

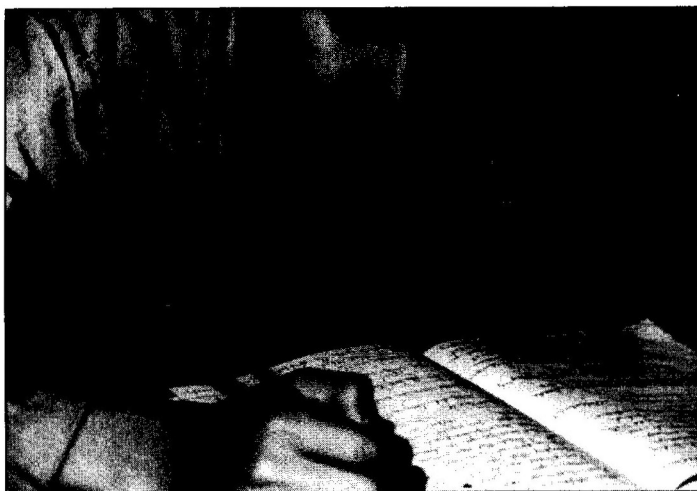
R E S O U R C E   B O O K

*FACING HISTORY*  
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HOLOCAUST AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR

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*Threats to Democracy*

Fascism was not solely a German or Italian aberration, nor a historical phenomenon confined to the 1930s and '40s. It recurs wherever the immune system of a society is weakened by economic decline and political exhaustion, whenever democratic politicians try to fend off a challenge from the far right by acceding to the political mythology of racial or cultural purification.

As the worldwide depression deepened in the 1930s, some people turned to communism. Others were attracted to fascism—a political system that seemed to offer an alternative to both democracy and communism. Fascists opposed democracy, because it is “too slow” and divides a nation against itself. Democrats, they insisted, put selfish individual interests before the needs of the state. Fascists, on the other hand, place their faith in a strong, charismatic leader who expresses the will of the nation and satisfies the desires of the masses.

Benito Mussolini, a former socialist, established the first fascist government in Italy in 1922. It served as a model for Germany’s. In both systems, the leader’s or *fuhrer’s* word was law. He was not dependent on a legislature, courts, or voters. Whenever he changed his mind, public policy changed. According to Hitler, a *fuhrer* is a leader “in whose name everything is done, who is said to be ‘responsible’ for all, but whose acts can nowhere be called into question,” because “he is the genius or the hero conceived as the man of pure race.”

Such a leader is not an emperor nor an aloof dictator. He knows what is going on around him. Again, in Hitler’s words, he is a “practical psychologist and an organizer—a psychologist in order that he may master the methods by which he can gain the largest number of passive adherents, and an organizer in order that he may build up a compact body of followers to consolidate his gain.” Among those followers are an elite group of advisors who are the “racially fittest” and who have been formed from “the struggle for power which is characteristic of nature.”

This glorification of the nation’s leader is based on the belief that people are “capable neither of heroism nor intelligence.” They are “swayed only by gross and violent feelings like hatred, fanaticisms, and hysteria.” So the “simplest arguments” must be “repeated again and again.” They must be “fanatically one-sided and with unscrupulous disregard for truth, impartiality, or fair play.”

Both Mussolini and Hitler maintained that only a few people were intelligent enough to rise in the world and that those men had the obligation to rule. Decision making was too important to be left to the people. It required a “man of the people” who could control the people. They, in turn, would give him unquestioning obedience.

Many people found fascism appealing in the 1930s. There were fascist groups not only in Italy and Germany but also in England, France, and the United States. Zabedi Barbi, a social psychologist, argues that many people were attracted to fascism because it "promised to solve the problems and give the people purpose and power." Other experts trace the rise of fascism to economics. They note that fascists were often brought to power by the rich and powerful people who saw democracy as a threat to their prestige, wealth, and influence. Still others, like Fritz Stern, believe the attraction lay in the clarity and simplicity of the solutions fascists offered.

## CONNECTIONS

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Draw a diagram showing how power is divided in a democracy. Who holds power? What role do the people play? What part do laws play? Draw a diagram showing the division of power in a fascist state. Where does power lie? What role do people play? What part do laws play? How well does either diagram square with reality?

Was the society described by Kurt Vonnegut in "Harrison Bergeron" (Chapter 2, Reading 1) a fascist society?

Reread the views of Carl Schurz and Otto von Bismarck (Chapter 2, Reading 6). Which of Hitler's ideas might each find attractive? Which would he disapprove of? Would either man be likely to join the Nazis?

In the early 1900s, people used words like *man* and *mankind* in two ways. Sometimes these terms referred to all of humankind, women as well as men. At other times, they referred only to men. When Hitler speaks of a fascist leader as "the man of pure race" or "the man of the people," in which sense was he using the word *man*? How was he linking racism with leadership? Research Mussolini's ideas about race and leadership. How were they similar to Hitler's? What differences seem most striking?

Hitler claimed that the people are "capable neither of heroism or intelligence." He insisted that they are "swayed only by gross and violent feelings like hatred, fanaticisms, and hysteria." How did the parade and the speech described in Reading 1 build on these beliefs?

In 1993, many people were surprised by the rise of fascism in the former Soviet Union. Editorial writer Alan Berger does not believe it should have been a surprise. In his view, "fascism was not solely a German or Italian aberration, nor a historical phenomenon confined to the 1930s and '40s." It can recur "wherever the immune system of a society is weakened by economic decline and political exhaustion, whenever democratic politicians try to fend off a challenge from the far right by acceding to the political mythology of racial or cultural purification."<sup>12</sup> According to Berger, why

are people attracted to fascism? How do you explain the appeal of fascism? Record your ideas in your journal so that you can refer to them as you continue reading.

What is the best way to combat fascism? Journalist I. F. Stone believed that it is by keeping alive "the tradition of freedom; it must be freshly taught, explained, and fought for in every generation." He went on to say that a "society in which men are not free to speak their minds is not a good society no matter what material benefits it may offer the few or the many. The only absolute value I would affirm is freedom of the mind. Without it there cannot be social justice which is our duty toward others."<sup>13</sup> Compare his views to those of Hannah Arendt in the overview. What connection do they both see between thinking and social justice? Why do they see that link as critical to fighting fascism?