

Current political and media references to 'fascism': Assess how accurate or inaccurate these references are when compared to historical fascism, and how these contemporary uses of the label affect public understanding and discourse.

Largely, the contemporary uses of the word, such as in reference to Donald Trump, Viktor Orban or Vladimir Putin are inaccurate to what we can describe as 'historical fascism'. Fascism is the pure denoting of the word 'evil'. The images of the horrors of the Second World War and of the Final Solution are inextricably linked with 'fascism'. With this in mind, in contemporary usage, the term is carelessly thrown around with the definition moulded to fit whatever political agenda the person using the word despises. Historians largely agree that contemporary references to 'fascism' are inaccurate due to the lack of revolutionary ultranationalism which I will demonstrate in this essay. Moreover, some historians such as Gilbert Allardyce argue the term should be left to describe only Italy in the interwar period and I will argue why this is disadvantageous and 'fascism' is still a useful word. I will first attempt to define 'historical Fascism' and discuss the problems of defining this loose term. I will then apply this justified definition to the aforementioned contemporary figures who are often labelled 'fascist' and spend the bulk of that time on Trump. Lastly, I will discuss the supposed 'misuse' of the word and will argue that it is overestimated and has always been misused but argue that it is still useful.

Fascism can only in its most technical form be attributed to Italy from 1919-1945 under Benito Mussolini.¹ Other 'fascist' movements did not technically call themselves fascist and even Hitler had large disagreements with Mussolini. This is a useful starting point because it already highlights the first and most important point: that because the core of fascism was ultranationalism, as Mussolini realised, each

¹ Allardyce, G., 'What Fascism Is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept', *The American Historical Review*, 84/2 (1979), p. 370.

movement was wholly unique to its respective nation.² Therefore referring to fascism with different labels is useful. 'True fascism' will refer wholly to Italy under Mussolini, but 'historical fascism' will refer to the collection of movements during the interwar and war period that resembled the regimes of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Calling Nazi Germany historically fascist is justified as British newspapers have since 1923.³ Furthermore, noting the debate of the usefulness of such a term as 'historical fascism' will justify the application of the term in later paragraphs to contemporary media. Historians such as Allardyce argue that the word should be buried in the interwar past and can only be applied to Italy.⁴ On the other hand, Stanley Payne argues that having a generic fascism is useful as so many similarities existed between the movements in the interwar period, that labelling them fascist is not a big leap in logic.⁵ Stanley is more convincing as, burying the term which is still so readily used, seems futile and the use of the term 'fascist' to describe the movements in the interwar period can be applied to the modern day.

Firstly, to outline the differences between the regimes of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy will distinguish typical myths of fascist movements and also highlight the important differences. The most glaring of these is the difference in the insistence on racial hierarchy between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The entire Nazi ideology was built on Hitler's idea of a racial hierarchy. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler outlines his belief that nation-building 'is the enormous scientific and technical work of Europe and America, that is, of Aryan peoples.'⁶ The Jew on the other hand, 'was never in the possession of a culture of his own' and therefore leached off the culture of the Aryan peoples, mixing in with their blood and causing the death of

² Allardyce, 'What Fascism is Not', p. 385.

³ Griffin, R., *The nature of fascism*, (1993), p. 1

⁴ Allardyce, 'What Fascism is Not', p. 387.

⁵ Kershaw, I., *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (3rd edn. London, 1993), p. 51.

⁶ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, J. V. Murphy (trans.) (London, 1942), p. 401.

civilisation.⁷ Italy however, was not antisemitic until 1938, and even after installing anti-Jewish laws in order to please Hitler, there is little evidence any died during 1938-43 in Italy for the sole reason of being Jewish.⁸ This is important to note as a common characteristic of a typical fascist is racism. It is important to note what 'fascism' is not, in order to define what it is. Is then, racism a hallmark of 'historical fascism'? The answer is that Nazis were undoubtedly antisemitic and racist, but Italians were less so and concludes that racism as a hallmark of fascism, is not entirely true. Lastly, fascism was not purely totalitarian, and the barbarism of fascism breaks down into a moral phenomenon when viewed in this way.⁹

There are various things similar about both regimes, but the core fundamentals can be extracted in order to define 'historical fascism'. Stanley Payne's definition highlights the similarities well: a form of revolutionary ultranationalism for national rebirth structured on extreme elitism, mass mobilisation, the promotion of the military and the normalisation of violence.¹⁰ This definition combines elements of other writers such as Emilio Gentile, Roger Griffin and Ernst Nolte. Roger Griffin supports this definition and particularly the idea that the core of fascism was revolutionary ultranationalism, a view which has prevailed since the 1990s.¹¹ Furthermore, this definition touches on the core elements of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and other fascist movements such as Romania and thus provides us with a criteria in which we can judge the use of the word 'fascist' contemporarily.

