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Ruling Oneself Out

A Theory of Collective Abdications



Ivan Ermakoff

CONTENTS



List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xxxi
A Note on Citations	xxxv

PART I: The Stage and the Problem 1

1	Actors and Events	3
2	Constitutional Abdication	37

PART II: Subservience, Common Sense 59

3	Coercion	61
4	Miscalculation	92
5	Ideological Collusion	131

PART III: The Terms of the Challenge 179

6	Collective Alignment: Three Processes	181
7	Diffusion	211

PART IV: Collective Stances 243

8	The Production of Consent	245
9	Vacillations, Convergence	277

PART V: Coda: Judgments of Significance 305

10	The Consistency of Inconsistency	307
11	The Event as Statement	323

Appendix A: Counts and Accounts	333
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Appendix B: A Two-Pronged Model of Alignment	346
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Bibliography	369
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Index	393
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TABLES



- 1 Parties and the Weimar Republic, September 1930–July 1932, 11
- 2 Parties and the Weimar Republic, July 1932–November 1932, 15
- 3 The Parliamentary Election of 5 March 1933, 18
- 4 Distribution of Seats in the Reichstag in the Absence of Communist Delegates, March 1933, 19
- 5 Vote for the Reynaud Cabinet in the Chamber of Deputies, 22 March 1940, 25
- 6 Breakdown of the Vote in the National Assembly, 10 July 1940, 35
- 7 Voting Behaviors and Military Occupation, 81
- 8 Political Camps and Military Occupation, 82
- 9 Coefficients from the Multinomial Logistic Regression of Vote on Assembly (Senate = 1), Military Occupation, and Political Camp ($N = 670$), 83
- 10 Vote Inclination on 23 March and Class Origin, 113
- 11 Odds of a “No” Vote in Meeting of Center Delegation, 23 March 1933, by Occupational Group, 114
- 12 Attendance in Bordeaux and Vichy: Chronological Assessments, 127
- 13 Absentees on 9 July, 128
- 14 Parliamentarians Who Signed the Bergery Declaration (List as of 10 July: Bergery Personal Papers), 161
- 15 Socialist Deputies Cross-Classified by Their Votes on the Blum and Faure Resolutions at the Montrouge Congress (December 1938) and on the Granting of Special Powers to Marshal Pétain, 10 July 1940, 170
- 16 Pre-war Pacifism and Political Stance in Vichy: The case of the Socialist Deputies (Odds Ratios of voting “Yes” on 10 July 1940, $N = 122$), 171
- 17 Logistic Regression of the Vote on 10 July on Military Occupation and Motions on Peace and War for Socialist (SFIO) Parliamentarians, 172
- 18 Votes and Occupation in July 1940: Lawyers versus Non-lawyers ($N = 640$), 230
- 19 Lawyers’ Probability of Voting “Yes” ($N = 640$), 231
- 20 The Center Delegates: Vote Preferences on the Enabling Bill (23 March 1933) and Election Districts, 254
- 21 References to the Public Stance of Prominent Actors ($N = 223$), 287
- 22 Classification Grids and References to Public Stances ($N = 223$), 288

- 23 Alignments: Variants and Their Frequencies for All Testimonies
($N = 223$), 289
- 24 Explanatory Claims: All Accounts ($N = 223$), 290
- 25 The Swindle Argument and the Reference to Prominent Actors' Public
Stances ($N = 223$), 291
- 26 Explanatory Claims in Narratives ($N = 126$), 292
- 27 Types of Sources, March 1933, 336
- 28 Types of Sources, July 1940, 337
- 29 Political Affiliations and Accounts, July 1940, 344
- 30 Accounts and Decisional Stances, July 1940, 345
- 31 Value Parameters for Figure 8, 350
- 32 Updating the Cost of a Mistake, 359
- 33 Assessing the Cost of a Mistake in Light of Indecision, 361
- 34 Belief Updating: A Numerical Example, 364

FIGURES



- 1 Abdication game, 47
- 2 Constitutional abdication or opposition? 55
- 3 Expected payoffs, 56
- 4 Nested games, 187
- 5 Nested games: generic version, 188
- 6 Individual accounts: production, formal structure, and content, 334
- 7 Ego's confrontation with the authoritarian challenger, 347
- 8 An example of utility functions producing a relative threshold, 351
- 9 Threshold distribution and sequential alignment, 353
- 10 Prior beliefs about the likelihood of opposition: three hypotheses, 356
- 11 Updated beliefs ($n = 10$, $k = 6$), 357
- 12 The future stance of the group reassessed from ego's standpoint, 363
- 13 Belief update in light of a threshold value of 0.3, 364
- 14 Belief update in light of a threshold value of 0.5, 365
- 15 Belief update in light of a threshold value of 0.7, 365
- 16 Belief update in light of a threshold value of 0.9, 366
- 17 A statement producing greater uncertainty, 367

PREFACE

“Nothing is so treacherous as the obvious” — Schumpeter (1976 [1942], 235)

History is punctuated with critical decisions, decisions that engage one's fate and the fate of others, decisions that people make in a mist of darkness, the darkness of their own motivations, the darkness of those who confront and challenge them, and the darkness of what the future has in store. This book is about decisions of this kind: collective abdications. The peculiarity of the collective abdications I am examining is that they were formally sanctioned by an explicit decision—a vote. A further peculiarity is that they meant the renunciation of democracy.

Abdication is different from surrender. It is surrender that legitimizes one's surrender. It implies a statement of irrelevance. When the act is collective, the statement is about the group that makes the decision. The group dismisses itself. It surrenders its fate and agrees to do so, thereby justifying its subservience. This broad characterization sets the problem. Why would a group legitimize its own subservience and, in doing so, abdicate its capacity for self-preservation?

