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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how global shifts in hegemonic power have shaped the rise and fall of autocratic regimes over the past century. I identify two distinct mechanisms that drive waves of autocracy: the ascent of nondemocratic great powers, and the collapse of overextended democratic waves. Drawing on historical examples from the fascist and communist waves of the twentieth century to the post–Cold War rise of hybrid regimes, the chapter argues that autocratic diffusion is closely tied to abrupt changes in global order. While the current autocratic turn reflects both democratic overstretch and the growing influence of alternative models, it lacks the ideological coherence of previous regime waves. Instead, the contemporary landscape is increasingly defined by the rise of personalist autocracies, whose instability may paradoxically limit their long-term global appeal.

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Great Powers and the Spread of Autocracy Since the Cold War

Seva Gunitsky

Even before a global pandemic sparked fears of democratic decay, the future of liberal democracy looked uncertain. The 2020 Freedom House report spoke of "democracy under assault" not only in autocratic regimes but in countries like India and the United States.[1] Three decades after democracy's apparent triumph, the world appeared on the brink of autocratic resurgence.

Concerns about democratic failure are nothing new. Democratic defeatism has been a constant companion of modern democracy, flaring up whenever its fortunes appear in decline. "It certainly seems that an authoritarian wave is beginning to surge through the countries of Central and Eastern Europe," wrote a British diplomat in 1938. "The trend is away from democracy which is represented as clogging and inefficient."[2]

Today, as in the 1930s, failures inside leading democracies and the rise of alternatives have dulled the appeal of liberal democracy. If we are witnessing the beginning of a global autocratic wave, what can previous waves of autocracy tell us about the present moment? And just as importantly, what are the limits of such comparisons?

This volume has focused on the powerful historical continuities that have persisted despite immense changes that followed the end of the Cold War. One such continuity, and the focus of this chapter, is the link between disruptions to the global order and waves of autocratic reforms.

Over the past century, waves of autocracy have occurred through two paths, both of which stem from abrupt changes in the configuration of Great Powers. The first is via the sudden rise of autocratic hegemons, or the *autocratic ascent*

[1] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World Report 2020*. Available at https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy

[2] Alexander Cadogan, "Minutes from January 3," reprinted in Bela Vago, ed., *The Shadow of the Swastika: The Rise of Fascism and Anti-Semitism in the Danube Basin, 1936–1939* (Farnborough: Saxon House for the Institute of Jewish Affairs, 1938 [1975]), 251.

path. The second is the *democratic overstretch* path, due to rollback from collapsed democratic waves. Both produce autocratic waves, or clusters of temporally bound and causally linked episodes of de-democratization. But the underlying forces driving these waves are distinct.

In cases of *autocratic ascent*, the sudden rise of a powerful autocracy leads to a cross-border wave of institutional reforms associated with that Great Power's regime. The fascist wave of the 1930s and the communist wave following 1945 were two instances of such cascades. Both were driven partly by conquest but also by economic inducements, self-interest, and sincere admiration for their regimes. In cases of *democratic overstretch*, by contrast, waves of autocracy happen when a cross-border cascade of democratic reforms overextends and falters. Just as with autocracies, the abrupt rise of democratic Great Powers leads to waves of prodemocratic reform. The waves of democratization after World War I, World War II, and the Soviet collapse were each shaped by the victory of democratic Great Powers in these hegemonic confrontations. However, these democratic waves inevitably overextend and collapse, leading to counter-waves of democratic failure. Periods of democratic optimism are followed by failed consolidation, rollback, and counter-waves.

Examples of such democratic overstretch can be found in Europe in the 1920s, following the powerful but temporary post–World War I wave of democracy; in Latin America and elsewhere in the late 1940s and early 1950s, following a brief democratic renaissance after World War II; and in Africa in the 1990s, following a democratic wave after the Soviet collapse. The degree of failure varied (nearly total after 1919, partial after 1991), but in each case the result was a wave of autocratic reassertion on the heels of democratic overexpansion.

Given the varied history of autocratic waves, a key question for today is whether contemporary decline is a case of democratic overstretch, autocratic ascent, or a combination of both. If the decline is a post-1991 correction – that is, the inevitable rollback of the overstretched post-Soviet wave – then democracy proponents may have some grounds for optimism.[3] However, if the decline reflects a deeper shift in the balance of global power from the United States to China, then the impending wave of autocracy will be far more lasting. Whatever the answer, Great Power rise and decline will remain essential for explaining the broad patterns of regime evolution in the twenty-first century.

Historical parallels have limitations, and simple frameworks cannot fully capture the multiple forces shaping domestic institutions. In some cases, the distinction between the two categories may be hard to maintain, as I discuss at the end of the section "Autocratic Diffusion as Ascent of Nondemocratic Great Powers." My goal in this chapter is to highlight recurring patterns linking Great

[3] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Myth of Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 45–58.

Power shifts and waves of regime change, not to offer an overarching explanation for such change.

I proceed in three parts. The first section, "The Failure of Democratic Waves," focuses on episodes of democratic overstretch. I examine how hegemonic transitions in which democracies emerge victorious – as after World War I, World War II, and the Soviet collapse – produce powerful but temporary waves of democratization. The failure of these waves produces autocratic counter-waves driven by rollback and democratic retrenchment. The section "Autocratic Diffusion as Ascent of Nondemocratic Great Powers" examines waves of autocracy as autocratic ascents – byproducts of the rise of nondemocratic Great Powers. These include the fascist wave stemming from Germany's resurgence in the 1930s and the communist wave that followed the USSR's victory in World War II.

