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Fascism in Asia: a comparative analysis

Why India, China and Japan demonstrate that Fascism should be considered as a global phenomenon

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*To my parents, my constant source of inspiration,
and their tireless efforts.*

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This paper is a comparative study of the fascist phenomenon in three different Asian countries, namely India, China and Japan. The analysis of fascist movements in such states will demonstrate not only their importance for the political and historical developments of the respective nations, but it will also show why it is necessary to abandon a Eurocentric understanding of fascism and move towards a more global approach. Different interpretations of the fascist ideology will be taken into account, presenting the most authoritative definitions of its doctrine and the main sources of disagreement among scholars. For what concerns the Indian case, the essay will concentrate on Hindu nationalism in the pre-WWII period, on the activities of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers Association) and on the ties between Hinduism and Nazism. The following section will analyze Chiang Kai-Shek's figure, the fascist organization known as the Blue Shirts society and how Confucianism helped fascism to spread in China. Finally, the essay will focus on the Japanese political system from the end of the Meiji era to the totalitarian and repressive governments of the 1930's and 1940's'. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that Fascism cannot be circumscribed only to Europe and, for this reason, a fascist revival may be possible in those countries in which democratic values are not sufficiently protected.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

2. Defining Fascism

- 2.1. Explanations for the lack of an exhaustive definition
- 2.2. Differences and disagreements among scholars

3. India

- 3.1. Benoy Sarkar and Subhas Chandra Bose
- 3.2. The RRS and the Sangh Parivar
- 3.3. Palingenesis, Aryan race and Discipline
- 3.4. Some Conclusions on India

4. China

- 4.1. The fascism of Chiang Kai-Shek
- 4.2. The Blue Shirts
- 4.3. Neo-Confucianism and the New Life Movement
- 4.4. China's imperfect fascism

5. Japan

- 5.1. Meiji Restoration's aftermath and the Shōwa era
- 5.2. Imperialism and Militarism
- 5.3. The divine origin of the Diet – an insurmountable obstacle for Japanese fascists
- 5.4. Authoritarian conservatism over fascism

6. Conclusions

7. Bibliography

8. Riassunto

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1. Introduction

"[...] [I]t is important to see fascism as a phenomenon that was much more widespread than the borders of Europe, both between the wars and after [...]. Much of the (still meagre) material on "global" fascism "outside Europe" still sees Europe as the natural homeland of fascism; it is not clear why this is the case"¹

Fascism has generally been understood as an almost-exclusively European phenomenon. Most political analysts and historians have always kept their focus on the Old Continent, thoroughly describing the tumultuous and obscure Italian *Ventennio* and the horrors of Nazism in Germany, and only seldom pushing their scope beyond Portugal, Spain or Eastern Europe. Although many have interpreted some South American military regimes of the 20th century as "fascist", such forms of government seem to belong more to the traditional image of a junta or military dictatorship rather than to the one of a true fascist regime.

Scholars have circumscribed the whole fascist experience only to European countries, considering non-European movements as unimportant and marginal imitations. But is this statement correct? Should we only take into account the major fascist regimes in our analyses? Were movements such as the British Union of Fascists more significant than other non-European groups?

It seems, reading the Eurocentric studies regarding fascism, that a sort of philosophical or socio-political predisposition allowed this ideology to take root. In this paper it will be argued instead that some of the extra-European fascist movements were far than marginal, and only the contingent historical scenarios and peculiarities of the given states have prevented the development of true and perfectly recognizable fascist regimes. The aim of this essay is indeed to demonstrate that countries that share no philosophical or historical background with Italy, Germany and the other nations in which fascist regimes were installed, were as well severely influenced by this phenomenon during the early 20th century.

¹ Benjamin Zachariah (2014), *A Voluntary Gleichschaltung? Perspectives from India towards a non-Eurocentric Understanding of Fascism*, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

What is going to be demonstrated is that in such countries, what prevented fascism to spread were not philosophical pre-conditions, but rather the power equilibria, the ability of the leaders, the level of organization within the movement and the strength of the oppositions. Because of its reliance on nationalism and its theoretical flexibility, fascism is able to adapt to several different political scenarios. The stress put on nationalism indeed offers a plausible explanation for the significant and sometimes striking differences among the objectives and strategies of fascist groups – since each nation follows a special path, the aims of the fascist organizations are bound to be diverse. Furthermore, in stark contrast to Marxist theories, fascism lacks a rigorous, inflexible doctrine. As it will later be shown, Mussolini proudly described its movement as spurred by “faith” rather than by doctrine, as fascism “was born from a need for action, and it was action.”²

It is essential to specify that, when speaking of fascism, we will not simply refer to authoritarian or nationalistic movements. Scholars have not been able to find a universally accepted definition of fascism yet, so any choice that will be made may not be entirely satisfying. For this reason, different definitions will be exploited in this study, focusing for example on the works of Roger Griffin, Aristotle Kallis, Robert Paxton, Stanley Payne and on the works of several other prominent scholars. The studies of Ernst Nolte and Benito Mussolini’s writings will also be taken into account. Although the objective of this essay is not to define what fascism is, the first chapter of this paper will be dedicated to this analysis, highlighting the essential elements that constitute a fascist movement and differentiate it from a simply far-right, authoritarian or ultra-nationalistic group. After the introductory and theoretical first chapter, our focus will shift on the three subjects of this study, namely India, China and Japan.

For what concerns India, the analysis will cover the last decades of British rule on the region and the country’s quest for freedom. Some scholars, especially Benoy Sarkar, saw fascism as a legitimate mean to obtain independence, and Hitler’s regime intensely tried to spread Nazi’s ideals among Indian scholars. Nazism and fascism found fertile ground in India thanks to the humiliations suffered by the Hindus, seduced by Hitler’s discourses about the superiority of the Aryan race. The Hindutva (Hindu ultra-nationalism), the Sangh-Parivar organization and how Hinduism and Nazism were able to melt will be the main elements of study. It will be therefore argued that fascist ideals influenced Indian politics and played an important role in the country’s historical development.

² “Il fascismo [...] nacque da un bisogno di azione e fu azione”. Benito Mussolini (1932), *La Dottrina del Fascismo*, Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana

We will later move on to the pre-WWII China, more specifically to Chiang Kai-Shek's regime. Although whether his rule was fascist or not remains the subject of an intense debate among historians (especially among Chinese and Taiwanese ones, for well-known historical and political contrasts), it is interesting to note that Chiang created an organization called "the Blue Shirts", explicitly inspired by the Italian *Camicie Nere* (black shirts) and the German *Braunhemden* (brown shirts). Even though the Kuomintang may not have installed a perfectly fascist regime in China, several factors indicate that Chiang Kai-Shek did not only admire the two European leaders, but also tried to emulate them. In this chapter, the numerous analogies between China's Nationalism and fascism will be exposed, arguing that Chiang's government represents a flawed example of a fascist regime. Confucian philosophy will be found to be a key gateway for fascist ideals in China.

Finally, the focus will shift towards Japan's political situation in the early Shōwa period – from its start, in 1926, to the end of WWII. Japan is probably the most well-known case of fascism in Asia, and it plays a central role in this study. However, Japanese fascism presents several contradictions, especially for what concerns parliamentarism. The socio-political situation of the country after the so-called "Meiji Restoration" will be presented in order to explain why fascism spread in the early 30's, highlighting nonetheless the severe differences between Japan and its two allies.

This research will demonstrate that no country is "philosophically immune" to fascism. If this political model was able to seduce the peoples and the intellectuals of nations that are so philosophically and historically distant from Italy and Germany, democracies all over the world should not underestimate the risk posed by a possible fascist revival, especially during a period of economic crisis such as the one that we are facing today. Without a global understanding of this phenomenon, fascism could reappear in those extra-European countries in which the democratic and liberal institutions are less solid, threatening the freedom of millions.

2. Defining Fascism

“Gli anni che precedettero la marcia su Roma, furono anni durante i quali le necessità dell'azione non tollerarono indagini o complete elaborazioni dottrinali. Si batteva nelle città e nei villaggi. Si discuteva, ma - quel ch'è più sacro e importante - si moriva. Si sapeva morire. La dottrina - bell'e formata, con divisione di capitoli e paragrafi e contorno di elucubrazioni - poteva mancare; ma c'era a sostituirla qualche cosa di più decisivo: la fede”

“The years preceding the march on Rome cover a period during which the need of action forbade delay and careful doctrinal elaborations. Fighting was going on in the towns and villages. There were discussions but... there was some-thing more sacred and more important... death... Fascists knew how to die. A doctrine - fully elaborated, divided up into chapters and paragraphs with annotations, may have been lacking, but it was replaced by something far more decisive - by a faith”³

2.1. Explanations for the lack of an exhaustive definition

Historians and scholars have been providing different definitions of fascism for decades, but they have not been able to come to a consensus. The absence of a universally shared set of elements that can clearly identify a fascist regime or movement often prevents observers to differentiate them from authoritarian or ultranationalist organizations. This difficulty is due to a lack of an organic and well-defined theoretical doctrine supporting the early stages of development of the Fasci Italiani di Combattimento and of the Partito Nazionale Fascista.

The starting point for this discussion has to be The Doctrine of Fascism, the essay written by Benito Mussolini in 1932 and published in the Italian Encyclopaedia under the section “*Fascismo*”. In this essay, Mussolini gives a detailed description of the reasons that led him to create his movement, summarizing the evolution of the PNF and exposing the goals of the party. The most relevant segment for our analysis is undoubtedly the first chapter – co-written with the philosopher Giovanni Gentile – in which the fundamental ideas of fascism are presented. Here, Mussolini describes the Fasci Italiani di Combattimento as an anti-party, a movement and an outburst generated from what he calls “a vital

³ Benito Mussolini (1932), *La Dottrina del Fascismo*, Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana. Translation by Jane Soames (1933)

need for action.”⁴ Fascism is here considered primarily as a refusal or, more precisely, as a rejection of Marxism, Liberalism and democracy.

In the essay, Mussolini states that any attempt to create a theoretical structure, in the early years of life of the movement, would have been a waste of time.⁵ Faith, death and the will to fight were the fundamental elements of fascism, much more than any doctrine or philosophical system.

This may partially explain why giving a clear definition of fascism is so complex. Mussolini himself refused to establish the fascist paradigm until several years after taking power and, even then, he and the fascist intellectuals chose not to create a political doctrine as elaborated as the Marxist one. Additionally, it must be considered that fascism experienced a significant evolution during the *Ventennio* and ended up diverging from the original ideology of Sansepolcristo – the movement that gave birth to the Fasci di Combattimento in 1919. The issue regarding the theoretical discontinuity of the Italian regime has been thoroughly addressed by Robert Paxton in his essay “The Five Stages of Fascism”.⁶ Here, Paxton observes the evolution of the fascist movement from his initial political program, that had many similarities with the socialist one and could almost be considered as “leftist”, to the policies adopted in the late 30’s.

The conceptual incoherence between the initial and the final phase is proven by events such as the adoption of the racial laws of 1938 (the idea of racial inferiority of the Jews only appeared in the fascist rhetoric after 1933) or by the recognition of Vatican State’s independence through the Lateran Treaty of 1929 (while, originally, the fascist movement considered the Catholic Church as one of its main opponents). The original identity of the movement would finally reappear after the Cassibile armistice of 1943, in the shape of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana, a dramatic effort to avoid the complete destruction of fascism in Italy.⁷

The words of Ernst Nolte seem to grasp the essence of the problem regarding any attempt to define fascism: “the concept of fascism is difficult to establish because it relates to a phenomenon that is

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Gli anni che precedettero la marcia su Roma, furono anni durante i quali le necessità dell'azione non tollerarono indagini o complete elaborazioni dottrinali”, *ibid.*

⁶ Robert Paxton (1998), *The Five stages of Fascism*, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 70, No. 1, pp. 1-23

⁷ “For example, Italian fascism began with a program which owed much to the left, but by the turn of the 1930s it was more clearly on the right and had signed a Concordat with the Catholic church, yet aspects of the Salò Republic during 1943-5 can be seen as an attempt to return to Fascism's radical roots”, *ibid.*

marked by paradoxes. It was simultaneously national and international, reactionary and revolutionary, bourgeois and populist, modern and antimodern.”⁸

2.2. *Differences and disagreements among scholars*

After having considered some of the elements that make fascism so hard to define, namely the lack of a definite theoretical structure and its significant ideological discontinuity, we shall proceed outlining fascism’s essential characteristics and underlining the most evident divergences among scholars.

We will begin, using Benjamin Zacharia’s words, pointing out that term “fascism” works on two levels: a normative one and a descriptive one.⁹ The normative level refers to the moral judgement attached to the concept and does not offer any useful tool for its understanding as a political, historical and philosophical phenomenon. We will have instead to build a descriptive definition of fascism, observing what differentiates it from the other major political theories of the 20th century and identifying the elements that will constitute the core of our comparative analysis.

The first definition that is going to be analyzed is the one given by Ernst Nolte in his book “The Three Faces of Fascism”. Nolte states:

“[Fascism is] anti-Marxism which seeks to destroy the enemy by the evolvment of a radically opposed and yet related ideology and by the use of almost identical and yet typically modified methods, always, however, within the unyielding framework of national self-assertion and autonomy.”¹⁰

Nolte considers the reaction against Marxism as the key component of the fascist spirit, followed by the rejection of Liberalism and Democracy. Several other scholars have shared Nolte’s view and have chosen to follow his lead and think of fascism in terms of a reactionary-revolutionary movement. American author W.F. Elkins offers a very similar description:

“[Fascism is] a variety of bourgeois technocratic rationalization in which the characteristic ideological feature is a double rejection: of Marxian socialism on the Left and of classical capitalism on the Right.”¹¹

⁸ Ernst Nolte (1979), *What Fascism Is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept*, The American Historical Review, Vol. 84, No. 2, pp. 389-394

⁹ Benjamin Zachariah (2014), *A Voluntary Gleichschaltung? Perspectives from India towards a non-Eurocentric Understanding of Fascism*, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

¹⁰ Ernst Nolte (1965), *The Three Faces of Fascism*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson

¹¹ W.F. Elkins (1969), *Fascism in China: The Blue Shirts Society 1932-37*, Science & Society, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 426-433

Ernst Nolte's contribution however goes way beyond a simple definition of fascism in terms of an anti-Marxist movement¹². The German scholar paved the way for the analysis of the phenomenon with the idea of a "fascist minimum", a list that sets out those elements which he considers to be essential for any fascist movement. These are: anti-Marxism; anti-liberalism; the Führer principle; the paramilitary party; the tendency to anti-conservatism; the aim of totalitarianism.¹³

The fascist minimum quickly became an element of paramount importance for any subsequent study. Nolte's work was continued by a vast number of scholars, such as Roger Griffin, Stanley Payne, Roger Eatwell, and Robert Paxton, and each one provides a different interpretation of the matter.¹⁴

Griffin, for instance, gives great importance to the concept of palingenesis, the process of spiritual re-birth of the nation that he considered to be crucial in fascist rhetoric. In his essay "The palingenetic core of generic fascist ideology", the British historian condenses the descriptions given in his previous works¹⁵¹⁶ into one sentence: "Fascism is a political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism."¹⁷ In his quest to find the fascist minimum, Griffin argues that the myth of regeneration is the true essence of this ideology. The synthesis of the palingenesis and of "ultra-nationalism" is what truly differentiates this ideology from other radical, authoritarian or conservative doctrines. Griffin explains that "[f]ascism thus emerges when populist ultra-nationalism combines with the myth of a radical crusade against decadence and for renewal in every sphere of national life."¹⁸ Furthermore, the author distinguishes fascism from populism arguing that both the palingenetic core and the fact that fascism is "a revolutionary form of nationalism"¹⁹ differentiate it from generic populist movements.