1

The time and the setting: 23 March 1933, the Reichstag building, Berlin. The building had been partially destroyed by arson three weeks earlier, on the night of 27 February. It still bore the marks of the fire, and the persistent smell of charred rubble lingered in the corridors. Clara Siebert and her colleagues of the Center party parliamentary delegation had convened in the room in which they usually held their meetings. It was a little before 6 P.M. The delegates were now leaving the building. Because of the damage caused by the arson, the parliamentary session was temporarily taking place in another building, the Kroll Opera House, situated a few blocks away. The session was about to resume after a three-hour intermission. Though the place was familiar, the circumstances were not.

The representatives of the Center party were about to vote on an enabling bill (the “Law for the Relief of the People and of the Reich”) that allowed Hitler's cabinet to issue, independently of the parliament, decrees deviating from the Constitution. In effect, the bill was a constitutional mandate. Hitler

had enjoyed executive and legislative powers since his appointment as premier (chancellor) by the president of the Republic, Hindenburg, on 30 January 1933. The enabling bill granted Hitler the right to legally discard the constitutional framework of the Weimar Republic. In light of the Nazis' explicit political agenda, there was no doubt that this was the goal intended by the bill. The new regime would clearly be authoritarian in nature. Nothing guaranteed that basic individual rights would be protected.

The session began. The first speaker to take the rostrum at the Opera was the chairman of the Social Democratic party, Otto Wels. The Social Democrats, Wels explained, had suffered considerable persecution since Hitler's appointment as chancellor, and after having experienced such persecution the Social Democratic Party could not be expected by anyone to vote for the bill. The Social Democrats held fast to the basic principles of a government based on law. Hitler responded to Wels's speech with immediate violence aimed at the representatives of the democratic camp. "Springing like a beast thriving to tear apart its prey" (Wirth), Hitler castigated the Social Democrats for coming too late. The fate of the Social Democratic party, Hitler explained, was sealed. The party would be cast into the dustbin of history.

Then came the turn of Ludwig Kaas, the Center party chairman, to explain his party's vote. Both the tone and content of his speech were different; Kaas spoke of the work of national salvation that had to be accomplished. The Center party consented to vote for the enabling bill, provided that the government would base its policies on the three principles outlined by the chancellor (Hitler) during the first reading of the law: the reconstruction of the state; the recognition of the Catholic and the Protestant confessions as the pillars of the state; and the preservation of the *Länder*. Kaas's explanation was followed by similar statements from the leading representatives of the other parties that had opposed the Nazis in the past. At 7:30 P.M. the vote took place and the die was cast. Hitler's enabling bill was passed by a majority of 444 to 94. The two-thirds majority required for any constitutional change was met, and this although the Nazi party and its allies in the government represented only 53 percent of the votes in parliament. The 94 "no" votes were cast exclusively by the Social Democratic representatives.

2

The passing of Hitler's enabling bill by the German Reichstag in March 1933 meant termination of the constitutional organs of the Republic and formally marked the end of a constitutional system of democratic representation. In voting for this bill, non-Nazi members of the Reichstag not only relinquished their constitutional authority but also validated, by an act of collective ap-

proval, the legitimacy of their own dismissal. Their withdrawal from the political arena went along with an explicit and formal transfer of constitutional rights. Hitler was in effect given a free hand to legally bury the democratic Constitution of Weimar.

The first explanation which comes to mind regarding this event is that political actors do not legitimize their own subservience if they are not coerced to do so. Threats and intimidation thus explain abdication. This claim is a factual one and needs to be assessed accordingly. Regarding March 1933 this argument, on the surface, has considerable merit. Hitler had been at the helm of the state since the end of January 1933. In addition to Hitler, three other National Socialist leaders held ministerial positions in March 1933: Frick supervised the Ministry of the Interior; Göring was minister of aviation and commissarial minister of the interior for Prussia; and after 7 March Goebbels was added to the team, at the head of the Ministry of Propaganda. The three were instrumental in curtailing freedom of the press—the government imposed bans on newspapers that criticized the government too harshly—and in using state repression against political opponents.

The Reichstag fire on 27 February—which the government promptly attributed to a Communist plot—provided Hitler with a political opportunity to increase his arbitrary power. With Hindenburg's seal of approval, on 28 February Hitler issued an emergency decree that suspended basic civil rights and allowed the government to assume the powers of any Land government that proved unable or unwilling to restore public order. Nazi thugs harassed their opponents with seeming impunity. They hoisted the swastika over official buildings, ransacked union and party locals, and jailed and brutalized journalists and politicians who had opposed them in the past. Violence and intimidation suffused the political climate and marked the rapid transition from a formally democratic constitutional setting to an arbitrary and authoritarian political system of rule.

Fear is a convenient explanation of abdication, because it offers a simple, readily available, and commonsensical solution to the problem. Yet the apparent obviousness of the explanation is deceptive. Implicit in the coercion explanation is the notion that threats are naturally effective, that they produce enough fear to incapacitate any attempt at resistance. This assumption is more problematic and paradoxical than it may seem. Groups also decide to resist in the face of coercive pressures, and threats of reprisal sometimes have effects opposite to those intended, yielding cohesion among those under challenge and providing them with a new impetus to resist. In assuming that credible threats are bound to produce fear, one overlooks an intriguing question: When do credible threats produce submission?

The coercion explanation also conceals a paradox. Hitler and his henchmen did not temper their efforts to frighten their opponents in parliament. This observation suggests two interpretations. One is consistent with the coercion explanation and the conclusion that the Nazis were successful: German democrats were fearful of reprisals and coercion worked. The other interpretation points to the paradoxical significance of such threats: Why did the Nazis feel it necessary to exert pressures until the very conclusion of the vote? Why did they invest so much energy in threatening their opponents? Was this not, on their part, an indication that in spite of their threats of reprisal, they had no guarantee about the outcome?

