

German and Jewish Conspiracies:
The October Revolution
from the Perspective of the Italian Fascists
and the German National Socialists

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The Italian Fascists and the German National Socialists were fierce ideological enemies of the Bolsheviks. Their views on the October Revolution were highly idiosyncratic. Mussolini considered the coup in Petrograd to be a German conspiracy, while Hitler stressed the Jewish origins of the new political elite in Moscow. However, both dictators were impressed with the successful and thorough regime change engineered by the Bolsheviks in Russia. Both Mussolini and Hitler became heads of government in their respective states within the constitutional framework. As it happens, both leaders considered this political success insufficient. They sought to be more than the victors of a bourgeois election. Mussolini and Hitler cast themselves as revolutionaries and promoted their accession to power as the beginning of a new historical era.

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To tackle the Italian Fascists' and the Nazis' strange fascination with the October Revolution, I suggest two hypotheses: First, both Italian Fascism and German National Socialism were not ideologically homogeneous political movements. Second, the traditional categories of the political "right" and "left" ought not to be applied to revolutionary phenomena at the beginning of the 20th century (Sieferle 1995: 7).

In Italian Fascism, a clear distinction between "imperial" and "revolutionary" factions may be observed. The "imperial" tendency continued the tradition of the Risorgimento and welcomed Fascism as a "revolution" in the proper sense: In this view, Fascism reinstated the old authoritarian order of the Roman Empire and the medieval Church State (Alfredo Rocco, Luigi Federzoni). Conversely, the "revolutionary" faction took an anti-bourgeois stance and highlighted the innovative meta-historical significance of Fascism (Berto Ricci, Romano Bilenchì) (Buchignani 2006: 11).

A similar dichotomy is present in early National Socialism. On the one hand, the anglophile and anti-Russian wing associated with Hitler and Rosenberg advocated the economic ideal of corporatist state capitalism. On the other hand, the Northern German wing associated with the Strasser brothers and Joseph Goebbels advocated anti-Western, pro-Russian perspectives. Concurrently, however, they backed a socio-political and economic order that guaranteed ownership of private property (Schulz 1975: 414f.).

Both Mussolini and Hitler eventually managed to integrate the different ideological factions into unified and powerful organizations. Mussolini closed the ranks behind him with his famous speech before parliament on 3 January 1925, in which he declared the end of the "revolution" and the "return to order" (Duggan 2014: 212). During a "Führertagung" in Bamberg on 14 February 1926, Hitler rallied his closest followers around him. He established a binding party line and drew Goebbels to his side (Schüddekopf 1960: 201).

Mussolini's and Hitler's revolutionary zeal was not grounded in the historical circumstances of their respective ascensions to power but hinged on ideological convictions. Both conceived their political projects as a radical negation of traditional state forms, which they viewed as antiquated. This explains why the October Revolution was a highly attractive model for Fascist and National Socialist historical self-interpretation. However, historical events had to be bent in order to accommodate the desired revolutionary romanticism in both cases. In hindsight, Mussolini spoke about the "march on Rome," thus insinuating that

he had entered Rome at the helm of a battalion of revolutionary Black Shirts. The reality, however, was much more prosaic. On 28 October 1922, Vittorio Emanuele III gave in to pressure from Mussolini and refused to sign a decree that would have allowed for the stamping out of Fascist aggression against the incumbent government. The next day, the king offered Mussolini the post of Prime Minister. It was only on 31 October that Mussolini staged the "Camicie nere della rivoluzione" (the "Black Shirts of the Revolution") during the Quirinal parade, which led to riots and left more than 20 dead and 200 injured (Woller 2016: 89). Angelica Balabanoff, a Russian-Italian socialist with close ties to Lenin, was appalled that Mussolini fancied himself a revolutionary who had successfully carried out a revolution (Balabanoff 1931: 121). Akin to the Bolsheviks' "storming of the Winter Palace," the "march on Rome" turned into a dominant Fascist self-interpretive myth. In both cases, the staged events masked historical realities. In revolutionary Petrograd, there had been no true "storming of the winter palace." Even the eye-witness John Reed depicted the Bolshevik coup as an affair of quite modest proportions in his report *Ten Days that Shook the World*. As late as 1920, the acclaimed theater director Nikolai Evreinov staged a mass spectacle in front of the Winter Palace with more than 10,000 extras. It was this show that imbued the revolution with the intended emotional effect on the public (Arns et al. 2017: 7). Evreinov's mass staging of the storming of the Winter Palace proved extremely successful: It shaped the imagery surrounding about the October Revolution for generations to come. A remarkable temporal dimension, however, separates the Revolution in Russia from the one staged in Italy. Three years had elapsed between the October Revolution in 1917 and Evreinov's open-air reconstruction in 1920, while Mussolini staged the "march on Rome" three days after his risky power game.

