Western Democracies and the New Extreme Right Challenge

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4 Defence of democracy against the extreme right in inter-war Europe

A past still present?

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Introduction

How to deal with extremists has been one of the main problems of mass democracies, both historically, as many democracies had to cope with the emergence of totalitarian parties and movements, and recently as new forms of political radicalism have emerged to challenge the stability of both old and new democratic regimes. Constitutional lawyers and political theorists have dealt variously with the difficult dilemma of the 'tolerance for the intolerant' raised by the presence of radical political associations or parties in many democracies. In general, they have taken an intermediary position between the two poles of 'no freedom for the enemies of freedom' and 'real freedom is freedom to dissent' (e.g. Agnoli and Brueckner 1967; Lippincott 1965). As an international law scholar put it: 'to strike a reasonable balance between safeguarding the substance of the rights enunciated to the greatest extent possible, on the one hand, and forestalling any abuses, on the other, has become one of the most delicate issues in a liberal state' (Tomuschat 1992: 33).

Several examples can be proposed to underline the current relevance of the problem of how to cope with extremists. In Germany, the elaborate system of legal protection of the liberal democratic order against extremists has been recently re-activated against an important extreme right-wing party, the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). In the United Kingdom after the attacks of 11 September, the law seeking to hinder the activities of terrorists took on even more draconian form, leading to protests from civil rights groups. Moreover, many new democracies of Eastern Europe have included in their democratic constitutions rules limiting political pluralism with the goal of protecting the integrity and viability of the state: this is the case for Croatia, Poland, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia and Bulgaria (Fox and Nolte 1995).

Despite its clear political importance and its eminently *political* nature, the problem of the *politics* of legal-institutional reactions to extremists has rarely been analysed with the tools of comparative political science.[1] Few comparative studies of the politics of institutional 'defence of democracy'

exist, and the existing scattered literature deals primarily with a few important (and controversial) cases, in particular the *streitbare Demokratie* system in the Federal Republic of Germany and the anti-Communist legislation in the USA.

In other words, comparative politics is still a long way from achieving a systematic and cumulative knowledge of the problems connected to the determinants and consequences of institutional and political reactions to extremism in democratic systems. In general, it seems that the existing literature needs to be complemented in at least two respects. On the one hand, a systematic typology of anti-extremist reactions in general, and of special legislation in particular, needs to be elaborated. On the other hand, the analysis should be expanded beyond the narrow set of the most well-known cases to less-researched democratic regimes that present interesting features in this respect.

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the political-institutional reactions of the democratic rulers against extremist parties in the European democracies between the wars. It identifies the main aspects of the problem of the relationship between democracy and extremism in that historical phase of the European political development. It describes the main strategies used against extremists in democracies in which the problem was particularly acute. In addition, it identifies the principal protagonists in the process of defence of democracy, those actors whose choices have the maximum influence on the outcome of the crisis. Finally, it draws conclusions on the dynamics of defence of democracy in inter-war Europe and reflects on the continuing importance of the legacy of that first encounter between mass democracy and mass extremism for the theory and practice of the relationship between democracy and extremism in Europe today.

The problem of reactions to extremism in inter-war Europe

In inter-war Europe, the encounter between extremism and democracy was a deadly fight, from which only one of the two contenders would emerge alive. While the term can be reconstructed at different levels of abstraction, by 'defence of democracy' I mean here the elaboration and enactment of *short-term* political strategies[2] that are explicitly aimed at reacting against those political forces that exploit the rights and guarantees of democracy in order to undermine its fundamental bases. Unlike in several of today's cases, the forms of political extremism that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s embodied totalitarian or authoritarian ideologies, which were incompatible with any form of political democracy. Thus, the stakes of 'defence of democracy' were in most cases extreme themselves, i.e. they consisted of the survival or breakdown of the democratic regime itself.

Reflecting the normative dilemma mentioned above, the most important characteristic of democratic defence is its delicate balance between two opposing threats to democracy. On the one hand, the discrimination against a certain political actor for political or ideological reasons represents a serious restriction of civil and political rights, which, if pushed too far, can give rise to authoritarian tendencies. On the other hand, tolerating an anti-democratic (extremist) actor might lead the system to collapse in a time of crisis. This dilemma is particularly urgent when extremist actors have strong support. It is in cases such as these, when the defence of democracy is most needed, that it would be most difficult to achieve.

For this reason, after a general perusal of the successes and failures of democracies in inter-war Europe, I will concentrate attention exactly on the cases in which the democratic regime survived strong extremist challenges, and compare them with cases of breakdown. By so doing, I explore this phenomenon in the worst possible conditions, and show that, while there can be different paths to democratic persistence, defending a democratic system is indeed possible, although at the cost of restricting some rights and freedoms.

More specifically, what drives the selection of the cases for this analysis is the particular kind of *process* leading to the outcome of democratic breakdown or survival. In fact, if we want to explore the conditions and effects of politico-institutional reactions of democratic incumbents to anti-system forces arising in political society, it is imperative to choose cases in which the process of regime crisis was characterized by the political struggle between a democratic government and an extremist party (or parties) threatening to take over. Figure 4.1 classifies 22 European regimes that could be considered democratic around 1920, according to, on the one hand, the presence or absence of a struggle between democratic incumbents and extremist outsiders, and, on the other hand, the survival or the breakdown of the democratic system. What the typology highlights is that within the two sets of breakdowns and survivals there are important differences in the political processes leading to the respective regime outcomes.

In inter-war Europe, breakdown of democracy came about in two different ways. The model of 'legal revolution' (e.g. Bracher 1953) – by which aggressive anti-democratic parties exploit the rights and guarantees of democracy to participate in the political process with the ultimate aim of bringing democracy down – has often been used to describe the paradigmatic cases of the victory of Fascist and Nazi forces in Italy and Weimar Germany in the early 1920s and the early 1930s respectively. In these countries, extremists played the democratic game, and the government, despite the extremists' obviously cynical attitude to the rules of democracy, did not do enough to weaken the position of such dangerous players.

