The interwar period of Europe between 1918 and 1939 was a time in which many European countries faced a dramatic rise in popular support for extreme political values, to a point where the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936 was widely seen as a final showdown between the forces of Bolshevism and fascism. Though fascism is still generally regarded as ‘reactionary’ in nature, a broad scholarly consensus has been reached in the last twenty years which sees it as a revolutionary political movement seeking to conserve key elements of the national tradition in a new type of totalitarian modern state based on a powerful sense of national community and destiny. It is this definition that allows the authoritarian states that arose in Europe and Latin America during the inter-war period to be distinguished from fascist regimes. When this criterion is applied it becomes clear that though there were many fascist movements in inter-war Europe, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were the sole examples of fascism being employed as the basis of a regime.\(^1\) Alongside the successes of these two regimes in gaining power, there were also several fascist movements that managed to share power with an authoritarian regime (e.g. in Spain and Romania) or take power briefly as a puppet regime of the Nazis (e.g. in Hungary and Norway). From this overview it is already clear that the popularity of fascism varied markedly from country to country, and became an overwhelming force in the political life of the nation only in Italy and Germany.

A common feature of all countries where fascism achieved significant levels of popularity was the widespread belief that only through fascism would the multiple social and political crises be improved to the point that the rebirth of the new nation could take place. The ability to channel vague public feelings of insecurity, hatred or anger towards specific groups in society would also further the popularity of fascism via negative cohesion (whereby greater public support would be obtained through fear of a common thing as opposed to genuine support for fascist policies). The effects of this proved most significant in the years following the Great Depression, resulting in entire nations suffering at the hands of economic downturn, looking in desperation towards an extreme political solution. Ian Kershaw describes how Nazism rose to this occasion, accounting for how “the Führer cult stood for the rebirth of Germany in which all the various interests of Germany would have a new deal”.\(^2\) This observation also draws upon the importance of the fascist regime’s appeal to society as a whole, offering a means of improvement and rebirth to all citizens regardless of their social position. This appeal would resonate within the individual, orchestrating a culmination in nationwide support for an alternative political solution, as seen in descriptions of Hitler as the saviour “who rescues the Russian prince, the scholar, the clergymen, the peasant, the worker, the unemployed”.\(^3\) Only fascist movements which could produce a similar effect to this could truly succeed in mobilising popular support and achieving success.

Further to this, an increase in popularity for any fascist movement is dependent upon several specific factors, namely the existence of a liberal democratic system which is undergoing structural crisis (usually as a result of war or economic downturn), underlying public dissatisfaction with liberal values, and the ability of the fascist regime to distinguish itself as credible beyond “numerically insignificant groupings of fanatical chauvinists and political terrorists”.\(^4\) A liberal democratic system undergoing structural crisis increases the likelihood of a surge in popularity for fascism because it encourages political movements to compete for political space which is no longer occupied by a democratic consensus.

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\(^3\) Kershaw, pg 264  
\(^4\) Griffin, pg 228
This is in strong contrast to the situation in an authoritarian state, whether nationalist or Bolshevik, where such space is closed down. Frustration caused by the political chaos and the weakness of liberal government in the post-war years and fear of an imminent Bolshevik take over was a common theme amongst European countries which were most susceptible to fascist influence and the conflict between rival political ideologies was played out against the background of a deep sense that Western civilisation itself was in crisis. These factors shaped the crises which brought fascism to power in Italy and Germany and account for surges of popularity for abortive fascist movements in England, France, Norway, Hungary and Romania. In Spain and Finland civil war provided the context for the rise of fascism. The paralysis of effective liberal governments played a decisive role in the success of Fascism and Nazism. Italy had not been ruled under a stable parliamentary majority for decades and Mussolini capitalized upon the post 1918 chaos and threat of Bolshevism by campaigning for a new Fascist state as a means of ending the succession of weak democratic governments, declaring that “If you want to save the state, you must abolish the collectivist state that the war forced on us”.5 This image of fascism as a means of ending the political deadlock and establishing a strong government which would make the country great served to raise the National Fascist Party’s public profile, with its popularity rising further following the onset of the March on Rome. This incident also provided the King Victor Emmanuel III, an opponent of liberalism, with a pretext to appoint Mussolini as Prime Minister in October 1922.

