

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 273

### “The Anatomy of Fascism”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Ur-Fascism is still around us, sometimes in plainclothes. It would be so much easier for us, if there appeared on the scene somebody saying “I want to re-open Auschwitz, I want the Blackshirts to parade again in the Italian squares.” Life is not that simple. Ur-Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises. Our duty is to uncover it and point the finger at any of its new instances — every day and in every part of the world.

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

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 273. The Anatomy of Fascism.

In the first two episodes of this series, we examined the social and political origins of fascism and the ideology of fascism. Today, in the third and final episode in this series, I want to talk about how fascism operates in government.

Fascist movements emerged in a number of countries during the 1920s and 1930s, even the three major Western democracies: France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The fascist movements in those countries were never able to secure sufficiently broad support to make them serious competitors in the political process, although you could imagine counterfactuals in which a fascist movement gained enough traction to make a serious bid for power in any one of them, and indeed some writers have done exactly that. For example, you have Sinclair Lewis’ 1935 novel, *It Can’t Happen Here*, and more recently, Philip Roth’s 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*, among others.

Sinclair Lewis wrote his book to make an overt political point, a rebuttal of the argument stated ironically in the title, “It can’t happen here,” which was a comforting claim commonly made in the United States of the time. Comforting, but dangerous, as there is nothing about fascism that makes it unique to any particular nation or culture.

That being said, the only two examples we have of a full-blown fascist movement taking control of a nation and remaking it into a fascist state are Italy and Germany. There is also the example of Austria, but Austrian fascism was inevitably influenced by geography, and the *Anschluss* occurred too soon for us to get a full read on what Austrian fascism would have looked like had it been allowed to develop independently. Many other European countries had governments in the 1930s that resembled fascism to varying degrees, including Spain, Greece, Hungary, and more.

But Italy and Germany remain the only two countries that offer us an insight into what an unadulterated fascist government actually looks like, although you need to be wary of the argument that there is something inherent in the cultures or the histories of these two countries that made them uniquely susceptible to fascism. That's just another way of saying, "It can't happen here," for any "here" outside Germany and Italy. It certainly can happen other places; don't get complacent.

Another kind of complacency about fascism tries to derive reassurance from the singular nature of people like Benito Mussolini or Adolf Hitler and of the political parties they led. From this perspective, the uniquely perverse political talents of these two leaders account for the success of their movements. The origin of this view lies in Allied wartime propaganda. In time of war, it's a natural propaganda tool to depict the leader of the enemy nation as a particularly corrupt and dangerous individual. They did it to Kaiser Wilhelm during the First World War, even though the Kaiser actually had very little to do with it. After the Second World War ended, there was another round of demonization, as subordinate leaders in Germany and Italy—figures in government, the legal profession, industry, and the military—sought to deflect blame from themselves by claiming that they too were victims of their now-dead leaders.

Figures like Hitler and Mussolini fully deserve the opprobrium heaped upon them after the war; still, you have to beware of focusing on one or two individuals. There was plenty of blame to go around, and as I've noted before, there has never been a nation entirely under control of a single individual, not even Nazi Germany. Hitler could not possibly have accomplished what he did without legions of willing and capable supporters.

There's a moment in the 2011 film, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, set during World War II, when a German character says, "So many people forget that the first country the Nazis invaded was their own." I understand the point the film is trying to make, and it's a reasonable one: that the words *Nazi* and *German* are not synonyms. Believe me, as someone with German heritage who grew up in post-war America, I understand very well why someone would want to emphasize that point. Nevertheless, the line I quoted is untrue. The Nazi Party did not invade Germany from somewhere else. Neither was the Nazi Party an act of nature, like a tornado or an earthquake or a plague of locusts. Some Germans were innocent victims of the Nazis, this is true, but it is also true that the Nazi Party was made up of Germans, Germans who freely decided they wanted to be Nazis. The Party originated in Germany, it grew in Germany, and it took control

over Germany only because it had the support of a large number of powerful and influential Germans, not all of whom were themselves Nazis.

And of course, all that I'm saying here is equally true of the Fascist Party in Italy. What happened in these two countries was not only because of the parties or because of the leaders, though they certainly deserve condemnation. But they could not have accomplished what they did without a lot of help.