The last section, "Autocratic Diffusion After the Cold War," concludes by applying the lessons of these precedents to contemporary global politics. The decline of American unipolarity and the country's domestic turmoil are undermining both the material and the ideological appeal of American institutions. The rise of a new alternative, represented by China's state capitalism, may be paving the way for an autocratic resurgence. But if we are seeing a wave away from democracy, what is it a wave *toward* – state capitalism, old-fashioned illiberal nationalism, or something else? China's turn away from a single-party regime to personalist rule under Xi Jinping may mean that the next wave of autocracy will lack the ideological coherence of fascist and communist waves.

THE FAILURE OF DEMOCRATIC WAVES

Since the end of World War I, the expansion of democracy around the world has been driven by democratic waves – turbulent bursts of regime change that quickly sweep across national borders (see Figure 12.1). Each of these waves has been the result of abrupt Great Power transitions, or hegemonic shocks.

Great Power transitions produce democratic waves in a number of ways. First, they create windows of opportunity for regime imposition by temporarily lowering the costs and raising the legitimacy of foreign impositions. Second, they enable rising Great Powers to expand their networks of trade and patronage quickly, exogenously shifting the institutional preferences of many domestic actors and coalitions at once. In this way, ascendant democracies are able to shape the regimes of other states by transforming the incentives and opportunities for the adoption of particular domestic institutions. Third, hegemonic shocks inspire emulation by credibly revealing hidden information about relative regime effectiveness to foreign audiences. By producing clear losers and winners, shocks legitimize certain regimes and make them more attractive to would-be imitators. Material success, in these cases, often creates

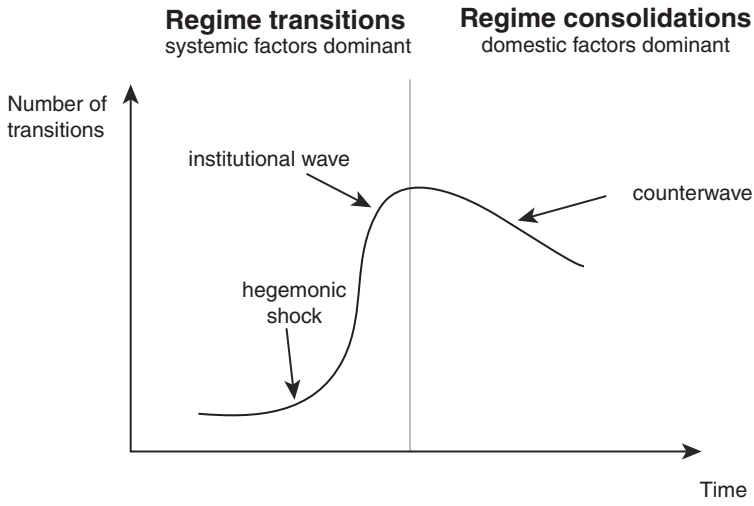

FIGURE 12.1 Autocratic diffusion as rollback from democratic waves

its own legitimacy: Democracy becomes appealing simply by virtue of its triumph in a tense struggle.

These are the mechanisms of coercion, inducement, and emulation that link hegemonic shocks to democratic waves. In other words, hegemonic transitions in which democracies emerge victorious – as after World War I, World War II, and the Soviet collapse – not only alter the global hierarchy of leading states but also shape the wave-like spread of democratization, even in countries not directly affected by the hegemonic shift.

But as the first figure shows, all democratic waves of the twentieth century experienced failures shortly after their peak: a catastrophic reversal after the wave of 1918, a severe one after the wave of 1945, and a partial but persistent one after the post-Soviet wave of 1991. This rollback leads to a counter-wave of autocratic retrenchment. The failure, moreover, is built into the process: Hegemonic shocks create strong but *temporary* incentives for democratization. In the short term, states experience great external pressures for reforms, both from the democratic hegemon and from their own populations.

These intense pressures help spark the initial wave by forging powerful but unwieldy prodemocracy coalitions, overturning unsuspecting incumbents before they have a chance to react, and spreading hopes of regime change to opposition movements in countries where reforms have been blocked. A wide variety of states experience immense pressures to democratize, and these pressures can override the domestic constraints that hinder reforms in times of normal politics. Countries with strained class relations, ethnic tensions, low levels of economic development, and no history of democracy suddenly find themselves swept up in the euphoric momentum of the democratic wave.

In this way, hegemonic shocks temporarily override the domestic constraints that prevent democratic transitions in times of "normal" politics. During the moment of post-shock euphoria, countries undergo turbulent democratization despite the absence of the internal conditions generally needed to sustain and consolidate democracy. Domestic factors that normally prevent democratization – institutional inertia, societal cleavages, or elite fears of asset redistribution – all fade into the background, overwhelmed by the structural pressures of the shock. But with time, the international pressures that initially drove the wave either disappear or refocus on traditional geopolitical interests.

As a result, failure is built into the process that creates democratic waves in the first place. This can help explain the puzzling finding that while democratic consolidations require a few well-established prerequisites, democratic transitions can occur at all levels of development. In the absence of continued external support, democratic coalitions that push for reforms in a moment of crisis dissolve as their disparate interests come to the fore. Failures of consolidation are thus inherent in the aftermath of hegemonic shocks. In their initial intensity, hegemonic shocks create episodes of "democratic overstretch" – the political regime version of a stock market bubble, in which systemic pressures create an artificially inflated number of transitions (see Figure 12.1).

Europe's democratic failures of the 1920s, for instance, can be traced back to the same factors that initially created the triumphant postwar democratic wave. The war's aftermath brought together extraordinary domestic alliances that supported democratic reforms. These ad hoc coalitions could not be sustained once the immediate crisis had passed, and the new states reverted to old ethnic and class-based antagonisms. The war's outcome created immense incentives for democratization inside countries that lacked the domestic preconditions for democratic consolidation – a large and powerful middle class, economic stability, or previous history with democratic governance.

