1913 to defend a program that was liberal, Flemish and social.³⁴ During the interwar years it increasingly distanced itself from the Liberal Party and became more isolated. Yet from 1936 onwards, LVV experienced a revival when its former president and prominent member Arthur Vanderpoorten was elected into the senate, and publisher of the journal *Het Laatste Nieuws*, Julius Hoste, became Minister of Public Education. Their positions increased the prestige of the Flemish liberals in the Party. Hoste's involvement in the government in exile in London would contribute to the role of Flemish liberalism after the war.³⁵

The historiography about LVV has focused on its role in the Flemish movement. Indeed, its ideology and activities pivoted on its demands for Flemish rights. Historian Olivier Boehme has included LVV's publications in his research on the social-economic agenda of the Flemish Movement. In his view, LVV's journals, including *L.V.V. Maandblad van het Liberaal Vlaams Verbond* and *Het Volksbelang*, are exquisite sources to study the economic and social themes in Flemish liberalism.³⁶ Boehme also discussed some of LVV's reactions to fascism during the interwar years, but related these responses to social and economic debates in the Flemish Movement. This thesis aims to focus on Flemish liberal discourses on fascism as a subject in itself. LVV and its publications offer the right material for this purpose.

³⁰ Gerard, *De schaduw van het interbellum*, 160-61.

³¹ Gerard, *De schaduw van het interbellum*, 162.

³² Adriaan Verhulst, "De Vlaamse kwestie: 1914-1971," in *Het liberalisme in België. Tweehonderd jaar geschiedenis*, eds. Adriaan Verhulst and Hervé Hasquin (Brussel: Uitgeverij Delta, 1989), 226.

³³ Verhulst, "De Vlaamse kwestie," 228. The same counted for *Willemsfonds*, the cultural organisation of the Flemish liberals, which generally shared LVV's ideas.

³⁴ Piet Van Brabant and Wouter Blomme. *Als een vuurtoren. 85 jaar Liberaal Vlaams Verbond (1913-1998)* (Gent: Liberaal Vlaams Verbond / Liberaal Archief, 1998), 69.

³⁵ Verhulst, "De Vlaamse kwestie," 228.

³⁶ Olivier Boehme, *Greep naar de markt. De sociaal-economische agenda van de Vlaamse Beweging en haar ideologische versplintering tijdens het interbellum* (Leuven: LannooCampus, 2008), 324.

Chapter 2: Liberal discourse on fascism: the case of *Liberaal Vlaams Verbond*

2.1 Discourse analysis of the *Maandblad* (1922-1924) and *Het Volksbelang* (1925-1940)

How did Flemish liberals respond to fascism in the interwar period? This chapter examines the two journals published by the *Liberaal Vlaams Verbond* (LVV) during the 1920's and 1930's: *L.V.V. Maandblad van het Liberaal Vlaams Verbond* (1922-1924) (henceforth *Maandblad*), and *Het Volksbelang* (1925-1940).

The chapter's build-up is chronological and thematic. It chronologically covers the period 1922 - 1940, but does not describe the journals' content from one edition to the next. Instead, articles from subsequent editions (sometimes spanning several years) are grouped if they cover a similar topic. The chapter begins by situating LVV's ideology, its conception of democracy, and its political priorities. The main body of the text describes the discourse on fascism. The conclusion offers a summary of the main findings.

The thesis seeks to analyse LVV's discussion of fascism, but does not aim to evaluate the roles played by its individual authors. While identifying these roles could offer a more complex understanding of how LVV's discourse was structured, it is not a necessary requirement to follow the discussions. In some cases, individual authors, many of whom used pseudonyms, will be named. Yet it is the diversity and development of the arguments which are central to this research, and not the actors.

Finally, it is useful to bear in mind a few notes on translation. LVV was both "*Vlaams*" and "*Vlaamsgezind*". This means it was not just "Flemish," but also "Flemish-minded." A synonym for *Vlaamsgezind* is "*flamingantisch*", so *Vlaamsgezinden* also go by "*flaminganten*". *Vlaamsgezind* and *flamingantisch* will both be translated as "Flemish-minded." Relevant in this context is the difference between Flemish-mindedness and Flemish nationalism. In the history of the Flemish Movement (*Vlaamse Beweging*), Flemish-mindedness is considered less radical than Flemish nationalism. The latter is traditionally anti-Belgian and is associated with the collaboration movement(s) during the war(s). Another term, finally, which deserves attention is "*franskiljons*." This word was pejoratively used to mark French-speaking Belgians who, in the eyes of the Flemish-minded, were anti-Flemish. In translation *franskiljons* will be "French-minded."

2.1.1 LVV, Flemish liberal democrats (May 1922)

The first edition of the *Maandblad* came out in May 1922. The journal aimed to be a "higher magazine" publishing scientific contributions which could be useful for liberal party members. Topics covered would include political science, social problems, the Flemish movement and international politics. Also announced were a women and children's section, and an opinion section.³⁷

LVV's president Arthur Vanderpoorten expressed the ideological orientation of LVV in an article entitled "Are we needed?" He declared that "[w]e, liberal democrats" stayed loyal to the original

³⁷ All citations in this section come from *L.V.V. Maandblad van het Liberaal Vlaams Verbond* (May 1922). Henceforth, this journal will be abbreviated as "*Maandblad*."

liberal idea and its “world view.” This is what separated LVV from the conservative liberals in the Liberal Party. Vanderpoorten defined liberal as the opposite of “servile,” and liberalism as

“resistance against old-fashioned concepts, against prejudice, against clerical compulsion, against exaggerated state intervention in private life. Liberal is such legislation, which takes into account the powers of the individual and which balances the different interests of the people.”³⁸

Vanderpoorten situated LVV’s ideology in the tradition of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the French Revolution, Manchesterianism, the Anti-Cornlaw League “and so many other liberating movements.” Every realisation of a liberal idea was founded on “sane democracy” and aimed for the protection and liberation of “the lesser man” or “the lesser class.” For this purpose, LVV rejected to use violence but instead chose to tread “the ways of a sane evolution.”

LVV opposed Catholics, socialists and “fronters,” the latter being the Flemish nationalists. LVV was against church dogma and interference of religion in politics. Religion should be a private matter, not a public one. Vanderpoorten also rejected the socialist ideology of class struggle and promoted class cooperation instead. While it was important to establish good living and working conditions for labourers, “[t]he democracy of the socialists” had radicalised and even become pathological.

The fronters, then, united in the Frontpartij, represented the Flemish soldiers who had collaborated with the German army during the First World War. Vanderpoorten accused the Frontpartij of being anti-French.³⁹ LVV, by contrast, was Flemish-minded, but not anti-French. LVV believed the Dutch language to be a necessary means to develop and educate the people in all levels of society. But as Vanderpoorten had it, “we believe in Belgium and reject the idea of separation.”

In short, it was asserted that “religious peace, Flemish-mindedness and people-mindedness” constituted “the trinity of our liberal faith.” The task for liberal democracy was to establish more “equality and fraternity.” Unfortunately, “our own liberal fellow combatants” on the conservative side did not fully share these ideals.

2.1.2 The meaning of democracy in the early 1920’s (July 1922 - November 1923)

Demands for Flemish rights were at the heart of the conflict between LVV and their conservative liberal colleagues. A prominent debate in the *Maandblad* was about the language used for teaching at the university of the Flemish city of Ghent. Traditionally this had been French. In such debates, the Flemish case was presented as a democratic case: “Democracy and Flemish-mindedness are synonyms.”⁴⁰ Both were about promoting people’s prosperity and development. The right to use your mother tongue in Flanders was a democratic right.

In a discussion on the same topic one author stated, “we can say that to make [the university of] Ghent Flemish is to democratise [the university of] Ghent.”⁴¹ This did not imply that “the son of a worker can then go to university. [...] Here, to democratise means: bringing it closer to the people, allowing the people to also enjoy its benefits, because science that is taught in the language of the people, will not experience a wall between itself and the crowd.” The language reform would bring

³⁸ *Maandblad* (May 1922).

³⁹ Anti-French refers to a negative sentiment towards the culture of both the French and the French-speaking Belgians.

⁴⁰ *Maandblad* (July-August 1922).

⁴¹ *Maandblad* (October-November 1922).

Flemish teachers to industry schools and allow that lawyers, engineers and doctors could converse with ordinary men.

In a later edition it was recalled that investments in professional education were necessary, because in a “reformed society” all people needed to be educated into “thinking, enlightened beings.”⁴² Such “moral uplifting of hand labourers” was thought to lead to the integration of the different classes. “The major social danger” was perceived not to lie in differences of wealth, but in differences of education.

This democratic, Flemish-minded attitude separated the LVV from their conservative counterparts in the Belgian liberal party. In an article on trade unions, Arthur Vanderpoorten re-emphasised the importance of cooperation between labour and capital. At the same time, he claimed that “[t]he fight of the liberal conservatives is near its end.”⁴³ They would not be able to oppose the wave of people-mindedness, and hence Flemish-mindedness, which the country experienced. The liberal democrats, however, were “returning to the principles of the founders of liberalism: no privileges for class or race. Equality of rights and duties for each state citizen.”

2.1.3 Challenges to democracy (July 1922 - January 1924)

This optimism was countered by the emergence of anti-democratic attitudes. In the edition of October/November 1923 the *Maandblad* included a summary of a lecture held by liberal minister Louis Franck. He was noted to have said that “[i]t has become fashionable to attack the liberal party. The worshippers of violence and dictatorship blame our party that she is the moral father of parliamentarism and universal suffrage.”⁴⁴ Franck saw no viable alternative for these institutions: “What would one propose instead? It is easy to say that members of parliament cannot act but only talk.”

The minister emphasised that democracies had won the war, and that liberalism opposed imperialism, the “doctrine of arbitrariness and violence.” Franck then called upon his liberal colleagues to stay loyal to their ideal of “government of, by and for the people in an atmosphere of freedom.” More concretely, promoting liberalism meant to educate people and to raise their intellectual capacities. The language reforms that were executed at the university of Ghent were perceived as a step forward. Franck concluded by warning that “our liberal party in Belgium will either not be, or she should remain democratic. Every reaction on the political or social level will find us on its way.” Earlier, another author had already claimed that “as democrats we fight demagogues and those who exploit the people.”⁴⁵

Some months later, in the first edition of 1924, the Liberal Party itself was observed to display “anti-democratic” and “anti-popular” attitudes.⁴⁶ In the French-written attachment to the *Maandblad*, LVV’s secretary Victor Heymans noted that “[t]here are in Brussels certain bigwigs who harm liberalism by their authoritarian attitude.” These liberal leaders were observed to be turning Belgian liberalism into a class party, which would serve big industry and defend old-fashioned privileges. Heymans observed this problem in debates about the university of Ghent, and in discussions about the eight hours working day. The fact that the liberal leaders did not consult the liberal organs or trade unions, was “another manifestation of this disdainful autocratic spirit and reactionary

⁴² *Maandblad* (October-November 1923).

⁴³ *Maandblad* (December 1922).

⁴⁴ *Maandblad* (October-November 1923).

⁴⁵ *Maandblad* (July-August 1922).

⁴⁶ *Maandblad, Feuilletts détachés* (January 1924).

conservatism" in the liberal party. In the *Maandblad*, debates about democracy were mostly debates about Flemish rights, and vice versa.

2.1.4 Ideological continuity in *Het Volksbelang* (October 1925 - January 1926)

The last edition of the *Maandblad* dates from April 1924. One and a half year later, in October 1925, *Het Volksbelang* became the new weekly outlet of LVV. The ideological orientation was the same: LVV represented "the most democratic conception of liberalism" or "the extreme left wing of Belgian liberalism, where the true democratic principles of the party have been honoured."⁴⁷

This stance still involved demands for Flemish rights: "These are not all of democracy, yet they are a big and inseparable part of it."⁴⁸ In debates on Flemish rights in the domains of education, government, justice system and army, the French-minded members of the liberal party continued to be a principal political opponent of LVV. In December 1925, tensions with their conservative colleagues became untenable. *Het Volksbelang* presented discussions on a program to start a new, independent party, but an actual split would never occur.

Important to note is the emphasis *Het Volksbelang* put on communal interests, in addition to individual freedom. Use of individual freedoms should never harm the community. This is why LVV did not subscribe to classical "Manchester-liberalism," which offered the market free reign.⁴⁹ The state protected the community. In addition, LVV formulated the ideal of "community service" or "social servitude." This was framed as an answer to the perceived lack of a connecting principle in liberalism. A shared liberal project needed to match what religion meant to Catholics, and what the theory of historical materialism meant to socialists.

2.1.5 Mussolini inspiring Belgian fascists (October 1925 - January 1926)

Fascism was not a subject in the *Maandblad*. The new outlet, *Het Volksbelang*, introduced it in October 1925. The first reference was included in a message on the Treaty of Locarno, an agreement which was "a safeguard against that which a madman like Mussolini would ever be up to."⁵⁰ The same edition also contained an article on the fascist sympathies of Belgian Catholic youth. Entitled "The Catholic youth against democracy," the article described how intellectual Catholic youngsters supported the "anti-freedom theories" of Maurras and "wishe[d] for our country a Mussolini", meaning "a tyrant [...] who would deny dissidents the right to talk and even to exist."

LVV thought the Catholic worldview, with its principles of authority and subjection, was problematic. The hierarchy in Catholic social institutions, such as health services and labour unions, was associated with "a sort of autocracy, absolute rule by one person."⁵¹ Moreover, Catholic intellectual youth was observed to be raised with the idea that they were the elites destined to lead society. Their education rejected democratic ideas, because these would lead to communism, bolshevism and anarchy. *Het Volksbelang* opposed these images with its own idea of democracy:

⁴⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (3 October 1925).

⁴⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (31 October 1925).

⁴⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (16 January 1926).

⁵⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (24 October 1925).

⁵¹ *Het Volksbelang* (24 October 1925).

“Democracy [...] wants equality and freedom for all, and that all receive the means to exercise this same freedom. Democracy tolerates authority, but first determines this authority, in freedom of thought and action.”⁵²

“Fascist fuss” was repeatedly associated with conservative Catholicism, French-speaking elites (*franskiljons*), and arrogant youth.⁵³ During a “fascist event” some French-minded participants scolded others who refused to salute the Belgian national flag and sing the anthem. In LVV’s view, fascists and *franskiljons* equally abused Belgian symbols for their own anti-Flemish party purposes.⁵⁴ A French-speaking youth organisation was described as “consisting of young fascists or French-maniac worshippers of Mussolini.”⁵⁵ Other articles in the same edition mentioned a “fascist gang” or “fascist youngsters” who caused turmoil by forcing their way into a city hall or a professor’s house. A local liberal journal was condemned for praising Mussolini. LVV noted that “a fascist wind (*windje*, i.e. small wind) is blowing over our country.”

Looking at foreign developments *Het Volksbelang* condemned the indifference of the pope regarding the “crimes of fascism”, “that shame of the twentieth century.”⁵⁶ Mussolini himself was noted to wish to nominate the king of Italy as emperor of Rome. To LVV, his nostalgia for the Roman Empire was an expression of his “reactionary mind.” *Het Volksbelang* reassured its readers not to worry, although “such lunatics at the head of a country” may cause a “danger to peace.” The journal ironically expressed its hope that in Belgium no such fascists would “dream of an emperor of Beulemanië.”⁵⁷ ‘Beulemanië’ or ‘Beulemansstad’ (Beuleman’s city) were mock names for Brussels, and ‘Beulemansen’ denoted French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels.⁵⁸

2.1.6 Fascism, socialism and liberalism (January 1926)

Early in 1926, the LVV expressed concerns about the presence of an “aggressive and ferocious nationalism” in Europe.⁵⁹ One author believed it was “the most harmful thought of our time.” Nationalism authorised politicians to suppress people with the tacit consent of those very people. In every country, a minority of agitating chauvinists was fighting against the “pacification of the minds” and inciting hate against “strangers.”⁶⁰ To those agitators, such strangers were not only foreigners but also all those whose opinion differed from their own.

Despite this explicit condemnation, nationalism attracted little attention in comparison to socialism on the one hand, and fascism on the other. The latter two were discussed together for the first time in an article from Italian professor of philosophy and old minister Benedetto Croce. The article had been published in the Vienna based journal *Europäische Revue* and was copied and paraphrased in *Het Volksbelang*.⁶¹

⁵² *Het Volksbelang* (24 October 1925).

⁵³ *Het Volksbelang* (5 December 1925).

⁵⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (12 December 1925).

⁵⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (5 December 1925).

⁵⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (26 December 1925).

⁵⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (2 January 1926).

⁵⁸ Jozef Cornelissen, *Nederlandse volkschumor* (Antwerpen: De Sikkel, 1930),

https://www.dbnl.org/arch/corn009nede01_01/pag/corn009nede01_01.pdf, accessed 26 July 2021.

⁵⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (9 January 1926).

⁶⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (16 January 1926).

⁶¹ *Het Volksbelang* (23 January 1926). From the *Europäische Revue*, the text was first copied by the Flemish liberal journal *De Vlaamse Gids*. *Het Volksbelang* then copied it from the latter. It is unclear at which points Croce was cited or paraphrased by *Het Volksbelang*. Citations here are in the first place citations from *Het Volksbelang*.

Croce's article was titled 'Liberalismus' and set out his views on liberalism's role in the political arena. According to the Italian politician, it was wrong to claim that there was no alternative to "socialism or communism" on the one hand, and to "reaction and fascism (authoritarianism)" on the other. He explained that "socialism strives for the authority of democracy" and "authoritarianism strives for power to government." Liberalism, however, "means freedom of the individual and freedom of social groups", and thus promoted "intellectual, moral and economic progress."

Croce stated that neither socialism nor authoritarianism had been able to realise its theoretical ideals. Liberalism, by contrast, had no theories and simply strove to make people benefit and not suffer from "the natural flow of things." Croce considered liberalism as "a centre party", "the party of culture."

Socialism and authoritarianism were considered extreme parties, as they showed "many traits of abstract primitivism." Croce exposed the socialist worldview as a theological vision rather than science. The "nationalists (fascists)" in turn, "all grew from literature and know as culture nothing but literature. They don't know what politics are; even less what history is." The fascist regime in Italy had not succeeded in writing a constitution, and the 'national state' it aimed to establish was nothing but the liberal state captured and ruled by another party. Croce believed that liberalism would be capable of converting fascists and communists alike, because it bore the tendencies of both extremisms.

2.1.7 What is fascism? (February-March 1926)

"Fascism in terms of domestic politics, is autocracy - rule based on violence."⁶² This is how LVV defined fascism in an article on "Italian imperialism" in February 1926. The author explained that fascism used extreme patriotism and hatred for foreign peoples to appeal to the masses. "That is why autocracy always means nationalism and imperialism (the germ of all wars!) all throughout history. That is why Bolshevism is nationalist and imperialist. And so is fascism."

Italian fascism, then, was perceived to be nationalist and imperialist "to the highest degree." Mussolini, having succeeded the "pre-fascist leader Gabriele d'Annunzio", preyed on "Italia irredenta," in the tradition of ancient Rome. He prohibited the League of Nations to interfere with South-Tyrol. Within Italian borders everyone had to "speak Italian, feel Italian, think Italian, be Italian..." *Het Volksbelang* predicted the Duce would not back off: "He who violates the law in internal politics, can only speak with cannons in international affairs too."

One month later, in March 1926, *Het Volksbelang* included an article entitled "What is fascism?"⁶³ The text offered a discussion of a lecture from Italian professor Salvemini, addressed to the National Liberal Club in London during his exile. Salvemini debunked the legend that Mussolini had protected Italy against communism. Originally, the Duce himself had promoted the seizure of factories by the labourers, but the socialists declined his offers. As a reaction to socialism, Italian industrialists, landowners and bankers had united and had used Mussolini and his fascist organisations as a "white guard" against the socialists and the popolari. They ordered the military to arm the fascists; the police was commanded to hold back.

"But has not fascism guaranteed the economical boom of Italy? No." Salvemini explained that only the North was prosperous, while railway investments had already been done before the fascists had

⁶² *Het Volksbelang* (20 February 1926).

⁶³ *Het Volksbelang* (27 March 1926).

taken power. The professor criticized the uncontrolled exploitation by the rulers. Financial policies had not improved. With freedoms being suppressed, there were no legal ways to vent frustrations, out of which a “revolutionary crisis” could erupt. The treatment of members of parliament illustrated what individual citizens could expect for themselves.

Finally, Salvemini lamented the popular objection often made by foreigners that the trains were running on time. “These people do not wonder if under fascist rule, justice works punctually too, and freedom and human dignity.” Because as railways were a public service, so were, supposedly, “legal certainty, the guarantee of freedom, respect of human dignity.”

2.1.8 Fascism spreading over Europe and to Belgium (February 1926)

February 1926 spawned different articles about the spread of fascism and its manifestations in Belgium. LVV used the term to denote a variety of, mostly francophone, political opponents.

For example, the author of an opinion article titled “About Belgian fascism” noted Italian fascism’s expansion in Europe: “There has been a time when one could think Mussolini [...] would abdicate, once calmness and prosperity would again rule in Italy. [...] There has been a time when one could think fascism was an Italian phenomenon.”⁶⁴ But fascism, the author observed, was not any longer limited in time and space. In Italy, the Duce’s leadership continued, and in Madrid, Athens and Budapest, leaders like Primo de Rivera, Pangalos and Horthy were copying Mussolini’s methods. Even in Paris the French were dreaming of a fascist revolution. The author observed a causal link between militarism and the Italian, Spanish and Greek dictatorships. The armies in these countries were dissatisfied about the way the war had ended, or frustrated over military reforms.

In Belgium, the article went on, “our democracy [...] has taken care” to accommodate war veterans so that they don’t have to go begging and suffer insults from the population. Yet here too, fascism was gaining traction. This happened mainly among the Catholic youth, which the author described as “fils à papa.” The “papa’s” themselves harboured fascist ideas too. These men were bankers, entrepreneurs, members of the *Association Catholique*, and even liberals. The Belgian liberal newspaper *L’Etoile Belge*, for example, was sympathising with the “stranglers of freedom of the press and freedom of thought.”

Another concern of the author was the *Union Civique* and the “social danger” it posed. This “monolingual and reactionary” organisation was preparing youngsters, often from bourgeois descent, for a mental and military “class struggle, class war.” “They will, with another colour maybe, be the Black or Blue shirts of Belgium.”

Finally, the author concluded that the Flemish would be the first victims of fascist politics. Fascism was “centralisation to the extreme,” meaning rule by one man, and tolerating only a single people and language. The Flemish would share the faith of the Catalans under Primo de Rivera. The author estimated this was why fascism was popular in “certain ‘liberal’ milieus.”

2.1.9 Belgian “fascistics” (February 1926)

Fascism was interpreted to threaten democracy in different ways. For example, LVV observed the existence of “[d]ark forces” which were trying to get in possession of the railways and the telegraph

⁶⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (6 February 1926).

and telephone network.⁶⁵ These “capitalists” and “stockbrokers” were preying on businesses that were state owned. They asked for a commission on state finances, which would supersede parliament. To LVV, they reviled democracy because it ruled out corruption. Labourers, in particular, were told to be wary, because “if the reaction gets the upper hand,” attainments such as high wages, reasonable working hours, social insurances and trade union freedom would perish.

While this article did not include an explicit reference to fascism, an earlier opinion article on the same topic did.⁶⁶ The author noted how managers of the Brussels stock market were trying to undermine ordinary people’s confidence in democratic government by threatening them with lower wages and a drop in share values. In the eyes of LVV this meant, “our Belgian fascistics (*fascisanten*) are seeking to recruit troops.” To the author, allowing “such an extra-parliamentary council to supervise the actions of our ministers” and to dictate their politics signified a “violation of the [...] will of the Belgian people”, and even “revolution! Dictatorship!” Against popular arguments for a dictator to bring order in the state budget, the author affirmed that the government prioritised the interests of the people as a whole above the interests of any specific categories.

Another article, which presented LVV’s arguments for the reduction of military service, *Het Volksbelang* railed against the “‘true patriots’, nationalists, fascists, chauvinists, boasters, [and] reactionaries of all kinds.”⁶⁷ Those who opposed the army reforms were also those who could afford excluding their own sons from conscription. Another article in the same edition discussed “franskiljons and fascists” who displayed hostility against a new pension law and in the same breath attacked the parliamentary system. In another edition, “nationalists and fascists” were blamed for having provoked the drop of the currency.⁶⁸ They urged for austerity policy as long as such measures did not affect their own privileges. The army in particular, it was noted, was being protected against cutbacks. *Het Volksbelang* encouraged democrats to keep an eye on “fascists, nationalists and military patriots.”⁶⁹

2.1.10 “The Belgian Fascio” (February - April 1926)

Elsewhere, the fascist threat was perceived to come from a different angle.⁷⁰ In an article headed under “Violence and liberalism,” LVV observed that “nowadays in our country there are a number of people who dream of violence.” The article spoke of “the Belgian Fascio,” ‘fascio’ being the Italian word for ‘bundle’ or ‘sheaf’ from which the word ‘fascism’ derives. This “Fascio” was observed to install “so-called ‘national guards’.” As such it posed a “a challenge to the liberal principles which nowadays are more and more honoured by democrats in all parties: the freedom of conscience and the inviolability of the will of the people.”

These fascists, however, were conspiring and committing acts against the law and the constitution. Like in Italy and Spain they pretended to protect the Belgian monarchical dynasty, yet in the author’s view they were trying to disguise dictatorship in the cloak of history. Youngsters were being physically prepared for battle, “because the Fascio needs legionaries. Will we see young people come to blows with organised youth groups of other parties?” The author concluded that “we as liberals have to make people see the worthlessness of the fascist principles.” Liberalism meant rejecting

⁶⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (28 February 1926).

⁶⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (20 February 1926).

⁶⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (6 March 1926).

⁶⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (27 March 1926).

⁶⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (17 April 1926).

⁷⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (28 February 1926).

fanaticism and violence, because violence was the “father of arbitrariness” and the “arch enemy of freedom.”

Another article in February ridiculed the turmoil caused by “fascists, nationalists and reactionary clericals” during a ceremony in a museum: “[O]ne will see their little troop melt away as snow in the democratic sun. [...] Their revolution attempt [demonstrates] that they are bad shepherds, who can howl and create chaos, but who are utterly incapable of rule through legal ways.”⁷¹

Again, these troublemakers were situated in the monarchic, patriotic camp. They were described as seeing themselves as “saviours of the fatherland,” but LVV suspected them for their intents to “destroy our democratic institutions.”⁷² Again, they were said to have used the Belgian flag to cover their fascist projects. When it came to concrete issues such as army reforms, however, their political program and opinions were highly ambiguous. One should not take all of this too seriously, it was claimed, but neither should one remain indifferent. Finally, the author assumed these fascist politics would not easily succeed in moving public opinion. “The Fascio will end in a fiasco.”

2.1.11 Communists, fascists, clericals (March 1926)

Like Benedetto Croce two months earlier, an article in March 1926 compared communists and fascists. They were labelled “The reactionaries” in an article of the same name.⁷³ The author stated that while conservatives accepted the conditions of the present and wanted to conserve and gradually expand personal freedoms, reactionaries were those who scolded the present and feared the future. In this sense, “nationalists and fascists [were] the cousins of the communists,” advancing society’s regression into dictatorship.

The dictator of the nationalists and the fascists was a “strong-willed military or civilian with a hard fist.” The communists, then, advanced the dictatorship of the proletariat, which in fact would have been an “executive committee of malicious parvenus.” *Het Volksbelang* was not surprised that nationalists and fascists were mostly found in clerical milieus, as clericalism “prepares people for nationalism and fascism.” Clerical doctrines were founded on the belief in and obedience to authority, as were the nationalist and fascist regimes in Italy, Greece, Spain, Hungary and Bavaria. This “principle of authority” was the same principle that founded communism. Freedom of thought and free speech were exclusively reserved for the leadership; the herd was there to follow.

