

10. The Rise of Fascism

Interpreting historical events

A review in the Independent of Donald Sassoon's book, *Mussolini and The Rise of Fascism* (2008) places a spotlight on the intention and accuracy of revisionist theories. "In 1919, Benito Mussolini assembled a political ragbag of followers in Milan and launched a movement that was to become the National Fascist Party in 1921. As the cult of ducismo strengthened in the 1920s, the high priests of Fascism began to hail their leader as "divine Caesar."

"It is fashionable these days to claim Mussolini as a fundamentally decent fellow, led astray by an opportunist alliance with Hitler. Whether revisionism is the song and dance of a minority, or something more widespread and foolish, is hard to say. A recent biography by Nicholas Farrell referred to Benito Mussolini as an unfairly maligned leader whose "charisma" and Machiavellian adroitness were "phenomenal." Others beg to differ.

"This book by the historian Donald Sassoon leaves one in no doubt that Italian Fascism was as meretricious as it was vile. In his analysis, Mussolini was one of the first modern leaders to achieve power in "exceptional circumstances." Italy, after the First World War, was convulsed by political violence. Discontent ran high as demobbed soldiers roamed the streets in search of work, and shop-floor grievances multiplied. He exploited fears of communism and offered a dream of a second Roman Empire."

"Italy was a mirror too of unease, unrest and discontent elsewhere in Europe, ravaged by war. The period 1919-1920 saw unprecedented social strife in Turin, Milan and Bologna; the middle classes watched in horror as life seemed to tumble into chaos," amidst strikes galore and fragile occupations. A firm hand was needed with the poet & aviator Gabriele D'Annunzio a possible candidate," but Fascism reared its head.

What followed next was a disregard for democracy and its institutions. Action was required and quickly. "Followers were dubbed "legionaries" to recall ancient Roman greatness, and displayed a violent contempt for parliamentary liberalism. In September 1919, they seized the Adriatic port of Fiume in the newly formed kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and then reclaimed it as Italian territory."

"For a little more than a year, Fiume functioned as an independent, quasi-Fascist republic and was, says Sassoon, a turning point for the 20th century. Mussolini learnt from D'Annunzio how intimidation helped to consolidate power. *Mussolini and the Rise of Fascism* has provided a useful corrective to apologetic accounts of Mussolini, and the darkness that was blackshirt rule in Italy." Whilst exploring the motives we need to understand the psyche of leaders and also that of the populous who, whether in Germany or Italy, became utterly disillusioned.

Connecting the strands

For Martin Gilbert, "Three facets of politics came together in 20th century European Fascism. The first is the one-party State and totalitarian rule. The second is nationalism that pushed beyond the nation's borders. The third is racism. Each in its turn brought to twentieth-century Europe a vast destruction of human enterprise and human life. With collapse of continental European Empires in 1918, the way had seemed clear for a host of new, democratic nations based on the most recent western ideals of that era: universal suffrage; equal justice for all, legal and social; religious tolerance, and minority rights."

The paradox and illusion of peace is highlighted by Martin Gilbert. "War was to become an anachronism through disarmament. Indeed, war as a means of deciding differences between sovereign states was formally abolished in 1924 by the Kellogg-Briand Pact; both of whose distinguished authors were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. There would be no more war. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) would protect workers in farms and factories from exploitation."

"The Minority Rights Treaty of the League of Nations would protect those who came within the new national borders, but who did not share the language or origins, or religion of those who made up the majority of the nation." The issue was would all nations sign up to these ideals in action as well as words and were they in a position to enforce and police them.

"An examination of what went wrong reveals several connected reasons. First, the post-war treaties at Versailles, Trianon, St. Germain and Lausanne not only created new nations but also nations like Hungary and Italy who felt aggrieved at insufficient territories. The treaties also created multi-national entities like Yugoslavia – an uneasy amalgam of different peoples as shown by its formal title: The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes; and that made no mention of the Bosnians or Herzegovinians or Kosovars."

"The economic strains caused not only by the destruction and costs of the First World War, but by heavy reparations payments demanded by the victors of those whom they had defeated, led to further abnormal situations – social unrest, economic disruption and widespread unemployment."