This, however, is not the way things went in most of the European countries in which democracy did not survive in the 1920s and 1930s. Leaving aside the particular case of Spain, where the increasingly harsh confrontation between the left and the right ended in a civil war, in several

Struggle between democratic incumbents and anti-system
outsiders as main characteristics of the political process

	Yes	No
Yes Democrats prevail	**Challenged survivors:** Czechoslovakia, Finland, Belgium, (France)	**Non-challenged survivors:** The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, United Kingdom
No	**Takeovers:** Germany, Italy	**'Suspension' (or pre-emptive coup):** Bulgaria, Portugal, Poland, Lithuania, Yugoslavia, Austria, Estonia, Latvia, Greece, Romania

Figure 4.1 Political processes and political outcomes in inter-war Europe.

other cases – either because large parts of the political establishment were not democratically oriented, or because the challenges were too strong to keep the system of democratic guarantees alive – democracy was 'killed from above', rather than 'taken over from below'. That is, either the government in charge indefinitely suspended democratic rights and guarantees, or there was a successful coup, and the regime was turned into a non-democratic one by the action of sectors of its institutional elites, not infrequently exactly against extremist 'outsiders' (see Capoccia 2004).

In sum, while commonalties exist between the 'takeover' and 'suspension' types of democratic breakdown, they can indeed be distinguished by a crucial trait in the political process that led to the regime outcome. In the two 'takeovers', a harsh struggle took place between the democratic incumbents and (at least) one anti-democratic political actor. To be sure, the latter attacked the citadel of democratic power also 'from outside', undermining the regime's effectiveness by using political violence.[3] At the beginning of this process, democratic forces held power, but failed to respond effectively to the anti-system challenges arising from political society. As a result, the democratic forces increasingly lost power, until an anti-system actor, thanks to a shrewd coalition strategy, took control of the levers of government, formally respecting the constitutional procedures, and established a non-democratic regime soon thereafter.

On the contrary, in the cases classifiable as '(indeterminate) suspensions of democracy', (the 'killing from above' of a democratic system), the process of crisis took one of the following two paths. In some countries, non-democratic factions within incumbents wrested power from the hands of the more democratic sections of the establishment, and created an authoritarian regime. In another set of countries, democratically elected leaders pre-empted the anti-system threat, preventing possible takeover and loss of power by abandoning democratic procedures altogether. In both sets of cases, the struggle that characterized the crisis process did not oppose democratic incumbents to anti-democratic outsiders. In 'suspension' cases, the main fight took place either among sections of the establishment, or between non-democratic incumbents (or incumbents disregarding *in toto* democratic procedures), and non-democratic outsiders.

Radically different political processes may also account for democratic survival. As in breakdown cases, the existence (or the absence) of a political struggle between democratic incumbents and anti-democratic outsiders marks the line of distinction between different types of survived democracies in inter-war Europe. The main indicator that reveals the presence of such a struggle in survival cases is the strength of anti-system political forces (Capoccia 2002a). In fact, if no relevant anti-system formation is present to challenge the persistence of the democratic system, the incumbents will not have to undertake any serious struggle to make the regime survive. On the contrary, a political struggle of the kind that I have singled out in 'takeovers' exists in those cases in which anti-system forces, formally playing by the rules of the democratic game with the more or less concealed intention to do away with democracy itself, reach a significant level of strength.

The strength of the challenge to a democratic regime can be operationalized as the highest percentage of seats held by parties that challenged either the fundamentals of pluralist democracy or the territorial unity of the state, or both, in the lower chamber of parliament. This basically restricts the field of such formations to Nazi, fascist or authoritarian parties, communist parties, and secessionist-irredentist parties (see Capoccia 2001a). Figure 4.2 ranks ten democracies that survived on the basis of the 'peak' percentage of seats reached by extremist parties in the Lower Chamber between 1919 and 1939. The peaks represent, therefore, moments of crisis, in which the democratic system underwent considerable strain and was in serious danger of breakdown.

The graph highlights that at least three of the countries where democracy survived had, in fact, to face very strong challenges. In Czechoslovakia after the 1935 elections, and in Finland in 1930–1, extremist parties had about one third of the parliamentary seats in the more important chamber, while in Belgium (1936–9) this percentage was slightly below a
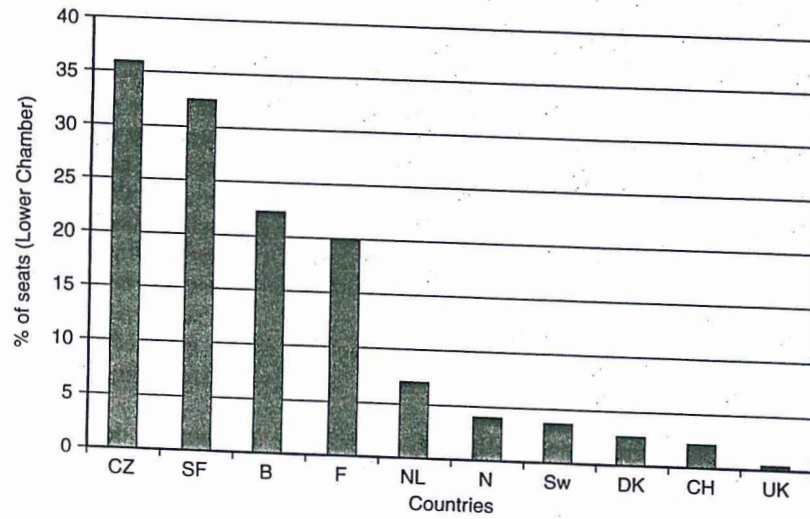
Figure 4.2 Peak results of extremist parties 1919–39.

quarter. These three cases therefore present themselves as critical ones for the assessment of the opportunity for enactment and possibilities of success of democratic defence strategies. In these countries, in fact, the parliamentary strength of anti-system forces rendered the political conditions for the coordination of democratic forces around a common strategy worse than in any other case of survival.