2.1.12 Polarisation and democratic liberalism (March 1926)

LVV observed that polarising politics prevailed over Europe since the war had ended in 1918. Political oppositions had intensified, parliaments had been damaged, and Bolshevism and fascism thrived. All this resulted from the long war, which had exhausted Europe “materially and intellectually.”⁷⁴ The author who wrote this, was convinced people had to “learn to think European.”

⁷¹ *Het Volksbelang* (20 February 1926). Also see *Het Volksbelang* (13 February 1926). On 9 February 1926 there was a demonstration against the abolishment of a number of military regiments. General Kestens and general Maglinse had made this decision. According to *Het Volksbelang*, the protest was carefully prepared and led by military dressed up as civilians, together with members of a “closed society with a Gaulish label.” *Het Volksbelang* also noted that the fascist protesters were actually followers of the same generals who had decided for the abolishment. The demonstration was occasioned by a ceremony during which the banners of those regiments were given a place in the military museum.

⁷² *Het Volksbelang* (28 February 1926).

⁷³ *Het Volksbelang* (13 March 1926).

⁷⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (27 March 1926).

Yet LVV remained optimistic particularly about Belgium's steady base of democratic liberalism.⁷⁵ Despite unease about the possibility of a "fascist coup" in France, Belgium had been spared from extremist politics. Many moderate socialists and Catholics had renounced Marxism or reactionary dogma and de facto accepted the principles of democratic liberalism. The author spurred on his readers: "Friends of *Het Volksbelang*, express your views, they will resonate!"

2.1.13 Southern European dictatorships (April 1926)

Meanwhile, *Het Volksbelang* kept an eye on foreign political developments. Primo de Rivera's dictatorship in Spain was observed to incarcerate Catalan civilians and censor the press.⁷⁶ Greece, in turn, had the "third dictator of Europe." The parliamentary system had now disappeared from all of Southern Europe's peninsulas. Yet *Het Volksbelang* asserted these events did not represent a crisis of parliament: Spain and Greece had never been ruled by parliaments, but by disguised coups instead. Meanwhile, Mussolini's imperial ambitions for a "new Roman Empire" were becoming increasingly obvious: "Mussolini is becoming an ever more dangerous lunatic."⁷⁷ It was believed the "spirit of Locarno" would succumb under the burden of his warlike quest for colonies.

2.1.14 Fascist youth (April - May 1926)

Fascist youth was a recurring theme in *Het Volksbelang*. The journal described "rascals" or "young hotheads" who dreamt of following a dictator in black or yellow shirts.⁷⁸ In another article these youngsters were called "young boys [...] with sticks," dreaming that Mussolini would come "sailing up the sea channel to dictate his will."⁷⁹

These youngsters were observed to turn their backs on progressive liberalism and join the "French-minded reactionary fascism," which rooted in France and Italy.⁸⁰ To LVV, French-minded conservative liberalism, with its aversion of democracy and of all forms of social policy, was responsible for stirring up demagogic resistance against the democratic regime. The conservative liberal conception of freedom was "a peculiar freedom, which means that the mighty one has the freedom to reduce small people's freedom to nothing." Such ideas attracted "a selfish youth confusing liberalism with the lack of any sense of solidarity."

2.1.15 Fascist liberals (May 1926)

In the context of the governmental crisis and the dramatic drop of the currency in the spring of 1926, fascism seduced many French-speaking Belgians, including liberals. *Het Volksbelang* mockingly cited a French-minded women's magazine, which had asserted "a fascist government seems more advantageous to the country than a socialist one."⁸¹ This magazine also wondered about the benefits "[i]f only we too had a Mussolini."

⁷⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (13 March 1926); *Het Volksbelang* (27 March 1926).

⁷⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (3 April 1926).

⁷⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (24 April 1926).

⁷⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (24 April 1926).

⁷⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (29 May 1926).

⁸⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (1 May 1926).

⁸¹ *Het Volksbelang* (15 May 1926).

Liberal leaders too were noticed to protest against parliamentarism and to support calls for a dictator or an extra-parliamentary, technocratic government (*zakenregering*). According to *Het Volksbelang*, these liberals were responsible for the failing attempts to form a new government. They were supposedly all about patriotism, but opposed everything Flemish and democratic.

Looking ahead to the upcoming elections, LVV supported the idea for a liberal coalition with the left, rejecting “artificial anti-socialism.” The same sympathy was felt for Catholic democracy, which had evolved from “obedient slaves to conscious citizens,” who strove for democracy.

2.1.16 Defending parliament (May 1926)

In the last edition of May, *Het Volksbelang* included a historical reflection on “The parliamentary system” and its challengers in Europe.⁸² This system had evolved from, originally, a “safety lid for liberal tendencies in Europe” in the first half of the 19th century, to a more democratic institution after 1848. Until the war of 1914-1918, parliaments had been the safeguards of “order, authority, progress and prosperity” in all countries. Yet in the wake of the war, monarchies were too weakened and democracies unprepared to succeed them. In this setting emerged “a new and yet old character: the ‘dictator’.” Listing Lenin, Horty, Mussolini, Primo de Rivera and Pangalos, *Het Volksbelang* found the term “dictator” confused: in ancient Rome dictatorship was a legally bound function with limited and controlled powers. Yet present dictators had seized power by revolutionary means. As such, “[t]hey are rather what the ancient Greeks called ‘tyrants’.”

According to LVV, the nationalists were hoping to introduce such a tyrant in Belgium. For years they had been claiming the “powerlessness of parliament’.” According to *Het Volksbelang*, the nationalists themselves had been responsible for this mistrust, because they rather had patriotic than capable MP’s. Their propaganda even discouraged other MP’s to the extent that they too now wished for “a dictator, or rather, a tyrant.” *Het Volksbelang* noted that the nationalists - “such idiots” - would be the first victims of a tyrant, because they would be excluded from participation in public affairs.

Finally, the author claimed that parliament was the very reason for the progress democracy had made: in its absence, bloody crises would have ruined the nation. He concluded: “The parliamentary and democratic system will always be the only suitable system of government for Belgium.”

2.1.17 How fascism conquered Italy (June 1926)

Het Volksbelang included an excerpt of an article about Italian fascism from a journalist called Robert Leurquin. The article had earlier been published in the francophone Belgian journal *La Flandre Libérale*. Entitled “How fascism took over Italy,” Leurquin’s article explained how fascism became popular with the Italian people.⁸³ Having entered the war with big expectations, Italians had been disappointed with the peace. They had hoped to continue the work of the Risorgimento. The end of the war had thus “united all the dissatisfied,” ranging from landless and jobless veterans to nostalgic intellectuals. Mussolini called upon them to unite and promised that fascism would give Italy what the war had not. As such, fascism first addressed the masses instead of the wealthy classes. “Far from being a reactionary movement,” it was instead a “confused movement of social demagogy” with “a sharply delineated imperialist tendency.”

⁸² *Het Volksbelang* (29 May 1926).

⁸³ *Het Volksbelang* (5 June 1926).

Leurquin continued by analysing “the character traits of the Italian people.” Traditionally ruled by dynastic governments, Italy did not know democracy in its Anglo-Saxon form. Individual politicians had historically been more important than parties, leaders prevailed over people’s representatives, and the battle for authority mattered more than the realisation of a program. Winning a seat in parliament was unpopular, and the “undeveloped masses” had never casted a vote before 1913. Italy was a pre-modern, agricultural economy with localised interests. Its sentimental population was traditionalist and provincialist. In short, “Italian traditions have nothing in common with parliamentarism.”

To Leurquin, this explained why fascism’s demagogic program of occupying factories, nationalising industries and taxing capital, could so swiftly change to its opposite. Public opinion was about “sympathy rather than reason,” and sympathy for fascism was great in the wake of the bloody strikes of 1922. Using such elements as decorative dress, the Roman salute, speeches and decors, Mussolini capitalised on these cultural traits and exploited the Italian people’s love and nostalgia for ancient Roman aesthetics and grandeur.

Het Volksbelang commented on Leurquin’s text: “This is what needs to be said about fascism” to those “who see or want to put a ‘black shirt’ on every street corner” here too. They “do not understand anything of fascism,” and Belgian fascists clearly would have to use different methods. In Belgium too some had been dreaming of a “Belgium irredenta.” In Brussels there were still people who lamented the heterogeneity of Belgium and hoped to re-establish a “moral unity” based on the dynastic institutions of the monarchy. “Those constitute the core of the fascist movement in our country.” With their enormous capital they were observed to be capable of suppressing everything democratic, yet their actions would be bloodless, using diplomatic and economic means of coercion, which did not provoke the population. LVV appealed to those who could recognise their game to “keep an eye on them and inform the people in time.”

Another article in the same edition described once again how some people in Belgium idolised “the Italian autocrat” and desired a Belgian copy of the Duce.⁸⁴ The author criticized Italy’s new law on labour unions, which placed them under the state’s authority. Forced to give up their freedom, unions had either to become fascist or would cease to exist. “The Mussolinists have the king, the government, the police, the army, expulsion, beating, forced purging, arson and murder [...] to impose their will.” In LVV’s view, liberals who called for Mussolini were clearly mad.

2.1.18 Particularism, middle classes and democratic deficits (June 1926)

Meanwhile, LVV observed Belgian society had a problem with particularism. The “nationalists, fascists and patriots” were noted to have committed a “horrible smear campaign” against the democrats.⁸⁵ All political parties and classes now mistrusted each other, and each group believed to be a victim of its neighbour.

In another edition, LVV set its hopes on the middle classes and “small citizens.” The socialists had pushed these citizens away. The idea of the class struggle was outdated and detached. Technicians, clerks, officers, teachers and journalists were “men of conscience and knowledge” who formed the executives of democracy.⁸⁶ They could give Belgium a progressive government. As educated and cultured citizens, they shared with the people their courage and their love for work. By consequence,

⁸⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (5 June 1926).

⁸⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (12 June 1926).

⁸⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (19 June 1926).

to LVV the concept of “people” needed to include not just the proletariat, but “everyone who only possesses the necessary and makes ends meet through work and effort.” According to *Het Volksbelang*, liberal democrats had to fulfil “a mission for the small citizen.”

This trust in the middle classes persisted. Eight months later, in February 1927, the middle classes were called “the best of the nation” (*keur der natie*).⁸⁷ They were the most brave, most active and most progressive class of all. *Het Volksbelang* affirmed that respect for commitments and the constitution were foundations for social life. Trade and industry, “and any other intercourse,” were impossible without such respect. Yet political parties, parliament, and by extension the whole country were observed to be going through a crisis. “Utterly incapable professional politicians” were “ruling us blindly.” As an alternative, communism would be a mistake, as it implied “regression into barbarity” instead of progress. *Het Volksbelang* reiterated that, as had been the case in 1830, salvation would come from the middle classes, and the liberal middle classes in particular.

Back in June 1926, however, LVV was not overly optimistic. The “most reactionary” financial powers were predominant in the democratically elected government.⁸⁸ To LVV, this meant that democracy had to emancipate itself not only politically, but economically too. This could happen either through intense effort and labour in many enterprises, or, more easily, through violence and revolution. The latter was not a mere “spectre” but a real historical option: “if a class does not get what it sees as its right, it will take it.” The “illegal order” that had been shaped, was potentially dangerous in that sense. *Het Volksbelang* interpreted foreign revolutionary coups of “the reaction” as a possible prelude to future events at home. Still, Flemish liberals remained hopeful too: “As for us, we are order loving citizens and we have a boundless confidence in the final victory of the democratic spirit.”

2.1.19 Foreign coups and dictatorships (May 1926 - January 1927)

Looking outward, *Het Volksbelang* reported “another military coup in Europe” in Poland in May 1926, surprisingly executed by the left and not by the forces of reaction.⁸⁹ To LVV this proved the fact that “even so-called democratic parties” had no understanding of sound democracy and parliamentary rule. In September the journal noted the impeachment of the Greek dictator Pangalos, who had exacerbated Greece’s economic situation.⁹⁰ His fate was a “serious warning” for his “brother in arms” Primo De Rivera. Greece had experienced a revolution every year for two decades. It seemed perpetually out of balance, “because the people is not politically mature.” At the same time, none of its rulers had had the capacity to rule.

Mussolini, in turn, was observed to commit continuous attacks to stir up public opinion.⁹¹ Being a prisoner of his financiers, he was unable to act upon his “belligerent speeches” and threats to neighbouring countries. Instead then, he agitated the masses by letting them lynch innocent people. In January 1927, a right-wing coup in Lithuania occasioned *Het Volksbelang* to observe that the parliamentary system was “not running smoothly” in many “newly created countries.”⁹²

⁸⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (1 February 1927).

⁸⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (19 June 1926).

⁸⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (22 May 1926).

⁹⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (1 September 1926).

⁹¹ *Het Volksbelang* (15 November 1926).

⁹² *Het Volksbelang* (1 January 1927).

2.1.20 "Spirit of revolt", "democratic spirit" (July 1926 - January 1927)

From July onwards, *Het Volksbelang* was published twice a month instead of weekly. The rest of 1926, few articles appeared about fascism. Most prominent were contributions about the domestic financial crisis and the continuous communitarian tensions between the Flemish and the *franskiljons*. A new subject was extremism within the Flemish movement, but this was not yet associated with fascism.

In December, an article entitled "The new times" offered thoughts on political culture.⁹³ Not referring to fascism as such, it spoke of "dictatorship and the "authority principle." These "old, renewed thoughts" were imposing themselves violently, and gave the impression of a new "Zeitgeist" (*tijdsgeest*) and new morals. *Het Volksbelang* observed a "general sense of dissatisfaction", paired with the need for change and subversion. All this resulted from the "terrible catastrophe from which the world has not yet broken free." The war had shaken even the most stable institutions, which had lost all authority.

The "spirit of revolt" existed with all peoples, classes and environments. This included labourers desiring political power, old tradesmen who felt "threatened by labourers and merchants", and even intellectuals who wished to overturn society and believed their diplomas would give them front-row seats. "The dictatorship of the proletariat they [the intellectuals] demand is in fact their own dictatorship." While the end of the war was expected to have been the end of militarism and the start of proper international law, justice, and the protection of the weak, reality was different. *Het Volksbelang* diagnosed that "we lack character." It advocated teaching children willpower and perseverance to withstand the "fantasies of reactionary ministers."

However, in the next edition, an article on "The democratic spirit" argued that a democratic mindset already existed and that it was a case of "wonderful progress."⁹⁴ Democracy was understood as "the organisation of a state, in which each individual labours freely, contributes to the prosperity of the mass, and willingly subjects himself to the authority he creates and controls." Belgium, being a "country of experiments," had its constitution built on democratic institutions. LVV asserted that "all our history testifies to the thoroughly democratic spirit of the Belgians." Democracy was once again described as the "sole form of government that suited our national temperament." Without it, "Belgium would neither be viable politically nor economically."

2.1.21 The parliamentary system (November 1927 - February 1928)

In January 1927, *Het Volksbelang* had become a monthly publication. During spring of that year, no relevant contributions on fascism appeared. Internally, debates with Catholics and *franskiljons*, for example on amnesty for Flemish war collaborators, continued. In terms of foreign affairs, German domestic politics and the conflict between nationalists and communists in China came more frequently into view. In July *Het Volksbelang* discussed the "reactionary campaign" which conjured up the picture of a communist "red spectre."⁹⁵ To LVV there was no real communist threat, but instead a conservative campaign, which aimed to discredit democratic socialism.

An article in November 1927 discussed ideas on parliamentary reforms. Belgian liberal minister Albert Devèze had developed ideas to "reform the state."⁹⁶ One idea was to give more power to

⁹³ *Het Volksbelang* (15 December 1926).

⁹⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (1 January 1927).

⁹⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (1 January 1927).

⁹⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (1 November 1927).

organisations of labourers and employers by establishing a “High Economic and Social Council.” This council would include seats for representatives of capital, management, labour, trade, maritime affairs and ports.

Het Volksbelang raised concerns about the democratic nature of such a new institution. Improving the parliamentary system, it was believed, should happen from within. Parliament required more capable men, or the willingness of representatives to listen to experts. The composition of the Chamber could be adjusted to the people’s needs, like the Senate was already accommodating special representatives of industry, trade, science and professional organisations. Yet in LVV’s opinion, parliament was receiving too much criticism. Its composition depended on the political education of the voters, thus on their maturity and general culture.

Later, in February 1928, LVV continued to defend parliamentary democracy against anti-parliamentary “propaganda,” even within the liberal party.⁹⁷ To the Flemish liberal democrats, parliament was the political “cornerstone of liberalism.” It was “the government of the people, entrusted upon those whom the same people has appointed.” It had taken ages to conquer these democratic rights, and universal suffrage had only just arrived; yet “everywhere voices are calling to demolish it.” *Het Volksbelang* noted that people were only seeing the ravages of the war and forgot the many “blessings” which “government of the people, by the people” had brought.

LVV did not share any desire to return to rule by an “autocrat with powerful courtiers,” or to go “back to ‘authority’.” This would “reduce us to an insignificant number in the big crowd,” with no rights but to obey. Instead, LVV wanted freedom of conscience and political freedom. It refused to accept a state religion and any kind of censorship. *Het Volksbelang* affirmed:

“We form the state but are not the state’s servants. We accept the authority that we ourselves have created and deem respectable, not the one [authority] which imposes itself without proof of respectability.”⁹⁸

Liberalism was believed to guarantee progress and peace among people. “So as liberals we have to defend the parliamentary organisation of the state.” *Het Volksbelang* argued that parliaments were not the reason for people’s political struggles. These problems resulted from the destructions caused by the war, and from the excessive power of magnates who did everything to safeguard their wealth. Against such display of power, the only response could be united people power, expressed through universal suffrage and proportionate representation.

2.1.22 Democracy between bolshevism and fascism (June 1928 - September 1928)

Between June and September 1928, *Het Volksbelang* published a series of articles of LVV’s former president Arthur Vanderpoorten. The title of the series was: “Is there still a place for democracy between Bolshevism and fascism?”⁹⁹ Vanderpoorten discussed the origins and performances of the bolshevist regime in Russia and the fascist regime in Italy. Bolshevism was defined as “the Russian form of communism,” and as “government of and by one single class.” Fascism was “the Italian form of dictatorship,” and “the government by one or a few men without actual participation of the community.” Democracy, finally, was understood as “people’s power,” and “the government of the people or by the people, and for the people.”

⁹⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (1 February 1928).

⁹⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (1 February 1928).

⁹⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (1 June 1928).

Vanderpoorten first elaborated on communism and bolshevism. "Socialism, collectivism, communism," ordered by their closeness to the realisation of Marx' theoretical goals, were "without a doubt a reaction to the abuses of the capitalist regime." These theories for the improvement of ordinary people's lives were most influential in Russia, where the excesses of autocracy and power abuse were worst. Yet, Vanderpoorten argued, living standards had not gone up in the new Soviet Republic. Working conditions were as grim as before, and a militarist spirit and bad morals prevailed.

In the following edition, Vanderpoorten focused on Italian fascism, which he called a reaction against Bolshevism.¹⁰⁰ The fact that Mussolini had changed from being a revolutionary socialist to a fascist, demonstrated to Vanderpoorten that fascism was the expression of an emotional mood rather than of any political theory. The remainder and largest part of the article then was a translation of a text from former Italian Prime Minister Francesco Nitti.¹⁰¹

To Nitti, Mussolini had to be judged not for his ideas but as a "conquerer temperament (*veroveraarstemperament*)." While Mussolini had been an admirer of Russian bolshevism and its violence, the Italian socialists opposed him, and fascism developed into an anti-socialist movement. According to Nitti, the socialists carried great responsibility for the social spirit that led to fascism. The more antipathy they reaped by provoking "stupid strikes," the more sympathy fascism gained. Mussolini exploited popular opposition against socialism and fascism became a "white guard" for industrialists and farmers, against socialism.

In his third article, Vanderpoorten continued with his own analysis of Italian fascism.¹⁰² Having established his anti-socialist movement, Mussolini aligned himself with the nationalists and gave up his revolutionary ambitions. To Vanderpoorten, fascism, "which lacks all self-knowledge," now showed its anti-democratic and anti-liberal spirit. There had not been a revolution, only an agreement between "state power and reaction." Once in power, Mussolini proclaimed his contempt of freedom and started to threaten parliament, public freedom and the whole polity.

According to Vanderpoorten, Mussolini had established dictatorship like the Bolsheviks had done: it involved the same scorn for dissident opinions, the threat of liberty, the erosion of parliament, and censorship. Fascism was capable of turning "its will into law." The state was its highest value, but embodied by a single individual only. A despot had taken advantage of the circumstances after the war to seduce the people in Italy as well as in Russia.

Vanderpoorten quoted Mussolini to illustrate the latter's creed: "We embody a new world principle. We embody the fierce opposition against the common world of democracy, plutocracy, freemasonry, in short, the world of the immortal principles of 1789." Vanderpoorten interpreted this fascist spirit as one of "blind obedience" and "absolute subjection" to the leader of the state. Army, traffic and press were all put under state authority, and nationalism was peaking. "Iron discipline, mechanical order, sacrifice of all sense of freedom, that is fascism." The Roman-fascist salute and the inconsequent attitude towards the church illustrated its "superficiality" and "narrow-mindedness." On the international level, fascism was the "government of violence and egoistic (*eigenwillig*) pride." All the while, Italian citizens were not better off than Belgian ones.

"What to conclude from all this?" Vanderpoorten asked.¹⁰³ fascism and Bolshevism were one-sided worldviews, which were understandable responses to crises, but useless to organise society. To Vanderpoorten, only democracy could keep society sound in a sustainable manner. The right to vote,

¹⁰⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (1 July 1927).

¹⁰¹ Vanderpoorten referred to Nitti's book *Fascism, Bolshevism, Democracy* in an endnote.

¹⁰² *Het Volksbelang* (1 August 1928).

¹⁰³ *Het Volksbelang* (1 September 1928).

parliamentary representation, cooperation of labour and capital, and the shared ideal of social service, were all crucial elements in a democratic society. A middle road between individual freedoms and social and economic state policies needed to be found.

Much remained to be done, for example regarding the domestic politics of education, the standard of living, the quality of industrial production and the education of labourers.¹⁰⁴ Vanderpoorten hoped that liberals would bring back the sheep that had left the herd because its leaders had been “resentful, gluttonous and selfish.” The creed of the liberal “crusade” remained: “for the people, by the people!”

2.1.23 Liberal alliances (December 1928 - February 1929)

In December 1928, *Het Volksbelang* published an article on the growth of liberal labour unions. The author called upon liberal citizens and in particular liberal bosses to bond with their labourers.¹⁰⁵ “The liberal party cannot only be a middle class party. The most decent, most fair and most hard working part of the crowd should be organised in our ranks. Without the crowd it is impossible to win.” In this way, there was a place for liberal democracy between “socialist demagogy” and “narrow minded reaction.” The main task for liberals, then, was to meet and support each other across the country.

Two months later, in February 1929, Arthur Vanderpoorten pleaded for a “united front” in defence of democracy, with “our competitors, social democrats and Christian democrats.”¹⁰⁶ Despite ideological differences, such an alliance was believed to strengthen progressive liberalism during the general elections of May. He repeated the liberal “belief in the individual and personal initiative.” The state was to be kept out of private affairs, and religion could not interfere with the state. Much work was to be done in raising workers’ salaries and in obtaining complete equality for the Flemish. Yet Vanderpoorten renounced any social or political revolution to reach these goals, and trusted in the power of parliament: “We will have the laws we deserve.” Finally, he reiterated the “gospel of community service,” and the ideals that freedom should not harm others, and interference should not thwart creativity.

2.1.24 Universal suffrage and social pluralism (March 1929 - April 1929)

LVV also continued to defend the system of universal suffrage, which was increasingly under attack. The government seemed utterly incapable of rule, causing a situation of “complete despair.”¹⁰⁷ In this context, so-called “men of order” proposed to abolish universal voting and return to an election system based on the payment of taxes. To LVV, universal suffrage was there to stay. One author admitted that “we undoubtedly have not used it too well.” The system had caused conflict over particular interests and impeded efficient government. Yet as a principle it was just. “Whether I am a capitalist or a porter,” the argument went, if the government taxes my property or sends me on a mission, I need to authorise it first. The vote was the best way to do that.

Even among liberals, such a defence of universal suffrage was not so evident. For example, one author found it justified to ask if giving the vote to politically uneducated citizens would not

¹⁰⁴ The so-called “school conflict” (*schoolstrijd*) was a conflict between liberals and Catholics about the right to organise education in Belgium.

¹⁰⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (1 December 1928).

¹⁰⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (1 February 1929).

¹⁰⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (1 March 1929).

undermine the state and its parliamentary foundations.¹⁰⁸ Yet he observed that universal suffrage had been established, society had adjusted to the new situation, and liberals had accepted it. At the same time, the article described the idea of a certain professor Dupréel, who maintained that liberalism should abandon its idea of society as a collection of individuals. To Dupréel, liberalism had to become a “social pluralism.” As such, it would offer an alternative to social Marxism and Catholic political theory, which both made the mistake of believing a particular class represented the whole of society. As “society is not uniform and should not become so,” the liberal state had to mediate between different groups and classes. Finally, it had to win back those who had been disappointed by liberalism’s individualistic vision of society.

2.1.25 National Socialism and the spectre of war (May - December 1930)

Between May 1929 and May 1930 few new ideas related to fascism appeared in *Het Volksbelang*. The sections on foreign affairs discussed subjects such as the German debt and the Briand-Kellogg Pact, government crises in Berlin and Paris, and various post-war settlement issues such as the demilitarisation of the Rhineland.¹⁰⁹ In terms of domestic news, the subject of the language conflict with the *franskiljons* never left the journal’s columns.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, LVV’s position on liberal democracy remained unchanged. In October 1929, *Het Volksbelang* cited the liberal “eminent historian” Guglielmo Ferrero on the idea of the state: “What it [the state] lacks is not strength: it is wisdom, truthfulness, moderateness, righteousness - and will.”¹¹¹ And: “He who demands the strong state is like a drunk man asking for wine.”

National Socialism appeared for the first time in the edition of May-June 1930. These “right-wing extremists” were observed to participate in government in the German state of Thüringen.¹¹² *Het Volksbelang* noted that an anti-republican militant was thus leading the police force of Thüringen. Meanwhile, National Socialists and communists were noted to battle each other in the city council of Berlin. Their disputes often ended in shouting and fights, which *Het Volksbelang* called “sick phenomena.”

In August 1930 an article explicitly confronted the spectre of a new European war. Tensions between France and Italy conjured up this image. According to *Het Volksbelang*, no one consciously wanted war, “except maybe Mussolini.”¹¹³ Yet the real danger was indifference: the lax attitude of democratic diplomats, and the “mocking curiosity” of the European peoples. The author then asked whether “Western European democracies” would resist the temptation to eliminate fascism, “this other concept of government,” with weapons. “Will we, democracies, have the courage to refuse to fight?”

After having conquered Italy and Hungary and now jumping to Germany, fascism posed a “danger for peace.” The press, the author noted, presented a showdown between France and Italy, or between democracy and fascism, as something unavoidable. Yet to *Het Volksbelang* such a vision demonstrated “the spirit of a population which was not sufficiently disgusted by a new world fire;” a population, which maybe even desired such chaos. “Pacifists and democrats” of all countries and parties were called upon to resist to such a spirit.

¹⁰⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (1 April 1929).

¹⁰⁹ See e.g. *Het Volksbelang* (1 July 1929).

¹¹⁰ See e.g. *Het Volksbelang* (1 December 1929).

¹¹¹ *Het Volksbelang* (1 October 1929).

¹¹² *Het Volksbelang* (May-July 1930).

¹¹³ *Het Volksbelang* (August 1930).

