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Research article

Antidote to Civil War? European ‘small states’ and political legitimacy during World War II¹

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The experience of European small states involved in World War II varied widely. Not all of them entered the war as victims of aggression, and even those that did so did not necessarily share the same dire consequences of warfare and/or foreign occupation; they also exited the war in, sometimes dramatically different ways: a number of small states entered the post-war period relatively peacefully, other were plunged into civil war, while a third category experienced a measure of unrest short of civil strife. It is argued in this paper that, among the factors influencing the outcome of a European small state’s involvement in World War II, the political legitimacy of its government should not be underestimated. The impact of this factor was particularly felt during the sensitive transition period from war and/or occupation into peacetime. Reinterpreting existing material, it is further argued that, during the war, democratic legitimacy increasingly appeared to guarantee a safer ground for both withstanding wartime travails and achieving a relatively smooth restoration of free national institutions, without the risk of civil war.

Keywords: World War II, Europe, small states, legitimacy, legitimation, transition

I. ‘Small states’ in World War II

Even before the Second World War broke out, Europe was proving a very dangerous place for states smaller than those conventionally recognized as ‘great powers’. Nazi Germany and fascist Italy were following a revisionist foreign policy bent on destroying the Paris Peace Settlement of 1919 and expanding at the expense of lesser neighboring powers. The German annexation of Austria and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, the Italian invasion of Albania and the involvement of both totalitarian states in the Spanish Civil War, in addition to their brutal domestic record of repression, manifested their disrespect for the rule of law at home and abroad. Their disdain for democratic government, in particular, was shared by the

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third totalitarian great power, which was lurking in the background. Under Stalin, the world's only socialist state was preparing itself to take advantage of the 'inevitable' clash between the capitalist powers in order to promote its own concept of security through 'revolutionary' expansion beyond the borders of the Soviet Union.

War came when the two remaining democratic great powers, Britain and France, refused to acquiesce to yet another manifestation of Nazi expansionism. Their reaction did little to help Poland which Germany quickly overpowered in partnership with the Soviet Union. During the following twenty months, a string of smaller European states plus France were invaded and subjugated or were pressed into more or less complete alignment with Berlin, Rome or Moscow. This element of external coercion was the apparent common denominator of the condition in which 'small states' found themselves during World War II. Otherwise, their experience of war and occupation or collaboration varied widely as did their transition into the post-war era. This paper aims to test the assumption that a democratic tradition and culture provided a more enduring basis for political legitimacy in comparison with the authoritarian alternatives prevalent in interwar Europe and considerably reduced the risk of civil strife in the wake of liberation or capitulation. There follows a brief examination of a number of individual cases, which, in addition to affirming variety, focuses on legitimacy as an important variable affecting the war-time course and post-war transition of different European states. (1)

Following the defeat and dismemberment of Poland, the next country to be sucked into the vortex of war was Finland. The secret protocols appended to the Nazi-Soviet Pact consigned it to the Soviet sphere of influence. Moscow initially tried to negotiate its territorial and other claims, which would have rendered Finland a vassal state. When, in late November 1939, the latter's government rejected certain of these demands, the Red Army attacked. During the ensuing 'Winter War', the Finns put up stiff resistance and repelled the invader. With minimal help from the Western powers and foreign, mainly Swedish, volunteers, Finnish defence exploited the arctic conditions of the terrain in order to offset the material superiority of the aggressor. However, by March 1940, the Finnish leadership was forced to realise that, come spring, the sheer numbers of the Red Army would prove decisive. Helsinki capitulated and conceded territory and bases to Moscow. On 26 June 1941, Finland re-entered the war as 'co-belligerent' but not allied to the Axis powers invading the Soviet Union. The aim was to retake lost territory and, subsequently, to expand into Eastern Karelia. The Finns were able to resist German demands for more active participation in operations after they had achieved their objectives. The so-called 'Continuation War' lapsed into stalemate before, in September 1944, the Finns finally sued for peace while still in control of much of their pre-war territory.

Finland was the only functional democracy to fight alongside Nazi Germany before being forced to switch sides, as a result of its armistice with the Soviet Union. Throughout the war, multi-party governments, excluding the extreme nationalists and the communists, managed to retain a high degree of domestic consensus over their slaloming between the Axis and its opponents. Fears that the bitter precedent of the 1918 civil conflict might be repeated did not materialize. The high command of the

armed forces also served as a factor of cohesion. The post was entrusted to field-marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, who had defeated the Finnish 'Reds' in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Mannerheim had refused to head a dictatorship when the opportunity arose in the turbulent 1930s, advised a compromise with the Soviets before the Winter War and was instrumental in limiting the Finns' part in Hitler's war and in the timely decisions to stop the fighting both in 1940 and 1944. Despite its defeats, Finland avoided enemy occupation in all but a fraction of its national territory and, given its four long years of belligerence, its war-related fatalities reached a comparably low 2,5 per cent of the population. The painful experience of the Red Army from its fighting against the Finns and the all but impregnable domestic front in the country must have convinced Stalin of the high cost involved in the total subjugation of Finland, which would be able to retain its democratic institutions and free market economy, at the price of neutrality benevolent to its imperious neighbour.

As Hitler turned his attention to Finland's northernmost neighbour, Norway, in April 1940, German troops entered the Danish soil unannounced. A democratically elected coalition government, in unison with King Christian X, decided that the small, flat country was unsuited for defence against an infinitely stronger adversary. Thus, Denmark turned into virtual German protectorate, though the government strove to defend its domestic jurisdiction to the extent possible. In fact, Denmark had the privilege of being the only country in Nazi-dominated Europe to hold free and fair elections, in March 1943, with disastrous results for the local National-Socialist party. This peculiar status was terminated in August of that year, when Copenhagen refused to introduce the repressive measures demanded by the Germans, who consequently imposed their own martial law. The government resigned but the civil service continued to function effectively, while the king remained in the country, turning the throne into the focal point of national unity. With the exception of the great strike of July 1944 and a number of skirmishes on the eve of liberation, Danish resistance was essentially passive. As a result, at the end of the war the country counted less than 0.2 per cent of its population as war dead and limited material damage. In their effort to protect the population as a whole, the Danish authorities succeeded in saving the Jews of Denmark. With the citizenry's assistance, more than 95 per cent of these people made their way to safety in neutral Sweden.

