

Stephen J. Lee. *European Dictatorships, 1918-1945*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. xi + 340 pp. \$120.00, library, ISBN 978-0-415-23045-2.



Reviewed by Jason W. Davidson

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The arrival of a second edition of Stephen J. Lee's *European Dictatorships, 1918-1945* will be seen as a godsend to many history instructors. This book gets almost all of the fundamentals right and consequently is appropriate for advanced secondary and post-secondary students needing a good introduction to political history on the European continent in the interwar years. In the opinion of this reviewer, however, the book does have some shortcomings--in its use of sources; in its resolution of disputes in the scholarly literature; and in its definitions of core concepts--that detract from its value.

Lee set out to write a history of the dictatorship phenomenon in Europe--East and West--between the two world wars. The book begins with a chapter on the factors contributing to the spread of dictatorships during the period. The three core chapters of the book are dedicated to the domestic politics and foreign policy of the Soviet Union, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Lee then offers the reader a chapter of thumbnail sketches of thirteen additional dictatorships. The

book closes with a comparison of the regimes outlined in the previous chapters.

Lee should be commended on his excellent narrative accounts of these complex and diverse cases. The chapters are well organized and the prose is generally clear and direct. Lee also has a talent for focusing solely on the most important details and for making these details come alive. Perhaps the most attractive feature of Lee's text is his frequent posing of important questions in the history/historiography of the subject matter. A section of the Soviet chapter asks, for example, "Why not Trotsky?" (pp. 45-46), whereas one of the important questions of the chapter on Nazi Germany asks whether Hitler did or did not have a blueprint for world conquest (pp. 216-220). The questions are answered with relatively detailed discussions of the current state of historiography on the specific issue. Finally, Lee should be commended for including, in the final chapter, a detailed, comparative discussion of the different manifestations of dictatorship, which students will be able to better understand because of what

they will have learned in the earlier chapters of the book.

European Dictatorships does, however, fall short in a few areas. First, I would have preferred a more broadly researched book. While Lee does an excellent job of summarizing most important English-language secondary sources, he almost never refers to native-language secondary sources or English language collections of primary sources or memoirs. While doing the former would enhance his historiographic discussion, doing the latter would push more advanced students to do similar work themselves.[1] For example, Lee's discussion of Mussolini's legitimacy struggles after the Ethiopian War would have been improved had he discussed Renzo De Felice's seminal work on that question. Whereas Lee refers briefly to a "downturn" in public confidence (p. 133), De Felice provides a sophisticated discussion of the development of "unease," which combines currents of dissent and support for the regime.[2]

I also struggled with many of the answers Lee offers to the questions he poses throughout the book. The general problem is that Lee rarely cites historical evidence as the deciding factor in a judgment between two conflicting interpretations of an event. He often presents multiple interpretations or authors as equally plausible and cites as deciding factors consensus in the scholarly community or the recentness of the scholarship. Lee also suggests in several cases that synthesis of divergent views provides the best answer to the question. For example, in discussing Nazi Germany, Lee suggests that the best explanation of the chaotic and often confusing structure of the Third Reich is a synthesis of the "intentionalist" and "functionalist" schools, wherein Lee claims Hitler did his best to minimize opposition, but that he did not intend the chaos that resulted. Lee speculates about what Hitler's motives might have been, but cites virtually no evidence to support his claims.[3] It seems that students would benefit

from exposure to some of the criteria scholars use to judge diverse interpretations of the same event.

Finally, while I found Lee's discussion of the key terms "totalitarian" and "authoritarian" provocative, I heartily disagree with his definitions. Lee argues that totalitarian dictatorships have radical aims, whereas authoritarian dictatorships have conservative aims (pp. 298-299). A better alternative would have been to label regimes totalitarian when the leadership faces little opposition and to label authoritarian those regimes where opposition to the government exists.[4] This manner of labeling the cases categorizes Italy as an authoritarian dictatorship and Germany a totalitarian one. This is a helpful contrasting insight on the two cases that Lee's definition misses. Mussolini faced rival centers of power in both the Vatican and the Monarchy and subsequently was often concerned with the legitimacy of his regime.[5] Hitler, in contrast, faced no comparable opposition and had no such concerns. Lee's definition also poses the question of whether a country that has achieved (or failed to achieve) its radical goals is totalitarian or authoritarian.[6]

I do not intend for any of the three critical comments cited above to detract from the substantial worth of this book as an introductory text to the history of continental Europe in the inter-war period. And if Lee's narrative, accuracy, and organization were not enough to make the book appealing, *European Dictatorships* also features an excellent selection of photographs of the dictators and other relevant political figures, which will be sure to make the book stand out in readers' minds.

Notes

[1]. An example of an introductory text that cites both types of materials effectively--and also one that is surprisingly absent from Lee's otherwise adequate bibliography--is P.M.H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe*. Second edition. London: Longman, 1997.

[2]. Renzo De Felice. *Mussolini Il Duce: Lo Stato Totalitario, 1936-1940*. Turin: Einaudi, 1981. The interested reader should also see Borden W. Painter, Jr., "Renzo De Felice and the Historiography of Italian Fascism," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 95, no. 2 (April 1990): 391-405.

[3]. Pp. 174-176. For a similar example, see also pp. 216-220. If no evidence exists to resolve the dispute, then it seems that the preferred course would be to recognize that this is the case and that the dispute will have to remain unresolved.

[4]. For similar definitions see Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980, pp. 95-96.

[5]. Alexander De Grand, "Cracks in the Façade: The Failure of Fascist Totalitarianism in Italy, 1935-39," *European History Quarterly*, Vol 21 (1991): 515-535.

[6]. A good case to consider here is the Soviet Union during Stalin's late years. Because Stalin's goals became more conservative, does that mean the regime was less totalitarian?

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