The political situation in Germany was subject of another article in the same edition. The Reichstag had “in a sense committed suicide” by putting an end to the government’s rule by emergency decrees.¹¹⁴ This meant parliament had to be dissolved for new elections, which would benefit extremist parties. The National Socialists on the extreme right, in particular, would take advantage of the situation. As a consequence, forming a government would be even harder, making the option of a dictator more realistic. “The shadow of a dictator in Germany could in turn be a prelude to much calamity.” As a reason for the confused situation, *Het Volksbelang* pointed to the “fear of the moderate middle class parties and socialists,” who were impressed by the successes of the extremists. The latter could thrive because of the “lack of education of the German people,” which had in turn been sparked by material suffering caused by inflation, heavy taxation and unemployment.

In December 1930, LVV announced that the National Socialists had booked an “amazing” victory.¹¹⁵ The article mentioned the economic crisis and the burden of the Young Plan as causes for the result. The argument that the German people lacked political education was repeated as well. As a consequence, the Germans had voted for “the screamers of Hitler.”

2.1.26 Class cooperation in defence of liberalism (February 1931)

In February 1931, LVV called upon all liberals in Flanders to defend their liberal convictions.¹¹⁶ The necessity of these had never been clearer. Stirred up by economic despair, communism and fascism were strangling free speech. Misery and turmoil in Russia, Italy and Spain demonstrated the impossibility of life under dictatorship, which changed citizens into servants. In response, *Het Volksbelang* re-emphasised the importance of cooperation between labourers and intellectuals, as “liberalism is not selfishness.” The growth of the university of Ghent offered opportunities for strengthening this relationship. The author stated that LVV’s goal was to establish this “significant cooperation” between the classes. Its politics were based on democratic principles and aimed to create humane living conditions for all.

2.1.27 Civilisation’s doom (November - December 1931)

Het Volksbelang now observed the growth of radical parties in Germany, a country which was ruled by emergency decree.¹¹⁷ In combination with the drop of the pound, the massive implosion of American banks and the threat of war between Japan and China, the journal saw a “massive breakdown of the ‘civilised’ world.” The author looked back on former illusions about prosperity, the demise of radicalism, and the League of Nations. Now all one could do was hope things would not get worse. Finally, in the same edition an opinion piece on the economic crisis concluded that if capitalism would not solve its problems soon, Europe was doomed for “bolshevisation.”

One month later, *Het Volksbelang* nervously asked if “the whole future of society” really was at stake.¹¹⁸ Hitler was observed to become “ever more presumptuous.” New elections would inevitably bring about an association of the “Hitlerians” and the political centre. *Het Volksbelang* argued that the National Socialists’ popularity was due to their safe role in the opposition, as they had been

¹¹⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (August 1930).

¹¹⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (December 1930).

¹¹⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (February 1931).

¹¹⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (November 1931).

¹¹⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (December 1931).

spared from the damage that came with participating in government. The journal also referred to Hitler's warning that once he would have obtained power through legal means, he would no longer respect legal restrictions.

2.1.28 Flemish Hitlerians, Catholic fascists (January - April 1932)

January 1932 was the first time radical Flemish nationalists were compared to Hitler. An article mentioned the establishment of the "*Dietse nationaalsolidaristen*" by Joris Van Severen and Wies Moens.¹¹⁹ This movement strove for a unified Great-Dutch state. Van Severen, in his press organ, had declared his aim was to fight democracy, which he considered a "corollary of the liberal system" and a regime corrupted by the "dictatorship of financial power." These "young Hitlerians" announced they rejected the "liberal discussion method," which they called a "talking shop." Instead they preferred the "living battle." *Het Volksbelang* compared their slogans to those of Hitler, although his demagoguery was unasked for in Belgium. A fight between fascists and a communist "Red Guard" occasioned the claim that Van Severen's "fascism is an import article which will not easily be shipped in through Antwerp."¹²⁰

In addition to Van Severen's movement, Catholics too were aligned and associated with demagoguery, fascist ideas of violence, "superior clericalism," and aversion to democracy.¹²¹ Equally, the Flemish nationalists of the Frontpartij were observed to copy their "solidaristic" ideas from "fascist and National Socialist theories."¹²² One of its elected members had compared parliament to a "house of fornication." *Het Volksbelang* asked: "Why is he babbling in it then?"

2.1.29 Papal fascism (March 1932)

In March 1932, an article was published on "Catholic Action. Papal fascism."¹²³ *Het Volksbelang* claimed that "we naturally reject fascism and its foundation on violence and force," yet it was "pleased" with Mussolini's "harsh intervention" and "victory" against the Italian Catholic Action. The author described this Vatican-led movement as "papal fascism," which aimed to increase the pope's secular power over the masses. Its success would have meant a "regression to the Middle Ages," yet Mussolini had "crushed the head of the growing monster." The downside, the author commented, was that Mussolini now strengthened his grip on Italian youth.

2.1.30 Dutch fascists (April 1932)

In April 1932 *Het Volksbelang* included an article from the Amsterdam newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad*, which made ironic comments on Dutch fascism. It observed that the "supply of fascists, national solidarists, National Socialists etc." had increased.¹²⁴ The newspaper asked what those fascists had to offer to the Netherlands, except from their entertaining weekly journal. Apparently they claimed that a central authority should replace parliament, provinces and city councils. Yet which kind of authority would that be, the author of the Dutch article asked, and based on which norms? Who would be responsible? Dutch fascists believed that an elite would bring glory. To the

¹¹⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (January-February 1932).

¹²⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (April 1932).

¹²¹ *Het Volksbelang* (January-February 1932).

¹²² *Het Volksbelang* (April 1932).

¹²³ *Het Volksbelang* (March 1932).

¹²⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (April 1932).

Handelsblad, they were “errand boys for alien principles or idols” like “Mussolini, Hitler, Pilsoedski, Stalin, or whatever they are called.”

2.1.31 German dictatorship (June 1932 - July 1936)

Het Volksbelang continued to report on the political situation in Germany and the position of Hitler.¹²⁵ In 1932, military dictatorship was seen as an increasingly realistic scenario, while the “building of the republic is gradually crumbling.”¹²⁶ Elements of the scare included ambitious army generals, the possible dissolution of the Reichstag and a “new Hitlerian victory” leading to a “right-wing government or right-wing dictatorship.” And while *Het Volksbelang* found it “advisable” to let Hitler experience the damaging effects of taking responsibility in government, the question was if he would ever return power once he seized it. In that case one could expect the abolishment of elections, suspension of liberties, establishment of censorship and a reign of terror.

In September *Het Volksbelang* announced that the “crisis of the parliamentary regime” was acute since the German National Socialists and Catholics seemed ready to form a government.¹²⁷ Until then, rule by emergency decree had happened within the framework of the constitution. Now the latter’s preservation seemed untenable.

Over the years, *Het Volksbelang* continued to cover news on Germany’s foreign politics. The referendum in the Saar, remilitarisation and the breaking of the Treaty of Locarno raised concerns about the reliability and the expansionist aims of the Nazi regime.¹²⁸ In addition LVV observed “the dictatorship at work”: massive imprisonment, concentration camps and racist sterilisation policies demonstrated how the “reign of terror” worked.¹²⁹ While the author did not reject sterilisation by principle, he expressed reservations about its scientific use.¹³⁰

2.1.32 Hitler (January 1933)

The edition of January 1933 offered a mocking characterisation of Hitler, borrowed from a book from German author Weigand von Mittenberg.¹³¹ The book criticised Hitler as a dilettante with primitive political ideas. His speeches were “ugly and empty,” yet people “fervently listen to his flood of platitudes.” Apparently, his pathos compelled the crowds. His intellectual poverty, then, made him the leader of the masses because “in him everyone feels represented.” Blaming the Jews and opposing Versailles and Weimar was everything his program offered. In the same edition, another article discussed Hitler as chancellor. *Het Volksbelang* found it “curious” how National Socialism had always detested the constitution of Weimar, but had now used that very system to come to power.

2.1.33 German “state of mind” (December 1933 - August 1936)

One explanation for the Nazi success was culture. In December 1933, *Het Volksbelang* claimed that Hitler had “radically forsaken” his earlier promises. The author then deduced that the Germans seemed to have a short memory, a weak sense for reasoning, and, inversely, a strong sense for faith

¹²⁵ See e.g. *Het Volksbelang* (August 1932).

¹²⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (June 1932).

¹²⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (September 1932).

¹²⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (4 April 1936).

¹²⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (18 July 1936); *Het Volksbelang* (27 June 1936).

¹³⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (4 July 1936).

¹³¹ *Het Volksbelang* (January 1933).

and obedience.¹³² The German “state of mind,” longed for a genius and was in awe for power, another article repeated.¹³³ In Russia, Italy and the United States too, dictatorial systems were observed to “correspond” with the people’s “level of development” and “state of mind.”

Yet “our people,” had not been affected as much by extremism.¹³⁴ Feelings of freedom, tolerance and honest cooperation were “very lively” with the Flemish. This made that a dictatorship was “impossible with us.” Discussing the Spanish Civil War in the summer of 1936, *Het Volksbelang* argued that Belgium’s democratic traditions protected it from extremism and polarisation like in Spain.¹³⁵

2.1.34 Fascism, Marxism, and the “collapse of individualism” (January 1933 - May 1936)

Fascism and Marxism continued to figure as two sides of the same coin. In January 1933 an article discussed where liberalism stood between the “autocracy of capital” and the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”¹³⁶ Flemish liberals were told to fight “extremist cultural bolshevism.” The “accomplices of Moscow,” were observed to commit “sneaky acts of undermining” in milieus of labourers. “Western civilisation,” the author affirmed, “carrying the stamp of liberal thought,” needed to stay clear from “state capitalism, civil quarrels, terrorism and forced labour.” Yet liberals equally needed to oppose the “demagogy of the clerical, nationalist fascists.” *Het Volksbelang* described

“their religious fanaticism, their romantic mysticism, their social doctrines à la Mussolini, their militarist ‘Verdinaso’ [Verbond der Dietse Nationaalsolidaristen] alias Van Severen’s stormtroopers.”¹³⁷

The next edition repeated the same motive, namely that in countries like Italy or Germany, liberalism had been crushed between the left and the right. One was either fascist or Marxist, and respect for individuals had vanished completely.¹³⁸

Yet a new idea was presented here too. The author asserted that the “collapse of individualism,” which was influenced by socialism, “encouraged dictatorship and fascism.”¹³⁹ In other words, because Marxism “excludes a personal sense of dignity and does not value freedom,” it stimulated fascism. In a next edition too, the “failure of socialism” and “failed Marxism” had caused a reaction “which has benefited fascism.”¹⁴⁰ This argument returned later too. Socialists were repeatedly condemned for having “generated the reaction of fascism” in Italy.¹⁴¹ In Germany too, “Marxist politics and their method of the class struggle” was “one of the causes for Hitler’s rise to power.” Socialism and fascism alike “stole from the people all participation and freedom.”

“A renewed liberalism against Marxism and fascism” would be able to find its way to the masses.¹⁴² LVV contended once again that “[w]e have to bring the individual values to the front and demonstrate what personal freedom can mean for the elevation of the people.”

¹³² *Het Volksbelang* (December 1933).

¹³³ *Het Volksbelang* (January 1934).

¹³⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (November 1932).

¹³⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (29 August 1936).

¹³⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (January 1933).

¹³⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (January 1933).

¹³⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (March - April 1933).

¹³⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (March - April 1933).

¹⁴⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (October 1933).

¹⁴¹ *Het Volksbelang* (16 May 1936).

¹⁴² *Het Volksbelang* (March - April 1933).

2.1.35 The liberal response (November 1932 - May 1934)

LVV believed that “enlightened rulers,” who engaged for general prosperity and for the “enlightenment of the people,” were more needed than ever.¹⁴³ One year later, the question whether liberalism had become “old-fashioned” was answered negatively: the position of the individual and the violation of “human rights” in Germany, Russia and Italy “teach us to value the blessings of the democratic constitutional state.”¹⁴⁴ In December 1933, then, “a liberalism adjusted to the needs of its time,” needed to add “a strong executive power” to its constitutional foundations.¹⁴⁵ Serving as an example, the new government of the Netherlands had made parliament faster and more “fruitful.” Dutch democracy was observed to have eliminated its own excesses as a means to slow down the waxing fascist movement.

In January 1934, Arthur Vanderpoorten continued to defend parliament as the body which represented the people’s interests. He admitted that it showed “signs of wear,” and recognised the importance of some minor reforms.¹⁴⁶ Yet he did not support the idea of an “exclusively corporatist state,” because “we do not believe in the homo economicus, but instead in the complete person.”

Another article in the same edition re-affirmed the importance of “an executive power, which works more quickly” and which substituted community interests and long term thinking for “small particular interests.” Yet here, the formulation was that democratic parties should “exploit the advantages” of dictatorship, namely the “reinforcement of authority,” without copying its flaws. The author added, however, that freedom of opinion should never be suppressed in the name of disciplining the nation. “The rights of the spirit are among the most precious goods of human kind.”

2.1.36 Liberal fascist youth (October - November 1935)

After a break from June 1934 until October 1935, *Het Volksbelang* re-emerged as a weekly periodical, now published in Ghent instead of Antwerp. In the first renewed edition, its authors restated their commitment to tolerance, freedom and the interests of the community.¹⁴⁷ They also pleaded for a “strengthening of the executive power” and a “more specific delineation of the scope of the legislative power.”

Under the heading of “Liberal fascism!” *Het Volksbelang* critically commented on the program of the newly energised Bond of the Liberal Youth in Antwerp.¹⁴⁸ These young liberals were apparently against universal suffrage, renounced the parliamentary system and proposed to change it by a corporatist system. This organisation “condemns democracy and considers fascist Italy as the ideal state!!” It promoted a guided economy and supported the French position in the language conflict.

Het Volksbelang hoped that their young colleagues would abandon these “fashionable thoughts.” According to LVV, the “democratic elements in the liberal party” had never been more convinced of the fatal destiny of the fascist regime. “They do not even need the examples of Italy and Germany to

¹⁴³ *Het Volksbelang* (November 1932).

¹⁴⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (October 1933).

¹⁴⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (December 1933).

¹⁴⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (January 1934).

¹⁴⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (5 October 1935).

¹⁴⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (26 October 1935).

know that.” Despite all its defects, parliamentarism remained “the best regime.” England and the Scandinavian countries were still giving proof of that.

The next edition in November ousted the same criticism against Catholic youth. They were observed to “be dissatisfied with the constitutional monarchy and stood up for an absolute monarchy, so for some sort of dictator-king.”¹⁴⁹ Constitutional freedoms could simply be disposed of, and their sympathies for fascist Italy were out in the open. *Het Volksbelang* noted that an anti-fascist league had always sounded unnecessary, but “[n]ow we don’t think like that anymore.”

2.1.37 Rex and liberalism’s weak spots (November 1935)

The anti-liberal expressions of youth remained a concern for *Het Volksbelang*. A speech of “Wallonian troublemaker Degrelle” at a congress of the Catholic Party occasioned observations about attacks on the regime.¹⁵⁰ To LVV, Degrelle and others abused the confusion of the crisis to scold the system, without offering a clear alternative. “Those are real attacks against the state.” The author then asked whether there were any “laws to suppress those criminal enterprises?” and noted that “[t]olerance, leniency, indulgence are virtues which we have to honour, but they cannot elapse into weakness.” State leaders had to maintain a tight grip on those who intended to cause chaos and distract public opinion.

Foreign examples of “havering, hesitating and stalling” had spawned “a Stalin, a Mussolini, a Hitler” and had brought dictatorship to half of Europe, while autocracy still seemed to expand. With the Flemish Joris van Severen and the Walloon Léon Degrelle, Belgium was not being spared from comparable agitators. They and others took advantage of the chaos to advance their fascist or communist ideas. According to the author, the youth required a “more thorough insight in the high principles of freedom, solidarity and responsibility.” Finally, the “prospect of a higher level of individual life and a fair social existence should encourage us all to bundle our common forces to reach the common goal: the re-conquering of general prosperity.”

In a later article, *Het Volksbelang* asserted the Liberal Party lacked emotional appeal.¹⁵¹ It had always promoted common sense, tolerance and balance. Yet because of these very traits it also was the least emotionally attractive, least dynamic and least exciting party. “The crowd looks for emotion and excitement and avoids common sense.” The phrases of socialists and Catholics had attracted many people. These phrases were “hollow and empty,” but they were expressed with fire and appealed to psychology. The liberal party needed to win back both those labourers and intellectuals who had turned their backs on the party. Telling the truth and persuading citizens with strong and sensible arguments would not be enough. Liberal ideas needed to be expressed in ways which moved the heart, not just the mind. This would serve the defence of truth, humaneness, justice and reason.

2.1.38 Branches of collectivism (November 1935 - February 1936)

13 years after the March on Rome, *Het Volksbelang* published an analysis, which had appeared in the Dutch newspaper *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*. Mussolini had made Italy into “a big army base.”¹⁵² He had awakened in the people a self-confident spirit and an awareness of a great history.

¹⁴⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (2 November 1935).

¹⁵⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (23 November 1935).

¹⁵¹ *Het Volksbelang* (30 November 1935).

¹⁵² *Het Volksbelang* (30 November 1935).

Millions were now prepared to follow his orders. Yet according to the *Courant*, such a regime, in which “the individual is, in all his expressions, made subordinate to the state,” would ultimately fail.

Fascism and communism would share the same fate, as they were “two branches [...] derived from the trunk of collectivism, which suppresses the individual and thereby kills the spirit.” While both systems could be useful for a short period in specific circumstances to specific peoples, their ultimate destruction was immanent. The dictator would increasingly distance himself from the people, personally embody the system and eventually become an idol believing to equal God. *Het Volksbelang* concluded that “[u]ndoubtedly fascism has done victorious work by disciplining the Italian people [...], by catching up on all kinds of areas.” Yet the goods did not compensate for the wrongs.

Later, under the heading “National Communism and National Socialism,” another article made explicit comparisons between the Russian and German regimes.¹⁵³ *Het Volksbelang* cited the official journal of the Dutch liberal party *De Vrijheidsbond*: while fascism and communism were each other’s arch enemies in their “demagogic battle to ‘grab’ the crowds,” they were “extreme poles” which touched each other “in their principal anti-liberal objective.” *Het Volksbelang* also referred to an article in *The Times*, which compared both regimes in terms of their abuse of the justice system, suppression of opposition, incarceration of dissidents and “servile subjection” to the leader.¹⁵⁴ Other articles continued to discuss such shared features.¹⁵⁵

2.1.39 Mass culture and spiritual chaos (January - October 1936)

In January 1936 Dutch historian Johan Huizinga published a book, which offered a cultural approach to contemporary problems.¹⁵⁶ *Het Volksbelang* briefly discussed it. In *In de schaduw van morgen. Een diagnose van het geestelijk lijden van onze tijd*, Huizinga analysed mass culture and its intellectual poverty. The renunciation of reason and the glorification of life and battle undermined morality and glorified the state, to which everything was now allowed. This caused excesses such as a “hand-and-shirt-heroism,” which referred to the manifestation of brown or black shirts and the Hitler or fascist salute.

This same theme of moral decay and spiritual chaos was recurring in other articles too. In 1936, the Spanish Civil War occasioned such observations about the lack of a “universal” and “social, invigorating idea.”¹⁵⁷ The fragmentation and disintegration across Europe proved that “we Europeans are going through a period of spiritual impoverishment.”

2.1.40 Liberalism in a “new world order” (January 1936)

Meanwhile, Arthur Vanderpoorten contributed with a new series on the question “Is liberalism worn out?”¹⁵⁸ He repeated that democratic policies, the parliamentary system and an individualistic worldview remained the founding principles of liberalism, and that absolutism, dogma and dictatorship were liberalism’s enemies. However, Vanderpoorten also observed liberalism had not triumphed, as the state had come to intervene in all aspects of life. Which role could liberalism play

¹⁵³ *Het Volksbelang* (8 February 1936).

¹⁵⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (8 February 1936).

¹⁵⁵ See *Het Volksbelang* (30 January 1937); (13 February 1937); (20 February 1937).

¹⁵⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (4 January 1936).

¹⁵⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (3 October 1936).

¹⁵⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (11 January 1936).

in this new world order? His response was that it should stay true to its principles without being rigid: it was a worldview rather than a doctrine.¹⁵⁹ State intervention was a necessary counterweight to absolute freedom, which would otherwise amount to a “freedom of the wilderness.”¹⁶⁰ Social freedom involved laws that protected the weak from exploitation. The state had obligations too in the areas of education, security and the promotion of trade.

2.1.41 What democracy needs, why democracies fail (March 1936 - February 1938)

Confronted with the phenomenon of mass propaganda, LVV supported calls to commit to responsible, realistic politics. *Het Volksbelang* referred to statements of a Dutch minister, taken from the Dutch newspaper the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*. In his view, democracy did not mean foolishly telling the crowds what they wanted to hear, but opposing such propaganda and keeping the community on the right track.¹⁶¹ This required a firm response from democratic parties and government. Being soft on extremism amounted to suicide.¹⁶² Government leaders should give more radio speeches to expose demagoguery and to underline the accomplishments of government.¹⁶³ Parliamentarism was not a self-sustaining “iron system”: it needed committed parliamentarians to lean on.¹⁶⁴

Yet “well-meaning citizens” shared this responsibility with politicians. They had to fight propaganda and defend democracy in their direct environment.¹⁶⁵ Democracy and personal freedoms were never acquired but required continuous effort, sacrifice and vigilance, as *The Times* had cited the PM of Sweden.¹⁶⁶ Another article referred to the Dutch journal *De Opbouw*. A certain professor Kohnstamm was quoted on the necessary conditions for a parliamentary-democratic state to function. First, all people needed to share certain fundamental opinions on justice and morality. Second, such a state required people to be not overly excited and caught up in emotions, so that conversations based on reason could take place. In addition, people had to be sufficiently educated to be able to follow parliamentary work. Finally, “parliamentary labour in and through parliament demands discipline, discipline by the community, discipline with every member.”¹⁶⁷

Another academic, prof. Casimir, expressed a similar argument in different words: “The ideal of democracy is never realised. It is carried by individual people, all deficient, all unilaterally minded, all locked into their own limitations. Yet democracy lives as an ideal form of life.” It was important that people realised democracy was some kind of work in progress, and, more particularly, required “working on ourselves and in our circle.” In Casimir’s words: “Democrats must develop the democrat in themselves.”¹⁶⁸

These arguments resonated in speeches of notable Flemish and Belgian liberals too. LVV president M. Somers and Minister of State M. Lippens argued that democracies were losing ground due to licentiousness among the insatiable crowds and weak and meek leadership.¹⁶⁹ Those in power were concerned with advancing the interests of one class only, instead of those of the whole community.

¹⁵⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (21 March 1936).

¹⁶⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (11 January 1936).

¹⁶¹ *Het Volksbelang* (21 March 1936).

¹⁶² *Het Volksbelang* (5 September 1936).

¹⁶³ *Het Volksbelang* (17 October 1936).

¹⁶⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (9 May 1936).

¹⁶⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (26 September 1936).

¹⁶⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (30 January 1937).

¹⁶⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (17 April 1937).

¹⁶⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (17 April 1937).

¹⁶⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (21 November 1936); (26 February 1938).

To Somers, the application of Marxist experiments had caused dictatorship in Italy, Germany and Austria. His hope was for liberals to open up their ranks to socialists and Catholics to oppose absolutism and despotism together. Lippens agreed, and emphasised that rescue could not come from state reforms, but required a shift in thinking.

Liberal senator Arthur Vanderpoorten and liberal MP L. Boeckx equally called on the “constitutional parties [to] brace each other against Rexists, nationalists and communists.”¹⁷⁰ Liberal minister Julius Hoste reaffirmed the government would not make concessions to communism or fascism. He recognised the need for order.

This order, or rather the lack thereof, was another important element in explaining the rise of dictatorships. One article noted that “fear of chaos [and] the need for order” made Germans vote for Hitler, not because they were Nazis, but in spite of not being Nazis.¹⁷¹ Anarchy had always given rise to “Caesars” because every society needed order.¹⁷² Even in democratic countries, only those who managed to establish discipline and justice would convince the people.¹⁷³ While Hoste recognised this, he also asserted that freedom of opinion would continue to count for all.¹⁷⁴

The best soil for democracy, LVV believed, was a prosperous labour class and a social and solidary middle class.¹⁷⁵ So were, according to Julius Hoste, a “sense of balance for our nation,” the improvement of the economic situation, the refusal of the socialists to side with the communists, and of resistance of the Catholics to ally with the extreme right.¹⁷⁶

2.1.42 Rex and Léon Degrelle (May - December 1936)

On the day before the elections of May 1936, *Het Volksbelang* compared Degrelle and his party Rex to the Italian fascists and the German Nazis: “Think of the horrors of the Hitler dictatorship in Germany, of the ‘humane’ Italian fascism, and then see what Degrelle wants. Vote liberal!”¹⁷⁷ Yet the Rexists and the Flemish nationalists triumphed. To LVV, it was because of their “noisy propaganda”: charlatans had seduced the crowds.¹⁷⁸

Another article offered a longer analysis of Rexism, originally published in the Belgian Catholic journal *Le Cité chrétienne*. Rexism was interpreted as “the first clear fascist expression” which resonated among the masses, “or at least in the middle classes” in Belgium.¹⁷⁹ The author cited a passage from *Mein Kampf*, comparing the illiberal, violent ideology of Hitler to that of Rex. fascism’s aim was “to seize power, complete power and nothing but power.” Rexism did not represent any social ideal, economic program or worldview. Power was a goal in itself. Degrelle was observed to no longer conceal his objective to abolish the constitution and establish a dictatorship.

What had caused Rex’s success? The main factor was general dissatisfaction caused by the crisis. Part of the press worsened these feelings by expressing disobliging criticism on the regime. Some groups of the population, then, willingly accepted such slander, “as long as it looks like change and does not

¹⁷⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (21 November 1936).

¹⁷¹ *Het Volksbelang* (14 June 1936).

¹⁷² *Het Volksbelang* (20 March 1937).

¹⁷³ *Het Volksbelang* (23 March 1940).

¹⁷⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (21 November 1936).

¹⁷⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (26 September 1936).

¹⁷⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (21 November 1936).

¹⁷⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (23 May 1936).

¹⁷⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (30 May 1936).

¹⁷⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (6 June 1936).

require thinking.” Degrelle was a professional mudslinger who followed the masses without leading them. Catholic youths eagerly joined his team. Rexism exploited the bad mood of the middle classes and popular beliefs in a strong leader. It embodied the political opportunism of youth, “under the name of mysticism,” and depleted intellectual standards.

If Rex succeeded to establish itself as a stable fascist party, this could heavily impact the structure of Belgian politics. Moreover, minister Julius Hoste argued, Rexist agitation was playing into the hands of communism.¹⁸⁰ And Rex was not the only representation of fascism. Staf De Clercq, the leader of the Flemish nationalists of VNV, “copied from Hitler” too.¹⁸¹ LVV urged to pay close attention to the alliances that were being formed between Rex and the Flemish nationalists, as well as between the Flemish nationalists and the Catholics.¹⁸² It was re-emphasised that the power of foreign examples should not be underestimated. It enchanted Belgian youths, and not just the snobs.¹⁸³

2.1.43 Social structure, political program and political techniques of fascist movements (May 1937)

In May 1937, *Het Volksbelang* included an analysis from the Swiss journal *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, which discussed the “remarkable similarity” in the social structure, political program, and political technique of fascist movements in different countries.¹⁸⁴ In social terms these movements recruited among the middle classes and retailers (*middenstanders*), the class most hit by the economic crisis. Romantic youths, the unemployed, and a dissatisfied military joined this group. Political outsiders and failed writers provided for the “intellectual filling.”¹⁸⁵

The programs of these movements were interchangeable and all shared a fundamental feature: they were anti. They were against democracy, parliamentarism, political parties, liberalism, internationalism, freedom of thought, Judaism, big finance, supermarkets, Marxism and corruption. Any positive orientation was limited to nationalism, establishing some kind of order, vague ideas about a class society, corporatism and the “Führerprinzip’.”

