

Fascism

Fascism stands as one of the most destructive and emotionally charged ideologies of the 20th century. It represented not only a political doctrine but also a psychological revolt against the liberal, rational, and egalitarian spirit of modernity. Emerging after World War I, fascism promised **order amid chaos, unity amid division, and greatness amid humiliation**—but at the cost of freedom, equality, and humanity. It rejected the Enlightenment ideals of reason, democracy, and individual liberty, replacing them with **emotion, will, myth, and violence**.

Although its most infamous expressions were seen under **Benito Mussolini's Italy** and **Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany**, fascist ideas also shaped Spain under **Francisco Franco**, Portugal under **António Salazar**, Japan during its imperial expansion, and later authoritarian movements across Latin America and Eastern Europe. Even after 1945, the **psychological and political impulses** of fascism have not disappeared; rather, they have adapted to new political landscapes and digital technologies in the 21st century.

I. Core Characteristics of Fascism

1. Extreme Nationalism

At its core, fascism is driven by **ultra-nationalism**—an intense emotional devotion to the nation seen as a living organism defined by blood, culture, and destiny. The nation, in fascist imagination, is not a voluntary political community but a **sacred entity** bound by racial and historical destiny.

This nationalism was deeply **militarized**. The state and the army became one and the same: instruments for defending the nation's "honor" and expanding its "living space." Fascists celebrated **war as a regenerative force**, cleansing the nation of weakness and restoring virility.

Mussolini's declaration—"*War alone brings up to its highest tension all human energy*"—summed up this ethos. In Nazi Germany, this was further intensified by Hitler's racial nationalism, which viewed war as a biological struggle between superior and inferior races.

The **symbolism of militarism**—uniforms, parades, marches, and salutes—transformed politics into a ritual of collective strength. War, for fascists, was not just foreign policy; it was **spiritual rebirth**.

Modern parallels can be seen in how some contemporary movements glorify militarized nationalism, portraying dissenters as "traitors" and equating patriotism with obedience.

2. Rejection of Democracy & Rationalism

Fascism defined itself through **negation**—a rejection of liberal democracy, socialism, and rational humanism. To fascists, democracy represented **weakness, compromise, and decadence**. They argued that liberal systems produced division and paralysis, incapable of inspiring collective energy.

Fascist movements thus exalted **emotion, intuition, and will** over rational debate. Mussolini dismissed democracy as "a disease of disintegration," while Hitler mocked parliamentary systems for empowering "inferior" elements.

Fascism replaced democratic pluralism with **totalitarian unity**. Citizens ceased to exist as autonomous individuals and were instead absorbed into the collective

identity of the nation. In fascist thought, **freedom meant obedience**—obedience to the leader, who was believed to embody the people’s spirit.

Under Mussolini, Italy’s corporatist state eliminated political parties, replacing them with state-controlled syndicates. Hitler went further, dissolving the Reichstag, banning opposition parties, and transforming Germany into a one-party dictatorship under the Nazi Party.

3. Cult of Leadership

A central feature of fascism was its **leader cult**—the near-religious worship of the **Duce** (Mussolini) or the **Führer** (Hitler). The leader was seen as the **embodiment of national destiny**, infallible and divinely chosen.

The principle of **Führerprinzip** demanded absolute loyalty; the leader’s will was law. Propaganda presented Mussolini as the modern Caesar and Hitler as the savior of the German people. This personal rule replaced institutions with charisma.

Fascism also mastered the art of **mass mobilization**. Through rallies, symbols, uniforms, and slogans, it created a sense of emotional unity. The **Nuremberg rallies**, attended by hundreds of thousands, were choreographed to project strength, harmony, and national purpose.

Modern technologies—radio, cinema, newspapers—allowed fascists to penetrate private life, turning propaganda into a form of social control. Citizens became participants in a **theatrical performance of loyalty**, where politics became spectacle.

Even today, echoes of this can be seen in populist rallies, online nationalism, and performative patriotism—where **emotion replaces deliberation** and **spectacle replaces substance**.

4. Glorification of Violence

Fascism's intolerance for opposition was absolute. Political parties, free media, and trade unions were banned. Dissenters were imprisoned, tortured, or executed.

Paramilitary organizations like the **Blackshirts (Italy)** and **Brownshirts (Germany)** served as instruments of intimidation and terror. They broke strikes, attacked minorities, and destroyed democratic institutions.

But violence was not only a tool—it was a **moral ideal**. Fascists glorified struggle as the highest expression of vitality. They believed that nations, like species, survive through conquest. Compassion was despised as weakness.

