

Was the Falange fascist?

In order to determine whether or not the Falange was fascist, it is first necessary to determine what fascism is and what is meant by the term. The historiography concerning the nature of fascism is vast, and many varying definitions of fascism have been established by different historians. The term ‘fascist’ was first used to define a political movement based upon both ultra-nationalism and hostility towards the Left by Mussolini in 1919.¹ This is a basic definition of fascism at its core. However, there are many other different features of fascism as a political movement, which means that interpretations and definitions of fascism change depending on what is being focused on. For example, Marxist approaches to fascism all emphasize its links with capitalism, stating that when pressure from the proletariat for the end of capitalism rose to extreme heights, capitalists used terror to defend their monopoly over industry, and used the mass fascist movement to destroy socialism.²

Marxist scholars therefore emphasise the difference of fascism to communism. However, fascist and communist regimes have been compared for their similarity, despite being at opposite ends of the political spectrum.³ This is due to the totalitarian aspect of fascism. Totalitarianism in fascism is often part of the drive to incorporate the masses into a total hierarchical and mobilized community serving the needs of the country.⁴ Totalitarian scholar C.J. Friedrich defines totalitarianism as having seven key aspects- a single mass party led by one man which forms the hardcore of the regime; a system of terror by the police or secret police against the real and imagined enemies of the state; a total control of mass media; a near monopoly of weapons; central control of the economy; an elaborate ideology which covers all aspects of man’s existence and finally an aim to restructure society in accordance

¹ Passmore (2002), p. 10.

² Ibid. pp. 14-15.

³ Forman (1974), p. 14.

⁴ Passmore (2002), p. 8.

with an ideological blueprint.⁵ However, focusing solely on the totalitarian or capitalist aspects of fascism ignores the aspects of the movement which set it apart from other political concepts, such as its nationalist focus and attack on ‘enemies’ of the nation state on a racial or biological basis.

Due to these many varying aspects and perspectives on fascism, many historians have therefore attempted to make a concise definition of fascism. One such definition is that of Stanley Payne. He argues that fascism can be defined through three ways. Firstly, through the fascist ideals: anti-liberalism, anti-communism and anti-conservatism, though the fascists are willing to engage in temporary alliances with groups from other sectors, most commonly from the Right.⁶ Secondly, through ideology and goals: creation of a new nationalist authoritarian state; organisation of a new kind of regulated national economic structure; and the achievement of an empire.⁷ Thirdly, through their style and organisation: attempted mass mobilisation with the militarization of political relationships; the goal of a mass party military; positive evaluation and use of violence; extreme stress on a masculine principle; adoration of youth; and a tendency towards an authoritarian, charismatic, personal style of command from their leader.⁸ An alternative definition is one by Kevin Passmore who states that fascism is a series of ideologies that seek to place a nation (which is defined in select biological, cultural or historical terms) above all other potential sources of loyalty and to create a mobilized national community. Fascism acts in the name of the people and the movement is headed by a charismatic leader and personified in a mass militarized party, but above all, all aspects of its policy are infused with ultra-nationalism.⁹

Roger Griffin also attempts to define the generic features of fascism as a movement. His definition includes: the values of the fascist party are expressed in its writings, speeches,

⁵ Passmore (2002), p. 19.

⁶ Renton (1999), p. 21.

⁷ Ibid. p. 21.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Passmore (2002), p. 31.

propaganda, uniforms, and above all the style of its politics; a utopian vision of the future under the party which will never actually be realized in practice; fascist ideology and the impact it has is not due to any one leader; and that fascism is defined in a series of values and goals all centred around its ideological core.¹⁰ Finally, there is the definition reached by James D. Forman. He states that since fascism is largely a reaction to communism, the main support of fascism will come from those groups whose social or economic positions are threatened by communism, such as the economic elite.¹¹ As for the fascist movement itself, he identifies key elements of the fascist state- misfits are eliminated; politically, the individual has been eliminated; a final objective of imperialistic expansion; the youth participate in mandatory athletic programmes; military forces are quickly expanded; the seizure and control of economic, social, political and cultural aspects of a state; fear of the communists and the Left; and overall the state has become fiercely nationalistic, anti-communist, militaristic and imperialistic.¹²

Overall, these many definitions demonstrate that what fascism is as an ideology and as a political movement is subject to interpretation by the person defining it. There are also things that one scholar may identify as a key aspect of fascism whilst another may not, or may have missed out of their definition entirely. For example, Griffin argues that the impact of fascism is not centred around any single leader, whilst Passmore states that a key aspect of fascism is that the group is led by a charismatic, authoritarian leader. However, by comparing and grouping these varying definitions, a common definition of fascism with key elements can be identified, which can then be used to determine whether or not the Falange was a fascist group.

The background for the rise of the Falange in Spain is one of disparity and economic hardship, something which also gave rise to the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy. Spain

¹⁰ Griffin (1993), pp. 22-23.

¹¹ Forman (1974), p. 15.

