

# Introduction

*What you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening.*

DONALD J. TRUMP, 2018

*Since then, a struggle between the truth and the lie has been taking place. As always, this struggle will end victoriously for the truth.*

ADOLF HITLER, 1941

*You must believe me because I have the habit—it is the system of my life—of always and everywhere saying the truth.*

BENITO MUSSOLINI, 1924

One of the key lessons of the history of fascism is that racist lies led to extreme political violence. Today lies are back in power. This is now more than ever a key lesson of the history of fascism. If we want to understand our troublesome present, we need to pay attention to the history of fascist ideologues and to how and why their rhetoric led to the Holocaust, war, and destruction. We need history to remind us how so much violence and racism happened in such a short period. How did the Nazis and other fascists come to power and murder millions of people? They did so by spreading ideological

lies. Fascist political power was significantly derived from the co-optation of truth and the widespread promulgation of lies.

Today we're seeing an emergent wave of new right-wing populist leaders throughout the world. And much like fascist leaders of the past, a great deal of their political power is derived from questioning reality; endorsing myth, rage, and paranoia; and promoting lies.

In this book, I offer a historical analysis of fascists' use of political lies and their understanding of the truth. This has become a highly relevant question in the present moment, an era that is sometimes described as post-fascist and sometimes as post-truth. The book presents a historical framework for thinking through the history of lying in fascist politics in order to help us think through the use of political lies in the present.

Lying is, of course, as old as politics. Propaganda, hypocrisy, and mendacity are ubiquitous in the history of political power struggles. Hiding the truth in the name of a greater good is a hallmark of most, if not all, histories of politics. Liberals and communists and monarchs, democrats, and tyrants have also lied repeatedly. To be sure, fascists were not the only ones lying in their time, nor are their descendants the only ones lying in ours. Indeed, the German Jewish philosopher Max Horkheimer once observed that the submission of truth to power is at the heart of modernity.<sup>1</sup> But the same argument can be made for ancient times. In more recent history, studying fascist liars should not mean letting liberals, conservatives, and communists off the hook. Indeed, lies and an elastic understanding of the truth are a hallmark of many political movements.<sup>2</sup> But the point I want to make clear in this book is that fascist and now populist liars play in a league of their own.

Fascist lying in politics is not typical at all. This difference is not a matter of degree, even if the degree is significant. Lying is a feature of fascism in a way that is not true of those other political traditions. Lying is incidental to, say, liberalism, in a way that it is not to fascism. And, in fact, when it comes to fascist deceptions, they share few things with others forms of politics in history. They are situated beyond the more traditional forms of political duplicity. Fascists consider their lies to be at the service of simple absolute truths, which are in fact bigger lies. Thus, their lying in politics warrants a history of its own.

. . .

This book addresses the fascist position on truth, which lays the foundations of what became a fascist history of lies. This history still resonates in our present time whenever fascist terrorists, from Oslo to Pittsburgh and from Christchurch to Poway, decide after turning lies into reality to act on them with lethal violence.

At the time I finished this book, a fascist massacred twenty people at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, in the worst anti-Hispanic attack in the history of the United States. This fascist terrorist invoked a “truth” that has nothing to do with actual history or with reality. In fact, he invoked “the inconvenient truth” in the title of his short manifesto. The killer maintained that his attack was a preemptive action against Hispanic invaders and that “they are the instigators, not me.” He was especially concerned about the American-born children of Hispanic immigrants, whom he clearly did not consider real Americans. In doing so, he promoted a vile and racist metric that he, and others, believe should be the standard for determining

American citizenship or legal status. This metric is based on things that never happened: immigrants do not cross the US border with the intention to conquer or contaminate. But this is not what the racist ideology of white supremacy alleges.

Fascist racism itself is based on the lie that humans are hierarchically divided into master races and inferior races. It is based on the purely paranoid fantasy that the weaker races aim to dominate the superior ones and that this is why the white races need to preemptively defend themselves. These lies led the killer to kill. There was nothing new in the terrorist's conflation of lies and death or his projection of his racist and totalitarian views onto the intentions of his victims. Fascists had killed many times before in the name of lies masquerading as truths. But in contrast to previous histories of fascism, this time fascists share common goals with populists in power. In other words, their racist views are shared with the leadership at the White House.

Fascism acts from below, but it is legitimized from above. When the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro openly denigrates Afro-Brazilians or when the American president Donald J. Trump talks about Mexicans as rapists or an "invasion" arriving in "caravans," they legitimate fascist thinking in some of their political followers. Racist lies, in turn, proliferate in public discourse. As the *New York Times* explained following the El Paso shooting, "At campaign rallies before last year's midterm elections, President Trump repeatedly warned that America was under attack by immigrants heading for the border. 'You look at what is marching up, that is an invasion!' he declared at one rally. 'That is an invasion!' Nine months later, a 21-year-old white man is accused of opening fire in a Walmart in El Paso, killing 20 people and injuring dozens more after writing a manifesto railing against immigration and announc-

ing that ‘this attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas.’”<sup>3</sup>

The same lies that motivated the El Paso killer are at the center of Trumpism and the so-called effort to Make America Great Again. Lying about things that are part of the permanent record has become part of the American president’s daily routine. Trump continuously has used specific propaganda techniques, lying without consequence, replacing rational debate with paranoia and resentment, and casting reality itself into doubt.<sup>4</sup> Trump’s attacks on the mainstream media and the extensive documented instances where he claims he didn’t say something that is in fact in the public record are related to the history of fascist lies analyzed in this book.