The paradox of coercion is that it often highlights what it attempts to suppress: the possibility of resistance. In relying extensively on threats and intimidation, one acknowledges the irreducible character of the other party's capacity for decision; and the more coercive the threats, the greater the acknowledgment that resistance is a possibility. Ultimately, actors can choose to disregard the threats that are deployed against them. They can decide to challenge the odds. At the final moment, the decision is theirs. That is why acquiescence can never be assumed away as a foregone conclusion. That the threats were quite real in March 1933 cannot account for abdication. Rather, it reminds us that the outcome could have been different.

3

We cannot fully account for this relative indeterminacy without focusing on the moment of the decision. Doing so implies exploring what made these decisions critical from the actors' *own* point of view. Two observations stand out. First, the actors in March 1933 related their decision to their peers'. Witnessing their world crumbling, they turned their eyes to political affiliates expecting them to provide guidance and meaning. Second, uncertainty was pervasive. Commitments and dispositions lacked a firm grounding. Opinions were vacillating. The group did not know where it stood.

The theory of collective alignment developed throughout this inquiry draws a connection between these two observations and conceptualizes them as the defining features of a type of collective conjuncture. Individuals fluctuate because (1) they are concerned about the behavioral stance of those whom they define as peers and (2) they do not know where these peers stand. Individual oscillations are the seismograph of collective perceptions. Their uncertainty fluctuates with the degree of irresolution imputed to the group. Actors are uncertain about themselves because they are uncertain about their peers.

Mutual uncertainty as a result describes a situation in which the members of a group face the same decision, are uncertain about their peers' preferences re-

garding the decision to be made, and expect to pay a high cost if their action is at odds with the action of the other group members. In this situation individual consequences are interdependent, and action preferences are conditioned by this interdependence. Uncertainty is a key feature of the group situation: individuals realize how difficult it is for them to ascertain their position relative to that of their peers and, as a result, how difficult it is to assess the risks involved. The uncertainty becomes mutual when individuals realize not only that they experience the same state but also that they share this awareness.

In such situations, being mutually aware that they experience the same predicament, individuals realize that they share an interest in forming concordant beliefs about their own collective behavior. For this purpose, they need information about the group's future stance. They can acquire this information in two ways. Through their interpersonal contacts individual actors get pieces of information about one another's behavioral preferences. This information is localized. It constitutes their local knowledge. On the basis of this local knowledge, actors attempt to assess how the group might behave as a whole.

Public statements, for their part, provide actors with information about their own collective preference if they are in a position to interpret these statements as reflecting the group's stance. They tacitly coordinate their expectation about the group by assuming that others share their interpretation. The thrust of the analysis is to explain how they come to this conclusion. I advance the hypothesis that the key to the possibility of such a convergence process is the group's knowledge of the properties of those who take a public stance. This knowledge in turn is conditional on their prominent status.

4

Four concepts provide the analytical moorings of this theoretical framework: alignment, reference group, threshold, and prominence. These conceptual bearings echo one another and set a constellation of functional relations. *Alignment* is the core concept. The argument I have just outlined points to a theory of collective alignment. By alignment I mean the act of making oneself indistinguishable from others. As a collective phenomenon, alignment describes the process whereby the members of a group facing the same decision align their behavior with one another's.

Alignment is *sequential* when actors make their decision after having observed how many others opted for each option. *Local knowledge* prevails when actors rely on the information gathered through face-to-face interactions to assess the preference distribution and likely stance of the group facing the challenge. *Tacit coordination* describes the process whereby actors coordinate their beliefs about the group's future stance by drawing inferences from events that

are common knowledge, such as the behavioral stance adopted by prominent actors in a public setting. Group members tacitly coordinate their beliefs about their own collective stance when they are confident that they have reached an informal consensus about themselves. They determine their behavioral preference in light of inferences about the group they assume to be widely shared.

Underlying this threefold category is a basic distinction between behavioral and inferential processes of alignment. Sequential alignment is serial and based on observation. Local knowledge and tacit coordination are inferential mechanisms. These two types are incompatible. Either actors align because their information is perfect—they know that their threshold is met: enough actors have already committed themselves to one stance—or they infer the most plausible outcome and make their choice accordingly. Local knowledge and tacit coordination, on the other hand, may have congruent effects. Therefore the local knowledge and the tacit coordination scenarios are not mutually exclusive. Local knowledge orients individual actors' assessment of the group stance if it helps them reduce their uncertainty. But individuals may also amplify their mutual uncertainty through their interpersonal contacts.

The notion of alignment implies the notion of a *reference group*. Individual actors determine their behavior by reference to a group. This group can be based on status distinctions or formal criteria of membership, or it can be ad hoc. If it is ad hoc, individuals define the reference in light of the problem that confronts them. In any case, the individual actor actualizes this reference to others in the process of making his decision. His reference group is the collective entity onto which he projects a definition of the situation and from which he derives an interpretive frame for assessing the risks involved.

Both the definition of a reference group and the decision to align a behavioral stance with the stance of other group members point to the notion of "individual threshold." This is the third critical concept. The notion of individual threshold describes an individual actor's propensity to choose one course of action depending on the absolute or relative number of those opting for this line of conduct (Granovetter 1978, 1422). The threshold metaphor captures the image of a tipping phenomenon: this number, or proportion, tips this actor over from one line of conduct to another. It refers, furthermore, to a specific action. For instance, a German parliamentarian's opposition threshold in the context of Hitler's enabling bill is this actor's propensity to cast a "no" vote as a function of the number, or proportion, of the members of his party delegation who choose this line of conduct.

