

Fascism: *fascio*



What is Fascism?

This video examines fascism's defining characteristics. Fascism rose most prominently in Italy and Germany between the two world wars. Benito Mussolini rose to power as a fascist in the 1920s. His movement violently seized power and defined the Italian nation in racial terms. This example was soon followed by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party, which seized power in Germany in the 1930s. Utilizing extreme forms of nationalism, these leaders pushed their citizens to expel or murder those deemed an enemy of the state. The video compares these examples with the KKK in the United States.



00:01

*Amy Elizabeth Robinson,
PhD
Photo of a guitarist; the
guitar has a tag on it that
says "This machine kills
fascists"*

00:42

*Images of Fascist Italy and
Germany*

*Political images of bundles
of sticks*

01:33

*Photos of men that
would become part of the
National Fascist party
The symbol: A bundle of
sticks and an axe, over the
Italian flag*

02:31

*Definition: Fascism
is a form of political
behavior marked by
obsessive preoccupation
with community decline,
humiliation, or victimhood
and by compensatory
cults of unity, energy, and
purity, in which a mass-
based party of committed
nationalist militants,
working in uneasy but
effective collaboration with
traditional elites, abandons
democratic liberties and
pursues with redemptive
violence and without ethical
or legal restraints, with the
goals of internal cleansing
and external expansion.*

In this unit, we need to go into some difficult territory. We are going to talk about fascism. Fascism was probably the most explosive and damaging political phenomenon of the 20th century, and it is also an explosive and misunderstood word. Have you heard people use this word? It is often thrown around as a way of denouncing a political system, movement, or leader one fears or doesn't like.

Fascism is a definable thing. And in some places—most notably Italy and Germany—it was a system of government. It is extremely important to understand the meaning and history of fascism, so that we can all notice when it is beginning to appear and when fascists are beginning to acquire power.

The word "fascism" comes from the Italian word "fascio," which just means a bundle or sheaf. It had long been used as a political image in Europe. Because a bundle of sticks is hard to break, this image was used by late-19th-century Italian revolutionaries to symbolize their commitment to each other and to militant action.

Then, in 1914, a copy editor and former socialist named Benito Mussolini, having turned his back on socialism, was looking for a name for his new political group. He chose Fascio Rivoluzionario d'Azione Interventista—Revolutionary League for Interventionist Action. Later, in 1919, Mussolini created the Fasci di Combattimento, or Fraternities of Combat. In this simple name, he managed to capture the sense of exclusive community they were trying to create, the male-dominated nature of the organization, and the glorification of aggression that lies at the heart of fascism. Eventually, Mussolini founded the National Fascist Party. And this was its symbol.

So, now we have a better understanding of where the word "fascism" came from. But what is fascism?

Historian Robert O. Paxton, in his book "The Anatomy of Fascism," came up with this definition. That's a long paragraph, so let's take it one bit at a time. First, Paxton calls fascism a "form of political behavior." He is telling us that it is important to pay attention to what fascists do, and not just what they say. Fascist leaders like Mussolini and Adolf Hitler gave dramatic speeches and produced manifestos, but these do not tell us much about how they actually acquired and used power.

Fascist behavior aims to bring together different groups of angry, discontented extremists and to figure out how to get them to work with each other. Fascists have to form alliances with existing elite groups and individuals and to figure out how to get ordinary people's cooperation.

03:40

A racist map of the British Empire in 1886 depicting white people as powerful conquerors of other nations

How can they convince people to let them change society and commit atrocities? Or at least get them to not resist? One answer, Paxton says, is that fascists spin messages about “community decline, humiliation, or victimhood,” and say that they can “unify, energize, and purify” this community. But in order to benefit from people’s anger or sense of victimhood, they must first tell a story about who is a member of the “community” and who is not.

04:21

Artwork depicting violent war; photo of Fascist soldiers

In late 19th and early 20th-century Europe, ideas about “race” provided the easiest—you might say laziest—way to think about who could belong to a community. Once fascists had defined the “nation” in terms of race, they could claim to know how to “purify” and “strengthen” the nation, and justify radical violence to exclude or eliminate those perceived as “outsiders.” Of course, in order to convince the public that their stories about race and nation were right and true, fascists had to challenge other stories.

05:01

In the 1920s, Mussolini’s National Fascist Party and Hitler’s National Socialist Party both tried to push Italian and German workers and artisans into extreme forms of nationalism. But to do this, they had to pull people away from international movements like socialism, communism, pacifism, and feminism. Socialism, which used class, rather than nation or race, to define community, was especially hated by fascists. So the emphasis in the Nazis’ formal name should be more on the “national” than the “socialist.”