The author suspected these movements of mutually supporting each other with advice and money. Sure, though, was how they shared their “tactics” and “technique,” which compensated for the lack of ideology.¹⁸⁶ This “fascist technique” was based on “masterly psychology” and a thorough understanding of the “Zeitgeist of mob rule.” (*het tijds karakter der massa-heerschappij*). It involved the open exploitation of democratic institutions and their driving forces, but aimed at the very collapse of democracy.¹⁸⁷ Disguised as a legal political party, fascist movements used the ballot to access the masses. Their propaganda roused the crowds and stirred up emotions. Most effective was their boundless attack on democratic ideals, institutions and politicians. The party apparatus then competed with the state apparatus, party symbols opposed state symbols, and the superior legal authority of the party replaced the legality of the state.

¹⁸⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (21 November 1936).

¹⁸¹ *Het Volksbelang* (20 June 1936).

¹⁸² *Het Volksbelang* (26 December 1936).

¹⁸³ *Het Volksbelang* (20 June 1936).

¹⁸⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (8 May 1937); (15 May 1937).

¹⁸⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (8 May 1937).

¹⁸⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (8 May 1937).

¹⁸⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (15 May 1937).

The article argued that the transformation from innocent party to power instrument happened through more or less “legal” ways.¹⁸⁸ The fascists exploited the liberal rights of free speech and the freedom of association and assembly. Constitutional rights had been maintained even for such groups that were hostile to the state. In that sense, “[d]emocratic tolerance has supported the fascist technique,” which, through political violence and murder, paved the way for a latent civil war. Italy, Germany and Spain, the author concluded, had taken the lead on this track.

2.1.44 Thomas Mann on the “rejuvenation” of democracy (April - June 1938)

A number of editions in 1938 included references to and excerpts from an article of German author Thomas Mann. Mann interpreted “the socialism of the fascist dictatorship” as a cover-up for its real intents: securing the power of those whose power would not survive in conditions of actual peace and security.¹⁸⁹ To counter fascism and Bolshevism, Mann pleaded for reforms and a “rejuvenation” of democracy.¹⁹⁰ To renew its appeal, he commended to follow the example of its enemies.¹⁹¹ These had understood the attraction of newness: they declared a general reboot by clearing the old order and establishing something new. Even though their showy promises were nothing but deception, this “fresh world of ideas” was even seducing the elderly.

As such, a “renewed discovery of the values of democracy” was essential. Democracy was more than its political meaning of majority rule or government by the people, which was easily confused with the fascist rule of the mob. Instead, Mann argued, “[i]f one wants to truly know democracy, one has to call it the state and social form which is, more than any other, inspired with human dignity.” Democracy aimed at uplifting people by teaching them to think, and by freeing them from what kept them bound.¹⁹² A sound democracy needed to be combative. It had to protect the Western cultural traditions and protect our civilisation from barbarism and political adventures.

2.1.45 “We live in an illiberal world” (November 1938 - May 1940)

The period preceding the outbreak of the war spawned few new ideas about fascism. In April 1938, the German annexation of Austria offered a lesson of domestic nature. According to socialist minister Henri Spaak, this new development “urges us to unity, order and tolerance.”¹⁹³ Yet *Het Volksbelang* observed a lack of commitment to such values on the side of the socialists, clericals, communists and Rexists. Meanwhile, Hitler had transformed Vienna into an army base and was ruining Austrian culture.¹⁹⁴

The Nazi regime was seen to be preying on further territorial expansion, with the support of big industrialists.¹⁹⁵ *Het Volksbelang* reported on the German claims on Czechoslovakia in 1938 and 1939, and the invasion of Poland in September 1939. Rather than prompting new insights, these developments were interpreted as a confirmation of Europe’s pernicious state, and of the acute threat that constituted fascist dictatorship.

¹⁸⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (15 May 1937).

¹⁸⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (25 June 1938).

¹⁹⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (9 April 1938).

¹⁹¹ *Het Volksbelang* (16 April 1938).

¹⁹² *Het Volksbelang* (16 April 1938).

¹⁹³ *Het Volksbelang* (2 April 1938).

¹⁹⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (27 August 1938).

¹⁹⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (27 January 1940).

Specific other themes that were covered included the suppression of Jews in Germany, whose situation was deemed “a hundred times worse” than that of other Germans.¹⁹⁶ *Het Volksbelang* also commented on Italy’s educational reforms, designed to promote fascist thought with Italian children.¹⁹⁷ LVV saw that “[g]angster governments” and their “law of the fist” were tightening their grip on the world.¹⁹⁸ Economic barriers had never been higher, legal order was disrupted, spiritual freedom caged. “We live in an illiberal world,” one article cited a passage from the *Hollandsch Weekblad*.¹⁹⁹ In such a world, it was believed, liberalism offered the only way towards reconstruction. In May 1940, the German invasion of Belgium stopped the publication of *Het Volksbelang*.

2.2 Conclusion

The *Liberaal Vlaams Verbond* (LVV) represented a democratic, Flemish-minded liberalism. During the interwar years, its political views were expressed through its weekly or monthly journals *L.V.V. Maandblad van het Liberaal Vlaams Verbond* (1922-1924) and *Het Volksbelang* (1925-1940). This chapter has presented an analysis of LVV’s understanding of, and reactions to fascism in these publications.

2.2.1 Italian fascism

Overall, LVV described and rejected fascism in terms of its anti-liberal essence. Italian fascism first became a topic in *Het Volksbelang* in 1925. Numerous articles treated various aspects of its nature and causes, often based on works of Italian authors like Benedetto Croce, Gaetano Salvemini and Francesco Nitti. Fascism was seen as an expression of “madman” Mussolini’s temper.²⁰⁰ It was called authoritarianism, marked by its suppression of individual freedoms and defiance of the rule of law. Fascism exploited extreme patriotism, imperialism and political violence as strategic means to sustain popular support for its regime. Its ideas were founded in literature, not in politics or any sense of history: it expressed an “emotional condition” rather than political theory.²⁰¹

Some articles referred to fascism’s Italian cultural roots: its aesthetics, for example, appealed to the audience because it recalled the greatness of ancient Rome. Other analyses described its function and historical ascent as a “white guard” of Italian industrialists, landowners and bankers. Its anti-socialism, then, was a central feature too. Italian socialists, in return, were persistently criticised for their contribution to fascism’s popularity.

2.2.2 Nazism

Het Volksbelang first mentioned National Socialism in 1930. It was described as right-wing extremism, and was quickly identified as fascism, which had moved up from Italy. The Nazis were observed to rally against the Treaty of Versailles and the Weimar Republic, while ordering the elimination of the Jews. Incessant economic pressures, lack of political education of the people, and fear by the moderate parties explained their success. Led by a presumptuous dilettante, whose

¹⁹⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (19 November 1938).

¹⁹⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (May 1938).

¹⁹⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (30 December 1939).

¹⁹⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (4 February 1940).

²⁰⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (24 October 1925).

²⁰¹ *Het Volksbelang* (1 July 1928).

platitudes aroused the crowds, National Socialism represented anti-republicanism and dictatorship. The “shadow of a dictator in Germany” then, augmented concerns about a new European war.²⁰² If Hitler came to power, it was believed, he could abolish elections, suspend liberties and establish a regime based on censorship and terror. Once the Nazis took office, these grim prospects were increasingly confirmed.

2.2.3 Belgian fascism

LVV also paid close attention to fascists in Belgium. From 1925 onwards, Belgian youth, mostly Catholic and francophone, was observed to admire Mussolini and hold fascist manifestations. They were “rascals” and “young boys with sticks.”²⁰³ Catholic, liberal and financial elites too were seen to have fascist sympathies. Yet the phenomenon remained marginal during the 1920’s. In the following decade, so-called imitators of Hitler proved a more severe threat to the Belgian political regime. “Young Hitlerians” and “candidate dictators” were found in extreme right-wing parties such as Joris Van Severen’s Verdinaso, Leon Degrelle’s Rex and the Flemish nationalist VNV of Staf Declercq.²⁰⁴ These parties were characterised by their rejection of the Belgian parliamentary democratic system.

2.2.4 Transnational fascism

Fascism was often not related to any specific country. In the 1930’s, it became a Europe-wide phenomenon, most visible in Germany, but increasingly in Belgium too. A significant amount of analyses was drawn from international press, such as the British *The Times* or Dutch newspapers like *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*. An article taken from the Swiss *Neue Züricher Zeitung* in May 1937 coherently presented the main features of fascist movements. Across the continent, they shared their social structure, political program and political techniques.²⁰⁵ Their ranks were filled with members of the middle class and retailers (*middenstanders*) hit by the crisis, youth, unemployed, military and outsiders. Their program was more anti than it was in support of anything: anti-parliament, anti-Judaism, anti-supermarkets etcetera. Their political technique, finally, generously made up for the ideological nothingness. These techniques mainly consisted of unlimited attacks on democratic ideals and institutions. Fascist movements thus exploited their constitutional rights to free speech and assembly to undermine the state by all legal means, until the fascists themselves became the state.

2.2.5 Fascism and communism

Since Italian fascism became a topic in *Het Volksbelang*, it was consistently associated with and compared to Russian Bolshevism. While the fascist dictator was a “strong-willed military or civilian with a hard fist,” the Bolshevik “dictatorship of the proletariat” in fact constituted of “an executive committee of malicious arrivistes.”²⁰⁶ Both regimes were regarded as anti-liberal. They were founded on a “principle of authority,” suppressed freedom of thought and speech, and subjected individuals to the state and its leaders.²⁰⁷ Like Italian fascism, National Socialism matched “National

²⁰² *Het Volksbelang* (August 1930).

²⁰³ *Het Volksbelang* (24 April 1926); (29 May 1926).

²⁰⁴ See e.g. *Het Volksbelang* (January-February 1932); (28 November 1936).

²⁰⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (8 May 1937); (15 May 1937).

²⁰⁶ *Het Volksbelang* (13 March 1926).

²⁰⁷ *Het Volksbelang* (13 March 1926).

Communism.”²⁰⁸ They were “extreme poles, touching each other,” or “two branches [...] derived from the trunk of collectivism.” They were “totalitarian systems” clashing in a “demagogic battle.”²⁰⁹

In addition to such comparisons, LVV observed a causal connection between both regimes: dictatorship and fascism flourished because Marxism had eliminated the values of personal dignity and freedom. Socialism effected the “collapse of individualism.”²¹⁰ In more concrete terms, LVV maintained that the socialists in Italy, and the “Marxist politics [...] of the class struggle” in Germany had played a role in generating the fascist and Nazi reaction.²¹¹ Socialism and fascism alike “stole from the people all participation and freedom.” Finally, at one point *Het Volksbelang* warned for an inverse dynamic: it called the fascists of Rex agitators who served the interests of communism.²¹²

2.2.6 Analyses and reactions

Above, I have summarised how the Flemish liberals of LVV defined and described fascism. Then which answers did they offer? On the one hand, their response was consequent. They continued to honour the liberal principles formulated by Belgian liberal MP’s in 1900: honest communication, good education and class cooperation remained principal commitments in striving towards economic progress and the “establishment of a peaceful, progressive and enlightened democracy.”²¹³

Yet this investigation also observes an evolution in LVV’s responses. New understandings of the causes and successes of fascism seem to have induced new ideas on how to oppose it. Originally, fascism was interpreted as an Italian phenomenon, similar to the ways in which Spanish and Greek dictatorships were explained by the absence of democratic traditions. Meanwhile, in Belgium fascism was mostly considered a marginal phenomenon. Such understandings generated a response that emphasised the values of liberalism. LVV found that the parliamentary system was undermined by self-interestedness and particularism among voters and leaders. Despite all popular criticism, it believed that liberal (parliamentary) democracy remained the best system to organise society. Universal suffrage and parliamentary representation had made society more just. It was good to keep an eye on those fascists, but they formed no serious threat.

This view changed in the 1930’s. Fascism took hold of Germany and gained strength in Belgium. In the latter country, attention was directed to *enfant terrible* Leon Degrelle and his party Rex, which appealed to the crowds in ways the liberals did not. LVV argued that liberalism was too rational and should defend its ideas with fire, like its enemies did. The “masterly psychology” and “political techniques” of fascist movements contrasted with liberalism’s lack of charisma.²¹⁴ If democracy was to survive, it had to work itself in the picture.

Yet as inspiring as these techniques were, more pessimistic cultural analyses sparked another response too. Morality was fragmented, reason renounced, and the crowds seemed to have an insatiable thirst for deception. Leaders showed indifference or weakness. As such, the problem was increasingly framed as a matter of responsibility and order. On the one hand, leaders should not aim to placate the people, but communicate with honesty and keep the crowds on track. LVV called upon the leaders of the Catholic, socialist and liberal parties to unite and firmly respond against all fascist

²⁰⁸ *Het Volksbelang* (8 February 1936).

²⁰⁹ *Het Volksbelang* (8 February 1936); (13 February 1937).

²¹⁰ *Het Volksbelang* (March - April 1933).

²¹¹ *Het Volksbelang* (16 May 1936).

²¹² *Het Volksbelang* (21 November 1936).

²¹³ *Het Volksbelang* (6 August 1938).

²¹⁴ *Het Volksbelang* (8 May 1937); (15 May 1937).

and communist agitation. The population, on the other hand, needed to become politically educated. Parliamentary democracy could only function when people shared some fundamental opinions and had a sense of what parliamentary work was. This implied a responsibility on the side of individual citizens. Democracy was a work of many hands, and each should do his part. More than institutional reform, democracy required a shift in thinking. In the words of Dutch professor Casimir, “[d]emocrats should develop the democrat within.”²¹⁵

²¹⁵ *Het Volksbelang* (17 April 1937).

3. The European perspective: germanophone and francophone liberal discourses on fascism and Nazism

3.1 Introduction

Which perceptions of fascism circulated in and among liberal journals and intellectuals in Germany, France and francophone Belgium during the interwar years? This second chapter addresses this question by reviewing secondary literature on liberal oriented journals and authors. Some authors and journals focused on Italian fascism, others on Nazism, and still others took both movements and regimes in view. The aim here is not to offer a comprehensive overview of all liberal opinions on fascism and Nazism, but to give a selection of relevant examples from the three countries. The summary at the end of the chapter offers a touchstone that allows for a short comparison with the Flemish liberal discourse, and can form the basis for further comparative research.

The chapter first discusses opinions from German liberals, briefly listed here. Journalist Fritz Schotthöfer and economist Moritz Julius Bonn offered early interpretations of the Fascist regime in Italy. Liberal politician Theodor Heuss wrote about the National Socialist movement and its ideology in his book *Hitler's Weg* (1931). Publicist Leopold Schwarzschildt promoted a democratic anti-fascist spirit in his journals *Tage-Buch* and *Neues Tage-Buch*. Journalist Georg Bernhard's book *Die Deutsche Tragödie. Selbstmord einer Republik* (1933) offered an analysis of "Hitlerism" and the demise of the Weimar Republic. Finally, journalist and lawyer at the Berlin Supreme Court Rudolf Olden wrote a biography of Hitler (1935) and condemned the left-wing parties for not making necessary democratic reforms.

Francophone contributions are the subject of the second part of this chapter. Liberal thinkers Elie Halévy and Louis Rougier offered insightful observations of fascism's totalitarian and spiritual qualities. The liberally oriented Catholic Louis Martin-Chauffier proved to be an informed observer of Nazism in various periodicals over the 1930's. The French perspective is further examined in three periodicals. *Nouvelle Revue française* was an important liberally oriented journal which offered space to a diversity of voices, going from marxists to authors with fascist sympathies. The *Revue des Deux Mondes* and its chronicler René Piron offered the view from the liberal and moderate conservative elite in the Third Republic. Finally, *La Revue des Vivants* represented the pacifist and Europeanist opinions from the generation of the war.

3.2 Germany

3.2.1 Fritz Schotthöfer

Historian Jens Hacke discusses journalist of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* Fritz Schotthöfer, who wrote "an early liberal interpretation of fascism."²¹⁶ Before the First World War, Schotthöfer had been foreign correspondent for the German newspaper in Paris, London and Madrid. From 1918 onwards he headed the editorial team for foreign politics. Within a time span of one year, Schotthöfer published

²¹⁶ Jens Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie. Zur politischen Theorie des Liberalismus in der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018), 140.

two books that dealt with new political threats: the first was *Sowjet-Rußland im Umbau* (1923), the second *Il Fascio. Sinn und Wirklichkeit des italienischen Faschismus* (1924).

Moskauer Muster

Il Fascio offered an early example of comparison between Bolshevism and fascism. In the chapter “Moscow model” (“*Moskauer Muster*”), Schotthöfer described Bolshevism and fascism as “brothers in the spirit of violence.”²¹⁷ In both cases, an illegally organized and armed minority had succeeded in capturing and controlling the state by means of terror. Such comparisons increasingly circulated among liberals and preceded the theories on totalitarianism in the 1930’s. In 1925 German economist and geographer Alfred Weber drew a parallel between violent tendencies of “partly proletarian, partly national-fascist kind.”²¹⁸ In Italy, politician and critic of fascism Luigi Sturzo perceived fascism as right-wing Bolshevism and Bolshevism as left-wing fascism. Old minister president Francesco Nitti noticed both regimes’ “denial of the same foundations of freedom and order, the foundations of 1789.” Nitti called fascism “white Bolshevism.”²¹⁹

A typology of Fascist rule

The manuscript of Schotthöfer’s book on Italian fascism was handed over to the printer late 1923, 13 months after the March on Rome. Counting 220 pages, it was “among the earliest and most extensive Germanophone presentations of the Fascist takeover.”²²⁰ Schotthöfer developed a typology of Fascist rule and took into view, in Hacke’s words, “four novel elements of a dictatorship under conditions of modern mass society.”²²¹ The first and principal feature of fascism was its “spirit of violence.”²²² To Schotthöfer, fascism was a “by-product of the war”, reflecting the “war atmosphere, in which legal concepts dwindle before the worship and the success of strength.” While terror and the breach of law were inherent to fascism’s ascent and exertion of power, Schotthöfer perceived that its initiators (“*Urheber*”) themselves had difficulty with the illegal and immoral violent nature of fascism. Hacke notes that while this ascription of moral sensibility to the Fascists may seem naive in hindsight, it also displays “an unclouded diagnostic view.”²²³

A second element was the “inner dualism of the system,” by which Schotthöfer referred to fascism’s battle to destroy the state on the one hand, and to seize it on the other. While it attacked the state, it also strove to penetrate its institutions. Fascist terror thus “behaved like a state within the state.”²²⁴ Thirdly, Schotthöfer emphasised “Mussolinismus” and the cult of the leader: “Where there is no Mussolini, there can also be no fascism.” Fundamental to his power was “the cult that is carried on around him, [...] the belief and trust of his followers in his energy.” Seeing Mussolini more as “organizer” than captivating “personality,” Schotthöfer doubted whether the foundations of his power could be a lasting alternative to any democratic legitimacy. Worth mentioning here is the

²¹⁷ Fritz Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio. Sinn und Wirklichkeit des Italienischen Faschismus* (Frankfurt/M.: 1924), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 142.

²¹⁸ Alfred Weber, *Die Krise des modernen Staatsgedankens in Europa* (Stuttgart: 1925), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 138.

²¹⁹ Francesco Nitti, *Bolshevismus, Faschismus und Demokratie* (München: 1926), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 143.

²²⁰ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 142.

²²¹ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 144.

²²² Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 144.

²²³ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 144.

²²⁴ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 145.

opinion of German legal scholar Hermann Heller, who believed that Mussolini's "personality dictatorship" could not be transplanted to another country.²²⁵

Schotthöfer's fourth observation of fascism concerns its essential lack of ideas and the absence of any theory of the state. The idea of fascism was simply "the fomenting negation of liberalism," while at the same time it copied privatisation measures from liberalism.²²⁶ Mussolini's commitment to actions needed to compensate for his aimless politics. Against democracy, fascism opposed nothing but an anachronistic "principle of political energy." "The Fascio fights ideas with weapons. This is the deepest mark of its violent nature."²²⁷

The superiority of liberal democracy

In opposition to these Fascist features, Schotthöfer posed a defence of the liberal order and its principles. He praised the "freedom of the individual" as a "higher creative power," because "in freedom is competition, the natural awakening and unfolding of living energy."²²⁸ Claiming that "the Manchesterian concept of freedom" belonged to the past, Schotthöfer mentioned "freedom and organisation" as the "creative principles" of a modern democracy. The democratically legitimate rule of law remained the sole way to realise "the organisation of political freedom."²²⁹

Schotthöfer gave four reasons why liberal, so parliamentary democracy was superior to fascism. First, its political personnel enjoyed more support and legitimacy: "The great leader (*"große Führungspersönlichkeit"*) who is carried by the free trust of the people or by a majority is stronger than any dictator who stands on a breach of the constitution."²³⁰ Secondly, the parliamentary system is flexible and has the capacity to accommodate political diversity. Schotthöfer promoted the representation of the plurality of opinions and the pursuit of compromise. Thirdly, liberal democracy produced its own legitimacy and continuity through its constitutional, legal functioning and its periodic organisation of elections. Fourth, democratic politics was not driven by violence, but by "inner conviction and the commitment to what one sees as right and necessary." As such, democracy aims to "express the spiritual and the ethical in politics."²³¹

To Hacke, Schotthöfer's defence of liberal democracy showed that fascism did not simply pose a threat or a cause for uncertainty, but evoked reflections on the values and performances of parliamentary democracy.²³² More specifically, events in Italy were an occasion for Schotthöfer to write an apology of the Weimar's constitutional order and of Western democracy more generally. Hacke notes that his ideas were influenced by those of Max Weber, who in 1917 published a series of articles in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, headed *"Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland."* Weber discussed liberal democracy in terms such as efficiency, rationality and performance, but Schotthöfer emphasised its normative principles: freedom of the individual, political self-determination, "the right of the citizen to freedom of opinion" and "free cooperation to

²²⁵ Hermann Heller, *Die politischen Ideenkreise der Gegenwart* (Breslau: 1926), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 131-32; Hermann Heller, *Europa und der Faschismus* (1929/1931), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 134.

²²⁶ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 146.

²²⁷ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 146-47.

²²⁸ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 147.

²²⁹ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 148.

²³⁰ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 148.

²³¹ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 148-49.

²³² Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 147.

the management of public businesses.”²³³ These convictions he combined with and “unshakeable trust in progress.”²³⁴

Considering Schotthöfer was the leading expert in international relations and renowned correspondent and journalist at the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, his assessment of fascism mattered. To Hacke, his observations embodied “the sensitive and value driven liberal criticism of fascism.” They also illustrate how liberal journalists early on displayed “an alert sensorium for the danger fascism conjured up.”²³⁵ Hacke concludes that “overall, the early analyses of fascism, whether from journalists or scientists [...] were far less naïve than some sweeping judgments about liberal sympathizers of authoritarian anti-parliamentarism suggest.”²³⁶

3.2.2 Moritz Julius Bonn

German economist Moritz Julius Bonn shared with Fritz Schotthöfer his close connections to Frankfurt, his education from economist Lujo Brentano, and his liberal convictions. Bonn published one of his first articles in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1897 and remained a welcome contributor to the paper. While we cannot assume Bonn was familiar with Schotthöfer’s work on fascism, Hacke believes they probably knew each other personally.²³⁷

Hacke describes Bonn as one of those liberal intellectuals who made early observations of political violence both on the right and on the left. Bonn saw this arrival of violence as a political concept and means as one of the heaviest effects of the war. In 1920 he observed what Hacke calls a “brutalisation of political confrontations” and discussed similarities between a Bolshevik and a conservative-revolutionary willingness to use violence.²³⁸ This violence did not simply occur as practice, but enjoyed theoretical recognition too. Hacke perceives in Bonn’s characterization of this “paramilitary paradigm” with its “Bolshevist methods, praetorianism, its will for destruction, and its opposition to formal democracy and parliamentarism” the contours for later theories on totalitarianism.²³⁹

Fascism and defence of liberalism

Next to his many press contributions and newspaper articles, two publications offer important insights into Bonn’s observations: his book *Krisis der europäischen Demokratie* (1925) and his concluding contribution to the edited volume *Internationaler Faschismus* (1928). Like Schotthöfer, Bonn used the challenge of fascism as an occasion to defend parliamentary democracy against its anti-liberal critics, and to demonstrate its superiority. According to Hacke, Bonn’s writings on fascism can be read as an implicit answer to Carl Schmitt’s critiques on liberalism. Similar to Hermann Heller in his *Europa und der Faschismus*, Bonn analysed fascism’s irrationalism and animosity towards Western democracy. Both Heller and Bonn understood that Italian fascism was of pan-European importance.²⁴⁰

²³³ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 150.

²³⁴ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 150.

²³⁵ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 152.

²³⁶ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 151.

²³⁷ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 152.

²³⁸ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 153.

²³⁹ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 153.

²⁴⁰ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 154.

Features of fascism

Bonn shared the view with many of his contemporaries that fascism was a product of the First World War. A “spirit of violence” occupied the masses, which the war had psychologically damaged and deformed, but which had not been sufficiently demobilised. fascism and related currents involved the “belief in physical violence as the fundamental means for shaping and governing the community.”²⁴¹ Bonn emphasised the decisionism and arbitrariness of Fascist dictatorial rule in a passage on Mussolini:

“His violence does not merely spring from a violent temperament; it rests on the conviction that governing without acceptance of the governed is an expedient, legitimate method to rule the people. His theory and praxis are those of Lenin. But while Lenin had a clear idea of an ideal social world, towards which he strove with reckless will, Mussolini does not know a sharply outlined goal. For him suffices the will for action, and the will to build a community [...]”²⁴²

Reflecting a common liberal critique, Bonn exposed what Hacke calls the “hypostasis of the political act”: believing in action as the foundation of politics instead of protracted parliamentary processes.²⁴³ Hacke mentions Karl Löwith, who in 1935 wrote about Carl Schmitt’s “decision for decisiveness” as a sign of the emptiness of his thinking.²⁴⁴ Bonn also ironically described the personal cult that surrounded the leader, and pointed to fascism’s Machiavellian principles, or lack of any principles. In addition to its manifestations in terror and breaking the law, violence was a constitutive cultural element of the fascist militarist system: “Where liberalism desires law and freedom, fascism demands arbitrariness and violence.”²⁴⁵ The militarist system did away with any obligation to justify its deeds, and “consciously starts from the idea of irresponsible government.” At the same time Bonn noted clientelism as a central aspect, as the leader depended on direct support from his followers.

Bonn observed how fascism only consisted of negative elements: its anti-parliamentarism, anti-liberalism and anti-pluralism made it an outlet for groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. To Hacke, this reference to the KKK demonstrated that Bonn was attentive to the “irrational character of fascist ideologies.” He interpreted fascism “not solely as authoritarian governmental technique [...] but as a conglomerate of radical nationalist and racist world views.”²⁴⁶ Similarly, the mobilising power of the Ulster nationalist movement in 1912 evinced to Bonn “the archetype (“*Urbild*”) of fascism in all of Europe.”²⁴⁷

The tyranny of primitive democracy

Fascism involved a “violent community concept.” In Bonn’s view, it had “substantial understanding of the tyranny of primitive democracy against elements foreign to the clan, which have to be expelled

²⁴¹ Moritz Julius Bonn, “Schlusswort,” in *Internationaler Faschismus. Beiträge über Wesen und Stand der faschistischen Bewegung und über den Ursprung ihrer leitenden Ideen und Triebkräfte*, eds. Carl Landauer and Hans Honegger (Karlsruhe: 1928), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 155.

²⁴² Moritz Julius Bonn, *Die Krisis der europäischen Demokratie* (Munich: 1925), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 155-56.

²⁴³ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 156.

²⁴⁴ Karl Löwith, “Der okkasionelle Dezisionismus von Carl Schmitt,” in Karl Löwith, *Heidegger - Denker in dürftiger Zeit. Zur Stellung der Philosophie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1984), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 156.

²⁴⁵ Bonn, “Schlusswort,” cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 158.

²⁴⁶ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 157.

