

Introduction: Left-Wing Radical Politics and Emergency Powers in Interwar Europe

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Abstract: This argument aims to provide an overview of the historical context and main factors shaping the relation between left-wing radical politics and emergency powers in interwar Europe. It also brings to the fore how left-wing radical movements fuelled, reacted to and were connected with the multiple crises of the time span between the two world wars. The main argument is that emergency powers had the potential and were turned into a vehicle for an authoritarian drive, as several cases of that time illustrate. The abuse of emergency powers led to a normalisation of political violence and worked as a corrosive force against the liberal order in several European countries during the interwar period.

Keywords: emergency powers, martial law, revolution, radical left, political violence

The interwar era is constantly represented as a historical epoch under the aegis of crisis. Starting with the revolutions and civil wars following the end of the First World War, carrying on through the rise of the far-right, and the normalisation of political violence, the Great Depression, the upsurge of authoritarian regimes and dictatorships, as well as the looming threat of a new total war, the interwar period is marked by conflict, political dissent and a “sense-making crisis” (Platt 1998 [1980], 208).

While the far-right and various forms of conservative, revolutionary or hybrid right-wing authoritarianisms present themselves as being at the forefront and the eventual victors of the general dissolution of the Versailles and liberal

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consensus, the interwar period is also the battleground witnessing the struggle between state authority and forms of left-wing contestation of the status quo. The October Revolution undoubtedly marked the heyday of new forms of politics, and fuelled both left-wing radicalisation, civil wars, and violent dissent as well as peaceful forms of resistance and struggle for social justice. However, it was just a central knot in a series of social, political and institutional transformations that sprang during the interwar years. On its trail, the rise of the Comintern, the emergence of anti-colonial struggle, of new forms of trade-unionism, marked the politics of the interwar period in Europe and across the world. This trajectory was certainly not linear and could not be reduced only to communist politics. New forms of activism, such as anti-fascism, popular fronts and inner divisions within the communist movement were also part of the troubled history of the interwar era.¹

For their part, following the Versailles Peace, state institutions within the European countries were also in a process of transformation and reconstruction. The rise of mass politics, following a generalised introduction of “universal” male suffrage, the acquisition of statehood for most of the countries of East-Central Europe, the re-writing of constitutional arrangements, were as many sources of reform as they were of political contestation, conflict and crisis. At the core of the mechanisms states across Europe used in diffusing or repressing dissent, and at times outright addressing economic, financial, or political crisis, we find the politico-legal category of emergency powers. Thus, the interwar period is not only the time of revolutions and counter-revolutions surfacing a transnational ideological conflict labelled as the “European civil war” (Nolte 1997, Preston 1996, Traverso 2016), of overlapping economic, social and political crises, but also the period marked by the over-use of emergency powers. Although the last two decades have witnessed an increase of valuable contributions on emergency powers, some of them dealing with the interwar period (see for example: Stolleis 2007; Cercel 2015; Lavis 2018; Skinner 2019), there is still not enough research on those transversal lines connecting these aforementioned entangled phenomena.

Starting from these general trends, what we are keen on exploring in this special issue is how left-wing radical movements fuelled, reacted to and were connected with the multiple crises of the interwar period, but also how various political regimes instrumentalised emergency powers to deal with their activism in this time span. By left wing radical politics we understand not only the Communist parties and the trade unions subordinated to them, but also various left-wing movements and groups which promoted a radical reshaping of the social status quo and political order by either violent or peaceful means.

With origins in the French legal institution of the state of siege for most countries in the Civil Law tradition (Rossiter 1948, 79), or within the concept

of martial law or royal prerogative for the common law tradition (Gross and Ni Aolain 2006, 26–30), emergency powers mark a political and legal threshold suspending temporarily the regular functioning of state institutions. In the case of liberal regimes based on the rule of law, emergency powers blur the traditional separation of powers, and affect the constitutional and legal protections of fundamental rights. Theorised as essentially *temporary and conservative* (Ferejohn and Pasquino 2004, 210–239), emergency powers are understood as mechanisms for protecting the status quo. Their proliferation during the interwar era, as a response to the various actual or perceived crises, challenges the traditional understanding prevalent among constitutional lawyers and political theorists. As the experience of the infamous Article 48 (emergency decrees) of the Weimar Constitution proves (Evans 2003), the constant use of the state of siege could actually be a transformative experience, giving way to regime change. This case is not only limited to the Nazi takeover, be it the resort to *estado de sítio* (“state of siege”) in Portugal in January 1934, the declaration of state of emergency in 1934 by Kārlis Ulmanis in Latvia, or the so-called *stare de asediū* (“state of siege”) proclaimed for an indefinite period in Romania by King Carol II in February 1938, these moments illustrate how emergency powers have the potential to be turned into vehicles for establishing dictatorial regimes (Pintilescu 2019; Cercel 2020; Feldmanis 2001; Butulis 2001; Novo 2012).