Hitler, too, wanted to be more than the victor of a bourgeois election. Mussolini served as a role model for Hitler from as early as November 1923, when Hitler first attempted to seize power. At a party meeting, Hermann Esser, the propaganda chief of the NSDAP, asserted solemnly: "We also have Mussolini of Italy in Bavaria. His name is Adolf Hitler" (Joachimsthaler 2000: 304). In January 1933, Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor within the unspectacular framework of the Weimar constitution. The Nazis later spoke about this event in terms of a "seizure of power" (*Machtergreifung*) and presented the events of 1933 as a revolution. Many observers interpreted Hitler's landslide victory as a

“counter-revolution” and the response to the communist November Revolution in 1918 (Nolte 1987: 31). However, the cruel abatement of the Röhm Putsch on 30 June 1934 demonstrated that the Jacobin phase of the Nazi revolution had come to an end. Hitler gathered the SA leaders as early as 1 July 1934, explaining that the main goal of a revolution was not political takeover but the education of the people. The revolutions of the past 2500 years had failed, he continued, because they did not care about this stabilizing period. Hitler commissioned the SA with the important task of spreading the ideas of the accomplished Nazi revolution among the German population (Sauer 1962: 685–966, 898).

For both Mussolini and Hitler, appointment as head of government in their respective countries was not sufficient legitimation. The problem with constitutional procedures, in their view, was the rather administrative notion of the “office.” The constitutional order in inter-war Italy and Germany stressed the importance of the executive position, not the incumbent’s person. Both leaders, however, aimed for more. They invoked their historical calling, relied on their personal charisma, and cared little about democratic compromises. Instead, they sought dictatorial powers. They did not want to rely solely on traditional “party” structures, which were compromised by weak parliamentary institutions and in any case could never represent the “whole” state. A much more impressive and palpable legitimation for the overwhelming aspirations of the two leaders was the idea of a revolutionary movement that allegedly incorporated the “will of the people.” As different as their ideologies may have been, the Russian Bolsheviks, the Italian Fascists, and the German National Socialists relied on the same legitimizing strategies for the unlimited exertion of their political power: In their own view, the “people” had to install them as heads of government in a revolutionary act. Especially important to the new Italian and German political elites was the aesthetic dimension of the Bolshevik revolution. Mussolini’s artistic vision of the Fascist state centered on futurism, while Hitler—following a brief flirtation with “Nordic Expressionism”—opted for a brutalist classicism that would endow the German Reich with an impressive design (Schmid 2005). Goebbels even called for the development of a Nazi propaganda cinema, following the example of Sergei Eisenstein. After watching Eisenstein’s *October* (1927), Goebbels noted the following in his diary: “Some mass scenes are very good. So this is the revolution. We can learn a lot from the Bolsheviks and their propaganda, especially when it comes to inciting people” (Goebbels 2003: 287).

Goebbels’s comments on Lenin’s death in 1924 testify to his high esteem for the leader of the Russian Revolution: “Lenin died on January 21, the greatest spirit of communist thought. It will be impossible to replace him. He was one of the leading minds in Europe. Maybe he will eventually become a legendary hero” (Bärsch 2008). In 1925, Goebbels gave a talk entitled “Lenin or Hitler?” in which he claimed that Lenin embodied the revolutionary type as such—the leader of the Red October had not succumbed to foul compromises and pursued his radical goals without irritation (Höver 2007: 39–48, 44). Compared to Goebbels, Hitler took a much more skeptical stance toward the Russian Revolution. At a party rally in Rosenheim on 6 August 1920, Hitler asked: “What has been achieved in Bolshevist Russia? Bureaucracy has expanded maximally, militarism is stronger than ever, and the death penalty is applied widely” (Hitler 1980: 172). Hitler had witnessed the upheaval of the “Bavarian Soviet Republic” in 1919. The leader of this short-lived communist state was Eugen Leviné (1883–1919). Leviné hailed from St. Petersburg but was naturalized in Germany in 1913. As head of the “Bavarian Soviet Republic,” Leviné received instructions from Lenin to take hostages from the petty bourgeoisie. Both Hitler’s anti-communism and his antisemitism were deeply shaped by the events in Munich in 1919 (Gellately 2007: 89f.). Hitler perceived Lenin himself as a “Jew” and a “mass murderer,” (Hitler 1980: 202, 374) and as a consequence, he downplayed the significance of the October Revolution. At an NSDAP party meeting on 21 October 1921 in Munich, he declared:

Russia is dominated by its agrarian economy and is not revolutionary at all! The Russian Revolution was fabricated in the revolutionary headquarters in Kraków and Lwów by Polish Jews with Austrian crowns. Austria has always been Russia’s arch enemy and sought to destroy the Russian empire with a revolution. (ibid.: 503–507, 505)

During his jail time in Landsberg, Hitler also read Lenin, probably merely in order to familiarize himself with his enemy’s ideological position (Over 2004: 18). In his autobiographic propaganda book *Mein Kampf* (1927), Hitler took a very critical stance toward Lenin’s philosophical works and described the Bolshevik regime as a Jewish dictatorship over Russian illiterates (Hitler 1934: 532, 586). According to this interpretation, Hitler continued the radical anti-Semitic tradition of Alfred Rosenberg—the architect of the party line toward Bolshevism and author of the pamphlet *Pest in Russia!* (1922) (Piper 2017).

In Italy, the situation was comparable. Right-wing intellectuals admired Lenin's political assertiveness, but the leader himself was eager to distance himself from his communist rival. The sympathizers of the "fasci di combattimento" expected Mussolini to serve as an "Italian Lenin," the savior of the Italian people. The socialist philosopher Giuseppe Rensi (1871–1941), who flirted with early forms of fascism, published a series of articles in Mussolini's newspaper *Il popolo d'Italia* in the summer of 1920, in which he called for a new and radical start for Italy. He affirmatively quoted Lenin's Machiavellian program, by which it was possible to create a majority by means of a dictatorship, but not a dictatorship by means of a majority. Rensi continued: "Every day, my admiration for the Russian dictator grows. That is a man. If there was among our politicians a single man who would be worth a quarter of him, we could draw a breath [...]" (Buchignani 2006: 19).

However, Mussolini was not the first candidate for the post of the Italian Lenin. Initially, Gabriele d'Annunzio overshadowed Mussolini. The "soldier-poet" had a proud reputation following his adventures as a combat pilot in World War One and his military coup in the city of Fiume in 1919. It was only after d'Annunzio retired to his self-made aesthetic reserve in his villa on Lake Garda that Mussolini moved to the fore. Il Duce presented himself as the spearhead of a new revolution that strove to abolish the "bourgeois" lifestyle and was no less radical than the Bolshevik revolution (ibid.: 91f.). Mussolini's stance toward the paradigm of the revolution changed considerably over the years. Until 1915, many positive remarks on the French Revolution were to be found in Mussolini's newspaper articles. After Italy entered the Great War, the revolution vanished from Mussolini's socialist agenda (Salvatori 2016: 87). He began to stress the importance of national consolidation and strong leadership. During the founding ceremony of the Fascist Party in Rome on 8 November 1921, Mussolini hailed Napoleon as one of the geniuses of the Italian people (ibid.: 92). In a newspaper article from 1919, Mussolini declared that Italy's participation in the war amounted to a national revolution:

We already carried out our revolution. In May 1915. [...] We call for the material and spiritual elevation of the Italian citizens (and not only of those who call themselves proletarians ...) and the greatness of our people in the whole world. (Mussolini 1951a: XII, 310–311)

Mussolini had a very ambivalent stance on Lenin. On the one hand, he criticized the Bolshevik regime, which he deemed crueler than the Tsar's (Mussolini 1951b: XIV, 117f.). On the other hand, he admired Lenin's assertiveness and his absolute will to power. Paradoxically, Mussolini declared that although he repudiated "all Bolshevisms," if he were to accept one, "it would be Lenin's Bolshevism from Moscow, exclusively because it has acquired gigantic, barbaric, and universal dimensions" (Mussolini 1951c: XVI, 157).

In his fight against labor movements during the "biennio rosso," Mussolini also pointed to Lenin's firm position:

The ministers of the liberal government do not have the courage to "suggest" to the workers that they return to their jobs, threatening them with instant dismissal. Lenin, the Bolshevik minister, ended a strike in the Putilov factory with the simple, clear and irrefutable words: "Those workers who do not resume their jobs by Monday will be sentenced to death." On Monday, no one was missing. (Mussolini 1951d: XIV, 248–250)

Mussolini was impressed with Lenin's success, which rested on his personal authority. In a series of staccato sentences, Mussolini acknowledged Lenin's eminent position of power: "In Lenin's Russia, there is only one authority: his. There is only one freedom: his. There is only one law: his" (Mussolini 1951e: XV, 91). In a speech in the Chamber on 1 December 1921, Mussolini himself highlighted the proximity of Fascism to Communism:

I recognize that there are no political affinities between us and the communists, but there are intellectual affinities. We, like you, consider necessary a centralized and unitary state, which imposes an iron discipline on all individuals with this difference: that you arrive at this conclusion via the concept of class, while we arrive there via the concept of nation. (Mussolini 1934: 219)

Mussolini called for a genuinely Italian revolution. He criticized the Italian Socialists, who blindly followed Lenin:

Instead of propagating and preparing an "Italian revolution" – a revolution that is not foreign, but complies with our historical climate and our specific needs – the official socialists started to dress up Italy in the short shirt of the Russian muzhik; they started to mold Italian life according to the Leninist model. (Mussolini 1951f: XIV, 98f.)

For Mussolini, the October Revolution was a conspiracy against the Russian people—not a Jewish one, as Hitler and Rosenberg maintained, but a German one. Mussolini interpreted the Jewish family names of many Russian revolutionaries as a “tedescheria,” as “Germans.” It turns out, however, that Mussolini was not quite accurate in his biographical assessment. For Mussolini, Lenin was “Ceorbaum”—Mussolini had confused him with Yuli Martov, the leader of the Mensheviks, who actually opposed the October Revolution. Martov’s real name was “Cederbaum.” Furthermore, Mussolini points to the revolutionaries Apfelbaum, Rosenfeld, and Bronstein. These are the real names of the Bolsheviks Zinov’ev, Kamenev, and Trotsky (Mussolini 1951g: X, 41). On 4 December 1917, Mussolini promptly concluded in one of his articles for *Il popolo d’Italia* that “Lenin’s government is German” (Mussolini 1951h: X, 111). On 2 March 1918, he added: “It makes no difference whether the Kaiser, the Tsar, or Lenin rules” (Mussolini 1951i: X, 359).

Mussolini’s party supporters also viewed Bolshevism as an ideology that was not to be imitated. At the same time, they saw more commonalities between Bolshevism and Fascism than between Fascism and capitalism. In early 1920, the futuristic poet Mario Carli (1888–1935) drew a close parallel between Moscow and Fiume. Between both cities, he saw a dark ocean with two brightly lit shores, Moscow and Fiume. He called for a bridge between these two beacons. Moreover, he admired Lenin and was impressed with the “cold force of this small man” (Buchignani 2006: 88, 92).

In a similar vein, the Fascist writer Berto Ricci (1905–1941) highlighted in 1927 that there was indeed a counterpart to the Fascist city of Rome. He stressed, however, that the opposite of the eternal city was not communist Moscow but capitalist Chicago. He called Rome the “capital of the soul” and Chicago the “capital of the pig” (ibid.: 92).

Curzio Malaparte (1858–1957) interpreted fascism and Bolshevism at the beginning of the 1920s as complementary projects. In his view, both were directed against the bourgeois system of Western modernism. Fascism, however, occupied a higher position than Bolshevism because Fascism could look back on a long tradition of Latinity and Catholicism (ibid.: 138).

Not all observers were as complacent as Ricci and Malaparte. In an article titled “Lenin and Mussolini” in 1923, Harold Laski warned against the dangers of the new totalitarian movements: “For every system which fails to rely upon persuasion and agreement will always attract

to itself men who are capable of neither” (Laski 1923: 53). In 1933, Hugo Fischer explicitly stated that Mussolini was “someone who had learned from Lenin” (Fischer 2018: 62).

There is a strange kind of revolutionary competition between Bolshevism, Fascism, and National Socialism. What is the reason for this rivalry? Historically, none of these three movements had a real revolution at its starting point. Nevertheless, their leaders insisted on the revolutionary quality of their ascension to power. In order to give an answer to this problem, it is necessary to consider the inflated number of self-declared revolutions against the backdrop of world history. A good theoretical framework is provided by Harold J. Berman in his groundbreaking study *Law and Revolution* from 1983.¹ Berman holds that the Western legal tradition started with the Papal Revolution in 1075 and developed a series of subsequent revolutions, i.e., the German Reformation, the Glorious Revolution in England, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and finally, the Russian Revolution. As a common feature of these revolutions, Berman highlights their claim to salvation. The European revolutionaries do not confine themselves to considering this life as an Augustinian waiting room for the Civitas dei but consider the world as a Holy Empire in its own right. The Heavenly Kingdom must be installed in the historical present. All six revolutions mentioned by Berman shift the line between Godly providence and human contingency. Berman points to the fact that every revolution creates a new system of coordinates with a specific set of features: There is a collection of authoritative writings, a hermeneutic toolbox for analysis, and an educational organization that educates new experts.