²⁴⁷ Bonn, *Die Krisis*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 157.

or made uniform.”²⁴⁸ Bonn here pointed to the anti-liberal potential of democracy, in which “the minority very organically becomes the majority, which suppresses or melts down disruptive elements and which represents a true national democracy.” Against this Bonn endorsed a “social pluralism,” which protected minorities and called for tolerance.²⁴⁹

Conditions for fascism

Bonn also reflected on three major conditions that enabled fascism to develop. First, fascism thrived where democratic-republican traditions and a culture of the rule of law were absent: it could “only develop there, where in the broad masses was no need for self-government, but where the subjection to a foreign will was a historical habit, [and] where this obeying took away from the individual the burden of self-responsibility [...]”²⁵⁰ Secondly, Bonn noted that war propaganda and mass mobilisation had created expectations among groups who, disappointed, refused to participate as civilians in society. After Italy, Bonn foresaw Germany to be at risk. Thirdly, citizens displayed an excessive entitlement to the state, discharging themselves from individual responsibility and abetting an already exuberant level of state control:

“Politics would be much better off, if one had made the humble realisation that governments are quite capable of making their peoples desperately unhappy, while, in the same manner, [...] the possibilities for happiness (*“Beglückungsmöglichkeiten”*) are very small. The belief in the boundless possibilities of governing is the deepest cause for criticism of the bounded possibilities of the existing governments.”²⁵¹

The promise of the Italian corporatist state to guarantee “absolute economic security” illustrated this unsound political culture.²⁵² Bonn observed that fascism’s economic ideas not only violated the principles of freedom and equality, but were economically senseless too. Sound economic policy, however, would stabilise the economy and protect against fascism.

National Socialism

Hacke observes Bonn’s “all too functionalist” view when the economist interpreted National Socialism as a “political phenomenon” that was “economically sensitive to the highest degree.”²⁵³ Yet he realised the movement could not be “exclusively understood from the economic situation,” and extensively discussed the Nazi racist anti-Semitism. Bonn analysed the power of Nazi ideology and “the susceptibility of depraved layers of the population” for its promises.²⁵⁴ Nazism combined “an irrational faith in salvation and radical nationalism with anti-capitalist or rather anti-bourgeois resentment.”²⁵⁵

Bonn interpreted National Socialism in two ways. On the one hand, it was a youth movement populated by students who lacked professional perspectives. As a protest movement it rejected the existing order and bourgeois-capitalist society. On the other hand, Bonn interpreted National Socialism as a manifestation of a deeper crisis of modernity. He related it to foreign racist

²⁴⁸ Bonn, “Schlusswort,” cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 157.

²⁴⁹ Bonn, “Schlusswort,” cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 158.

²⁵⁰ Bonn, “Schlusswort,” cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 159.

²⁵¹ Moritz Julius Bonn, in *Neue Freie Presse* (January 1926), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 160.

²⁵² Bonn, in *Neue Freie Presse* (January 1929), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 160.

²⁵³ Bonn, in *Neue Freie Presse* (April 1931), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 161.

²⁵⁴ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 161.

²⁵⁵ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 161.

movements such as the KKK, and categorized it with other contemporary irrational and “biologistic” ideologies.²⁵⁶ Bonn also discussed Hitler’s worldview and linked it to anti-Semitism and its spokesmen in Vienna. Finally, Hacke discerns in Bonn’s account “the stations of a German Sonderweg” or ‘special path’, composed of “feudalism, a protestant deification of the state, the resistance against Roman law” and German nationalism.²⁵⁷ All of these nurtured the ideological conglomerate of National Socialism. With sense of irony Bonn even portrayed Nazism, with its belief in a chosen people and its desire for a leader as some kind of clan god, as a Jewish invention.

Hacke concludes with Bonn’s thesis on the “Racial doctrine as family tree of the democrats.”²⁵⁸ Bonn thus warned for the aristocratic arrogance of democracy. To Hacke this characterised his liberal position in the tradition of philosophers Tocqueville and Mill: “Democratisation as mere expression of desires of the masses, without institutional mediation and representation, without connection to liberal ideas, always carried the danger of a spiritless conformism and the tyranny of the majority.”²⁵⁹ All the while, Bonn maintained a strong belief in progress and the triumph of liberal democracy: “Mussolini and Lenin are therefore not the conquerors of parliamentary democracy, on the contrary, they give it new goals and new life.”²⁶⁰

3.2.3 Theodor Heuss

Theodor Heuss is most known as first president of the Republic of Germany from 1949 to 1959. It is often overlooked how he was formed by his experiences before 1949, living through and in the subsequent ages of the German Empire, the Weimar Republic and Nazi dictatorship. In 1918 Heuss became co-founder of the German Democratic Party (Deutsche Demokratische Partei, DDP) and in 1924 he was elected into the Reichstag for the first time.²⁶¹ In 1930, the same year the NSDAP became the second strongest fraction in parliament, the DDP united with more conservative liberal parties and organisations and formed the new Germany State Party (Deutsche Staatspartei, DStP). In March 1933 Heuss and his five seats counting party fraction agreed with the enabling act (“*Ermächtigungsgesetz*”) that granted the Nazis dictatorial power.

Heuss, whose intellectual and political mentors were his doctoral supervisor Lujo Brentano and social liberal politician Friedrich Naumann, was an early defender of democracy. In publications such as ‘Das Wesen der Demokratie’ (1921) he pleaded for a more engaged democratic civic attitude and sense of individual responsibility. In 1920 he warned that the biggest threats to the young Weimar Republic were coming from the political right. An academic and prominent DDP member, Heuss offered one of the first analyses of National Socialism.²⁶²

Hitler’s Weg

²⁵⁶ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 161-62.

²⁵⁷ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 162.

²⁵⁸ Bonn, in *Neue Freie Presse* (April 1931), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 162-63.

²⁵⁹ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 163.

²⁶⁰ Bonn, in *Europäische Revue* (1926), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 161.

²⁶¹ Werner Treß, “Theodor Heuss und sein Buch *Hitlers Weg*. Eine historisch-politische Studie über den Nationalsozialismus,” in *Confrontations au national-socialisme en Europe francophone et germanophone / Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus im deutsch- und französischsprachigen Europa (1919-1949)*, eds. Michel Grunewald, Oliver Dard and Uwe Puschner (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2018), II: 31-2.

²⁶² Treß, “Theodor Heuss,” 32; Grunewald, e.a., “Liberale, *modérés* und Proeuropäer über den Nationalsozialismus,” 22.

His book *Hitlers Weg* (1931) was the result of a lecture he wrote about the program, actors and ideological origins of the National Socialist movement or NSDAP. Heuss drew on the 25 points program of the NSDAP, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and other writings that influenced the National Socialist movement, such as from Alfred Rosenberg, Hans F. K. Günther and Gottfried Feder. For broader influential ideological views, Heuss consulted among others the work of Oswald Spengler, Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Theodor Fritsch.²⁶³

The four main chapters of the book cover the topics of "people and race", "the search for a state concept", "the question of economic order" and "foreign policy goals."²⁶⁴ Heuss exposed the 'scientific' racist theories of the Nazis as a purely ideological matter and displayed its emptiness and inconsistencies. Describing anti-Semitism as a stain which "we carry", Heuss found the assaults on Jewish families were "a reason for shame", not only for Nazis but for all Germans.²⁶⁵

On the subject of the National Socialist conception of the state, Heuss found it does not really exist. The Nazis were rather indifferent to the idea of the state: "it is surpassed by the consciousness and feeling of the idea of the people and its national traditions (*Volk und Volkstum*), and the measure to evaluate the state's being is its level of usefulness" to the people, whose value is absolute.²⁶⁶ The 25 points program of the NSDAP offered an indication of what a Nazi state order could look like: "Establishment of a central imperial power, unquestioned authority of the political central parliament over the whole empire and its organisations [...]" The program also planned for "the development of class based and professional chambers to carry out the laws commissioned by the Reich."²⁶⁷ Heuss thus observes the National Socialist ambition to establish a centralist-authoritarian and corporative state order. He does not yet recognise more specific aspects such as the pivotal role of the *Führer* or the party's seizure of the state's sovereignty.

In the two other main chapters, Heuss first criticised the unrealistic economic policy plans of the NSDAP. In what historian Werner Treß calls one of the best-argued passages of *Hitler's Weg*, Heuss exposed the utopian substance of both Nazi economic theorist Gottfried Feder and the parliamentary Nazi faction. He also demonstrated that the financial policies of a National Socialist government would lead to economic isolation and a terrible surge of national debt. Finally, on the subject of foreign policy, Heuss' analysis swung between two poles: on the one hand he emphasised the dangers posed by the Nazi agenda, on the other he was convinced it was destined to fail.²⁶⁸

Historiographical views on Theodor Heuss

Overlooking the body of literature about Heuss, Werner Treß observes that many interpretations are coloured by strong retrospective perspectives. Historians such as Peter Merseburger and Eberhard Jäckel, for example, have stated that Heuss had underestimated the violent and totalitarian potential of the Nazis. In 1973 Jürgen C. Heß recognized Heuss' insights in the historical development, defective program and brutal violence of the Nazis, but equally evaluated *Hitler's Weg* as a time-bound book which did not reveal much of the Nazi and German road ahead. Treß finds the opinion of

²⁶³ Treß, "Theodor Heuss," 33.

²⁶⁴ Theodor Heuss, *Hitlers Weg. Eine historisch-politische Studie über den Nationalsozialismus* (Hildesheim/Zürich/New York: 2008 [1932]), cited in Treß, "Theodor Heuss," 33.

²⁶⁵ Heuss, *Hitlers Weg*, cited in Treß, "Theodor Heuss," 34.

²⁶⁶ Heuss, *Hitlers Weg*, cited in Treß, "Theodor Heuss," 35.

²⁶⁷ Heuss, *Hitlers Weg*, cited in Treß, "Theodor Heuss," 35.

²⁶⁸ Treß, 'Theodor Heuss,' 36-8.

Horst Möller noteworthy. In 1990 he highlighted how Heuss treated the Nazis as political opponents and not as “political enemies” who threatened to abolish parliament and eliminate all opposition.²⁶⁹

Such retrospective arguments are influenced by Heuss approval of the enabling act (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*) of March 1933, which granted Hitler dictatorial power to set up his authoritarian state. Heuss and the remaining democratic representatives were indeed deluded by the illusion the old elites around Hindenburg would be able to domesticate Hitler and the Nazis. Yet Treß stresses we should interpret *Hitlers Weg* in the political landscape visible to Heuss. At the time of writing, the SPD faction still outnumbered the Nazis in the Reichstag. Hitler’s rule could still be averted through free and democratic elections. Treß concludes Heuss did not intend to demonstrate the political dangers, but to expose to his readership the emptiness and foolishness of the Nazi program. Furthermore, by constantly questioning its originality he wanted to disenchant National Socialism’s charisma. Heuss’ book *Hitler’s Weg* should thus be evaluated by specific, contemporary criteria.

Finally, what characterizes Heuss as a liberal, according to Treß, was his choice to publish an appeal to citizens’ political reason and desire for civil freedom, instead of calling for a radical political intervention and effective prevention. Heuss was aware books had limited power. The fact he nevertheless committed to publish a written argument, Treß interprets as a liberal escape, rather than an “escape from liberalism.”²⁷⁰

3.2.4 Leopold Schwarzschild and the journals *Tage-Buch* and *Neues Tage-Buch*

According to historian Axel Schildt, Leopold Schwarzschild (1891-1950) was one of the most important publicists who warned against the Hitler movement and fought National Socialism both before and after 1933. He was the main editor of the weekly magazines *Tage-Buch* (*TB*, 1920-1933) and its successor in exile, *Neues Tage-Buch* (*NTB*, 1933-1940), the views of which generally represent those of Schwarzschildt. Both publications advanced the spirit of democratic anti-fascism, which “belonged to the best tradition of the minority political culture of Weimar.”²⁷¹

Together with the journal *Weltbühne*, the *Tage-Buch* belonged to the most important weekly journals of the Weimar Republic in the field of culture and politics. Both published critical essays and reviews for an audience of “leftist urban intellectuals.”²⁷² The readership of the *Tage-Buch* should not be estimated higher than 16 000. The Brüning government labeled Schwarzschild’s journal a “pacifist-communist organ.” To Axel Schildt, this indicates that the “retrospective construction of a political and ideological opposition between a liberal *Tage-Buch* and a radical left *Weltbühne* should not be overestimated.”

In the first years of its publication in the early 1920’s, the *Tage-Buch* again and again expressed “highly ambivalent considerations” about a Führer and the national community

²⁶⁹ Horst Möller, *Theodor Heuss vor 1933. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des demokratischen Denkens in Deutschland* (Stuttgart: 1973), cited in Treß, “Theodor Heuss,” 41.

²⁷⁰ Treß, “Theodor Heuss,” 42-3. Historian Dieter Langewiesche diagnosed the transformation of the DDP into the Deutsche Staatspartei as an “Escape from liberalism.”

²⁷¹ Axel Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*. Leopold Schwarzschilds Analyse und Kritik des Nationalsozialismus,” in *Confrontations au national-socialisme en Europe francophone et germanophone / Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus im deutsch- und französischsprachigen Europa (1919-1949)*, eds. Michel Grunewald, Oliver Dard and Uwe Puschner (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2018), II: 45.

²⁷² Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*,” 47.

(“*Volksgemeinschaft*”).²⁷³ Author Thomas Großmann, for example, wrote that “at the top of the Republic should be a man of illusioning nature [...], a Führer”, who could impress the national community.²⁷⁴ The authors of the *Tage-Buch* shared the widespread regret about the low emotional appeal of the Republic, and believed in using authoritarian images to battle their right-wing enemies. In 1924 guest author Ernst Bloch enthused over the National Socialist movement as “good, powerful youth.”²⁷⁵ In these years the journal did not distinguish itself from a general tendency to sympathise with the “revolutionary protest movement against the mediocre Republic, her trite dreariness and spiritual emptiness.”²⁷⁶

Mindless masses and economic crisis

Scharzschildt’s discussion of National Socialism mainly occurred during the time of the economic crisis. Schildt compares his description of Hitler as a corrupted servant of powerful political forces to the propagandistic writings of social democrats and communists in the *Weltbühne*. Yet Schwarzschildt’s “Master-servant-scenarios” were not embedded in any social theory or critiques of capitalism.²⁷⁷ For Schwarzschildt, on the one hand the National Socialist movement was one of mindless masses, led by a mediocre führer. He called it “the hollowest and most confused movement in political history.”²⁷⁸ On the other hand, National Socialism was seen as a phenomenon of the economic crisis. National Socialism would disappear once the crisis was over. To Schildt this view testified to an “astoundingly inexperienced economism and sociology as an explanatory factor.”²⁷⁹

To oppose the NSDAP, Schwarzschildt promoted what Schildt calls a “popular politics” (“*volkstümliche Politik*”). He advised chancellor Brüning “to approach the people like a Lassalle, Lenin, Mussolini or Hitler.”²⁸⁰ The *Tage-Buch* wrongly perceived the disempowerment of parliament by this same Brüning in 1930 as an opportunity for a new kind of parliamentarism. It did not see how these actions initiated the destruction of the Weimar Republic. One year later, Schwarzschildt advocated forcing Hitler into government, assuming this would stop the Nazis’ electoral appeal: “In the current situation Hitler only has successes; everything that goes wrong, benefits him [...] The moment [he] joins government, he will only have failures.”²⁸¹

Like countless other civil politicians and publicists, Schwarzschildt believed the National Socialist movement could be tamed. Together with the social democrats, the Catholic *Zentrumspartei* and the splintered liberal and German national organisations, the *Tage-Buch* supported Hindenburg’s re-election in 1932 as the least bad option. His presidency was thought of as a guaranteed protection of the constitution.²⁸²

Middle-class front

²⁷³ Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum Neuen *Tage-Buch*,” 47.

²⁷⁴ Thomas Großmann, in *Tage-Buch* (1921), cited in Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum Neuen *Tage-Buch*,” 47.

²⁷⁵ Ernst Bloch, in *Tage-Buch* (1924), cited in Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum Neuen *Tage-Buch*,” 48.

²⁷⁶ Renate Schober, “*Das Tage Buch*. Eine politische Zeitschrift der Weimarer Republik. Zur Krise der Kritik im Zeitalter der Massenemokratie” (PhD Diss., Munich, 1977): 349, cited in Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum Neuen *Tage-Buch*,” 48.

²⁷⁷ Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum Neuen *Tage-Buch*,” 49.

²⁷⁸ Leopold Schwarzschildt, in *Tage-Buch* (1932), cited in Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum Neuen *Tage-Buch*,” 49.

²⁷⁹ Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum Neuen *Tage-Buch*,” 49.

²⁸⁰ Schwarzschildt, in *Tage-Buch* (1930), cited in Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum Neuen *Tage-Buch*,” 49.

²⁸¹ Schwarzschildt, in *Tage-Buch* (1932), cited in Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum Neuen *Tage-Buch*,” 50.

²⁸² Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum Neuen *Tage-Buch*,” 50-1.

While his colleagues from the *Weltbühne* supported the idea of a people's front of the working class parties, Schwarzschildt opposed this. His idea was that an anti-bourgeois block would push even more people into the Nazi camp: "A civil anti-Hitler movement would be an event within the ruling class, so it would positively influence the exercise of power of this class. A proletarian anti-Hitler block, however, would be an event outside the ruling class", and would affect its exercise of power negatively.²⁸³ Schwarzschildt saw National Socialism as a fear response of the middle classes against Bolshevism and the spectre of social revolution. As such, a people's front divided the enemies of Hitler. What was needed instead, was a "closed and self-conscious block of middle class provenance", yet Schwarzschildt admitted chances it could be realised were small.²⁸⁴

The Reichstag fire of 27 February 1933 signalled to Schwarzschildt the end of the parliamentary Republic. In his last article in *Tage-Buch*, he dealt with social democracy, which had not learnt the lessons of the failed 1848 revolution, and which after the First World War had "not understood what was power and what powerlessness."²⁸⁵ Earlier, in 1932, he had already blamed "the criminal failure of both the democratic liberal and the socialist-communist intelligentsia" for Hitler's rise.²⁸⁶ Now he added to these accusations more criticism against the illusions and errors of the allied forces after the First World War, the failed support to French security interests, the bad response to the crisis with austerity politics and the vain hopes set on the Nations League.

Neues Tage-Buch

Leopold Schwarzschildt fled to Paris and continued to publish his writings in the *Neues Tage-Buch*, which he alone now authored. Together with the *Pariser Tageblatt*, the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* and the *Neues Weltbühne* it represented the German exile periodicals. Schildt notes the *Neues Tage-Buch* could occupy a leading position because all renowned exile publications were situated on the political left, "while Schwarzschildt's journal represented the middle class opposition."²⁸⁷ Its articles reached up to the intellectual elites. Schwarzschildt hoped to convince these to establish an all states covenant against Nazi Germany.

Schwarzschildt's descriptions of the National Socialist regime, according to Schildt, qualify as ethnology rather than political theory. The terror in Germany was observed as the absolute evil, of a different nature than the crimes being committed in fascist Italy or Soviet Russia. The latter regimes, for Schwarzschildt, were plain political opponents. The Nazis, however, wanted "abuse purely for the sake of abuse, murder for pleasure in the activity of murder." National Socialism was a "retransformation from Homo sapiens to Pithecanthropus."²⁸⁸ The article from which these citations are derived drew international attention. While it characterized Schwarzschildt's vision, Schildt notes it demonstrates how Schwarzschildt missed nationalism as the mobilising factor in National Socialism's success. Presenting National Socialism as a regression into prehistory allowed him to advocate the establishment of an anti-German pact, which even included the non-democratic regimes of Russia, Italy and Austria. His ideal to save the European middle classes was not based on a sober analysis of other states' interests.²⁸⁹

²⁸³ Schwarzschildt, in *Tage-Buch* (1932), cited in Schildt, "Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*," 51.

²⁸⁴ Schwarzschildt, in *Tage-Buch* (1932), cited in Schildt, "Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*," 51; Schildt, "Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*," 55.

²⁸⁵ Schwarzschildt, in *Tage-Buch* (1933), cited in Schildt, "Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*," 52.

²⁸⁶ Schwarzschildt, in *Tage-Buch* (1932), cited in Schildt, "Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*," 49.

²⁸⁷ Schildt, "Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*," 53.

²⁸⁸ Leopold Schwarzschildt, in *Neues Tage-Buch* (1933), cited in Schildt, "Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*," 54.

²⁸⁹ Schildt, "Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*," 54-5.

In 1938 Schwarzschildt described National Socialist ideology and praxis as an “accumulation and exaggeration of the worst qualities, which are scattered throughout the rest of the German people.”²⁹⁰ Some weeks before the outbreak of the war he called for a “re-education of the German minds and customs.”²⁹¹ Over the course of the war, Schwarzschildt adjusted his evaluation of Hitler: rather than a puppet of the elites, he had been elected and chosen by the German people.

3.2.5 Georg Bernhard

Georg Bernhard was one of the most well-known liberal journalists of the Weimar Republic. From 1920 until 1930 he was the editor in chief of the liberal newspaper *Vossische Zeitung* and received an honorary professorship at the Berliner Handelshochschule in 1928. His political observations and economic commentaries were widely acclaimed. Until 1906 he had been part of the revisionist wing of the SPD. In 1924 he entered the Deutsche Demokratische Partei (DDP) and in 1928 he was elected into the Reichstag, where he stayed for two and a half years.

Combative republican

Historian Susanne Wein writes how Bernhard “understood himself as opinion maker and political explicator, who always knew best - he polarised.”²⁹² As early as 1923 Bernhard was everything the Nazis contemptuously denounced:

“As a Jew, who openly confessed to it; as a democrat, who defended the Republic; as a stock market expert; as a well known representative of what they called the ‘Jewified press’, being a recognized guest at international conferences, and finally as a friend of the French and an ‘internationalist’, because he advocated for an understanding with France and welcomed the League of Nations.”²⁹³

Wein calls Bernhard a “combative republican” who denounced the unification of the DDP with the Jungdeutschen Orden into the Deutsche Staatspartei and changed his membership to the irrelevant Radikaldemokratische Partei. With Kurt R. Grossmann and Willi Münzenberg he participated in the organisation of the left-liberal congress ‘Das Freie Wort’ before the police forbade its occurrence in February 1933. On May 10th fires lit in university towns across the country devoured his writings. A few months later Bernhard fled to Paris, where he soon acquired important status as editor in chief of the *Pariser Tageblatt*. First published in December 1933, between 1935 and 1937 the newspaper counted as the flagship of left-wing liberalism and the German striving for a people’s front.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁰ Schwarzschildt, in *Neues Tage-Buch* (1938), cited in Schildt, “Vom Tage-Buch zum Neuen Tage-Buch,” 56.

²⁹¹ Schwarzschildt, in *Neues Tage-Buch* (1939), cited in Schildt, “Vom Tage-Buch zum Neuen Tage-Buch,” 56.

²⁹² Susanne Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie. Der Selbstmord einer Republik. Eine frühe Analyse des Nationalsozialismus von Georg Bernhard,” in *Confrontations au national-socialisme en Europe francophone et germanophone / Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus im deutsch- und französischsprachigen Europa (1919-1949)*, eds. Michel Grunewald, Oliver Dard and Uwe Puschner (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2018), II: 60.

²⁹³ Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie,” 60.

²⁹⁴ Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie,” 61-2.

Die Deutsche Tragödie

Of particular interest to this thesis is Bernhard's book *Die Deutsche Tragödie. Der Selbstmord einer Republik*, published in autumn 1933. Of its French translation, *Le Suicide de la République Allemande*, the fourth edition was printed as early as December. In 22 chapters the book described the way to "Hitler's heavenly kingdom."²⁹⁵ More than on National Socialism as such, the analysis centred on the failures of the social democratic and liberal powers, or, as Wein puts it, on "democracy's sins of omission."²⁹⁶ Bernhard's central thesis was that these omissions played a crucial part in National Socialism's success.

The word '*Selbstmord*' or 'suicide' in the title referred to the fact that the Germans themselves had chosen the Hitler movement *en masse*. The election of 5 March 1933 was to Bernhard an affirmation by the people of their own submissiveness: "Yes [...] we take ourselves to be stupid and unemancipated (*unmündig*)."²⁹⁷ Bernhard judged it as the eight wonder of the world that a people would exchange its constitution for the violent rule of a "political adventurer."

His explanation of this suicide was that the German people were never clearly informed about the true culprits for their suffering following the war. The old elites, the "all-German warmongers" and the supreme commands of the army were never called to account for their deeds in public.²⁹⁸ The new Republic, originally enjoying the people's support, omitted to hold them accountable. The "nationalist agitation" exploited the public's need for a scapegoat to blame "Jewish and Marxists" who were accused of having "conspired against the German people."

National Socialism in Die Deutsche Tragödie

Bernhard saw National Socialism as "Hitlerism" and as a religious movement. Hitler received Bernhard's full attention, other Nazi personalities staying largely out of sight. National Socialism could not be equalled with fascism, for example because Mussolini was an old political fighter with a real temperament, while Hitler was a "politically dilettante fanatic."²⁹⁹ His world of ideas was awfully empty, yet his speeches did exert some peculiar power of attraction, which Bernhard found admirable. His "right instinct" and "cunning tactics" added to the image Bernhard drew of Hitler as a charismatic ruler.³⁰⁰

Hitler's public performances, then, functioned as "religious awakening rallies."³⁰¹ Originally offering some welcome entertainment, they became the high point of the Nazi propaganda machine. The attraction of these speeches compared to "what one cares to call sex appeal" and generated some kind of medieval "political-religious mass delusions." Hitler's primitive ideas easily connected to the naive imagination of the masses. He understood their desire to make someone suffer for their misery and "cried out to the masses the liberating message" that the Jews and the Marxists were guilty.

²⁹⁵ Georg Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie. Der Selbstmord einer Republik* (Praha: 1933), cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 63.

²⁹⁶ Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 63.

²⁹⁷ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 63.

²⁹⁸ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 64.

²⁹⁹ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 64.

³⁰⁰ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 65.

³⁰¹ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 65.

Bernhard also emphasised the point that National Socialism did not bring any new ideas. The party program only offered repetition and “astonishing nonsense.”³⁰² Age-old anti-Semitism was redressed in the scientific cloak of the ‘racial question’ and the economic program was nothing but a “hotchpotch of all socialist and social teachings and false teachings of the past century.”³⁰³ For example, Bernhard considered the objective to overcome class conflicts through a national community as theft from liberal thinking. The “true spirit” of the program was “one of reaction.” As did any capitalist system, it pleased the big landowners. As such, the Hitlerian movement was not marked by its ideas, but by its methods.

Nationalist agitation was for Bernhard the most important of these methods. Right-wing extremists early on propagandized against the Versailles Treaty and recuperated all political problems to discredit the Weimar Republic. The later NSDAP could easily expand on these nationalist foundations. Another crucial method in Hitler’s take-over was his “legality strategy,” which was very apt for the German psychology: when something simply had the “appearance of legality,” Germans would nod “Yes and Amen to everything.”³⁰⁴ The Reichstag fire offered in Bernhard’s view the ideal justification to criminalise and persecute communists in an unseen witch-hunt. In Bernhard’s view, the exploited fear of Bolshevism drove voters into the führer’s arms. Hitler kept up legal appearances until the enabling act (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*) of 23 March 1933.