Contemporary uses of the 'fascist' title towards Donald Trump are inaccurate, largely due to Trump's lack of a core revolutionary ideology. However, historians such as Timothy Snyder and Sarah Churchwell believe

⁷ *Mein Kampf*, p. 413.

⁸ Gregor, A. J., *Mussolini's Intellectuals : Fascist Social and Political Thought*, (1st edn. ,Princeton, 2004), p. 127.

⁹ Kershaw, I., *The Nazi Dictatorship*, p. 20.

¹⁰ Stanley, P., *A History of Fascism 1914-1945* (London, 1995), p. 14.

¹¹ Jackson, P. N., 'Debate: Donald Trump and Fascism Studies' *Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 10/1 (2021), p. 14.

Trump deserves the fascist title. The January 6th riots, as historian Robert Paxton argues, is the evidence needed to convict him of the fascist label and demonstrates that he is violent and revolutionary.¹² Although the storming of the capitol may indicate an overthrow of the US government, this mischaracterises the event. As Richards Evans points out, the rioters did not want to overthrow the constitution but rather wanted to employ it as they deemed it was not being used fairly.¹³ Although the rioters were undeniably violent and nationalist, their aims were not the rebirth of the nation through a revolution. This is the core reason Trump does not meet the criteria for fascism. Simply, he is not revolutionary in his nationalism.

Secondly, the rebirth and call to 'Make America Great Again' is eerily similar to historical fascist propaganda. But again, this mischaracterises the nature of fascism. Key to Hitler and Mussolini's philosophy was the return to a mythic past. For Mussolini, it was the Roman Empire and for Hitler, it was Germany before the onset of the First World War. However similar these are to Trump's return to a mythic glorious past, the nature of this rebirth, through a revolution and establishment of a totalitarian state, does not apply to Trump. Hitler destroyed the Weimer Governmental system with the Enabling Act of 1933 which gave him absolute authority whereas Mussolini slowly gave himself legislative power proceeding the March on Rome where he was appointed Primer Minister. Roger Griffin argues that Trump completely lacks an ideology or political strategy to structurally change the United States' governmental system.¹⁴ He may erode democracy and the faith in it, but in the end, he wishes to uphold the political system in the United States.¹⁵ Furthermore, Trump's foreign policy was by no means fascist. Richard Evans points out that

¹² Paxton, R., 'I've Hesitated to Call Donald Trump a Fascist. Until Now, *Vox*, 11 January 2021.

¹³ Evans, R., 'Why Trump isn't a fascist', *The New Statesman*, 13 January 2021.

¹⁴ Jackson, P. N., 'Debate: Donald Trump and Fascism Studies' *Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 10/1 (2021), p. 14.

¹⁵ Evans, R., 'Why Trump isn't a fascist', *The New Statesman*, 13 January 2021.

Trump was firmly isolationist.¹⁶ Trump withdrew troops from Syria and Afghanistan, and although assassinating Iran's top military general, did not assert America's dominance or normalise militarism more than any other US president. Core to historical fascism was the reassertion of greatness over enemies through military conquest. Trump does not meet this criterion.

Moreover, Trump's anti-immigration stance and banning of Muslim travel to America is often cited as a reason for his deserving of the fascist title. True fascism is not concerned with race so much as Nazism is. The blurring of Italy and Germany in the inter-war period into the category of historical fascism makes the point of racism hard to discern from the word fascist. As previously discussed though, it is not particularly true to cite concerns over race & immigration as a hallmark of fascism as other elements such as revolutionary ultranationalism and militarism which are more accurate indicators.

However, a point of contention is the type of nationalism in the United States, which is unique to its own national culture as all fascist movements are and could be isolationist and unrevolutionary. The governmental systems in which historical fascism rose were new and unstable leading to a large loss of faith in the system and more extreme systems such as fascism or communism were appealing. Nationalism within the contemporary United States, does not necessarily have to be revolutionary. However true this is, it changes the definition and especially the core of what fascism is and changing the definition to fit a particular political agenda is inaccurate. One may be a nationalist, but they become fascist when the preservation of the nation is needed through revolution. Timothy Snyder argues that Trump is a stepping stone to fascism, his blatant lies normalise distrust and lead to a cycle in which the truth becomes more abstract and allows for the subversion of the rule

¹⁶ Evans, R., 'Why Trump isn't a fascist', *The New Statesman*, 13 January 2021.

of law and democracy.¹⁷ This argument is sound but overall, to call Trump a fascist is largely inaccurate as he lacks the core revolutionary ultranationalism and militarism.