In this regard, it is also important to note that in neither country did the fascists take power by force or arms. They took power through legitimate constitutional means, but use of force played a crucial role. We should zero in on this aspect of fascism, because it's crucial to understanding the movement. The rising fascist movements encouraged the use of violence, but not against the state. Rather, the fascists employed their violence in a sort of jiu-jitsu, attacking their opponents on the left, and then using the left's retaliatory violence as an excuse first, to escalate their own violence, and second, to demand that the power of the state be deployed against their opponents to restore order. When that fails, which it inevitably will, since the violence is coming from the fascist side, the fascists then brazenly assert that the only way to restore order is to place the power of the state in their hands.

In truth, the fascist movement is holding law and order hostage, while maintaining a cover story that it is actually their opponents on the left who are putting law and order at risk. It's a sophisticated version of a protection racket. "Nice peaceful little society you have here. It would be a real shame if someone stirs up political violence. P.S. Vote for me, and I'll make sure no one stirs up political violence."

This argument is most effective with people of conservative or right-wing leanings who may not be ready to embrace the entire fascist package, but whose views do overlap with the fascists in some respects, especially in being leery of the political left, hence the willingness of other conservative and right-wing parties to enter into coalition governments with the fascists. This was precisely the route both Mussolini and Hitler took toward becoming prime minister of Italy and chancellor of Germany, respectively.

As we saw in Italy and Germany, one powerful advantage the fascist parties have over other political parties of the right is that the fascists are a broad-based movement of the working class and of younger people, especially veterans. In this way, the fascists bring numbers and energy into a conservative coalition that otherwise tends to be older and stiffer. A weakness that conservative political parties in any country often exhibit is that their membership skews older and wealthier than the population at large. The fascist movement makes a valuable coalition partner because it brings in a younger, more working-class membership that fills a demographic gap in the political right.

Younger and more energetic party members are valuable to the movement in a number of ways. Since fascism makes use of violence against the left as part of its political strategy, clearly you

need young, strong party members, almost certainly young men, often with military experience. Also, young people are valuable in more traditional party roles, such as attending rallies and marches, handing out leaflets, knocking on doors, that sort of thing. And naturally, numbers matter when elections are held.

Because, again, in the historical examples available to us, fascists do not take power by means of arms or violence. Not through coups or revolutions, but by a constitutional process. Both Hitler and Mussolini came to power as leaders of coalitions that included non-fascist right-wing parties. In both cases, they had insisted on the top leadership position for themselves as a condition for participating in the coalition.

And notably, in both cases the other right-wing parties agreed to the coalition because they believed that they could harness the numbers and the energy of the fascist movement for their own political ends. They viewed the fascist leader as unsophisticated, as a political amateur who as prime minister or chancellor, would be in over their heads and would have no choice but accept direction from more seasoned and experienced politicians such as themselves.

Yeah, so how'd that work out for you?

Very badly, as it turned out. The key mistake that Mussolini's and Hitler's political partners made in joining forces with them was in thinking of the Fascist and Nazi Parties as just another political party, organized like other parties to pursue recognizable political goals. Twice this proved to be a terrible miscalculation, because fascist parties are not like other political parties. Other political parties seek political power in order to do things, to enact changes the party believes will be beneficial to the nation.

Fascist parties, by contrast, believe that the change the nation needs is for the fascist party to be in power. Or to put it more simply, for a fascist, power is not a means, it's an end. Fascists might agree with the other right-wing parties on some policy issues, like lower taxes and higher subsidies for the wealthy, more military spending, traditional family structures, and so on, but only when these policies are being put into place by a fascist government.

Or perhaps more accurately, when they are being put into place by the fascist leader, because fascism embraces what the Germans called *das Führerprinzip*, or the *leader principle*. Only the leader knows the answer. He—it's always a he—decides the policy; everyone else trusts in the leader's golden gut. It must be a good idea, because the leader thought of it.

One obvious consequence of the leader principle is that the leader must always be the leader. Therefore, as we saw in both Italy and Germany, as soon as the fascist leader assumes power, job one is making sure the leader never has to give it up again. The fascists place a higher priority on retaining control of the government than they do on any substantive policy for the nation.

This is why both nations soon saw their other political parties dissolved or outlawed and became one-party states.

[music: *Into the Abyss*]

It's not only a naked desire for power, although that is certainly part of it. It is also ideological. Fascists disdain multi-party liberal democracy. To a fascist, democracy is just a debating society or an argument clinic, a forum where unworthy political parties that represent special interests within the nation jockey for political power. Divisions within the nation are a weakness, in the fascist analysis, since the nation has to face its foreign enemies. Since the fascist party represents the whole of the nation, there is no longer a need for narrow parties representing special interests. The fascist party represents everyone's interests.