However, emergency powers are not only limited to being a purely constitutional practice. More often than not, they take the form of a silent and furtive re-writing of the legal system, by embedding these practices in the regular functioning of the modern state. As Mark Neocleous argues, the resort to emergency powers by British governments during the nineteenth century and beginning of twentieth century was a regular tool in suppressing anti-colonial uprisings or movements, while the 1920 Emergency Powers Act was the favourite instrument to pacify social turmoil in the United Kingdom during the interwar and post-Second World War periods (Neocleous 2008, 44, 52–53).

In order to understand the use of emergency powers and their relation to radical left-wing politics during the interwar period, particularly two key factors need to be taken into consideration: 1. the long-lasting aftermath of the First World War on the European societies and politics; 2. the shift brought by the October Revolution and its failed or short-lived replicas in Europe concerning the perceptions/policies on both emergency powers and the radical left-wing movements.

Giorgio Agamben brought to the fore that the world conflagration turned emergency powers into an everyday reality in most European countries (Agamben 2017, 176). Moreover, the experience of the Great War led in general to an insinuation of military techniques of government in the everyday

functioning of the state apparatus and an increase of the presence of the military in the political arena. Key figures such as Józef Piłsudski, Miklós Horthy, Alexandru Averescu, or Ioannis Metaxas² epitomise a trend of prominent military leaders becoming political leaders during the interwar period.

The second factor was the impact the October Revolution and its replicas in Central and East-Central Europe on how European political elites in power, either belonging to the liberal, social-democrat, conservative or far-right ideological spectrum, perceived the left-wing radicalism and the exceptional measures to deal with it. The fear of revolution determined the political elites design a broader set of institutions and practices aiming to contain the expansion of Communism in Europe. Mark Mazower rightly pointed out that the emergence of Comintern and Communist parties in the European countries led to an upsurge of policing politics during the interwar period (Mazower 1997, 244–245). These practices of law enforcement institutions adjusted to the transnational networks developed by the Comintern. As Cyrille Fijnaut argues, the emergence of the International Criminal Police Commission (or in short ICPC, the forerunner of the Interpol) in September 1923 was not only the result of the need to combat transnational criminality, but also to counter Communism across borders (Fijnaut 1997, 111–112).

Another part of the armature of the state deeply affected by this impact entails the legislation and the institutional tools pertaining to emergency powers. Following the October Revolution, both liberal and authoritarian regimes in interwar Europe heavily used the narratives of the “Communist danger” to legitimise the resort to the exceptional powers provided by martial law or state of siege. Although in some countries, due to their vicinity with the Soviet Union, the fear of Kremlin’s use of Communist uprisings to interfere with their domestic politics was not irrational (such as the cases of the Baltic states, Romania or Poland during the 1920s), in many others, such as Greece and Portugal during the 1930s, the outbreak of a revolution with Soviet support was unlikely (Pajur 2001; Feldmanis 2001; Cercel 2015; Pintilescu 2020)

The resort to emergency powers entailed the potential to be turned into a vehicle for an authoritarian drive, as several cases of the interwar period showed. Although the Greek Communist Party was too weak at that time to represent a real danger to the social and political status quo, in August 1936, Greek Prime Minister Ioannis Metaxas proclaimed the “state of emergency” by invoking the “Communist danger” following the strikes that broke out in the north of the country in April. Besides, the Comintern was already promoting the strategy of “popular front” after its Seventh Congress in July 1935 and the revolutionary narratives of the Communist parties were softening across Europe. In Romania, the February 1933 strikes at the Grivița Railway Workshops were suppressed by the National Peasants’ Party’s government led by Alexandru

Vaida-Voevod following the declaration of state of siege on 4 February 1933. As Cristina Diac argues in her contribution to this special issue, the official narratives invoking the danger of a “Communist revolution” were an easy way to legitimise the resort to the state of siege. After several years of abusing emergency powers (1933–1938), King Carol II proclaimed state of siege for indefinite period and turned it into one of the main tools of his dictatorship in February 1938. Thus, in both interwar Greece and Romania, emergency powers functioned as effective mechanisms for dismantling the liberal order and establishing dictatorial regimes.