If this propensity is an individual characteristic—i.e., if it reflects a bundle of idiosyncratic features: the actor's sensitivity to risks, his inclination for the

different options at hand, and the extent to which he values his affiliation with the group—it is also, as Granovetter (1978, 1436) pointed out, context dependent. An actor's assessment of the risks involved depends on the features of the situation he is experiencing. The terminology of the notion is counterintuitive. An actor whose opposition threshold is high is unwilling to oppose the legal endorsement of a prospective Nazi dictatorship unless a high proportion of those whom he views as his peers oppose this prospect as well. Hence a high opposition threshold means a low individual propensity for opposition.

This brings me to the fourth concept: *prominence*. Individuals coordinate their stance by forming beliefs about the group which they assume to be commonly shared. The clue to the tacit character of coordination lies in this last clause: actors assume their inferences about the group to be commonly shared. They draw these inferences from events that are common knowledge. In the present case, these events are statements made in a public forum by one or several group members about their own action preference. The key claim is this: statements of this kind *indirectly* shed light on the group's preference when there is ground to believe that the author or authors of the statements make their own stance conditional on that of the group.

Why is prominence so crucial? If the author of the statement is anonymous—I use the feminine to designate this actor—group members have no clue for collectively assessing whether this actor might choose one or the other option depending on the proportion of her peers opting for one line of conduct. In other words, they have no clue for figuring out the value of her action thresholds. If, on the other hand, this actor is prominent, both conditions are no longer a priori problematic. This actor took a stand on multiple issues in the past, either because her group responsibilities compelled her to do so or because she is inclined to take a public stand. These statements generated attention. They had "resonance." They are the source of her prominence.

The more frequent and recent these public stands, the more likely her prominence. Prominence is an individual property that only exists through the beliefs of those who endorse it. A prominent actor enjoys salience in the eyes of her peers. These in turn know it. The record of this prominent actor's past public stands is part of the group's common knowledge. Group members establish her political profile from this record. In addition, they can reasonably believe that the conclusion they draw from this record regarding her present inclination is also widely shared. This last point answers the question. Prominence is crucial because it makes possible the disclosure of threshold values. This disclosure makes alignment cognitively possible.

5

At this point, to avoid any misunderstanding about the status of these theoretical claims, two possible objections need to be discussed. The discussion allows me to outline how historical research and conceptual abstraction, including the type of abstraction that can be transposed in formal terms, can be combined to further their own requirements. The first objection invokes the exceptional character of the case as a pretext to call into question the scope of the argument. In other words, the theory is primarily a theory of the case. Its scope is limited to the confines of the case. The second objection is based in the opposite view. Here the problem is the explanation of the case. In confining the analysis to the moment of decision, we forget about the context. I discuss each objection in turn and, in the process, specify the terms of the dialogue.

To the first objection (the theory is a theory of the case), my response is twofold. First, the empirical investigation unfolded throughout the following chapters probes two paradigmatic cases, not one, of collective alignment. Consider the decision by the National Assembly of the French Third Republic to transfer constitutional authority to Marshal Pétain in July 1940. On the afternoon of 10 July 1940, a great majority of deputies and senators—569 parliamentarians, about 85 percent of those who took part in the vote—endorsed a bill that vested the premier of the time, Marshal Pétain, with full powers, “not merely the full powers by which many 1930’s prime ministers had legislated by decree during crises, but explicit authorization to draft a new constitution” (Paxton 1972, 30).

This event is as unique and irreducibly singular as the constitutional devolution of March 1933. Pétain was premier since 17 June 1940. He had been appointed in the midst of a military disaster. With this vote French parliamentarians signed a blank check to him, legalizing their own political ousting and the political collapse of the Republic. The decision was, again, a collective abdication. The next day Pétain abolished the legislative power of the parliament, repealed the constitutional article stipulating that the president of the Republic is to be elected by the National Assembly, and adjourned the existent chambers *sine die*. Political leaders suspected of opposition were arrested two months later. Anti-Semitic decrees were enacted in October 1940. The Vichy regime soon committed itself to a policy of collaboration with Nazi Germany.

Interestingly, as chapters 3–5 outline, the vote of 10 July 1940 elicited explanations similar to those that historians and actors have proposed to account for the Reichstag decision of 23 March 1933: French parliamentarians were fearful of possible reprisals; they were mistaken about the political implications of the bill; and they were ideologically contaminated by an authoritarian zeitgeist that overshadowed the end of the 1930s. These explanations overlook

the significance of the event as a moment of initial decisions, and they fail to pay due attention to the actors’ uncertainty, their qualms and oscillations.

With the exception of the small clique that actively pushed for passage of the bill, the great majority of those who voted for the power transfer did not want a regime politically aligned with Nazi Germany. The crucial factor underlying the collective abdication of the French National Assembly on 10 July 1940 was not threats, blindness, or ideological propensities but the dynamic of expectation formation that took shape among parliamentarians in Vichy. French parliamentarians endorsed the power transfer when they realized that no one would oppose it. They rationalized their decision by portraying it as the only viable and acceptable course of action.

6

My second response to the objection that the theory is primarily a theory of the case relates to the substance of the theory. Although my empirical focus is on dramatic cases of abdication, the theory elaborated in this book is a theory of collective alignment. This theory applies to a broad class of collective situations and outcomes. The situations are ones in which individuals experience a behavioral dilemma which they assume is shared by others. Similarly, the theory of inferential alignment applies whenever this mutual interdependence translates into mutual uncertainty. The penultimate chapter (chapter 10) demonstrates that these situations are independent of institutional context and group configuration. The argument about processes of collective alignment is therefore not limited to formally defined groups. Nor is it restricted to the parliamentary setting. In this sense, the theory has no time and space. It stands on its own, and needs no empirical referent to set forth its claims and counterclaims.