Contrarily to Nolte and Griffin, scholars like Stanley Payne have instead chosen to dedicate their efforts to build a model that may be intended as a fascist maximum or, as Aristotle Kallis put it, "an ideal type of what fascism aspired to be, thus producing elaborate lists of features which need apply

¹² For a review of Nolte's main works, see: Martin Kitchen (1974), *Ernst Nolte and the Phenomenology of Fascism*, Science & Society, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 130-149

¹³ Ernst Nolte (1965), *The Three Faces of Fascism*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson

¹⁴ See also: Kevin Passmore (2014), *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

¹⁵ See: Roger Griffin (1993), *The Nature of Fascism*, London: Routledge

¹⁶ See also: Roger Griffin (1995), *Fascism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

¹⁷ Roger Griffin (2003), *The palingenetic core of generic fascist ideology*, chapter published in: Alessandro Campi (ed.), *Che cos'è il fascismo? Interpretazioni e prospettive di ricerche*, Rome: Ideazione editrice, pp. 97-122

¹⁸ Roger Griffin (1994), *Staging the Nation's Rebirth: The Politics and Aesthetics of Performance in the Context of Fascist Studies*, draft of the chapter published in *Fascism and Theatre: The Politics and Aesthetics of Performance in the Era of Fascism*, Günter Berghaus, Berg, Oxford, pp. 11-29

¹⁹ Roger Griffin in the 2017 debate Battle of Ideas, *What is... Fascism?*

partly (but not necessarily in toto) to the fascist case studies.”²⁰ Payne focused on three main aspects of the fascist identity: negotiations, ideology and style/organization. The notion of negotiation refers to anti-liberalism, anti-Marxism and anti-conservatism.²¹ Ideology is sectioned into four different points: creation of a new authoritarian state, restructuring of the economic system into a corporatist one, the aim of creating an empire and the willingness to create a new national culture.²² Finally, style and organization are divided into six other elements: symbolism, mass mobilization, use of violence, masculinity, exaltation of youth and authoritarianism.²³

While the validity of Griffin’s and Payne’s theories has been widely recognized, other scholars have raised questions about their analyses. Roger Eatwell, for instance, believes that Griffin exaggerates the importance of palingenesis in his study:

“It is true that fascism often employed the iconography and language of religion, such as hagiographic processions and the terminology of ‘rebirth’. But in part this was a propagandistic attempt to exploit existing sentiments, or to counter the religious mythology of the left. Most fascists did not seek to replace existing religions, at least in the foreseeable future.”²⁴

Eatwell goes on to propose his own definition of fascism, which is “An ideology that strives to forge social rebirth based on a *holistic-national radical Third Way*, though in practice fascism has tended to stress style, especially action and the charismatic leader, more than detailed program, and to engage in a Manichean demonization of its enemies.”²⁵ Ultimately, the author discards the whole pursuit of the mythical fascist minimum. In his words:

²⁰ Aristotle Kallis (2003), *To Expand or Not to Expand? Territory, Generic Fascism and the Quest for an 'Ideal Fatherland'*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 237-260

²¹ Stanley Payne (1980), *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press

²² Ibid.,“(a) creation of a new nationalist authoritarian state based not merely on traditional principles or models; (b) organization of some new kind of regulated, multi-class, integrated national economic structure, whether called national corporatist, national socialist, or national syndicalist; (c) the goal of empire or a radical change in the nation’s relationship with other powers; (d) specific espousal of an idealist, voluntarist creed, normally involving the attempt to realize a new form of modern, self-determined, secular culture.”

²³ Ibid.,“(a) emphasis on aesthetic structure of meetings, symbols, and political choreography, stressing romantic and mystical aspects; (b) attempted mass mobilization with militarization of political relationships and style and with the goal of a mass party militia; (c) positive evaluation and use of, or willingness to use, violence; (d) extreme stress on the masculine principle and male dominance, while espousing the organic view of society; (e) exaltation of youth above other phases of life, emphasizing the conflict of generations, at least in effecting the initial political transformation; (f) specific tendency toward an authoritarian, charismatic, personal style of command, whether or not the command is to some degree initially elective.”

²⁴ Roger Eatwell (2003), *The Nature of 'Generic Fascism': The 'Fascist Minimum' and the 'Fascist Matrix'*, U. Backes, *Rechtsextrem Ideologien im 20 und 21 Jahrhundert*, reprinted in English in C. Iordachi, *Comparative Fascist Studies. New Perspectives* (Routledge 2010)

²⁵ Roger Eatwell (1996), *'On Defining the "Fascist Minimum": The Centrality of Ideology'*, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 1, No. 3, p.313

"[...] [T]he 'fascist minimum' needs to be supplemented by what I call the 'fascist matrix'. Instead of seeking to offer a relatively brief definition focusing on specific keywords, the term 'matrix' highlights the need to contrast the different ways in which fascists could interpret three partly overlapping key themes. The first theme in the fascist matrix is the quest for a 'new man', which has been central to most of the empathetic school's attempts to distinguish fascism from the reactionary and reformist right. Second and third are the fascist goals of forging a new sense of nation and state."²⁶

Moving to Stanley Payne's works, Eatwell points out some significant weaknesses in his colleague's study. Although recognizing that Payne has been able to produce "an admirably clear and highly influential definition of fascist movements"²⁷, Eatwell shows his dissatisfaction with his decision not to consider Franco and Salazar dictatorships as fascist because of their extreme conservativeness. Furthermore, the British scholar then criticizes the marginality of ideology in Payne's analysis and the excessive importance given to negotiations. Finally, the author writes that "there is a sense that in which his central claim that fascism was essentially a movement of the inter-war era in Europe is verging on a tautology."²⁸

The number of scholars that have addressed the issue is enormous, and the aim of this paper is not to define what fascism is, but rather to specify which are the main components of a fascist movement and how we can use such elements for our comparative analysis. For these reasons, we will not go too much further in the review of literature regarding generic definitions of fascism. Nevertheless, it is necessary to take into consideration a few other studies. For instance, Antonio Costa Pinto's review of the works of Robert Paxton and Michael Mann offers an interesting contribution to the study.²⁹ The Portuguese scholar, in his "The Nature of Fascism Revisited", describes as "obsessive" the desire to find a short definition of fascism and wonders why this necessity has not emerged in the study of communism or democracy.³⁰ Pinto shares this attitude with Stanley Payne, and directly quotes the American author: "[The] complexity of fascism cannot be adequately described without recourse to a relatively complex typology, however laudable the principle of parsimony may be."³¹

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ António Costa Pinto (2013), *Commentary "On Fascists"*, *Análise Social*, 209, xlvi (4.º), pp. 965-96

³⁰ António Costa Pinto (2012), *The Nature of Fascism Revisited*, Boulder: Social Science Monographs, distributed by New York: Columbia University Press, p.48

³¹ Ibid.

Pinto goes on to analyze Michael Mann's book "Fascists" and highlights the five key terms of which fascism consists of. These are: nationalism, statism, transcendence, cleansing and paramilitarism.³² The Portuguese author however, as many other scholars do, confines fascism to the European borders, disregarding the external fascist experiences. He claims that "while acknowledging the culture of fascism extended to other continents (most notably Latin America), most historians would agree with Roger Eatwell's description of it as being 'European-epochal'. This reflects a consensus about its main placement in terms not simply of geography but also of periodization, with particular reference to the years between 1918 and 1945."³³

The idea that fascism should be considered mainly as a European phenomenon is legitimate. However, the aim of this paper will be precisely to show how significant and influential some non-European fascist movements were, and why they should not be overlooked.

³² Ibid., "1) Nationalism: the 'deep and populist commitment to an "organic" or "integral" nation'; 2) Statism: this is concerned with goals and organizational form. The organic conception imposes an authoritarian state 'embodying a singular, cohesive will [as] expressed by a party elite' adhering to the leadership principle. Mann is well aware of the tensions between movement and bureaucracy and confirms that 'fascism was more totalitarian in its transformational goals than in its actual regime form'; 3) Transcendence: this is the typical neither/nor of fascism as a third way. Mann stresses that the core constituency of fascist support can be understood only by taking their aspirations to transcendence seriously. 'Nation and state comprised their center of gravity, not class'; 4) Cleansing: 'Most fascisms entwined both ethnic and political cleansing, though to differ[ring] degrees'; 5) Paramilitarism: both a key fascist value and an organizational form. Just as many analysts have done before him, Mann stresses that 'what essentially distinguishes fascists from many military and monarchical dictatorships of the world is [the] "bottom-up" and violent quality of its paramilitarism. It could bring popularity, both electorally and among elites.'"

³³ Ibid., p.4

3. India

“To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races – the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for Races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by”³⁴

Our journey through Asian fascisms will begin in India, and the observation of the fascist phenomenon in this country will rely primarily on the writings of Benjamin Zachariah. Zachariah has proposed an extremely valuable analysis of nationalism in India, highlighting the cultural and philosophical characteristics that allowed fascism to spread in the former British colony. The historian has dedicated himself to the study of India’s post-colonial political development, providing a truly innovative view point on Indian nationalism thanks to his interpretation of what he defines as the “Völkisch element”. Zachariah’s dedication in trying to shift the focus of the literature regarding fascism outside of Europe is remarkable, as he understands that it is necessary to move towards a “non-Eurocentric understanding of fascism.”³⁵

Two of his essays will be here considered: “At the Fuzzy Edges of Fascism: Framing the Volk in India” and “A Voluntary Gleichschaltung? Perspectives from India towards a non-Eurocentric Understanding of Fascism”. In the former, the scholar describes how the Nazi ideology was able to take root in India through the glorification of the Aryan race, focusing on the writings of Indian scholar Benoy Sarkar, possibly the intellectual that more than anyone else tried to spread fascist and Nazi ideologies in the country. The latter essay instead explores the fascist phenomenon from a more “political” point of view, analyzing the figure of Subhas Chandra Bose, the history of the Indian far-right groups and the Sangh Parivar organization.

3.1. *Benoy Sarkar and Subhas Chandra Bose*

In order to show how Nazi ideology came to interact with Indian culture, Zachariah provides a thorough analysis of Benoy Sarkar’s works. Sarkar is considered as one of the founding fathers of

³⁴ M.S. Golwakar (1939), *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur: Bharat Publications

³⁵ Benjamin Zachariah (2014), *A Voluntary Gleichschaltung? Perspectives from India towards a non-Eurocentric Understanding of Fascism*, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

Indian sociology³⁶ and was arguably one of the most prolific and relevant Indian social scientists of the early 20th century. His thoughts on Comte, Weber and Durkheim provide some stimulating viewpoints and through his work he immensely contributed to the diffusion of sociology in India. The Bengali scholar also produced some extremely relevant pieces of literature regarding imperialism and post-colonial transition³⁷, and his study of the structure of colonialism is an important factor for our research.

Because of his strong-stance against British rule and foreign imperialism, Sarkar came to believe that fascist and Nazi ideologies would have provided a viable option for the liberation of the country. Sarkar admired the efficiency and the strength of the German and Italian regimes, but more than anything else he considered Germany as an incredible source of inspiration for the Indian people. Hitler had been able to destroy the *ancient regime* that brought the country to the collapse and vindicate the humiliations suffered after the Versailles treaty:

“In earlier times, Benoy Sarkar would also have been a logical volunteer for Right-wing mobilizational attempts among Indians in Germany and attempts by the German Right to move towards them. Fundamentally sympathetic towards a Germany humiliated and dispossessed of its colonies after the Versailles peace settlement, he stated that Germany would be a hope for the liberation of the colonies of other powers since Germany was now a non-possessor of colonies.”³⁸

Although the Bengali scholar’s early admiration for Hitler could have had some legitimate and logical political motivations (mostly the fact that Germany was the only European superpower that apparently held no imperialistic aspirations), it is striking to see how far Sarkar went in his enthusiastic descriptions of the Führer, portrayed almost as a demi-god:

“What Young Germany needed badly was the moral idealism of a Vivekananda multiplied by the iron strenuousness of a Bismarck. And that has been furnished by Hitler, armed as he is with two among other spiritual slogans, namely, self-sacrifice and fatherland.”³⁹

³⁶ Suhrita Saha (2013), *Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887–1949): A Tryst with Destiny*, Sociological Bulletin 62, pp. 4–22, Indian Sociological Society

³⁷ Clemens Six (2018), *Challenging the grammar of difference: Benoy Kumar Sarkar, global mobility and anti-imperialism around the First World War*, European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire, 2018 Vol. 25, nos. 3–4, 431–449

³⁸ Benjamin Zachariah (2015), *At the Fuzzy Edges of Fascism: Framing the Volk in India*, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, Vol. 38, No. 4, pp. 639-655

³⁹ Benoy Sarkar (1933), *The Hitler State: A Landmark in the Political, Economic and Social Remaking of the German People*, Calcutta: Insurance and Finance Review

In this sentence, Sarkar's intention to relate Hitler to the Indian culture is manifest. Vivekananda was one of the greatest Indian mystics of the 19th century, a symbol of Hinduism not only in India but also in Europe and in the United States, thus such a daring comparison speaks volumes of Sarkar's admiration for Hitler.

The sociologist's interest for Nazism grew in the late-20's and early-30's, the years in which Indo-German connections became increasingly strong. The Reich created in India some academic institutes such as the Indisches Ausschuss (founded in 1928), not only to intensify the cooperation among German and Indian scholars, but mostly to spread Nazi ideology in India and find here points of connection between the two cultures, as the Institute "became active in pro-German propaganda during the Nazi period."⁴⁰ Unsurprisingly, the Indisches Ausschuss tried to reinforce the idea that, thanks to Germany's help, India would have finally become free from the imperialist yoke that had been humiliating and exploiting Hindus for decades.

An extreme form of nationalism was seen by Sarkar as the only possibility for Hindus to regain their lost dignity, and Zachariah provides a very clear and graphic example of the Indians' efforts to restore their racial pride:

"[...] [T]his fantasy of military prowess drew on emotional responses to British insults about the effeminacy of Indians, and of Bengalis in particular, and can be seen in the hypermasculinity of Subhas Chandra Bose's plagiarism of the design of Mussolini's uniform, boots and all, for his own use as he strutted around on horseback as the leader of the Bengal Volunteers during the 1928 Calcutta Congress."⁴¹

Indian people's sense of frustration was not dissimilar to the one that led Italians and Germans to revolt against their democratic establishment and to install their nationalistic regimes, and it is fascinating to note that some Indian leaders chose to adopt elements belonging to the fascist iconography. This extract gives us the opportunity to link Zachariah's study of Benoy Sarkar with another key figure in our journey through Indian fascism, Subhas Chandra Bose.

"Netaji" was one of the most prominent political leaders of the country during the 30's. A proud right-wing nationalist, he strenuously fought for Indian independence within and outside the National Congress, of which became president in 1938. Inside the realm of independence movement, Subhas

⁴⁰ Benjamin Zachariah (2015), *At the Fuzzy Edges of Fascism: Framing the Volk in India*, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, Vol. 38, No. 4, pp. 639-655

⁴¹ Ibid.

Chandra Bose could be considered as the “right-wing alternative” to Gandhi, with whom he had several political disputes. His famous phrase “Give me blood and I promise you freedom!”⁴² shows a severe difference between his and Gandhi’s approach to civil disobedience.

Subhas, similarly to Sarkar, saw in Hitler the chance for freedom from British rule: he visited Berlin and Rome in 1941, meeting personally with Hitler and Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano⁴³ in order to convince the two regimes to support his Free India Government.