As German war planning had provided since the early 20th century, the decisive attack against France was launched through the territory of Belgium and neighbouring Luxemburg. The Belgian policy of neutrality announced as early as 1936 failed to deter the aggressor. At the end of May 1940, after eighteen days of fighting, King Leopold III, in his capacity as commander-in-chief, overruled the democratically elected government in Brussels and surrendered with his army to the Germans. Appearing to share the fate of his captive people, Leopold at first enjoyed high levels of popularity, especially as he attempted to mitigate the effects of defeat and extract from Hitler the release of the 200,000 Belgian prisoners of war. Intending to exploit the country's ethnic dichotomy to its own ends, Berlin chose to release the Flemish and keep the Walloon rank and file interned until the end of the war. The harsh realities of occupation and the turn of the tide of war against the Axis

eventually tipped the scales in favour of the London-based Belgian government-in-exile. As a symbol of continuity with pre-war legality, this government helped to keep the spirit of resistance alive both at home and abroad, unlike the authoritarian-inclined Leopold, who had practically resigned himself to the Nazi New Order. The king's attitude would trigger a regime crisis at the end of the war, which was aggravated by the initial refusal of the leftist resistance to give up its arms. At a time when Belgium was still a theatre of war, the formerly exiled government was able to maintain its cohesion minus the communists, reaffirm the confidence of the pre-war parliament and, most crucially, secure the support of the omnipresent Allied factor. If civil conflict on account of disarmament was thus averted, the regime issue continued to plague the country until 1950, when Leopold was finally persuaded to resign in favour of his successor. It was the last chapter of the war legacy which involved much destruction and human losses in excess of 1 per cent of Belgium's population, including one third of its 75,000-strong Jewish community.

Despite its revisionist outlook, Bulgaria also opted for neutrality at the early stage of the war. Having suffered bitter defeats in the Second Balkan and the First World War, by 1939 it was the Balkan country most exposed to German economic penetration, cultural influence and diplomatic leverage, though one should not overlook a considerable tradition of russophilia, especially among the peasantry and the small working class. However, even after the country joined the Tripartite Pact on 1 March 1941, King Boris and his loyal government, supported by a hand-picked chamber of deputies, sought to avoid involving their militarily weak state in Axis operations. The Bulgarian contribution to Hitler's war was limited to occupation duties in parts of Yugoslavia and Greece, which lay conveniently away from the main theatres of war and which Sofia aspired to annex. Moreover, Bulgaria never declared war on the Soviet Union. This, however, did not prevent Moscow from declaring war itself at exactly the time when the Sofia government, as part of its effort to come to terms with Britain and the United States, turned against its erstwhile ally, Germany. The unopposed invasion of the Red Army, on 8 September 1944, immediately placed the country under the control of the local communists who, two years later, would establish a single-party 'people's democracy'. Meanwhile, the Bulgarian army was obliged to withdraw from the occupied territories and fight against the retreating Germans inside Yugoslav territory. However, Bulgaria exited the war with territorial gains, as it was permitted to keep Southern Dobrudja, a region which Romania had been forced to cede under German pressure, in 1940. Its 'calculated' involvement in the war and its distance from the main theatres of operations saved Bulgaria from the gruesome fate of its neighbours – except Turkey. The country neither experienced the lethal famine, large-scale destruction and civil conflict that befell Greece and Yugoslavia, nor suffered the massive human casualties of these two countries and Axis satellite Romania. It is estimated that Bulgaria's war-related fatalities amounted to roughly 0.33 per cent of its population. It also protected its Jewish population of Bulgarian nationality, at the expense, however, of the Jews in occupied Greek and Yugoslav territories, who were turned over to the Nazi 'final solution'.

Whereas all preceding cases share a strong element of continuity of national institutions and, at least in Finland, Denmark and Belgium, the presence of governments with democratic legitimacy, Greece entered the war under an unpopular dictatorship. The imposition of the ‘4th of August’ regime by King George II and Ioannis Metaxas, in 1936, had only superficially ended the intermittent crisis of legitimacy which had plagued the country since the eruption of the so-called National Schism in 1915. Despite its fascist inclinations, that regime remained firmly orientated towards Great Britain. Metaxas’ decision to reject the Italian ultimatum in the early hours of 28 October 1940 corresponded to the national mood and probably turned him into the most popular Greek until his death, in January 1941. However, the spirit of unity engendered by fascist aggression did not survive the ordeal of defeat and occupation. Following the German conquest, in May 1941, three indigenous contenders would try to fill the apparent vacuum of domestic authority: the king and his government-in-exile, the collaborationist regime in Athens and the communist-controlled National Liberation Front (EAM), which had grown into the strongest resistance organization. Each disputed the legitimacy of the other two. Their rivalry would plunge the country into bitter civil strife well before the withdrawal of the German troops from mainland Greece, in October 1944. The formation of a government of national unity, which the communists eventually joined as junior partners on the eve of liberation, failed to prevent another round of internecine fighting over the issues of disarmament of the resistance and the composition of the future army, with the questions of the monarchy and the treatment of army officers with a record of collaboration looming in the background. A communist take-over was forestalled owing to the massive intervention of British troops, but their presence and the incipient American involvement did not deter yet another phase of full-blown civil war, in a country whose human losses during the war and occupation were variously estimated between 7 and 11 percent of its population, including 87 percent of its 77,000 strong Jewish community. One is entitled to wonder whether the presence of a representative, lawfully constituted government from the eve of occupation through to liberation could have facilitated an undisputed restoration of legitimate authority and prevented the descent into civil war.

