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Essay

The Rise of Totalitarian States

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Essay question

The rise of totalitarian states, Germany, Italy and Japan, is a key component to the interwar period. Which of these countries was most successful in their plans and how did the regime come about?

In the lead up to the Second World War, the world became characterized by politics of a radical nature. The 1920's had been a decade of relative peace. Out of the conflict of the decaying dominance of the previously hegemonic empires and the increased militancy of working people, there emerged a more moderate form of liberalism. However, with the depression of 1929 and the increasingly apparent impotence of these governmental forces, new political concepts began to pervade across the globe. Many of these concepts were drastically more extreme and they also possessed a distinctly totalitarian character. Carl J. Friedrich attempted to distinguish the fundamental features of totalitarian regimes and he identified five which he listed as: "an official ideology, to which everyone is supposed to adhere, focused on a 'perfect final state of mankind'; a single mass party



usually led by one man, organized hierarchically and either superior to or intertwined with the state bureaucracy; a technically conditioned near-complete monopoly of control, by the party and the bureaucracy subordinate to it, of the effective use of all weapons of armed combat; a near-complete monopoly similarly exercised over all means of effective mass communication; and a system of physical or psychological terroristic police control (Schapiro, 1972)". Several of these features were at the forefront of the three Axis regimes entering into to the war. Whether in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy or Imperial Japan, totalitarianism engulfed the respective societies in an unprecedented way. The regime that was most successful in implementing such a system, however, was unquestionably Japan. Whereas resistance in the two European Axis powers remained despite intense campaigns of physical and psychological coercion, Japan managed to construct a potent ideological obedience, a fervent nationalistic zeal, and a cult of personality surrounding Emperor Hirohito that was almost of a divine nature.

One of the most essential elements of any totalitarian regime is the construction of consent, and Imperial Japan established an obsequiousness within its citizens that was unparalleled. As Eric Hobsbawm explains, Japanese society "was a society of rigid hierarchy, of the total dedication of the individual (if such a term had any local meaning in the Western sense at all) to the nation and its divine Emperor, and the utter rejection of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" (Hobsbawm, 1996). The most

striking example of the sheer dedication of Japanese soldiers to their country was that of the Kamikaze strikes in which military aviators would perform suicidal attacks against Allied naval vessels. The attacks left 3,860 Japanese soldiers dead. What is even more astonishing is that that countless people volunteered for the position, with Captain Motoharu Okamura referring to the vast numbers as a swarm of bees (Axell, 2002). One would-be Kamikaze pilot by the name of Horiyama made extremely revealing comments about his experiences in the process, stating: “When we graduated from army training school the Showa emperor [Hirohito] visited our unit on a white horse. I thought then that this was a sign that he was personally requesting our services. I knew that I had no choice but to die for him. At that time we believed that the emperor and nation of Japan were one and the same” (McCurry, 2015) For Japan, the powerful sense of nationalistic fervor was implicitly intertwined with their loyalty to the emperor, something which was always lacking with its European allies (particularly Italy). And the appeal of totalitarian ideals existed in every facet of Japanese society. Kanokogi Kazunobu, a prominent Japanese intellectual, declared during the interwar period that “Only by living in a totalitarian way can we be truly alive, so to reject totalitarianism would be to reject life itself” (as cited in Szpielman 2004, p. 75).

The totalitarian characteristics of German society during the Nazi era possess an almost mythical aura that is somewhat incongruous with reality. While there is no denying that the Nazis relentlessly pursued total control

over the German people, the reality was that, unlike in Japan, there was a large degree of resistance. Hitler's desire to create such a society was succinctly summarized in a speech directed towards industrial workers (arguably the most resistant faction of German society to Nazi ideology) on the first of May, exclaiming that "this is the glorious day when a great new Community of the People was founded, which sweeps aside all barriers, unites the towns with the countryside, working people, farmers and intellectuals, and establishes as the supreme goal the protection of the Reich" (Hitler, 1937). Often, however, these attempts were in vain. Unrest within working class movements was especially common and by 1936, Nazi ministers began noting "that strike attempts by skilled workers, in order to gain wage increases, were no longer a rarity" (Mason, 1981). In other areas such as youth groups, the Nazis' attempt at ideological dominance faltered. Groups such as the Swing Youth and the Edelweiss Pirates were not compliant with the ideal German youth that organizations such as the Hitler Youth were eagerly attempting to construct. Thus, the Nazis became heavily reliant on coercive forces to maintain their totalitarian vision. The efforts of Goebbels and the propaganda machine had to be supplemented by the repressive arm of the state that constituted the SS and the Gestapo. For any totalitarian regime, resorting to coercion is a sign of weakness since it is both more costly and possesses a risk of escalation. Hence it is apparent that the Nazis were not as successful as their Japanese counterparts in creating the total subordination of the people to their ideological will.

Fascist Italy, despite emerging before them, mirrored in many ways the Nazis in Germany. Their attempts at establishing the consent of their citizens were practically the same with the cult of personality surrounding Il Duce being central to their ambitions. But also like Germany, Italy possessed a highly militant working class and an empowered communist movement. Thus it was highly problematic for both regimes to dissolve the tensions that these movements brought and create a unified, compliant society dedicated to serving the nation. As Alexander Grand explains “The Mass of Italians and Germans who voted Socialist or Communist did not become Fascists or Nazis; many were reduced to silence after their political and trade union organizations were smashed and their neighborhoods terrorized by black- and brown-shirted thugs. In our rush to analyze fascist propaganda and political religion, it is easy to forget that the regimes were built on fear and, especially in the early years, on force” (Grand, 1996). Grand perfectly captures the necessity of coercion in the face of resistance that was a staple in the Western totalitarian regimes. An additional European state that underwent similar transformations was Spain and the fact that the tensions there escalated to a full-blown Civil War is revealing of the degree of opposition that stood in the face of fascism and dictatorship.

Imperial Japan managed to establish a totalitarian regime that was significantly more successful than those of its Axis counterparts. While many would attribute this to abstract cultural reasons, there is a more coherent cause

for the kind of obedience that existed in Japan. Whereas Italy and Germany had been developing into modern capitalist states wherein the primary political ideal was that of liberalism for more than a century, Japan still contained many elements of the old feudal arrangements. The divine right of kings that had become an essential part of feudal political organizations still lingered in Japan. The connection between the monarch and the country, expressed ever so brilliantly by Louis XVI's declaration of "I am the state", was also prominent in any feudal society and that was why the Japanese citizens felt a deep tie to their emperor. The ideological constructions allowed for this totalitarian control to take place in the material formations of society. Consent was much more systematically achievable in Japan, whereas in Italy and Germany the repressive forces of the police and the military had to ensure that the regimes would not collapse.

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