In Weimar Germany a similar political deadlock was a vital precondition of the Nazi takeover, since the paralysis of the system made it impossible to form a parliamentary majority from March 1930 until the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor in January 1933.6 This was a direct result of the Great Depression’s onset in 1930, engineering the breakdown of several coalition governments which failed to cope with the economic difficulties that the crisis presented them with. The increasing use of Article 48 powers enabled Chancellors to bypass the Reichstag, effectively embracing the move towards a dictatorship-style of ruling. The public appetite for fascist rule was significantly increased as a result, with the Nazis gaining a further 95 Reichstag seats in 1930 than in comparison with 1928.7 The importance of existing economic instability and political deadlock remain clear when considering that the Nazi party was unable to significantly increase its popular support during the period of Weimar prosperity in the years 1923-1928. During this period Stresemann’s government had several successes, namely ensuring economic stability within Germany via the 1924 Dawes Plan, which granted Germany vital loans from the US, and the improvement of post-war international relations via the 1925 Locarno Pact.8 It was only following the onset of the Great Depression and the fragmentation of Germany’s political system that Nazism could mobilize popular support and truly thrive.

The necessity of a political vacuum to engineer an increase in popular support for fascism was also evident in the example of Romania, which saw the Iron Guard movement rise to prominence in 1927. It did so as a result of the failure of Liberals, Conservatives or the PNȚ (Peasants’ Party) to establish a working democracy. Against this background the project of the Iron Guard’s leader Codreanu to replace the existing liberal democracy with a fascist authoritarian democracy became irresistibly attractive to millions of Romanians,

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7 Lee, Stephen J., Weimar and Nazi Germany, pg 38, Heinemann, 1996.
both peasants and intellectuals, who felt threatened by the chaos of modern history. As interwar Germany, Italy and Romania were the main European countries undergoing failures of weak liberal democracy, they naturally became the three nations most vulnerable to the influence of fascism, even if authoritarian forces succeeded in preventing the fascist seizure of power in Romania.

Fascism, although a widespread force which spawned movements in the majority of Europe during the interwar period, enjoyed its highest levels of popularity in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, because it was only here that it formed the basis of a regime instead of being a revolutionary opposition to the status quo. A common reason for the polarization of politics which preceded the rise in popularity of fascism was the deep public discontentment following the First World War. This was experienced nowhere more acutely than in Weimar Germany, which hosted a mass public outrage and anger as a result of the reparations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, and to the extensive loss of German territories. Hitler easily capitalised on these feelings by promising to put an end to chaos, purge Germany of its inner and outer enemies, reverse the Versailles settlement and make it a great European power. The extent of this initial popularity for Nazism prior to the Great Depression was however limited, with the NSDAP only securing 2.6% of the vote in 1928. In Italy the support for Fascism in the early 1920s was at a comparatively higher level due to the existence of pre-war frustrations towards liberal democracy, which gave rise to various projects for a new Italy such as that of the national syndicalists who hoped that Italy would “bury for good the forms and ideologies of the past and prepare the way for something radically new” even before the onset of the war. As a result there was already an ideological basis for fascism existing in Italy during the early stages of the interwar period, cementing the need for a unifying political vision in the 1920s. Alongside this there were widespread frustrations at the lack of substantial territorial gain following the peace settlements, contributing further to the dissatisfaction of the liberal ruling class and the overall need for a political movement extensive enough to overcome the liberal system and replace it with a “new state”. The post-war economic crisis which resulted in rising levels of unemployment within Italy also served to contribute to the growing popularity of fascism by creating social conditions which were favourable to a Communist takeover. The Fascists offered many Italians a solution to this growing threat, with Mussolini’s party “adroitly exploit[ing] the fear of Communism as their springboard to power”. This serves as an explanation for why Mussolini’s ‘Fascismo’ movement developed mass popularity despite initial electoral disappointments in 1919, attracting extremist support from a wide range of political perspectives. The alliance of the Fascists with Giolitti’s liberal party in May 1921 not only improved their respectability and credibility among the general population, but also granted them a further 35 seats in parliament, with Mussolini’s abandonment of the original 1919 Fascist programme removing all hostility towards the Catholic Church.

The mobilisation of public support over the following months reached significant levels, with the fascists seizing control of Ancona, Livorno and Genoa, harnessing enough regional power by mid 1922 to make a bid for government. Mussolini’s March on Rome

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11 Griffin, pg 69.
that followed this proved to be a success, with the solidarity of the Fascists and the willingness of the existing government to allow a Fascist takeover contrasting greatly with Hitler’s failed Munich Putsch which took place the following year. In seizing power through force Mussolini undermined the method of mobilizing popular support via election in order to gain control, with his introduction of the Acerbo Law (guaranteeing the largest party with over 25% of the vote two thirds of the seats in parliament) also indicating that the Fascists were relying less upon popular support to engineer their rise to power. Nevertheless in 1924 when the party gained 64.9% of the vote, the extent of fascism’s popularity within Italy was clearly demonstrated.  