Democracy’s omissions

Considering the terror against the Jews, Bernhard emphasised the League of Nations’ duty to act upon its commitment to protect minorities. States that targeted their minorities should lose their sovereignty. While he barely discussed the role played by the German communist party, Bernhard did confront the Weimar coalition parties and the democratic press. They failed to educate the German people in thinking and feeling like republicans and democrats. The social democratic party in power neglected to “republicanise” the administration, legislation and the education system, allowing the “half-educated bourgeoisie” to drift into a comfortable German nationalism.³⁰⁵ In parallel, press publishers were doing good business instead of engaging for “a lively democracy, which was no longer socially acceptable.” Bernhard predicted that the shrinking of the German economy would eventually produce the explosion of the National Socialist system. Hitler’s regime would end in “the social revolution in its most horrific form or the imperialist war as global catastrophe.”³⁰⁶

3.2.6 Rudolf Olden

Leading editor of the *Berliner Tageblatt* and lawyer at the supreme court of Berlin, Rudolf Olden counted as a party independent voice of middle class descent. He was involved in the organisation of the congress ‘Das Freie Wort’, fled Germany in 1933, arrived in Oxford in 1935 and co-founded the German PEN club in exile. Frequently cooperating with Leopold Schwarzschildt, Olden, in contrast to the former, believed a popular front was the sole possible constellation against Nazism. Yet he kept a critical distance from the USSR and engaged to keep the PEN Club politically independent. Essentially, the National Socialist dictatorship could only be fought with “truth.” It was the task of

³⁰² Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie,” 65.

³⁰³ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie,” 66.

³⁰⁴ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie,” 67.

³⁰⁵ Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie,” 69.

³⁰⁶ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie,” 70.

writers and publicists to inform the countries of exile about this truth, so the “peaceful world” could arm itself against “the power [...] of the lie.”³⁰⁷

Hitler, Amsterdam 1935

In 1933, Olden wrote a brochure on Hitler, which by 1935 grew into a biography of the führer, published by Querido in Amsterdam. One of Olden’s central theses was that the Prussian big landlords who were unable to adapt to changing economic circumstances brought Hitler to power. Hitler was the “last resource” of the Junkers, the squirearchy east of the river Elbe.³⁰⁸ Instead of subject, Olden saw Hitler as object, as an instrument of those traditional elites. Historian Jens Flemming indicates that from our present perspective, such explanations are much like conspiracy theories, which “overestimated the power of the old elites, but underestimated the dynamic force of the Nazi movement and its führer.”³⁰⁹ Yet this was what a journalist and lawyer in Berlin, and with him many left-wing middle class contemporaries, perceived.

Olden quite extensively discussed *Mein Kampf*, portraying the “Austrian semi-educated” as a narcissist with petty bourgeois ideals, someone who was in “agonizing need for adoration and worship.”³¹⁰ Hitler owed the beginning of his career to the army, which had “chosen, fed, dressed, posted, supported and directed” him. To Olden he was not, as the socialist left had it, an agent of capital in general, but of some individual industrialists and affluent patrons. He exercised “power for the powerful”, thus being a “revolutionary against the revolution.”

A liar and demagogue, he despised the masses, but also understood how to lure and overwhelm them, exploiting and whipping up resentment against career politicians. Olden analysed how the hardships, triggered and sharpened by the economic crisis, caused a “mass psychosis” which made the “souls receptive and eager” for “messianic promises.”³¹¹ In a world “weary of reason”, self-proclaimed prophets thrived.³¹² Finally, Hitler exercised his influence through “countless big and small speakers” who were “media, means of a power, which resided in the führer.”³¹³

Social democratic and communist failure

The fall of the Weimar Republic rooted in its origins. Both labour parties SPD and KPD had omitted to dispossess the landed aristocracy east of the Elbe, and to reform the military, bureaucracy and judiciary. According to Olden, such measures would have given democracy a real chance. Instead, continuity prevailed, providing an unstable foundation for the new republic. In the words of Klaus

³⁰⁷ Rudolf Olden, in *Das Wort* (April-May 1937), cited in Jens Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus. Rudolf Olden über Hindenburg, Hitler und die deutsche Geschichte,” in *Confrontations au national-socialisme en Europe francophone et germanophone / Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus im deutsch- und französischsprachigen Europa (1919-1949)*, eds. Michel Grunewald, Oliver Dard and Uwe Puschner (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2018), II: 76.

³⁰⁸ Rudolf Olden, *Hitler, der Eroberer* (Berlin: 1933), cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 77.

³⁰⁹ Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 78.

³¹⁰ Rudolf Olden, *Hitler* (Amsterdam 1935), cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 79.

³¹¹ Rudolf Olden, *Hitler* (Amsterdam 1935), cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 79.

³¹² Alice Rühle-Gerstel, in *Literarische Welt* (March 1933), cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 79.

³¹³ Rudolf Olden ed., *Propheten in deutscher Krise. Das Wunderbare oder die Verzauberten* (Berlin: 1932), cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 80.

Mann, the socialist left had missed “a secular chance, an unparalleled power opportunity.”³¹⁴ Olden attributed this to a “lack of civil courage” on the left, to their inability to analyse the situation and their lack of will to discuss their own failures.³¹⁵

Olden blamed the communists for escalating tensions. He asserted that “[t]he confusion of the capitalist economy did not bring forth revolutionaries, but instead a counterrevolutionary situation.”³¹⁶ The polemic response from the communist side was that Olden was one of those “perpetual Weimarians” who thought “all would have gone different and well if the social democrats [...] had filled military and judiciary with ‘good republicans’.”³¹⁷ Jens Flemming sees that this was indeed Olden’s conviction, from which followed his even stronger disappointment in the SPD. Social democracy had failed to clear the Republic’s institutions of undemocratic elements. While they adhered to Marxist “shadowy dogma”, their actions were not guided by any revolutionary practice. And though they clung to “formally liberal democracy,” they did not assume liberal idealism and ideology. The expectation was that “socialism would come naturally in democracy”, but it did not.³¹⁸

In the “New Germany,” Olden observed, “liberalism, which was never politically powerful, is today more or less dead. But socialism too, the power of the proletariat, is crippled, paralysed. It would be wrong to set our hopes for tomorrow on the labourers.”³¹⁹ The shattering of the republic and the labouring class losing its rights “without battle, without resistance, without fame”, was owing to both socialist parties. Marxist party leaders contributed as much to deceiving the German people as did the army generals. The social democrats had slid into “despicable conservatism” and the communists decayed into an “equally despicable vulgar radicalism.” Germany, finally, relapsed into “slavery and barbarity.”³²⁰

3.3 France

3.3.1 Élie Halévy

Elie Halévy was philosopher and historian at the École Libre des Sciences Politiques (Sciences Po). From 1936 onwards he developed an interpretation of Nazism as one regime in an “era of tyrannies.” Halévy distinguished between dictatorship and tyranny, because, “the Latin word dictatorship implies the idea of a provisional regime [...] whereas the Greek word tyranny expresses the idea of a normal form of government.”³²¹

³¹⁴ Klaus Mann, in *Die Sammlung* (1934), cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 83.

³¹⁵ Rudolf Olden, in *Pariser Tageblatt* (January 1934), cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 83.

³¹⁶ Rudolf Olden, *Warum versagten die Marxisten?* (Paris: 1934), cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 83.

³¹⁷ Kurt Stern, in *Der Gegen-Angriff* (1934), cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 83.

³¹⁸ Rudolf Olden, *Hindenburg oder Der Geist der preußischen Armee* (Paris: 1935), cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 84.

³¹⁹ Olden, *Hitler*, cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 82.

³²⁰ Olden, *Marxisten*, cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 84.

³²¹ Unless stated otherwise, all citations were taken from Elie Halévy, *L'ère des tyrannies. Etudes sur le Socialisme et la Guerre* (Paris: 1938), cited in Olivier Dard, “Les libéraux français et le national-socialisme (1933-1945),” in *Confrontations au national-socialisme en Europe francophone et germanophone / Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus im deutsch- und französischsprachigen Europa (1919-1949)*, eds. Michel Grunewald, Olivier Dard and Uwe Puschner (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2018), II: 91-3

Halévy reflected on the question whether “the tyranny of Moscow on the one hand, the Italian and German tyrannies on the other, should be considered as identical phenomena as to their fundamental traits,” or instead as “antithetical.” He observed, “as to their form [...] the regimes are identical. It is the government of a country by an armed sect, which imposes itself in name of the presumed interest of the whole country, and which has the power to impose itself because it feels animated by a common belief.”

Despite the communist depiction of the state as a temporary evil to be suspended in the future, its tyranny, to Halévy, was very similar to its Italian and German variants. Eventually, individual subjects of the Soviet Union were demanded to “suffer to perform great deeds in service of the state.” Turning to the “fascists, in the ordinary meaning of the term, in Italy in Germany,” Halévy perceived “under the name of corporatism, some sort of counter-socialism.” On an economic level, Halévy broke with the marxist vision elaborated by the Third International or someone like Daniel Guérin, in which fascism was an instrument of “big capital.” He did not deny that

“big industry benefits from such regimes [...] But it is not old capitalism, free Manchesterian capitalism. The captains of industry prefer such a [fascist] regime to a communist one. They let them in charge of their affairs. But they are no longer the masters, they are high functionaries. And the big sums they can receive annually have the character of a salary, not of a profit.”

Halévy concluded, “departing from integral socialism, they tend to some sort of nationalism. [...] departing from an integral nationalism, they tend to a form of socialism.” Dard calls Halévy’s comparison of Nazism and communism through the prism of totalitarianism “a major interpretation dear to liberals”, Raymond Aron being one of them.³²²

3.3.2 Louis Rougier

Another particular view can be found with philosopher Louis Rougier. In a series of lectures he gave at the Institut Universitaire des Hautes Etudes Internationales in 1935, Rougier developed ideas on “political mystiques.”³²³ To Rougier, Nazism was characterized by a “totalitarian mystique,” or “what the Germans call *Totalitätsgedanke*.” Distinguishing between Nazism and Italian fascism, he noted that the Italian mystique was dominated by the “myth of the corporative state,” whereas the German regime involved the “myth of the blood,” to which one needed to add the myth “of the soil and of the tectonic powers,” together forming “the *Blubogeist*, the spirit of blood and soil.” Both fitting the totalitarian frame, only Nazism involved “an essentially ethnic notion, the *Volkstum*, the racial community of men [who] feel the same blood circulating in them.”

Rougier analytically opposed the juridical foundations of liberalism and Nazism. In liberalism, sovereignty and power sprang from the sum of the individual subjects. National Socialist power, by contrast, was rooted in the “collective soul, transcending individuals, of the nation or the race.” This soul incarnated in someone who miraculously ascended from the people, a “*Volksmann*.” The National Socialist “*Führerprinzip*, the principle of the chef” replaced the liberal concept of “popular sovereignty.” Nazi power devolved from a chef who was appointed by the party, and this party occupied the exclusive position to interpret the will of the nation. The “*Rechtsstaat*” was replaced by a “*Polizeistaat*,” in which “the individuals only have duties towards the state which has all the rights.”

³²² Dard, “Les libéraux français,” 92.

³²³ Unless stated otherwise, all citations are taken from Louis Rougier, *Les mystiques politiques contemporaines et leurs incidences internationales* (Paris: 1935), cited in Dard, “Les libéraux français,” 93-5. Italics appear in the original text.

In addition to this constitutional dimension, Rougier observed “the radical negation of the difference between the spiritual and the temporal.” Without referring to the term “political religion,” which became in use in the late 1930’s, Rougier saw the totalitarian state “equal to the ancient theocratic governments, it claims to rule souls like bodies and to put minds like bodies in uniform.” Souls had to actively and joyfully adhere to the state, and agnosticism was punished. As such, all institutions, universities in particular, were politicised, and the individual lost all autonomy. Germany “has never been able to understand what democracy is,” and its “racist mystique thus represents in the heart of Europe a perpetual danger of war.”

In his later work on “the economic mystiques” in 1938, Rougier presented his appreciation of liberal values and institutions when he refused to “accept the dilemma: fascism or communism.”³²⁴ Starting with economic arguments, he emphasised:

“it is to refuse the advantages of the division of labour between nations, the free circulation of capital, goods and workers, the solidarity among peoples in the reciprocity of their exchanges; to the cosmopolitanism of culture, to the dignity of the individual considered a respectable end in itself, the security of the citizen founded on a stable juridical statute; to the free initiative of producers, the free choice of consumers; to the independence and the universality of thought; to the flavour of life, which results from it being risky, but in the ordered framework of a game of which one knows and respects the rules [...]”³²⁵

All of this would have to “make place for the despotic power of leaders, for the arbitrary decisions of a planned economy, for the uniform slogans of a politicised culture.” Yet Rougier considered as a major error of the “Mystique libérale” its “unconditional primacy of economics.”³²⁶

3.3.3 Louis Martin-Chauffier

Historian Jean-René Maillot describes Louis Martin-Chauffier as “an informed observer of the brutal interruption of National Socialism on the European scene.”³²⁷ A professed but isolated Catholic, Martin-Chauffier contributed to various generally secular press organs with a Europe-minded and leftist orientation, ranging from *Notre Temps* to *Vendredi*. In Maillot’s words, Martin-Chauffier “offers a large view on the confrontation of these milieus with the Hitlerian movement and regime.” His moralist reflections on politics did not strictly coincide with a particular partisan position.

Notre Temps: denunciation

An advocate of intellectual French-German reconciliation, Martin-Chauffier was hostile to French nationalists. These “internal enemies,” who sew discourse among the French, were the biggest

³²⁴ Louis Rougier, *Les mystiques économiques. Comment l’on passe des démocraties libérales aux Etats totalitaires* (Paris: 1938), cited in Dard, “Les libéraux français,” 95.

³²⁵ Rougier, *Les mystiques économiques*, cited in Dard, “Les libéraux français,” 95-6.

³²⁶ Rougier, *Les mystiques économiques*, cited in Dard, “Les libéraux français,” 96.

³²⁷ Jean-René Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier: un moraliste en politique, entre ferme condamnation du nazisme et hostilité aux “nationaux” français (1929-1938),” in *Confrontations au national-socialisme en Europe francophone et germanophone / Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus im deutsch- und französischsprachigen Europa (1919-1949)*, eds. Michel Grunewald, Oliver Dard and Uwe Puschner (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2018), II: 103.

threat to peace.³²⁸ He signed the “Manifest against the excesses of nationalism,” published by the weekly periodical *Notre Temps* in 1931. At the same time, he observed the potential dangers emanating from authoritarian regimes elsewhere. In a lively discussion with Jean-Pierre Maxence, a rising figure of the ‘Jeune Droite’, he wrote: “Don’t make us look like we’re absolving the German National Socialists, the fascists, the bolshevists of all stripes.”³²⁹ Martin-Chauffier had not established an exact denomination of the National Socialists yet, but Maillot notices how he compared them to the dictatorial regimes of Italy and the USSR.

In June 1931 Martin-Chauffier perceived the threat of a civil war in Germany: “A government without force, an authority without defence; facing the Hitlerian party on the one side, the communist party on the other,” continuously inflating themselves.³³⁰ The success of these extremist parties is due to the “almost insoluble economic drama.” By consequence, dissolving the economic hardships would also abolish extremism. For some 200 000 revanchists, Martin Chauffier reasoned, there were “15 or 20 million malcontents, to whom the question is above all internal, and who are Hitlerians just like our underprivileged are communists. Save them from their misery, they will become pacifist.”

In 1933 Martin-Chauffier broke with *Notre Temps* because its director Jean Luchaire maintained contact with Nazi youth. He protested,

“the slightest welcome to the enemies of democracy, liberty and thought, to those who proscribe (I am discreet) people for their race, their religion, their opinions, and who, moreover, are stupid, is an encouragement, a kind of membership [...] against which honour and intelligence revolt.”³³¹

Lu and Vu: observations

Back in the summer of 1931, Martin-Chauffier participated in creating the weekly magazine *Lu* with editor Lucien Vogel. *Lu* was situated on the left and offered its readers a selection of articles from the international press. Paying close interest to Germany, it informed about “the reinforcement of dictatorship, interpretations of National Socialist politics, the existence of concentration camps, the process which followed the Reichstag fire, the export of the Nazi movement, racism and anti-Semitism, daily life in the Reich and the progress of rearmament.”³³² Hitler’s personal power (12 articles) his alleged divine nature (3 articles), and confrontations of *Mein Kampf* with official Nazi statements (2 articles) also figured in *Lu*’s publications. Martin-Chauffier did not sign any articles, but was editor-in-chief.

He occupied the same position at *Vu*, another collaboration with Lucien Vogel, in 1933 and 1934. *Vu*, also with left-wing and even Soviet sympathies, extensively used photography to tell its stories. Martin-Chauffier contributed among others with three articles on Italian fascism, discussing the party, the press and the church under Fascist rule. In November 1933 the process of the Dutch communist van der Lubbe occasioned observations on the Nazi regime: “the notion of race” was “the foundation of National Socialism.” Maillot notes that “by emphasising the denial of justice, the author shows how the specificity of the regime and its ideology isolate Germany from the international community.”³³³

³²⁸ Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *Notre Temps* (January 1931), cited in Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 104.

³²⁹ Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *Notre Temps* (February 1931), cited in Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 104.

³³⁰ Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *Notre Temps* (June 1931), cited in Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 104.

³³¹ Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *Notre Temps* (June 1933), cited in Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 105.

³³² Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 106.

³³³ Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 106.

La République: polemics

Throughout 1935 Martin-Chauffier writes in the radical daily *La République* under pseudonym “Monsieur Guillotin.” In these contributions he engaged in polemical discussions with the French right-wing press and leagues. Regarding Germany, his texts sometimes demonstrated stereotypical thinking. For example, he wrote that “[t]he sense of justice, of equity, the respect for the human person, are part of our tradition, like respect of force and the cult of warrior virtues are part of German tradition.”³³⁴ On another occasion, he opposed France to Germany and the United States: “Germany and the United States have all progress and culture one can wish for; the only thing they lack is civilisation.”³³⁵ Considering “the psychological factor,” Germans were particularly prone to “admiration and adoration of a chef.”³³⁶ Hitler being nothing more than “a pitiful word handler,” his success stemmed from the lack of experience the Germans had with the parliamentary regime. The “blindness of his crowds” gave him prestige.

Vendredi

In November 1935, *Vendredi* was established as a literary and political weekly journal. According to Maillot, it was “characterized by the will of left-wing intellectuals to emerge themselves in the heart of the news and political battles.”³³⁷ Its management was in general support of the popular front and Martin-Chauffier worked as editor-in-chief. He often engaged with Hitler’s personality. Comparing him to Mussolini, the latter he simply deemed presumptuous, whereas the first “does think of himself not as a genius, but as a missionary, a prophet and, more and more, as an incarnation of the divine.”³³⁸ Germany, therefore, was worse off than Italy:

“If Germany has been and still is more scarred and ruined than Italy, if its laws are more insane, its prescriptions heavier, its murders more numerous, its liberties more chained, it is because she is the prey of a more insane master - [insane] in the true sense of the term [...]”³³⁹

Maillot observes that Martin-Chauffier’s contributions to *Vendredi* showed more nuances than his polemical texts in *La République*. In 1937, for example, he wrote about Germany as “an old country of high civilisation” which “its new leaders have [...] reduced to a shameful mediocrity.”³⁴⁰ He saw how young Germans were being taught to hate Jews and in 1938 he described how special schools educated German children to become executives of the Nazi regime. He emphasised the complete suppression of any critical sense: “This takeover by a party of a country through carefully denatured subjects, this artificial formation of executives is the most monstrous we have imagined until now.”³⁴¹ As a humanist, he perceived this program as “the most cruel attack on the freedom of thought and the dignity of man.”

Martin-Chauffier set his hopes on resistance from the Catholics: “Let us remember, finally, that the Third Reich does not have adversaries that are more numerous and determined [...] than the

³³⁴ Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *La République* (April 1935), cited in Maillot “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 109.

³³⁵ Martin-Chauffier, in *La République* (September 1935), cited in Maillot “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 109.

³³⁶ Martin-Chauffier, in *La République* (April 1935), cited in Maillot “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 109.

³³⁷ Maillot “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 109.

³³⁸ Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *Vendredi* (April 1936), cited in Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 111.

³³⁹ Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *Vendredi* (April 1936), cited in Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 111.

³⁴⁰ Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *Vendredi* (January 1937), cited in Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 110.

³⁴¹ Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *Vendredi* (January 1938), cited in Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 110.

Catholics, and that its loss can come from them, followed and supported by all the enemies of the regime [...]"³⁴² This resistance also needed to be directed against the "fascist international," which had its outposts in France too, in the shape of a "snarling and sneaky gang of 6 February."³⁴³ These men wanted to tear down the Republic, "relying on occult support in Italy and admiring Hitler." Maillot thus notes how the international news connected to older political debates on the republican regime in France.

In its last editions in 1938, *Vendredi* struggled with the contradictions of a pacifism confronted with fascism. After the Munich crisis, the prime objective of keeping peace no longer seemed a realistic option. The demise of the journal illustrates to Maillot "the defeat of the political project of the Popular front but also means the bereavement of a pacifism that no longer fits with its time."³⁴⁴ All the while, Louis Martin-Chauffier maintained a consequent view in his dismissal of Hitler and his regime. Confronted with the absence of any political solutions, he eventually abandoned his integral pacifism, in defence of justice and human dignity.

3.3.4 *La Nouvelle Revue française*

La Nouvelle Revue française (NRF) was a liberally oriented journal, which aimed to represent the "juste milieu" of the French intellectual scene. Historian Martyn Cornick describes how its pages gave space to a diversity of voices, going from marxists to authors sympathetic to fascism. Political developments in Germany generated unrest in the NRF, but strong opinions on Nazism only appeared in 1933. Six years before, however, in 1927, philosopher Julien Benda predicted an apocalyptic war arising from the supremacy of self-interestedness: "if one asks where a humanity goes, in which each group buries itself more obstinately in the conscience of its particular interest" and only has ears for moralists who glorify these interests, "a child would find the answer: she goes into the most total and perfect war the world will have seen, whether it will be among nations, or among classes."³⁴⁵

"Documents on National Socialism"

Under the new heading 'Texts and Documents', in August 1933, the NRF published a first thorough analysis of the historical development of Nazism. The examination was carried out by 'chef du secrétariat' Brice Parain and his former co-student at the Ecole des Langues Orientales Georges Blumberg. Before scrutinizing fragments of *Mein Kampf* and other Nazi publications, the authors first provided an interpretation of the rise of Nazism. The Versailles treaty had nurtured opposition to the new government and unified a movement of "outcasts" (*Réprouvés*).³⁴⁶ In addition to frustrations about the French occupation of the Ruhr (1923-1925), massive unemployment resulted from the "rationalisation of German industries."³⁴⁷ The situation changed towards the end of the 1920's with

³⁴² Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *Vendredi* (December 1937), cited in Maillot, "Louis Martin-Chauffier," 111.

³⁴³ Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *Vendredi* (July 1937), cited in Maillot, "Louis Martin-Chauffier," 112.

³⁴⁴ Maillot, "Louis Martin-Chauffier," 113.

³⁴⁵ Julien Benda, in *Nouvelle Revue française* (November 1927), cited in Martyn Cornick, "La Nouvelle Revue française face à la question allemande durant les années 1930," in *Confrontations au national-socialisme en Europe francophone et germanophone / Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus im deutsch- und französischsprachigen Europa (1919-1949)*, eds. Michel Grunewald, Oliver Dard and Uwe Puschner (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2018), II: 165.

³⁴⁶ Cornick, "La Nouvelle Revue française," 163.

³⁴⁷ Brice Parain and Georges Blumberg in *Nouvelle Revue française* (August 1933), cited in Cornick, "La Nouvelle Revue française," 163.

the electoral successes of the Nazi movement. These provided its representatives with “legality” and allowed the party to transform its “battle against the system” into a “battle against marxism.”

The actual analysis of the documents, then, was divided in four thematic sections. The first was the anti-rationalist character of the Nazi ideology, including its anti-semitism. Second came the interpretation of National Socialism as a mass movement. Thirdly, electoral successes were seen as ensuing from the mobilisation of the countryside, which explained the importance of the *Blut und Boden* doctrine. Fourthly the analysis focused on what the authors saw as a politics of deindustrialisation.

Other contributions

A second relevant contribution on Nazism came from Léon Trotsky in February 1934, with an article titled ‘What is National Socialism?’. Trotsky confirmed the thesis that National Socialism took advantage of “the disillusion of the petty bourgeoisie.”³⁴⁸ The Nazis worked to “weld the petty bourgeoisie against the proletariat through a shared hostility.”³⁴⁹ Rejecting marxism, materialism and rationalism, the Nazi aim was to elevate the German nation above all historic evolution. This project was underpinned by racist theses. Trotsky claimed that once in power, Nazism was no longer “the government of the petty bourgeoisie” but “the most ruthless dictatorship of monopoly capital.” Imperialism would be the outcome.

From 1934 onwards, *NRF* was increasingly attracted to the anti-fascist camp, although author Pierre Drieu la Rochelle was still allowed to express his Nazi sympathies in the magazine’s columns. Author André Suarès conveyed a strong germanophobic message, perceiving National Socialism as the worst of all totalitarian ideologies. He recognized in Germany “the perfection of barbarism. [...] Brutalities like Hitler, Göring, Goebbels, all sorts of Hesse [sic] and Rosenberg, triumph in the vilest vanity of violence and hate.”³⁵⁰

In 1935, in the context of the plebiscite in Saarland and the restoration of military conscription in Germany, *NRF* pressed more actively for the establishment of a popular front against Nazism. Benda described Nazism as a violent rupture with the art of compromise. He observed Nazism as a regression into German traditions, which according to him had nothing to do with Western liberalism. He calls for a new party, committed to “patriotic anti-fascism” in order to defend republican liberties internally, and to combat Hitlerism externally: “I want you to vote proudly, fully [and] with zeal to defend the democratic liberties against the threat from abroad, like they voted a Danton, a Gambetta, a Clemenceau, the true patrons of the party I propose.”³⁵¹ Referring to the anti-parliamentary street demonstrations in Paris one year earlier, Benda concluded: “prepare yourselves as resolutely against Hitlerian fascism as against the men of the 6th of February.”

Martyn Cornick concludes his exposé of *La Nouvelle Revue française*’s perception of National Socialism with a citation from author and germanist Félix Bertaux. In January 1937 Bertaux stated that “[t]he National Socialist politics [...] have put us in a condition of shock.”³⁵² To Cornick, this

³⁴⁸ Cornick, “*La Nouvelle Revue française*,” 164.

³⁴⁹ Léon Trotsky, in *Nouvelle Revue française* (February 1934), cited in Cornick, “*La Nouvelle Revue française*,” 164.

³⁵⁰ André Suarès, in *Nouvelle Revue française* (November 1934), cited in Cornick, “*La Nouvelle Revue française*,” 167.

³⁵¹ Benda, in *Nouvelle Revue française* (June 1935), cited in Cornick, “*La Nouvelle Revue française*,” 168.

³⁵² Félix Bertaux, in *Nouvelle Revue française* (January 1937), cited in Cornick, “*La Nouvelle Revue française*,” 170.

illustrated the “difficulty, or impossibility” to engage in an ideological debate about Nazism, not only for the *NRF*, but for France more generally.

3.3.5 *Revue des Deux Mondes*

La *Revue des Deux Mondes* counts as one of the most influential French periodicals of the interwar period. Its ideas can be read as representing the whole liberal and moderate conservative elite in the Third Republic. Historian Michel Grunewald analyses the *Revue*’s discussion of National Socialism and the Hitlerian regime through the prism of the chronicle of René Pinon. Pinon was the periodical’s political commentator between from 1922 until 1940, a historian and professor at Sciences Po.

Regression into barbarity

Pinon saw National Socialism as a rupture with the “constitutive values of European civilization”. Grunewald writes about a “*corpus* of values”, in which the contributors to la *Revue* recognized each other, and which were founded on Christian values and the principles of 1789. Based on this *corpus* the authors “condemned any system that fought Christian universalism and human rights, and rejected any doctrine founded on materialism and disrespectful of the ‘dignity of the human person’ and of the unalienable rights of the individual.”³⁵³ Grunewald stresses these ideological foundations to explain how Hitler’s regime, in Pinon’s view, meant a separation from European tradition.

