

PAST AND PRESENT: HOW TO STOP THE FAR RIGHT FROM INFILTRATING THE STATE

Halil Berktaş
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I keep preparing and teaching, preparing and teaching. Somehow I have ended up with six courses this semester. I don't quite know why. Currently I am spending at least 18 hours per week in class, and at least another 18, maybe 20 hours writing lecture notes or creating powerpoints. It's a race against time. I am only able to breathe easily when I have made it to late Thursday evening.

I shouldn't complain, because it is all my own doing. Even worse — I actually like it. It is how I develop and test a lot of my ideas. Ernest Hemingway watched bullfighting in Spain, by way of training himself to look and see and put down on paper exactly what he had seen. Out of it came *Death in the Afternoon*, which I read when I was fifteen or so. That is like sixty years ago. I particularly remember how, at one point, he describes the matador's and the bull's twirling bodies, now merging and now moving apart, as two volumes interacting to create an impermanent sculpture. I forget the exact words, but that is the gist of it. And that is how I think of teaching. From fleeting glimpses to words; from fleeting thoughts to words. You do have a basic script but at the same time you improvise all around it, which results in an impermanent art.

Anyway. In both HIST 213 and HUM 406, for the past two weeks we have been focusing on the rise of Fascism and Nazism. A key element has been the question of real or imagined continuities between (a) on one side the previous state, and the 19th-century style Old Conservatives who think of themselves as the patrician masters of that state, and (b) on the other side, these upstarts, the plebeian newcomers from below that were the Fascists and Nazis. What is interesting is how, with all the difference between them, the latter propagated an image of loyalty to and continuity with the former. In both cases, there was an emphasis on taking over the cause of the (Italian or German) nation that was portrayed as having fallen (or being on the verge of falling) into an abyss. Why? Not because of the failure of the ancien régime, but because of the traitors in our midst (which shall be duly taken care of). Hence Mussolini adopted the uniforms of the Italian WWI army's elite arditi regiments for his Black Shirts. Hence, too, Hitler adopted the name of the German WWI army's elite shock troops, the Storm Troopers (Hücum Taburları), so-called, for his Brown Shirts, NSDAP's paramilitary Sturmabteilung units. He also designed his party banner and emblem in the colors of the German Imperial flag: a red ground, a white circle in the battle, containing a black swastika. Red, white, black: from the Second Reich, through National Socialism, to the Third Reich. The message was clear. We are not thugs or criminals. We are legitimate. We are one with the army and the state. The sacred task of saving the nation has fallen on us.

As an identity projection and a propaganda line it was successful in many ways. It provided the squadristi and the SAs with enormous self-confidence as they kept on beating, killing or terrorizing the entire opposition. It led the judiciary of the Weimar Republic, formed under the Bismarckian Empire, to regard such “patriotic” intimidation of leftists or liberals in a positive light. And ultimately it persuaded the very top echelon of the Old Conservatives, that crude and vulgar as these Fascists or Nazis were, they could nevertheless be used to crush the Left and reimpose order, after which they too could be got rid of. This was how and why King Vittorio Emmanuele handed the prime ministry over to Mussolini in 1922, and President Paul von Hindenburg made Hitler chancellor in 1933. But it didn’t turn out in the way they had hoped. Given half a chance, it was the unprecedented daring, gambling, aggressive politics of the Fascists and Nazis that turned the tables on the Old Conservatives and quickly established these horrific dictatorships.

Consider the photograph below. It is from Prussia, which was a federal state under the overall umbrella of the Weimar Republic. In 1933, when Adolf Hitler became the chancellor of a coalition government, his close comrade-in-arms Hermann Goering was made Interior Minister in the state of Prussia. That put Goering in command of the largest police force in Germany at that time. And what kind of force was it? On the left, you see a regular policeman, virtually arm-in-arm with, on the right, an SA Brown Shirt, one of 50,000 Nazis in Prussia, appointed by Goering to serve as a *Hilfspolizei* (auxiliary police officer). It speaks volumes for the Nazi infiltration of the state as facilitated by the “national cause” continuity that I have tried to describe.

Now from history to current time: is it possible to say that this is a danger of the past, that it is forever behind us? We are living through such a resurgence of the Far Right, that even in Europe, let alone the rest of the world, it has once more become very difficult, very fragile ground. Consider today’s two Recommended Readings: [0010.(BBC 13.4.2021) Gruppe S – German far-right group on trial for terror plot] and [0010.2.(BBC 16.9.2020) Germany far-right – police suspended for sharing neo-Nazi images]. On the one hand there is a continuing, indeed increasing menace. Look at how the Far Right has been able to win over so many policemen! Clearly, today’s extreme rightists like the German Brotherhood are able to appeal to nationalism to such an extent as to be able to mobilize modern monstrosities like the Gruppe S. But on the other hand, born out of the experience of the past there is a sharp degree of democratic watchfulness on the part of the government and the security forces. It is an ongoing struggle. The future hangs in the balance.