This brings us back to the fundamentals of fascism as national socialism, an ideology that seeks to explain the world as a competition between different nationalities or ethnic groups in a way analogous to how socialism seeks to explain the world as a competition between economic classes. Socialists believe that class interest is the unifying force that brings all members of a class together, which is why the Soviet Union sees no need for more than one political party. The Communist Party already represents the interests of all workers; nothing more is needed. To a fascist, the fascist party represents the interests of all Italians, or all Germans, or all of whatever ethnic group the party claims to represent. In this regard, fascism relies heavily on a variation of the No True Scotsman argument, a variation that sounds like this:

"The Fascist Party represents all Italians."

"Well hey, the Fascist Party doesn't represent *me*."

"The Fascist Party represents all *true* Italians."

Someone living within the nation but not identifying with the nation is not truly a citizen of the nation, and is a potential threat to the nation. Since fascists see everything through the lens of competition between nations, it is therefore imperative to the fascist that such weaknesses be identified and eliminated.

This helps explain fascism's special hostility toward socialism. The socialist doctrine of class struggle takes it as right and inevitable that different economic classes within the same nation view one another as opponents. Even worse, socialism teaches members of the working class within "our" nation to reach across national borders and work cooperatively with the working classes of other nations as their allies against the capitalists and the bourgeoisie, and that war and competition between nations is merely a tool of the capitalists and imperialists that they use to keep the working classes in line. To a fascist, this kind of talk is anathema. It is straight-up treason.

Fascism sometimes borrows socialist rhetoric about the insidious schemes of the ruling classes, but to a fascist, it's always the ruling classes of other countries that are the threat. Never our own. Nations that become fascist do not experience "revolution" as the French or the Russians understood it. Traditional power relationships were preserved. They were reinforced, if anything. The social changes fascists did seek, the revolution, if you want to call it that, was in the attitudes of individual citizens.

Fascism sees its role as banding together the people of our nation, unifying them for the great task of opposing the other nations, the ones that are trying to weaken us and bring us down. Taking power as they did, in the aftermath of rule by democrats and socialists, the revolution fascists sought was in the attitudes of their own people. Citizens needed to understand the special heritage of "our" nation, its special role in the world, how and why this is under threat, and the need to work together to preserve what makes us special. Those who are members of our ethnic community need to be educated on our community's values. Those who are members of other ethnic communities need to abandon their own identity and embrace ours, or else they need to leave.

Or to put it more bluntly, individual citizens need to understand and embrace their duties to the nation. For this reason, fascist governments intruded into areas of individual life where none before them ever thought government had a role. Where liberal democracy sees the state as the guarantor of the rights of individuals to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (to coin a phrase), fascism sees the nation as the means by which the destiny of the people is fulfilled. The role of individual citizens then, is to assist in the fulfillment of that destiny. Life, liberty, and happiness are not private pursuits; they are the public benefits that accrue to individual citizens when the nation is strong and pure, and each citizen is obligated to help make the nation strong and pure.

Therefore, fascists place a premium on teaching proper values: both the traditional values of the nation (as defined by the fascists) and a fascist understanding of the nation's destiny. This is why fascist governments devote much attention to public education. Even in liberal democracies, public education is seen not only as a means through which individual students fulfill their potential, but also as a way to provide young people with the knowledge and understanding necessary to become good citizens in adulthood. Fascists placed a heavy emphasis on the second role, in schools, universities, museums, art galleries, concert halls, and elsewhere. Fascist rulers obsessed endlessly over decadence and cultural decline and carefully policed all elements of art and culture for anything they might deem harmful to the nation. Fascist education also strongly emphasized physical education, beginning with sports and leading to physical fitness programs, toward the goal of providing the national military with the finest of soldiers.

And the fascist program for young people did not end when the school bell rang at the end of the day. Fascist youth programs provided after-school activities that kept up the training. Or indoctrination, if you like. In northern Italy, 70% of Italian children six years and older were

involved in Fascist youth organizations, although the number was below 50% in the south of Italy. In Germany, by 1939 a staggering 87% of German children were enrolled in the Jungvolk, beginning at the age of ten, until the age of fourteen, when they moved up to the notorious Hitlerjugend, the Hitler Youth.