Although the use of emergency powers was generalised in different parts of interwar Europe, there are also specificities from one region to another. In 1918-to-1933 Germany, the use of emergency powers was fuelled not only by the 1918–1919 Revolution, but also by economic crises and the social turmoil of the early 1920s and the years of the Great Depression. Thus, the Weimar Republic heavily resorted to emergency powers to deal with economic issues (Neocleous 2008).

In Southern Europe, the Fascist (Italy) and hybrid dictatorships merging conservative-authoritarian or military components with Fascist influences (such as Salazar’s and Franco’s regimes) turned emergency powers into regular instruments of annihilating the political opposition and suppressing hostile trade unions. The conservative political milieu, the military, and parts of the far-right gathered around authoritarian leaders such as Salazar and Franco in order to counter the increasing radical left-wing activism within the trade unions. While elsewhere in Europe the trade unions were under the influence of Social-Democrat and Communist parties, the anarcho-syndicalists were more influential in the trade-unionist movement of the Iberian Peninsula during the 1920s and early 1930s than the Communists. The anarcho-syndicalists (gathered in the General Confederation of Labor), together with the Inter-Union Confederation (dominated by communists) and the Federation of Workers’ Associations initiated a general strike in Portugal on 18 January 1934 (Novo 2012, 728; Patriarca 1993, 1137–1152). The strike was caused by a decree issued in September 1933 by the Salazar regime, which practically made strikes and independent trade unions illegal in Portugal. Salazar suppressed the strike by resorting to state of siege, which, as in the aforementioned Romanian and Greek cases, offered him the possibility to dress his authoritarian drive into a legal form.

In Spain, an alliance between the socialist trade union entitled General Union of Workers and the anarcho-syndicalists of the Regional Confederation of Labour of Asturias, León and Palencia initiated the revolutionary general strike of the Asturian miners in October 1934. The Asturian workers were mobilised by the co-optation of the conservative catholic Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rights (CEDA)—which had undergone a process of

fascisation since 1933—in a right-wing government led by Alejandro Lerroux (Preston 2006, 63–65). Francisco Franco, at that time a general in the Spanish army, was one of the minds behind organising the suppression of the 1934 general strike in Asturias by resorting to martial law (Preston 1995). This experience shaped his view about the role of the military in politics. In this respect, Stanley Payne identified correctly the origins of the Franco dictatorship in the period from 1933 to 1936, when the Spanish Republic entered a deep social and political crisis (Payne 2008, 94).

Interwar Spain is the most illustrative case of the transnational ideological conflict in Europe labelled as an “European civil war” by historians such as Ernst Nolte (1997), Paul Preston (1996, viii) or Enzo Traverso (2016). However, this approach tends to minimise the different shapes and sizes this conflict took in different parts of the continent. Robert Gerwarth coined the concept of “war in peace” in order to emphasise that “postwar meant something very different in Russia in 1918 than it did in Britain” (Gerwarth 2019, 221). In the same direction, Jochen Böehler proposed the expression “Central European Civil War” in his inquiry into the entangled wars in the region from 1918 to 1921, which broke out following the dismantling of Austria-Hungary, Russian and German empires. According to Böehler, although there are some similitudes in the political violence that characterised the Russian Civil War and what he calls the “Central European Civil War”, the latter featured a specific “vast disarray of concurring and competing ideological agendas” (Böehler 2018, 61). In this respect, Böehler developed Dan Diner’s argument, who brought to the fore the existence of “a distinct arc of conflict” in the aftermath of the Great War, which spanned from the Baltic to the Adriatic seas and emerged from a “general meshing of military defeat, social revolution, and national battles on the frontier” (Diner 2008, 64).

Against this background, in this special issue we are interested in exploring the nexus between left-wing radical politics and emergency powers. We aim to do so by investigating the legal, political and institutional aspects of the matter, as well as by reflecting on how both state practices and political movements responded, partook into, and fuelled further political instability by actually reversing and hollowing out the liberal armature of the state. This thematic issue focuses particularly on legal, political and institutional mechanisms through which repression of radical left-wing movements took place and the strategies the latter took in response to state policies. Moreover, it aims to inquire into the process of re-writing legal frameworks and institutional practices in an authoritarian vein as a response to communist, anarchist or other forms of radical left-wing militancy.

The issue is structured in two parts: 1. a first part aiming to provide an overview of the encounter between left-wing radical politics and emergency powers in interwar Europe (and its postwar aftermath) by focusing on the

state policies of containing communist parties in the Nordic countries, France, Italy and Yugoslavia; 2. a second part dealing with the emergency powers and anti-communist policies/narratives in interwar Romania. The main arguments for choosing interwar Romania for the focus of the second part of this thematic issue is the centrality of emergency powers and their relation with what the official discourse labelled as the “Communist danger” for understanding the crisis of the liberal order established by the 1923 Constitution and the authoritarian turn of the period from 1933 to 1938.