Berman also analyses the Russian Revolution in these conceptual terms. Considering the reception of the Russian Revolution by Italian Fascists and German National Socialists, the newly established Communist history of salvation challenged competing visions in the totalitarian projects in Italy and Germany. The Fascist and Nazi models of human progress embraced somewhat similar ideas, such as social justice and solidarity. However, they soon ended up in a conflict with Bolshevism because every model insisted on its own exclusive truth. It is likely that divergent ideological contents did not even play the most

¹Berman’s conception was deeply influenced by Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy’s *Out of Revolution: Autobiography of Western Man* (1938) (Höslé 2017: 41).

important role in this debate. More decisive was the claim of all three systems to first accelerate history in the revolutionary process, to slow it down after the "uprising," and to eventually transform history into a timeless state of everlasting happiness. For Soviet Communism, this final stage consisted in the Marxian withering away of the state and the establishment of social welfare according to the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Italian Fascism wanted to embed individual existence in the framework of the family, the community, the nation, and the state. Mussolini described this ideal in his "Doctrine of Fascism" in 1932 as follows: "The foundation of Fascism is the conception of the State, its character, its duty, and its aim. Fascism conceives of the State as an absolute, in comparison with which all individuals or groups are relative, only to be conceived of in the relation to the State" (Mussolini 1933: 21). National Socialism propagated the idea of the Reich, which would eventually—echoing the Romantic tradition—create "the beauty and the dignity of a higher mankind." The state assumed only an intermediary function in this conception. It was only a means to reaching the "ideal Reich" (Hitler 1934: 434, 487).

All three systems legitimated their existence on the basis of an authoritative ideology. Bolshevism, Fascism and National Socialism disrupted historical development and understood themselves—much like the Papal Revolution of 1075—as an entirely new system of ideas of justice, morality, and societal organization. Ernst Nolte correctly observes that the Bolshevik, Fascist, and National Socialist revolutions were party revolutions that annihilated their political adversaries according to a logic of civil war (Nolte 1987: 5, 67). All three systems initiated an alternative order of law, a set of authoritative writings, a tradition of orthodox interpretation, and autonomous practices of distribution. Ultimately, Bolshevism, Fascism and National Socialism insisted on their revolutionary origins because they propagated a mutually exclusive truth that affected the core of their existence: The state will either disappear (Bolshevism), be reinforced (Fascism), or be transcended (National Socialism).

Comparison of the three revolutionary movements lays bare the inherent contradictions in their ideological foundations. Every revolution is, first and foremost, an act. A revolution, moreover, is only successful when the act of revolting ends. A permanent revolution will eventually

destroy itself. To preserve the achievements brought about by the revolution, the revolutionary act must transform itself into a "state"—a state of being, as well as a state of governing. The main problem for Bolshevism, Fascism and National Socialism was their inability to conclude a mutually binding contract between state and society. All three movements suffered from an overdose of ideology. Ideas cloaked in emotions, not democratic representation, provided the main legitimacy for the totalitarian governments. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, Berman's teacher, examined this phenomenon from a historical perspective (Rosenstock-Huessy 1938). In his groundbreaking study, Rosenstock-Huessy points to the timing of each of the three principal revolutions that characterize modernity, especially regarding the relation between action and ideology. In England, action preceded ideology; in France, action and ideology coincided; in Russia, ideology preceded action. The Glorious Revolution transpired, and ideological explanations of the revolutionary events were given *post factum*. The French Revolution occurred at "high noon," just when political philosophy had caught up with historical reality. Finally, the Russian Revolution occurred due to a highly elaborate set of ideas and plans, which is why its historical manifestation in October 1917 was poor and essentially amounted to a coup. Rosenstock-Huessy does not explicitly deal with Fascism and National Socialism, but it is obvious that both "revolutions" suffered from the same excess of ideology as the Bolshevik coup. All three totalitarian systems rejected the notion of a self-regulating society. Instead, they advocated the creation of a "new man," be it "l'uomo nuovo," the German "Herrenmensch," or the socialist worker. Both the English and the French Revolutions aimed at—and achieved—the constitutionalization of monarchic power. Conversely, the totalitarian revolutions of the early 20th century worried little about constitutions and the legal regulation of policy making. For all three movements, the highest political truth was already known and revealed to the elites. It just needed to be staged and implemented in public—there was no need for discussion, let alone revision. At certain times, ideas may exert considerable attraction on the masses. However, societal reality changes over time—ideology does not. This may explain why the totalitarian state projects in Europe were short lived, lasting only one (Germany), two (Italy) or seven decades (Russia), respectively.

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