

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 272

“The Vision of Fascism”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

[D]isagreement is a sign of diversity. Ur-Fascism grows up and seeks for consensus by exploiting and exacerbating the natural fear of difference. The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is an appeal against the intruders. Thus Ur-Fascism is racist by definition. . .

Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology, insofar as it is fundamentally aristocratic, and aristocratic and militaristic elitism cruelly implies contempt for the weak. Ur-Fascism can only advocate a popular elitism. Every citizen belongs to the best people of the world, the members of the party are the best among the citizens, every citizen can (or ought to) become a member of the party.

Umberto Eco, in his 1995 essay “Ur-Fascism.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 272. The Vision of Fascism.

Last week, we took a look at the roots of fascism. We traced the origins of fascism and examined in what circumstances fascism appears. In summary, fascism is a mass movement. It comes out of democracy, and specifically out of a broad-based democracy in which the working classes can vote.

I also read a quote from Friedrich Engels, in which he suggested that broadening the voting franchise to allow more workers to vote would inevitably lead to socialism because these newly enfranchised voters obviously would vote for the only political party committed to their interests, *i.e.*, the socialists.

With the benefit of hindsight, you and I know this is not how it turned out. What happened instead was the appearance of a new political ideology, a new movement, a new party, that competed with the socialists for that mass working-class vote. Fascism.

Engels expected that the twentieth century would see a democratic constitutional movement toward socialism. The defenders of capitalism would be the ones to resort to violence. He saw this as a delightful historical irony: the socialists were becoming the party of law and democracy, forcing the capitalists to become the revolutionaries.

One way of looking at this, and indeed a view many leftists have adopted, is that the capitalists did indeed embrace revolutionary violence in order to prevent the triumph of socialism and that capitalist-driven violent revolutionary movement is what we call fascism.

Socialists are fond of blaming the world's evils on those infinitely resourceful, infinitely dastardly capitalists. I think it's more helpful to see fascism as arising naturally out of the political, social, and economic circumstances of the early twentieth century, as we discussed last week. This week, I want to look at a different question: where does the fascist ideology come from and why does it have this working-class appeal that makes it such a formidable competitor to socialism?

Fascism resembles socialism in some ways. National socialism adopts the very word socialism as part of its name. In our time, this inspires ignorant people to suggest that national socialism and socialism are one and the same thing. This is akin to suggesting that fireflies must be made out of fire, since it's right there in the name.

The connection fascism has to socialism is that, like socialism, it seeks to appeal to the broad masses of ordinary people. It also resembles socialism in that it identifies the same symptom; that is, it tells ordinary people that they have less wealth and less happiness than they deserve, and that this lamentable state of affairs is caused by someone else, someone who is deliberately using unjust and underhanded means to deprive ordinary people of what is rightfully theirs.

That's the message, and be it socialism or fascism, the message is more likely to be heard and taken seriously at a time of political and economic distress, when large numbers of people are already primed to believe that the existing social, political, and economic order is stacked against them.

Where socialism and fascism part ways, however, is both in their explanation for *why*: why the masses of ordinary people aren't getting all they deserve and why they deserve better, and also in the *who*. Who is the culprit taking it away from them? Let's examine what each ideology has to say:

Why do socialists say that the broad masses of ordinary working people deserve better than they're getting? Their answer is this: working people are the ones actually making the products

and performing the services that keep society going. In the class struggle, the socialist supports the working class, because the working class are the people who are actually making things and doing things. They produce all the good things in life that people of all classes enjoy. They should be enjoying rewards commensurate with the value of what they contribute. But they don't. And that's a problem.

So why aren't workers getting what they deserve? They aren't getting it because the capitalists are siphoning off for themselves wealth that ought to be going to the workers. In the socialist analysis, all the world's ills are caused by capitalists. They encourage poverty and oppression and they support war, because all these things help enrich the capitalists, while keeping the workers under capitalist control.

Fascism's explanation for the state of things is very different. It is based on an ethno-nationalist vision. While socialism analyzes history through the lens of class conflict, fascism analyzes history through the lens of ethnic conflict. Fascism sees history as a struggle among different ethnic groups, and applies a sort of Darwinian analysis, as if each ethnic group was a different species and we were all in competition for the resources of the planet.