This moral inversion reached its horrific climax in **Hitler's racial imperialism**, where nationalism merged with **biological racism**. The Holocaust represented fascism's most catastrophic realization: the purification of the nation through genocide.

The dehumanization of Jews, Roma, communists, and homosexuals was justified in the language of “cleansing” the national body. The same rhetoric can be found in modern hate movements that frame minorities or migrants as threats to purity or order.

II. Historical Context

Fascism was born out of **crisis—economic, psychological, and political**.

- **World War I** shattered Europe's faith in progress and reason. Veterans returned disillusioned, craving discipline and belonging.
- The **Treaty of Versailles (1919)** humiliated Germany, creating resentment and a sense of betrayal.

- The **Great Depression (1929)** devastated economies, fueling unemployment, poverty, and class tensions.
- The **fear of communism** among the middle class and elites made them receptive to authoritarian promises of stability.

Fascism presented itself as a “**third way**”—rejecting both laissez-faire capitalism and Marxist socialism. It promised to end class conflict by organizing society into **corporations**—bodies representing workers and employers—united under state control.

This illusion of unity appealed to those weary of ideological battles. As historian Robert Paxton noted, fascism thrives when democratic institutions appear **incapable of decisive action**, and citizens seek salvation in strong leadership.

III. Intellectual Background

1. Giovanni Gentile and the Philosophy of the State

Italian philosopher **Giovanni Gentile**, the intellectual architect of fascism, reinterpreted **Hegelian idealism** to justify totalitarianism. He argued that the **state is the embodiment of the ethical spirit**, and individuals gain meaning only through participation in it.

In Gentile’s view, there was no distinction between the individual and the state—*“The individual exists only in relation to the state; the more completely he identifies himself with it, the more he realizes himself.”*

This philosophy turned liberalism upside down: instead of protecting individuals from the state, fascism **demanding their absorption into it**. The result was what Gentile called “**ethical totalitarianism**”—a regime claiming moral legitimacy in controlling every aspect of life.

2. Nietzsche, Sorel, and the Cult of the Will

Although **Friedrich Nietzsche** was not a fascist, his ideas about the “*will to power*” and the creation of values by heroic individuals were distorted by fascists to glorify domination and hierarchy.

Likewise, **Georges Sorel’s** concept of **myth and violence** inspired fascist aesthetics. Sorel argued that myths—like the “general strike” for socialists—could mobilize masses emotionally. Fascists adapted this, using the myth of the “nation reborn” to generate collective passion.

These thinkers gave fascism its **irrationalist foundation**: a belief that **emotion and myth** were superior to logic and truth. Politics, in this sense, became **aesthetic theater**—a stage for expressing will rather than reason.

IV. Neo-Fascism

Fascism was militarily defeated in 1945, but its **ideological residues** survive in subtler, democratic forms. Political scientists describe these as **neo-fascism** or **postmodern authoritarianism**—movements that adopt fascist methods while preserving electoral legitimacy.

1. Right-Wing Populism

Across Europe and the United States, movements such as **the National Rally (France)**, **Alternative for Germany (AfD)**, **Vox (Spain)**, and **Trumpism (USA)** echo fascist rhetoric. They emphasize **cultural homogeneity**, **anti-elitism**, and **xenophobia**, portraying themselves as defenders of “the real people” against minorities or migrants.

In countries like **India, Turkey, and Hungary**, majoritarian nationalism has produced similar outcomes—strong leaders claiming to embody the nation’s will, suppressing dissent, and blurring the line between democracy and authoritarianism.

These movements thrive on the **politics of resentment**—the belief that traditional identities are under siege from globalization, feminism, secularism, or liberal elites.

2. Postmodern Authoritarianism

Unlike the 1930s, today’s neo-fascist movements rely not on radio and rallies but on **social media algorithms** and **digital echo chambers**. Disinformation, conspiracy theories, and online hate groups create emotional communities bound by fear and outrage.

This manipulation of digital space serves the same purpose as fascist propaganda: **to replace debate with belief and reason with emotion**. Political scientists have termed this “**postmodern authoritarianism**”—a system that keeps the façade of democracy while hollowing out its liberal substance.

3. The Politics of Fear

Fascism was always theatrical. Modern populist leaders continue this tradition—grand rallies, nationalist iconography, performative masculinity, and dramatized crises.

By portraying the nation as constantly under attack—by migrants, minorities, or moral decay—leaders justify authoritarian measures in the name of security and unity. Fear thus becomes **a political resource**, binding citizens to the regime.