Gilbert emphasises, "There was also in many nations, especially the defeated ones, a sense of the need of dramatic national self-assertion. To all this, the appeal of the confident leader, of the autocrat, of the one-party State was widespread and, for many, irresistible. The Italians were the first people to turn to one-man rule. Mussolini treated the Italian parliament and judiciary with contempt." The reason was clear. "Had there been a longer democratic tradition or a greater respect for the institution of democracy, the Opposition – which did exist – might have prevailed."

"In Italy, Fascism came not only with the charismatic leader Mussolini, but also with the harsh apparatus of repression: the growing rigours of a police state. Establishment of totalitarian rule by Mussolini and his Fascisti was to set a pattern for dictatorship in many countries in Europe between November 1922 and January 1933." Fascism was contagious.

"The pattern was stark, and widely emulated: ignoring parliamentary institutions (Matteotti's cry "long live parliament" had cost him his life); emasculating the judiciary (Hitler was to set up People's Courts in which judges had to be members of the Nazi Party); legalising Fascist thugs – Italian Blackshirts who had earlier terrorised the citizens in the streets were legalised, just as Hitler was to legalise his Brownshirts; closing all critical newspapers and publications, and the despatch of recalcitrant editors to prison and concentration camps; abolishing the right to strike, and making all protests subject to severe punishments and strict censorship of books including school textbooks and films."

"Censorship of school textbooks was an essential element to maintain Fascism: a perversion of classroom ethics and the elimination from the curriculum of everything liberal, humane or critical. This was followed by distributing state enterprises and confiscated enterprises to Party officials for their personal gain."

"Greed played a central part in bringing all sorts of people to support the One-Party State: industrialists, bankers, teachers, shopkeepers, even neighbours with their eye on another neighbour's property. Greed as well as ideology could lead to the acceptance of totalitarian rule by those who put their selfish interests first."

"We should remember the warning given in 1936 by British historian and political liberal, H.A.L. Fisher: "Progress is not a law of nature. The ground gained by one generation may be lost by the next." The thoughts of men may flow into channels which lead to disaster and barbarism. In Nazi Germany, those thoughts were deliberately subverted by the imposition of an extreme philosophy in the teaching of the young, starting at the stage of kindergarten."

"Byron was cited. "Those who fail to stand up to emerging totalitarianism in its earliest days might also remember Lord Byron's perceptive, frightening couplet:

*A thousand years scarce serve to form a State,
An hour can lay it in the dust.*

Another feature of Fascism that became widespread was ostentatious and dramatic show and display. For Mussolini and his followers, uniforms, banners and symbols became all important. Even the handshake was replaced by an arm's-length salute, which Hitler later emulated. Above all, terror pitted itself against good government: against the striving of social forces for social justice."

The contagion effect

A ripple effect was inevitable as Martin Gilbert asserts. "The success of Fascist totalitarianism in Italy in 1922 was followed in varying forms in Turkey, Portugal, Hungary and Romania. In each, some aspects of the rule of law were preserved, but not after 1933 in Germany. There, Hitler's contribution and that of his Nazi Party, was to accelerate and intensify the totalitarian structure. Using terror in the streets to tyrannise the population, and emergency decrees to give spurious legitimacy to suppress Germany's democratic institutions, Hitler outstripped even Mussolini. Within a few months, he extended his terror throughout Germany under the symbol of the Swastika – cruelly perverted from its Sanskrit origin as a symbol of harmony."

"At the same time that Nazism was being imposed on Germany, a mirror image of Hitler's totalitarian rule was being created in the Soviet Union. Stalin's version of Communism, under the symbol of the Hammer and Sickle, was not only a mirror of Hitler's Nazism but, in the end (lasting, as it did, three times as long as Nazi rule) was responsible for as many innocent civilian victims as all of Europe's Fascist regimes combined."

"The internal victims of Fascism, as of Communism, were drawn from every area of society: civil servants, professional men and women, teachers and scholars, trade unionists, priests of every faith, scientists, doctors, journalists and judges. No liberal-thinking person, no critic of tyranny, was immune from arrest and even execution. How did this happen? The clearest exposition was made by one of Hitler's German victims, former First World War submarine commander, and later clergyman, Pastor Niemoller."