Because my primary focus is on processes of alignment and their conditional factors, the theoretical framework elaborated in the following chapters provides analytical leads to investigate not only collective abdications but also cases that do not fit the coercion argument, that is, cases in which groups collectively decide to confront coercive pressures, in spite of all indications suggesting that the group will be crushed (e.g., the student uprising in Kwangju, South Korea, in May 1980). Additionally, since this theory of alignment is not conditional on specific group configurations and institutional contexts, it can shed light on abdications that did not have a formal sanction. The universe of investigation is any situation in which one or several groups confront the possibility of collective persecution and have to decide whether to endorse the prospect of abdication. As a result, the theory can account for the apparent willful consent to a dreadful fate.

Thus, this book takes as objects of investigation two historical instances of collective abdication: those at the Kroll Opera House in Berlin on 23 March 1933 and at the Grand Casino in Vichy on 10 July 1940. The framework is comparative, but the method is not. My unit of analysis is not the historical case, but the individual actors who partook in the collective decision. The primary focus is on the collective interactions that took place within the time and space referents constituting each event.

But why two events instead of one? And why these two events in particular? The first answer is: historical significance. This point deserves close attention. For now I state my claims in an apodictic fashion. The analytical and empirical underpinnings of these claims will become fully apparent once the inquiry has been completed. That is why I return to the issue in the concluding chapter (chapter 11).

In sanctioning the legality of a new system of political rule, the delegation of constitutional powers to Hitler on 23 March had two significant impacts. First, the legality of the power transfer crucially undermined the prospect of effectively mobilizing against a Nazi takeover of the state. The parliamentary decision of 23 March stated that Hitler now had the right to define the rules of the game, and there was no doubt that these rules would buttress the Nazis' political domination. Second, the parliamentary abdication of 23 March prompted a wave of rallying in support of the new rule. Since the transition was legal, one could expect groups that had always demonstrated their respect for constitutional legality to now acquiesce in the new rule, even though some, such as the German bishops, had opposed Nazism in the past on ideological grounds. Both effects demonstrate the gain in political legitimacy acquired by Hitler in the spring of 1933 and the Nazis' capacity to implement a totalitarian regime within a few months.

Similar observations apply to the political impact of the parliamentary decision of 10 July in Vichy. In the subsequent months no one seriously challenged Pétain's right to establish a regime of personal rule with a strong reactionary ideology. His constitutional mandate authorized him to do so. Political opposition on legal grounds was therefore excluded. Similarly, the decision to initiate a policy of state collaboration with Nazi Germany initially encountered passivity and acquiescence among the former political élite (Baruch 1997, 577–78). Again, people abode by these policy decisions under the assumption that since these decisions emanated from a duly invested ruling élite, they would receive widespread acceptance. The legality of the transition had a legitimizing effect.

The second motivation for an in-depth examination of these two events

is their paradigmatic status. The collective decisions of March 1933 and July 1940 lay bare in an exemplary fashion a problem—the problem of collective abdication—that has been overlooked in studies of democratic breakdowns and political transitions. These events are ideal-typical cases: they approximate pure cases of critical decisions in situations of collective and mutual uncertainty. Hence they provide us with a magnifying lens for examining the dynamic of collective interactions that are likely to emerge in such conjunctures. Transition processes are punctuated with confrontation moments of this kind, and—such is my claim—to understand the outcome of these transitions we need to understand the outcome of these confrontation moments.

This conclusion redirects our attention to instances of democratic collapse in which collective abdication was a significant aspect of the transition process. Consider the passing of the “Acerbo bill” by the Italian parliament on 20 April 1923 that granted Mussolini the right to amend the constitution and allowed him to legally take over the Italian state. Or consider the collapse of the Czech Republic in January 1948, or even the granting of full powers to de Gaulle in July 1958, which marked the end of the French Fourth Republic. In all these cases political challenge was intense and uncertainty rife among democrats. At some point, acquiescence and a willingness to compromise with the challenger got the upper hand. I hypothesize that the signals provided by prominent actors through their public behaviors were the key to consensus formation and political alignment.

The point is not confined to political breakdowns in the modern age. In July 1672, in a context of military disaster and popular unrest, the representative assembly of the Dutch Republic (the States-General) granted full powers to the Prince of Orange and endowed him with the title of military commander, or Stadholder (Geyl 1964, 128). William's appointment did not give him the equivalent of a Roman dictatorship: it was not meant to be a temporary arrangement motivated by military emergency. The appointment implied a transformation of “the structure of power” (Israel 1995, 802)—a reallocation of powers among groups competing for the control of the state. At the time of the transfer, the military situation was dire: the Dutch Republic was at war with France and England. The armies of Louis XIV occupied three of the seven provinces of the Republic. There is no doubt that the emergency loomed large in the republican representatives' decision. But it is also worth asking why the republican representatives endorsed the prospect of a state infused with a monarchical principle of sovereignty.

Nor is the argument confined to transitions from democracies to dictatorships. Several moments punctuated the process that led to the rapid demise of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989. At these critical junctures, the

members of the ruling *élite* faced an intractable choice: either reassert the primacy of socialist rule or open the door to a possible regime transformation (Pfaff 2006, chapter 7). The challenge was extreme and each option bore considerable risks. Again, if we follow the analysis developed here, we would expect the members of the ruling *élite* to have striven to overcome the strategic dilemma they faced by forming mutual beliefs about their future behaviors. An interesting question is the extent to which the public stances adopted by the state leadership influenced this process of belief formation.