Adults had their own fascist organizations. In Germany, workers belonged to Nazi Party trade unions, physicians to the National Socialist German Doctors' League, with further leagues for lawyers, for civil servants, and for teachers. In large businesses, most of the management were Party members. German businesses that traded abroad were required to maintain Nazi Party liaisons in their foreign offices, who kept the Party leadership back home abreast of the company's operations. After working hours were over, fascist groups organized leisure-time activities through the Dopolavoro in Italy or in Germany through the Kraft durch Freude movement. The latter translates into English as "Strength through Joy." These groups would organize leisure outings, like trips to the movies or to a concert, a picnic in the park, or a hike in the woods. So thorough was the Party involvement in the daily lives of Germans that the leader of the German Labour Front, which oversaw Kraft durch Freude, could boast that in the new Germany, the only private moments citizens experienced came when they were asleep.

It follows inevitably from this fascist vision of national unity that private organizations that operated outside the fascist network were suspect: churches, clubs, labor unions, political parties and so on. These private groups were inherently suspect because they cut against the national unity that was the fascist goal. The same was true for individual dissenters. It hardly needs to be said that there is no place for competitive elections in a fascist system. Nor is there such a thing as individual rights that a citizen can claim against the state. Even if you managed to win a legal decision in your favor in court, there was no means to prevent the state from seizing your property or arresting you as you walk out the courtroom door in triumph and shipping you off to a concentration camp.

You might think that private business interests would chafe at this degree of state oversight and regulation of their enterprises. It's true that business leaders in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany did not regard the governments that looked over their shoulders as ideal, but the consensus view seems to have been that fascist governments, whatever their shortcomings, were preferable to the chaos and instability of liberal democracy and certainly a better option than letting socialists run the country.

Some of what fascist government offered appealed strongly to the business community. The Party kept workers under control. Fascist militarism guaranteed lucrative military contracts which were good for business and stimulated the economy. During the 1930s, Germany and Italy saw rates of economic growth that shamed countries like the United Kingdom or the United States. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, along with the Soviet Union, made a compelling argument that liberal democracy and free-market economics were out of date, and that the twentieth century was destined to be the century of the planned economy.

Fascist nationalism took a dim view of multinational business dealings and supported economic self-sufficiency, even when that meant higher costs. In Nazi Germany, for example, the government set up the Hermann Göring Werke, a steel plant built to produce steel from domestic coal and iron ore, even though the imported versions were higher quality, and forced German steel companies to finance the operation with their own capital.

I said this before, and I'll say it again: in our time, many political debates revolve around economic libertarianism versus the call to address economic inequality. In these debates both sides tend to accuse the other of being the heirs to fascism. But this misses the point of fascism. Fascism is about unifying and strengthening the nation in competition with other nations. Economic policy is a side issue. Fascists will adopt whatever economic policy they view as in accord with that larger goal.

And what is that larger goal? I already talked about the seeming inevitable triumph of socialism in the early twentieth century, until fascism arose as a competing mass movement. Some Marxist analysts have taken these circumstances to be more than an historical coincidence and interpret fascism as a movement created by the capitalists as their last-ditch effort to prevent the socialist revolution. I don't buy that argument myself, because when you look at the workings of a fascist state, it's clear the capitalists are not running the show. The capitalists are often partners of the fascists and occasionally their captives, but never their bosses.

Another view of the rise of fascism is that it is facilitated by the capitalists, by the wealthy and powerful, who see the fascist movement as their last line of defense against the socialists, only to discover, too late, that the fascists are just as bad or worse. This was a common analysis when I was growing up, during the postwar period. There is some truth to it. As we saw in both Italy and Germany, the Fascists and the Nazis originally took power as leaders of a coalition that also needed the support of more traditional conservative and right-wing forces, but then quickly moved to take power for themselves. Ha, ha. You guys got played.

The trouble with this analysis is that it gives the traditional conservatives too much credit. It assumes they eventually came to regret their choices and rue the day they cut their fateful deal with the fascists. But history does not support that assumption. In fact, the other right-wing forces in society—the business leaders, the landowners, the military—never had that alleged epiphany. They never regretted supporting the fascists. The Fascist Party in Italy and the Nazi Party in Germany remained popular throughout their respective rules. It was only when Italy and Germany began experiencing defeat on the field of battle that their publics began to turn on their ruling fascist parties, because what's a fascist party worth if it can't win wars? But even then, in the face of failure, it was not internal dissent that brought down their regimes. It was military defeat and foreign occupation.

Germany offers us the one historical example of a fascist movement that played out to its logical conclusion. Fascism looks outward and sees a dog-eat-dog world. Perhaps I should say a rule-or-

be-ruled world. To the fascist, this is an unavoidable choice, and the fascist says, “I choose to rule.” Not merely because it is better to rule than to be ruled, but because the fascist believes that a world dominated by “us” would be a better world, more advanced, more civilized, than a world ruled by “them.”