"When they came for the Communists, I did not speak up as I was not a Communist. When they came for the Jews, I did not speak up as I was not a Jew. When they came for the trade unionists, I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist. When they came for the Catholics, I did not speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me. By that time there was no one left to speak up for anyone."

"The totalitarian regimes of Europe eliminated democracy and crushed dissent. Then they turned, in every case, to territorial expansion. The first to do so was Mussolini. His nation, although one of the victorious powers of the First World War, felt cheated of further spoils – including a slice of the Ottoman Empire. Flouting the League of Nations, Mussolini invaded first Ethiopia, then Albania and finally Greece. In Ethiopia he used poison gas, prompting Thomas Hardy to make the bitter comment on Catholicism – for Italy was a Roman Catholic country: after two thousand years of Mass, we've come as far as poison gas."

"Mussolini's territorial aggressions were overseas; Hitler's within Europe. First he remilitarised his own Rhineland province, then he annexed his birthplace Austria, and then he annexed the mainly German-speaking (but never before German) Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. These three aggressions were made without European military challenge. Mussolini's territorial designs on Ethiopia were actually condoned by British and French Foreign Ministers, Samuel Hoare and Pierre Laval. Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland was agreed at a conference in Munich, at which the British and French Prime Ministers, Neville Chamberlain and Edward Daladier, took the initiative to prevail upon the Czechs to surrender vital territory."

"Appeasement practised by the great democracies in the 1930s was the ultimate green light for the suppression of democracy elsewhere. Small states were considered expendable. Only with Hitler's invasion of Poland did the worm turn – and Britain and France declared war on the tyrant."

Gilbert puts his finger on the pulse of democracy. "What had been lacking was any common front, any common purpose among the democracies against the dictators. It was as if the Fascist ideals could unite those of like-minded views, while the democratic ideals could not. Democracy, widespread as it was, lacked a sense of common destiny and almost failed to survive. It was a lack of common purpose between 1933 and 1939 by those who were in fact equally threatened, which enabled Germany and Japan to pick them off, one by one. China was the first victim of the bystander syndrome, followed by Austria and Czechoslovakia."

In a book on the 1930s, Malcolm Muggeridge was forthright, "Each stage in this process was marked by solemn protests, diplomatic notes, conferences, appeals to the League, statements of policy, editorial fulmination, heated parliamentary debates and questions, agitated coming and going of politicians and discussion both private and public, both spoken and written."

"Like frightened householders who hear a burglar below, the British and French Governments discussed what preventative measures they should take, picked up a poker and then put it down again, shouting downstairs that if the burglar did not make off, they would fall upon him, or at least call the police. They even considered parleying with him, that if he left the fish knives, they saw no objection to his taking other cutlery, in reason. At last, they fell back on deriving what comfort they might from the thought that, at any rate, he did not know the formula for opening the safe." Their own safety was the paramount consideration."

Inevitably, this led to the relentless quest of European Fascism. Martin Gilbert states "It also revealed in its military aspect an ugly facet of national leadership – the decision of a dozen states to join in the apparently unstoppable march of conquest. Thus Hungary seized parts of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, and participated in the German invasion of both Yugoslavia and Greece. Thus Romania cast its lot with the dictators and joined Hitler against Russia. Thus Lithuania – even in the few days after Soviet forces left and before the Germans arrived – initiated the massacre of its Jewish citizens with a savage butchery in the streets."

"The success of Fascism bred ugly side effects. Greed could lead even conquered peoples to pillage and murder fellow victims, if they were of another race or creed. The German SS, the spearhead of terror and execution in conquered lands, received, and relied upon, volunteers from almost every conquered nation, although not from Poland. Special volunteer SS units were established by the Danes, Dutch, Belgians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and even Bosnian Muslims. Tyranny not only crushes decent elements in mankind; it also encourages the evil elements."

Gilbert then turns to racism. "It was the racist element in Nazism that enabled the SS killing squads to be turned upon the Gypsies as well as the Jews. Nor was the racism of totalitarian regimes a new feature when Hitler came to power in 1933. In Turkey, hundreds of thousands of Armenians were massacred in 1921 and 1922. The Armenians were Christian victims."

"Under the harsh military orders of a Spanish General (and later dictator) Francisco Franco, Muslims in Spanish Morocco suffered cruelly. Not only German Nazis (almost all of them born of Christian parents), but also Christian-born Hungarians, Romanians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukrainians, Croats, turned against the Jews."