It must be said that Bose never fully embraced every aspect of fascist and Nazi doctrines, especially the most totalitarian and racist elements of the two ideologies. Subhas’ thought appears somewhat contradictory: while he believed in democracy, he admired the authoritarian and totalitarian methods of Hitler and Mussolini; he was both an enthusiastic supporter of the fascist ideology but never truly anti-communist; he prided himself of his extreme nationalism but always refused racist doctrines. As he argued in his 1935 book “The Indian Struggle”, Netaji wished for a “Samyavada” – or synthesis – of both fascism and communism, as he believed that a fusion of socialism and nationalism could generate a more balanced and equal doctrine.⁴⁴

Although publicly Hitler and Mussolini supported Bose and his movement, Indian scholar Gautam Chattodpadhyay has shown how little consideration the German dictator held for Subhas:

“Soon after Nazi Germany’s attack on Soviet Union, in a closed-door meeting with some of his devout admirers, Hitler stated: “What India was for England, the territories of Russia will be for us”. Indian independence meant nothing to Hitler. In fact, he believed that Indians deserved to be ruled by others and could not possibly become independent within the next hundred years.”⁴⁵

Regarding Subhas’ visit to Rome, Chattodpadhyay writes:

“On 6 June 1941, Subhas met Count Ciano, Foreign Minister of Mussolini, but his mission was anything but a success. In fact, Ciano had made harsh assessment of Subhas Bose in his private diary of 6 June 1941, where he wrote: “I received Bose, the head of the Indian insurgent

⁴² Extract from a speech given in Burma in July 1947, quoted in: Rudrangshu Mukherjee (2007), *The Great Speeches of Modern India*, London: Random House India

⁴³ Gautam Chattodpadhyay (1996), *How the Axis powers viewed Subhas Chandra Bose and his activities (1941-45)*, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, vol. 57, pp. 846–849

⁴⁴ Benjamin Zachariah (2014), *A Voluntary Gleichschaltung? Perspectives from India towards a non-Eurocentric Understanding of Fascism*, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

⁴⁵ Ibid.

movement. He would like the Axis to make a declaration on the independence of India but in Berlin his proposals had been received with a great deal of reserve. Nor must we be compromised, especially because the value of his upstart is not clear.”⁴⁶

It almost seems that Bose and Sarkar were so desperate to push their nation towards independence from Britain that they could not realize the imperialistic essence of fascism. Some scholars such as Roger Griffin have argued that while the ideology is “inherently imperialistic, it is not necessarily expansionistic”⁴⁷, and it is indeed true that expansionism is not a crucial element of the fascist doctrine. We should then ask, as Aristotle Kallis wrote, “[...] [I]n what circumstances did the fascist discourse hold territorial expansion as an integral part of its quest for an ideal Fatherland or not?”.⁴⁸ The British historian argues that:

“Rather than being perceived as an exercise in power politics and diplomatic confrontation, [expansionism] was linked to the spiritual goal of national rebirth and was advocated with that uncompromising missionary zeal and defiant aggressiveness that distinguished fascist ideology from other previous articulations of radical nationalism in European history.”⁴⁹

Although then fascist imperialism cannot be considered on a par with European colonialisms, it is impossible not to recognize the expansionist essence underlining the fascist predatory foreign policy. Interestingly, one of the co-founders of the India Institute was Dr. Karl Haushofer, the former German general known as the theorist of the “Lebensraum principle”, the doctrine that justified and motivated not only Nazi but also Italian and Japanese expansionism.⁵⁰

3.2. *The RSS and the Sangh Parivar*

In 1925, in the city of Nangpur, a right-wing political activist named Keshav Baliram Hedgewar founded the National Volunteers Organization (or National Patriotic Organization), known in Hindi as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The aim of the RSS was to unite Hindus and to create a strong, well-trained and organized community that could fight together to achieve independence⁵¹. Hedgewar believed that the Indian youth should have been prepared both physically and spiritually in order to gain freedom, and the RSS quickly adopted para-military features: the members were given uniforms,

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Roger Griffin (1991), *The Nature of Fascism*, London: Routledge, pp. 48-49

⁴⁸ Aristotle Kallis (2003), *To Expand or Not to Expand? Territory, Generic Fascism and the Quest for an 'Ideal Fatherland'*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 237-260

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Benjamin Zachariah (2015), *At the Fuzzy Edges of Fascism: Framing the Volk in India*, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4, pp. 639-655

⁵¹ Sanjeev Kelkar (2011), *Lost Years of the RSS*, New Delhi: Sage Publications

received intense physical training and were thought the use of weapons such as swords or daggers. The military training was accompanied by the *baudhik*, or ideological education, through which the volunteers absorbed Hindu culture and religion. Indian historian Sumit Sarkar describes the activities carried out in the *shakhas*, the smaller groups or schools of which the RSS is composed of:

“Shakhas combined physical training of young men with indoctrination through *baudhik* sessions, a chain of schools was built up, ideas were disseminated through personal contact and conversation, and even a very popular Hindi comic series was brought out (the *Amar Chitra Katha* extolling Hindu mythical or historical figures). It was for long, almost, a Gramscian process of building up hegemony through molecular permeation.”⁵²

In 1940, after the death of its founder, K.B. Hedgewar, the RSS reached a turning point: the title of *Sarsanghchalak*, the Supreme Leader of the organization, was given to M.S. Golwalkar. Golwalkar, who had become a close friend of Hedgewar in the previous years and was considered by the leaders of the organization as his natural successor, had published in 1939 a book named “*We, or Our Nationhood Defined*”, in which he translated the words of Babarao Savarkar, one of the founders of the RSS. In this work, that can be considered as “the ideological fountainhead of the RSS”⁵³, the racist, ultra-nationalist and extremist aspects of RSS’ ideology are explicitly displayed. As quoted in Murzban Jal’s essay “*Rethinking Secularism in India in the Age of Triumphant Fascism*”, Golwalkar argued that:

“[...] There are only two courses open to the foreign elements, either to merge themselves in the national race and adopt its culture, or to live at its mercy so long as the national race may allow them to do so and to quit the country at the sweet will of the national race. That is the only sound view on the minorities’ problem. That is the only logical and correct solution. That alone keeps the Nation safe from the danger of a cancer developing into its body-politic of the creation of a state within the state. From this standpoint, sanctioned by the experience of shrewd old nations, the foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt Hindu culture and language, must hold to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu religion and lose their separate existence, to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen’s rights.”⁵⁴

⁵² Sumit Sarkar (1993), *The Fascism of the Sangh Parivar*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 28, No. 5, pp. 163-167

⁵³ Murzban Jal (2015), *Rethinking Secularism in India in the Age of Triumphant Fascism*, Critique, 43, vol. 3-4, pp. 521-549,

⁵⁴ Ibid.

The xenophobic rhetoric of depicting foreigners as a “cancer”, however extreme, may not be enough to state that the RSS’ ideology was fascist. In Golwalkar’s work though, there are self-evident attempts to link Nazism and Indian culture: his writings will allow us to observe, for example, how the caste system was exploited by Hindu fascists, the crucial role played by Aryan race theories and the importance of an enemy able to trigger a massive mobilization.

The main difference among Hindutva and Nazism for what concerns the racist ideological aspects is certainly the fact that, while blood and race were the two pillars of the Nazi view of a pure nation, for Hindus the stress is obviously put on religion. The RSS and the Hindu nationalists envisioned an anti-secular country in which faith has a prominent position, contrarily to what happened in Germany. Although significant, this difference did not prevent Indian nationalists to absorb fascist ideology. Murzban Jal claims indeed that the caste system was essential for Indian fascists to mobilize the Hindu community, as it contained principles such as the endogamy among castes, biological superiority of groups over others, disgust for other social classes and the “taboo of pollution”⁵⁵ that were easily expendable for the fascist cause.

If the psychosis regarding the purity of the race led Germans to consider Jews as a danger for their nation, Indian fascists had to find a different enemy – Muslims. Sumit Sarkar writes:

“Central to Hindutva as a mass phenomenon (or for that matter to Fascism) is the development of a powerful and extendable enemy image through appropriating stray elements from past prejudices, combining them with new ones skillfully dressed up as old verities, and broadcasting the resultant compound through the most up-to-date media techniques. The Muslim here becomes the near-exact equivalent of the Jew. Racist attitudes, finally, are neatly encapsulated in the very recent coinage of the formula 'Babar ki aulad'. Alleged descent from Babar is sufficient to damn, no overt misdeed is really required... just as once in fanatical Christian circles all Jews stood condemned because of what their ancestors had supposedly done at the time of the crucifixion of Christ.”⁵⁶

The analogies between Nazism and Hindutva are now becoming evident. The two ideologies made use of the same rhetorical elements, shared the same views on concepts such as the purity of the race, carried out repeated acts of violence against an enemy chosen solely on “biological” or ethnic bases

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Sumit Sarkar (1993), *The Fascism of the Sangh Parivar*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 28, No. 5, pp. 163-167

and embraced similar chauvinist and xenophobic ideals. In the words of Indian economist and political analyst Prabhat Patnaik:

“The Hindutva movement as it has emerged is, almost in a classical sense, Fascist in its ideology, Fascist in its class support, Fascist in its method, and Fascist in its program. All the ingredients of a Fascist ideology are present in it: the attempt to unify the majority under a homogenized concept, “the Hindus”; a sense of grievance against alleged injustices done to this homogeneous group in the past by an excluded homogeneous minority; a sense of cultural superiority vis-à-vis this minority; a reinterpretation of history exclusively in these terms; a total rejection of contrary evidence, of dispassionate analysis, of the scientific method, indeed of rational discourse; and above all an appeal to the so-called homogeneous majority in passionate, blood-curdling, and essentially male chauvinist terms to “stand up”, assert their manhood, show that it is blood and not water that flows in their veins, all of which amount to an incitement violence, and result in actual violence, against the minority group. [...] Its appeal is based not on the dreams of a better or more prosperous or meaningful future, but upon hatred.”⁵⁷

What the RSS lacked was a structured political program: as Golwalkar kept the movement distinct from a political party, the RSS remained a nationalistic movement for the preservation of Hindu culture and religious traditions. The RSS had no intention of sparking a fascist revolution, nor did it try to directly intervene in Indian politics. Golwalkar and his comrades, contrarily to many other fascist movements, accepted the leadership of moderate forces, democracy and parliamentarism, but were able to seize the nation with a more “Gramscian” strategy⁵⁸. While other figures such as Gandhi and Nehru shaped the political structure of India, leading the country through the delicate phases of transition from colonization to independence, the RSS formally remained outside of the political spectrum. Golwalkar’s organization was attacked by opposers for being too passive in the fight against Britain, as he believed that liberty would have been achieved reaching national unity rather than rebelling against the British Crown.

“[The RSS] concentrated on so called cultural work of spreading the Hindutva doctrine by molecular permeation, keeping aloof from the anti-British struggles which were being led by

⁵⁷ Prabhat Patnaik (1993), *The Fascism of Our Times*, Social Scientist, Vol. 21, No. 3-4, pp. 69-77

⁵⁸ Sumit Sarkar (1993), *The Fascism of the Sangh Parivar*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 28, No. 5, pp. 163-167

Gandhian Congress. It went to the extent of ridiculing the 1942 Quit India Movement and supported the British war effort.”⁵⁹

It is difficult to understand whether Golwalkar’s unwillingness to support liberation movements was led by authentic ideological beliefs or if he simply tried to avoid the sanctions and bans imposed by Britain upon subversive organizations. What is certain is that, after 1940, the RSS grew immensely, becoming the largest and most important organization of its kind in India and developing a massive net of parent organizations.

On the 30th of January 1948, the RSS reached another turning point, as M.K. Gandhi, the father of the nation, was shot to death by the Hindu nationalist and RSS-member Nathuram Vinayak Godse. Godse murdered Gandhi as he considered him as the primary responsible for the massacres caused by the Partition with Pakistan, in which allegedly more than half a million people were killed. Hindu nationalists could not withstand Gandhi’s “soft hand” in the negotiations with the new-born state of Pakistan, and they called for the expulsion of the Muslims from India. The events of 1948 led Nehru’s government to outlaw the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh for almost a year, a period in which the Indian leader and Golwalkar repeatedly clashed. Despite this major setback and the opposition of all the moderate forces of the nation, once the ban was lifted, the RSS came back to thrive, becoming one of the biggest volunteer organization in the world: the Sangh Parivar, the name chosen in the 60’s to indicate any organization affiliated to the RSS, is nowadays present in over 50.000 Indian villages and is thought of having more than 5 million members.⁶⁰⁶¹

The importance of the RSS in modern Indian politics is unmatched: India’s ruling party, the BJP, is part of the Sangh Parivar organization, and as of 2019 it is the largest political party in the world, counting more than 110 million members, outnumbering the Chinese Communist Party⁶²⁶³. Thanks to the alliance with other center-right political parties, its coalition – the NDA – was able to gain the absolute majority at the 2014 general elections, taking 336 out of the 543 seats of the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Indian Parliament.⁶⁴ We are not here suggesting that the BJP is fascist in its ideology, but rather that several fascist ideals have permeated the RSS through the decades. Even though the BJP is

⁵⁹ P.R. Ram (1996), *Hindutva Offensive: Social Roots & Characterization*, Mumbai: Centre for Study of Society & Secularism

⁶⁰ From the official website of [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh](#)

⁶¹ Smriti Kak Ramachandran (2018), [RSS says it’s getting new members, breaking ‘myths’ about its ideology](#), Hindustan Times, New Delhi,

⁶² Times of India, 30 May 2015, [BJP becomes largest political party in the world](#)

⁶³ The Week Magazine, 9 January 2019, [BJP claims to have conducted world’s largest political party training](#).

⁶⁴ Satish Misra (2018), *Understanding the Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party*, Observer Review Foundation, September 2018, Issue no. 258

not a fascist party, it is part of a larger organization which we have found to display fascist tendencies and features, and for this reason a more in-depth analysis of Indian fascism is needed.

3.3. *Palingenesis, Aryan race and Discipline*

Before concluding the observation of India's para-fascist organizations, a more thorough study of the ideological linkages between fascism and the Hindutva is necessary. In the previous pages, we approached two topics that deserve a more careful examination, the concept of palingenesis and the myth of the Aryan race.

The idea of palingenesis has already been exposed in the second chapter, "Defining Fascism", where the works of Roger Griffin were presented. Griffin considers the idea of a national rebirth as the crucial element of distinction between fascism and right-wing or populist movements. The myth of national reincarnation, "the triumph of a new life over decadence and decay"⁶⁵ is the essence of the fascist ideology, which seeks to restore the ancient values and the glory of the nation through a fascist revolution. The concept of palingenesis seems to explain how the fascist ideology is both conservative and anti-conservative at the same time. Griffin's idea is found to be extremely relevant to the Indian case, especially comparing it with Benjamin Zachariah's study of the Indian "folk".

Zachariah describes how some aspects of German romanticism came to interact with Hindu culture, specifically because of the veneration of German intellectuals (and, later, Nazi theorists) of the Aryan race. The mythical Volk that inhabited Bharat was considered by the thinkers of scientific racism as the prehistoric ancestor to the Nordic Aryans, composing the so called "Proto-Indo-Europeans". The glorification of Aryanism was also accompanied by the theories of the vital space, or *Lebensraum*, which affirmed the necessity for Aryans to regain their sacred space at the expenses of the inferior races. These concepts gained an unprecedented allure for the mortified and humiliated Hindus, subjugated by a foreign ruler (moreover, an enemy of the Reich), and to those intellectuals such as Benoy Sarkar that were trying "to present, and to perform, a glorious pre-colonial and predominantly 'Hindu' past for the Indian nation-state-to-be."⁶⁶

"One strand of thinking in India always wished to hold on to the alleged spiritual core of 'Indian' civilization, to amplify its anti-individualism, and to develop its völkisch elements—

⁶⁵ Roger Griffin (1994), *Staging the Nation's Rebirth: The Politics and Aesthetics of Performance in the Context of Fascist Studies*, draft of the chapter published in *Fascism and Theatre: The Politics and Aesthetics of Performance in the Era of Fascism*, Günter Berghaus, Berg, Oxford, pp. 11-29

⁶⁶ Benjamin Zachariah (2015), *At the Fuzzy Edges of Fascism: Framing the Volk in India*, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, Vol. 38, No. 4, pp. 639-655

without necessarily asserting that Indian civilization was otherworldly and spiritual. The renewal and strengthening of a 'nation' otherwise liable to decay ought to come from the 'folk-element': this was understood and actively promoted in India."⁶⁷

The image of the reincarnation of the Aryan ancestors in a modern nation was clearly appealing and well suited for Hindus, whose religious beliefs easily allowed them to embrace this mission. What Sarkar and the other Hindu admirers of the Nazi regime didn't realize was that Hitler did not have any sympathy for the Indian people. Zachariah reports the thought of Saumyendranath Tagore, the founder of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India, on his fellow countrymen's delusion:

"Saumyendranath Tagore, who spent the late 1920s up to 1933 moving in and out of Berlin, and was a nephew of the poet Rabindranath, wrote about the brutality of the Nazi regime and, for the benefit of his Indian audience, commented that Indians were too easily taken in by the Nazis' apparent respect for "Aryan" culture and the Aryan race, to which Indians claim to belong. They did not know, he wryly commented, that the Nazis saw Indians as degenerate Aryans due to many generations of miscegenation, and were therefore willing to leave Indians to their fate under British rule."⁶⁸

Another feature that proved to be fascinating for Indians was the ability of the fascist regimes to give a strong sense of unity to their people, also thanks to the intensive and far-reaching process of social control enacted in both countries. This made, at the eyes of Indian observers, the peoples of Italy and Germany strong, united and disciplined, characteristics that would have been essential for the Indian communities in their quest for freedom.