The popularity of fascism in Germany did not significantly improve until after the Great Depression, with this serving as the catalyst for Hitler’s rise to power. During the roaring twenties the Germans effectively “ignored this vicious little man with his programme of hatred”, only turning to fascism and “voting for [Hitler] in increasing numbers” once the Great Depression had made a significant impact upon their lives. The widespread starvation and rising levels of unemployment in the early 1930s resulted in the polarization of politics, with many turning to Nazism as a result. The propaganda released by the NSDAP persuaded German citizens to believe that Hitler was the last hope of the nation, offering the Jews up as scapegoats and capitalizing upon the deep anger which was felt by German inhabitants during this time. Alongside this the Nazis provided a strong opposition to the growing threat of Communism, exploiting public fear in a similar fashion to that of the Italian Fascists almost a decade earlier by using propaganda to increase anxiety about a Bolshevik revolt. The fascists also benefitted from the financial support of wealthy businessmen and other patrons, providing the party with a means to extensively circulate propaganda and run election campaigns. The effectiveness of this can be seen in comparing election results of 1928, in which the Nazi party secured 2.6% of the vote, with that of July 1932, which saw an increase to 37.4%. The rise to 43.9% in 1933 can however be discounted as proof of Nazism’s growing popularity, as German citizens were effectively living under a Nazi terror state at this point.

Despite the high levels of popularity for fascism in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, there was still some resistance against both regimes, indicating that there were limitations to this popularity even in areas where it reached significant levels. Communists provided the most obvious form of opposition to fascism, with the Iron Front movement in Germany uniting Communists with members of the SPD’s paramilitary Reichsbanner between 1930 and 1932 under a minority fighting organisation. Several inter-war Marxists spoke of the need to unite the working classes in order to defeat fascism, with the non-Communist left publicizing the need for unity via pamphlets which sold by the thousand. Prior to the Nazi rise to power in 1930 there were several breakaway parties which formed in response to the growing popularity of the fascists, either to the right of the Communists or the left of the Socialists on the political spectrum. In Italy there was similar opposition in the 1920s with the Arditi del popolo, which saw the alliance of radical unionists with ex-soldiers against Mussolini’s regime. Both Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy however had the ability to prevent this opposition from gaining momentum, with the Italian anti-Fascist movements being isolated and defeated, and the left-wing parties and unions being banned in Nazi Germany. Interwar Spain also demonstrated mass resistance to the takeover of what was

15 Clare, John D., How was Hitler able to become Chancellor in January 1933?, http://www.johndclare.net/Weimar7.htm, 2002.
17 Nohlen et al., pg 762.
seen by the left as a fascist regime, with over 100,000 Spanish citizens fighting and dying for a Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War.\textsuperscript{18} Their efforts were similarly no more successful than those of anti-fascists in Germany and Italy, largely as a result of internal Republican divisions, with Communists, Liberals and right-wing Socialists pursuing separate tactics to those of the Anarchists and others who wanted a revolutionary war against Franco.\textsuperscript{19} Nevertheless the active anti-fascist campaigning which took place in Spain, Germany and Italy clearly demonstrates that during the interwar period there were significant limitations to fascism’s popularity, even in regions of Europe where it had proved most successful.

Another reason for fascism’s popularity appearing limited outside Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy was due to its inability to thrive in countries ruled by strong liberal democracy. The British Union of Fascists (BUF) led by Sir Oswald Mosley was a clear example of this, with its popularity and success being limited by the lack of public dissatisfaction with the existing political system. The diminished fear of communism in Britain than in comparison with countries such as Germany and Italy would have also contributed to the lack of public support for the party, with the BUF never gaining enough momentum to participate in a general election, nor successfully electing any of its candidates in 1937 London County Council elections.\textsuperscript{20} Additional to this, the party faced strong opposition in the mid 1930s due to participation in violent street brawls with opponents, leading to the passing of the Public Order Act in 1936 which orchestrated a reduction in public violence.\textsuperscript{21} Unlike in countries such as Nazi Germany where violence was used effectively to intimidate the opposition, the BUF’s actions only served to damage public opinion of fascism even further, with one observer claiming that “Mosley was a political maniac”, and that “all decent English people must combine to kill his movement”.\textsuperscript{22} The British Union of Fascists was eventually banned in 1940, demonstrating the difficulty of promoting fascist beliefs within a strong liberal democracy. A similar effect was evident in Finland following the development of the Lapua Movement in 1929, which initially attracted some approval from the National Coalition Party and the Agrarian League during its initial stage as a nationalistic organisation. However following its ideological progression towards fascism, the Lapua Movement struggled to maintain the same level of support, with fascism once again being unable to thrive in an otherwise stable liberal democracy. This was most clearly seen in 1932, when the Movement unsuccessfully staged a government coup, failing to entice members of the Civil Guards to support them in their actions. The Lapua Movement was subsequently banned following this, with Finland remaining a liberal democracy throughout the entirety of the interwar period.