Table 1

Country	Side	Democratic legitimacy	Fighting war(s)	Foreign occupation	War-related fatalities (% of population) [2]	Civil Unrest	Civil War	Holocaust
Finland	Axis/–	X	X / X	–	2.3–2.57	–	–	–
Denmark	–/Allied	X	–	X	0.16	–	–	–
Belgium	Allied	X	X	X	1.05	X	–	X
Greece	Allied	–	X	X	7.02-11.17	X	X	X
Bulgaria	Axis/–	?	X	X	0.33	X	–	–

II. What kind of legitimacy?

Ever since Max Weber offered his definition and typology of legitimacy a century ago [2. P. 75], the concept remains much debated among political scientists (2). Weber identified three ‘inner justifications’ or principles of legitimate rule, all related to different value systems, which, in the eyes of its subjects/citizens, entitle an authority to exercise power: legality, tradition and charisma [2. P. 294–297]. Weber did not consider democracy integral to any of these types of legitimacy. In his view, a ‘legally’ constituted authority could equally be appointed or elected. Moreover, he apparently considered democratic politics compatible with both ‘charismatic’ and ‘legal’ forms of legitimacy. As Jürgen Habermas has observed, in Weber’s analysis the ‘pluralism of competing’ sources of legitimacy is ‘rationally irresolvable’. ‘Our highest values’, he pointed out, are ‘a matter of faith’. [4. P. 100] However, Weber did not miss the advantages of democracy, especially the consent-generating potential of its decision-making process and the safeguards of accountability built in the parliamentary system of government, which positively distinguished it from the authoritarian versions of ‘legal’ rule, e.g. the ‘bureaucratic absolutism’ of his native imperial Germany. [3. P. 454–455] A further advantage lies in the capacity of liberal democracy to prevent crises of succession through free and fair elections, an option which is not available to other political systems. At the same time, Weber was aware of the ‘potentially dictatorial element of mass appeal’ present in democratic politics, [3. P. 455–457] an element which would become evident in the rise of totalitarian movements *via* formally democratic means in Italy and Germany, after Weber’s lifetime.

An epistemological clarification of the concept of legitimacy in historical context would require a project of a different order. This paper focuses on its importance as a factor of political development in wartime Europe. Therefore, it entails the study of different cases on the basis of available secondary material which, it is proposed, is open to reinterpretation. A point of departure is offered by two important collective works, edited by historians Martin Conway and Peter Romijn. These deal with the issue of legitimacy in various European states on the eve of, during and in the immediate aftermath of World War II. (3)

In addition to being a period of escalating uncertainty and insecurity in relations among states, the 1930s witnessed painful setbacks for liberal democracy across much of Europe. As has been noted, the three totalitarian great powers aspired to dominate the international scene in both territorial and ideological terms. Yet the radical forces of fascism, national socialism and communism, unleashed by the unprecedented catastrophe of the Great War and fuelled by the great economic world crisis and depression, were not the only enemies of democracy. Anti-democratic ideologies with roots to Europe’s dynastic and religious *Ancien Régime* were equally prepared to challenge the legitimacy of elected governments in the name of pre-Enlightenment value systems; and if the totalitarian movements owed much to the charismatic leadership provided by figures such as Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler, the authoritarian regimes which imposed themselves upon several European

countries, other than Russia, Italy and Germany, exalted 'tradition'. In the process, these rather conservative alternatives to democracy appropriated certain vestiges and techniques of their radical counterparts, especially the use of propaganda which was proving effective as a means of 'organizing' consent (4). All of them used the, real or perceived, threat which communism represented for the 'bourgeois' social order and capitalist economy as a pretext for terminating democratic politics which the Soviet experiment also rejected. Of course, they had benefited from the apparent failure of their parliamentary predecessors to achieve the degree of consensus required for meeting the multiple challenges generated by conflicting nationalisms, economic woes and the rise of radical alternatives to themselves. This, however, should not conceal the fact that a number of democracies, especially in north-western Europe, survived the test with certain 'adjustments' in favour of executive power. (5) There, the existence of a strongly democratic political culture meant that a non-democratic model of government would only be imposed as a result of foreign occupation. (6)

When war came, the nature of a country's domestic regime did not predicate its **foreign orientation**. Most European governments, democratic or authoritarian, tried to stick to neutrality for as long as possible. By spring 1941, the remaining democracies had been engulfed in Hitler's war with only three exceptions. (7) This was also the fate of authoritarian regimes, again with three exceptions, (8) one of which, Spain, was still reeling from the ravages of its devastating civil war. Eventually, two in every three continental states succumbed to the aggression of Europe's three totalitarian great powers. Only one (Finland) managed to maintain its independence throughout the war, while the rest experienced mostly complete or, in fewer cases, partial enemy occupation. This grim reality triggered a variety of national responses, including governments-in-exile, collaborationist regimes, *de facto* civilian administrations, resistance movements and secessionist entities. Again, only one country (Denmark) managed to preserve its liberal democratic form of government for most of the war, albeit under German tutelage.

The emphasis here is on the **transition** of states from war and/or occupation into the post-war era. Indeed, the defeat of the Axis powers in Europe was followed by a variety of political outcomes. Not all formerly occupied countries were reconstituted as sovereign and integral states. Some emerged independent but territorially truncated and the three Baltic states were reabsorbed into the Soviet Union. The very different experience of the European states-victims of aggression during World War II and its aftermath is apparently due to various factors, both external and domestic. Among the former, the impact of the policies of foreign powers, conquering or liberating, can hardly be exaggerated. With regard to domestic factors, those affecting the cohesion of a society and its ability to withstand the rigours of war and/or occupation apparently stand out. In his attempt to explain the very different impact of German conquest across Europe, Polish historian Waclaw Dlugoborski has identified the following variables: first, the stability of pre-war social structures; secondly, the 'endurance' of different types of society and their ability to preserve their distinct identities under occupation; thirdly, the '**social legitimacy**

of pre-war domestic institutions', especially in comparison with those imposed by the occupier; and fourthly, the relative importance of social or ethnic groups which fell victim to policies of dislocation or extermination implemented by the occupying power(s).[5. P. 8–9] In other words, the disintegration of a country's social cohesion, the fragmentation of its national identity and the incapacity of its institutions to resume their pre-war authority, i.e. their loss of legitimacy, rendered its post-war restoration an all but impossible task.