Even M.K. Gandhi, in different occasions, demonstrated his interest in the fascist model, especially the Italian one. Gandhi visited Rome on the 12th of December 1931⁶⁹ and personally met with Mussolini, with whom we spoke about the Indian cause. Briefly afterwards, in a letter to Romain Rolland, Gandhi described his feelings regarding the Duce and his regime:

"Mussolini is a riddle to me. Many of his reforms attract me. He seems to have done much for the peasant class. I admit an iron hand is there. But as violence is the basis of Western society, Mussolini's reforms deserve an impartial study. His care of the poor, his opposition to super-

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Benjamin Zachariah (2014), *A Voluntary Gleichschaltung? Perspectives from India towards a non-Eurocentric Understanding of Fascism*, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg. See also: Tagore, Soumyendranath (1934), *Hitlerism: the Aryan Rule in Germany*, Ganashakti, pp. 42-43

⁶⁹ Footage of Gandhi's visit to Rome can be found on the historical archive of the Istituto Luce, [A Roma giunge il Mahatma Gandhi](#)

urbanization, his efforts to bring about co-ordination between capital and labour, seem to me to demand special attention. I would like you to enlighten me on these matters. My own fundamental objection is that these reforms are compulsory. But it is the same in all democratic institutions. What strikes me is that behind Mussolini's implacability is a desire to serve his people."⁷⁰⁷¹⁷²

The desire for a disciplined nationalism in India was shared by many: Benoy Sarkar⁷³, Subhas Chandra Bose⁷⁴, Inayatullah Khan al-Mashriqi⁷⁵ – founder of the Muslim organization called “Khaksar”, engineer and politician Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya⁷⁶, M.S. Golwalkar⁷⁷ and Keshav Baliram Hedgewar⁷⁸.

3.4. Some conclusions on India

India did not have a true, explicitly fascist organization. The RSS and the Sangh Parivar are arguably not even political organizations, many of the protagonists of this study never considered themselves “fascist”, and it could be argued that much of the influence exercised by Italy and Germany over India was due to their fierce opposition to Britain.

“There is an assumption that fascism in general, or Italian Fascism in particular, was only attractive to some Indians before they properly understood its imperialist intentions: in the case of Italian Fascism, the turning-point for this period of fascination should have been the Abyssinian war in 1935–36.”⁷⁹

⁷⁰ M.K. Gandhi to Romain Rolland, 20 December 1931, in: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1973), Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, vol. 48, pp. 429-430

⁷¹ Quoted in: Leonard A. Gordon (1990), *Brothers Against the Raj: A Biography of Indian Nationalists Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 277

⁷² Quoted in: Benjamin Zachariah (2014), *A Voluntary Gleichschaltung? Perspectives from India towards a non-Eurocentric Understanding of Fascism*, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg.

⁷³ Benjamin Zachariah (2015), *At the Fuzzy Edges of Fascism: Framing the Volk in India*, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, Vol. 38, No. 4, pp. 639-655

⁷⁴ Benjamin Zachariah (2014), *A Voluntary Gleichschaltung? Perspectives from India towards a non-Eurocentric Understanding of Fascism*, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Murzban Jal (2015), *Rethinking Secularism in India in the Age of Triumphant Fascism*, Critique, 43, vol. 3-4, pp. 521-549

⁷⁸ Sanjeev Kelkar (2011), *Lost Years of the RSS*, New Delhi: Sage Publications

⁷⁹ Benjamin Zachariah (2014), *A Voluntary Gleichschaltung? Perspectives from India towards a non-Eurocentric Understanding of Fascism*, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

However, quoting once again Benjamin Zachariah's valuable essay, "[...] if fascism as an academic field of study can (or thinks it can) do without India, it is more than apparent that by now, both politically and academically, India cannot do without fascism."⁸⁰

This chapter tried to demonstrate how influential some aspects of fascist ideology were for several Indian scholars, politicians, leaders and activists. Many of the essential elements of Hindu nationalism were undoubtedly inspired by the Nazi and fascist rhetoric, and the admiration towards the two regimes from prominent figures of the Indian political and cultural panorama was manifest. Fascism in India has been far from irrelevant, having shaped the ideology of groups such as the RSS, whose importance is yet secondary to none.

Pogroms, massacres and acts of violence against minorities, especially Muslims, are still carried out by Hindu nationalists⁸¹⁸², pushed by the same anger present in Germany during the years of the Swastika. Fascism in India has been able to hide itself behind religion, culture and nationalism, acquiring legitimacy at the eyes of uninformed observers. This analysis of Indian proto-fascism or para-fascism represents only the first step towards a non-Eurocentric understanding of the issue.

⁸⁰ Benjamin Zachariah (2015), *At the Fuzzy Edges of Fascism: Framing the Volk in India*, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, Vol. 38, No. 4, pp. 639-655

⁸¹ Prabhat Patnaik (1993), *The Fascism of Our Times*, Social Scientist, Vol. 21, No. 3-4, pp. 69-77

⁸² Arundhati Roy (2002), *Fascism's Firm Footprint in India*, The Nation

4. China

*“Can Fascism save China? We answer: Yes! Fascism is what China now most needs. At the present stage of China's critical situation, Fascism is a wonderful medicine exactly suited to China, and the only tonic that can save it”*⁸³

At the beginning of the 20th century, China was facing a catastrophic moment of crisis, as the Qing dynasty was disintegrated by uprisings⁸⁴, corruption⁸⁵, famines⁸⁶ and Western colonialism⁸⁷. The reign that ruled China for over three hundred years crumbled down in the dust and was overthrown in 1912, but when in 1915 former Qing general Yuan Shikai tried to reinstate monarchy, China entered in a period of severe political and territorial fragmentation. The country was partially controlled by Qing loyalists, the Kuomintang, the Communists and the mighty warlords for nearly a decade, and when Chiang Kai-Shek's KMT and the Communists joined to defeat the warlords in the military campaign known as the “Northern Expedition”⁸⁸ of 1926-1928, China found itself in the midst of a civil war.

When the Republic of China was established by the Nationalists, the Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, which took control of the KMT after Sun Yat-Sen's death in 1925, started an ambitious project of modernization of the country. However, despite the defeat of the warlords, China was still divided in two spheres of influence, one controlled by the Nationalists and the other by the Communists. The collaboration between the two groups was crucial to the success of the Northern Expedition, but Chiang's hatred and distrust for the Reds eventually prevailed, leading him to split the United Front before purging all the Communists that had joined the KMT. At the beginning of the 30's, after centuries of political crystallization, Chinese people found themselves in a state of near-anarchy, caught up in a fight that they could not bear.

⁸³ Chiang Kai-Shek addressing members of the Blue Shirts, quoted in: Lloyd E. Eastman (1972), *Fascism in Kuomintang China: The Blue Shirts*, The China Quarterly, No. 49, pp. 1-31

⁸⁴ Most notably the Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1901

⁸⁵ See also: Nancy E. Park (1997), *Corruption in Eighteenth-Century China*, The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 56, No. 4, pp. 967-1005

⁸⁶ See also: Andrea Janku (2001), *The North-China Famine of 1876–1879, Performance and Impact of a Non-Event*, in Measuring Historical Heat; Event, Performance and Impact in China and the West, Symposium in Honour of Rudolf G. Wagner on his 60th Birthday, Heidelberg, November 3rd – 4th 2001

⁸⁷ See also: Mohammad Shakil Wahed (2016), *The Impact of Colonialism on 19th and Early 20th Century China*, Cambridge Journal of China Studies, Volume 11, No. 2, 24

⁸⁸ See also: Andrea Relevant (2017), *Revolution Deconstructed: Chiang Kai-shek and the Northern Expedition in the Japanese Press, 1926-28*, Edizioni Ca' Foscari

This chapter will focus on the structure of the KMT and of Chiang Kai-Shek's regime from the beginning of the Northern Expedition in 1926 to the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949. It will be argued that the Republic of China adopted features that are undoubtedly fascist, especially for what concerns the para-military organization called "the Blue Shirts Society". This group, blatantly inspired by the *Camicie Nere* (or black shirts in English), is probably the clearest evidence of Chiang's admiration for Mussolini's regime. Additionally, several elements of the government's political program seem to be in continuity with the projects of both European regimes, starting from the willingness to discipline the people of China through the system of social control known as the New Life Movement. We will also try to find out how Confucian philosophy helped to spread fascism in China and why Chiang Kai-Shek's project eventually failed.

4.1. *The fascism of Chiang Kai-Shek*

When Commander-in-Chief Chiang Kai-Shek was able to gain control of over two thirds of the country, China was an un-industrialized, backward and underdeveloped region. Western countries and Japan had been taking advantage of the situation for decades, buying or renting vast areas at unfairly low prices by warlords or corrupted government officials. For this reason, Chiang was initially perceived by Chinese people as a strong and uncompromising leader that could put an end to the humiliations that they had suffered.

"There was a vague political programme outlined in these writings, but a former provincial leader of the movement in later years could only remember its general outlines: to support absolutely the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, carry out the centralization of government, recover lost territory and protect national sovereignty, abolish the unequal treaties, carry out the equalization of land rights, develop agriculture, carry out economic controls, develop national capital, strengthen national defence, carry out a system of conscription, thoroughly train and develop a national people's army, clean out bureaucratic corruption in the government, establish universal education, eradicate the Communist Party completely, and bring peace and social order to the country. Of all these, the two goals he most vividly recalled as being emphatically stressed were to render full support to Chiang Kai-shek's leadership and to exterminate the Communists."⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Frederic Wakeman (1997), *A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism*, *The China Quarterly*, No. 150, Special Issue: Reappraising Republic China, pp. 395-432

Chiang had an ambitious political program, and was actually able to achieve some important objectives he had set out. The KMT was indeed able to renegotiate the unfair treaties signed with the Western colonial powers, reacquiring pieces of land and obtaining more favorable deals. Furthermore, Chiang started an aggressive project of modernization of the state: as Italian scholar Giorgio Borsa wrote in his essay “*Tentativi di penetrazione dell’Italia fascista in Cina: 1932-1937*”, even Western observers were led to think of Chiang as a modernizer and a great reformer in his first years of rule.⁹⁰

If it is fair to point out the merits of Chiang’s government, it is also necessary to underline its flaws and its authoritarian, anti-democratic and fascist elements. The Generalissimo had no interest or respect for the republican institutions, that were mainly set up to hide his dictatorial methods.⁹¹ However, besides Chiang’s authoritarianism and ideological proximity with Mussolini and Hitler, elements that will be covered in the following pages, what is most striking is arguably the KMT’s strategy during the Japanese invasion of Manchuria.

The troops of the Japanese Empire invaded the Chinese region in 1931 and established the puppet state of Manchukuo, but the two countries did not engage in an open conflict until the infamous Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937, that triggered the Second Sino-Japanese War. Notwithstanding the presence of a foreign state and a large number of Japanese troops within Chinese borders, Chiang Kai-Shek kept considering the Communists as the biggest threat to his country. Chiang’s anti-Communism was radical: in the Chinese Civil War among Nationalists and Communists, Chiang launched five campaigns against the Reds, only two of which came before the Mukden incident of 1931 that started the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. Although other members of the KMT kept arguing that Japan represented a real menace and tried to persuade the Generalissimo to organize the resistance against the foreign invasion, Chiang refused to stop the hostilities with the Communists. As Frederic Wakeman writes, describing a meeting held in February 1932 among KMT leaders:

“Already the domestic political situation was changing in his [Chiang’s] favour, and he was about to become chairman of the Military Affairs Commission while Wang Jingwei was named head of the Executive Yuan. From that point of domination, Chiang thought that he would be able to turn all his resources upon exterminating the Communists, though this meant

⁹⁰ Giorgio Borsa (1979), *Tentativi di penetrazione dell’Italia fascista in Cina: 1932-1937*, *Il Politico*, Vol. 44, No. 3, pp. 381-419

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

momentarily conceding to the Japanese. A slogan – *rangwai bi xian annei* (if you want to repel foreign aggression, then you must first pacify the interior) – was fast becoming a policy.”⁹²

Chiang was convinced that facing the superior Japanese army would have been a suicide, and it was necessary to unify the country before launching a counter-offensive against the invaders. Additionally, his fight against the Communists also earned Chiang significant support from Hitler’s Germany:

“[...] [I]n 1933, after the failure of the four years of his First, Second, Third and Fourth campaigns against the Communists, Chiang, with the support of Hitler, imported the German Fascist General von Seeckt and some 70 German military advisers to plan the Fifth campaign. Von Seeckt led the Fascist trained Nationalist armies and employed the military tactics used by foreign imperialist powers in the conquest of Africa and India and destroyed the Communist resistance. The Communists lost their Red Area and had to start the famous Long March in search of a new base.”⁹³

Chiang’s strategy, however, proved to be counter-productive in the following years. His hatred for the Reds was so profound that even his most loyal generals, Zhang Hsueh-liang and Yang Hucheng, were forced to take extreme measures in order to prevent their leader to continue the Civil War – and to avoid the inevitable capitulation the imminent Japanese aggression.

“The anti-Japanese tendency within the Blue Shirts movement gained predominance over the anti-Communist tendency in December of 1936. The Communist Party earlier in the year had convinced Marshal Chang Hsueh-liang, a powerful Kuomintang commander, once a fascist sympathizer, that the Chinese government should end its anti-Communist policy and begin to resist the Japanese government. With the encouragement of the Communist Party, Chang Hsueh-liang and his followers arrested Chiang Kai-shek in Sian on December 12.

Representatives of the Communist Party and Chang Hsueh-liang persuaded Chiang Kai-shek to halt his annihilation campaigns against the Communists and to join a united front against the Japanese government.”⁹⁴

The arrest – or, more precisely, the kidnapping – that came to be known as the Xi’ān Shìbìàn or Xi’an Incident, demonstrates how radical and intense Chiang’s anti-Communist feeling was. As stated in the first chapter, anti-Communism is one of the fundamental elements for any fascist movement, and it is

⁹² Frederic Wakeman (1997), *A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism*, The China Quarterly, No. 150, Special Issue: Reappraising Republic China, pp. 395-432

⁹³ Fan Hong (1999), *Blue shirts, nationalists and nationalism: fascism in 1930s China*, The International Journal of the History of Sport, 16:4

⁹⁴ Ibid.

evident that Chinese Nationalism fully respects this essential pre-requisite. Despite being an integral part of fascism, however, anti-Communism alone is obviously insufficient to demonstrate that the Republic of China was a fascist state.

KMT's proved to be unable to understand the importance of the lower classes, as it refused to turn into a mass movement – on the contrary, Mao's Communists gained enormous support from Chinese peasants. During the Civil War, Nationalist troops were accused of committing acts of violence, thefts and brutalities against the farmers and the villagers of the countryside, while Mao ordered his army to respect the so called "Three Rules of Discipline and Six Points of Attention" of 1928. The three rules were: "(1) Obey orders in your actions, (2) Do not take anything, from the workers and peasants, and (3) Turn in all things from local tyrants. These rules would undergo some slight modifications during the following years: Rule 2 became, 'Do not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses'. Rule 3 was changed to 'Turn in all money raised'"⁹⁵. Additionally, the six points of attention told members of the Red Army to "(1) Put back the doors you have taken down for bed-boards; (2) Put back the straw you have used for bedding; (3) Speak politely; (4) Pay fairly for what you buy, (5) Return everything you borrow; and (6) Pay for anything you damage. Two additional points would be added in 1947: (7) Do not bathe within sight of women, and (8) Do not search the pockets of captives."⁹⁶

Many scholars have argued that Chiang's regime should not be considered fascist, but rather an authoritarian military dictatorship. The KMT never adopted a system of totalitarian social control such as the Nazi did in Germany⁹⁷ and, apparently, Chinese Nationalists did not have the willingness to create a new social and political ideology – they were instead merely trying to revive Confucianism, acting as guardians of the ancient Chinese values. Frederic Wakeman Jr., in the conclusion of his essay "A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism", explains why he considers a mistake to describe the Republic of China as a fascist state:

"Structurally [...], Chiang's was a military dictatorship; the regime was authoritarian rather than fascist, and the ideology of his Renaissance Society was "a form of reactive, developmental nationalism" that has been identified generically by political scientists as an "ideology of delayed industrialization". [...] In short, the most striking contrast with European fascism was

⁹⁵ Michael Massie (1977), *An Analysis of Mao Tse-Tung's Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention*. Occasional Paper, No. 77-3

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Frederic Wakeman (1997), *A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism*, *The China Quarterly*, No. 150, Special Issue: Reappraising Republic China, pp. 395-432

the Nationalists' inability or unwillingness to create a true mass movement, which in turn reflected the regime's persistent distrust of social mobilization and political participation.”⁹⁸

Wakeman's analysis is perfectly correct, since it is fair to claim that the Republic of China never was a true fascist state. However, we could argue that what Chiang's government lacked was not the willingness to turn China into a fascist state, but rather the opportunity and the ability to do so. There were several reasons that prevented the Republic of China to become a fascist regime: a) the opposition of a Communist party much stronger than the Italian or the German one; b) Chiang's lack of interest in gaining popular support; c) the absence of a well-defined political ideology or doctrine; d) the adoption of Confucianism as Nationalism's philosophical system of values, which made unnecessary the production of a new political theory; e) the opportunistic element at the basis of Chiang's choice of adopting fascism, since it provided a perfect justification for his dictatorial/authoritarian methods.