Another contributing factor to the limitations of fascism’s popularity outside Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy was the inability of fascist organisations to thrive in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes. This was evident in interwar Spain, which saw the transformation of the Falange party from a republican and modernist party, similar in characteristic to Italian Fascism, to one dominated by General Franco with minimal fascist influence. This ideological change took place during the Spanish Civil War, resulting in the arrest and execution of the Falange’s founder José Antonio Primo de Rivera, who had previously governed as Spanish Prime Minister in the 1920s. This was only made possible by Primo

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\item[18] Simkin, John, \textit{Spanish Civil War: Casualties}, \url{http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/SPcasualties.htm}, 2013.
\item[19] Renton, Dave, \textit{What is anti-fascism?}, \url{http://www.dkrenton.co.uk/antifascism.html}, 2012.
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de Rivera’s loss of Parliamentary immunity following poor election performance in 1936, also demonstrating the lack of appetite for fascism in Spain at this time. Following the outbreak of the civil war the party did expand rapidly, but only due to Franco seizing power in 1937 and focusing on the development of a new ideology for his regime.23 This ideology was more conservative and focused much less upon the revolutionary transformation of society, leading us to conclude that Franco was arguably much more autocratic than fascist in nature, with his rule resembling that of the “average African, South American or Asiatic dictator of the present day”.24 With the fascist aspects of the Falangist party being minimized and discarded by Franco, his dominance over Spain until death in 1975 serves to demonstrate the weaknesses of fascism within Spain, largely due to its lack of popular support, and how easily its impact on a country could be overcome by one man. The National Radical Camp (ONR) of interwar Poland is another example of a fascist organisation which struggled to reach success or advance its popular support due to the oppression it faced from an authoritarian regime, the Sanacja. The ONR faced scrutiny from government forces from the time of its inception, only being popular among students and other groups of Polish youth. Due to the organisations involvement in several attacks on left-wing worker demonstrations and the boycott of Jewish-owned stores, it was banned in July 1934 after just three months of existence, once again demonstrating the futility of fascism in the face of authoritarian governments.25

Additional to this were the succession of weak fascist parties which never succeeded in gaining comparative levels of popularity to that of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, rendered to be puppet governments under Nazi invasion. Amongst these was the main fascist party in Norway, led by Vidkun Quisling, whose Nasjonal Samling party failed to gain substantial popularity during the interwar period, as demonstrated in the general election of 1933, with approximately 2% of the vote being secured and in 1936, when this dropped further to 1.8%.26 Despite aiming to emulate the Italian fascist state, Quisling never succeeded in achieving such popularity during the interwar period, with the Nasjonal Samling party only gaining a degree of power through the German occupation as opposed to via the process of democratic election. The Netherlands during the interwar period also provided several examples of weak fascist parties which failed to secure significant amounts of popular support, such as the Verbond van Actualisten, which aimed to emulate the successes of Fascist Italy, disbanding in 1928 after failing to do so. The Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging party (NSB) also aimed to bring fascism to the forefront of Dutch politics, but at best only managed to secure 7.9% of the vote in 1935, with membership of just 100,000. Despite being singled out as the only permitted political party upon German occupation, membership did not rise significantly and the NSB still struggled to exert authority, merely playing a role in lower government and the civil service. The ease at which Nazism was able to influence the NSB dated back several years before the German occupation, when extremist elements of the party persuaded the initially reluctant Mussert to adopt anti-Semitic policies and prevent Jews from joining the party in 1938.27 Through lack of popularity and inability to resist German invasion, fascism in the Netherlands conformed to the submissive role of puppet government to a stronger fascist regime,

26 Nohlen et al., pg 1438.
supporting the idea that the popularity of fascism was only at its greatest when Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were concerned.

Overall we can see that the popularity of fascism, despite reaching notable levels in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, was largely limited in other regions of Europe during the interwar period. This was mainly due to the differing political climates of European countries, with fascists struggling to mobilise popular support in nations ruled under strong and stable liberal democracies such as that of the United Kingdom and Finland. This was largely as a result of the lack of widespread impetus to seek an alternative solution to the current political regime, with there being no popular desire for the reinvention and rebirth of the nation. Within countries governed under strict authoritarian regimes such as Franco’s Spain and Sanacja Poland, the development of any existing fascist movements was also hindered, often before public appetite for right-wing politics could easily be demonstrated. In other regions such as Norway and the Netherlands fascism simply failed to capture the support of the masses, with fascist parties only reaching power via puppet governments under Nazi occupation, ultimately subordinate to their German counterparts. The lack of public support for these movements can again be linked back to the lack of popular desire for revolutionary political change which could lead to the transformation of the political climate. It thus remains apparent that fascism could only truly thrive in countries which adhered to this notion, governed by weak liberal democratic governments undergoing a state of crisis, and producing a public impetus for the rebirth of the nation which only Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were able to truly satisfy.

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