In the class struggle, the socialist sees supporting the working class as a moral imperative. The socialist also believes that the eventual triumph of the working class is inevitable. The fascist supports a particular ethnic group—"our" ethnic group—for similar reasons. The moral argument is that "our" people are inherently more worthy than other people, because "our" people are more upright, more moral, more just. We are more intelligent, more faithful, and more diligent. We are also more productive. We work harder and we work better. We are more talented, and we are more capable.

We have talked about eugenics and the nature versus nurture debate in this podcast, especially in episode 248. Fascism claims that "our" people are better people in both dimensions. We are better nurtured because we were raised in our culture and with our values, which are superior to those of other people. But fascists don't stop there; they also embrace eugenics and other pseudo-scientific ideas to claim that "our" people are also by their birth, by their ancestry, and by their genetic heritage, superior human beings. "We" should be training the other nations of the world in our superior values and uplifting the backward. "We" should be running the planet. This is not only our destiny, it is our right, as "we" are the superior specimens of the human race.

So why aren't "we" already running everything, if "we" are better than everyone else? Shouldn't "we" be out-competing everyone? Doesn't that make "our" triumph inevitable? Well, says the fascist, yes and no.

The fascist says that "we" aren't getting "our" due because "they" are cheating us. This resembles the socialist diagnosis, but whereas the socialist defines "we" and "they" by class, workers and capitalists, the fascist defines them by ethnicity. "We" are the people of our nation, though not necessarily *all* the people of our nation, only those of us of the ruling ethnic group.

“They” are the people of other nations, working to undermine us. They are aided in this effort by minority ethnic groups and traitors within our own nation, who willingly ally with our enemies to undermine us and keep us from the destiny meant for us.

Fascists cite the history of their own nation and their own ethnic group as proof that they are a people apart: a people greater, smarter, harder-working, and more accomplished than their neighbors. These fascist histories blend real historical facts with convenient interpretations and outright myth-making to construct a narrative about how “our” people have always been the best and the brightest representatives of the human race. For example, the Italian fascists used the Roman Empire as a handy historical reference point. Hey, we once ruled the world. Hard to argue with that one.

History forced the Nazis to be a little more creative in their pseudo-history, because Germany was a much younger country. So they embraced the pseudo-scientific anthropology of Aryanism. I don’t want to delve too deeply into Aryanism because a) it’s totally bogus and b) despite being totally bogus, it’s still popular with fascists even today and I don’t want to give it any more oxygen than I have to. In fact, I bet many of my listeners are already familiar with the basic principles of Aryanism. I may decide to dig a little deeper into Nazi ideology in a future episode. Or not. We’ll see.

We touched on this sort of scientific racism a bit in episode 248, when I talked about the eugenics movement and books like *The Passing of the Great Race* by the American Madison Grant, which held that the so-called “Nordics,” the people of northern Europe, were superior to other kinds of human beings and were responsible for all the great human accomplishments. I also mentioned that Adolph Hitler personally thanked Grant for writing it.

This idea was not unique to the United States. One of the earliest examples of Aryanism was the 1853 *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, by a French aristocrat named Arthur de Gobineau. He and his followers argued that white northern Europeans were the only truly civilized race on the planet, that they had spread widely throughout Europe and Asia and were responsible for ancient glories like the Roman Empire and classical India, though those glorious kingdoms of old eventually fell because the Aryans ruling them intermarried with the local people, leading to degradation of the race.

De Gobineau was a French Royalist who was primarily interested in denouncing republicanism and arguing for a restoration of the French monarchy, but you shouldn’t be surprised to learn that his essay generated interest in places like Britain and Germany, the homelands of the people he was exalting as the only truly civilized humans, and in the United States, a country where a substantial portion of the population—and most of the ruling class—trace their roots to northern Europe.

There is a grain of truth in this history. The people everyone from de Gobineau to Hitler called Aryans are more or less the people we today call Indo-Europeans. The word Aryan is related to

the words Iran and Iranian, as in Persia. Archaeology, anthropology, and philology of the time were investigating the Indo-Europeans, a prehistoric ethnic group that spread widely across Europe and Asia. In our time, the consensus is that these people probably originated in the steppes north of the Black Sea, in the area we today call Ukraine.

But Aryanism disregards all that and insists the Indo-Europeans of old were northern Europeans; that they were tall, blond, and blue-eyed. Aryanist researchers took cranial measurements of northern Europeans and compared them to people of other ethnic backgrounds, which supposedly showed northern Europeans had bigger brains that were especially well developed for abstract thinking and leadership.

