

WHAT IS FASCISM?: AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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“Fascism is the power of finance capital itself. It is the organization of terrorist vengeance against the working class and the revolutionary section of the peasantry and intelligentsia. In foreign policy, fascism is jingoism in its most brutal form, fomenting bestial hatred of other nations.... The development of fascism, and the fascist dictatorship itself, assume different forms in different countries, according to historical, social and economic conditions and to the national peculiarities, and the international position of the given country.” Georgi Dimitrov, at the 7th World Congress of the Communist International, 1935

“Totalitarianism is the very essence of fascism, and fascism is without question the purest example of a totalitarian ideology.” Zeev Sternhell, “Fascist Ideology”

“Despite the decades that have passed since the second world war, fascism remains a subject of much heated argument. In daily usage it is hurled as an invective against political enemies. It is frequently invoked in the media... It also continues to be a subject of controversy, partly because of it collides with so many preconceived ideological notions, partly because generalizations are made difficult by the fact that there was not one fascism but several fascisms.” Walter Laqueur, ed. *Fascism: A Reader's Guide*

“The modish use of the general catchword *fascism* explains little and produces many cliches. What is more, it means minimizing the insane ideas and terrible reality of Hitlerism if we throw it into one and the same category with fascism.” Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship*

“Perhaps the term fascism should be banned, at least temporarily from our political vocabulary.” S.J. Woolf, ed. *European Fascism*.

The Course

While this course will be rooted in an historical examination of fascism, we will also consider its utility for understanding aspects of our contemporary moment. Exploring this complex phenomenon should be a productive learning experience for all of us. As much as possible, I would like to include opportunities for us to discuss the issues raised by my comments and course readings.

While it seemed as if fascism was totally discredited after the defeat of Fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany in the Second World War and the exposure of these regimes' many crimes, in recent times it has reemerged in our political discourse as certain movements and regimes have taken on some of its characteristics. There has been considerable debate about whether the concept is being appropriately applied. The purpose of this class is twofold: first, to analyze the fascist movements that became powerful in the interwar period, most especially in Italy and Germany, and thus help us better answer the question posed in the title of this course; second, to examine several contemporary political developments to assess whether fascism is an accurate descriptor in these cases. In addressing these issues, we want to keep in mind the following questions: What were the conditions that gave rise to fascism? Was fascism an ideology, if so, what were its key tenets? What was the nature of these fascist movements and how did they gain power? What were the characteristics and policies of fascist states? Why did these states fail?

Reading: I have selected documents and brief opinion pieces which will be sent to you as email attachments several days before our first and then subsequent classes. They can also be accessed at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute website at wm.edu. Go to Course Information: Class Notes & Presentations, then to Spring 2022 and Schilling.

Objectives: 1) Class members will acquire a fuller understanding of fascism in the interwar period, particularly in Italy and Germany.

2) Through consideration of contemporary developments in the Western world, especially in Hungary, Poland, Russia, and the United States class members can assess whether fascism appropriately characterizes these cases.

Class Schedule:

April 12 Introductions and the Origins of Fascism

Caveats

The European Preconditions and Precursors, c. 1880-1918

Mussolini and the Emergence of Fascism in Italy

Adolf Hitler and the Emergence of Fascism in Germany

Comparative Analysis of the Two Cases

Required Reading: Documents—"Manifesto of Futurism," "Program of the Italian Fascist Movement, 6/1919," "Program of the NSDAP, Feb. 24, 1920," Extracts from *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler."

Discussion Questions: For each document consider the following questions. Who produced the document? When? What key principles and policies does the document reveal about Italian Fascism or German National Socialism? What similarities and differences do they reveal between the two movements?

April 19 Fascism in Power

The Seizure of Power in Italy and Germany

The Mature Fascist State in Italy and Germany

Unsuccessful Fascist Movements

Required Reading: Documents—"Nazi Accomplishments After Six Months in Power," "The Doctrine of Fascism,"

Discussion Questions: What does the statement of Joseph Goebbels reveal about the Nazi seizure of power. What are the key features of Italian Fascism as defined by Mussolini in 1932?

April 26 War and the Collapse of Fascism and its Possible Revival

War and the Fall of Fascism

Considering the Case of Hungary

Considering the Case of Putin's Russia

Other Examples: Poland, Austria, Germany, France, Italy

And What About the United States?

Required Reading: Documents—"Mussolini Launches the War in Ethiopia," "The Hossbach Memorandum," "Don't Call Donald Trump a Fascist," "Robert Paxton's Opinion Piece"

Discussion Questions: What does Mussolini's statement launching the Italian war against Ethiopia reveal about him and Italian Fascism? What does the Hossbach Memorandum reveal about Hitler and German National Socialism? Do recent developments in Hungary reveal the revival of fascism? What about Putin's Russia? How concerned should we be about these developments and those in Austria, Germany, France, Italy, and the US?