Pinon’s interpretation of this rupture linked up to analyses of National Socialism as a ‘political/secular religion’ or ‘mystique’, which circulated in the second half of the 1930’s. Men like Louis Rougier, Raymond Aron or Albert Rivaud began to see fascism, National Socialism and communism as “contemporary political mystiques.” Already in 1930, Pinon had written: “Hitler, after M. Mussolini, brings to Europe a new element, a mystique out of which emerges a politics.”³⁵⁴ Pinon describes this “German religion” as a compromise between a Germanized and nationalized form of “Lutheranism decrowned of its Christianity”, and barbaric paganism stuffed with Germanic scientism.³⁵⁵

A second element of the break with European civilisation is the racism, which lies at the heart of Nazism. Thirdly, there was “the permanent violation of the fundamental principles of law.”³⁵⁶ This is visible in the contempt of freedom of expression, the disrespect of contracts and property rights and the abolition of the legal principle of habeas corpus. The Minister of Interior Affairs himself was seen to discount the most elementary notions of the law.

The crisis of democracy

³⁵³ Michel Grunewald, “La *Revue des Deux Mondes* face au national-socialisme et au régime hitlérien (1923-1939) au prisme de la chronique de René Pinon,” in *Confrontations au national-socialisme en Europe francophone et germanophone / Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus im deutsch- und französischsprachigen Europa (1919-1949)*, eds. Michel Grunewald, Oliver Dard and Uwe Puschner (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2018), II: 178.

³⁵⁴ René Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (October 1930), cited in Grunewald, “La *Revue des Deux Mondes*,” 178.

³⁵⁵ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (January 1934), cited in Grunewald, “La *Revue des Deux Mondes*,” 179.

³⁵⁶ Grunewald, “La *Revue des Deux Mondes*,” 180.

Nazism, in the same vein as fascism and communism, is seen as a symptom of the crisis of democracy, which leads to totalitarianism. Pinon notes in the beginning of the 1930's how the youth is being seduced by both revolutionary communism and radical nationalism. The individual loses all value in the communist and National Socialist order. From 1935 onwards the notion of 'totalitarianism' appears more and more frequently in Pinon's texts. The totality of the nation is observed to integrate into the party, and the party becomes the nation. This tendency is not seen in opposition to democracy, but rather as the result of its evolution in "the age of the masses."³⁵⁷

In 1933 Pinon observes dictators in Russia, Italy and Germany, who, in order to govern, are obliged to speak to the masses. For this purpose they organize mass manifestations, which install a sense of cohesion and the desire for power in the people. These dictators abolished parliamentary rule and replaced it by "a form of direct democracy [which allows] direct contact between the chef and the mass." Once they are in power, they can directly address the crowds, who "are under the illusion of participating in his guiding actions."³⁵⁸

"It is absurd to oppose democracy and fascism." In Pinon's eyes, the regimes of democracy and fascism "are democratic by their origin and object, although the methods and procedures of government are not." The real opposition is between parliamentarism and autocracy.³⁵⁹ Parliamentarism is essentially liberal, and liberal regimes have historically been issued by the middle classes. Now that these "bourgeoisies" are disappearing or absent, autocratic regimes necessarily take over. To paraphrase Pinon, fascism was not the destruction of democracy, but the death of the liberal parliamentary regime which used to be sustained by the middle classes.

Egalitarian democracy

Rather than being the antithesis of democracy, the National Socialist regime is seen as "the outcome of some disordered forms of democracy" in countries threatened by their own disintegration. "Egalitarian democracies tend to result in some kind of annihilation of the individual in the mass. Perfect equality is that which can be found in the rows of the militarised masses."³⁶⁰ Grunewald notes how Pinon's view of "egalitarian democracy" corresponds with Elie Halévy's theses on "tyrannies." They share the observation that closed and armed parties who seize the state constitute these regimes. The party "tends to identify itself with the people on whom it has imposed itself by force, and to restore their secular and traditional aspirations."³⁶¹

Comparing the communist and National Socialist exercise of power, Pinon notes their common "mistrust of intelligence", their militant anti-Christianity and, he added in 1937, anti-Semitism.³⁶² On a structural level he highlights both systems "scorn the universal norms of law", and that the pressure of one party systems contributes to the disintegration of the state.³⁶³

In 1923 Pinon described "Hitler and his National Socialist clans" as similar to Italian fascism, a definition which he maintains until the beginning of Hitler's chancellorship.³⁶⁴ Later, he observed fascism and Nazism as "systems that marry a very audacious social program with an appeal to force

³⁵⁷ Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 182.

³⁵⁸ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (October 1933), cited in Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 182.

³⁵⁹ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (September 1936), cited in Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 183.

³⁶⁰ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (October 1937), cited in Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 183.

³⁶¹ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (June 1935), cited in Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 183.

³⁶² Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (June 1933; October 1934; September 1937), cited in Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 183.

³⁶³ Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 184.

³⁶⁴ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (November 1923), cited in Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 184.

and dictatorship.”³⁶⁵ What distinguishes one from the other is the anti-Semitism of the Nazis, for which Pinon does think Mussolini will not be susceptible, until the Duce adopts anti-Semitic legislation too.

Fascism and communism

Finally, both fascism and National Socialism are explained as products of communism. In 1927, and again in 1932 and 1933, Pinon expresses the conviction that communism created fascism, and that there would not be fascism without communism. This view fits in the anti-socialist and anti-communist ideological orientation of the *Revue*. When the Nazis win the elections in Prussia in May 1932, Pinon explains this as a consequence of the politics of the social democrats. The “Hitlerian movement” was a reaction from the socialists’ clientelist abuses of power.³⁶⁶ In 1938, a new thesis emerges in Pinon’s chronicle. At the point when the Austrian crisis was drawing to its climax and the prospect of war became a realistic image, Pinon began to express the reversed idea that National Socialism would lead to a communist revolution. This would happen “everywhere and first in Germany in a terrible crisis of decompression.”³⁶⁷ National Socialism was now the “harbinger of Bolshevism” and Hitler the man “who brought Bolshevism further in Europe.”³⁶⁸

3.3.6 La Revue des Vivants

La Revue des Vivants (henceforth *LRV*), published between 1927 and 1935, can be seen as one of many interwar journals that expressed pacifist and Europeanist political views. Historian Christine Manigand situates its authors and readership at the intersection of the literary world, veterans of the Great War, and the political world. Not affiliated to any specific party, its monthly contributors were often “the greatest writers of all Europe” with a wide range of perspectives or “horizons.”³⁶⁹

Racists, communists and mass unemployment

Central to *LRV*’s understanding of National Socialism was the economic crisis and resulting mass unemployment of the 1930’s. As such, three dynamics nurtured the “Hitlerian movement”: political despair inherited from the defeat of 1918, economic despair caused by the crisis of 1929 which hit particularly hard in Germany, and professional despair which “sentenced a whole generation of graduated youngsters to unemployment.”³⁷⁰

In the late 1920’s, the journal’s attitude towards National Socialism was in line with its overall view of the Weimar Republic. This view was one of suspicion. *LRV* argued for France to assist in consolidating Germany’s democracy and in fighting extremists, including “monarchists, nationalists and other

³⁶⁵ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (October 1930), cited in Grunewald, “*La Revue des Deux Mondes*,” 184. Grunewald dates this quote the First of October 1930 but refers in his footnote to 01.10.1933.

³⁶⁶ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (May 1932), cited in Grunewald, “*La Revue des Deux Mondes*,” 186.

³⁶⁷ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (March 1938), cited in Grunewald, “*La Revue des Deux Mondes*,” 187.

³⁶⁸ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (October 1939), cited in Grunewald, “*La Revue des Deux Mondes*,” 187.

³⁶⁹ Christine Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants* (1927-1935). Une vision réaliste de la génération de la guerre et des débuts du national-socialisme,” in *Confrontations au national-socialisme en Europe francophone et germanophone / Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus im deutsch- und französischsprachigen Europa (1919-1949)*, eds. Michel Grunewald, Oliver Dard and Uwe Puschner (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2018), II: 131.

³⁷⁰ Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 136.

racists.”³⁷¹ From the German elections in May 1928 onwards, the Nazis appear on the *LRV*’s radar and are consistently called “racists”.³⁷² At this point potential danger is still being situated with the German nationalist party of M. Hugenberg, who could form an extreme right party with the racists. Yet the economic crisis and its consequences soon revealed how the Nazi movement and Hitler were becoming an autonomous power.

Manigand notes that the crisis figured as “the only explanation for the success of the Nazis and the communists: the two movements are associated [...] and defined as revolutionary, because both wish to destroy capitalist society.”³⁷³ Indeed, *LNR* observed how Hitler captured the frustrations of all those hit by the crisis: “He denounces the exploitation of workers by German capitalism and by the victorious states. He excites all popular passions, he drums up the disgruntled; he uses all kinds of hate, hate of class and hate of race.”³⁷⁴ In particular, the role of unemployed youth is a recurring theme: “communists and racists” owe much of their success to “those guys who like to play soldier in assault groups.”³⁷⁵ Together with workers and farmers, they are easy targets for the National Socialist propaganda.

Despite the Nazi self-representation as anti-capitalist workers party, the authors of *LRV* observed that National Socialism was more closely allied to fighter’s leagues and organisations, and supported by Ruhr and Saxon industrialists. A comparison was drawn between National Socialism and Boulangism, a political movement in France at the end of the 19th century which threatened to undermine the institutions of the Third Republic: “Because Hitler too, having stepped out of the anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois, anti-patron revolution, has become the man of the reactionaries, the big bosses and simultaneously the man of the unemployed, the socialist patriots and the women.”³⁷⁶ Hitler himself is at one point described as “a mediocre muddler whose easy speech pulls along the numerous unthinking people who proliferate among the dissatisfied.”³⁷⁷

Manigand notes that Thomas Mann was the only one to offer “a true introspection on the nature of what he calls a German fascism.”³⁷⁸ In 1931 he saw it as “an ethnic religion opposed not just to international Judaism but also and explicitly against Christianity as a humanitarian force [...] German fascism is a national paganism, it is the cult of Wotan, it is, to express it hostilely (and we want to express it hostilely), a romantic barbarity.”³⁷⁹

The Nazi regime in power

Originally the *LRV* believed that Hitler would not outlive the crisis. Two possible scenarios were drawn: if the crisis passed, his troops would “return to republican obedience”. But if the crisis protracted, “they will move to communist obedience and the socialist voters will follow.”³⁸⁰ The image of the dissatisfied crowds moving from the Nazis to the communists is repeated several times. Editor in chief Emile Bremond in 1932 postulated a Nazi coup d’état in the future and immediately warned for a countermovement of the masses of workers: “behind the swastika of Hitler increasingly

³⁷¹ Edmond Bloch, in *La Revue des Vivants* (March 1927), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 134.

³⁷² Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 134.

³⁷³ Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 135.

³⁷⁴ Pierre Cot, in *La Revue des Vivants* (November 1930), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 135.

³⁷⁵ Pierre Waline, in *La Revue des Vivants* (January 1931) cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 136.

³⁷⁶ Wladimir d’Ormesson, in *La Revue des Vivants* (March 1932), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 136.

³⁷⁷ Henri Guirel, in *La Revue des Vivants* (November 1931), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 137.

³⁷⁸ Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 137.

³⁷⁹ Thomas Mann, in *La Revue des Vivants* (June 1931), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 137.

³⁸⁰ Henri De Jouvenel, in *La Revue des Vivants* (April 1931), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 136.

looms the star of the Soviets.”³⁸¹ Victory of any of both movements would constitute a fatal blow to democracy and peace.

One year later, the Nazis were in power. Between April 1933 until the last edition in 1935, *LRV* paid much and close attention to the constitutive elements of the regime. The new German revolution was based on terror and had kept its violent promises. Throughout 1933 *LRV* offered “excessively precise” descriptions of anti-Semitic laws and tragedies in Jewish families, who were considered “among the most besieged.”³⁸² Under the heading of “terrorism”, another section described the fate of opposition parties and leaders, and the treatment of leftist and particularly Jewish affiliated press.³⁸³ *LRV* denounced the propaganda machine, which “systematically fights against all that is not German in art and literature” and the politics of the *Gleichschaltung*, which was observed to bringing press, youth movements and church into line.

Manigand notes an increasing interest of *LRV* from the end of 1933 onwards for the economic results the regime produced. A contribution in November 1933 expressed some kind of respect for the regime’s attempts to alleviate unemployment:

“No doubt the Nazis will do more than their predecessors to ease misery. [...] One cannot reproach them for not finding a remedy because there is none. How their efforts, their belief, their will to live would be worthy of admiration if they were not based on this stupid racism, destroyer of intellectual values and justification of all violence!”³⁸⁴

1934 and 1935 offer two major inquiries, the first called “One year of Hitlerism”, the other “German ideas.”³⁸⁵ The first investigation consisted of articles from the point of view of both German exiles and Nazis. The exiles are Heinrich Mann (with an article titled “Free thought”), Frank Hildebrand (“The political parties”), Alexander Schiffrin (“Hope in peace”) and Dr. Ludwig Marcuse (“Scientific and artistic creation”). On the other side, Dr. Gehrard Krause, Dr. Johann Von Leers, Dr. Herbert Scula, Dr. Wilhelm Stapel and Dr. Theodor Wilhelm represented the Nazis. This edition also included a contribution from Henry Brunschwig, who emphasised no country should meddle with another country’s doings, regardless of how much one disapproved: “We don’t have to judge and our descendants would not understand we went to war because the Germans mistreated their Marxists or their Jews.”³⁸⁶

Interfering with these German affairs would mean to compromise French-German relations. This argument reminds Manigand of one made in 1927 regarding Italy, by Henry de Jouvenel: “let us not seek to divert Italy from fascism: that is none of our business. She should leave us to our liberalism, because we hold it for an honour of a republic, and... with all this we do not desire anything than to be friends.”³⁸⁷

The last edition of *LRV* was on “German ideas.” It mainly dealt with the churches and their resistance to the establishment of a “totalitarian state”, and with the spirit of the youth, including testimonies of both followers (“Why I love Hitler”) and opponents of Nazi values.³⁸⁸ A crucial question is asked

³⁸¹ Emile Brémont, in *La Revue des Vivants* (February 1932), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 138.

³⁸² Gustav Huber, in *La Revue des Vivants* (April 1933), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 138.

³⁸³ Huber, in *La Revue des Vivants* (June 1933), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 139.

³⁸⁴ Huber, in *La Revue des Vivants* (November 1933), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 139.

³⁸⁵ Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 140-41.

³⁸⁶ Henry Brunschwig, in *La Revue des Vivants* (February 1934), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 140-41.

³⁸⁷ Henry De Jouvenel, in *La Revue des Vivants* (February 1927), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 133.

³⁸⁸ Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 141.

under the title “What does Germany want?” *LRV*’s generation of the war is remembered of the unrest preceding the Great War: “the results of the plebiscite on Saarland consolidated the realist analyses of the journal and the reestablishment of military service generates the same fears as in 1914.”³⁸⁹

3.4 Belgium

3.4.1 *Le Flambeau*

First published in the last months of 1918, until its demise in the 1970’s, *Le Flambeau* can be considered “the great political and literary periodical of Belgian liberalism.”³⁹⁰ Its publication and circulation was situated in and around the “Brussels microcosm” of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), the intellectual hub ‘salon Errera’, the Jewish community, and liberal milieus associated with the Liberal party.³⁹¹ A journal of and for the French speaking elite, an “unshakable Francophilia” characterized *Le Flambeau*. Its liberal orientation involved an open attitude towards Catholic intellectuals too.³⁹²

Historian Christoph Brüll discusses the journal’s views regarding National Socialism. He observes changing opinions regarding the Nazis in the early 1930’s. While historian, germanist and later Sorbonne professor Edmond Vermeil in 1930 appealed to have patience with the young German democracy, by 1933 he denounced the anti-liberal character of the National Socialist regime.³⁹³ That same year, five well-documented articles on the Nazi Regime appeared. The first one, entitled ‘Hitlerian dictatorship’ and written by Taeda (pseudonym), discussed how the nationalists gathered around Franz von Papen had no chance to beat Hitler. Taeda observed how the racist Nazi regime threatened to split Europe into democracies and dictatorships.³⁹⁴

In April 1933, liberal member of parliament and professor at the ULB Herbert Speyer wrote another article, titled “How the German republic died.” Taking a longer historical perspective, Speyer condemned the violent track record of the regime since its installation. Speyer declared to have “never seen, with any civilized people, such a cynical intimidation campaign, neither such a scandalous abuse of governmental power”.³⁹⁵ He described the suppression of liberties, imprisonment in concentration camps and the revocation of Jewish civil servants and professors. He pointed out how “[t]he Hitlerian revolution” was completely different from the 19th century movements of national renaissance in Prussia or Italy. While those had had a liberal inspiration, Speyer saw Hitlerism as a reactionary movement dominated by feelings of hate and conflict.³⁹⁶

Ideologically, Speyer’s essay principally discussed Germany’s revisionism and anti-Semitism. His analysis generally excelled in modesty, yet at some points he slipped into essentialising his subject.

³⁸⁹ Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 141.

³⁹⁰ Christoph Brüll, “La revue libérale belge *Le Flambeau* et le national-socialisme (1930-1940),” in *Confrontations au national-socialisme en Europe francophone et germanophone / Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus im deutsch- und französischsprachigen Europa (1919-1949)*, eds. Michel Grunewald, Oliver Dard and Uwe Puschner (Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2018), II: 197.

³⁹¹ Brüll, “*Le Flambeau*,” 197.

³⁹² Brüll, “*Le Flambeau*,” 209.

³⁹³ Brüll, “*Le Flambeau*,” 200.

³⁹⁴ Brüll, “*Le Flambeau*,” 202.

³⁹⁵ Herbert Speyer, in *Le Flambeau* nr. 4 (1933), cited in Brüll, “*Le Flambeau*,” 203.

³⁹⁶ Speyer, in *Le Flambeau* nr. 4 (1933), cited in Brüll, “*Le Flambeau*,” 203.

Brüll gives two examples, both of which are claims about the German people's "innate tendencies" which conflict with the laws of the republic. According to Speyer, "Germany does not love freedom, it does not understand it."³⁹⁷

Generally, all articles in *Le Flambeau* identify as main traits of the regime its revanchist ambitions, reactionary character and anti-Semitic program, the latter being a central and recurring theme in discussions on Nazism. Of particular relevance for understanding *Le Flambeau's* conception of the regime is its choice of words to describe it. The word 'Hitlerian' was used systematically, yet 'Nazi' was uncommon and 'National Socialist' simply absent. Brüll interprets these choices as revealing for the authors' conception of the regimes. The choice of terms signals the conviction that "the party - mostly called the 'movement' - and its successes only exist because of its leader."³⁹⁸

Another indication of the perception of the Nazi regime in *Le Flambeau* was a text from 1938, in which young Brussels sociologist Henri Janne compared the regimes of Robespierre and Hitler. Janne perceived many resemblances between the revolutionary government of the period 1790 - 1794 and the Nazi Third Reich. Both were totalitarian police states, which persecuted 'enemies of the people' and exalted the party. They shared the use of propaganda, a "populist" terminology (*à tendance populaire*), "egalitarian verbosity" (*logomachie égalitaire*) and a clear-cut anti-workers politics.³⁹⁹ The main difference, according to Janne, was racism, which characterised the pessimist and anti-humanist Hitlerian revolution, and which would lead to its self-destruction: "it seems the Hitlerian logomachy has to perish altogether with the regime it served. To our understanding, nothing universal could survive from it."⁴⁰⁰

3.5 Summary

How did liberals describe fascist movements and regimes? Which causes did they see for their success? And how did they think liberal democracy could be defended against the fascist threat? This final section summarises the main findings of this chapter.

3.5.1 Violence

A prominent feature ascribed to fascism was its violence. To German journalist Fritz Schotthöfer the "spirit of violence" was fascism's fundamental characteristic.⁴⁰¹ With *Il Fascio. Sinn und Wirklichkeit des italienischen Fascismus* (1924), Schotthöfer wrote one of the earliest Germanophone interpretations of Italian fascism. Fascism reflected the violent atmosphere of the war, and terror and neglect of legal norms were inherent to its emergence and rule. Political violence was also an early concern of Schotthöfer's contemporary Mortiz Julius Bonn. In 1920, this German economist perceived how Bolshevik and conservative-revolutionary politics shared a willingness to use violence. To Bonn too, this phenomenon was a major effect of the war. Violence became a constitutive cultural element of the Fascist militarist system. It involved the "belief in physical violence as the fundamental means for shaping and governing the community."⁴⁰² Mussolini's violent and arbitrary rule did "not merely spring from a violent temperament; it rests on the conviction that

³⁹⁷ Speyer, in *Le Flambeau* nr. 4 (1933), cited in Brüll, "Le Flambeau," 203.

³⁹⁸ Brüll, "Le Flambeau," 204.

³⁹⁹ Henri Janne, in *Le Flambeau* nr. 5 (1938), cited in Brüll, 207.

⁴⁰⁰ Janne, in *Le Flambeau* nr. 5 (1938), cited in Brüll, 207.

⁴⁰¹ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 144.

⁴⁰² Bonn, "Schlusswort," cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 155.

governing without acceptance of the governed is an expedient, legitimate method to rule the people.”⁴⁰³

Various liberal observers of National Socialism held the same view. The pacifist and Europeanist French journal *La Revue des Vivants*, for example, covered how the “new revolution” of the Nazis was founded on “terrorism” directed against Jews, leftist and Jewish affiliated press, and opposition parties and leaders.⁴⁰⁴ Also in 1933, liberal MP and law professor Herbert Speyer wrote about the Nazi movement’s violent track record and its most “scandalous abuse of governmental power” in the Belgian journal *Le Flambeau*.⁴⁰⁵ Speyer described the suppression of liberties, imprisonment in concentration camps and the revocation of Jewish civil servants and professors. “The Hitlerian revolution” was a reactionary one, propelled by hatred and conflict.

3.5.2 Leader cult, Mussolinismus, Hitlérisme

Another fascist trademark liberals noted was the central role of the leader or führer. Fritz Schotthöfer used the term “Mussolinism” and emphasised the leader cult in fascist Italy, and the “belief and trust of [Mussolini’s] followers in his energy”: “Where there is no Mussolini, there can also not be fascism.”⁴⁰⁶ German legal scholar Hermann Heller mentioned Mussolini’s “personality dictatorship,” founded on “immanent legitimation.”⁴⁰⁷ In *Europa und der Faschismus* (1931), Heller maintained that fascism could not be transposed to other countries because it was founded on a person instead of institutions. Hitler he merely found a “bad copy of Mussolini.”⁴⁰⁸

Comparisons between Mussolini and Hitler frequently occurred in the 1930’s. In his articles in the weekly journal *Vendredi*, journalist Louis Martin-Chauffier found Mussolini presumptuous, while Hitler assumed the status of a prophet and even a divine being. Germany was worse off than Italy because its master was “more insane.”⁴⁰⁹ Earlier, in 1933, Martin-Chauffier’s German colleague Georg Bernhard called National Socialism “Hitlerism.” Hitler took central stage in the analysis of what Bernhard understood as a religious movement. Other Nazi personalities hardly figured in his discussion of Nazism. To Bernhard, Mussolini was an “old political fighter with a socialist past and real temperament”, and Hitler a “politically dilettante fanatic.”⁴¹⁰ While the führer’s ideas were negligible, his speeches, “right instinct” and “cunning tactics” did impress Bernhard.⁴¹¹

Journalist and jurist Rudolf Olden also pointed to Hitler’s charisma, from which his spokespersons could draw even in his absence. Olden saw how the Nazi leader cunningly overwhelmed and seduced the masses, which he, in reality, despised. Yet in Olden’s view, Hitler was an instrument of the old political elites of Prussia, the “last resource” of the economically outdated Junkers. A “revolutionary against the revolution,” he owed his career to the army and exercised “power for the powerful.”⁴¹² Hitler was a “semi-educated” petty bourgeois narcissist in “agonizing need for adoration and worship.”

⁴⁰³ Bonn, *Die Krisis*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 155-56.

⁴⁰⁴ Huber, in *La Revue des Vivants* (June 1933), cited in Manigand, “*La Revue des Vivants*,” 139.

⁴⁰⁵ Speyer, in *Le Flambeau* nr. 4 (1933), cited in Brüll, “*Le Flambeau*,” 203.

⁴⁰⁶ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 145.

⁴⁰⁷ Heller, *Die politischen Ideenkreise*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 131-32.

⁴⁰⁸ Heller, *Europa und der Faschismus*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 134.

⁴⁰⁹ Louis Martin-Chauffier, in *Vendredi* (April 1936), cited in Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 111.

⁴¹⁰ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie,” 64.

⁴¹¹ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie,” 65.

⁴¹² Olden, *Hitler*, cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 79.

In *Le Flambeau's* discussions of National Socialism the systematic use of the word "Hitlerian" demonstrates how important the führer's role was perceived to be. The word 'Nazi', however, was uncommon, and 'National Socialist' entirely absent.⁴¹³ French philosopher Louis Rougier, finally, understood the central role of the Nazi führer in the context of what he called "political mystiques."⁴¹⁴ Hitler was a "*Volksmann*" and gave expression to a "*Führerprinzip, the principle of the chef,*" which replaced the liberal principle of "*popular sovereignty.*" He had ascended from the people and incarnated the "collective soul [...] of the nation or the race."

3.5.3 "Mystique," propaganda, performance

Rougier developed his ideas on political mystiques in the middle of the 1930's. While the "myth of the corporative state" inspired Italian fascism, the German regime incarnated ethnic myths, specifically the "myth of the blood," and that "of the soil." Nazism involved a "totalitarian mystique," or "what the Germans call *Totalitätsgedanke.*" It aimed to rule "souls like bodies and to put minds like bodies in uniform." Individual autonomy and freedom of conscience virtually disappeared. However, Rougier was not the first one to link fascist regimes to the idea of the mystique. In 1930, chronicler of the conservative liberal journal *Revue des Deux Mondes* René Pinon had written: "Hitler, after M. Mussolini, brings to Europe a new element, a mystique out of which emerges a politics."⁴¹⁵ Pinon described Nazism as a "German religion."⁴¹⁶

Earlier observations on fascism's propaganda methods too included elements similar to those found in Rougier's theses. Moritz Julius Bonn saw war propaganda as a major cause of fascist mobilisation in the early 1920's. Hermann Heller noticed the fascist "[m]yth of the nation."⁴¹⁷ Elie Halévy in his discussion of tyrannical regimes observed how charismatic leaders like Mussolini, Stalin and Hitler succeeded in the "organisation of enthusiasm" or "state control of thought."⁴¹⁸ To Georg Bernhard, mass-events were central and constitutive to the success of the Nazi regime. Hitler's public performances were the high point of Nazi propaganda and functioned as "religious awakening rallies."⁴¹⁹ His speeches lured the audience into "political-religious mass delusions." Bernhard also noted how the Nazis adapted their strategy to German psychology and gave all their actions the "appearance of legality." The people would simply answer "yes and Amen to everything."⁴²⁰ Pinon too observed how mass manifestations installed among members of the audience a sense of cohesion and lust for power. Dictators in Russia, Italy and Germany addressed the crowds directly and so created the illusion of political participation.

Louis Martin-Chauffier, finally, observed Nazi brainwashing education programs to prepare a new generation of Nazi professionals. This formation of "carefully denatured subjects" formed "the most cruel attack on the freedom of thought and the dignity of man."⁴²¹

⁴¹³ Brüll, "Le Flambeau," 204.

⁴¹⁴ All citations from Louis Rougier are from Rougier, *Les mystiques politiques*, cited in Dard, "Les libéraux français," 93-5.

⁴¹⁵ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (October 1930), cited in Grunewald, "La *Revue des Deux Mondes*," 178.

⁴¹⁶ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (January 1934), cited in Grunewald, "La *Revue des Deux Mondes*," 179.

⁴¹⁷ Heller, *Die politischen Ideenkreise*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 132.

⁴¹⁸ Élie Halévy, *L'ère des tyrannies* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), cited in K. Steven Vincent, *Élie Halévy. Republican Liberalism Confronts the Era of Tyranny* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 245.

⁴¹⁹ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 65.

⁴²⁰ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 67.

⁴²¹ Martin-Chauffier, in *Vendredi* (January 1938), cited in Maillot, "Louis Martin-Chauffier," 110.