8

There remains the issue of context. For the practice of historical research and the ethos of the discipline the issue is critical. Abstracting the event from its historical context is a crucial mistake. The discipline of history, as we are reminded by Goldthorpe (1991, 212), following E. P. Thompson, is “the discipline of context.” In narrowing the focus down to the actors’ experience of the decision process, am I breaching the ethos of the discipline?

But what is the “context”? Are we talking about diffused ideological beliefs, the legacy of past and current conflicts, the structure of social relations, or political institutions? Most often, we mean all of these bundled together. As a result, we do not mean much. Intuitively, the “context” refers to factors beyond the reach of individual actors, factors which define actors’ understanding of the realm of the possible and from which they derive schemas of interpretation, implicit or not, that help them to assess others’ behaviors as well as their own behavioral choices. The contextual quality of these factors lies in their collective significance. Actors get enmeshed in these beliefs and presuppositions often because they impute them to others. This collective makeup is essential to a shared sense of possibility and constraint.

This definition has methodological implications. Lurking in the back of the reference to the context is a call for a historical anthropology of collective representations that can capture the specificity of collective motives and beliefs. If we take this methodological imperative seriously, the only way to pin down the “context” is to examine how actors collectively define the situations they experience, which presuppositions they mobilize for this purpose, how they reconsider their beliefs if at all, and whether this subjective process affects their behavioral stances. I identify three realms of possible contextual factors inherited from the long run and the immediate circumstances: institutional constraints and organizational resources, the structure of political conflicts, and ideological beliefs.

To what extent do the institutional and organizational characteristics of the setting in which actors interact constrain their capacity for coordination? Do

patterns of cleavages, antagonisms, and alliances that have endured over time structure the way in which groups assess the tactical options available? Is there ground to believe that shared ideological categories shape actors’ political doxa to the point of determining which strategic options they deem thinkable? Institutions, conflicts, and ideology, broadly defined as contextual factors, are causally significant if they are motivationally relevant, that is, if they provide information and schemata of interpretation which individuals deem relevant to their dilemma and decision. Assessing this relevance requires examining actors in the process of making their decision. For this purpose I reconstitute actions, interactions, webs of subjective beliefs, and assess which beliefs were behaviorally of consequence.

The surprising observation emerging from this analysis is how little impact these different factors have on actors’ ultimate decisions. A pervasive sense of indeterminacy lingers throughout these meetings. This indeterminacy reflects actors’ mutual uncertainty. Those who go through this uncertainty *de facto* agree to make their choice conditional. As they realize that their peers have no firm preferences, they decide to leave their choice in abeyance until an informal consensus takes hold of it and decides for them. Mutual uncertainty thus prevails, independent of the organizational context. For as I outline in chapter 7, German and French parliamentarians confront their dilemma in significantly different institutional and organizational settings. Party delegations in the Reichstag are clearly defined and display strong behavioral cohesion. The parliamentary setting of the French Third Republic is made up of loosely defined affiliation groups.

These contrasting organizational and institutional contexts have different implications for patterns of interactions. Whereas the German delegates primarily met with the members of their own affiliation group, French parliamentarians were involved in out-group ties. As a result, the configuration of reference groups is different across these two events. For German parliamentarians, the reference group is the party delegation. For French parliamentarians, the Assembly as a whole emerges as a reference group “by default,” partly produced by the circumstances. Given this major difference in the organizational configuration of interpersonal ties, we would expect individuals in the more “structured” environment to rely more on the prospect of coordination and to be less subject to the mutual character of their uncertainty.

Nothing indicates that this was so. True, the German delegates met with this expectation in mind. Nonetheless, the sense of the dilemma overwhelmed them as the decision moment came closer and as they realized how much of their political ethos they would be giving away through their acquiescence. French parliamentarians for their part were at a loss to figure out whether co-

ordination would effectively take place given the organizational breakdown of their affiliation group. The scope of their uncertainty had less clear-cut boundaries. Still, it crucially undermined their resolution and motivated their wait-and-see stance. The broader observation suggested by this comparative insight is that the type of challenge imposed upon actors shapes how group members define and frame the situation beyond institutional and organizational factors (chapter 10).

9

This brings me to the issue of sources. The theory that I develop in this book encompasses three hypothetical scenarios: sequential alignment, local knowledge, and tacit coordination. We cannot differentiate these scenarios in light of their outcome. All three can in theory produce unanimity or quasi-unanimity. Thus the focus should be on the processes of decision making and on the behavioral indicators differentiating these processes. Sequential alignment prevails when actors react to group-level indicators that reveal levels of commitment. Alternatively, these actors rely on their local knowledge if they pay primary attention to the information conveyed by interpersonal contacts. They engage in tacit coordination when they relate to their peers indirectly, in the process of acknowledging the revealing quality of their statement.

To probe the empirical soundness of these different hypotheses, we need a kind of evidence documenting actors' subjective states as they make their decision. Only actors, those who were involved, can provide us with evidence of that kind. Consequently, the data basis that I constituted for the purpose of this inquiry incorporates multiple sources: (1) contemporary accounts whatever their format (diaries, letters, published articles, explanations of votes before an audience), (2) published memoirs, (3) unpublished accounts, (4) verbal testimonies before a jury or inquiry commission, and (5) written accounts requested by a jury or a commission. In addition, I draw on information provided by witnesses and informants who were in close contacts with those who took part in these decisions. Appendix A offers a synoptic overview of these sources. Depending on the group under consideration, the data bases of personal testimonies constituted for each case represent between 20 percent and 30 percent of the reference population.