In what follows, I will briefly account for the historical developments in these three countries and compare the political crises there with those in Italy and Germany. Prior to analysing those cases, though, it is necessary to have a better look into the politics of democratic defence.

Actors and the process of democratic defence

The analysis of the inter-war European cases of problematic survival highlights the crucial importance of the government and the Head of State in the process of short-term defence of democracy. The crucial factor for a democratic government attempting to act effectively against extremists is the stability of the political coalition on which it is founded. In political systems where extremist parties are strong, as in the cases under analysis here, the crucial element for this stability is the political strategy of those components of the coalition that border ideologically with the extremists.

Sartori's analysis of polarized party systems shows that such systems have an in-built tendency to 'centrifugal competition', since extremist parties compete in such a way to force all others, and in particular those

bordering with them along that space, towards extreme positions. Extremist parties, by using 'outbidding' propaganda tactics, attract electors from the centre and especially from the moderate wings, which here I call 'border' parties. The systemic propensities of the party competition, thus, push the border parties towards the extremes, in order to regain the electors that they have lost, thus nurturing the overall polarizing trend (Sartori 1976).

Sartori's model does not have any deterministic nature: although polarization and centrifugal competition push the system towards breakdown, they do not pre-constitute a specific regime outcome. Between the systemic propensities and the regime outcome are the political actors, who can stop or even counteract these propensities, and therefore have an impact on the final outcome (Sartori 1982). In general, depending on the historical and geographical context, various actors and as many strategies can successfully counteract the centrifugal tendencies of a polarized party system. In the cases analysed here, the decisive (re-)actions against extremists mainly came from the leadership of the border parties, the government and the Head of State.

Focusing first on the border parties and the government, it can be expected that the centrifugal tendencies give rise to 'defectionist' tendencies in the parliamentary arena (Figure 4.3). In polarized systems, the government is normally supported by a centre-based coalition. By definition, the stronger the parliamentary representation of extremists, the more likely it will be that the border parties will be part of the governmental majority, and possibly a numerically necessary part of it. A further

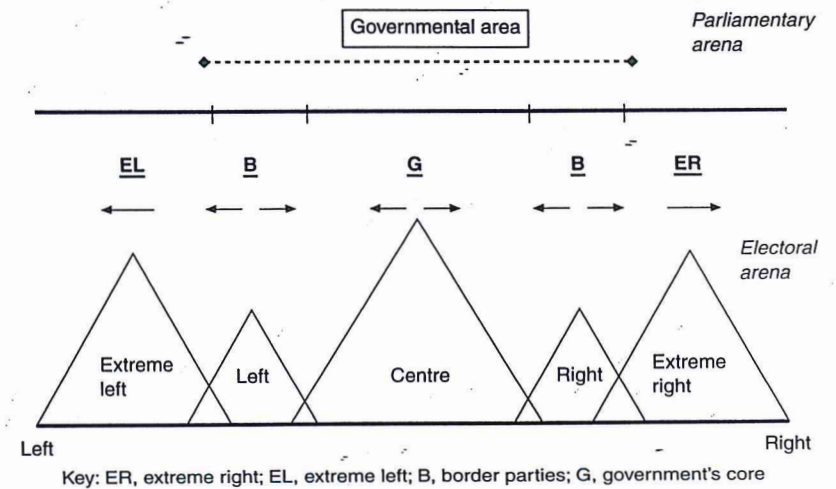Key: ER, extreme right; EL, extreme left; B, border parties; G, government's core

Figure 4.3 Party system propensities in the electoral and parliamentary arena (adjusted from Sartori 1976).

consequence is that the government majority will also be heterogeneous, which on the one hand makes governmental paralysis likely, and, on the other, makes border parties uncomfortable.

In other words, we can say that border parties generally face a choice: either they abide by 'systemic' considerations, and make a common front against the extremist party, perceived as a common enemy; or they put their immediate electoral and political interests first, and defect from the governmental alliance. They might choose to defect from the centre either in order to reclaim the votes lost to the extremists, or to create the political conditions for a different and more rewarding governing majority. Border parties' decisions during times of crisis are the crucial factor in making democratic defence in the short-term possible or impossible in the face of the challenge of strong extremist parties.

This causal process unfolds as follows: the cooperation of the border parties, by stabilizing the governmental majority, gives the government the possibility to react against the extremists, which increases the probability of a decline in the latter's popular support. The defection of border parties, on the contrary, triggers the opposite causal process, leading to the increase of centrifugal tendencies in the party system and ultimately to democratic breakdown, either in the form of extremist takeover or of suspension of democratic rule by a government that can no longer count on a political majority.

The Head of State is a crucial actor in short-term democratic defence. While the effectiveness of the government in acting against extremists is largely conditioned by the strategies of border parties, the Head of State can generally operate with a greater degree of independence. This is certainly the case in systems in which the Head of State has a prominent position in the executive (such as in the semi-presidential systems of the Weimar Republic and Finland), but also when, although formally endowed with limited competencies, the Head of State enjoys a great personal prestige.

To be sure, in no case could they ignore the equilibrium between the political forces when making choices, especially in critical political junctures. But they can nonetheless be decisive in using personal prestige and political influence to channel the crisis towards a certain outcome. Generally speaking, the Head of State can intervene in all the intermediate steps of the causal process described above, by influencing the party interplay and the coalition-formation process, by supporting the government and its strategies in front of public opinion, and in some cases by exerting influence on the policy choices of the cabinet. Moreover, they can exert independent powers in exceptional situations, where the legal prerequisites for this exist.

The breakdowns

Table 4.1 shows the opposite patterns of survived and collapsed democracies in the strategies of border parties, the government and the Head of State. I will not waste too many words on the quite well-known stories of the breakdown in Italy and the Weimar Republic (Farneti 1978; Lepsius 1978). Generally speaking, one of the main factors precipitating the political crisis in both Italy and Germany was that border parties, or important sectors of these, defected from the political centre and pursued a different political alliance that, at one stage or another, would have foreseen the inclusion of the extremists. In pursuing this project, they were mainly driven by the (wrong) belief that in such alliance they would have the leading role.