Anyway, you get the idea. I'm sorry to say that right now, today, as I record this episode, more than 75 years after the Nazi regime was crushed and all this ridiculous nonsense supposedly fell into complete disrepute, it is still the dogma of a small and *very* disturbed minority, who have managed to keep these ideas well enough known that I'd bet most of you listening have some familiarity with them, even though you don't accept them as true.

I wish it would fall completely down the memory hole and be forgotten, along with other pseudo-sciences like phrenology or alchemy, but unlike alchemy, Aryanism has the advantage of telling certain people that they are better than everyone else, a message that will always be popular with, you know, certain people.

So to summarize, then, the fascist mythology comes in three parts.

Part one: Our people are the best and smartest people in the world. You can see this in our history, which clearly demonstrates our abilities and shows it is our destiny to lead the lesser peoples of the Earth. We are the guardians of civilization.

Part two: But we are not the great nation we were meant to be. Our nation and our people are in decline, the result of an insidious effort by lesser nations to weaken and control us.

From these two propositions inevitably flows part three: only by embracing fascist principles and fascist leadership can we defeat the sinister forces arrayed against us and become once again the great and mighty nation we were always meant to be.

That's the essence of the fascist message. We already looked at the first part, the pseudo-history of how our people have always been the greatest in the world. I'll defer the third part, and the question of how a fascist movement and a fascist government actually operate in practice, until next week.

For the rest of today's episode, I want to focus on the second part of the fascist myth: that our nation and people are weak, that we have lost our past glory, and that this is the result of insidious forces working to undermine us.

[music: Sousa, "Bullets and Bayonets"]

Let us begin with the question I already posed: if our nation is the smartest and strongest and best, why are we not already running the world, or at least, well on our way to world dominance?

Fascism is not an ideology for the content. It does not emerge during good times and tell "our" people that everything is going great, nothing to worry about, clap yourselves on the back. Fascism is aimed at the unhappy, the discontented, the angry. It emerges when times are bad. And times were really bad during the Great Depression. Fascism tells a more complicated story than socialism, with its emphasis on the one-way ascendance of the working class. Fascism tells us that "our" people used to be great, we *were* ascending, but our rise has been interrupted. We have been weakened by our sneaky enemies, and only by embracing fascism can we shake off that weakness, defeat those enemies, and claim our rightful role as the world's leading nation.

So let's consider why and how "our" nation became weakened.

National socialism, *per se*, takes the socialist framework of class struggle and applies it to national struggle. Where a socialist would say, our class, the working class, the proletariat, is being victimized by the capitalists and the aristocrats and the imperialists, a fascist substitutes the claim that our nation is the *nation* that produces everything of value—in this case, not necessarily limited to material production, but also in the sense that our nation is the font of culture, civilization, and virtue—our nation is being victimized by hostile foreigners, who rob us of what is naturally ours, in the same way a socialist would accuse the capitalists of using underhanded means to rob the working class of what is naturally theirs.

Why do these foreigners do it? They do it because they are fully aware of how great "our" nation is and they fear us and our destiny. How do these foreigners get away with it, if our people are superior people? They use underhanded means. They conceal their motivations. They mislead us as to their intentions. They tempt our people into corruption, indolence, and decadence.

Who are these awful people, who do these terrible things? At the top of every fascist's list are the socialists, the Communists, the Bolsheviks. Anti-socialism is a key component of fascist ideology, as it is of fascist political tactics, since the fascists are competing for the support of the same people the socialists are campaigning to. You'll recall how Mussolini, an ex-socialist, led a fascist movement that fought the communists in the streets. The Nazis did the same. When Hitler and the Nazi Party came to power in Germany and opened up their first concentration camps, the first people sent to those camps were the Communists and the socialists.

Back in the Jazz Age, when the fascists of Italy and Germany pointed to the Soviet Union and said, "The Communists are trying to destroy our society," the Communists in Moscow replied, in effect, "We sure are." There was a whole agency in Moscow, Comintern, dedicated to spreading Communism and revolution to other countries. And in Italy and Germany there were Communist political parties that were inspired, often outright led, by Moscow. Internationalism is a key

element of socialist ideology, which teaches that you have more in common with members of your own class in other countries than you do with people in your own country of other classes.