Further, the Trump agenda transforms ideological premises, often based in paranoia and fictions about those who are different or feel or behave differently, into actual politics that include adopting racist measures specifically targeting Muslims and Latino immigrants, as well as denigrating black communities, neighborhoods, journalists, and politicians. At the same time, he has defended white nationalist protesters who attended the march in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a counterprotester was murdered.<sup>5</sup> As Ishaan Tharoor explained in the *Washington Post*, “He has stoked white-nationalist grievances among his base while demonizing, belittling or attacking immigrants and minorities. Just in recent weeks, the president launched tirades against minority congresswomen and spoke of the nation’s inner cities as zones of ‘infestation.’ Ahead of the 2018 midterm elections and now, as his reelection campaign gets into full swing, he stirred fear and anger about an ‘invasion’ of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, warning of an existential peril marching into the country.”<sup>6</sup>

How is it possible for the White House to promote and provoke acts by fascist terrorists? As I explained in my previous book, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, we are witnessing a new chapter in the history of fascism and populism, two different political ideologies that now share an objective: to foment xenophobia without preventing political violence. Fascist assassins and populist politicians maintain common goals.

In contrast to fascism, populism is an authoritarian understanding of democracy that reworked the legacy of fascism after 1945 in order to combine it with different democratic procedures. After the defeat of fascism, populism emerged as a form of post-fascism, which reformulates fascism for democratic times. Another way of putting it: populism is fascism adapted to democracy.

In the United States, it is not surprising that people whose ideology aligns with Trump's might engage in political violence, from harassing immigrants on the streets to sending bombs to individuals Trump labeled "enemies of the people." These forms of political violence occur outside the direction of the US government and its leadership. And yet Trump bears the moral and ethical responsibility for fostering a climate of violence.<sup>7</sup>

This climate of violence is fomented in the name of racist lies that are repackaged as truth.<sup>8</sup> This situation bears a great many similarities to the fascist lying in history. In fact, there are strong historical ties between German and American fascism. The Nazi party admired US racist and segregationist policies during the early twentieth century, modeling its Nuremberg laws on Jim Crow legislation, which formally legalized public racial segregation.<sup>9</sup> Hitler himself admired stories by the German writer Karl May about the Aryan conquest of the American West. Today Hitler's ideology is echoed in the American neo-Nazis' belief that they are

inheritors of the Aryan legacy and responsible for defending it against an invasion.

With the benefit of history, we know that fascist lying had horrible consequences. We know what happened when fascist lies were transformed into reality. It was not only people who supported Hitler's racist policies that made German fascism successful but also people who simply did not care that a defining element of National Socialism was racism. The key difference between then and now is that there is a great deal of condemnation of the president's racist lies and their impact on broad sectors of American society. In contrast to the dictatorial times of Hitler and Mussolini when the free press was eliminated, today the independent press continues to work in the United States. Its task is essential for democracy. Accusing the media of lying, of being untrustworthy, relies on the idea analyzed in this book that only the leader can be the source of truth. In a time when the American president demonizes journalists, even calling them "enemies of the people," the independent press continues to report the lies and corroborate the facts.

This is not only an American story. In Brazil, Bolsonaro, who is called "the Trump of the Tropics," has similarly demonized journalists, glorified the country's dictatorial policies, and subscribed to despicable lies about the environment. Against the facts of climate change, both Trump and Bolsonaro have supported fabrications that are directly linked to one of the biggest crimes on the planet now—the rapid destruction of the Amazon. As with fascist lies about "blood and soil," populist falsehoods are tied to violence not only against people but also against the earth. As *The Guardian* reported, the Amazon forest "is being burned and chopped down at the most alarming rate in recent memory[,] . . . [a]t a clearance

rate equivalent to a Manhattan island every day.” Bolsonaro denied the facts about the exponential increase in deforestation under his rule and accused his own state agency of providing “false figures.” As the *New York Times* reported, “That claim was unfounded.”<sup>10</sup>

As the history of fascism demonstrates, questioning these lies is of key importance to the survival of democracy. The fact that Trump is stoking suspicion of our electoral system without real evidence should not be taken lightly. For example, he claimed that millions of undocumented people in California voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and that election fraud existed in other states—claims that he himself could not prove. These and other recurrent examples of Trumpist lying stand as serious attacks on democracy. They do so in a manner that unsettles faith in democratic institutions just as the fascists did. However, a key difference, so far, is that populists merely want to diminish the power of representative democracy, whereas fascists wanted to end democracy. Today we know that democracy needs to be actively defended because democratic institutions and traditions are not as strong as many believe them to be. Indeed, lies can destroy democracy.

The aim of this book is to understand why twentieth-century fascists regarded simple, often hateful lies as truth and why others believed them. Historically, lies have been the starting point of undemocratic politics, a fact that had disastrous consequences for fascism’s victims. For this reason alone, the history of lying cannot be excluded from the inquiries of historians of modern political violence, racism, and genocide.

The prominent fascist leaders of the twentieth century—from Mussolini to Hitler—regarded lies as the truth incarnate in themselves. This stood at the center of their notions of power, popular sovereignty, and history. An alternate universe where truth and



falsehood cannot be distinguished rests on the logic of myth.<sup>11</sup> In fascism, mythical truth replaced factual truth.

In the present, lies again seem to increasingly replace empirical truth. As facts are presented as “fake news” and ideas originating among those who deny the facts become government policy, we must remember that current talk about “post-truth” has a political and intellectual lineage: the history of fascist lying.