The same contrasting patterns of behaviour between cases of survival and breakdown can be seen in the political strategies and actions of the Heads of State in critical moments. The actions of Finnish President Per Evind Svinhufvud in implementing emergency powers against the Lapua insurrection in 1932, the political activism of President Edvard Beneš in Czechoslovakia after 1935, and the determination of King Leopold III in Belgium in solving the political deadlock of a hyper-fragmented party system were decisive at key junctures of the political crises in the respective countries. By contrast, the decision of Victor Emmanuel III in Italy not to oppose the Fascist insurrection of 1922, and especially the decisions of Hindenburg and his advisors between 1930 and 1933 in Germany, were crucial in favouring an anti-democratic outcome of the crises (Dorpalen 1964).

The survivals

The three cases of 'difficult survival' of Finland, Belgium and Czechoslovakia are much less known, but are crucial to understanding the working of the politics of defence of democracy in countries where extremists are particularly strong in the party system.

Finland

Finnish inter-war democracy had to react to two opposed and consequent extremist challenges. In the 1920s, the government exerted strong repression against the Communist Party, resorting widely to police action and to the intelligence services. Many Communist militants and leaders were charged with treason or sedition, and the party's organization was repeatedly disbanded during those years (Mäkelä 1987; Hodgson 1967; Upton 1973). Although the object of continuous repression, and politically isolated – the Social Democratic Party constantly kept its distance from them – the Communists remained in the public sphere. Constantly changing

| Country | Belgium | *Lapua Movement/* | Czechoslovakia | Italy | Weimar |
Challenge Actor	Rexists (1936–9)	NC (1929–32)	SdP (1933–8)	PNF (1919–25)	NSDAP (1928–33)
Head of State	(Leopold III) Interventions on coalition-making process to solve deadlocks. Constant exclusion of Rex	(Svinhufvud) Orders military reaction against armed insurrection. Outlaws of Lapua. Outlaws movement afterwards	(Beneš) Appeals to public opinion; influence on governmental policies in favour of moderate German parties	(Victor Emmanuel III) Vetoes state of siege proposed by government against Fascist insurrection (Oct. 1922). Appoints Mussolini as PM thereafter	(Hindenburg) Suspends parliamentary rule after break of Grand Coalition in March 1930. Destabilizing influence on cabinet thereafter
Border Parties	(Catholic Party) No defection. Prompt reaction at organizational and propaganda levels	(Agrarian Party) Defection until early 1931. No defection afterwards	(Agrarian Party) Internal right wing defects consistently before 1935, and sporadically later countered by an alliance of rest of the party with Socialists and Presidency	Large sectors of the liberals prefer an alliance with the Fascists in 1921 and in 1924 to a centre-based alliance	Extremization of National Conservatives after 1928. Move to the right of centrist parties after 1930
Government (majority)	Administrative provisions against Rex. Some *ad hoc* legislation. Appeals to public opinion	Implementation of 'anti-Communist' legislation against Lapua	Policy concessions (to moderate German parties). Strong anti extremist legislation	Negotiations with Fascists to stop political violence fail	Scarcely autonomous from the Presidency after 1930 (presidential decrees)

Table caption (rotated, left margin): Defensive actions of the Head of State and the Government

organizational form, the party managed to stay in the political arena and to participate in elections until 1929.

The decisive factor for the eradication of Communism from Finland in the inter-war period was the emergence, at the end of 1929, of a strong extreme right-wing movement, the Lapua Movement, which itself turned into a danger for Finnish democracy. Backed by large and influential parts of the Finnish conservative establishment, this movement unleashed an unprecedented wave of political violence throughout the country and forced the parliament to pass a very elaborate apparatus of anti-extremist legislation and to implement it against the Communists, banning them from public life in 1930–1.

Shortly afterwards, the same legislation was used against the Lapua Movement. President Svinhufvud used the broad emergency powers that the new laws conferred on him to react against an armed uprising by Lapua in early 1932, and outlawed the movement. His prompt reaction (and the support given to it by the Chief of Staff Aarne Sihvo, who resisted strong pressure from within the army) was certainly of vital importance, but such a strategy was helped by the increasing political isolation of Lapua after 1931. While, in a first phase, large sectors of the bourgeois establishment gave their support to the Lapua Movement, after 1931 most bourgeois parties clearly distanced themselves from it. The political trajectory of the Agrarian Party, the most important centrist party in those years, is crucial in this respect. Once the Communist challenge had been eradicated, it was no longer necessary for the moderate parties to tolerate Lapua's outright political violence, as well as its increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic positions (Rintala 1962).

Czechoslovakia

In the First Czechoslovak Republic (1920–38), the main challenge to the regime came from Sudeten German ethnic parties. The political expression of this ethnic cleavage – about one quarter of the population of Czechoslovakia was German-speaking and concentrated in the border regions – had a moderate and an extremist face. The former was that of the German bourgeois and Social Democratic parties, which decided quite early (1921–3) to cooperate with the newly born Czechoslovak State, and were fully integrated politically within a few years. The other face was both nationalist-secessionist and anti-democratic, and was represented by the German Nationalist Party and the German National Socialist Workers' Party. These two parties had little significance in the 1920s, when the regime was stable and they were politically entirely isolated. They became a reason for concern, however, after Hitler's rise to power in January 1933.[4]

The Czechoslovak government's first reaction was to ban these two parties in October 1933, and to reinforce anti-extremist legislation in

several areas. In 1933–4 several special laws were passed limiting political propaganda, introducing the political screening of public employees, and allowing the ban of extremist parties (e.g. Sander 1935). Most members of the two dissolved parties, however, were absorbed by the newly founded Sudeten German Home Front (SHF), which would constitute the fifth column of Nazi Germany within democratic Czechoslovakia for the remaining years of the Republic.