Although the return to peacetime conditions in Europe was nowhere uneventful, only in a minority of cases liberation (or capitulation) was preceded and/or followed by civil strife, with or without foreign intervention. It is argued that, however crucial the policies of foreign powers may have been, the transition process owed much to circumstances prevailing in each state and extending back to its pre-war regime. It is also submitted that, among these circumstances, the existence of a domestic authority with broad recognition of its right to rule was important, if not critical, in making the difference between a peaceful and a crisis-ridden transition. A valid claim to **legitimacy** significantly facilitated a government's task to reclaim the monopoly of violence throughout the national territory, inspire loyalty among the majority of the population, secure foreign recognition and deter domestic rivals. Even in cases where 'liberation' meant the advent and more or less temporary presence of foreign armies, the existence of a legitimate authority could have far-reaching effects not only for the character of transition from war to peace, but also for the political future of a given state. In simple terms, legitimacy facilitated restoration, while delegitimation produced revolution; and it was *democratic* legitimacy that, as World War II drew to its end, appeared to guarantee a rather peaceful restoration.

Stressing the historically conditioned nature of legitimacy, [6. P. 383] Conway and Romijn identify three broad types of countries in transition from war to peace. At the one end of the spectrum, where Scandinavia predominates, they place states with a strong legitimacy background. A clear case in point is Denmark, a country with an exceptional record of political stability and social cohesion during the inter-war years, where, as has been noted, national institutions remained operative even after the initially indirect German control turned into outright occupation. Such **continuity** is considered a potent guarantee (or deterrent) against the emergence of alternative poles of legitimacy. (9) At the opposite end of weak legitimacy, one finds what these authors define as 'civil war states', e.g. Hungary, Italy and, of course, Greece and Yugoslavia. There, it is argued, the absence of a commonly accepted notion 'of what constituted political legitimacy' led to extreme polarization. This in turn facilitated the rise of 'alternative pretenders to power' who pursued 'a strategy of revolutionary legitimation'. Finally, countries such as Belgium, France and Poland are located in an intermediate space, where political legitimacy was fragmented among different agents, 'each of which sought to build upon different forms of legitimacy'. [6. P. 387; 7. P. 179–185]

At this point, it is necessary to distinguish between internal and external legitimacy, and to attempt a definition of these concepts in the specific context of World War II. It is rather easier to define **external legitimacy** as recognition accorded

to a government by third countries. This in principle secures its acceptance as the incarnation of a state's continuity at the international level. It is all the more important wherever foreign military intervention is indispensable for restoring national sovereignty to states-victims of aggression. External recognition is facilitated if the government in question controls at least part of national territory or, in case of complete enemy occupation, it can claim a title of continuity or succession in relation to the last national government before the loss of territorial sovereignty. Of course, in the case of a government-in-exile, it matters a great deal if its aims are in harmony with those of the foreign powers which recognize it. (10) Otherwise, as the cases of Yugoslavia and Poland prove, such recognition may be rendered meaningless to the extent that one or more of these powers assist a pole of authority operating beyond the control of the government-in-exile.

Internal legitimacy is a trickier issue, since it is not so easy to gauge. (11) It has been noted that the variety of political systems and cultures in pre-war Europe renders a general interpretation problematic. Conway and Romijn stress the importance of **political culture** as a factor of **continuity**, which reinforces legitimacy, in so far as it provides recognizable and durable 'frames of reference' to which the exercise of political power must conform in order to be acceptable to the ruled. [8. P. 2–5] As these authors rightly observe, even the most arbitrary, authoritarian form of government is 'embedded' in a political culture 'from which the state derive[s] its authority but which also constrain[s] it'. [7. P. 383] Conway and Romijn are careful to stress the variety of political cultures across pre-war Europe and their inherent 'fuzziness' – what they describe as the 'murky textures of socially rooted norms and assumptions in which the traditional and the modern, the democratic and the anti-democratic, and the secular and the religious were intertwined'. [7. P. 383].

At this point, one might consider whether it is possible and useful to try and identify prevailing trends, e.g. towards liberal democracy or otherwise. Conway and Romijn warn against the assumption that the values of today's liberal democratic polities enjoyed more widespread acceptance than alternative, more or less authoritarian, models of government, which claimed legitimacy on the basis of *Volkisch*, nationalist or class ideologies. [7. P. 384] In their view, only in 'some fortunate territories', such as Scandinavia, legitimacy became predicated on 'constitutional rule, democratic accountability and respect for legality'. Elsewhere, in the absence of free and fair elections, legitimation or, rather, acquiescence could be extracted through the restoration of traditional modes of authority or charismatic leadership, with the aid of modern devices, [8. P. 7–8; 9. P. 35, 43, 53–54, 60] especially mass propaganda and pseudo-representation in the form of rigged plebiscites and single-ticket 'elections'. Yet, given the fact that authoritarian rule is inherently arbitrary and ultimately rests on coercion, it is worth considering to what extent – and for how long – such methods can really displace democratic politics with their potential for building consent in complex societies and securing the peaceful alternation of power.