Thus, leftist ideology plays right into the hands of the fascists. The Communists and the socialists, by their own admission, are more loyal to foreigners than to their own country. Socialism is just an elaborate justification for treason. Some of our ordinary citizens may be honest dupes, but the leadership of the leftist parties know perfectly well what they are doing. They are helping foreigners bring down our country. They are traitors.

In socialism, internationalism is a virtue; in fascism, it is the ultimate crime.

In this model of foreign enemies and foreign ethnic groups who plan to undermine “our” country, these external enemies are actively aided and abetted by collaborators within our own country, whose first loyalty is not to “us,” but to “them.” The list of our domestic enemies begins with socialists, but doesn’t end there. The second group of collaborators, the enemies within our own nation, is typically immigrants. Immigrants are by definition people of a foreign background who live among us, so they are easy enough to demonize by accusing them of being more loyal to the country from which they came than “our” country in which “they” now live.

After immigrants come those who were born in “our” country but are not members of “our” ethnic group. To a fascist, these people, perhaps even more so than immigrants, are a threat. These are people born among us, who could be like us if they chose, but have deliberately and consciously rejected our identity, as have members of our ethnic group who have chosen to intermarry with them, which fascists see as an attack on our national eugenics.

In the early days of Italian fascism, these people were the Croatians and other South Slavic peoples who inhabited Trieste and the towns on the Dalmatian coast that Italy claimed after the war. Remember when I described Italian police confronting Slavic schoolchildren on field trips and forcing them to say “*Viva Italia!*” or else be beaten?

In Germany, ethnic minorities like Poles and Czechs filled this role, as did the children left behind by French and other troops after their occupations of western Germany. Fascism is always opposed to intermarriage between “our” people and “other” people out of eugenics concerns. Such marriages weaken “our race.” This argument goes all the way back to Arthur de Gobineau.

And then there are Jewish people.

I talked at length about anti-Semitism in Europe in episode 8, where I described the Dreyfus Affair. That was the beginning of the century. In those days, anti-Semitism was present everywhere in Europe. I suggested that if you went back in time to the early years of the century and told someone that in decades to come one European country in particular would erupt into

horrific anti-Semitism, that person would likely guess that the country you were referring to was France, or perhaps Russia.

This is not to say that anti-Semitism was unheard of in Germany, even then, and of course in our time, anti-Semitism is most closely associated with the Nazi Party. I described in episode 8 the plight of Jewish people in Europe, often regarded as foreigners in the land of their birth. Given fascism's innate suspicion of ethnic minorities and foreigners, it seems inevitable that the fascists would categorize Jewish people as yet another minority group of questionable loyalty. Anti-Semitism is a common, even typical, feature of fascist movements everywhere, even in countries that have only a small Jewish population. Nevertheless, I should point out that fascist movements are not always anti-Semitic. The Italian Fascists were not notably so until the late 1930s, when Mussolini began cozying up to the regime in Berlin. Mussolini, I should note, had a Jewish mistress.

But there is more to fascist anti-Semitism than merely identifying Jewish people as a disloyal ethnic minority. You also have to consider fascism's hostility to liberal democracy.

Fascist political movements thrive in liberal democracies suffering deadlock. When multiparty systems become divided and the parties bicker among themselves, when the nation is in crisis and the democratic process seems unable to deliver anything more than endless argument even as the nation disintegrates, here is the environment when fascism's critique of national weakness gains traction. The fascists take aim squarely at the democratic process and denounce it as something that weakens our great nation and holds it back from achieving its destined greatness.

And it is in times of democratic division and unending debate that the fascist call for direct action is most seductive. I will point out to you that in the only two examples we have of fascist movements that achieved political control over their home country—the Fascists in Italy and the Nazis in Germany—the fascists took power from a democratic government. They did not employ violent revolution to overthrow the old government, the way the Bolsheviks did. Mussolini and Hitler each came into office through a legal, democratic process.

But fascism's relationship to liberal capitalism is a more complicated story. This is where national socialism overlaps with actual socialism to a degree. The national socialist sees nation, not class, as the defining conflict, but both the Italian Fascists and the German Nazis attacked the leaders of international banking and finance—the “plutocrats” if you will—as oppressors of the Italian and German people.