Although the legal prerequisites for this existed, and the majority of the governing parties were in favour of banning the SHF before the 1935 elections, the government did not take this decision. Given the disagreement within the cabinet on this issue, Agrarian Prime Minister Jan Malypetr transferred the decision to President Thomas Masaryk. Although in principle favourable to the ban, he decided against the dissolution of the SHF in order not to endanger the stability of the government coalition, thinking that the party would be 'parliamentarized' after the elections, i.e. its entry in parliament would lead it to adopt more moderate positions. Then, if the need arose, the party could be dissolved anyway (Mamatey 1973). This decision was based on a gross miscalculation, but did not have easy alternatives when it was taken. The necessary counterweight to banning the SHF would have been making generous concessions to the German minority in general, which no Czech party was willing to do on the eve of the elections. Thus, the closer the elections, the feebler the position of the forces pushing for the party's dissolution, and so the scenario of a ban increasingly lost credibility.

In other words, the real reasons for this 'non-decision' were not a political mistake by Masaryk but rather the strategies of important political groups, notably the two Agrarian parties, who were members of the government coalition. In Czechoslovakia, as in other countries, the emergence of a new extremist actor had triggered plans for political re-aggregation, offering to some members of the democratic coalition the possibility of improving their political dividends.

At first, the German Agrarian Party (BdL), feeling threatened in their countryside strongholds by the dynamism of the SHF, tried to reach an agreement with them, with negotiations going on for most of 1934. Soon, the project of the BdL became part of a more comprehensive political plan of the internal right wing of the Czechoslovak Agrarians which, in order to increase their share of governmental power and to pursue their policy preferences (heavily constrained in a coalition in which the moderate working class parties played a major role), aimed at a general shift of the equilibrium of the national government towards the right.

More specifically, their project was to form a new coalition that excluded both the Czechoslovak and the Sudeten German Social Democrats and included the SHF along with the Czechoslovak conservatives and the tiny Fascist party. This would have enabled the election of a new President of the Republic, who would be more sensitive to their political orientations than Masaryk was. To this aim, the SHF hoped to form an electoral alliance with the BdL, in which the former would obtain 'fifteen or twenty seats', and reinforce the new majority (Brügel 1967).

The large electoral victory of the SHF, renamed as the Sudeten German Party (SdP) in the 1935 elections, rendered this project difficult to realize. The SdP turned out to be the strongest party in Czechoslovakia in terms of votes (about two thirds of the Sudeten Germans voted for it), and was only one seat smaller than the Czechoslovak Agrarian Party. In these conditions, it became obvious that the SdP was not easily amenable to play a subservient role in someone else's political plans. Thus, after 1935, the German Agrarians assumed a generally more confrontational attitude, while the right-wing circles of the Czechoslovak Agrarians still displayed, although less continuously, defectionist tendencies.

Crucial to defeating the project of the right-wing Agrarian circles, however, was the timely political alliance formed between Masaryk and Edvard Beneš (and the Social Democratic forces influenced by them), on the one hand, and the leader of the Slovak wing of the Czechoslovak Agrarian Party, Milan Hodza, on the other. Hodza, very influential within his party, was appointed Prime Minister after the 1935 elections. This alliance proved decisive in stabilizing the political situation on several occasions in which, also after 1935, the right-wing Agrarian circles defected from the majority.

The governing parties and the President of the Republic devised a three-pillar defensive strategy against the SdP in 1935–8. First, they gave a strong impulse to rearmament, and to the construction of military fortifications at the Western boundaries, which was undertaken at a tremendous pace (Hauner 1986). Second, they equipped the state with the legal means necessary to cope with internal and international emergencies. This was done by passing the 1936 law on the 'défence of the State', which gave the government the legal possibility to declare military rule and govern by decree in the whole national territory or large portions of it (e.g. (Sander 1937). Third and last, the executive pursued the nationality policy towards the German minority with a firmer hand, both by making important concessions to them in several areas, and by resorting to intense appeals to the public to support coexistence and fair cooperation between Czechs and Germans (see below). This articulate strategy managed to keep the SdP at bay, although obviously it could not avoid the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, decided in Munich in 1938 by the European powers, and its subsequent military conquest by Germany in 1939.

Belgium

Belgian democracy faced a serious challenge in 1936–9, with the rise of the Rexist party, a right-wing Catholic party with authoritarian leanings. In the elections of May 1936, Rex, created only a few months earlier,

obtained 11 per cent of the seats in parliament, while the Flemish nationalist and authoritarian Flemish National League (VNV), and the Communist Party also reported large victories and obtained a further 12 per cent in total.

The Rexist challenge, the most aggressive and dangerous of the three, was counteracted quickly and effectively thanks to the prompt reaction of the establishment. In particular, the strategy of the Catholic Party, which had been the biggest loser to Rex in 1936, deserves attention since it was decisive in allowing an effective defence.

The Rexist Party came from within the Catholic political area, and its young leader, Leon Degrelle, was director of a Catholic publishing house. After the constitution of Rex as an independent political party in February 1936, and Degrelle's strong propaganda attacks against the Catholic leaders, mainly by denouncing cases of corruption and politico-financial collusion, the Catholic Party reacted promptly. They officially severed all contacts with Rex and accelerated internal organizational reforms to make the party and its leadership less vulnerable to Rexist propaganda, in part by achieving stricter central control over the loosely connected peripheral Catholic political organizations (Beaufays 1973). In the campaign for the May 1936 elections, the new party leader Hubert Pierlot made specific moves aimed at capturing the vote of the younger generations of Catholics, who had been largely attracted by Degrelle's oratory; for example, by sponsoring and supporting the formation of new groups of young Catholics (Gérard 1985). This, however, was not enough to avoid the electoral defeat of the Catholic Party; virtually all of the Rexist Party's votes came from the ranks of the Catholic electorate.