These sources vary considerably in terms of format and length. Some are a few handwritten notes scribbled on a piece of paper. Others are letters, diaries, accounts and memoirs. The time of their production also differs widely: some were written at the time of the event, others a few hours afterward, still others months later. This heterogeneity can be a liability or a resource. It is a liability

if the sources are not comparable. It is a resource if it provides multiple points of entry to probe the empirical soundness of alternative hypotheses. Appendix A further elaborates this point. I draw on actors' accounts for different heuristic and demonstrative purposes, depending on their timing and formal characteristics. Contemporary accounts such as letters and diaries are very helpful to debunk *ex post* rationalizations. Accounts, whether retrospective or contemporary, that have a full-fledged narrative structure not only highlight fine-grained factual observations but also situate them in a chronological temporality that is critical to assessing a behavioral mode versus an inferential mode of alignment.

10

As the preceding remarks make clear, this book researches historical processes as much as it elaborates theoretical claims about decision making and collective interactions. To this end, it incorporates different levels of analysis and different interpretive idioms. Drawing on a range of analytical tools—formal, quantitative, and hermeneutic—applied to a variety of historical sources, I combine these interpretive idioms within and across individual chapters. This dialogue across genres is geared to greater analytical specificity for the purpose of investigating the complexity of the cases. In the process, both theory and history gain in intelligibility and leverage. The benefits derived from an immersion in complex cases through an engagement with theoretical claims abstract enough to lend themselves to formal formulations set the terms and requirements of this dialogue.

The specifics of historical cases compel formal theory to tackle research questions that initially fall outside its purview. Consider the issue of reference groups. As I document in chapter 7, actors bereft of a behavioral script gauge the extent of their mutual interdependence and their uncertainty as they interact through interpersonal contacts. The question then is how they construct their beliefs about the group given this awareness. This question calls for analyzing the relational configuration of reference groups and draws attention to the cognitive makeup of belief formation. These dimensions go beyond models of interactions cast in strategic terms. In this respect, an immersion in the maze of historical processes from the participants' point of view expands the realm of inquiry of decision theory.

A close scrutiny of the dynamics of collective processes that seeks to document the subjective and interactive dimensions of these processes—in the same way that ethnography seeks to document the dispositions of the subjects—contributes to refining theoretical explorations in another respect. The

close-up draws attention to conditional factors, at the level of groups and institutions. In the present instance it is because the circumstances of the vote were dramatic that they offer a particularly vivid image of how individuals deal with a decision-making problem characterized by choice interdependence and high potential costs. The critical character of the decision provides a magnifying lens through which to explore the factors conditioning different "logics of the situation" (Popper 1961, 149) when the members of a group experience mutual uncertainty.

Conversely, formal theory enhances our historical understanding of collective processes by furthering the search for specificity. Here the input is twofold. For one thing, the formal lenses of decision theory help interrogate broad explanatory categories which we often use out of convenience, from a synoptic and stylized point of view, because their meaning seems quite obvious. Ideology and coercion are prime examples (chapters 3 and 5). In inviting us to examine how these categories translate in terms of actors' dispositions, schemes of representation, and motivations, formal theory hones our attention to the "noise" of history, these apparent "small" details that actually can carry considerable analytical weight and historical significance. In addition, the focus on decision parameters restores the range of actors' subjective orientations toward their future. I reconstruct the temporality of these subjective orientations to elucidate the dynamics of collective abdication in two subsequent chapters (chapters 8 and 9).

Formal modeling serves a second methodological purpose. To reconstruct an actor's subjective orientations, I use a type of evidence produced by the actor herself (memoirs, letters, personal testimonies, narrative accounts), and as a result bound to remain fragmentary, sometimes contradictory, or truncated. One way to deal with this problem is to employ the historian's critical method: examine the evidence in the same way a judge probes the exhibits of a case, juxtaposes testimonies one against the other, situates their authors, and identifies possible motives for falsification. Another way to confront the incomplete character of this evidence is to relate it to formal insights about possible logics of action.

Insights developed deductively provide not only antidotes to the historicist bias inherent to any retrospective analysis but also indications about which bits of information to seek. They provide a grid of reading which can help uncover clues that go unnoticed in a literal reading, clues which often actors provide incidentally, in passing, without being aware of their causal significance. As I will show throughout this inquiry and as I point out in Appendix A, personal statements say much more than their authors assume.

11

The following chapters accordingly call into question a strict division between theory and empirics. Each tackles an analytical issue and weaves empirical observations. Chapter 1 provides a chronological account from afar and poses the problem of historical significance. Probing the legal architecture of the bills submitted to the German and French parliaments, chapter 2 defines the problem of abdication. These two chapters set the stage. A group of actors abdicates when these actors collectively relinquish their capacity to defend themselves and formally acknowledge this incapacity. In explicitly depriving themselves of the right of self-defense, these actors legitimize their future subservience.

Part II of the book discusses three commonsensical explanations of collective subservience—explanations that relate collective abdications to either the fear of retaliation, misjudgment, or ideological contamination. Showing that these prevailing explanations are either incomplete or misleading, the analysis calls for greater specificity. The first explanation presumes that credible threats and, more broadly, coercive pressures necessarily produce subservience. Consequently, this interpretation cannot account for collective resistance in the face of credible threats of persecution (chapter 3). The explanation, that abdication is based in misjudgment, takes actors' most common retrospective justification at face value—they had not fully realized what the stakes were—thereby obfuscating the extent to which the actors experienced their decision as a dilemma *at the time of the decision* (chapter 4). As for the ideological collusion explanation, it obfuscates the extent to which actors realize that in abdicating they relinquish basic values (chapter 5).