Simmering anger and resentment

Nationalism and pride seared the German soul. "The conviction, deep-rooted in the Germans army, was remaining undefeated. Only inept and treacherous politicians forced Germany to surrender, and lack of food caused by a cowardly blockade, kept in place until 1919. Before the English came we starved. Berliners were identifiable by prominent cheekbones, sallow complexions and ill-fitting clothes as not only the poor went hungry. Market-places became soup kitchens, feeding thousands daily from every class of society. Hunger is a great leveller. The rag-picker stood cheek by jowl with the professor."

No remorse was apparent; only seething resentment of Treaty conditions and humiliations imposed by occupying the Rhineland. "This meant invading our private life, being unable to write letters, telephone or telegraph or publish newspaper articles, nor gather in cafes without consent." The republic was regarded with enormous cynicism and occupation with stoical acceptance, but far better that than spreading the cancer of Bolshevism. "Sphinx-like and proud," an industrious and indefatigable nation was determined to emerge strong again.

The American attitude was not unlike the British in despising the French approach to money, and war reparation especially, "repeated by commentators of every class and political hue." German efficiency and energy was admired, "once arrogant and overbearing, now bewildered and wrestling with anarchy." After Treaty terms were made public, vitriolic posters appeared, venting fury at the Jews: "End of Militarism: Beginning of Jew Rule"; "A government of Jews" and "Open Your Eyes" typified blame.

Between 1921 and 1923, the Weimar Republic experienced hyperinflation. The government believed it could pay off its debts by winning the war and imposing massive reparation on the defeated Allies. The mark devalued from 4.2 to 7.9 against the dollar and quickly fell further. By the first few months of 1921 the exchange rate was around 90 marks. Problematic as that was the 'London Payment Plan' changed the tune entirely.

An Allied ultimatum required Germany to pay in gold or foreign currency. A levy of 26% of Germany's exports was added with the first payment in June, resulting in a spike to 330 marks to the dollar. Hyperinflation had started. By December 1922 the exchange rate was

7,400 marks, leaving Germany completely unable to repay its reparation commitments. By November 1923 a US dollar was worth 4,210 bn German marks. The economy had melted.

A Rentenmark, backed by gold, was adopted. Twelve zeros were cut, enabling the exchange rate to remain stable. The Rentenmarks in circulation increased three-fold by July 1924. A critical John Maynard Keynes said, "The various belligerent governments, unable or too timid or too-short-sighted to secure from loans or taxes the resources they required, have printed notes for the balance." Reparations accounted for one third of government debt and left an unpalatable choice: stop inflation and cause bankruptcies and unemployment and the collapse of civil order, or default on foreign debt. Adolph Hitler felt this a simple choice to make.

At 12:30 on 9 November 1923 twelve members of the Nazi Party were shot dead in a failed putsch. Hitler dedicated the first volume of *Mein Kampf* to them as he began his sentence in the Fortress of Landsberg five months later. Denouncing the Treaty, Jews and government, Hitler made an impression with the judge who gave him a derisory sentence of nine months. Even the Manchester Guardian reported, "Hitler is the hero of the hour."

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler refers to "a personal spirit of nationalism and a sense of social justice," inculcated in the hearts of youth. "A nation of citizens will arise to be forged by a common love and a common pride, unshakable and indestructible forever." Implicit was restricting the rights of states, not just for financial reasons but to maintain autocratic control of each one, and therefore all states. The strategy was clear: divide and rule to unify, under your control.

Hitler bitterly resented the collapse of German government from 1918. "The leadership of our people was just as miserable as it was conceited." The attitude of France was abominable he thundered. "During the winter of 1922-23, everyone should have seen the iron determination France displayed, as she continued to pursue her original war aims, even after peace was declared." Obsessing Hitler was the French intent of breaking up Germany into small states, and exacting the highest price possible on Germany through reparation, disarmament and "economic and political destruction." Borders had been shifted too with Alsace & Lorraine and Upper Silesia lost and the wide and long Danzig corridor, leaving an isolated East Prussia.