After the elections, a situation emerged similar to Czechoslovakia after 1935, in which the main danger for Belgian democracy came not so much from the increasing popularity of Degrelle, but rather from the presence of a sector of the Catholic Party itself. One part was in favour of a political alliance with Rex in a *bloc d'ordre*, a project which would have made Rex's chances of taking power much higher. The Catholic Party was in disarray, and Pierlot's frantic attempts at fostering internal reforms encountered unconcealed internal opposition from various sectors of the party. Moreover, the Catholic Party also had to confront the challenge of the VNV in Flanders, where it had lost some 100,000 votes, mainly to the VNV (Rex had been more successful in Wallonia).

After the 1936 elections, several projects for regrouping Flemish Catholics in different coalitions emerged, and were discussed in an innumerable series of reserved meeting and public interventions by various personalities of the Catholic world (Gérard 1985). A further problem for the Catholic Party was the political alliance that Degrelle and the leader of the VNV, Staf De Clercq, signed in October 1936, in which a fusion between the Flemish sector of Rex and the VNV was foreseen. The leadership of the Catholic Party reacted to this difficult situation by changing its internal organization and giving more visibility to its Flemish component. In October 1936 it was established that the leading body of the party, a 'Directorium' endowed with full powers, should be divided into two separate wings – the Christian Social Party and the Catholic Flemish People's Party – which should be responsible for the activities of the party in Wallonie and Flanders respectively (Mabille 1986).

This change strengthened the position of the Flemish leaders of the Catholic Party: Alphonse-Pierre Verbist, the leader of the KVV, started negotiations with the VNV, which ended in an agreement of principle between the two parties in December 1936. Although this agreement did not lead to concrete developments, and actually met with the opposition of the Christian Labour Union and the bishops (Gérard 1985), it had the effect of providing a partial counter-force to the tendencies towards an inclusion of both Rex and the VNV in a right-wing catholic front. It must be kept in mind that these were very unfavourable times for the Catholic Party: the party was in crisis after the defeat, undergoing a process of internal restructuring, torn by centrifugal tendencies due to the political dynamism of Rex, and it was a senior partner in a government coalition whose members were attacking in their propaganda not only Rex, but also the VNV.

In these difficult conditions, the prospect of a split, or even disintegration, of the Catholic Party would not have been unlikely, had the projects for a broader right-wing alliance materialized (Gérard 1985). Despite these centrifugal tendencies, the leadership of the party managed to keep a firm route towards a centrist alliance with the Liberals and the Socialists, and to resist the various attempts of the internal traditionalist wing to move the whole party to the right. This gave the government the political strength to react effectively to Rex's challenge.

The Belgian King Leopold III was also important in channelling the political crisis towards a democratic solution, in particular by intervening actively in the coalition-forming process. After the 1936 elections, several attempts to form a government failed, and the country was left without a government for a month, during which big Communist-led strikes blocked several industrial sites, and Rex continued to ride the wave of its political success. After the resignation of several *formateurs*, Leopold III intervened directly, summoning the leaders of the internal factions of the three centrist parties (all politically necessary for a government) and asked them to give the go-ahead to a tripartite coalition. The decisiveness of this intervention is demonstrated by the fact that the new government, led by the Catholic-leaning technocrat Paul Van Zeeland, saw the light only two days later (Höjer 1946).

Once formed, the Van Zeeland government decided to react against the challenges from Degrelle and Rex: *inter alia*, it prohibited a Rexist mass demonstration in Brussels, it denied Degrelle access to the State radio for a propaganda speech, some Rexist journalists and militants were arrested,

and the trials under way against Rexist members were sped up. The government also took up the most overt and symbolically loaded challenge that Rex put forward against the regime: a by-election, tactically provoked by Degrelle in April 1937, in which the Rexist leader would stand in person. The majority supporting the government responded by passing an *ad hoc* law forbidding 'frivolous' by-elections, and put forward the Prime Minister in person to stand against the Rexist leader. Van Zeeland, supported by all the traditional parties and even by the Communists, who decided not to put forward a candidate, defeated Degrelle heavily, marking the beginning of his decline and that of Rex (Étienne 1968).

The repressive strategies

What instruments did the democratic governments of Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Finland use to respond to extremism? First of all, reinforcing the legislative apparatus for repression of extremists was a strategy to which most European democracies resorted in the inter-war years in their responses to internal challenges, and it was also present, as mentioned, in the cases analysed here.

The special legislation against political extremism passed in European democracies during the inter-war years is very complex and covers a very broad area. Under the heading of 'anti-extremist legislation' one can find the special norms conferring on the cabinet or the Head of State extraordinary powers to face emergency situations; norms aimed at protecting the bureaucratic and military structures of the state from extremist influences; the special legislation enabling the government to ban or temporarily suspend parties or associations considered threatening to some fundamental feature of the system; legislation limiting political propaganda on certain issues; and legislation aimed at the protection of public order (see Capoccia 2001b).

The analysis of anti-extremist legislation in the inter-war European democracies reveals a mixed picture. On the one hand, Czechoslovakia and Finland, which survived the worst political crises, possessed the most elaborate systems of protection against extremism, with strong legislative restrictions in virtually all areas mentioned above. A large part of this legislation was a conscious reaction of the democratic elites to the rise of extremist actors (Capoccia 2004). Comparatively less important, although not irrelevant, was the role played by the reinforcement of *ad hoc* legislation in the overall defensive strategy of the Belgian democratic elites against the challenge of the Rexist Party.

On the other hand, special anti-extremist legislation was also present in the Weimar Republic, where a 'law for the protection of the Republic', introduced restrictions to extremists' activities in several areas. Furthermore, several presidential decrees in 1931–2 provided for severe legal restrictions, especially for the protection of public order and the limitation

of extremist political propaganda (Jasper 1963). What differentiated Czechoslovakia and Finland from Germany was the persistence, during the crisis, of a democratic coalition that was sufficiently strong to devise and enact a coherent *political* strategy against extremists (see also Güsy 1991). Of such a strategy, the reinforcement of special legislation can be an important part, but the crucial factor is the *politics* of democratic defence.