Characterising other contemporary figures such as Viktor Orban and Vladimir Putin are also largely inaccurate for similar reasons. There are however some familiar themes. Orban is also concerned with immigration as Trump is and for the preservation of the Hungarian national community.¹⁸ This is common for most right-wing leaders who often receive the title of 'fascist'. He also has eroded democracy and a 2018 Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights report found 'the need to revise the electoral legislation with an aim of granting a level playing field for contestants.'¹⁹ Authoritarianism in Hungary is rising slowly in a similar fashion to Mussolini's Italy. However, Orban lacks the foreign militarism needed to qualify for the term 'fascist' and is explicitly against intervention in the Ukraine war. On the other hand, Putin perhaps best qualifies for the term. Timothy Snyder claims that Russia is fascist because of its anti-Semitic justification of the invasion of Ukraine as well as the authoritarian nature of Putin's rule.²⁰ Furthermore, Stanley Payne argues that Putin is the closest contemporary example of a historical fascist.²¹ Putin most closely resembles the criteria set out. Being in a war for the protection of ethnic Russians is eerily similar to Hitler's foreign policy pursuits. Furthermore, Putin's Russia has extreme elitism, militaristic values and the normalisation of violence. What makes Putin not fascist is his use of the democratic system in Russia, although he has

¹⁷ Snyder, T., 'Historian Timothy Snyder: Trump's lies are creeping tyranny', *Vox*, 22 May 2017.

¹⁸ Beauchamp, Z., 'It happened there: how democracy died in Hungary', *Vox*, 13 Sep 2018.

¹⁹ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 'HUNGARY PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 8 April 2018', 27 June 2018, p. 3

²⁰ Snyder, T., 'We should say it. Russia Is Fascist', *The New York Times*, 19 May 2022.

²¹ Coalson, R., 'Nasty, Repressive, Aggressive -- Yes. But Is Russia Fascist? Experts Say 'No.'', *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 9 April 2022.

destroyed this system, he nonetheless does not reject it.²² He operates in the framework he used to establish power, even though he has subverted it into an authoritarian regime, he has not overtly overthrown it. Lastly, although part of Putin's justification for the invasion of Ukraine was anti-Semitic, it was more justified by claiming to rid Ukraine of Nazis. The contemporary uses of the word 'fascist' are therefore largely inaccurate as they often lack the revolutionary aspect of nationalism in order to qualify for the term.

The Washington Post claims that the misuse of the word is leading to the erasing of its actual meaning.²³ I argue that the supposed dangers of the inaccuracy of using the word fascism in a contemporary setting are overestimated. Although figures such as Trump or Putin are not fascist, it is undeniable they have fascist traits such nationalism and elitism. These warning signs being acknowledged is useful. Fascism has always had a loose definition and is the stem of the problems of the misuse of the term. This problem is not a contemporary one, however. George Orwell in his 1944 essay 'What is fascism' states that 'there is almost no set of people — certainly no political party or organized body of any kind — which has not been denounced as Fascist during the past ten years.'²⁴ Fascism has always been a denunciatory term and will likely remain so. What remains important is the association of the word 'fascism' with the horrors of the Second World War which it continues to have.

To conclude, current political and media references to 'fascism' are largely inaccurate when compared to historical fascism. However, historical fascism is extremely difficult to define, and no definition satisfies every side of the argument. Compared to Hitler and Mussolini, contemporary figures lack the revolutionary aspect of nationalism, which is the core of

²² Coalson, R., 'Nasty, Repressive, Aggressive -- Yes. But Is Russia Fascist? Experts Say 'No.', *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 9 April 2022.

²³ Daniels, M., 'Tossing around 'Nazi' and 'fascist' as insults is reckless and historically illiterate', *The Washington Post*, 11 July 2021

²⁴ Orwell, G., 'What is Fascism?', *Tribune*, 1944.

fascism, in order to qualify for the term. Public understanding of what fascism is may be muddled by the use of the term to these figures but undeniably these figures have similar traits to those of historical fascists. What remains important is the association of the term 'fascism' to the horrors of the Second World War. The misuse of the term demonstrates this association and understanding of the public of the evil of fascism.

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