The indeterminacy of European political cultures before World War II, especially the relative importance of democracy and the rule of law among their values,

needs to be substantiated, by taking into account the experiences of both the states which maintained their representative pluralist system during the pre-war crisis and those which resorted to more or less authoritarian methods. However, as much as they emphasize variety and fuzziness, Conway and Romijn identify important common elements. Among these, a politically ‘neutral’ one is what they call the ‘culture of bureaucratic uniformity’ which is typical of the modern nation state and stresses ‘due process, predictability, legality and equity’ – with the emphasis on **legality**. (12) Legality of authority, it is argued, was an important value across Europe as was the demand for other core elements of legitimacy: national liberty, just and good government, relative prosperity and respect for ‘the will of the people’, expressed through some form of participatory politics.

In practice, these values could be interpreted in ways quite remote from the tenets of popular sovereignty. (13) However, when discussing the scope and effectiveness of **the democratic principle** as a legitimizing factor even before World War II, one needs to consider the ultimate **failure of authoritarian regimes** to translate their tactics of legitimacy-building into ‘constitutional reality’ – or even legality. Despite their carefully orchestrated rituals of popular participation and their known capacity for Orwellian ‘Newspeak’, especially the distortion and (mis)appropriation of the semantic toolkit of liberal democracy, these regimes generally failed to shape durable popular perceptions of legitimacy which could survive total defeat in war or, as was the case of the Soviet empire, implosion and disintegration. In the long run, ‘authoritarian visions’ of a community based on race or class and predicated on a high degree of coercion could not compete with the essential attachment to the sovereign nation, its culture and its representative/participatory institutions. [8. P. 13–14; 9. P. 41; 10. P. 165]

Table 2

Type of legitimacy	Foreign orientation			Cost of war &/or occupation			Exit from war/ transition to peace		
	pro-Allied	pro-Axis	neutral	heavy	medium	light	continuity	fragmentation	civil war
Democratic	B, DK, N, NL	SF	CH, IRL, S		B, N, NL, SF	DK	DK, N, NL, SF	B	
Semi-authoritarian	YU	BG	TR	YU		BG		BG	YU
Authoritarian	GR, PL	HU, RO, SK	E, P	GR, HU, PL, RO	SK			RO, SK	GR, HU, PL
Totalitarian		HR		HR					HR

III. Legitimacy and transition from war to peace

War may enhance the acceptability and prestige of even non-democratic regimes but only in the short run, as the case of the Metaxas dictatorship in Greece demonstrates. A prolonged war and, even more so, defeat and foreign conquest severely test the political, social and economic structures of any country and trigger a **crisis of confidence** in pre-war institutions, especially national governments. The extent of the crisis depends on a number of external and internal factors. Military defeat followed by a harsh occupation regime humiliates national ruling elites and may destroy their credibility as guarantors of national existence; and the ability of these elites to protect essential values, such as life and livelihood, is the ultimate justification of their claim to rule, the basis of their **legitimacy**. [8. P. 16–17; 9. P. 35; 11. P. 70, 74, 81–84; 5. P. 2, 28]. The strength of the bonds between rulers and ruled is in turn crucial for the ability of a society to withstand the tribulations of war and occupation and make its transition to peace with the least trouble possible. Even indirect enemy control, rather than outright occupation, premised on the ‘routine’ or ‘political collaboration’ of national authorities, (14) risks alienating a defeated population, especially if or when resistance proves a viable alternative, and thus result in the **fragmentation** of legitimacy. (15) Only highly cohesive Denmark scored a narrow escape from this predicament.

In much of wartime Europe, defeat and occupation undermined social cohesion and national unity by accentuating pre-existing and generating new political, socio-economic and ethnic cleavages. (16) This state of flux enabled various pretenders to dispute the legitimacy of pre-war ruling elites and national institutions and stake their claim to the post-war dispensation of power. Some, if not all, of these counter-claimants may have been politically marginal before the war. This was mostly the case of extreme right or left wing movements, including communist parties.

Both extremes sought to profit from the break-down of national institutions and the ensuing insecurity and disorientation of a population stunned by defeat. Those on the Right, in most cases and at least initially, opted for **collaboration** with the enemy in return for their recognition as legitimate authority. In some cases, among which Vichy France stands out, this course did not immediately alienate a majority of the population. The collaborators’ authority was eroded gradually, as the occupation powers’ brutality increased in proportion to their receding prospect of victory. (17) The Axis defeat totally discredited collaborators and, eventually, resulted in the radical Right’s exclusion from mainstream politics. At the opposite extreme, after a period of prevarication due to the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, communist parties were prominent in actively organizing **resistance** to the occupier. They were determined to exploit their record in this respect in order to disadvantage their domestic rivals, including the moderate, mainstream parties which often proved less inclined or adept at using mass mobilization and violence against the forces of occupation. In most cases, the grim reality of occupation eroded the appeal and, hence, the legitimacy not only of mainstream political forces but also of national institutions: faced with the impotence of central authority, people turned their eyes to either traditional sources of support, such as the family, a local com-

munity and the Church, or to new agents, hatched in wartime conditions. However, this trend could prove reversible, once a national authority was able to restore its power at the end of the war. (18)

In many cases, the pressures exerted by war and occupation ultimately triggered a degree of convergence based on the values of national independence and survival. As Conway and Romijn acknowledge, on the eve of liberation, legitimacy could be claimed by those possessing ‘the sacred conch of a **revivified patriotism**’ [6. P. 383] – or, in other words, the nationalism of self-preservation, restitution and, in some cases, aggrandizement, which, it should be noted, was *not* inherently democratic. The hegemony of this patriotic discourse dictated identification with (and appropriation of) the **resistance**, which offered not only a moral high ground but also a handy constitutive myth for post-war unity. The obvious exception were those who found themselves on the wrong side, especially after the defeat of the Axis looked increasingly certain, and were subjected to more or less extensive retribution. [6. P. 385; 12. P. 31–32; 11. P. 94; 13. P. 227] Usually with some delay, governments-in-exile became the chief beneficiaries of this process, at least where their return was not vetoed by an Allied great power – as was the case in Poland. Given the continuity with pre-war actors and institutions, one may speak of restoration which, with a few notable exceptions such as Greece and Yugoslavia, the forces of the Resistance, however grudgingly, finally accepted. [11. P. 95] Things turned out differently where the erosion of national institutions had been combined with a strong and defiant resistance or a separatist movement. Wherever the latter had tasted power, they were simply reluctant to relinquish it.