The 'inclusive' mechanisms of democratic defence

As the Italian and the German cases show, inclusion of a totalitarian party might be dangerous, yet successful short-term reactions against political extremism are not confined to political exclusion and legal repression. On the contrary, they are normally accompanied by explicit attempts by the democratic establishment to include *specific sectors* of the extremist challenge. Apart from the attempts of border parties to appeal to the electors supporting the extremist formations, inclusive strategies can be developed and enacted by institutional actors too. In fact, the government and the Head of State can develop inclusive strategies aimed at 'integrating' the extremist rank and file, or sectors of the extremists' elites. Table 4.2 summarizes the use of these mechanisms in the three survival cases analysed here.

The resort to repressive provisions, particularly strong in Finland and Czechoslovakia, has already been analysed in the previous sections. The defensive strategies labelled as the 'integration of rank and file' aim at reducing the electoral appeal of the extremist party. Into this category fall the explicit appeals to the public against the extremists, a course of action to which both the Belgian and the Czechoslovak government resorted. Under the label of 'appeals to the public' I include the public speeches, meetings, conferences etc, held by important political figures (the Head of State, the Prime Minister, democratic leaders, etc) and explicitly aimed at alerting the electorate to the danger presented by a specific extremist challenge, and at enlarging the legitimacy of the system. More specifically, I only refer to those appeals explicitly conceived by their authors as part of a strategic reaction against the extremist challenge, as was the case in both the countries mentioned.

In Belgium, the Van Zeeland government decided to react without hesitation against Rex's increasingly aggressive propaganda, with the Prime Minister taking an active role. A programme of public meetings and speeches by the Prime Minister and several ministers and democratic leaders was planned, in which they warned the population, and in particular the Catholic electorate, about the danger represented by Rex.

In Czechoslovakia, the most active figure in addressing public opinion in order to undermine support for the extremists was President Be— In 1936–7 he travelled incessantly in the German-inhabited re— of Czechoslovakia, addressing the problem of national minoriti—

Table 4.2 Mechanisms of democratic defence (Finland, Belgium, First Czechoslovak Republic)

Extremist actor	Strategy		
	Repression (special legislation)	Integration	
		Rank and file	Sectors of the elite
Rexists (1936–9)	Medium	• Appeals to the public • Sector organizations of the Catholic Party created for electoral appeal	
Lapua Movement/NC (1929–2)	Strong	• Ban of Communist organizations to contain extreme right • Attempts to create a new organization	Attempts to create a new organization
Czechoslovakia SdP 1933–8	Strong	• Appeals to the public • Strategic policy concessions to German moderate parties	(Sterile) contacts with SdP

highlighting the government's willingness to meet all reasonable requests for equal treatment for all citizens (see Brügel 1967, Beneš 1937). He instructed several cabinet ministries to allocate their budgets to German-inhabited areas in proportion to their population. The government independently followed the same line, both in allocating public expenditure and in accepting the requests of the German moderate parties, which needed support to restore their credibility with the Sudeten community after the landslide victory of the SdP.

Ad hoc inclusive strategies can also be directed at the extremist elite with the aim of integrating at least its more moderate sectors into the democratic process by meeting some of their demands without however questioning the fundamentals of the democratic regime. An attempt to integrate both the rank and file and part of the extremist elite was made by Finnish President Svinhufvud after outlawing the Lapua Movement. He tried to recreate an all-inclusive, new right-wing movement under his control, which would continue the work of the Lapua Movement without endangering public order. Emphasis was to be put, in his opinion, on educational means: 'even though they take more time, they will certainly lead in the end to definite results' (quoted in Rintala 1962, p. 221). These were the ideals that were originally at the base of the People's Patriotic Movement (IKL). However, this attempt failed and less than one month after the founding convention, held in April 1932, Svinhufvud's collaborators found themselves sidetracked and outnumbered. Having completely lost control of their 'creature', they left the IKL shortly afterwards.

In Czechoslovakia, the Hodza government sought an agreement with the moderate Sudeten German parties, but also had repeated contacts with SdP leader Henlein. Although these never evolved into an articulate negotiation, and probably came too late to attract part of the SdP elite towards more moderate positions, their existence shows that the attitude of the Czechoslovak government, although certainly uncompromising, was not of total closure towards the Sudeten German nationalists.

Whether the inclusive strategies were successful or not, their presence in the toolbox of short-term regime defence shows that democratic elites clearly thought that mere repression was insufficient to respond effectively to a serious extremist challenge. Repression was deemed necessary, but trying to regain as much systemic loyalty from the extremists as possible was also crucial, as this reduced the costs of democratic defence and the risk of authoritarian involvement.

In conclusion, not all strong extremist challenges to democracy in inter-war Europe led to democratic breakdown, as in Italy and Weimar Germany. In Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Finland the political elite managed to react effectively against dangerous anti-democratic threats by politically isolating the extremists and using both repressive and inclusive strategies. The high degree of political intolerance against the extremists generally reached in these democracies was in fact accompanied by

attempts to convert extremists to systemic support. The analysis of the centrifugal propensities of electoral competition in systems where relevant extremist actors are present highlights simultaneously the non-obvious nature and the political importance of the political choices of the 'democratic defenders' in Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Finland. On these bases, maintaining that different decisions of those same actors at crucial moments would both have been possible and have led those democratic systems much closer to breakdown seems to be plausible (on this, see Fearon 1991 and Tetlock and Belkin 1996).

The inter-war years and defence of democracy in contemporary Europe

The issue to be addressed in this concluding section is what we can learn from the analysis of the defence of democracy in inter-war Europe for the contemporary relationship between democracy and extremism. The analysis of inter-war Europe is important at several levels.