Capping it all was France occupying the Ruhr on 11 January 1923, with full access to iron and coal reserves, in breach of the Versailles Treaty. Negotiation was pointless. Only a resurgent and militaristic Germany could combat appalling and vengeful treatment. It was not difficult for Hitler to write the script, nor a decade or so later to carry out his intentions – by force.

In 1925, at the conclusion of a European peace conference, the Locarno Pact was signed, reaffirming national boundaries decided by the Treaty of Versailles. In a spirit of goodwill, German entry into the League of Nations was approved. By 1930 German Foreign Minister, Gustav Stresemann, had negotiated removal of the last allied troops from the demilitarised Rhineland, reasserting the desire for continued peace. It was inevitable Germany would seek return of a still demilitarized zone, either through negotiation, or more likely military means.

The Wall Street crash intensified financial pressures. Christopher Isherwood, living in Berlin, wrote later, "Here was the seething brew of history in the making, a brew which would test the truth of all the political theories, just as cooking tests the cookery books. The Berlin brew seethed with unemployment, stock market panic, hatred of the Versailles Treaty and other potential ingredients."

Life in 1930s Germany

On 14 September 1930, the political landscape shifted with the Nazis winning 107 seats in a federal election. Press baron, Lord Rothermere, in Munich at the time, was delighted but not diplomat Sir Horace Rumbold. He was in the Reichstag when "these Fascists made their entrance in forbidden uniforms," concealed beneath overcoats. Rumbold thought they were play-acting with their Nazi salute and mannerisms, hurling insults at the Communists. He did concede though a new spirit in the country had been created, and a wish "to get a move on."

That night, shop windows were smashed in Berlin, including the department stores Wertheim and Tietz. Rumbold, though visibly shocked at these targets, was appalled on his arrival at the number of Jews in Berlin. Resentment of Jewish business success was widespread.

Rumbold reported back to the Foreign Office in 1931, "No-one has any money, the price of bread does not fall, unemployment remains high. People do not see how they are going to come through the winter. They seem to themselves to have nothing to lose and nothing to hope for; it is the lack of hope which makes the situation seem to them so depressing and makes it difficult for Brüning (Chancellor) to keep them in hand."

Writing from Berlin in 1932, diplomat Harold Nicholson said the Nazis had "mobilised and co-ordinated the discontented into an expectant group." He doubted Nazism could last, saying "it was a doctrine of despair." He had misjudged Hitler, the fanaticism of his followers and mood of people. Hitler became Chancellor on 30 January 1933. Hindenburg realised his preferred candidate Franz von Papen did not command support. "That evening saw a Nazi extravaganza in Berlin. It started like a 'glittering serpent' with the youth of Germany on the march. Six abreast they came with their brown shirts, each carrying a flaming torch, in a procession that was five hours long. No one would forget the tramping boots, beating drums, Nazi marching songs and shouts of Germany awake." The atmosphere was both electric and euphoric."

Four weeks later the Reichstag was burned down with the blame put on communists. On 24 March, Hindenburg signed papers giving Hitler the authority he required. The Reichstag was redundant. The position of Jews was now more precarious. On 1 April Stormtroopers took up positions outside Jewish shops, blocking the entrances. Isherwood's landlady, formerly a Communist, spoke of Der Führer as did many, united by the common enemy of Communism and "bacillus corrupting German blood and race." Little comment was made by foreigners who were impressed by German efficiency, cleanliness, ability to get things done and order.

Parades, ceremonies, bands and salutes were now re-enacted every Sunday in cities, towns and villages. At 7:00 am, loudspeakers blasted out the 'Horst Wessel', and ended close to midnight with the inevitable torchlight procession. The Goebbels propaganda machine turned next to burning books in some 30 university towns. In Berlin, a crowd of 40,000 gathered as trucks and cars piled high with books, accompanied by students, slowly made their way along five miles of streets late evening to a funeral pyre, twelve feet square and five feet high. The climax came at midnight. Mounting a rostrum, Goebbels declared "Jewish intellectualism is dead; the German soul can again express itself." Hitler had been in power exactly 100 days.