3.5.4 Empty ideology

While the fascist and Nazi movements excelled in image and myth building, many observers criticised the emptiness of their political programs. Fritz Schotthöfer perceived fascism's essential lack of ideas and of a theory of the state. Mussolini's commitment to actions was a compensation for his political aimlessness. Merely a "principle of political energy" and "the fomenting negation of liberalism," Fascism "fights ideas with weapons." This, to Schotthöfer, was "the deepest mark of its violent nature."⁴²² Hermann Heller pointed to the emptiness of the Italian Fascist talk of a "true constitution."⁴²³

The same emptiness was emphasised by liberal DDP politician Theodor Heuss in his analysis of the rise of Nazism. Heuss claimed the Nazis had no conception of the state, or were indifferent to it. The "idea of the people and their national traditions" (*Volk und Volkstum*) were of greater importance.⁴²⁴ With his book *Hitler's Weg* (1931), Heuss aimed to expose how empty and foolish the Nazi program was. German publicist and editor of the journal *Tage-Buch* Leopold Schwarzschildt, in turn, called National Socialism "the hollowest and most confused movement in political history."⁴²⁵ Georg Bernhard emphasised the Nazis could not claim any originality. Their program only offered repetition and "astonishing nonsense."⁴²⁶ They gave anti-Semitism a scientific outlook and their economic programs were an eclectic collection "of all socialist and social teachings and false teachings of the past century."⁴²⁷ Nazism's "true spirit" was a reactionary spirit, which promoted the interests of big landowners.

Bonn, like Schotthöfer, observed fascism's mostly negative orientation: it was anti-parliament, anti-liberal, anti-pluralist, anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois. In addition to this, he noted fascism's irrational character, radical nationalism and radical racism. Bonn observed these ideological features not just in Italy but also with the American Ku Klux Klan and the Ulster nationalist movement. Similarly, René Pinon defined Nazism negatively in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*: like communism, it displayed a "mistrust of intelligence," a militant anti-Christianity and anti-Semitism. Both regimes were seen to "scorn the universal norms of law."⁴²⁸ In the same vein, the periodical *Nouvelle Revue française* described the anti-rationalist and anti-Semitic ideology of Nazism.

Racism and nationalism feature in most descriptions of Nazism. *La Revue des Vivants* in the late 1920's consistently referred to the Nazis as "racists," who could form a coalition with the nationalist party of Hugenberg.⁴²⁹ In the journal *Vu*, Louis Martin-Chauffier emphasised National Socialism's racist foundations and its denial of justice. Georg Bernhard described in *Die Deutsche Tragödie* how nationalism was a principal element in the Nazis' rise to power. Right-wing war nostalgics in the twenties inflamed public opinion against the Weimar republic. Their "nationalist agitation" provided the foundation on which the NSDAP could expand.⁴³⁰ At the same time, the "half-educated bourgeoisie" slipped into a comfortable nationalism because Germany's institutions had not been sufficiently "republicanised" after the War.⁴³¹

⁴²² Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 146-47.

⁴²³ Heller, *Die politischen Ideenkreise*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 131-32.

⁴²⁴ Heuss, *Hitler's Weg*, cited in Treß, "Theodor Heuss," 35.

⁴²⁵ Schwarzschildt, in *Tage-Buch* (1932), cited in Schildt, "Vom Tage-Buch zum Neuen Tage-Buch," 49.

⁴²⁶ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 65.

⁴²⁷ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 67.

⁴²⁸ Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 184.

⁴²⁹ Manigand, "La Revue des Vivants," 134.

⁴³⁰ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 66.

⁴³¹ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, "Die Deutsche Tragödie," 69.

3.5.5 Economic crisis

To most observers, the economic crisis of the 1930's is a central factor in National Socialism's success. It made the Germans more susceptible, or even "eager" for Hitler's messianic promises.⁴³² In an article series in the *Nouvelle Revue française* in 1933, the massive unemployment of the 1920's figured as an element in the build-up of frustrations that led to the Nazi regime. In 1931 Moritz Julius Bonn found National Socialism "economically sensitive to the highest degree," but also understood there were more factors at play.⁴³³

Others perceived the crisis to be the main cause of political extremism. Martin-Chauffier, for example, believed that ending economic hardship would end extremism. Like communists were underprivileged French citizens, Nazis were underprivileged Germans: "Save them from their misery, they will become pacifist."⁴³⁴ In 1932, Leopold Schwarzschildt displayed a similar economic view, claiming that National Socialism would disappear once the crisis was over. To *La Revue des Vivants*, the Nazis thrived on political despair, economic despair, and the professional despair of a generation of unemployed youth. Originally declaring an anti-capitalist revolution, Hitler had become "the man of the reactionaries, the big bosses and simultaneously the man of the unemployed, the socialist patriots and the women."⁴³⁵ *La Revue des Vivants* also expressed some recognition for the Nazi attempts to reduce unemployment.

Interestingly, various observers took a nuanced view on Hitler's relation to capitalism. A Marxist theorist, Leon Trotsky in *Nouvelle Revue française* described National Socialism as an anti-Marxist ideology that welded the petty bourgeoisie against the proletariat, but once in power transformed into "the most ruthless dictatorship of monopoly capital."⁴³⁶ Georg Bernhard too saw the Nazi regime as a reactionary force to the advantage of large landowners. Elie Halévy, however, understanding National Socialism as "counter-socialism" in corporatist disguise, made a different argument: "the captains of industry prefer such a [fascist] regime to a communist one," and remain "in charge of their affairs. But they are no longer the masters."⁴³⁷ The same view can be found with Rudolf Olden: Hitler was not an agent of capital in general, but of some specific industrialists and affluent patrons. French liberal essayist Louis Marlio, finally, counted National Socialism among "the interventionist systems," placing Hitler in line not only with Mussolini and Stalin, but also with Roosevelt and Blum.⁴³⁸

3.5.6 Communism, fascism, totalitarianism

Liberal discussions displayed a complex relationship between fascism and communism. Many observers discussed the similarities between both systems. Others perceived fascism and Nazism to be consequences of communism. Finally, some warned for an inverse effect, namely Nazism generating a communist revolution. This section discusses examples of each of these three approaches.

⁴³² Olden, *Hitler* (Amsterdam 1935), cited in Flemming, "Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus," 79.

⁴³³ Bonn, in *Neue Freie Presse* (April 1931), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 161.

⁴³⁴ Martin-Chauffier, in *Notre Temps* (June 1931), cited in Maillot, "Louis Martin-Chauffier," 104.

⁴³⁵ d'Ormesson, in *La Revue des Vivants* (March 1932), cited in Manigand, "La Revue des Vivants," 136.

⁴³⁶ Trotsky, in *Nouvelle Revue française* (February 1934), cited in Cornick, "La Nouvelle Revue française," 164.

⁴³⁷ Elie Halévy, *L'ère des tyrannies. Etudes sur le Socialisme et la Guerre* (Paris: 1938), cited in Dard, "Les libéraux français," 91-2.

⁴³⁸ Louis Marlio, *Le sort du capitalisme* (Paris: 1938), cited in Dard, "Les libéraux français," 90.

Early observers of fascism in the 1920's compared communism and fascism before the concept of totalitarianism emerged in the 1930's. In 1925 German economist and geographer Alfred Weber perceived in society such violent tendencies of "partly proletarian, partly national-fascist kind."⁴³⁹ According to historian Jens Hacke, such presentations were not unusual among liberals of that time. The Italian politician and critic of fascism Luigi Sturzo perceived fascism as right-wing Bolshevism and Bolshevism as left-wing fascism. Old minister president Francesco Nitti noted how both ideologies shared "the denial of the same foundations of freedom and order, the foundations of 1789." Fascism, in his view, was "white Bolshevism."⁴⁴⁰

Another early comparison of Bolshevism and fascism can be found in journalist Frits Schotthöfer's book *Il Fascio*, in his chapter headed "Moscow model" ("*Moskauer Muster*"). Schotthöfer described Bolshevism and fascism as "brothers in the spirit of violence."⁴⁴¹ In both cases, an illegally organized and armed minority had succeeded in capturing and controlling the state by means of terror.

This idea was later developed by Élie Halévy in his *Era of tyrannies*. Both fascism and Bolshevism represented "the government of a country by an armed sect, which imposes itself in name of the presumed interest of the whole country, and which has the power to impose itself because it feels animated by a common belief."⁴⁴² Highly similar observations on Nazism can be found with René Pinon in *Revue des Deux Mondes*: in both the communist and the Nazi case, the party "tends to identify itself with the people on whom it has imposed itself by force, and to restore their secular and traditional aspirations."⁴⁴³ Communism, like Nazism, distrusted intelligence, dismissed the universal norms of law, and displayed militant anti-Christianity and anti-Semitism.⁴⁴⁴

Pinon, then, also represented the view that fascism and National Socialism were products of communism. He repeatedly argued that there would not be fascism without communism, reflecting the anti-socialist and anti-communist orientation of *Revue des Deux Mondes*. In particular, Pinon saw the Nazi victory in Prussia in 1932 as reaction against the abusive clientelist practices of the socialists. Leopold Schwarzschildt saw National Socialism resulting from fear among the middle classes for social revolution and Bolshevism. Georg Bernhard equally saw how exploited fear of Bolshevism drove voters into the führer's arms. Rudolf Olden directly blamed the communists for escalating tensions. He asserted that "[t]he confusion of the capitalist economy did not bring forth revolutionaries, but instead a counterrevolutionary situation."⁴⁴⁵

Finally, some believed fascism would cause communism. In 1939, René Pinon called National Socialism the "harbinger of Bolshevism" and Hitler "he who brought Bolshevism further in Europe."⁴⁴⁶ A similar image earlier appeared in *La Revue des Vivants*, in the context of the economic crisis. If the crisis protracted, the Nazis would "move to communist obedience and the socialist voters will follow."⁴⁴⁷ Head editor Emile Brémont postulated a Nazi coup would be followed by a countermovement of the proletarian masses: "behind the swastika of Hitler increasingly looms the star of the Soviets."⁴⁴⁸

⁴³⁹ Alfred Weber, *Die Krise des modernen Staatsgedankens in Europa* (Stuttgart: 1925), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 138.

⁴⁴⁰ Nitti, *Bolshevismus, Faschismus und Demokratie*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 143.

⁴⁴¹ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 142.

⁴⁴² Halévy, *L'ère des tyrannies*, cited in Dard, "Les libéraux français," 91.

⁴⁴³ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (June 1935), cited in Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 183.

⁴⁴⁴ Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 183-84.

⁴⁴⁵ Olden, *Marxisten*, cited in Flemming, "Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus," 83.

⁴⁴⁶ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (October 1939), cited in Grunewald, "La Revue des Deux Mondes," 187.

⁴⁴⁷ De Jouvenel, in *La Revue des Vivants* (April 1931), cited in Manigand, "La Revue des Vivants," 136.

⁴⁴⁸ Emile Brémont, in *La Revue des Vivants* (February 1932), cited in Manigand, "La Revue des Vivants," 138.

3.5.7 Democracy's failure

One other explanation given for the success of fascist movements can be characterized as the failure of democracy. This strand of argument most prominently featured with Bernhard in *Die Deutsche Tragödie*. The German people were ill informed about who were the true culprits for their suffering after the war, because the new Weimar Republic never held the “all-German warmongers” accountable for their deeds.⁴⁴⁹ Neither the social democrats nor the democratic press sufficiently invested in a republican and democratic culture.

Comparably, Rudolf Olden concentrated on the roots of the young republic to explain its demise. Both the social democrats and communists had omitted to dispossess the big landlords East of the Elbe and failed to reform the country's institutions. The left demonstrated its inability for self-reflection and analysis. Olden was particularly disappointed in social democracy. They had sunken into a “despicable conservatism” and had not defended liberal idealism.⁴⁵⁰ The expectation was that “socialism would come naturally in democracy”, but it did not.⁴⁵¹ Similarly, in 1932 Schwarzschildt blamed “the criminal failure of both the democratic liberal and the socialist-communist intelligentsia” for Hitler's rise.⁴⁵²

A distinct argument, which also involves the failure of democracy, can be found with Bonn. He does not blame the political parties, but holds the people themselves accountable. State power has gotten out of control because people have too high expectations of the state and politics. In 1926 Bonn highlighted the need for individual responsibility, while “[t]he belief in the boundless possibilities of governing is the deepest cause for criticism of the bounded possibilities of the existing governments.”⁴⁵³ A similar reflection appeared in Schwarzschildt's writing towards the end of the 1930's. Some weeks before the outbreak of the war he called for a “re-education of the German minds and customs.”⁴⁵⁴ Over the course of the war, moreover, he re-evaluated Hitler: rather than a puppet of the elites, he had been elected and chosen by the German people.

While his condemnation of the coalition parties of Weimar was strong, Bernhard too pointed to the role and responsibility of the people. Ill informed and misled by the elites, they had still committed suicide, as the subtitle of his book suggested. To Bernhard, people had declared their own stupidity and submissiveness in deliberately swapping their constitution for a dictatorship. Élie Halévy, finally, described how “a spirit of compromise” required popular common sense: “the responsibility of the horrors which torment humanity should be transferred from political leaders to the common people, that is to say to ourselves.”⁴⁵⁵

3.5.8 Democracy's degeneration

Another approach to fascism, which involved democracy, was the observation of its degeneration or, to use a strong word, perversion. Bonn, for example, denoted fascism the “tyranny of primitive democracy.” As in an underdeveloped democracy, a majority ousted or made uniform “elements foreign to the clan.” As noted earlier, Bonn saw people's excessive belief in the state as a cause of its excessive control. Discussing racism, he warned, in Hacke's words, for the “democratisation of

⁴⁴⁹ Bernhard, *Die Deutsche Tragödie*, cited in Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie,” 64.

⁴⁵⁰ Olden, *Marxisten*, cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 84.

⁴⁵¹ Olden, *Hindenburg*, cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 84.

⁴⁵² Schwarzschildt, in *Tage-Buch* (1932), cited in Schildt, “Vom Tage-Buch zum Neuen Tage-Buch,” 49.

⁴⁵³ Bonn, in *Neue Freie Presse* (January 1926), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 160.

⁴⁵⁴ Schwarzschildt, in *Neues Tage-Buch* (1939), cited in Schildt, “Vom Tage-Buch zum Neuen Tage-Buch,” 56.

⁴⁵⁵ Halévy, *L'ère des tyrannies*, cited in Vincent, *Élie Halévy*, 252.

aristocratic arrogance.”⁴⁵⁶ Without mediation through liberal institutions, democracy, to Bonn, risked forging conformism and the tyranny of the majority.

Pinon made a very similar analysis, demonstrating his conservative liberal attitude. In his view, fascism and democracy were not opposites. Rather, fascism was a malformation of democracy in the age of the masses. The real opposition, to Pinon, was between parliamentarism, supported by the middle classes and autocracy, in which the individual was consumed by the masses. While the middle classes or “bourgeoisies” disappeared, the democratic pursuit of absolute equality paved the way for dictatorship.⁴⁵⁷

3.5.9 Culture and ethnography

Next to economic, sociological or political analyses, culture prominently featured with different liberal observers. Bonn, for example, stated about fascism that it thrived where democratic-republican traditions and a rule-of-law culture were absent, and where among the masses there was “no need for self-government, but where the subjection to a foreign will was a historical habit.” Bonn must have assumed this was the case in Italy. Nazism, then, Bonn perceived to be a next stage in the historical German *Sonderweg* from feudalism to nationalism.

Many authors at some point essentialised German culture to an inclination for force rather than reason. Herbert Speyer in *Le Flambeau*, for example, had it that “Germany does not love freedom, it does not understand it.”⁴⁵⁸ Its innate tendencies conflicted with the laws of the Weimar Republic. Louis Rougier noted that Germany “has never been able to understand what democracy is,” while Martin-Chauffier claimed: “[t]he sense of justice, of equity, the respect for the human person, are part of our tradition, like respect of force and the cult of warrior virtues are part of German tradition.”⁴⁵⁹ German psychology, then, was prone to “admiration and adoration of a chef.” Bernhard, in turn, thought their psychology made Germans accept everything that had the air of legality. Explicit Germanophobic tones can be heard with André Suarès in *Nouvelle Revue française*, who recognized in Germany “the perfection of barbarity. Brutes like Hitler, Göring, Goebbels, all sorts of Hesse [sic] and Rosenberg, triumph in the vilest vanity of violence and hate.”⁴⁶⁰

3.5.10 The superiority of liberal democracy

The authors discussed above criticised fascism and Nazism for their violent, irrational and oppressive features. While such critiques suggest their ideals, few authors made the reasons for their liberal conviction really explicit.

Fritz Schotthöfer can be seen to have given an outspoken defence of liberal order and its principles. Fundamentally, the liberal “freedom of the individual” and the democratic “organisation of political freedom” enabled a “higher creative power” through competition. Also, liberal regimes and their political personnel enjoyed more legitimacy and proved to be more sustainable than dictatorships. Next, Schotthöfer perceived the parliamentary system to be flexible and capable of accommodating dissent and diversity. Finally, democratic politics aimed to “express the spiritual and the ethical in

⁴⁵⁶ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 163.

⁴⁵⁷ Pinon, in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (September 1936), cited in Grunewald, “La *Revue des Deux Mondes*,” 183.

⁴⁵⁸ Speyer, in *Le Flambeau* nr. 4 (1933), cited in Brüll, “Le Flambeau,” 203.

⁴⁵⁹ Martin-Chauffier, in *La République* (April 1935), cited in Maillot “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 109.

⁴⁶⁰ Suarès, in *Nouvelle Revue française* (November 1934), cited in Cornick, “La *Nouvelle Revue française*,” 167.

politics,” instead of the violent.⁴⁶¹ Confronted with the dilemma “fascism or communism,” Louis Rougier too explained his preference for liberal values and institutions. Instead of despotic rule, arbitrary economic plans and a uniform politicised culture, Rougier favoured

“the advantages of the division of labour between nations, the free circulation of capital, goods and workers, the solidarity among peoples in the reciprocity of their exchanges; to the cosmopolitanism of culture, to the dignity of the individual considered a respectable end in itself, the security of the citizen founded on a stable juridical statute; to the free initiative of producers, the free choice of consumers; to the independence and the universality of thought; to the flavour of life, which results from it being risky, but in the ordered framework of a game of which one knows and respects the rules [...]”⁴⁶²

3.5.11 Defending liberal democracy

However, Rougier also noted liberal democracy’s biggest shortfall, the error of the “liberal mystique,” being its “unconditional primacy of economics.”⁴⁶³ Historian Jens Hacke states that many liberals struggled with the limited emotional attractiveness of political liberalism, especially in comparison to the dynamic political force of fascism. While it was possible to intellectually argue against fascism, political liberalism stood no chance against it. Hacke notes that “one can very well understand a source of danger intellectually, without therefore having the means to face it appropriately.”⁴⁶⁴ While there are many examples of liberals who were seduced by the authoritarian images of a new, fascist order, the examples discussed above demonstrate the existence of critical interpretations. This last section summarises which arguments or strategies these liberal observers proposed in defence of parliamentary democracy.

Schotthöfer emphasised liberal democracy’s normative principles: the freedom of the individual, political self-determination, “the right of the citizen to freedom of opinion” and “free cooperation to the management of public businesses.”⁴⁶⁵ All the while, he maintained a strong belief in progress. Bonn shared this conviction with Schotthöfer, and believed the challenges posed by Mussolini and Lenin would eventually give liberal democracy new purpose and strength.⁴⁶⁶

More practically, many progressives supported the idea of a leftist popular front against fascism. To Olden, it was the sole political answer to Nazism. Yet Olden also put hope in the activity of writing and informing: essentially, the National Socialist dictatorship could only be fought with “truth,” which was the only weapon against “the power [...] of the lie.”⁴⁶⁷ Schwarzschildt, then, believed in opposing fascism with a kind of populism, or *volkstümliche Politik*, in the words of historian Axel Schildt. Thus he advised chancellor Brüning “to approach the people like a Lassalle, Lenin, Mussolini or Hitler.”⁴⁶⁸ Yet Schwarzschildt, in contrast to Olden, opposed the popular front. To him, what was needed was “a closed and self-conscious block of middle-class provenance,” which would not further divide the proletarian and bourgeois enemies of Hitler.⁴⁶⁹ Like many others, Schwarzschildt believed the traditional parties would be able to tame the Nazis.

⁴⁶¹ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 148-49.

⁴⁶² Rougier, *Les mystiques économiques*, cited in Dard, “Les libéraux français,” 95-6.

⁴⁶³ Rougier, *Les mystiques économiques*, cited in Dard, “Les libéraux français,” 96.

⁴⁶⁴ Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 140.

⁴⁶⁵ Schotthöfer, *Il Fascio*, cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 150.

⁴⁶⁶ Bonn, in *Europäische Revue* (1926), cited in Hacke, *Existenzkrise der Demokratie*, 161.

⁴⁶⁷ Olden, in *Das Wort* (April-May 1937), cited in Jens Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 76.

⁴⁶⁸ Schwarzschildt, in *Tage-Buch* (1930), cited in Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*,” 49.

⁴⁶⁹ Schwarzschildt, in *Tage-Buch* (1932), cited in Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*,” 51; Schildt, “Vom *Tage-Buch* zum *Neuen Tage-Buch*,” 55.

Similar to Schwarzschildt, French philosopher Julien Benda, writing in *Nouvelle Revue française*, promoted a “patriotic anti-fascism” and the conscious choice for a magnetic leader such as Danton, Gambetta or Clemenceau.⁴⁷⁰ For Martin-Chauffier, in turn, liberation could come from the Catholics, among whom were the most “numerous and determined” enemies of the Third Reich.⁴⁷¹ Journalist Bernhard saw a major role to be played for the democratic coalition parties of the republic, and for the democratic press. His analysis was one of failure, but implicated were his answers for a successful democratic system: republican institutions and a democratic press needed to “educate the people in republican and democratic thinking and feeling.”⁴⁷² Olden, then, emphasised the importance, and lack, of “civil courage” on the side of democratic parties.⁴⁷³

Heuss, finally, aimed to expose to his readership the emptiness of National Socialist ideology. In 1931, when parliamentary resistance against Nazism was still an option, Heuss did not plead for radical or preventive political measures. Although he was aware of the limited power of books, he instead wrote down and published his arguments. Writing, to Heuss and to many other liberals, remained the defence method most closely at hand.

⁴⁷⁰ Benda, in *Nouvelle Revue française* (June 1935), cited in Cornick, “La Nouvelle Revue française,” 168.

⁴⁷¹ Martin-Chauffier, in *Vendredi* (December 1937), cited in Maillot, “Louis Martin-Chauffier,” 111.

⁴⁷² Wein, “Die Deutsche Tragödie,” 69.

⁴⁷³ Olden, in *Pariser Tageblatt* (January 1934), cited in Flemming, “Junkertum und Nationalsozialismus,” 83.

Conclusion

This thesis has described and analysed some of the ways in which liberals in Belgium, France and Germany responded to fascism in the 1920's and 1930's. There are three main conclusions.

Liberaal Vlaams Verbond on fascism

First, *Liberaal Vlaams Verbond* (LVV), the organisation of Flemish democratic liberals, engaged in elaborate descriptions and analyses of fascism, from 1925 onwards. This finding contributes to the available literature on Flemish liberalism in the interwar years, which has mainly dealt with LVV's role in the Flemish movement. In its monthly journal *L.V.V. Maandblad van het Liberaal Vlaams Verbond* (1922-1924), LVV indeed directed most attention towards domestic issues related to the promotion and defense of Flemish rights in the predominantly francophone Belgian state. Yet *Het Volksbelang* (1925-1940) frequently offered contributions on fascism in its Italian, German, Belgian and transnational forms.

The changing discourse of Liberaal Vlaams Verbond

Second, LVV's response to fascism changed as fascism became a bigger and, in the 1930's, domestic threat. Generally, fascism was observed to represent an ideology and system of government which was fundamentally hostile to liberal values. In LVV's view, parliamentary democracy was and remained the best system to defend liberalism and thus organise a free and prosperous society. Originally, fascism was framed as an Italian phenomenon, which inspired marginal, mainly francophone groups in Belgium. This interpretation changed when it started to impact Germany and other European countries too, including Belgium. On the one hand, fascism's success was increasingly explained by its capacity to appeal to the masses, a skill which liberalism lacked and needed to acquire. On the other hand, fascism became more accounted for by the absence of reason and responsibility among both leaders and populations. To survive, parliamentary democracy required a level of discipline, education and responsibility, among leaders, crowds and individuals.

Intersections with germanophone and francophone discourses on fascism

Third, the analysis shows that Flemish liberals shared many of their views on fascism with liberal authors in Germany, France, and francophone Belgium. Examples of such shared themes and motifs are the description of fascism as an empty, emotional and action-oriented movement; its explanation in cultural terms; its interpretation as a reactionary movement in populist disguise; the focus on its propaganda; the awe felt for its popular pull; the observation of its use of legal strategies; its historical roots in the First World War or in the economic crisis of the 1930's.

In particular, *Het Volksbelang* and other germanophone and francophone liberal authors and journals shared the tendency to associate fascism with communism. The relationship between both regimes was interpreted in three ways. First, fascism and communism, or, in the 1920's, Bolshevism, were judged as equally violent, demagogic and anti-liberal. Such views by authors like Alfred Weber, Luigi Sturzo, Francesco Nitti, Frits Schotthöfer, Élie Halévy and René Pinon resonated with LVV's discourse in *Het Volksbelang*. Second, LVV's explanation of fascism and Nazism as reactions to socialist and Marxist politics can be found with Leopold Schwarzschildt, Georg Bernhard and Rudolf

Olden and Pinon. Finally, Pinon's and Emile Bremond's idea that Hitler had advanced communism in Europe mirrored *Het Volksbelang's* one-off assertion that Rex was helping to promote communism in Belgium.

Finally, LVV and its non-Flemish liberal counterparts maintained a strong belief in the importance of liberal values, education, responsible leadership and citizenship. Yet there was no consensus on the idea of a left-wing popular front. To Rudolf Olden and Georg Bernhard it was a viable or even necessary solution. Many liberals, including those of LVV, rejected it.

The case study thus confirms historian Jens Hacke's thesis, that many liberals actively contemplated and confronted fascism's challenge to liberal democracy. In addition, the thesis contributes to the debate facilitated by Michel Grunewald, Oliver Dard and Uwe Puschner, by finding that Flemish liberal discourse on fascism and National Socialism often intersected with its germanophone and francophone counterparts. At the same time, the question of the popular front illustrates divergence too.

Further research

Further research could involve comparative source research on how liberal discourses on fascism evolved and connected during the interwar period. This thesis has demonstrated how LVV's responses to fascism correlated with its understanding of the threat. Comparative source analysis could establish whether the same dynamic played among other liberal authors and groups. In addition, such research could track the transnational circulation and development of ideas.⁴⁷⁴ It was demonstrated that LVV's interpretations of fascism were frequently indebted to foreign authors and press. Future contributions could map such intertextual, transnational connections in more detail.

⁴⁷⁴ Such a transnational approach has already become more common in studies on fascism. See for example Dietrich Orlow, *The Lure of Fascism in Western Europe: German Nazis, Dutch and French Fascists, 1933-1939* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Frederico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy 1919-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Samuel Huston Goodfellow, "Fascism as a Transnational Movement: The Case of Inter-War Alsace," *Contemporary European History* 22, no. 1 (2013): 87-106; Matteo Albanese and Pablo del Hierro, *Transnational Fascism in the Twentieth Century. Spain, Italy and the Global Neo-Fascist Network* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Kevin Passmore, "Fascism as a Social Movement in a Transnational Context," in *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective. A Survey*, eds. Stefan Berger and Holger Nehring (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 579-618; Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, eds. *Fascism without Borders: Transnational connections and cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2017); Nathaniël D. B. Kunkeler, *Making Fascism in Sweden and the Netherlands. Myth-Creation and Respectability, 1931-40* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

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