Still, as it has already been stated, ignoring the fascist spirit of Chiang Kai-Shek's rule would be a mistake. Fascism in the KMT was more than a just a tendency and reducing Chiang's figure to a simple military dictator means overlooking a multitude of elements that demonstrate his closeness to Mussolini or, in a less pronounced way, to Hitler. Although the Republic of China did not develop into a fascist regime, its fascist essence must not be disregarded.

4.2 *The Blue Shirts*

In the early 1930's, Chiang became increasingly interested in the Italian and German models. In particular, he admired Mussolini's ambition and strength, his ability to unite the country and to destroy any enemy that would cross his path. In this period, Chiang Kai-Shek began to emulate some of the aspects of the Italian regime and tried to recreate them within the KMT. The element that most of all shows the Nationalists' adoration for Fascism was the group called "Blue Shirts":

“Inspired by the Italian and German Fascist movements, in 1931, a young progressive party member Liu Jianqiong wrote a proposal called 'Suggestions of Reforming the Nationalist Party'. [...] The new party should imitate the ideals and forms of the Hitler Youth in Germany and the Black Shirts in Italy. The new party should be called the Blue Shirts, for the members would wear blue shirts as their symbol. Liu's proposal met with an enthusiastic response from Chiang and some young officers of Huangpu Military Academy – China's equivalent to West Point of the United States, Sandhurst of Britain and St. Cyr of France. [...] Supported by Chiang, in Autumn

⁹⁸ Ibid.

1931, 12 young officers from Huangpu Military Academy and Liu, the writer of the Proposal, formed the Fascist Blue Shirts.”⁹⁹

The name chosen already suggested a strong correlation between this group and the Italian Camicie Nere or the German Braunhemden. The Blue Shirts were a para-military group that served as Chiang’s strong hand: they preached a blind obedience to the leader of the nation, strongly opposed any form of liberalism, fought their opponents through the use of violence, hoped for a disciplined and well-trained community and tried to revive Confucian philosophy. “The Blue Shirts claimed that their goal was national salvation through Fascism. They criticized the government as too soft, too liberal, too bureaucratic and too corrupt to continue the spirit of the reconstruction of China. They regarded Fascism as the only hope of saving China.”¹⁰⁰

Frederic Wakeman quotes the president of the Sun Yat-sen University, Zou Lu, which in 1933 had been repeatedly harassed by members of the Blue Shirts. Zou Lu lamented that Blue Shirts had become “a major annoyance”, and they were “[...] trying to undermine the Kuomintang at the behest of certain militarists who wish to gain absolute powers in government like Benito Mussolini or Adolph Hitler.”¹⁰¹

Additionally, Wakeman explains why Chinese fascists had chosen the name “Blue Shirts” for their organization:

“According to newspaper reports [...], this new body of Chiang loyalists, whose appearance coincided with the advent of the Nazis, was considering adopting various names, including the Chinese Fascist Society and the Black Shirts Party. Finally, they took the name Blue Shirt Society "because they thought that the [other] names ... might cause [the] Kuomintang to think that the new organization would be in violation of the rule of the Kuomintang that there can be no other political party besides the Kuomintang and that there must be no parties in the Kuomintang.”¹⁰²

The Blue Shirts quickly grew in size and importance, as Chiang Kai-Shek believed that they could help him to gain the same amount of power that Mussolini had in Italy. Fascism allowed him to justify his role as the unquestioned leader of the KMT and of the Republic, since its doctrine imposed the figure

⁹⁹ Fan Hong (1999), *Blue shirts, nationalists and nationalism: fascism in 1930s China*, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 16:4, pp. 205-226

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Frederic Wakeman (1997), *A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism*, *The China Quarterly*, No. 150, Special Issue: Reappraising Republic China, pp. 395-432

¹⁰² Ibid.

of the Duce as the infallible guide and savior of the nation. Chiang repeatedly expressed his intention to gain absolute control of the Nationalist movement and of the whole country:

“The most important point of Fascism is absolute trust in a sage, able leader. Now we in China do not have one leader. I believe that, unless everyone has absolute trust in one man, we cannot reconstruct the nation and we cannot complete the revolution. From the day we joined the revolutionary group, we completely entrusted our rights, life, liberty, and happiness to the group, and pledged them to the leader. Thus for the first time we can truly be called Fascists.”¹⁰³¹⁰⁴

Although the Blue Shirts tried to replicate several aspects of Mussolini’s movement, they failed to understand the importance of one essential element: the social mobilization. The organization committed the same mistake that prevented Chiang from gaining the support of the masses, as it completely ignored the fact that fascism intrinsically calls for the creation of a mass-movement. The social mobilization of the masses is central, as we have seen in Stanley Payne’s definition of fascism¹⁰⁵, and it has proved to be an essential element of Italian, German and even Indian fascist experiences. The Blue Shirts were composed of only a few hundreds of members and the group was actively trying to remain in the shadows of mainstream politics: “those who had sworn oaths to join the society ‘were forbidden to admit to outsiders that they were members of the Blue Shirt Society or to disclose its secrets under the penalty of death, which was the only punishment’. Needless to say, the existence of the Blue Shirts was never publicly recognized by Chiang Kai-Shek.”¹⁰⁶ The desire to remain secret seems to be in contrast with traditional fascism:

“[...] [N]o Fascist party can be or wants to be secret; its strength lies in its ability openly to propagandize and organize on a broad mass base and thus establish a common front of sections of all classes in support of the movement.[...] The Kuomintang itself resembles Western Fascist parties to some extent, but it is far more heterogeneous – and also because it sprang more from

¹⁰³ John Toland (1976), *Adolf Hitler: The Definitive Biography*, Garden City: Anchor Books/Doubleday

¹⁰⁴ Fan Hong (1999), *Blue shirts, nationalists and nationalism: fascism in 1930s China*, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 16:4, pp. 205-226

¹⁰⁵ Stanley Payne (1980), *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press

¹⁰⁶ Frederic Wakeman (1997), *A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism*, *The China Quarterly*, No. 150, Special Issue: Reappraising Republic China, pp. 395-432

Western democratic than from dictatorial traditions, it has not proved very adaptable to the peculiar conditions of modern China.”¹⁰⁷

Despite their inability to conquer the support of the lower class, the Nationalists did carry out an ambitious program of social militarization and training, especially for what concerned China’s youth. Chiang took inspiration from the Opera Nazionale Balilla, the youth organization founded in 1926 under Mussolini’s regime which educated and trained young Italians from the age of four to seventeen.¹⁰⁸ Fascism aimed at “making new Italians”, as the Duce said, and the ONB was the laboratory in which the new nation was being created: children received physical training, were taught to use weapons such as the famous “moschetto Balilla” (a toy musket that replicated the rifle used by the Black Shirts) and were “educated in the fascist sense.”¹⁰⁹ The ONB reflected the fascist interpretation of the ideal society made of strong, athletic, virile men ready to sacrifice their lives to their country. The same experiment was carried out with equal enthusiasm in Germany through the well-known Hitler-Jugend.

Chiang and the other leaders of the KMT tried to introduce this program of social engineering in China by means of restructuring the pre-existent youth organizations, in particular the Boy Scouts. “There had been a Boy Scouts movement in China since about 1917, [...] but the Chinese Boy Scouts of the 1930s embodied a much more militaristic effort, closely associated with the Department for National Military Training (Guomin junshi jiaoyu zu) that was formed in July 1932.”¹¹⁰ The reform of the Chinese Boy Scouts was implemented in order to “strengthen and enlarge their organization, to stimulate their intellectual and physical capacities, to heighten their consciousness, to firm up their patriotic and revolutionary will, and to give these youths some military knowledge.”¹¹¹ Although the youth organizations in China never reached the importance or the dimensions of their Italian and German counterparts, the willingness to recreate the fascist structures of social control is evident.

4.3 *Neo-Confucianism and the New Life Movement*

Chiang’s and the KMT’s efforts to create a new, modern and fascist society would have never been successful without some sort of philosophical legitimization. The Nationalists needed a cultural and

¹⁰⁷ Wilbur Burton (1936), *Chiang's secret blood brothers*, Asia, pp. 308-310, quoted in: Frederic Wakeman (1997), *A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism*, The China Quarterly, No. 150, Special Issue: Reappraising Republic China, pp. 395-432

¹⁰⁸ See also: Gianluca Giansanti (2016), *La politica pedagogica fascista: l'Opera Nazionale Balilla e la Gioventù Italiana del Littorio*, Il Pensiero Storico. Rivista italiana di Storia delle Idee, No. 2, pp. 121-150

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Frederic Wakeman (1997), *A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism*, The China Quarterly, No. 150, Special Issue: Reappraising Republic China, pp. 395-432

¹¹¹ Ibid.

theoretical justification for their rule but they did not propose any new interpretation of the social, political and economic structures. The KMT chose instead to rely upon Confucianism as the gateway to spread fascism in the country, arguing that it was vital to preserve Chinese values from the 20th century's decadence. Chiang tried to appear as both the guardian of Chinese culture and the modernizer that would carry the nation into the future through the fascists revolution. Confucianism preached obedience, discipline and respect for tradition, while calling for a rigidly hierarchical social structure.¹¹²

Confucianism had been, in the previous decades, subject of an intense debate among Chinese scholars: the iconic May 4th Movement of 1919, driven by the government's decision to accept a financial payment from Japan in exchange for the Chinese territory of Shandong, was also aimed at creating a new system of values that could overtake the obsolete Confucian precepts. The New Culture Movement was mostly composed of Marxist and Socialists intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu, which through his "New Youth magazine" called for the democratization of the country, the creation of popular literature, egalitarianism and a critical analysis of Confucian texts.¹¹³

The Nationalists were obviously at the opposite side of the spectrum. The Nationalist ideology considered the moral collapse as the main cause for the majority of China's problems and blamed the New Culture Movement. The response to the Communists and to this ideological/spiritual degeneration came in 1934 through the New Life Movement, described by William Wei as an "ideological hodgepodge of classical Confucian tenets, a Christian code of ethics, and military ideals."¹¹⁴

The project of social regeneration of the nation, from 1936 onwards¹¹⁵, was directly managed by Chiang's wife Soong Mei-ling. China's first lady was born in a Christian family and had spent most of his youth in the United States, before moving back to Shanghai.¹¹⁶ It is important to note that Soong Mei-ling was the sister of Soong Ch'ing-ling, Sun Yat-Sen's widow, and for this reason her marriage with Chiang gained great importance within the KMT. Soong Mei-Ling was even able to convince Chiang to convert to Christianity in the mid-20's, before the two eventually married in 1927.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Vera Schwarcz (1986), *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919*. Berkeley: University of California Press

¹¹⁴ William Wei (1985), *Counterrevolution in China: The Nationalists in Jiangxi During the Soviet Period*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press

¹¹⁵ Arif Dirlik (1975), *The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 945-980

¹¹⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica, [Soong Mei-ling](#)

The movement was “a curious East-West ideological fusion of neo-Confucian precepts, thinly disguised, New Testament Christianity, YMCA-Style social activism, elements of Bushido – the samurai code – and European fascism, along with a generous dose of New England Puritanism”, and it is obvious that many of the elements here quoted by Laura Tyson Li are a direct byproduct of Soong Meiling’s personal education and religious beliefs.¹¹⁷

The ultimate aim of the Xinshenghuo Yundong was to purify the nation, which Chiang described with words of disgust.

“The life of the Chinese at that time, according to Chiang, could be summarized in a few adjectives. Topping the list was “unbearable filthiness” (wu-sui) in every aspect of their lives. Next came “hedonism” (lang-man), which signified the unprincipled and uncontrolled pursuit of pleasure. Third was “laziness” (lan-tuo); they had no sense of the value of time, were careless, negligent, and irresponsible shirkers. Finally, they were “decrepit” (t’ui-t’ang), physically and spiritually. “To sum up in one word, the life of the average Chinese at the present is barbaric (yeh-man) and devoid of reason (pu-ho-li)”. This, Chiang continued, could be seen in the way they lived. They ate like “cows, horses, pigs and sheep”. Their clothes and homes were in utter disarray; they spat and urinated wherever they pleased. Having no principles, they smoked opium, gambled, and whored their lives away. When they walked, they looked half dead, with demeanor reminiscent of “zombies” (huo-szu-jen).”¹¹⁸

The brutality of the picture painted by the leader of China to describe his own people is somewhat staggering. The New Life Movement could have represented the perfect opportunity for the KMT to create a mass-movement and gain popular support. Chiang instead seemed to use the NLM to express his repugnance for the lower classes rather than to purify and educate them: “A movement that had purportedly been intended as a mass movement to educate the public – but, equally importantly, to reform those in power-quickly turned into a movement of those in power against the public. [...] Its goal was not to extend political participation to the people but to mobilize them in support of state goals, to convert them into voluntary functionaries of a bureaucratic machinery that encompassed the whole nation.”¹¹⁹

From the very beginning, it became clear that it would have been impossible to complete the regeneration of the nation in such a short period of time. Enthusiastic of Fascism’s achievements in

¹¹⁷ Laura Tyson Li (2006), *Madame Chiang Kai-shek: China's Eternal First Lady*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press

¹¹⁸ Arif Dirlik (1975), *The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 945-980

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Italy and Germany, Chiang rushed a process that would have required decades of “education” to be successfully completed. The KMT and its leader ignored the peculiarities of their country and forcefully imposed rules and principles that did not belong the Chinese culture. This is not to say that everything the New Life Movement called for was unfitting or inappropriate for Chinese people – the lack of hygiene was, for example, a severe problem in pre-war China. Chiang’s mistake however was that he “somehow seemed to equate tooth-brushing and public sanitation with the collective engine of power and popular will that fascism represented in the mid-1930s.”¹²⁰ “Fascist militarization”, writes Wakeman, “[...] was just another way of teaching Confucian citizenship to the people.”¹²¹

The New Life Movement and the cultural regeneration of China were aborted in 1937, when Chiang was forced to stop his fight against the Communists and prepare the country for the Second Sino-Japanese War. Unsurprisingly, since the movement survived only three years, the NLF was able to reach very few of its goals, if any at all.

4.4 *China's Imperfect Fascism*

After having carefully analyzed the main aspects of Chiang Kai-Shek’ rule in China, some doubts remain on whether his government should be considered fascist or not. “The movement bore a strong resemblance to European movements described by the generic term Fascist, both in its counterrevolutionary stance and in its designs for the total mobilization of society in the service of the state”, but “unlike its European analogues, the New Life Movement was initiated not by a radical right movement trying to gain access to power but by the government itself.”¹²²

Although the Republic of China never became a fascist regime, its underlying fascism cannot be ignored. As it has been above argued, anticipating the conclusion to this chapter, Chiang was undoubtedly trying to emulate Italy and Germany, but failed to understand some of the basic elements of the fascist doctrine. The Generalissimo and the other KMT leaders believed that violence, strength and tradition would be sufficient to unify the nation and discipline it, but they failed to grasp the revolutionary essence of fascism. Arif Dirlik concludes his paper on the NLM arguing that “[t]he Kuomintang was unable, as the Communists were, to promise the people the amelioration of their

¹²⁰ Frederic Wakeman (1997), *A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism*, *The China Quarterly*, No. 150, Special Issue: Reappraising Republic China, pp. 395-432

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Arif Dirlik (1975), *The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 945-980

existence. Nor was it able, like the European Fascist movements with which it shared a great deal in common, to offer the people scapegoats with which to explain the miseries of that existence.”¹²³

Taking a closer look to Chiang’s figure, it is impossible not to recognize some analogies with Mussolini’s behavior and character. They both tried to appear not only as the unquestioned leaders of their respective countries, but also as special individuals driven by a divine force. What separates fascist leaders from generic dictators or tyrants is their desire to regenerate the nation, as we have understood from Roger Griffin’s study of the fascist myth of palingenesis, and Chiang clearly respects this prerogative. The Nationalists were furthermore profoundly and relentlessly anti-communists, so much as they preferred to continue the conflict with the Reds rather than facing the Japanese invaders. Finally, Chiang “despised the institutions”. As Borsa explains, “he kept following the Confucian conception under which the good government is entrusted not to institutions and laws, but to ‘men of talent’ – as he considered himself to be. Sheltered by the institutions, he exercised a purely personal power.”¹²⁴

Chinese fascism respects all the preconditions laid out in Nolte’s fascist minimum: it was anti-Marxist and anti-liberal; Chiang played the role of the Duce or of the Führer; the KMT made use of a para-military organization; there was a drive towards totalitarianism and, in the face of its mystification of Confucianism, it proved to be anti-conservative in several aspects. The Republic of China could have developed into a true fascist regime, but the contingent political situation, the mistakes committed by the KMT and the strength of the Communist opposition prevented China from following the steps of Italy and Germany.

