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Historian Daniel Hedinger on Donald Trump, fascism, and the lessons of failed policies of appeasement

Fascism is not a template but an ideology of action, stresses historian Dr Daniel Hedinger of Leipzig University. In this interview, he warns that the second Trump presidency could pave the way for a fascist system precisely through such radical transgressions. He explains how, even in the 1930s, imperial expansion and mutual radicalisation tore apart the world order of the time – and issues a warning: recognising the annexation of Crimea would mark a historic breach of taboo, reminiscent of the fatal errors of appeasement policy. A conversation about the global dynamics of fascism and historical lessons.

Dr Hedinger, is Donald Trump a fascist?

This question has been around since Trump's first presidency, but the clarity it demands is problematic. It obscures a key characteristic of fascism: its rise is always the result of a gradual process marked by surges of radicalisation. So let me put it the other way around: if we can say with absolute certainty that a politician is a fascist, it's already far too late – and here, speaking German, I deliberately use the masculine form of the German word, as history is strikingly short on female fascist leaders, let alone dictators.

Fascism is based on a revolutionary ideology that aims at the rebirth of individual nations and overturns existing social, cultural, economic and political orders. However, the debate about the phenomenon has focused too long and too heavily on questions of definition, which in turn led to seemingly clear answers that shut down any further discussion. The trouble is: even in a pseudo-fascist autocracy or a quasi-dictatorship, life can already become difficult – depending on your skin colour, gender, or beliefs. What we can say with certainty at this point is that fascism has been on the rise for several years – and not just in one country, but across the globe. And this has quite a lot to do with Trump.

In your book about the Axis powers, Die Achse, you show that fascism was historically a transnational phenomenon, marked by mutual radicalisation and the unfolding of global dynamics. Where do you see parallels – but also differences – between that and the renewed rise of anti-liberal movements, and the dynamic that once linked the Axis powers Germany, Italy and Japan?

The world order of the interwar period collapsed because Japan, Italy and Germany destroyed it in concert. In doing so, all three countries radicalised each other in a mutual and cumulative process. What is often overlooked, however, is that this breakdown began on the imperial peripheries of East Asia and Africa – well before it reached Europe in the second half of the 1930s. In the interwar period, fascist radicalisation therefore drew especially on transimperial cooperation and competition. As a result, even at that time, fascism was not merely a European phenomenon but a global one.

We should be cautious about drawing direct parallels. But translated into the present, this implies two things in my view: first, we need to pay very close attention to such processes of radicalisation, especially when they involve crossing boundaries. Fantasising about occupying the Panama Canal or Greenland is one thing; launching a military invasion is

quite another.

The latter has not happened so far – and this leads to my second point: attention is currently focused heavily on Trump and the fascist drift in the United States. But that is probably far from our biggest problem – even if media coverage might suggest otherwise. Because unlike the Axis powers of the past, the US today is by no means a "have-not" nation. In other words, in the event of a fascist revolution, many Americans would have far more to lose than to gain. In Germany, by contrast, things appeared very different to many people at the start of the 1930s, in the context of the Great Depression.

The US also has a long democratic tradition with robust institutions. That places certain limits on further radicalisation and fascist drift. Admittedly, the first hundred days of Trump's second presidency seem to contradict that. Yet in recent days we've also seen him hesitate repeatedly. Fascism, however, is an ideology of action – and it remains to be seen what can actually be enforced within the system. What is deeply concerning is that Trump is promoting an imperial agenda. This is likely to have a profoundly destabilising effect in many parts of the world for years to come.

Fascist regimes not only aim to aggressively reshape their own society and culture – they also pursue outward expansion. Your new book Munich 1938, which explores the policy of appeasement in the 1930s, is due out this autumn. Even today, many people advocate a "realistic" approach and a pacifist arrangement with expansionist regimes. What is your view on this from a historical perspective?

Chamberlain's great mistake – one for which history has never truly forgiven him – was precisely that he believed Hitler was acting "realistically" and had limited aims. The Munich Conference was the result of that belief. And the consequences were monstrous. Overnight, a border that had existed for centuries simply vanished into thin air. And once the borders began to shift, peace in Eastern Europe was no longer conceivable. A few months later, Hitler ordered the occupation of what was left of Czechoslovakia. This marked the transition from an ethnonationalist to an imperial policy. And from that point on, things turned truly bloody. Before 1938, the victims of National Socialism numbered in the thousands; after that, in the millions.

One problem is that not every would-be dictator is automatically the next Hitler. Since 1945, the "lessons of Munich" have been invoked to justify all manner of US interventions. But of course, not every dictator has had similarly far-reaching ambitions. In such cases, appeasement and coexistence can indeed be viable options. As the recent peace proposal shows, Trump now appears to be betting that Putin can be pacified by ceding Ukrainian territory. That is, in itself, a highly risky gamble.

But the issue goes much further than that: recognising the annexation of Crimea would constitute a watershed moment in international law. In response to the occupation of Manchuria in 1931, the United States developed the so-called Stimson Doctrine, which holds that the violent acquisition of territory will not be recognised. This principle was incorporated into the UN Charter and international law and, put simply, became one of the pillars on which the post-war order rested. If the United States now abandons this principle, Europe will inevitably have to ask itself how far it is willing to go to defend it. As our book shows, this is roughly the same dilemma that was faced by representatives of the Western democracies in the context of appeasement. In that sense, we are back in 1938. The fact that we are once again confronted with such questions in acute form also reveals just how far the erosion of the existing world order has already progressed.

About Daniel Hedinger

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Leipzig-based historian Dr Daniel Hedinger.
Photo: Daniel Hedinger

In June 2020, US President Donald Trump views a section of the border wall between Mexico and the United States.
Photo: Courtesy Donald J Trump
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