Underlying these three interpretations is a similar conception of historical causality—one that shares some of the basic postulates of what Abbott (1988, 169) has termed the "general linear model": a conception of the social world as made up of broad causal entities, the assumption that big events can only be produced by big causes and the absence of sequence effects. The starting point is a contextual variable: the balance of power between two or several groups (coercion), collectively shared misrepresentations (miscalculation), or pervasive ideological affinities (ideological collusion). This variable summarizes the context and affects the group as a whole, thereby producing individual propensities to choose one option or the other. Typical in this regard is the coercion argument. Pressures and intimidation "act" on people in the same way an external force would act on a material object. Fear is the outcome. It comes to dominate the group and determine collective behavior. In this framework, individual actions are the translation of broad exogenous factors.

The argument developed in parts III and IV builds on and expands this

critique. In part III, I lay out an explanatory framework accounting for both acquiescence *and* opposition (chapter 6), and I probe the empirical soundness of the behavioral alignment hypothesis (chapter 7). Chapter 6 presents the core hypotheses of the theory in light of the empirical observations presented so far. This chapter specifies the general class of collective decisions (of which the constitutional challenges of March 1933 and July 1940 are two specific instances), presents the notion of individual threshold, conceptualizes the notion of reference group, distinguishes between the three types of alignment processes that I outlined above (sequential alignment, local knowledge, tacit coordination), and defines prominence.

The class of decision that I am considering has two main features. First, the decision is risky. Individuals face options the consequences of which can be extremely costly. Second, whichever option is chosen, isolation is the worst possible outcome. This means that publicly disclosing one's preferences is also risky. In this situation the members of the group under challenge face imperfect information and, to the extent that they remain trapped by it, experience uncertainty. Given the terms of the challenge, they seek to overcome their uncertainty by aligning their line of conduct with that of their peers. I elaborate the distinction between behavioral (i.e. sequential) mechanisms of alignment and inferential ones (i.e. local knowledge and tacit coordination). For this purpose I draw on the concepts of reference groups and individual thresholds. One contribution of this analysis is to highlight the factors conditioning the likelihood of each process.

Chapter 7 examines the extent of sequential alignment and raises the issue of the relevant reference group for making this assessment. I show that when German and French parliamentarians confronted their decision, they referred their stance not to their constituents but to those whom they identified as their parliamentary peers. In Berlin the parliamentarians' reference group was the members of their party delegation. In Vichy parliamentary delegations collapsed from an organizational point of view and parliament as a whole became the reference group. The empirical examination allows me to consider whether in the process of interacting with one another, actors converged on a similar assessment of the situation. The upshot of this analysis is paradoxical in light of the sequential alignment argument: interpersonal interactions, far from assuaging actors' qualms and hesitations, led them to realize the mutual character of their uncertainty.

Part IV narrows the focus down on inferential mechanisms. Inquiring into the twists and turns of actors' subjective assessments, I delve into the temporality of the interactive process. Chapter 8 documents the emergence of a collective stance in favor of acquiescence among the Center party parliamentary

delegates. Two factual observations stand out in this account. First, the context of the delegation meetings in Berlin brought these actors' sense of dilemma to the fore. Second, the Center party delegates resolved their mutual uncertainty in light of the behavioral cues provided by their most prominent peers. Chapter 9 lays bare widespread collective oscillations among French parliamentarians in Vichy and traces these oscillations back to the public statements of highly visible members of parliament.

Part V addresses the issues of scope and significance. In chapter 10 I examine the extent to which the theory of collective alignment discussed in this book is indebted to the specifics of the two paradigmatic cases providing the empirical leads. I show that the peculiar characteristics of these events magnify processes we might otherwise overlook, and that they help us further our understanding of preference instability and ambivalence. Chapter 11 reconsiders the issue of historical significance from the broader point of view of the theory of collective alignment. I expand the scope of the argument by conceptualizing these events as public statements delivered by a collective actor in a situation in which groups have to decide which line of conduct they should adopt vis-à-vis the powers that be. The event is significant because as a public statement, it elicits shared expectations about acquiescence.

The primary focus of these chapters is on rank-and-file group members. Actors who enjoy prominence, as I define the term in chapter 6, face strategic constraints different from those of their rank-and-file colleagues as a result of their prominent status. Explaining their stance requires additional hypotheses. In terms of length, analytical qualifications, and evidence, the discussion of these hypotheses is beyond the scope of this book. As a result, this analysis will be the subject of a subsequent inquiry.

A brief note on organization and design: in the course of this inquiry, I go back to the same facts and events several times, each time with a different lens in hand. This design—which departs from the convention of narrative exposition and, in this respect, is peculiar—translates in formal terms the interdisciplinary character of this inquiry. It also reflects the requirements set by the blending of different research idioms, and acknowledges the complexity of its object. As the previous considerations make clear, I put different accounts of abdication to the test. These accounts belong to different disciplinary genres. They often differ with regard to the factual observations deemed worthy of analytical attention. They also differ in terms of scales. The greater the scope, the greater the scale: single claims bundle many processes and actors at once. Hence the greater the scope, the lower the magnifying effect of the lens used to this effect. Conversely, the lower the scope, the greater the visibility.

This explains why I adopt different lenses depending on which explanation

I put to the test. I adjust the level of specificity, and hence the lens, to the type of argument being considered. I start with the least magnifying lens of factual narrative in terms of regime breakdown. I end with the most magnifying lens in identifying interactions and subjective states. Similarly, I document interactive processes from different angles, combining a quantitative assessment with a phenomenological inquiry. In procedural terms, both approaches stand far apart. Most often they defiantly look at each. In the present case, thick descriptions and quantitative analyses converge on the same assessment and outline the significance of tacit coordination.