The lapidary judgement of CP Fitzgerald serves as a fitting conclusion to this analysis. In his 1964 book “The Birth of Communist China”, the British historian wrote: “The Chinese people groaned under a regime Fascist in every quality except efficiency.”¹²⁵

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Giorgio Borsa (1979), *Tentativi di penetrazione dell'Italia fascista in Cina: 1932-1937*, Il Politico, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Settembre, 1979), pp. 381-419

¹²⁵ CP Fitzgerald (1964), *The Birth of Communist China*, London: Penguin Books

5. Japan

*"In order for the empire to continue its advance in the way of the gods, and so that people, parents and children and brothers and sisters in harmony, may enjoy their work, rejoice in the flowers, amuse themselves with sake, and offer congratulations of 'Long Life!' to the imperial reign, a small number of people chosen by heaven must taste agony, suffer grief, abandon their lives, and break their bones. I, who hope for the honour of those loyal to that fate, think there is nothing I could be more thankful for than to have been born in Japan and to be able to die for the Emperor. The history of Japan is a trail of the lifeblood shed by our ancestors to protect and foster the national polity. Now our lifeblood will become the eternal prosperity of the imperial throne"*¹²⁶

5.1. Meiji Restoration's aftermath and the Taishō democracy

Compared to other Asian countries, Japan had reached by the early 20's a remarkable level of modernization. Thanks to the Meiji Restoration of the late 19th century, Nippon had been able to move on from the obsolete feudal system that characterized the country's political structure for nearly four centuries and the state's institutions had undergone a process of severe transformation and democratization. The Meiji Constitution of 1889 introduced, for the first time, some democratic principles in Japanese politics: most notably, it created a new representative assembly called Teikoku Gikai (Imperial Assembly)¹²⁷, composed of an upper house (whose members were appointed by the emperor) and a lower house (based instead on popular election).

Japan, however, was far from being "liberal". The new system did not produce any drastic change within the country's power structure, in spite of its apparent democratic principles. As Purnendra Jain points out, the Meiji constitution's aim was "to ensure a strong central government with minimal opposition. This constitution, therefore, severely limited the powers of the legislature by vesting sovereignty in the emperor and giving effective power to the competing elites outside the parliament, such as the cabinet, the Privy Council, the military and the bureaucracy."¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Extract from a letter wrote by a 1936 mutineer to his mother, quoted in: Gregory Kasza (1984), *Fascism from below? A Comparative Perspective on the Japanese Right, 1931-1936*, Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 19, No. 4, Reassessments of Fascism, pp. 607-629

¹²⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, [Japanese Diet](#)

¹²⁸ Purnendra Jain (2004), *Democratic Development in Japan*, Indian Journal of Asian Affairs, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 35-66

The Meiji Restoration propelled Japan into the 20th century, but the institutional reforms did not alter the essence of Japanese politics. The Boshin war (1868-1869) had put an end to the military dictatorship of the Shoguns that ruled the Land of the Rising Sun for over two centuries, but the victory of Meiji over Tokugawa Yoshinobu only put Japan in the hands of a new *clique* – the new ruling class often referred to as the Meiji oligarchy. The elites remained steadily in control of the nation, while the vast majority of the people of Nippon were kept outside of the decision-making process. During the Meiji period, however, the progressive opening towards the western culture allowed for the proliferation of some “revolutionary” ideals that had never been able to permeate in to Japan before. The political turmoil of the Meiji era continued during the Taishō age, which began in 1912 after the death of Emperor Mutsuhito. This new period was characterized by protests and demonstrations from the newborn leftist parties that were demanding radical changes in favor of the lower class – their principal request was the introduction of the universal male suffrage, which was only implemented in 1925 with the General Election Law.

The weakness of Japanese democratic institutions allowed the oligarchs to remain in power and to adopt conservative and repressive policies aimed at protecting the pre-existing power structure. The clearest example of Taishō democracy’s reactionary essence is the implementation of the Peace Preservation Laws, promulgated between 1894 and 1925. The Laws prohibited strikes, workers’ manifestations, they severely restricted the freedom of speech and of association and even went on to make illegal any organization attempting to abolish private property or to alter Japan’s system of government.¹²⁹ The provisions were aimed at extinguishing every communist, socialist or revolutionary threat in the country and at removing any legal barrier that could hamper the national authorities’ mission. In his study of the Peace Preservation Laws, Professor Richard H. Mitchell underlines the importance of a “mystic” and “highly emotional”¹³⁰ word chosen in the bills of 1922 and 1925: *kokutai*. The first article of the 1922 laws recited:

“Art. 1. Anyone who has formed a society with the objective of altering the national polity [kokutai] or the form of government or denying the system of private property, and anyone who has joined such a society with full knowledge of its object, shall be liable to imprisonment with or without hard labor for a term not exceeding ten years.”¹³¹

¹²⁹ Richard H. Mitchell (1973), *Japan's Peace Preservation Law of 1925: Its Origins and Significance*, Monumenta Nipponica, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 317-345

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Peace Preservation Law of 1922, Art. 1, quoted in: Richard H. Mitchell (1973), *Japan's Peace Preservation Law of 1925: Its Origins and Significance*, Monumenta Nipponica, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 317-345

As the scholar explains, “the meaning of the term 'kokutai' was uncertain – as one committee member pointed out, even constitutional scholars could not agree on the definition of this term”.¹³² “Kokutai”, writes Mitchell, “in one word symbolized everything worth protecting”. This vague legal definition of the national polity allowed the government to prosecute nearly any leftist and to dissolve any radical group. “[The liberal’s] acceptance of the word 'kokutai', did have a devastating effect upon the parliamentary process because the bill undercut the weak pillars supporting the liberal-parliamentary structure.”¹³³ It could then be argued that the process of liberalization and democratization of Japan was, ironically, obstructed specifically by the Taishō “democratic” governments. Additionally, elements such as the Peace Preservation Laws could be seen as the first signs of a later drift towards fascism.

When Yoshihito died in 1926, the Chrysanthemum Throne passed to his son Hirohito, which became the Shōwa Emperor. Hirohito’s coronation marked the beginning of a new age for Nippon but, nevertheless, for what concerns the analysis of the Japanese fascist movements we should consider 1931 as a true turning point. Professor Masao Maruyama argues that, between 1919 and 1931, Japan only experienced the first of three stages of fascism – a period he describes as “preparatory”. With the invasion of Manchuria of 1931, an event that we have found to be crucial also for Chinese fascism, the Japanese movement entered in what Maruyama calls as the “period of maturity”, before reaching the final stage of “fascist consummation”.¹³⁴

5.2. *Imperialism and Militarism*

The invasion of Manchuria represents a fundamental moment in the history of both Japan and China, and it obviously assumes a special relevance for what concerns the study of fascism in the two countries. The events that followed the Mukden incident of 1931 allow us to consider an element that was not present in neither the Indian nor the Chinese movements: imperialism. Both fascist groups, for different reasons, never demonstrated any willingness to expand the territorial domains of their respective countries, as they limited themselves to call for the reconquering of the nation’s vital spaces – we have indeed found expansionism to be one of the most controversial aspects of Hindu fascism .

In Nippon, instead, expansionist tendencies had been present for decades: by 1931, Japan had already established colonies all across the Pacific Ocean, becoming the greatest colonial power in the continent. The invasion of China represented the final stage of a process that had begun in the late 19th

¹³² Richard H. Mitchell (1973), *Japan's Peace Preservation Law of 1925: Its Origins and Significance*, Monumenta Nipponica, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 317-345

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Masao Maruyama (1963), *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*, London: Oxford University Press, pp. 25-83

century, a course of action that, in the minds of Japanese leaders, would have allowed Nippon to dominate all over Eastern Asia.

Professor G. Lowell Field offers a convincing explanation for Japanese imperialism: the American scholar believes that Nippon was forced to expand its territories because of the sudden industrialization that the country experienced during the Meiji era. The Japanese economic system “failed to develop a national market to absorb its own industrial products”, a situation worsened by its monopolistic nature. Since the capitalist elite was able to keep the salaries at extremely low levels, Japan found itself with an overly-efficient system of production but short of consumers.¹³⁵ “In both Germany and Japan the situation can be seen to have been fundamentally related to an extreme concentration of control over capital in a very small section of the population. [...] [T]he effects of monopoly in holding down the distribution of income available for consumption purposes in the form of wage-payments and small entrepreneurial withdrawals”, writes Lowell, “necessitated for the monopolists an expansion into foreign markets where relatively cheap goods could be sold.”¹³⁶ The same interpretation is given by Victor A. Yakhontoff, a former member of the Russian embassy at Tokyo¹³⁷ who, in 1939, pointed out the weaknesses of Japan’s economic structure:

“It was upon a weak economic foundation that Japan started her ambitious plan of building a colonial empire, for she relied upon an antiquated agrarian system and upon handicrafts and small-scale home industries. [...] [H]eavy industries, such as metallurgy and machine-building, had for a long time a secondary place, employing only eighteen per cent of the total number of workers and contributing less than sixteen per cent of the total value. This left the country seriously dependent on foreign markets not only for the raw materials, but also for many important manufactured items, some of them indispensable in case of war. Rapid as it was, the transformation of the medieval Japan of the Tokugawa period into the kind of modern state that she has striven to become since 1868, has not been accomplished thoroughly enough to guarantee economic stability and undisturbed development.”¹³⁸

Having illustrated the conditions that led Japan to become an imperialistic power in the early 20th century, our analysis faces an important question: is expansionism a fundamental element of fascism? It is self-evident indeed that Nippon did not merely win back its *Lebensraum* and its belligerent effort was not pushed by cultural or historical motivations. Furthermore, some of the main colonial powers

¹³⁵ G. Lowell Field (1940), *Comparative aspects of Fascism*, The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly, Vol. 20, No. 4, pp. 349-360

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ From the section “About the author” in the 2001 edition of the book “*The Chinese Soviets*”, University Press of the Pacific

¹³⁸ Victor A. Yakhontoff (1939), *The Fascist Movement in Japan*, Science & Society, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 28-41

of the 19th and 20th centuries (such as the UK, France or Belgium) would later become the main antagonists of fascism in Europe during the Second World War.

This issue has been briefly introduced in the second chapter in relation to the Indian situation, where the arguments of Aristotle Kallis and Roger Griffin were reported. In his essay “To Expand or Not to Expand? Territory, Generic Fascism and the Quest for an Ideal Fatherland”, Kallis tries to determine whether expansionism is a crucial feature of generic fascism or not. After having presented the viewpoints of many other prominent scholars, the author concludes his investigation arguing that expansionism is ultimately a “secondary product” of fascism and, although it can be motivated by essential fascist principles such as the quest for the vital space, it is not a critical element of the generic fascism’s model.

“A categorical distinction between expansive and non-expansive fascism is only useful as an empirical observation and not in terms of its relevance to fascist ideology per se. There is no evidence to suggest that the pursuit or not of territorial expansion by the various fascist movements emanated from qualitatively different ideological variants of fascism. As has been demonstrated, expansionism was prescribed by the same generic fascist commitment to reclaiming a version of an ideal Fatherland that had motivated fascism's primary concern with internal renewal and spiritual strengthening of the national community.”¹³⁹

If expansionist tendencies are not an essential element of the study of generic fascism, why should the invasion of Manchuria be considered as a fundamental turning point in the history of the Japanese movement? The answer to this question is given us by Gregory Kasza and his analysis of the Japanese Right from 1931 to 1936. In his study, Kasza considers the sudden increase in number of right-wing newspapers to be a useful indicator of the growing consensus in favor of the Japanese right.

“In January 1930, officials counted only 27 right-wing newspapers and magazines, 21 of them published but once a month. [...] State documents consistently cite the Manchurian Incident of September 1931 as the critical turning-point in rightist activity – this came sixteen months before Hitler's rise to power. [...] [R]ightist periodicals more than doubled between 1930 and 1932, and of the 22 leading right-wing journals identified in mid-1932, ten had started since the Manchurian Incident.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Aristotle Kallis (2003), *To Expand or Not to Expand? Territory, Generic Fascism and the Quest for an 'Ideal Fatherland'*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 237-260

¹⁴⁰ Gregory Kasza (1984), *Fascism from below? A Comparative Perspective on the Japanese Right, 1931-1936*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Reassessments of Fascism, pp. 607-629

The proliferation of rightist publications was not casual: the invasion of Manchuria had generated an outburst of nationalism in the country, increasing thereby the audience for patriotic journals. Violent acts against political opponents became common, as shown by the police reports of the early 30's, and the majority of right-wing newspapers actively encouraged such violent tactics. Although imperialistic tendencies are not sufficient to qualify a country as a fascist state, they certainly helped spreading the ideology in Japan.

While extremist groups grew in size and importance, the right-wing movement split into two distinct lines of thought, namely the “national socialists” and the “pure Japanists”.¹⁴¹

“Both were critical of party politics and capitalism, but the national socialist journals were singled out for the extremism of their positive programme. [...] [T]hey proposed to eradicate capitalism and replace it with a planned state socialist economy; they were highly critical of private property, and they advocated nationalization of the means of production. [...] Their opposition to parliamentarism was uncompromising. [...] [T]he Japanists embraced more moderate positions. Most rejected party politics but not the Diet (only the Diet was inscribed in the constitution); they were in favour of keeping the good points of capitalism while compensating for its deficiencies, most supported only a 'lukewarm controlled economy', and many favoured the decentralization of authority.”¹⁴²

Nippon, despite the strong presence of right-wing nationalists, never fully transformed into a fascist regime, and many scholars even refuse to acknowledge a fascist presence in the country at all.

“Hayashi Kentaro has argued that there were no similarities between the institutions of Nazi Germany and those of early Shōwa Japan. No single mass party in Japan served as an analogue to the National Socialist Party in Germany, no dictator seized power, and no one ideology became dominant. Western historians have seldom used the concept of fascism to interpret early Shōwa Japanese history, and have instead emphasized basic differences between Japan and Germany.”¹⁴³

The main explanation for the fascists' failure to seize power in Japan is, as Professor Maruyama perfectly pointed out, that Japan never experienced a bourgeois revolution that would involve the nation into the political process. The exclusion of the middle and lower classes prevented Japanese fascism to turn into a mass movement – a flaw that we have observed also in the Chinese case. Nippon

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Miles Fletcher (1979), *Intellectuals and Fascism in Early Showa Japan*, The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 39-63

experienced what Maruyama described as a phenomenon of “fascism from below” until 1936: “anti-proletarian civilian groups advocating authoritarian government formed during the first stage, and, after the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, these groups cooperated with young military officers in an effort to topple the government.”¹⁴⁴ The process of “fascism from below” was, however, overturned in 1936. On February 26th a group of young officers of the Japanese Army, inspired by the writings of the controversial political philosopher Ikki Kita, organized a coup d'état against the government and occupied the city of Tokyo for almost three days. The “Righteous Army” believed that the oligarchs and the corrupt politicians were destroying the kokutai and damaging the authority of the Emperor, and the only way to save Japan was to eliminate the civilian government and put the country in the hands of the military and of the Emperor. During the “incident”, the troops of the Kōdōha were able to kill several members of the Tōseiha (the moderate government), such as general Jōtarō Watanabe and former prime ministers Takahashi Korekiyo and Saitō Makoto. The Emperor, despite the Kōdōha's intention to recognize him as the only leader of the nation, refused to support the uprising and ordered his army to suppress the rebellion. The Righteous Army, overwhelmed by the Imperial troops, surrendered on February 29th, while many of its officers committed suicide in order to avoid the dishonor of defeat. In the trials that followed the incidents, 17 rebels were sentenced to death – Ikki Kita was later found guilty of inspiring the uprising and ultimately executed in 1937.¹⁴⁵

In spite of its failure, the February 26th rebellion severely modified the power structure in Japanese politics. Maruyama argues that, after the coup, “senior officers of the ‘control faction’ [the Tōseiha] of the army gained power and, in cooperation with the civilian bureaucracy, began to implement fascism ‘from above’ through the structure of the state.”¹⁴⁶ The Kōdōha was almost completely wiped out from the Imperial Army and the young rebels were replaced by more experienced and conservative officers of the Tōseiha. The support for the military strongmen grew immensely between 1936 and 1937, and the control faction was rapidly able to gain control of the political institutions of the country. As written by George Macklin Wilson, “in a Japan lacking the tradition of a bourgeois-democratic revolution, fascism had to develop from above since mass energy, having never before been a main force in political change, could not serve to bring it to power.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ From the 1992 PBS documentary “The Pacific Century – Episode 4: Writers and Revolutionaries”

¹⁴⁶ George Macklin Wilson (1968), *A New Look at the Problem of "Japanese Fascism"*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 401-412

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

With the full-scale invasion of Manchuria of 1937 and the decision to sign the Tripartite Act on the 27th of September, 1940, Japan entered in the stage of “fascist consummation”, in which the kokutai was turned into a fascist military dictatorship. Less than a month later, on the 12th of October, parliamentarism was formally abolished with the establishment of a one-party system, the Taisei Yokusankai (Imperial Rule Assistance Association).¹⁴⁸

5.3. *The divine origin of the Diet – an insurmountable obstacle for Japanese fascists*

The project of a “new order” under the Taisei Yokusankai was designed by the Shōwa Research Association, a think tank composed of Japan’s most prominent scholars and political scientists. Created in the early 30’s by Ryūnosuke Gotō and sponsored by Prince and Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe, the association’s goal was to influence Nippon’s foreign policy and guide the state through a process of radical renovation of its political structure. The SRA members were convinced that Japan was destined to rule over the Pacific Ocean and over East Asia, taking the place of the Western colonizers. Furthermore, many scholars expressed their dissatisfaction and discontent towards the parliamentary system, which they judged inadequate and incapable of supporting the regeneration of the nation.