It's worth taking a moment to unpack that. The great world centers of banking and finance were London, in the United Kingdom, and New York City, in the United States. The UK and the US were also two of the most powerful nations in the world and leaders in the alliance that defeated Germany in the Great War. Italy was another member of that same alliance, but after the war, the UK and the US opposed Italy's territorial claims, producing what the Fascists called a “mutilated victory.” Fascists in Italy and Germany therefore argued that the plutocrats in London and New

York were behind the war against Germany and the mutilation of Italy's brilliant victory. This fit in easily to the fascist narrative of how "our" nation is destined to be the greatest in the world, but is being held back by lesser nations who fear "our" greatness.

But the fascists also wove in a pseudo-socialist argument that proposes that "our" people are harder working and more productive—the world's working class, if you will—but "our" productivity is being held in check by the devious financial manipulations of the plutocrats in London and New York. With the Great Depression seemingly coming out of nowhere and savaging the economies of Europe, each day's newspaper seemed to corroborate the fascist claim.

These charges of international plutocrats undermining "our" national greatness also intersect with fascist anti-Semitism. In Europe, Jewish people have been associated with merchants, trade, and money lending since the Middle Ages. And we've already discussed the appearance of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This was a document created by the Imperial Russian secret police which purported to be minutes of secret meetings of international Jewish leaders in furtherance of a plot to take over the world. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were first published in English in the UK and the US just after the Great War, and were promoted by anti-Semites in those countries, notably Henry Ford in the United States, despite an exposé in *The Times of London* in 1921 that demonstrated the document was a forgery, and a plagiarized forgery at that.

Members of the famous Rothschild family, a Jewish family originally from Frankfurt, owned banks in a number of European countries at the time, as indeed they do today. Collectively, the family was once one of the wealthiest in the world. A Rothschild owned a bank in Paris, and the British Rothschilds operated one of the most important banks in the City of London. A Rothschild was elevated to the British peerage in 1847, and his descendants have held the title Baron Rothschild ever since. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 was addressed to Baron Rothschild, who was active in the British Zionist Federation.

Now, the Rothschild bank in London is an important bank, but it's just one bank in a city famous for its financial institutions. But if you are an anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist, there's enough material here for you to weave a story of how secretly influential the Rothschilds are over British government policy. You could point to the Balfour Declaration as evidence the British Cabinet works to please the Rothschilds. You could point to the fact that another branch of the family owns a bank in Paris.

Now add in the Great War and the Treaty of Versailles and the reparations payments the British and French are demanding, along with the Great Depression, which seemed to come out of nowhere and wreck the German economy, wrap it all up in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and you can devise a monster of a conspiracy story about how everything bad that's happened to Germany since 1914 was a Jewish plot.

Oh, there's also Wall Street in New York City. New York was by this time noted for its substantial Jewish population, so there you go. In fact, the banking and financial industries in New York of the 1920s and 1930s had very little Jewish participation. Please note that of the big names in US banking and business we've talked about, none of them are Jewish. Not Andrew Mellon or J.P. Morgan, or John D. Rockefeller or Andrew Carnegie or Henry Ford. But since when do anti-Semites let facts get in the way of a good conspiracy story?

And even this far, as elaborate as this tale of Jewish plots has become, we are only halfway through the story; the other half is about how the Bolshevik movement and the October Revolution were also Jewish plots. I've touched on this before as well. Jewish people were prominent among the Bolsheviks, Leon Trotsky most of all. Given the oppression of Jewish people in the old Russian Empire, no one should be surprised to learn there were Jewish people in the Empire who wanted to bring it down, or that they would seek out left-wing socialist political movements that emphasized class unity over ethnic difference. Still, to suggest that Bolshevism was a Jewish movement is nonsense. Lenin was not Jewish. Stalin was not Jewish. Neither were Zinoviev or Kamenev. You would be hard pressed to name an important Bolshevik who was Jewish, other than Trotsky.

A lot of the blame for this false idea about the origins of Bolshevism has to be laid upon the White leadership of the Russian Civil War. They promoted this idea, along with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, as part of their propaganda war against the Reds. After the Whites lost the war, many of them fled to Germany, France, and the United States, and they brought their anti-Semitic propaganda along with them.

This idea that Bolshevism was a Jewish movement remains very much alive even in our time. As recently as 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that the first Soviet government was 80% Jewish, which is brazen nonsense.