First, at a more general level, the study of reactions to extremism in democracies is an almost unexplored field in comparative politics, and the analysis of extremist challenges and defensive reactions in Belgium, Czechoslovakia, and Finland (as well as Italy and Germany) between the wars can usefully complement the existing knowledge about this kind of political process. More specifically, by analysing cases in which extremist forces reached a substantial strength and entered *en masse* the representative institutions, a useful perspective is added to the scattered existing studies on this phenomenon, which focus on countries and periods in which extremists were relatively weak (the US and the Federal Republic of Germany first of all). This analysis warns, therefore, against too hasty generalizations about the viability and effects of such measures – and in particular the conventional wisdom according to which these are 'viable only if extremists are weak, and not otherwise' which, focusing only on the best-known cases, ultimately suffers from selection bias.

Second, the focus on 'difficult' democracies, a category that includes most of the recent democratization cases, in which extremist forces are relevant players in the transition or the post-transition phase, yields interesting insights. The analysis shows the importance of the maintenance of a cohesive democratic coalition for the viability of politico-institutional reactions, which would otherwise be impossible. That is, a strategy of institutional reactions against strong extremist parties is only possible if a parliamentary majority supports it, and is able to remain a majority to counteract the centrifugal tendencies that may destabilize it.

The analysis shows that a crucial factor for the stability of the parliamentary majority is the expectations of some sectors of the elites, in particular the leaders of the border parties. In this respect, border parties constitute a special case of what Nancy Bermeo (1999) has called 'pivotal elites', whose expectations of the future performance of extremists drive their decisions in critical moments, and therefore constitute a key factor in conditioning the outcome of a democratic transition.

A third interesting aspect is the composite nature of anti-extremist strategies, and the importance of the mix of repression. In the inter-war European democracies analysed here, both repression and inclusion had an important place in the overall strategy of reactions to extremism: strategies such as policy concessions and targeted appeals to the public were intensively used in crucial moments. Such strategies pose fewer normative problems than legal repression, but it is difficult to imagine how the former could have been successful without the actual and deterrent effects of the latter.

A further area of contribution is the reflection on the connections between the experience of inter-war Europe and the situation of contemporary Europe. Is there a direct legacy of the inter-war years on the strategies that European democracies today adopt to react to extremists? And how important is it? While an exhaustive answer to this complex question is obviously impossible here, a general answer is that, while some things have obviously changed in both the nature of the extremist challenge and the democratic response, the legacy of the inter-war years in this respect still seems to be very important indeed.

While the relationship between extremism and democracy in Europe today is certainly more complex and multifaceted than it was in the inter-war years, I will briefly focus on one of the many important differences between that period and now: the changing nature of political extremism in Europe, and the wide-ranging implications that this has for defence and the very conception of democracy. More specifically, this change influences the limits and possibilities of responses to extremism in democracies, but these changes do not mean that the 1920s and 1930s have left no legacy.

Back in the 1920s and the 1930s, European democratic regimes were confronted with the fully-fledged totalitarian and authoritarian ideologies of Nazi, Communist and Fascist parties. In contemporary Europe, extreme left parties have either changed radically and become fully integrated in the social democratic tradition, or (with few significant exceptions) have been reduced at the role of marginal forces. Many analysts have stressed the emergence of many extreme-right wing or populist parties in several European countries. In several cases, however, these parties present significant differences from traditional Fascism and Nazism (e.g. Eatwell 2000; Ignazi 1992, 1994). Whether their views and policies are 'law-and-order' oriented, 'welfare-chauvinist', anti-immigration, anti-EU, or all of these together, the incompatibility of these positions with democratic rights and guarantees requires a more elaborate conception of democracy, which might not perfectly fit all European states (Capoccia 2002a).

Yet it seems that despite these differences, the general way in which European democrats think of the relationship between 'their' democracies

and these 'new' extremist challenges is still informed by the legacy of the inter-war years, when the clash was between radically different visions of the world. Although the mobilization of civil society has played an important role in some cases, the role played by state repression (or deterrence) via special legislation still seems to be key. I have already mentioned the trial against the German NPD pending before the Federal Constitutional Court, and the various norms of restriction to political pluralism included in the constitutions of many East European democracies. The most recent example comes from Spain, where the Parliament has just passed a new organic law on political parties (Ley Organica 6/2002, BOE num 154, 27 June 2002) that prohibits parties that attack the democratic regime, promote racism or xenophobia, or support terrorist organizations. Similar provisions are in force in virtually all European democracies.

Are all European democracies becoming 'militant', at least to some extent (Fink 2001)? While a fully satisfactory answer to this question will have to be left to future research, a simple perusal of the constitutions and statute books of European democracies shows that this seems to be the direction in which many countries are going. The paradox is that, as said before, this is happening in a situation in which the 'old' totalitarian ideologies have waned, and the organizations abiding by them ceased to be dangerous for the survival of democracy.

Notes

The comparative study by Van Donselaar (1995), although of great interest, does not make use of the theoretical tools of comparative politics (the author is an anthropologist) and is virtually ignored in the debate.

2 In principle, democracy can be also 'defended' by strategies with long-term goals, such as those aiming at promoting a democratic culture through education, or democratic propaganda etc. These strategies are very important, for example, in the present context of the 'protection and promotion' of democracy in newly democratizing states, but this is not considered in the present analysis (Schmitter & Brouwer 1999). For a general typology of defensive strategies against extremists, see Capoccia (2001b).

3 As has been rightly argued, political violence was important not so much in the takeover itself, but rather before it, in limiting the efficacy of the democratic government in keeping public order and thereby creating a power vacuum that made the 'legal' takeover easier (Linz 1978, p. 56).

4 The Sudeten German nationalists were not the only extremist challenge that the new Czechoslovak Republic had to confront. Apart from the Communists and the relatively weaker Fascists, a serious threat for the Republic also came from the Slovak autonomists of the Slovak People's Party (HSL'S). These other challenges constituted further constraints on the action of the democratic forces in defence of the regime.

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