Caught up in the wave of democratic optimism, leaders of these restive and ramshackle new states adopted institutions that had little chance of being sustained in an atmosphere of economic uncertainty, political fragmentation, and ethnic strife. (In some cases these institutions were imposed externally as a condition for statehood, as in the case of minority rights.) "The new states hatched at Versailles," writes Tony Judt, "were fragile and somehow impermanent from the very start."[4] Parliamentary coalitions everywhere were short-lived, unstable, and ineffective.

Postwar Europe roiled with deeply held antagonisms that the settlement did little to resolve. Post-1919 Europe remained a kaleidoscopic jumble of nationalities – pockets, enclaves, exclaves, and scatterings of insecure minorities. Croatians complained of Serbian mistreatment in Yugoslavia,

[4] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 195.

Magyars decried Romanian mistreatment in Transylvania, and so on. States born from the war "were as divided within their new frontiers as they had been within the old," writes Francois Furet. "The Allies had miniaturized national hatred in the name of the principle of nationhood."[5] Nationalism, as the malicious twin of self-determination, was a shaky basis for creating new democrats. Self-determination was a concept "loaded with dynamite," warned Wilson's secretary of state. "Will it not breed discontent, disorder, and rebellion?"[6]

Throughout Europe, most cabinet coalitions endured less than a year – eight months on average in Germany and Austria, five in Italy, and less than four in post-1931 Spain. Even in France, which had already experienced unstable parliamentary coalitions under the Third Republic, average cabinet duration fell from ten months in 1870–1914 to four months in 1932–1940.[7] With the disappearance of strong prodemocracy class coalitions, and the absence of domestic prerequisites conducive for its consolidation, the momentum for democratization simply could not be sustained.

Instead of acting as focal points for deliberation and compromise, parliaments intensified national divisions, like a lens "magnifying rather than resolving the bitter social, national and economic tensions in society at large."[8] Cobbled from the remains of fractious empires, most of the new states contained sizable minorities who readily served as scapegoats for Europe's economic problems. Conflict between labor and capital also resumed anew – their fragile postwar alliances, prompted by fear of radical socialism, began to fray as the threat of crisis passed.

Moreover, international pressures for democratization quickly faded as the European powers resumed their traditional jostling for influence. Promoting democracy became secondary to building alliances and establishing spheres of influence. In contrast to 1945 and 1991, conflicting Great Power strategies contributed to instability that further undermined democratic consolidation. France sought to cripple Germany, while Britain sought to restore the continent's traditional balance of power (in part by aiding German recovery). Italy, Japan, and a number of smaller European states pursued territorial aggrandizement; and the United States sought the creation of a collective security framework resting on liberal capitalism. Yet its failure to join the League of Nations meant the United States would have no institutional mechanisms for engaging with the continent; it eschewed bilateral arrangements and retreated into a policy of noninterference in European

[5] Francois Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 58.

[6] Quoted in Joan Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 47.

[7] Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Random House, 1998), 19.

[8] Ibid., 18.

affairs. A brief but drastic recession in 1920–1921 further encouraged the country to withdraw from Europe.

By joining the democratic camp, the new states had hoped to secure American financial assistance and security guarantees. When they realized that no such assistance was forthcoming, the incentives to maintain and consolidate democratic rule quickly evaporated. In 1930, the anti-fascist writer Emil Müller-Sturmheim published a book titled *Without America It Doesn't Work*, but by then it was too late.

Likewise, Latin America saw a brief swell of democratic reforms empowered by temporary US support of democratization after World War II. But the defeat of a common enemy created a split in the region's fragile wartime alliances, and as the thrust of US policy shifted from anti-fascism to anti-communism, the reassertion of power by right-wing elites excluded the left by force.[9] The US policy of aiding or tolerating undemocratic anti-communist forces culminated in the 1954 covert coup in Guatemala, by which point the democratic aspirations of the early postwar period had been all but forgotten. As in Eastern Europe after World War I, a brief but powerful wave of democratization proved unsustainable in the face of shifting hegemonic support and unfavorable domestic conditions.

The emergence of hybrid regimes since the Soviet collapse is the most recent example of autocratic rollback following a democratic wave. About one in every five countries that democratized after 1989 either returned to authoritarianism or experienced significant democratic rollback. These reversals were unevenly distributed, affecting the former Soviet Union and Africa much more than Eastern Europe, Asia, or Latin America. These regimes experienced enormous external pressures to democratize after the Soviet collapse, but quickly discovered the fickleness of these pressures once the initial euphoria wore off. The initially strong post-1991 systemic pressures for democracy weakened over time. The failures of post–Cold War democratization, which brought us into a world populated by hybrid regimes, are a legacy of this dynamic. Intense pressures for democratization were followed by concerted efforts by autocratic rulers to adopt the façade of democracy without enacting real reforms.

The post-Soviet wave was stymied by a number of factors. Hopeful reformers began liberalization in countries with unfavorable domestic conditions, the pro-reform coalitions that formed in the immediate wake of the shock began to fall apart, and sitting incumbents quickly learned to subvert and co-opt democratic institutions, adopting the trappings of democracy without loosening their hold on power. As in previous cases, the strong but ephemeral pressures that allow

[9] Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

democratic waves to spread also ensured that at least some of these transitions took place in countries that lacked the domestic conditions needed to sustain and consolidate democracy. While the hegemonic shock of the Soviet collapse led to partial democratization in many states, shifting external pressures contributed to democratic stagnation and even rollback.