Even in 1923, with hyperinflation, Germany revived flagging festivals and concerts. Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* was a particular favourite; so was the venue, Bayreuth. In 1925 Hitler attended a performance of *Parsifal*, a mirror image of himself, summoned to heal Germany's gaping wounds. Hitler's presence in 1925 greatly added to the National Socialist fervour. At the end of *Die Meistersingers* the audience rose spontaneously to sing *Deutschland über Alles*. Toscanini was invited in 1925, and again in 1933 but declined, aware of the treatment meted

out to Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer. The Manchester Guardian said a visitor could be excused for thinking they were attending a Hitler and not Wagner festival.

In Hamlein, an annual October festival took place with peasants travelling from all quarters of the Reich. Expectation was high as the huge crowd awaited the arrival of Hitler's motorcade. This was a heady mix of folk traditions, a mock battle, fireworks, food and Führer himself. A competing attraction was Oberammergau with the stunning backdrop of the Bavarian Alps. In 1930 the play was seen by 100,000 foreigners, many British and American. Thomas Cook placed an advert for the August 1934 performance, attended by an enthralled Hitler. Goering talked about faith too; faith in the Führer. In a plebiscite, Hitler was given an unconditional mandate by the country. In pious Oberammergau, 92% voted for him. A victory bonfire was lit in celebration.

For spectacle and show, nothing transcended the Nuremburg rallies held between 1933 and 1938: incessant marching, beating of drums, sweeping searchlights, thousands of gigantic red and white swastikas, and wave after wave of goose-stepping precision and synchronisation. The Manchester Guardian reported "it was like Independence Day, Bastille Day and Empire Day rolled into one" – except it lasted an entire week.

At Königsburg in 1934, Sir Arthur Wilson MP spoke of National Socialism in glowing terms. Not mentioned was Hitler's 'night of the long knives' in eliminating his opponents. Wilson admired the intense energy, patriotic fervour of youth and the search for national unity "because it is wholly unselfish and wholly good." Yet Dachau greatly troubled him. He would never forget the "fear, haunting fear; a sense of utter subjugation to an arbitrary ruthless will." Michael Burn, a writer and poet visited in 1935. Years later, he questioned his indifference to horrific punishments inflicted for speaking out, absence of justice, and for feeling almost impervious to the fate of Communists, gypsies, homosexuals, 'lunatics' and Jews.

A returning Australian diplomat to Germany was struck by the improved physical appearance of people; spruced up, neatly pressed trousers and a spring in their step, pleased too with the clean up, citing tawdry bookstores and theatres and cinemas with "pornographic tendencies." Army representative Mary Allen, one of many women to have an audience with Hitler, found him charming, courteous, kind and patient, convinced enduring friendship would follow. A British Legion contingent in 1935 was deeply impressed by his simplicity, sincerity, intensity, inspired leadership and fanatical devotion to his country. Admiration extended to the upper middle and upper classes, swayed and seduced by the propaganda and contrived settings, exemplified by the Mitfords and Cliveden set. There were many others.

Literary admirers included Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and Henry Williamson, one of several English guests invited to Nuremburg. Even T.S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats were accused of having sympathies. Graham Greene and Jean-Paul Sartre were fascinated by Berlin, whilst Somerset Maugham often travelled to Munich, despite having his books burned. Samuel Beckett visited Germany in 1936, perhaps hoping to see famous paintings. On arriving in Hamburg all works of 'degenerate' art had already been removed. By the time he reached Munich in 1937 the mood was sombre and bleak. A weary Beckett was convinced Germany would fight soon.

Churchill, alarmed at events, sensed "odious conditions" prevailing in Germany, concerned too by "the threat of persecution and pogrom of Jews," citing Poland especially. In early March 1936, Hitler denounced the Locarno Pact and, in defiance, began military occupation of the Rhineland. In a speech to the Commons on 16 March Churchill said, "We cannot look with much pleasure on our foreign policy in the last five years. They have been disastrous years.

We have seen the most depressing and alarming changes in the outlook of mankind ever taken place in such short a period. We felt safe, were able to look forward to peace, enjoy treasures that science brings and ensure justice prevails.”

This reflected the idealism of the League of Nations. Ineffective, and a bureaucracy, it was ridiculed by dictators. Hitler’s elevation to Chancellor and invasion of the Rhineland shattered the dream of avoiding war. So did Japan’s incursions in China, Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia and Franco’s dictatorship in Spain, especially if Fascism linked arms.