And so, when the fascist movement takes power, it begins by remaking the nation into a society it believes best suited to ruling the world, and then it proceeds to, you know, try to rule the world. Since hostility, and frankly fear, of other nations is central to fascism, fascism needs an enemy to sustain itself. Conflict with other nations is central to the ideology, therefore war is inevitable. Victory does not sate the beast; it only sharpens its appetite. The wars get bigger, wider, costlier, until the fascist state can no longer sustain them.

On in other words, the fascist state degenerates into self-destructive madness. And what does the fascist think when the fascist state can no longer keep up the campaign for conquest? Hitler faced exactly that question in 1945. Either he had do repudiate the Nazi ideology or repudiate the German nation. He made the latter choice, and died a committed ideologue. A true fascist to the bitter end.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Phil and Brent for their kind donations, and thank you to Amy for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Phil and Brent and Amy 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](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I have a correction to make on last week’s episode. When I dismissed the Nazi suggestion that Bolshevism was a Jewish conspiracy, I remarked that neither Grigori Zinoviev nor Lev Kamenev were Jewish. Alert listener Ari pointed out that in fact Zinoviev was born to a Jewish family, as was Lev Kamenev’s father, although he converted to Russian Orthodoxy and that’s how Lev was raised. I make this correction because I want as best I can to be factually accurate in everything I say on the podcast, and Ari was right to point out my error, but we both agree that this does not in any way substantiate the Nazi claim, and I stand by my larger point that the Nazis were talking nonsense. You have to be careful, because once you start taking an accounting of who is or isn’t Jewish, you’ve already played into the Nazi’s hands. Jewish people have just as much right as

anyone else to participate in political movements, and, as I pointed out last time, a Jewish person living in the Russian Empire had no reason to support the regime and every reason to want to get rid of it and the Bolsheviks believed in equal rights for minorities, which is entirely to their credit, so no surprise that Jewish revolutionaries existed or that they might find a home among the Bolsheviks. I'll note too that Zinoviev and Kamenev were eventually executed by the Soviet government, a development we will get to shortly, but it hardly suggests they were the secret puppet masters behind the Soviet government or any such nonsense. So the Nazis are still wrong, and enough said about that.

And I hope you'll join me news week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we change topics, he said with a certain measure of relief. We've been wrestling with some pretty heavy material here lately. I think it's time to take a break and look at something a little more fun. How about the movies? In the 1920s, talking pictures were introduced in the United States. Ironically, this development helped break the American monopoly on motion pictures worldwide, since talking pictures are harder to export and thus created some space for other countries to develop domestic film industries. Sound also changed the type of movies that were produced and the style in which they were filmed. Start talking and stop moving, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing, before we let this subject go. After the Second World War, there was an intellectual movement that sought to lump together fascism with the highly controlled and centralized Communist states like the USSR under Stalin, and later the People's Republic of China under Mao, and label this "totalitarianism." In this view, the ideological differences between say, Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union are mere window dressing. In essence, they were both highly centralized dictatorships, and that's what really matters. Their common features are far more significant than their ideological hostility to one another.

I find this framework unconvincing. At best, it puts too little emphasis on ideology, and ideology matters. At worst, it was an attempt to harness the anti-fascist sentiments of the postwar world and repurpose them against the Soviet Union.

The darkest days of the Soviet Union during the purges were dark indeed. People were killed pointlessly, and lived in terror of the late night knock at the door. And you could say the same thing about Nazi Germany.

But even at its worst, the Soviet Union went after ideological opponents, real or imagined. Its victims were mostly political actors. The Communists never attempted to conquer new lands to displace their people with its own, or waged wars of extermination against whole ethnic groups. I know, some would point to the famine of 1932 and the millions of Ukrainian deaths, but the horrors of the famine were not restricted to Ukrainians. Ethnic Russians and other minorities starved alongside them.

Nazi Germany, on the other hand, methodically killed millions of people based solely on their ethnic heritage, and fought wars that killed tens of millions more, to the same end. The Nazis killed indiscriminately. They killed old people, mothers, and small children, not because of anything they did, or were thought to have done, but because of who they were.

A fascist looks at a baby born to a different ethnic group and sees only a future enemy. That's the essence of the ideology, and what makes it uniquely terrible.

[music: Closing Theme]