It should be kept in mind that, in terms of political orientation, resistance movements were for the most part sceptical towards, if not dismissive of, existing models of liberal democracy. (19) They often advocated far reaching, even revolutionary changes after liberation (or, in the case of Axis satellites, capitulation). These forces, mostly but not exclusively on the left of the political spectrum, were bound to come up against those who aimed to either restore their pre-war status (mostly governments-in-exile and their supporters at home) or protect interests acquired during the period of war and/or occupation (including groups and institutions with a record of political collaboration with the forces of occupation). [5. P. 24, 29–30] There usually followed an uneasy period, during which different projects for the future of the nation competed with each other. For the sake of argument, we can distinguish between ‘restoration’ and ‘revolution’. It is submitted that the forces of restoration enjoyed an important advantage vis-à-vis their radical rivals, to the extent that the former were recognized as the agents of both constitutional legitimacy by a domestic majority and state continuity by powerful foreign powers.

A relevant argument pointing at a close relationship between legitimacy and **continuity** is offered by Conway, Romijn and another prominent historian of the legacies of occupation, Pieter Lagrou. They dispute the widespread view of liberation and its immediate aftermath as a window of opportunity for radical change or even revolution which was abruptly shut owing to foreign intervention and the impact of the incipient Cold War. The reverse was the case at least in Eastern Europe,

where radical change was effected at the behest of the Soviet ‘liberators’. The aforementioned authors have observed a **high degree of continuity**, implying a hard core of legitimacy common to many countries, especially in north-western Europe. In these cases, long-established institutions and social agents, of both ‘modern’ and traditional provenance, such as elected local authorities, political parties and trade unions, professional and civil society associations, plus the Church, proved able to serve as focal points of loyalty and factors of cohesion and relative stability. Their tradition, skills, even clientelistic networks combined with remarkable adaptability to sustain their influence at a time when day-to-day survival was the overriding consideration. This short-term legitimacy crucially helped them to defend their turf against radical pretenders of power from both the resistance and the collaborators. (20) Their influence in society proved invaluable to the post-liberation governments in their effort to resume the mantle of long-term legitimacy. Both sides feared a communist takeover. It was this threat, possibly more than the apparent failure of the pre-war state to defend the fatherland, which forced them to realize that a straightforward restoration of the old order was not the best strategy. (21) In their effort to steal off the wind out of the sails of their radical opponents, these essentially conservative forces adopted the rhetoric of **renewal** and supported programmes of reform which ushered in the remarkably ‘durable politics of consensus’ that prevailed in much of non-communist Europe after the war. [8. P. 17–18; 7. P. 177–179, 198–199; 11. 101–103; 15. P. 9; 5. P. 1, 35]

The political fortunes of resistance figures at both the national and the local level seem to justify the premium put on continuity, with the exception, of course, of Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia. Far from being able to fulfill their wartime pledge of a, more or less, clean break with the past, resistance fighters-turned-politicians could generally play their part in post-war West European politics only by joining forces with pre-war political parties. (22) Lagrou mentions General Charles De Gaulle as a successful example of an exiled leader who tapped the legitimizing potential of the resistance from the outset, while presenting himself as the principal agent of continuity, the very incarnation of republican legitimacy. [5. P. 31; 11. P. 93–94] For those who insisted on the path to revolution, it would soon become clear that they had little to offer other than revenge for past wrongdoings and a millenarian vision to a public which largely looked forward to a return to conditions of ‘normality’ and a peaceful future. And if ideology may serve to undermine legitimacy in the short run, revenge hardly provides a basis for building a viable alternative. [16. P. 120; 10. P. 161, 169]

The analysis by Conway and Romijn implies a further argument in favor of the democratic component of legitimacy. As has been noted, in the widespread delegitimization of the enemy’s collaborators these authors perceive a clear indication that ‘**norms of legitimate government**’ were still relevant ‘amidst the chaos of wartime Europe’. [6. P. 386; 8. P. 5] And it was during such exceptional circumstances that ‘shared basic goals or beliefs’ between a people and its leaders become vitally important. [15. P. 126–127] The essence of these goals and beliefs, it is noted, were ‘freedom and civil rights’, apparently including the right to freely elect one’s government,

which starkly contrasted with the oppression of the occupation regimes. [15. P. 136; 10. P. 153–154]. These observations point at a **strong core of democratic legitimacy** broadly shared by societies in several individual states, an element which tended to eclipse alternative forms of justifying power by the later stages of the war.

The case for the ascendancy of democratic legitimacy seems to be corroborated by successive **declarations** of the leading powers of the anti-Axis coalition. Among them most prominent are the Atlantic Charter, (23) the United Nations Declaration, (24) and the Yalta declaration of liberated Europe, (25) which alluded to or explicitly acknowledged the right of every people to freely choose their government. The Yalta declaration, in particular, expressed the commitment of Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union to assist the peoples of former Axis-occupied or even Axis satellite states ‘to solve by democratic means their pressing political and economic problems... during the temporary period of instability in liberated Europe’. Beyond this transition period, the three powers pledged to assist these peoples to establish ‘through free elections’ governments ‘responsive to the will of the people’. Of course, Stalin treated such declarations as little more than window-dressing, a view already confirmed by the practice of the Soviet authorities in ‘liberated’ Poland and occupied Bulgaria and Romania. (26) It is also unlikely that Winston Churchill was prepared to acquiesce to a communist take-over in Greece by constitutional means. Still, it is important that Stalin did not refer to the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ any more than Churchill publicly proclaimed Britain’s imperial interests; and, of course, no one considered reviving discredited notions of ‘alternative legitimacy’, which seemed to consign states like Spain beyond the pale of international respectability. The repetition of the democratic principle at the highest level by the powers which would eventually win the war could not but have helped to foster a widespread belief that **legitimate government was a freely elected one**. (27)