AUTOCRATIC DIFFUSION AS ASCENT OF NONDEMOCRATIC GREAT POWERS

The link between hegemonic transitions and regime waves is not limited to democracy. Just as the sudden rise of democratic Great Powers leads to democratic waves, the sudden rise of autocratic Great Powers has led to waves of autocracy. The mechanisms through which prodemocratic hegemonic shocks create democratic waves – coercion, inducement, and emulation – are equally applicable to waves of autocracy driven by the rise of nondemocratic states.

After World War II, for example, both the United States and the Soviet Union emerged with their relative power and global prestige greatly strengthened by their triumph over the Axis powers. Despite the profound differences in their content, both regime waves propagated through a mixture of coercion (through occupation and nation building), influence (via the expansion of trade, foreign aid, and newly built international institutions), and emulation (by outsiders impressed with the self-evident success of the two systems).

A mixture of coercion, inducement, and emulation was therefore common to both waves, particularly in the early stages of the Cold War. To present the early postwar period "as a struggle between Soviet tyranny and American freedom is to simplify reality and distort the way most peoples around the world understood events," argues Melvyn Leffler. "In the cauldron of postwar national and transnational politics, the appeal of liberal capitalism was anything but certain."[10] As one of the two beneficiaries of the hegemonic shock, the USSR offered both the promise of material might and a vision of a better world. Its sudden emergence as a superpower, Furet writes, "combined the two gods that make or break historical times: power and ideas."[11]

Both fascism in the late interwar period and communism after World War II expanded through abrupt cross-border surges that quickly transformed the global institutional landscape (see Figure 12.2). These waves of autocratic diffusion spread not only through conquest but also via self-interest and sincere admiration of the alternative offered by these regimes. "If the Danubian States begin now to put on the Nazi garb," wrote the British Home Secretary in the late 1930s, "it will be because imitation is the sincerest form of

[10] Melvyn Leffler, "New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations," *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 2 (1995): 189.
[11] Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion*, 349.

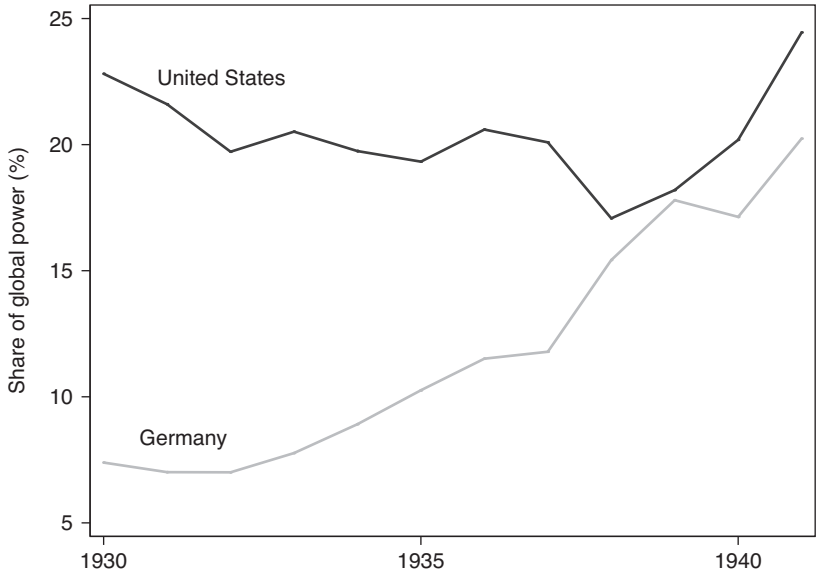

FIGURE 12.2 German and US shares of global power (measured by the CINC index), 1930–1940

flattery and because they want to ingratiate themselves in time with their future master."[12]

Fascist institutions of the 1930s, for example, spread in part due to inducements created by growing German power. After 1933, the country's economic expansion attracted converts through the expansion of trade ties, especially in regions lacking stable relations with Western powers, like Latin America and southern Europe. Trade with Germany appealed to the vast peasant populations of these largely agricultural nations, who had a ready market for their product at prices well above world levels. As German power grew, neutrality became an increasingly difficult proposition, creating opportunities for Germany to extend its political influence. A Romanian businessman warned that "If we continue a laissez faire policy, Germany will achieve the conquest of Romania *à la mode hitlerienne*, that is to say, without a fight."[13]

The economic ascent of Nazi Germany attracted imitators who were repelled by its ideology but admired its ability to rearm and eliminate unemployment. "The 1930s and 1940s were the period of fascist success," writes Hugh Seton-Watson.

[12] R. Hoare, "Annual Report to Anthony Eden, February 12," reprinted in Bela Vago, ed., *The Shadow of the Swastika: The Rise of Fascism and Anti-Semitism in the Danube Basin, 1936–1939* (Farnborough: Saxon House for the Institute of Jewish Affairs, 1937), 203–205.

[13] William A. Hoisington Jr., "The Struggle for Economic Influence in Southeastern Europe: The French Failure in Romania, 1940," *Journal of Modern History* 43, no. 3 (1971): 480.

"Inevitably fascist policies and institutions were aped by others."[14] As an economist noted at the time, fascism allowed "a central will capable of quick decision and armed with supreme authority" combined with "a highly disciplined organisation of the productive forces of the whole economy." Even the staunchly liberal *The Economist* presented the country as a potential model for emulation in Britain: "The one great lesson that can be drawn from German economic experience in the past three years," it argued in 1939, "is that well-organised control can secure the maximum utilisation of a country's resources for the piling up of armaments."[15]

The late interwar years thus witnessed a rapid hegemonic transition in which German power quickly matched and threatened to overtake that of a stagnant United States (see Figure 12.2). The wave of institutional reforms of the 1930s closely followed the contours of this hegemonic shift. As the relative power of democratic regimes declined, democracy was increasingly seen as outdated, inefficient, and undesirable. At the same time, as Germany began to increase its share of relative power and eliminate unemployment, other states began to look toward fascism as a model for emulation.