The drumbeats get louder

Sympathy in Britain was evident in upper echelons of society and amongst working classes, hostile to Communists and those with anti-Semitic tendencies. After meeting Mussolini in January 1932, Oswald Mosley disbanded his unpopular New Party to form the British Union of Fascists. Three years later he reorganised the BUF, preserving the ‘pure and immutable’ Blackshirt. This was reserved for those performing ‘conspicuous service,’ in committing to two evenings a week and party discipline. A distinctive badge was awarded. Such dress was not stipulated for those with a ‘political mind’ only, unmoved by any ‘spiritual passion for the brotherhood of Fascism.’

A large BUF rally at Olympia on 7 June 1934 turned ugly when 500 hecklers were attacked by twice as many Blackshirt stewards. On Sunday 4 October 1936, massed crowds turned back an army of Blackshirts in ‘The Battle of Cable Street.’ The BUF blamed communist agitators. Jews were advised to keep away; many didn’t. The battle cry was, ‘One, two, three, four, five – we want Mosley dead or alive.’ The march was disbanded. That very same month Oswald Mosley married Diana Mitford in the house of Joseph Goebbels. Adolph Hitler was one of only six guests. From that point the movement declined, although membership remained high in the East End.

After visiting Hitler in September 1936, Lloyd George verged on the euphoric in an interview with the Daily Express. “He is a born leader of men; a magnetic, dynamic personality with a single-minded purpose, a resolute will and a dauntless heart.” In a letter to Ribbentrop, Lloyd George was gushing in admiration of Hitler, even comparing him to Frederick the Great. An Anglo-German Fellowship, formed the previous year, comprised the rich and powerful, intent on fostering good relations. A monthly magazine gave glowing accounts of travellers, but a distinct coolness emerged from 1937 as British sympathies and friendship were questioned.

It was also clear from numerous press articles, Jewish refugees and concentration camps that Nazi intentions were anything but benign. Yet, optimists, including establishment figures, still clung to a belief that, by conceding reasonable demands, peace would prevail. Distinguished visitors continued to visit Germany in the late 1930s with the aim of dialogue, and to enhance mutual understanding. Added to these were those with Nazi sympathies. British ambassador, Sir Neville Henderson was impressed, especially with the son et lumière and grandiose ballet, surpassing Moscow.

The week of 20 September 1937 was devoted to air raid precautions with blacking out and no street lights. Cars were required to stop immediately and occupants had to run to the nearest shelter. To remain on the street was an offence, punishable by prison. The sight of over a hundred aircraft was a life-changing experience, though returnees to Germany still appeared convinced Hitler’s intentions were peaceful. The visit of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor

gave the perfect opportunity for the Nazis to showcase their social reforms. Lord Halifax was less impressed by his own rather frosty meeting with Hitler.

For many visitors, Germany had a magnetic appeal. Writer J.A. Cole, not a Nazi sympathiser, referred to Aachen, with a rising of the spirits in a place he could happily live; wide and tree-lined streets with pavements swept and washed. "People's faces shine with soap and water. The shops are smart and there is a cheering number of cafes. No hawkers and beggars stand in the gutters."

On 12 March 1938, Hitler annexed Austria – the Anschluss. In Linz, on the arrival of Hitler, vast crowds bellowed 'Sieg-heil, Sieg-heil ad nauseum. The Times published an article. "The drive to the Vienna station was difficult because of the long columns of incoming German mechanized units, and the almost hysterical crowds." From the windows of the night train, "ghostly processions of lorries, tractors and armoured vehicles could be seen moving towards Vienna, their headlights lighting up the countryside."

The scene was a reminder of Belgium in the Great War. Four weeks later a plebiscite was held throughout the Reich. The result was a 99.7% endorsement for the Anschluss. The urgency for Jews was to get out. Only later did it sink in for Austrians that living standards would not improve.

An undeterred Charterhouse hockey team set out in April for a tour of Germany. In Leipzig all public buildings were plastered with propaganda notices. The team stayed at the magnificent sports stadium in Cologne rather than with families. Homes were full with family and friends, eager to see Hitler who was drumming up support for Ja in the plebiscite. "Everywhere we went was the desire for friendship with England." This was an almost universal reaction to visitors. Their hosts found it incomprehensible that England would side with the French and therefore Russia too.