Ultimately, legitimacy depended on the ability of national authorities to construct an image of **efficiency and accountability** to their citizens. [8. P. 19] In most countries, liberation marked the lowest point of national economic output and the extreme compression of the standard of living for the vast majority of the population. In these conditions, the principal non-democratic alternative, communism, could easily gain new recruits by offering an impoverished public ‘at least a share out of what remain[ed]’. [16. P. 110] It was thus of the utmost importance that governments and state institutions should at least appear to be doing something in order to meet the most urgent needs of their citizens, from food and clothing to the resumption of public utilities. To that end, they relied not so much on scarce local resources as on the substantial foreign aid which the anti-Axis coalition, especially the United States and the British Empire, were prepared to provide in the aftermath of liberation. (28) Thus, indirectly, the foreign factor could further enhance the domestic legitimacy of transition regimes. Delays or mismanagement would produce the opposite result. [16. P. 212]

A closer examination of defeated and occupied nations of Europe during World War II may reveal that where the elements of external and internal legitimacy concurred (as in Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, but also in Axis co-belligerent

Finland), the transition from war to peace was relatively smooth. By way of contrast, wherever domestic turmoil and lawlessness were the rule, one or both types of legitimacy were missing or were being disputed, no matter how this ‘dynamic’ concept was understood by the public of each country. Moreover, in cases where, at the moment of liberation, there existed governments which could claim continuity with the last *elected* pre-war leadership (as was the case in Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway or Finland, but not in Greece, Italy or Hungary), these governments succeeded in overcoming whatever domestic challenge to their authority presented itself, with or without foreign interference. Therefore, perhaps one should not lightheartedly downplay the element of democratic legitimacy conferred by free elections in the framework of a pluralist representative system, which since the liberal revolutions of the late 18th and early 19th centuries had been integral to the notion of popular sovereignty and to the political practice and culture of countries, otherwise as diverse as Denmark, Belgium or Greece.

Of course, the benefit of internal and external legitimacy is not by itself sufficient to determine the outcome of a crisis centered on the future form of government, the social regime and the international orientation of countries weakened by war and/or occupation. It is no coincidence that legitimacy in the form of continuity with pre-war institutions proved easier to achieve wherever the Western Allies had been able to establish a strong military presence. (29) Foreign aid or intervention may decisively tip the balance in favour of one or the other side. What is more, a militant minority may manage to prevail thanks to superior leadership, control of the necessary resources, or some other material advantage. However, the existence of a government which enjoys broad legitimacy within and without the country, and can thus be deemed worthy of support by foreign powers, disadvantages the forces of revolution, even when they can count on help from abroad.

NOTES

- (1) A general overview of the wartime experience of Europe’s peoples and states is provided in Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2008. The Scandinavian countries are treated in John Gilmour and Jill Stephenson (eds.), *Hitler’s Scandinavian Legacy*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013. On Finland, in particular, see Olli Vehviläinen, *Finland in the Second World War: Between Germany and Russia*, London – New York: Palgrave, 2002. Belgium is the subject of Martin Conway’s monograph *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944–1947*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. For solid introductions to Bulgaria and Greece during the period under study, see the relevant chapters in R.J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, and Richard Clogg, *A Concise History of Greece*, both by Cambridge University Press (2nd edition, 2012, and 3rd edition, 2013, respectively).
- (2) Weber used the term *Herrschaft* which can be translated as ‘domination’ in the sense of ‘established authority that allocates the right to command and the duty to obey’: Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, London: Methuen, 1966, 290–291.

- (3) *Contemporary European History*, special issue, 13.4 (2004); and Peter Romijn and Ben Frommer, 'Legitimacy in Inter-War Europe', in Martin Conway – Peter Romijn (eds.), *The War for Legitimacy in Politics and Culture 1936–1946*, Oxford: Berg, 2008. It should be noted that neither work covers the states of Southeast and Eastern Europe.
- (4) The term 'consent' is used throughout the text as denoting a minimum level of agreement with decisions taken by a delegated authority, elected or otherwise. It is distinguished from 'consensus' in the sense of a high level of agreement with a decision collectively reached.
- (5) This could entail not only greater state intervention in the economy, but also bans on labour action and 'extremist' political activity.
- (6) For a thorough discussion of the crisis of legitimacy facing liberal democracies in Europe during the 1930s, see Conway – Romijn 2008, 29–65.
- (7) Ireland, Sweden, and Switzerland.
- (8) Portugal, Spain, and Turkey.
- (9) For a succinct account of the Danish experience during World War II, see Niels Wium Olesen, 'The Obsession with Sovereignty: Cohabitation and Resistance in Denmark 1940–45', in Gilmour and Stephenson 2013, 45–72.
- (10) In connection with the governments-in-exile formed in the aftermath of Germany's stunning victories in 1939–41, it has been remarked that their recognition and reception in London owed less to their ability to command allegiance at home or continue the war and more to the anxiety of the British to legitimize their own war effort as part of an 'Allied front': Lagrou 2000, 27–28.
- (11) Various indices have been proposed for 'measuring' legitimacy, such as a regime's 'practice of power, the evidence of consent', and the compatibility of its actions with the prevailing political culture: Conway and Romijn 2008, 10, 13; Romijn and Frommer 2008, 46, 57.
- (12) Following the Weberian analysis of legitimacy, Romijn and Frommer observe that the principle of legality binds 'both rulers and ruled to proper procedures of political decision-making'. This entails respect for the 'rules of the game', guarantees predictability and provides the security necessary for much social and economic activity. See *id.* 2008, 38–39.
- (13) For instance, the authors observe different sources of legality which, to some extent, could co-exist 'like the accretions of successive geological periods': succession, election, anointment and performance: Conway and Romijn 2008, 10–13; similarly, Romijn and Frommer 2008, 37; Romijn – Conway – Peschanski 2008, 69–73.
- (14) Political collaboration is defined as 'an arrangement in which institutions and persons being considered by a majority of the population as their legitimate representatives, collaborate with the (foreign) organs of the occupation': Ole Kristian Grimnes, 'Hitler's Norwegian Legacy', in Gilmour and Stephenson 2013, 167.
- (15) For an elaboration of 'fragmented legitimacy' among different contenders in pre-war and wartime Europe, see Romijn – Conway – Peschanski 2008, 74ff. The fragility of the public approval for collaboration, which was initially observed in many European countries, is demonstrated by Nico Wouters, Niels Wium Olesen, and Martin Conway, 'The War for Legitimacy at the Local Level', in Conway and Romijn 2008, 128–130.
- (16) The Scandinavian states stand out as exceptions of countries with a high level of cohesion. On the Danish experience of 'active co-operation' with the enemy as the price for salvaging internal sovereignty, see Olesen 2013, 52–59. In Norway, the German occupation helped to overcome the acute polarisation between the 'bourgeois' parties and