The first part opens with the article authored by Kristina Krake dealing with the perceptions and policies of the Scandinavian governments towards the radical left-wing militantism during the interwar period. Drawing on an approach that combines the analysis of both legislation and official discourse, Kristina Krake argues that although Norway, Sweden and Denmark did not use radical measures such as emergency powers to counter the Communist parties and their subordinated organisations, the governments in the Scandinavian countries developed tools and policies aiming to tame the radical left. They were part of a broader trend in the Scandinavian countries to issue a legislation aiming to prevent the activity of those groups, which contested the political order by violent means, coming from both the far-right and Communist parties.

The second article of this part, authored by Rastko Lompar, focuses on the turning moments of the legal and institutional framework involved in countering the activity of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia during the interwar period. Rastko Lompar identifies three phases of the evolution of the anti-communist legislation: 1. a first phase during which the state institutions tolerated the emergence of the revolutionary left (1918–1921); 2. a second one from 1921 to 1929, when, following some terrorist attacks organised by Communists, the repressive institutions of the state received free hand from the government to suppress the emerging communist movement after the issuance of the “Law on the Protection of Public Security and State Order” in 1921; 3. a third phase lasting from 1929 to 1939, which was characterised by the further extension of this legislation after the establishment of the King Aleksandar I’s dictatorship in 1929.

The first part ends with the article authored by Pascal Girard dealing with the policies of the post-war Italian and French governments that aimed at pacifying the labour unrest. The latter was perceived by the Italian and French politicians in power as being fuelled by Communist propaganda in the context of the tense atmosphere of the early Cold War period. Following the violent protests taking place in 1947 and 1948, the French and Italian governments adopted a policy of harsh repression of the labour unrest. These coercive measures were carried out mostly by using the existing penal code and less by resorting to emergency powers. The Italian *leggi eccezionali* of the

period 1950–1953 are among the most important exceptions. The Italian state authorities were harsher in carrying out their policies and, in countering radical far-left activism, they used several Fascist laws still in force. Consequently, the civil liberties were more often infringed in the early post-war Italy than in France.

The second part of this thematic issue opens with the Corneliu Pintilescu's article on the impact of the October Revolution on the use of emergency powers in the period from 1918 to 1933. He argues that the abusive use of the state of siege in Romania during the 1920s and early 1930s heavily contributed to the crisis of the liberal order established by the 1923 Constitution and fuelled the ascension of far-right authoritarianism during the 1930s. The second article, authored by Cosmin Cercel, provides an inquiry into the institutional and legal practices involved in the events that are known in the historiography as the 1924 Tatarbuniar Uprising. He analyses the legal and historiographical narratives of sovereign power as they surface from the files of the institutions involved in this case from Southern Bessarabia. The third article, authored by Cristina Diac, provides an inquiry into the role played by the transnational communist networks in the 1933 strikes at the Grivița Railway Workshops and the legitimising narratives of the Romanian government concerning the use of the state of siege in suppressing those protests. She argues that the Romanian secret services of the interwar period were able to evaluate the security risks emerging from the involvement of the Communists in these events and provide their analysis to the political leaders. The government in Bucharest was not threatened by the Communists' ability to ignite the strikes but by their success in mobilising a larger social discontent concerning the government's austerity policies during the Great Depression. This explains its unbalanced harsh reaction to the strikes. The last article authored by Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy deals with how the anti-communist narratives were instrumentalised in interwar Romania to legitimise the repressive measures carried out by state institutions to counter the development of several religious minorities. Her analysis focuses on the Romanian authorities' discourse and policies on the Old Calendarist community, a religious group that split from the Romanian Orthodox Church following to the adoption by the latter of a revised version of the Julian calendar.

To conclude this last part, the four contributions illustrate how—in the context of the overlapped crises of the interwar period—the use of emergency powers by Romanian governments undermined the liberal order these mechanisms were supposed to safeguard. As in many other European societies, the abuse of emergency powers led to a normalisation of political violence during the interwar period. Finally, the Romanian case epitomises the entangled relation between crisis, political radicalisation, emergency powers, and the authoritarian drive in Europe during the 1930s.

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Endnotes

- 1 For an overview on the transnational character of anti-fascist movements see: Braskén, Copesey, and Featherstone 2020.
- 2 Alexandru Averescu (1859–1938) was Prime Minister of Romania on three separate occasions: January 1918 – March 1918, March 1920 – December 1921, and March 1926–June 1927.