Professor Miles Fletcher, in his paper “Intellectuals and Fascism in Early Shōwa Japan”, provides a valuable study of the works of Rōyama Masamichi, Ryū Shintarō and Miki Kiyoshi, three notable members of the Shōwa Research Association.¹⁴⁹ Fletcher’s analysis allows us to observe how these intellectuals, originally close to liberal or even leftist ideals, came to advocate for the dismantlement of Japan’s democratic institution and to support Konoe’s New Order Movement.

After the invasion of Poland and the early successes of the Reich in 1939 and 1940, Germany seemed on the verge of destroying any liberal democracy in Europe. Fascism was perceived as the new, dominant ideology in the Old Continent, and Japanese leaders were persuaded to support Hitler and Mussolini in the world conflict. The events of 1940 gave strength to Japanese fascists, especially Konoe, who then saw the opportunity to reshape the political structure of the country.

“Konoe's New Order Movement quickly gathered support. Diet politicians, hoping somehow to take advantage of a restructured political system, dissolved their political parties within six weeks. The army supported Konoe in the expectation that his New Order would lead to a “national defense state” (kokubo kokka). [...] The Diet would, in effect, be replaced by a national

¹⁴⁸ Encyclopedia Britannica, [Japan - The rise of the militarists](#)

¹⁴⁹ Miles Fletcher (1979), *Intellectuals and Fascism in Early Showa Japan*, The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 39-63

cooperative council. [...] Economic reforms would have to accompany these changes. The state would dissolve the zaibatsu [industrial clique] and create "systematic cartel organizations" to facilitate the separation of management and capital. A Supreme Economic Council would coordinate economic planning."¹⁵⁰

Prince Konoe's project, however, never came into being. The representatives of Japan's main political and industrial groups accused the leader of the NOM of violating the constitution and attempting to establish a new bakufu [shogunate] that would destroy "the legitimately constituted organs of state" acting under imperial authority.¹⁵¹ Konoe and the Preparation Committee for the implementation of the New Order Movement were forced to settle for the creation of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, a political party that would substitute parliamentarism with in the new wartime totalitarian system. Konoe's reformism was repeatedly obstacle by the conservative elites: by 1941, the Prime Minister was forced to remove almost every reformist officer in the IRAA in favor of personnel chosen by the Home Ministry, turning the IRAA in a "mobilization agency of the government"¹⁵² rather than into a reformist, revolutionary fascist party.

Although Konoe's New Order Movement eventually failed to reshape Japan's political structure, observing the Taisei Yokusankai (IRAA) and the Shōwa Kenkyūkai (SRA) allows us to identify several key elements of Japanese fascism and to understand the reasons of NOM's downfall. First of all, it is worth to take a look at the New Order Movement's attempt to introduce fascist economic restructurings in Japan. The NOM tried to replicate many of the economic policies enacted under the Italian and German regimes, as they were "[the] proof that a state could enact substantial political and economic reforms quickly and effectively. The concept of economic control by the state enacted through industrial cartel organizations was borrowed from the Nazi economic system. The concept of occupational organizations as basic political units was similar to the ideal of the corporate state as embodied in the legislation of fascist Italy."¹⁵³

Konoe's effort to destroy the zaibatsu and to establish a corporatist system was strongly supported by the members of the Shōwa Research Association, such as Rōyama Masamichi. The Japanese intellectual, fascinated by the writings of Italian Minister of Justice Alfredo Rocco, saw in the

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Donald H. Shively & William H. McCullough, (1999). *The Cambridge History of Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 146

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Miles Fletcher (1979), *Intellectuals and Fascism in Early Showa Japan*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 39-63

corporatist state the only alternative to communism and liberalism. Rōyama was contrary to the introduction of a totalitarian one-party system, but he could not hide his enthusiasm for several key aspects of the Italian regime such as Mussolini's leadership and his government's ability to enact quick and effective economic reforms.¹⁵⁴ Miles Fletcher's essay on Japanese thinkers in the early Shōwa period shows the profound contradictions of SRA's intellectuals, caught between the willingness to reshape the country and the ideological distaste for anti-democratic doctrines. Miki Kiyoshi, for example, was arrested in 1930¹⁵⁵ for his connections with the Japanese Communist Party and repeatedly voiced his concern regarding the spread of fascism in Europe, a doctrine he considered dangerous and irrational. Nevertheless, in the late 30's Miki came to reconsider fascism: the Japanese scholar argued in favor of a cooperativist system that would limit individualism, eliminate class struggle and glorify the Japanese national identity.¹⁵⁶ Ryū Shintarō held similar opinions, as he was "impressed by the success of these German policies in raising industrial production, reducing unemployment, and achieving a trade balance without triggering severe inflation"¹⁵⁷, and pushed for the application of similar reforms in Nippon.

Having established that the fascist influence was pervasive in pre-war Japan, we ought to understand why the Land of the Rising Sun never adopted a perfectly fascist system of government. The opposition towards the abolition of a capitalist economy and towards the complete restructuring of the political infrastructure mostly came from the industrial and conservative elites, which held an immense power in Japan's politics. This, however, does not explain why right-wing intellectuals and other supporters of ultra-nationalism were so reluctant to abolish parliamentarism – take, for example, the members of the military that did not support the 1936 rebellion. The key reason for this hesitant behavior from Japanese rightists has to be found in the divine origin of the parliamentary system, which was created through Meiji Constitution of 1889. Any attempt to abolish such a fundamental provision of the Meiji Kenpō would have meant questioning the Emperor's authority, which was officially recognized as "sacred and inviolable".¹⁵⁸

This shows why the Diet represented an insurmountable obstacle for right-wing reformists in pre-war Japan. Fascism is not necessarily a totalitarian system of government, as the Italian case demonstrates. Mussolini, although having absolute power, did not attempt to replace King Vittorio Emanuele III and technically acted as a Prime Minister. The Duce was indeed appointed by the Italian monarch in 1922

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica, [Miki Kiyoshi](#)

¹⁵⁶ Miles Fletcher (1979), *Intellectuals and Fascism in Early Showa Japan*, The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 39-63

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Constitution of The Empire of Japan, 1889, Art. 3: "The Emperor is sacred and inviolable"

and eventually forced to step down, in 1943, after the motion of no confidence passed by the Grand Council of Fascism. The Japanese parliament though was firmly controlled by conservative groups that, backed by the divine essence of the Meiji Constitution, were able to prevent the radical changes proposed by Konoe and his New Order Movement.

“The fact that the Meiji Emperor had proclaimed and thus sanctified the constitution was a major impediment to a complete renunciation of parliamentarism and to any proposal for a radically new political regime. For example, the idea of a single party movement to take over the state was rejected by many rightists for creating an impure filter between the Emperor and his subjects (a new shogunate) [...]. The Emperor's status made it more difficult to borrow fascist ideas from Europe by the simple fact that they excluded monarchical rule. The *modus vivendi* Mussolini was compelled to accept with the Italian King was apparently not even a topic of discussion within the Japanese right - the notion of striking a bargain with the Emperor would undoubtedly have been perceived as sacrilegious.”¹⁵⁹

Furthermore, Nippon's fascists could not even rely on the support of the masses to start a revolution against the conservative clique, since the people were almost completely excluded from political participation. Ironically, the fascist ideology also received the opposition of several right-wing intellectuals that “rejected all things of obvious western origin”¹⁶⁰ and probably ignored the intrinsic ultra-nationalism of its doctrine.

5.4. *Authoritarian conservatism over fascism*

The situation of pre-war Japan is extremely difficult to analyze from a theoretical point of view. Rightists dominated the political scenario, nationalism was widespread, the democratic institutions set out by the Meiji Constitution were transformed into a totalitarian system and the government introduced policies of extreme social control. Many even “glorified terrorism and potential martyrdom as purifying acts of sacrifice for the nation.”¹⁶¹ Japan was undoubtedly authoritarian, conservative and reactionary, yet it was not fascist in the Italian or German sense despite many key political figures directly took inspiration from those regimes. The ambiguity is amplified by fascism's intrinsic conceptual vagueness, which leads scholars to disagree on the nature of Early Shōwa Japan. If Wilson

¹⁵⁹ Gregory Kasza (1984), *Fascism from below? A Comparative Perspective on the Japanese Right, 1931-1936*, Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 19, No. 4, Reassessments of Fascism, pp. 607-629

¹⁶⁰ Marcus Willensky (2005), *Japanese Fascism Revisited*, Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 55-77

¹⁶¹ Gregory Kasza (1984), *Fascism from below? A Comparative Perspective on the Japanese Right, 1931-1936*, Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 19, No. 4, Reassessments of Fascism, pp. 607-629

argues that the historical developments simply “don’t add up to fascism”¹⁶², Willensky on the contrary states that “[m]embers of the Japanese right wing, the military and the government may have vehemently denied that they were fascists but this doesn’t in any way change the political realities of what prewar Japan had become by the early 1940s—a fascist state.”¹⁶³ Willensky additionally writes:

“Prewar Japan exhibited many of the traits that modern scholars ascribe to fascism. Japan in the early Showa Era was intensely nationalistic, racist (including the pervasive belief on the part of the Japanese that they were racially superior both to westerners and other Asians), militaristic and also imperialistic. What seems to be missing is, in Ebenstein’s words, a “totalitarian organization of government and society by a single party dictatorship.”¹⁶⁴

Despite Prince Konoe’s inability to enact the revolution he and the scholars of the Shōwa Research Association envisioned, the underlying fascist spirit of early Shōwa Japan should not be confused with a generic tendency towards authoritarianism. The ideological connections between Nippon and its allies were profound, and the differences among the three cases are justified not only by the flexibility of the fascist doctrine, but most importantly by the importance given to the concept of national identity. The attraction between Japan and the two European regimes was not one-sided. It is interesting to note that by the end of the 30’s, and especially after the signing of the Tripartite Act of 1940, Mussolini started to introduce “Japonism” to its people, suggesting an intense correlation between the two cultures. Italians’ fascination for Nippon’s culture grew significantly in the early 40’s and the Bushido precepts, the code of honor of the samurai, rapidly became a source of inspiration for fascists.¹⁶⁵

Pre-war Japan and the New Order Movement were anti-communist, authoritarian, totalitarian, ultra-nationalistic, racist, imperialistic, reactionary, conservative and revolutionary at the same time. They glorified violence and militarism, preached complete abnegation for the Empire’s cause and installed a corporativist economic system. This demonstrates, once again, that non-European fascist movement not only existed, but also played a major role in the political development of several nations such as India, China or Japan. For this reason, then, we should abandon the Eurocentric view of fascism and start to consider it as a true, global phenomenon.

¹⁶² George Macklin Wilson (1968), A New Look at the Problem of “Japanese Fascism”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 401-412

¹⁶³ Marcus Willensky (2005), *Japanese Fascism Revisited*, *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 55-77

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ See also: Sergio Raimondo, Valentina De Fortuna, Giulia Ceccarelli (2017), *Bushido as allied: The Japanese warrior in the cultural production of Fascist Italy (1940-1943)*, *Revista de Artes Marciales Asiáticas*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 82-100

6. Conclusions

In our lengthy journey through Asia, we have observed three very different developments of fascism, each one with a specific set of characteristics, principles and goals. At first, we have tried to establish what the term fascism means, what are the basic elements of its doctrine and why it is often complicated to identify a political system or movement as fascist without generating an intense debate. The absence of a strict and well-defined ideological structure, which is explained by Mussolini's intention to create a movement based on action and courage rather than on doctrines, has allowed fascism to adapt to various political scenarios and combine with different cultures.

In India, although an explicitly fascist movement never appeared, several scholars and political figures took inspiration from Italy and Germany, especially for what concerns the concepts of ethnic purity. The anti-British sentiments played a major role for the growth of ultra-nationalistic sentiments in the pre-liberation period, and it is undisputable that figures such as Golwalkar or Benoy Sarkar saw in the fascist doctrine an example to follow. However, fascism in India remained confined to the religious/social spheres, exercising its influence outside of the political world. Fascism took root through the RSS and disguised itself as a form of radical Hinduism. A careful analysis of the Hindutva, however, has revealed how the elements of the Nazi and fascist rhetoric permeated into the RSS and its parent organizations: the hatred towards other ethnicities and religions, the intention to discipline the nation, the willingness to carry the people towards a national rebirth, the admiration for Hitler and Mussolini, the glorification of violence and the efforts to save the country from decay indicate that fascism was present in India, and its impact was far from marginal.

In the Chinese case, the fascist features of Chiang Kai-Shek's regime were obvious. The leader of the Kuomintang established a regime that respected almost every necessary precondition of fascism, starting from a relentless, extreme anti-Marxist sentiment. Chiang saw himself as the only leader who could guide China and his charismatic figure was not dissimilar to the one of his European counterparts. The KMT tried to create a system of social control through the New Life Movement and showed signs of both conservatism and anti-conservatism, a contradiction that we have found to be typical of fascist movements. Finally, it is impossible not to grasp the Nationalists' intention to emulate Italy and Germany through the creation of the Blue Shirts, probably the most striking indication of the fascist spirit at the basis of the KMT. Chiang, however, could not understand that the creation of a mass movement is essential for any fascist regime and, as his group could not gain popular support, the KMT ended up losing the Civil War against the Communists. As stated in the

previous chapters, what the Nationalists lacked was not the willingness to establish a fascist government but rather the ability to do so and the understanding of the fascist ideology.

Finally, we have looked at the history of Japan between the end of the Meiji era to the beginning of the second World War. With the Meiji restoration Nippon seemed to move towards liberalism and democracy, but the constitution was instead exploited to create an authoritarian system governed by the conservative elites. Japanese scholars and politicians always refused to identify themselves as fascists, but it is evident that both during the years of the Taishō democracy and in the early Shōwa era Japan became increasingly similar to the Italian and German regimes. The reactionary, authoritarian, anti-liberal tendencies of Japanese politics in the 1920's helped spreading ultra-nationalism in the country. These extremist feelings, together with the implementation of a corporatist economic system and the signing of the Tripartite Act, are clear signs of a strong fascist presence in the country. Although the government resembled more an oligarchy than a dictatorship and despite the fact that the revolutionary project of Konoe was quickly terminated, fascism clearly influenced Japan's political development.

The goal of this essay has been to demonstrate that countries which have no historical or philosophical connections with the Old Continent were deeply influenced by this ideology and, for this reason, an exclusively Euro-centric interpretation of the topic appears to be incomplete. It is legitimate to consider this doctrine as predominantly European. However, any study of this phenomenon is partial if it does not take into account the effect that this ideology had also outside of Europe. Finally, and most importantly, any analysis of such countries would be imperfect without acknowledging the influence of fascism. Realizing how impactful this model was even outside of Europe should demonstrate how easily anti-liberal ideals can spread and why it is necessary to take strong precautionary measures to defend freedom and democracy.