- the Labour left during the interwar period: Tom Kristiansen, 'Closing a Long Chapter: German-Norwegian Relations 1939–45', in Gilmour and Stephenson 2013, 96. For the Finnish case of co-belligerency with the Axis, see: Oula Silvennoinen, 'Janus of the North? Finland 1940–44', in Gilmour and Stephenson 2013, 129–146; Juhana Aunesluoma, 'Two Shadows over Finland', *ibid.*, 200.
- (17) Bloody reprisals and plunder easily spring to mind, but, as Romijn, Conway, and Peschanski observe, the requisitioning of workforce, especially for labour in the German Reich, may have been 'the single most important factor' in alienating populations from collaborationist regimes: *id.* 2008, 88–89.
 - (18) Various authors agree that, despite the ascendancy of the local at the expense of the national and the boosting of supranational designs, the occupation did not really signify the demise of the nation-state as the focal point of loyalty and framework of political agency: Romijn – Conway – Peschanski 2008, 98; Wouters – Olesen – Conway 2008, 136–141. An obvious exception was secessionist movements which led to the formation of puppet entities under Axis tutelage.
 - (19) A notable exception to this rule was the Norwegian resistance which remained committed to the restoration of democracy and loyal to the government-in-exile: Kristiansen 2013, 93; Grimnes 2013, 162–163.
 - (20) On the importance of local institutions and their adaptability under German occupation, see Wouters – Olesen – Conway 2008, 109–146. On the cultural and psychological pre-conditions of this phenomenon, see Mary Vincent and Erica Carter, 'Culture and Legitimacy', in Conway and Romijn 2008, 147–176.
 - (21) The word 'restoration', Lagrou notes, was to be avoided in favour of 'renewal' which better served the need to legitimize the post-war order. Its meaning was that the appropriate lessons had been learned, and pre-war weaknesses would be overcome: Lagrou 2000, 22.
 - (22) Lagrou 2000, 26; Pittaway and Dahl 2008, 190–191; Geoffrey Warner, 'Allies, Government and Resistance: The Belgian Political Crisis of November 1944', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 28 (1978), 45. The same conclusion with reference to local politics is reached in Wouters – Olesen – Conway 2008, 141.
 - (23) The Charter, signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill on 14 August 1941, acknowledged the democratic principle through its recognition of self-determination as a foundation of a 'better future for the world'. The leaders of the United States and the United Kingdom pledged to 'respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live'.
 - (24) Signed by the representatives of 26 states on 1 January 1942, the Declaration endorsed the Atlantic Charter and expressed commitment to the defence of 'life, liberty, independence and religious freedom', and the preservation of 'human rights and justice'.
 - (25) The Yalta declaration was signed by Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin on 13 February 1945. It also reaffirmed the commitment of the 'Big Three' to the principles of the Allied Charter. Significantly, it interpreted the 'right of all people (sic) to choose the form of government under which they will live' enunciated in the Charter as identical with their right 'to create democratic institutions of their own choice'.
 - (26) Stalin's attitude towards liberated or former enemy countries has long been identified with his remark recorded by Yugoslav communist leader Milovan Djilas, two months after Yalta: 'This war is not as in the past; whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system. Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army has power

to do so. It cannot be otherwise': Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962, 90.

- (27) This principle, which is central to the political culture of parliamentary democracy, would eventually be enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, which stated in Art. 21.3: 'The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures'.
- (28) This was done chiefly through the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). For a succinct account of its activity in liberated Europe see Hitchcock 2008, 215–248.
- (29) For a discussion of this, all important factor, see Romijn – Conway – Peschanski 2008, 103; Pittaway and Dahl 2008, 194–196.

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Противоядие от гражданской войны? Малые государства Европы и политическая легитимность во время Второй мировой войны

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Опыт малых европейских государств, вовлеченных во Вторую мировую войну, весьма различен. Не все они вступили в войну как жертвы агрессии, и даже те, кто был вовлечен в нее подобным образом, не обязательно испытали на себе все тяжести военного времени и иностранной оккупации. Их развитие после окончания войны также весьма различно: для некоторых послевоенный период был относительно мирным, другие оказались втянутыми в гражданскую войну, для третьих этот период охарактеризовался непродолжительными гражданскими волнениями. В данной статье автор утверждает, что среди факторов, повлиявших на исход участия малых европейских государств во Второй мировой войне, нельзя недооценивать фактор политической законности их правительств. Влияние этого фактора особенно ощущалось во время чувствительного перехода от войны и/или оккупации к мирному времени. Автор приходит к выводу, что во демократическая легитимность в значительной степени способствовала преодолению тягот послевоенного времени и относительно плавному восстановлению свободных государственных институтов без риска гражданской войны.

Ключевые слова: Вторая мировая война, Европа, малые государства, легитимность, легитимизация, переход

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