05:39

Portrait of Adolf Hitler

But neither party fits neatly into ideas of right and left. Hitler and Mussolini claimed that they would eliminate class conflict, but not through international cooperation or worker control. They thought that it would happen through national unification, racial cleansing, a return to “traditional” roles and values, and state-controlled, or corporatist, economies.

06:08

Fascists believed in elevating a “pure” state above all else. “Everything for the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state,” Italian fascists liked to say. In theory, this elevation of the state was supposed to pull a country together for la razza—the people, or the folk. In practice, fascism generally ended up benefiting capitalist owners and industries, while capitalist industries supported the state. As Paxton said, fascism worked “in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites.” In the process, democracy was sacrificed to benefit those economic elites and the fascists themselves. Lastly, Paxton states that fascism “pursues with redemptive violence “and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.” In short, fascism glorifies violence, conquest, and war, and disdains existing legal restrictions on their exercise. Total war is the only kind of war for fascists.

07:29

Fascism in practice

Early fascist violence was in fact rooted in the devastation and confusion after World War I. And then, war-making in the 1930s and ‘40s helped fascist regimes solidify their rule. As Hitler said to Joseph Goebbels, his minister of propaganda, “War made possible for us “the solution of a whole series of problems that could never have been solved in normal times.” Terribly, the “problems” that Hitler and other fascists wanted to solve often included the very lives of people they

considered to be outside the nation. One last thing that did not make it into Paxton's definition, but that is prevalent in all fascist movements, is the use of symbolic imagery, staged events, and propaganda.

08:27

*Photo of the Ku Klux Klan
in a march*

Fascist movements always use local symbols and myths in order to increase their appeal. In order to make this more clear, we will leave the well-known cases of Italy and Germany and consider one other example: the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s United States.

You might think of the United States as a country that fought fascism in World War II. But fascism has come in waves inside the U.S., too, starting in the late 19th century. Some Americans admired Mussolini, and, for a while, even Hitler. "The Ku Klux Klan," wrote Charles Edward Jefferson, a pro-Klan minister in 1920s New York, "is the Mussolini of America."

09:16

*Photos of Klan members of
all ages*

1920s Klan members believed that white Protestant Americans were victims of a rapidly changing and diversifying United States. They formed militias, advocated a white nationalism, and claimed that they could cleanse the United States of immigrants and other "un-American" elements. They were anti-Catholic, anti-black, and anti-Semitic, believing that those groups were "outside of the nation." Their symbols were both political and religious. In their rallies, they flew American, not Confederate, flags, and they burned crosses both as a threat and as a symbol of their militant Christianity.

10:02

Okay, so now we've learned where the term "fascism" came from, some ways that fascism grew under Mussolini and Hitler, and we've seen another—maybe unexpected—example of a local fascist movement. Now let's talk about what fascism is not.

Fascism is sometimes used interchangeably with the terms "authoritarianism" and "populism." Fascism includes elements of both, but they are not identical. Authoritarianism is a basically conservative political stance concerned with maintaining order. Authoritarian rulers often use existing institutions, like the military, the monarchy, or the church, in order to do this.

10:49

1930s Spain under Francisco Franco is often called fascist, but many historians disagree with this label. When it came to ruling, Franco was authoritarian and extremely conservative, rather than fascist. He was a military general who ignored the demands of his radical fascist allies, and instead worked closely with the existing monarchy, capitalist businessmen, and landowners. His brutal tactics during the Spanish Civil War were used against political and ideological enemies, but not so much racial or national "others."

11:29

Populism is a political stance that is critical of elites and that claims to fully represent "the people." Populists can easily dismiss their opponents by claiming that they do not truly understand or represent the people in an authentic way. But populism does not typically rest on the kinds of obsessive ideas about national or racial purity and aggression that fascism promotes. Juan Perón's rule in Argentina from 1946 to 1955 is an example of a populist dictatorship that was not fascist. Perón used personal popularity with the people to take and wield power, often against political enemies, but not by singling out a national or racial enemy.

12:21

Fascism, in contrast, embodies a dangerous spiral between conservatism on the one hand and radicalism on the other. It proclaims the value of “tradition,” using local and sometimes invented images and traditions to represent a “pure” nation, and it hurtles headlong into “modernity” using new technologies and proclaiming the need for radical change at one and the same time. It is often more about power than any real political philosophy. That’s why it is attractive to people who want to take and hold power—individual, national, or racial—and also why it is so dangerous.