As September neared, Hitler's demands to acquire the Sudetenland became more strident. At issue were parts of Czechoslovakia on the borders of Moravia, Bohemia and Czech Silesia with mainly ethnic German speakers. Before World War 1 these areas had been part of Austria.

Hitler's concluding speech at the Nuremburg Rally on 12 September 1938 was ominous. He first castigated the conspiracy and dishonesty of capitalist democracy and Bolshevism, before turning to the suppressed minority of three and half a million Germans. Hitler was referring to the Sudetenland, insisting there must be an end to this injustice, a point he had made in the Reichstag on 20 February. He reminded the Rally that steps had been taken to reinforce the Army and Luftwaffe and greatly expand fortifications. Never again would Germany bow to alien will, referring to "the power of our weapons" and "the carriers of those weapons."

Five days later a para-military corps of ethnic Germans was formed in the Sudetenland. The Munich Agreement, signed on 30 September, required immediate Czech withdrawal, giving up all fortifications and heavy industry. The German army was to complete occupation by 10 October. Czech prime minister, Jan Syrový, likened the choice between "being murdered or committing suicide." In a radio broadcast he elaborated; it was either desperate and hopeless defence, or acceptance of conditions "unparalleled in history for ruthlessness." In Munich there was indescribable joy. Beer flowed and long lines linked arms. Oktoberfest was special.

In 1936, signs appeared in many German cities, 'Jews Not Welcome' and in July 1938 a law was passed requiring all Jews to carry identification cards. In late October 17,000 Jews of Polish descent, many of whom had lived in Germany for years, were arrested. They were to

be returned but the Polish government refused. Internment camps were set up. Amongst the deportees was Zindel Grynszpan who had lived in Hanover since 1911, running a small store. This was confiscated, along with the family home and possessions. A son, Herschel, was living in Paris with an uncle. On receiving the news he went to the Germany Embassy, intent on assassinating the Ambassador. He was not there. Instead, he settled for the Third Secretary, Ernst vom Rath. Critically wounded, Rath died two days later.

This gave Goebbels the perfect pretext to launch Kristallnacht, a pogrom against all German Jews. On the nights of 9 and 10 November rampaging mobs in Germany, Austria and the Sudetenland attacked Jews in the streets, in their homes, at work, own businesses and places of worship. Nearly 100 Jews were killed, thousands injured, over 7,500 businesses destroyed, between 1,000 - 2,000 synagogues torched and 30,000 Jews sent to concentration camps. Goebbels called these incidents spontaneous events, blaming the Jews for incitement.

On 12 November, Goering summoned the Nazi leadership to solve the Jewish question, "one way or another" to eliminate Jews from the German economy. A fine of one billion marks was levied for murdering vom Rath and 6 million marks paid by insurance companies for damage was given to the state. Over the next few months draconian action was taken to restrict the lives of Jews, including curfews and confiscation of radios. All weapons had to be handed in.

Even in the summer of 1939, visits to Germany were not uncommon, especially by those with links such as the Rev. Henry Percival Smith, attending a conference of the Anglo-German Brotherhood. Clearly, he was impressed by Hitler's Germany. "It is a chastening experience for an Englishman to see in Durham or South Wales, men of 22 years of age who have not done a day's work since they left school at the age of 14, and then see in Germany every young man being employed in some way or other."

Sir Evelyn Wrench, a prominent establishment figure, travelled with his wife by train from Lake Constance to Berlin, a journey of 13 hours. "We hardly saw any young men. We did not see an untidy human being or building right over the country, and outwardly a look of prosperity and well-being. We practically never saw an unused acre on our whole journey. I thought ashamedly of our derelict countryside at home." His final comment was a sobering assessment. "Their food production must be enormous."

His enduring thoughts on Germany repossessing former territory, and making gains, reflected the views of many. "They are so living in the grievances of the past twenty years that they ignore the sufferings of other nations. You simply can't get them to look at things from a European viewpoint. They are really suffering from a resentment and inferiority complex. As one hard-minded German said to me, "my nation is at the moment mentally ill; they can't see straight." Wrench had visited Germany many times but felt different now. "Being in Germany is not a pleasant experience." They took the advice of a German friend to leave early and to get back to England by 1 September.