¹² Ibid. p. 16-17.

boasted a slow rate of economic growth due to low levels of popular education, as well as archaic agricultural and industrial equipment, an extremely slow rise in the standard of living, and low wages- Spanish workers in 1914 were paid the lowest real wages in Western Europe besides Portugal.¹³ Between the 1870s and the outbreak of the First World War, Spain, along with Germany and Italy, experienced deep structural problems and the tensions of a backwards political regime which was challenged both by the bourgeoisie and a militant working class.¹⁴ However, Spain did not participate in the First World War and did not experience a national psychosis of defeat or a plethora of angry war veterans to swell the ranks of fascist groups, unlike the other two countries.¹⁵ This may suggest that nationalism in Spain was not as contentious an issue as it was in Italy and Germany, and therefore that the Falange was not as infused with ultra-nationalism as the definition of fascism dictates. However, the leader of the Falange, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, did dictate that misery would only be over once the Spanish had an empire once more, and privately talked of absorbing Portugal.¹⁶

The Falange was formed by José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the son of the previous dictator of Spain. He advocated national reform based on authoritarianism and a radical national authoritarian reconstruction, aggressive towards liberals and the Left.¹⁷ This can be seen in José Antonio's first official address of the Falange's party goals in October 1933. He stated that the Falange aimed for unity of all classes and individuals: 'All the people of Spain, however diverse they may be, feel in harmony with the irrevocable unity of destiny'.¹⁸ Furthermore, the Falange wanted more respect for the liberty of man, which would happen if

¹³ Payne (1961), p. 2.

¹⁴ Preston (1990), p. 12.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 12-13.

¹⁶ Payne (1999), pp. 43-44.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 29.

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 38-39.

liberty were joined to a system of order, hierarchy and authority.¹⁹ This system may have to be achieved by violence but that was necessary, as the Falange were fighting for all the people of Spain, including the working class which would feel the benefits of a totalitarian state.²⁰ Overall, the Falange was captured by a powerful feeling for Spain and aimed to collapse the 'tired' political system.²¹ This address encapsulates many of the key features of fascism identified in the aforementioned definitions, such as nationalism, authoritarianism, aggressiveness towards the Left, an enthusiasm for violence and totalitarianism. However, there is no mention of mass militarization, which is a key part of the aforementioned definitions. *El Sol*, Spain's leading liberal newspaper also stated: 'We reject it in the first place for wanting to be fascist...and in the second, for not truly being it, for not being a deep and authentic fascism. This suggests that although the Falange had fascist elements to its ideology, it was not true fascism.

Looking at the Falange throughout its time as a political party, there are many key elements that can be identified as fascist according to the established definitions. The most striking is that identified by Paul Preston, who states: 'If style and ideology, rather than social and economic function, are the main criteria for defining fascism, then the Falange is the clear choice.'²² He goes on to talk about the Falange's cult of violence and its blue-shirted militias with Roman salutes and ritual chants.²³ The one consistent part of the Falange party programme was its fervid nationalism and desire for economic reform,²⁴ which is a key element of fascism as a movement. The ideology of the Falange showing crucial fascist aspects is a common occurrence. For example, José Antonio maintained that only an integral,

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 39.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 40.

²¹ Ibid. p. 41.

²² Preston (1990), p. 9.

²³ Ibid. p. 9.

²⁴ Payne (1999), p. 76.

totalitarian, national state could bring Spain to glory.²⁵ Furthermore, General Franco had used the Falange to gain power during the Spanish Civil War and with them, created a totalitarian national syndicalist state which remained in power until after the Second World War, until Franco attempted to cut all ties with fascism and established a traditionalist Catholic state instead.²⁶

However, there are also key elements of the Falange throughout the years which suggest that they were not a fascist group, or possibly not a true fascist group. Perhaps most significantly, José Antonio declared publicly that Falange was not a fascist movement after the Spanish people were beginning to reject fascism.²⁷ There were also doubts that José Antonio had the proper temperament to be a fascist- he continued to secretly have dinner with liberal friends and did not act like his political opposition was inhuman or less human than himself.²⁸ There is also the fact that between sixty and seventy per cent of all Falangists were under twenty-one and students.²⁹ This is in direct opposition to Forman's definition of fascism, which states that the majority of support for the fascists will come from those whose elite economic and social positions are challenged by communism, a group which does not include students. Furthermore, the Falange separated themselves from racism to avoid comparison with other nationalistic fascist parties.³⁰ However, the definition of fascism above states that there must be enemies of the state defined in exclusive racial or cultural terms. Falangist propaganda also differed radically from that of most other European fascist groups with an emphasis on Catholicism and Christianity.³¹ Fascism normally eschews religion as it implies that there is a higher and more important power than that of the totalitarian leader.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 87.

²⁶ del Boca & Giovana (1970), p. 236.

²⁷ Payne (1999), p. 70.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 75.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 82.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 126.

³¹ Ibid. p. 127.

Overall, it is difficult to determine whether or not the Falange was a fascist political party. The group never fully rose to power in Spain and therefore cannot be fully assessed by all the criteria available for determining fascism, as they never had an opportunity to implement policies such as mandatory participation in activity programmes for the youth or a mass militarized party. However, the Falange does display key elements of fascism such as a total focus on nationalism, a use of violence, a goal of empire, a uniting uniform and salute, and a goal to overthrow the current political system and implement reform. Despite this, elements of the party which were not associated with fascism, such as it being made almost completely of students, a lack of a racial or national enemy, a focus on religion and the party not being centred completely around one leader who had total authoritarian power, cannot be ignored. Due to this, it is necessary to conclude that the Falange was not a fully fascist group. It is arguably not inaccurate to call the Falange fascist, as it certainly displayed central fascist aspects such as those outlined above. However, when compared to the major European fascisms of the twentieth century and the definitions which aim to encapsulate these fascisms, the Falange is found lacking.

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