The fascist wave was therefore a direct result of Germany's recovery and rise. As Eric Hobsbawm argues,

> [W]ithout the international standing of Germany as an evidently successful and rising world power, fascism would have had no serious impact outside Europe, nor indeed would non-fascist reactionary rulers have bothered to dress up as fascist sympathisers, as when Portugal's Salazar claimed in 1940 that he and Hitler were "linked by the same ideology."[16]

By the late 1930s, the global number of democratic regimes had reached a new low after its brief postwar peak.[17] The number of democracies around the world declined both in absolute terms and as a percentage of all states. Their total number fell steadily from twenty-seven to seventeen between 1919 and 1943, and their proportion fell from 40 percent to just under 25 percent of all states.[18] The number of fascist regimes, meanwhile, increased rapidly after 1935.

[14] Hugh Seton-Watson, "The Age of Fascism and Its Legacy," in George L. Mosse, ed., *International Fascism: New Thoughts and New Approaches* (London: Sage, 1979), 365.

[15] Claude William Guillebaud, *The Economic Recovery of Germany: From 1933 to the Incorporation of Austria in March 1938* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 215; *The Economist*, quoted in Talbot Imlay, "Democracy and War: Political Regime, Industrial Relations, and Economic Preparations for War in France and Britain up to 1940," *Journal of Modern History* 79, no. 1 (2007): 1.

[16] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Vintage, 1937 [1994]), 117.

[17] Of the seventeen countries that adopted democratic institutions between 1915 and 1931, only four managed to retain them through the end of the decade. Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 17.

[18] Similarly, the number of democracies declined from thirty-five to twelve between 1920 and 1944, according to Alex Roberto Hybel, *Made by the USA: The International System* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

Germany's ascent thus led to a sharp increase in the global appeal and legitimacy of fascist institutions. Foreign observers saw Germany's economic miracle as the result of specifically Nazi innovations, which had set the regime apart from the stagnating liberal democracies. At the outset, Britain and France focused on conventional measures like cutting public spending. But as Goering declared: "We do not recognize the sanctity of some of these so-called economic laws."[19] Instead, the Nazis pursued an active policy of massive state intervention in the economy, including deficit spending and mass employment. "The mere *efficiency* of such a system, the elimination of waste and obstruction, is obvious," wrote Orwell in 1941. "In seven years it has built up the most powerful war machine the world has ever seen. However horrible this system may seem to us, *it works*."[20] As a result of its successes, according to Judt:

> [F]ascism was not only respectable but – until 1942 – the institutional umbrella for quite a lot of innovative economic thinking. It was uninhibited about the use of the state, bypassing political impediments to radical policy innovation, and happy to transcend conventional restrictions on public expenditure.[21]

In the preface to the 1936 German edition of his *General Theory*, Keynes himself suggested that his policies were "much more easily adapted to the conditions of a totalitarian state" than to a democracy.[22] In 1940 he rejected an offer to broadcast a critique of the Nazi economic plan, finding himself sympathetic to many of its suggestions. "In my opinion about three-quarters of the passages quoted from the German broadcasts would be quite excellent if the name of Great Britain were substituted for Germany or the Axis," he wrote in response. "If [Nazi economic minister] Funk's plan is taken at face value, it is excellent and just what we ourselves ought to be thinking of doing."[23]

Similarly, the Soviet Union inspired followers after World War II because its victory over Nazi Germany, "a country most observers had seen in 1939 and 1940 as an industrial giant, suggested that the Soviet system had considerable real-world vigor."[24] This victory, which "legitimated and reinforced the Stalinist system,"[25] played a key role in communism's attraction in the years

[19] Quoted in Richard Vinen, *A History in Fragments: Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2000), 179.

[20] George Orwell, "The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius." In *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, vol. 2*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1941 [1968]), 80–81, original emphasis.

[21] Tony Judt and Timothy Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 170.

[22] Quoted in Jeffry A. Frieden, *Global Capitalism: Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 212.

[23] Quoted in Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 186.

[24] Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 8.

[25] Robert Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse? Understanding Historical Change* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 57.

following the war. As Raymond Aron observed in 1944, its performance in the war "has refuted some classical arguments on the inevitable decadence inherent in a bureaucratic economy."[26] The low expectations of communist military efficiency both dampened the regime's appeal in the 1930s and bolstered it after the war's end. "Stalin had emerged from his victory over Hitler far stronger than ever before," writes Judt, "basking in the reflected glory of 'his' Red Army, at home and abroad."[27]

At the end of the war, the Soviet story possessed enormous political and ideological clout, particularly in developing states. The industrialization of a backward, illiterate, agrarian state; the dramatic defeat of a feared military juggernaut; a swift rise to the status of an anti-imperialist, anti-Western superpower: For new states shedding colonial bonds, everything in this narrative suggested a virtuous shortcut to modernity.