But the Nazis win the prize as the most brazen, because they stitched together these mutually exclusive narratives of Jewish plutocrats in the West and Jewish Bolsheviks in the East into a grand unified conspiracy theory of a plot to bring down Germany, and they successfully sold this idea, in the face of the obvious truth that bankers and Bolsheviks hate each other's guts. But that just proves how clever the enemy is, you see.

To understand how they were able to sell this idea, you have to look at the world as a German saw it in, say 1932. Eighteen years ago, the war began, and from 1914 to 1918, the German people were regularly being told that victory was near, right up until the final weeks when it all came crashing down. What happened? The Nazi claim that Germany was undone from within by socialists and Communists rang true to many patriots, especially when you also remember the post-war battles between the Army and the left. At Versailles, the Western powers forced Germany to give up colonies abroad and territory at home.

And the reparations, the reparations that have been front-page news in Germany for over a decade now. The claim that Western reparations demands were responsible for German economic woes, the inflation of the Twenties and the depression of the Thirties, doesn't hold up to close examination, but it was tempting to believe.

By 1932, the great Western democracies—France, Britain, and the United States—were mired in the Great Depression and in domestic political quarrels over who was to blame and what to do about it. These problems exactly mirrored the fascist critique of modern liberal democracy. On the political side, democracies couldn't handle crisis. When an emergency came, they fell apart into endless squabbles between different political factions, just like the Weimar Republic. On the economic side, liberal capitalism seemed to have sunken into a permanent state of stagnation and high unemployment. The United States, the economy that had soared the highest, also crashed the hardest and it was showing no sign of recovery.

Meanwhile, over in the East, the Soviet Union was strengthening rapidly under Stalin's Five-Year Plans. Economic output was growing as rapidly in the USSR as it was shrinking in the USA. The Communists were claiming they were the future. They might even be right, but the price of world Communism is internationalism and the destruction of Germany and Germany's unique values.

In this context, fascism successfully presented itself as a Third Way. Its emphasis on central leadership and unity of national purpose allowed fascists to take decisive action while democrats bickered, in a manner similar to what was happening in the Soviet Union, but its emphasis on German national identity and on preserving the traditional values that made Germany great offered an appealing alternative to Communism, with its bland, leveling internationalism.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Abel and James and Edward for their kind donations, and thank you to Sunnysideup for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Abel and James and Edward and Sunnysideup help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

The podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. Sometimes it's my own work, sometimes it's licensed, but many times, the music you hear here is free and downloadable. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

And I hope you'll join me news week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we conclude our examination of fascism. We've looked at its roots, we've looked at its ideology,

now let's consider how a fascist government operates in practice. The Anatomy of Fascism, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In our time, much of the political debate revolves around the proper level of government involvement in the economy, with the political left arguing for more intervention and the political right arguing for a more *laissez-faire* approach, and you see in these debates partisans on both sides each eager to accuse the other of being the modern version of fascism.

So who is right? Is fascism pro-regulation or is it *laissez-faire*?

The truth is, fascism is neither. Fascism is not particularly interested in economic policy. Neither Mussolini nor Hitler was knowledgeable about, or cared much about, economic questions, although both of them liked to claim their policies brought about economic revival.

Fascism is much more about ethnic competition than economic competition. Fascists don't mind big business, as long as it's "our" big business, and not someone else's. Remember when someone asked Hitler if he would nationalize the large German manufacturers and he asked, "Do you think I'm crazy?"

On the other hand, the Nazis didn't mind seizing Jewish property or barring Jewish people from certain businesses and professions. That's certainly intervention in the economy! They were also okay with labor unions, as long as they were Party labor unions, and they were perfectly willing to dictate the terms of labor contracts between unions and management.

It is best to think of the fascists as economic pragmatists, willing to pursue whatever economic policy they believed supported their larger goals. But it is certainly true that the fascists were staunch enemies of the political left, of socialists and Communists. For this reason, Italian and German capitalists, landowners, and aristocrats were in their attitude toward the fascist movements at least lukewarm, and often quite supportive. To them, a fascist government was not ideal, but it was something they could live with. Hey, at least it keeps the socialists under control, am I right?

With regard to the wealthy and powerful in Italy and Germany of this time, it is often said that they made a devil's bargain in embracing the fascists, a deal that led to their own destruction. It makes for a comforting morality tale, but the truth is more complicated: the wealthy and powerful in Italy and Germany lived quite well under fascism, and they didn't have many regrets, at least not until the bombs began to fall.

[music: Closing Theme]