Fascism in Asia: a comparative analysis

Why India, China and Japan demonstrate that Fascism should be considered as a global phenomenon

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8. Riassunto

Il fenomeno del fascismo è quasi sempre analizzato in un'ottica Eurocentrica: gli studi riguardo questa ideologia si concentrano principalmente sui regimi di Mussolini, Hitler, Franco e Salazar, spingendosi occasionalmente fino ai paesi dell'est-Europa o all'osservazione di movimenti "minori" come quelli francesi ed inglesi. Il fascismo ha però avuto un impatto significativo sullo sviluppo storico, politico e sociale di diverse nazioni extra-Europee, come ad esempio i tre oggetti di questo studio: l'India, la Cina ed il Giappone. Questi tre paesi sono stati selezionati appositamente per la loro lontananza dalle culture e dalle filosofie europee. Dimostrando infatti che il fascismo riuscì a svilupparsi prepotentemente anche nei suddetti paesi asiatici, si potrà concludere dunque che tale ideologia, per essere studiata nella sua interezza, non può fare a meno di un approccio analitico globale.

Il primo capitolo del testo è dedicato alla definizione generale del fascismo. Spesso infatti, l'incapacità di decretare se un regime o un movimento siano fascisti deriva soprattutto dalla confusione che genera questo termine. Storici e politologi dibattono da decenni su quali siano gli aspetti più importanti di tale ideologia nel tentativo di creare una definizione universalmente accettata, ma non si è ancora raggiunto un consenso. Esso appare infatti come un fenomeno controverso, spesso contraddittorio: la spiegazione per l'incertezza che circonda l'ideologia fascista è da ritrovare in parte nel testo fondamentale del movimento italiano, "La Dottrina del Fascismo", scritto da Benito Mussolini e Giovanni Gentile. Qui, il Duce spiega chiaramente che nei primi anni di vita dei Fasci Italiani di Combattimento, egli si astenne dal creare una dottrina ben strutturata poiché il suo partito (o meglio, anti-partito) doveva basarsi sull'azione e sulla forza, non su elucubrazioni teoretiche. Per questo motivo, l'ideologia si sviluppò nel tempo senza solide basi concettuali, assumendo occasionalmente posizioni contraddittorie su tematiche come i rapporti con la Chiesa Cattolica o sulla questione delle leggi razziali. Si può affermare quindi che la mancanza di chiarezza riguardo alla definizione del fascismo derivi dalla volontà di discostarsi dalle altre teorie ed ideologie ad esso contemporanee.

Tra le varie analisi prese in considerazione, quelle che hanno assunto più rilevanza durante questo studio sono state il "fascist minimum" di Ernst Nolte, il concetto di "palingenesis" di Roger Griffin ed il modello di "fascist maximum" ideato da Stanley Payne. Gli elementi comuni alla maggior parte degli studiosi dell'ideologia fascista sono, principalmente: l'anti-comunismo, il disprezzo verso le istituzioni democratiche, il rifiuto del liberalismo, l'ultra-nazionalismo, la celebrazione della violenza e della virilità, la fede cieca in un leader e la volontà di condurre la nazione verso un futuro glorioso grazie ad una rivoluzione fascista.

Il modello minimum di Nolte, prevede pochi requisiti essenziali per ogni movimento fascista. Al contrario, il fascist maximum elenca tutte le caratteristiche dei movimenti di riferimento, quello italiano e quello tedesco, includendo concetti come misticismo, simbolismo, machismo, militarismo ed altri. Secondo questo modello, la quantità di elementi presenti indica quanto vicino il movimento preso in considerazione sia alla perfetta ideologia fascista. Fondamentale è poi il concetto di palingenesis o reincarnazione spirituale della nazione, utilizzato dallo storico inglese Roger Griffin. Griffin ritiene infatti che l'elemento principale che distingue il fascismo da movimenti populistici o nazionalisti sia il desiderio di creare un nuovo popolo, una nuova nazione. Questa ideologia non si accontenta infatti di prendere il potere e governare sui suoi cittadini, ma punta ad elevare e purificare l'intero paese. E' in quest'ottica che, sotto i regimi di Hitler e Mussolini, fu attuato un così intenso e ramificato sistema di controllo sociale. La volontà di creare una gioventù fascista tramite l'Opera Nazionale Balilla o la Hitler Jugend dimostra ad esempio come i due movimenti puntassero a plasmare una nuova generazione pronta a dedicare la propria vita per la causa fascista.

Il secondo capitolo entra invece nel vivo di questo studio comparativo andando ad analizzare il caso indiano. Nonostante in India non si venne a formare un vero e proprio partito d'ispirazione fascista, l'influenza di questa ideologia fu enorme. Nel periodo che precedette la liberazione dal paese dal Regno Unito nel 1947, diversi leader dei movimenti nazionalisti videro nel fascismo e nel nazismo una via per raggiungere l'indipendenza. Il regime di Hitler creò nel paese un istituto culturale, l'Indisches Ausschuss, che divenne presto un mezzo di propaganda Nazista diretto agli intellettuali indiani. Diversi studiosi e membri di spicco della comunità indiana furono sedotti dalla retorica fascista. Il caso più eclatante fu senza dubbio quello del sociologo Benoy Sarkar, che espresse ripetutamente la sua sconfinata ammirazione per Hitler e per il modello tedesco. Sarkar credette che, supportando la Germania, l'India avrebbe potuto finalmente ottenere la dignità che le era stata tolta dai dominatori inglesi. Fu inoltre tratto in inganno dai discorsi del Führer riguardo alla superiorità della razza ariana, originaria proprio dell'India, e dall'apparente volontà della Germania di riconquistare soltanto ciò che le spettava, senza creare dunque un impero coloniale. Sarkar non comprese che non solo Hitler considerava l'etnia Indù come una degenerazione di quella ariana, ma che soprattutto non aveva alcuna intenzione di liberare il popolo indiano; il solo motivo che spingeva il Reich a supportare i movimenti nazionalisti indiani era indebolire il nemico inglese.

Un simile errore fu commesso da Subhas Chandra Bose, uno dei leader dei movimenti di liberazione indiani degli anni 30' e 40'. Bose cercò di instaurare un rapporto di amicizia sia con Hitler che con Mussolini, visitando anche il ministro Ciano a Roma nel 1941. "Netaji" ammirava il regime italiano per la sua forza, la sua efficacia e la sua risolutezza. Bose riteneva che, per raggiungere l'indipendenza,

fosse fondamentale ritrovare un'unità nazionale e prese ispirazione dal fascismo italiano, nonostante egli non fosse d'accordo con gli aspetti più autoritari ed anti-liberali del governo di Mussolini. Subhas Chandra Bose, come Sarkar, non capì che l'Italia non nutriva interesse per causa indiana e che i due regimi europei erano, a tutti gli effetti, due potenze imperialiste.

L'analisi del caso Indiano si conclude poi con lo studio della RSS, un'organizzazione nata nel 1928 con l'intento di proteggere e diffondere l'induismo. L'associazione assunse ben presto caratteri paramilitari, dal momento che il suo fondatore Hedgewar ed il successivo leader Golwalkar ritenevano necessario disciplinare il popolo per proteggere la cultura Indù e rendere coesa la nazione. Golwalkar espresse ripetutamente la volontà di attuare in India un'azione culturale simile a quella Nazista, individuando nelle comunità musulmane il principale pericolo per la sopravvivenza dell'induismo – un comportamento pressoché identico a quello adottato in Germania nei confronti della popolazione ebraica. Il leader dell'RSS riuscì a mantenere l'organizzazione fuori dall'universo politico, ottenendo per questo grande libertà d'azione all'interno del mondo culturale e religioso del paese. L'RSS diventò infatti la più grande associazione su base volontaria di tutta l'India e riuscì a trasformare l'Hindutva (o nazionalismo Indù) in un fenomeno di massa, creando un immenso network di organizzazioni affiliate che hanno tutt'oggi un'enorme peso nella politica indiana. Nonostante l'RSS non possa essere considerato un movimento fascista a tutti gli effetti, un'attenta analisi delle sue origini mostra che l'ideologia dei nazionalisti Indù fu certamente influenzata dalle teorie di Hitler e Mussolini.

Il secondo oggetto di questo studio è la Cina, precisamente gli anni di governo di Chiang Kai-Shek. Il leader dei Nazionalisti instaurò infatti un regime fascista nel paese, nonostante il governo avesse formalmente le sembianze di una repubblica. Chiang nutriva enorme ammirazione per Mussolini e tentò di emulare il fascismo italiano, ma si trovò prima a combattere una sanguinosa guerra civile contro i Comunisti e poi a dover respingere gli invasori giapponesi, non riuscendo mai a prendere pienamente il controllo della nazione. Dopo aver sconfitto i signori della guerra nella spedizione del nord (intrapresa per altro al fianco dei "rossi"), i Nazionalisti andarono al governo fondando la Repubblica di Cina, ma la feroce opposizione dei Comunisti portò le due fazioni allo scontro. Una tregua fu raggiunta soltanto quando, nel 1937, alcuni fedelissimi di Chiang rapirono il proprio leader per convincerlo ad abbandonare temporaneamente la guerra civile ed organizzare una resistenza all'invasione giapponese, lanciata dallo stato fantoccio del Manciukuo. Il comportamento del Generalissimo dimostra l'estremo e radicale anti-marxismo che animava i nazionalisti cinesi, un sentimento ovviamente comune a tutti i movimenti fascisti.

I Nazionalisti non erano però semplicemente anti-comunisti. La scelta di creare l'organizzazione paramilitare delle Camicie Azzurre dimostra infatti una lampante volontà da parte degli uomini di Chiang di riprodurre elementi chiave del fascismo europeo, che divenne ben presto il punto di riferimento del KMT. Il Kuomintang attuò poi un ambizioso piano di disciplinamento nazionale tramite il New-Life Movement, gestito in prima persona dalla first lady Soong Mei-Ling. Il NLM aveva come obiettivo quello di preservare e difendere le tradizioni culturali dalla decadenza moderna, proponendo una serie di precetti e regole comportamentali ispirate al Confucianesimo. Il movimento, influenzato anche dalle idee puritane di Soong Mei-Ling, tentò di correggere i comportamenti immorali e vergognosi del popolo cinese, ma non riuscì ad ottenere nessun risultato significativo anche a causa dell'improvviso scoppio della Seconda Guerra Sino-Giapponese. Fu questo l'unico tentativo di trasformarsi in un movimento di massa da parte del KMT, che non comprese mai l'importanza del sostegno popolare. I Nazionalisti infatti, al contrario del Partito Comunista di Mao, adottarono sempre un atteggiamento di repulsione verso il proletariato cinese, che Chiang descriveva quasi con disgusto. L'incapacità da parte di Chiang Kai-Shek di capire che qualsiasi movimento fascista è innanzitutto un movimento popolare contribuì fortemente al fallimento del suo progetto ed alla sconfitta nella guerra civile contro i Comunisti.

Il terzo ed ultimo caso osservato è quello giapponese. Il paese del Sol Levante fu il primo del continente asiatico ad aprirsi con decisione al mondo occidentale ed agli ideali democratici, adottando nel 1889 la Costituzione Meiji. Il documento rese il paese una monarchia costituzionale e creò la Dieta, un parlamento bicamerale ispirato a quello britannico. L'industrializzazione giapponese spinse però l'Impero ad espandere il proprio territorio ed a trasformarsi in una potenza coloniale: grazie ad un sistema industriale fortemente monopolistico, le élite erano in grado di mantenere i salari dei lavoratori a livelli estremamente bassi, aumentando così esponenzialmente la propria capacità produttiva. Ciò portò ben presto alla saturazione del mercato interno, che non aveva una quantità sufficiente di consumatori per bilanciare l'immensa offerta. Il Giappone fu quindi "costretto" ad espandersi ed a conquistare numerosi territori sul Pacifico, arrivando ad invadere la Manciuria nel 1931. L'espansionismo fu supportato dal crescente sentimento ultra-nazionalista degli anni '20 e '30, che portò l'opinione pubblica e gli intellettuali del tempo a giustificare le misure repressive adottate dai governi della Democrazia Taishō e dell'era Shōwa pur di assicurare all'Impero il ruolo di rilievo che esso meritava nel panorama asiatico.

Le "Leggi per la Preservazione della Pace", promulgate tra il 1894 ed il 1925, permisero alle autorità di eliminare, anche con la forza, ogni organizzazione sovversiva o di stampo comunista nel paese. Qualunque richiesta di cambiamento del *kokutai*, fumoso termine che indicava la struttura dello stato,

fu dichiarata fuori legge e additata come sovversiva. Il disprezzo verso le istituzioni democratiche raggiunse il culmine nel 1936: un gruppo di giovani ufficiali dell'esercito, stanchi della debolezza dei governi "liberali", assediò Tokyo per quasi quattro giorni nel tentativo di consegnare il potere esclusivamente all'imperatore ed alle forze armate. Il colpo di stato fallì e le figure di spicco della Tōseiha (gli avversari dei ribelli) presero il controllo del paese, rendendolo di fatto un regime autoritario.

Il fascismo giapponese assunse una forma più definita sotto la guida di Fumimaro Konoe, Principe e Primo Ministro, che tentò con il suo New Order Movement di eliminare la Dieta e di seguire l'esempio tedesco, rivoluzionando l'intero sistema politico e sociale del paese. Gli oligarchi giapponesi però impedirono a Konoe di realizzare il suo piano e, nonostante la creazione nel 1940 del sistema totalitario e mono-partitico noto come l'Associazione per il sostegno dell'Autorità Imperiale, il regime giapponese divenne repressivo e reazionario piuttosto che rivoluzionario e riformista, due caratteristiche essenziali per ogni movimento fascista. Fu fondamentale per l'NOM il supporto dell'Associazione di Ricerca Shōwa, una think tank composta dai più importanti intellettuali e politologi giapponesi dell'epoca. L'analisi del pensiero di alcuni membri della ASR mostra come essi, inizialmente vicini ad idee liberali o persino marxiste, divennero progressivamente convinti dell'efficacia del sistema fascista sia in campo sociale che in campo economico. L'ASR fornì al fascismo giapponese delle giustificazioni e delle solide basi ideologiche, un lavoro volto ad affermare la superiorità dell'Impero rispetto a tutti gli altri paesi asiatici. Quasi nessun intellettuale o politico giapponese accettò mai di essere definito fascista, probabilmente a causa di un'avversione verso ogni elemento culturale occidentale, ma è innegabile che il fascismo ebbe in Giappone una rilevanza enorme ed influenzò profondamente la storia del paese.

L'India, la Cina ed il Giappone dimostrano che il fascismo ebbe un impatto gigantesco anche al di fuori dei confini europei. In nessuno dei tre casi citati è possibile affermare che un partito o un movimento puramente fascista sia riuscito ad imporsi o a prendere il potere, eppure l'influenza di questa ideologia fu tutt'altro che secondaria. Il fascismo fu capace di rendersi invisibile in India, mimetizzandosi tra i movimenti culturali e religiosi del paese, ma le tracce della sua presenza sono riscontrabili ancora oggi all'interno del panorama politico/sociale. In Cina invece, se Chiang Kai-Shek avesse capito l'importanza del supporto popolare, i Nazionalisti avrebbero potuto instaurare un regime fascista e forse addirittura vincere la guerra civile, impedendo al Comunismo di proliferare e alterando per sempre la storia del paese. Infine, soltanto la struttura elitaria e monopolistica dello stato impedirono al Giappone di assorbire appieno la dottrina fascista. Il caso nipponico rimane comunque l'esempio più lampante di come questa ideologia fu capace di espandersi in Asia e di modificarne le sorti.

L'obiettivo di questo testo è di dimostrare come il fascismo fu capace di svilupparsi anche al di fuori dei confini europei e di giocare un ruolo centrale nella storia di alcuni paesi. E' perciò necessario abbandonare l'interpretazione puramente eurocentrica di tale fenomeno e d iniziare a considerare il fascismo come un caso globale. Senza una visione completa di questa ideologia, i paesi in cui le istituzioni democratiche sono più deboli e meno equipaggiate non sarebbero in grado di resistere ad un'eventuale spinta anti-liberale, credendo erroneamente di essere immuni dal fascismo e dalle sue degenerazioni. In un momento di profonda crisi economica come quello attuale, invece, ideologie di matrice fascista potrebbero trovare terreno fertile e riproporsi come la soluzione ai problemi causati dalla globalizzazione e dalle imperfezioni della democrazia. Bisogna pertanto esser pienamente coscienti di tale pericolo e difendere la libertà ed i valori democratici ovunque essi siano minacciati.