The outcome of the hegemonic shock allowed the USSR to credibly present itself as an enticing alternative to capitalist democracy in a way that no Soviet exhortations could have done before the war. The Soviet victory over fascism lent communism a moral authority lacking before the war, transforming the regime into "a viable form of political modernity, as significant a threat to democracy as fascism had ever been."[28] This gave the rising hegemon the power not only to coerce but also to attract, whether the source of the attraction was ideology or material success. "No one can deny [that] the ruthlessness of the Soviet leaders paid dividends," wrote Granville Hicks, a Marxist who had renounced communism after the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact. "I grow impatient with those who argue that the Soviet regime must be virtuous because it triumphed in war, but there can be no argument about its power."[29]

In sum, the ascendance of nondemocratic Great Powers, marked by a sudden increase in their share of relative global power – Germany in the 1930s and the USSR after World War II – has been a key driver in creating waves of autocratic diffusion. The clear parallel to today is the rise of China and the decline of American unipolarity. I examine this comparison in more detail in the last section.

Having examined the two paths in more detail, it is now possible to return to a possible objection I posed at the beginning of the chapter: Can we properly disentangle democratic rollback from autocratic ascents? The comparison between the 1920s and the 1930s serves as a useful illustration of the distinction. Well before the Great Depression, despots and dictators began coming to power across Europe and around the world. Fledgling democracies fell in Russia (1917), Hungary (1919), Italy (1922), Bulgaria (1923), Poland

[26] Raymond Aron, "The Secular Religions," in *The Dawn of Universal History: Selected Essays from a Witness to the Twentieth Century*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Basic Books, 1944 [2002]), 194.

[27] Judt, *Postwar*, 174. [28] Smith, *America's Mission*, 186.

[29] Granville Hicks, "The Spectre that Haunts the World," *Harper's* 192 (June 1946): 537.

(1926), Portugal (1926), Lithuania (1926), and Yugoslavia (1929). In addition, the new states of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, which had also adopted democratic institutions, had been reabsorbed into the Russian empire by 1922, this time under a communist aegis. The optimistic period after the war, Ikenberry writes, "was a democratic high tide rather than a gathering flood."[30]

But in this earlier period, the causes of these failed democratic consolidations were tied to the sources of the initial wave. Democratic institutions spread into countries that lacked the domestic preconditions for democratic consolidation, leading to reversal and disappointment. The wave was away from democracy, in other words, but not toward a particular alternative. The fascist wave as a distinct phenomenon began with Germany's hegemonic rise after 1933.

What about Italy? Mussolini seized power in 1922, although his regime was not consolidated until several years later and opposition newspapers continued to operate until 1925. But as with the Russian Revolution of 1917, a new ideology alone could not inspire a fascist wave without an accompanying transition of hegemonic power. Although a number of imitators sprung up in Mussolini's wake, few of these movements achieved any measure of popularity until after 1933. "Without the triumph of Hitler in Germany in early 1933, fascism would not have become a general movement," argues Hobsbawm. "In fact, all the fascist movements outside Italy that amounted to anything were founded after his arrival in power."[31]

Even movements personally cultivated by Mussolini, like the Croatian Ustashi, did not gain many followers or even develop a radical fascist ideology until the 1930s, when they began to look to Germany for patronage and inspiration. In France, the right was not radicalized until 1933, transforming from nationalist Poincaré loyalists to Nazi followers seeking direct linkages with Germany.[32] Likewise in Romania, Codreanu's Legion of the Archangel Michael did not develop any significant following until the mid-1930s. For several years after its founding in 1927 it remained "a tiny sect," notes Payne, which was "a common experience for most fascist movements in the 1920s."[33] But 1933 brought increasing Nazi influence and popular support, and by mid-decade the Legion was one of the largest fascist movements in Europe.

Likewise in Hungary, fascist mobilization efforts failed during the 1920s but succeeded in the next decade. Until the early 1930s, argues Vago, the country's

[30] G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 155.

[31] Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 116. Outside of Italy, notes Paxton, the "early fascist movements, offspring of crises, shrank into insignificance as normal life returned in the 1920s." See Robert Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 91.

[32] Kenneth Ingram, *Years of Crisis: An Outline of International History, 1919–1945* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1946), 98–99.

[33] Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 282.

extreme right was "still in its infancy, without mass support."[34] Gyula Gömbös, Hungary's most prominent representative of the radical right, was forced to moderate his views to such an extent that Miklos Horthy, the country's regent for most of the interwar period, comfortably co-opted him as the defense minister in 1929. But as elsewhere, Hitler's ascent to power rejuvenated the movement; Gömbös began to move both the party and the state toward fascism, and the country as a whole drifted into the German orbit.[35] Within a month of Hitler's election, Gömbös rushed to Berlin "to assure the Nazi Fuhrer of Hungary's loyalty and traditional friendship toward Germany."[36] Economic agreements tying the country closer to Germany soon followed; in 1935 Gömbös told Göring that Hungary would be transformed into a nationalist-socialist state within three years.[37] (His plans were disrupted by his sudden death in 1936, whereupon the focus of Nazi activity shifted away from the state and toward the Arrow Cross.)

The timing of the fascist wave highlights the immense importance of hegemonic shifts in shaping waves of autocracy. While fascist movements "of consequence" arose in the 1920s in Italy, Spain, and the Balkans, notes Harrington, it was the rise of Nazism after 1933 that "suggested the existence of the new, totalitarian mass."[38] In that year quantity turned into quality, and as German power grew its example eclipsed all others. By 1938, argues Kohn, the German variety of fascism "became so predominant that it impressed its peculiar character upon all other (and even upon the older) forms of fascism."[39] Noting the weakness of philofascist groups in the 1920s, Payne concludes that "the major diffusion of fascist movements throughout Europe occurred during the following decade, in the aftermath of Hitler's triumph."[40]

AUTOCRATIC DIFFUSION AFTER THE COLD WAR

While their mechanisms are distinct, both pathways of autocratic diffusion can be seen in the international system since 1991. First, the democratic overstretch

[34] Bela Vago, *The Shadow of the Swastika: The Rise of Fascism and Anti-Semitism in the Danube Basin, 1936–1939* (Farnborough: Saxon House for the Institute of Jewish Affairs, 1975), 10.

[35] Federigo Argentieri, "Hungary: Dealing with the Past and Moving into the Present," in Sharon L. Wolchik and Jane L. Curry, eds., *Central and East European Politics: From Communism to Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 216.

[36] Stephen Borsody, *The Tragedy of Central Europe: Nazi and Soviet Conquest and Aftermath*, rev. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale Concilium on International and Area Studies, 1980), 51.

[37] Payne, *History of Fascism*, 270.

[38] Michael Harrington, *The Accidental Century* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1965 [1971]), 220. "Throughout the 1920s dictatorships like that of Mussolini were still very much the exception and confined to the periphery." (Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916–1931* [London: Allen Lane, 2014], 515.)

[39] Hans Kohn, *The Twentieth Century: A Mid-Way Account of the Western World* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 154–155.

[40] Payne, *History of Fascism*, 290.

story – the decline of democracy from its high point following the Soviet collapse. Second, the autocratic ascent story – the decline of American unipolarity and the rise of a new Great Power challenge from China, embodying a consciously distinct (and in some places, increasingly attractive) regime. My goal in this last section is not to offer a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms behind autocratic diffusion, but to speculate briefly on its content.

The first decade of the twenty-first century was marked by democratic anxiety – what *The Economist* called "liberty's lost decade" after 9/11.[41] America's heavy-handed policy of spreading democracy through force contributed to a backlash against democracy promotion and gave ideological cover to autocrats by allowing them to credibly present democratization as a tool of Western neo-imperialism.[42] The Great Recession cast doubt on democratic capitalism as a viable economic system, reviving the search for alternatives. In its early stages, the crisis drew parallels to the Great Depression. Polanyi's 1944 conclusion that "the origins of the cataclysm lay in the utopian endeavor of economic liberalism to set up a self-regulating market system" would not have been out of place in a 2008 newspaper editorial.[43]

Despite the avoidance of another Depression-like catastrophe, and despite the partial and uncertain recovery that followed, the economic crisis seems to have permanently damaged the appeal of democratic capitalism. Like the Depression, the Great Recession began in the United States and, in the process, "has tarnished the American model," writes Ikenberry.[44] Since then, a global pandemic and domestic turmoil in the United States have only exacerbated these concerns. The early US mishandling of Covid-19 reinforced the impression that the United States may not be a regime worth emulating.

But if we are seeing a wave away from democracy, what is it a wave *toward*? Russia provides one key example. In March 2020, Vladimir Putin announced his support for a constitutional change to allow him two more terms in office. When these terms end in 2036, he will be eighty-four years old and – if he survives – the longest-ruling leader in Russian history. Although Putin's longevity stands out, Russia's turn to personalist rule – in which political

[41] *The Economist*, "Liberty's Lost Decade," Aug. 3, 2013.

[42] Thomas Carothers, "The Backlash against Democracy Promotion," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 2 (2006) and Thomas Carothers, "The Continuing Backlash against Democracy Promotion," in Peter Burnell and Richard Youngs, eds., *New Challenges to Democratization* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Marina Ottaway, "Ideological Challenges to Democracy: Do They Exist?" in Peter Burnell and Richard Youngs, eds., *New Challenges to Democratization* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[43] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, MA: Beacon, [1944] 2001), 29.

[44] G. John Ikenberry, "The Future of the Liberal World Order: Internationalism after America," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2011): 57.

power is increasingly concentrated in a single individual – is part of a broader trend. China, for example, seemed until recently to be cementing a one-party regime in which elites shared power and maintained a functional mechanism of succession. But over the past couple of years, Chinese President Xi Jinping has abolished term limits and concentrated political power, often at the expense of other institutions, such as the Chinese Communist Party and the military. Other countries, such as Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte, have also seen regimes coalesce around a single individual. The strongmen, it seems, are getting stronger.

Personalism, however, lacks not only the ideological coherence of fascism or communism but also the institutional coherence of other autocratic arrangements like single-party states. Personalist regimes are more fragile than other types of autocracies, and they tend to end badly for their leaders. By concentrating power in private hands, personalism breeds corruption and undermines state capacity. Most importantly, unlike single-party regimes, personalist regimes do not offer an easily exportable model of autocratic rule that other governments can imitate. As a result, the rise of personalist rulers, despite the problems they pose, may have a silver lining for the future of democracy.

Personalist rule emerges when other elites are unable to successfully block the accumulation of power by an autocrat.[45] Personalism is bad for the other elites: Fearing the rise of a rival, personalist dictators frequently rotate, purge, imprison, and even execute their fellow ruling elites. Under these circumstances, it becomes increasingly difficult for other elites to coordinate with one another to remove the autocrat.[46] Over time, personalist leaders become difficult to dislodge from within.

In time, however, such paranoia-induced rigidity becomes the source of the regime's downfall. As research has repeatedly shown, personalist regimes are less durable than those led by collegial ruling parties – surviving in office about half as long as dominant-party regimes – and their vulnerability grows out of the relentless accumulation of power.[47] Since loyalty is key, security forces end up being led by sycophants and kept weak in the hopes that they will not be able to stage a successful coup. As a result, personalist regimes are less capable of fighting wars.[48] And when mass protests do arise, these regimes are more likely to see defections by both the armed forces and the elites.[49]

[45] Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[46] Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[47] Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*; Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[48] Vipin Narang and Caitlin Talmadge, "Civil-Military Pathologies and Defeat in War: Tests Using New Data," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 7 (2018): 1379–1405.

[49] Alexander Taaning Grundholm, "Taking It Personal? Investigating Regime Personalization as an Autocratic Survival Strategy," *Democratization* 27, no. 5 (2020): 797–815.

When, shortly after Putin's announcement, an unctuous Russian TV commentator explained that "without Putin, Russia is not viable," he meant it as a compliment. But the phrase also highlights the tenuous nature of personalist regimes. To remain indispensable, Putin must perform a continuous balancing act among the competing factions in his regime, which places real limits on his power and keeps Russian institutions in a permanent state of disorganization.

Once in power, personalist leaders find themselves locked in a web of favors in which personal connections take precedence over institutional interests. As a result, leadership transitions create immense amounts of uncertainty. In Putin's case, for example, the prospect of his departure is destabilizing even for people unhappy with his leadership. Personalist regimes, not surprisingly, are highly susceptible to crises of succession after the death of the autocrat or before an anointed successor can successfully consolidate control.[50]

In the long run, therefore, the turn to personalism may help preserve the viability of liberal democracy as a universal model. Personalism can only be local. Its ideology is to amass power in whatever way possible; it is a tactic for personal empowerment, not a strategy for institutional rule. It therefore lacks the appeal of previous universalizing ideologies, such as fascism and communism, which offered credible, coherent, and at times extremely appealing regime alternatives to liberal democracy.

China's single-party state, until recently, seemed to offer one such rival ideology. Beijing appeared to have developed a system in which term limits were respected and a coterie of elites could pursue the national interest in a way that combined the advantages of capitalist flexibility with autocratic centralization.[51] Instead of competing groups alternating power, a single body would represent the will of the people. In doing so, it promised to avoid the deadlock of multiparty democracy, improve government efficiency, and safeguard the country's sovereignty against the encroachments of the US-led global order.

Thus, even if democracy no longer faces an ideological rival like fascism or communism, it could still face an emerging *organizational* rival in the form of the one-party state. The one-party state represents an alternative institutional form in which a single party maintains either a legal monopoly on power or a de facto dominance via the suppression and co-option of other parties (the dominant-party state).

The one-party state is ideologically thin. It can be technocratic, populist, or oligarchic. It exists in left-wing or right-wing variants, the latter focusing on ethnic group identities and the former focusing on socioeconomic group

[50] Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorship Works*.

[51] J. Stromseth, E. Malesky, D. Gueorguiev, L. Hairong, W. Xixin, and C. Brinton, *China's Governance Puzzle: Enabling Transparency and Participation in a Single-Party State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

identities. Capitalism coexists peaceably with a one-party state under some limits, liberalism much less so. Most importantly, a functioning single-party state resolves the problem of succession that frequently plagues nondemocratic regimes, especially personalist ones.

Personalist rulers can make the same promises as dominant ruling parties. But the promises of personalist rulers are backed up by the force of their charisma and personal loyalties, not by institutional mechanisms. As a result, their ability to govern is more limited than it looks. Most problematically, the power of their proclamations depends on collective estimations of how long they will remain in power. Regimes that appear stable and highly efficient when unchallenged begin to look fragile and hollow as soon as they are threatened.

A recent defense of Francis Fukuyama's argument about the end of history noted that his central contention – that "there is no conceivable ideological rival to liberal democracy" – remains true today. China, Russia, ISIS, or nationalism more broadly: none of these offer a "comprehensive set of political and economic ideas poised as a rival to liberal democracy with universal aspirations and global appeal."[52] Although the single-party state, abetted by power sharing and institutionalized succession, might have become that rival, this now looks increasingly unlikely. The strongmen may be getting stronger, but the ideology used to prop up their rule is not.

Despite its weaknesses, the spread of personalist autocracy is not welcome news. The move toward personalism may be self-defeating in the long run, but in the long run, as Keynes said, we are all dead. Personalist regimes start more wars and make life miserable for their people.[53] The lack of an ideological firmament is no consolation if the end result is still oppression. But even in an age of disillusionment with democracy, a universally appealing alternative has yet to emerge. The turn to personalism, for all the potential problems it poses, only reinforces this fact.

While the Soviet collapse marked a new era, its effects on domestic regimes were part of a much older pattern. First, the rapid decline of a Great Power – the discrediting of its ideology, the disruption of its material levers of influence, and the triumph of its democratic rival. Second, a global burst of regime transitions driven by the consequences of this hegemonic shock. Third, the democratic overstretch – rollback and the rise of hybrid regimes brought about by capricious systemic pressures, adaptation by shrewd elites, and the splintering of reform coalitions.

Given the two historical paths of autocratic diffusion, which path are we witnessing now? That is, are the current problems a lingering legacy of post-Soviet democratic overstretch, or the result of a deeper shift in the nature of global

[52] Paul Miller, "Fukuyama Was Right (Mostly)," *The American Interest*, Jan. 14, 2019, www.the-american-interest.com/2019/01/14/fukuyama-was-right-mostly/.

[53] Jessica Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 326–347.

power – or perhaps something new entirely, not amenable to historical patterns? Unlike previous hegemonic shocks, the Soviet collapse was largely self-imposed, precipitated by Gorbachev's failed attempt to reform an ossified regime. As a result, the transition concluded on a sour note, with the self-inflicted dissolution of a resentful empire, robbed of the transformational catharsis that had accompanied other hegemonic cataclysms. Democracy triumphed by default rather than through struggle, and its victory was therefore both decisive and oddly incomplete. Thirty years later, disappointment and ambivalence have reached a critical mass. The broad patterns of hegemonic rise and decline will play a key role in resolving this ambivalence.