

THE WESTERN PATRONAGE OF FASCISM AND ITS INTERNATIONALISATION FROM 1945 TO 1991

Original Article

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ABSTRACT

The post-1945 international order has conventionally been portrayed as a definitive break from fascism and a triumph of liberal democracy, yet the historical evidence suggested a far more complex continuity that held significant implications for understanding modern authoritarian resurgence. This analysis examined the period between 1945 and 1989 through a historical-materialist and post-colonial lens, emphasizing how institutional practices embedded within Western security, financial, and cultural infrastructures reproduced core fascist imperatives. Archival material, declassified intelligence records, and comparative case studies demonstrated that the post-war order incorporated former Nazi cadres into Western intelligence networks, institutionalized authoritarian interventions through covert CIA operations and debt-driven IMF–World Bank policies, and legitimized these practices through a Cold War cultural discourse that externalized fascism onto communist adversaries. The comparative evidence indicated that these measures collectively formed a liberal-fascist hybrid that preserved hyper-nationalism, racialized exclusion, and executive exceptionalism within ostensibly democratic frameworks. The case ultimately showed that the post-war liberal order did not extinguish fascism but instead reconfigured it into technocratic forms that continued to shape global governance. Recognizing this lineage offered a critical foundation for future research on contemporary far-right movements and the institutional logics that enable their resurgence.

Keywords: Cold War, democracy, fascism, imperialism, NATO, totalitarianism

INTRODUCTION

The assumption that fascism was conclusively defeated in 1945 and that liberal democracy emerged as the only viable political horizon after 1989 has shaped mainstream political thought for decades. This teleological narrative was further strengthened by Fukuyama's influential "end of history" thesis, which positioned liberal democracy as the final stage of political evolution (1). Yet the resurgence of far-right populist movements across Europe, the Americas, and South Asia over the past decade signals that the historical closure presumed by post-war liberal optimism was neither complete nor stable. These contemporary movements not only draw upon fascist iconography but also operate comfortably within electoral democracies, challenging the belief that democratic institutions inherently inoculate societies against authoritarian revival. This pattern invites a deeper inquiry into why fascist logics continue to re-emerge despite the apparent global triumph of liberal democracy. Recent scholarship complicates the notion of fascism as a discrete historical aberration confined to the interwar and wartime periods. Toscano argues that fascism should instead be seen as a recurring "repertoire of crisis governance," activated whenever capitalist systems encounter crises of legitimacy (2). This conceptualization broadens the analytical frame by shifting attention away from formal party structures toward the underlying political, economic, and racialized mechanisms that enable authoritarian forms of crisis management. Within this lens, the period often celebrated as the "golden age of democracy" between 1945 and 1989 appears less a normative rupture from fascism and more a recalibration of its core imperatives—anti-communism, racial hierarchy, oligarchic power, and state-sanctioned exceptionalism—rearticulated through the institutions of the emerging liberal order.

A key limitation in conventional political science scholarship lies in the subsuming of fascism under the broad category of "totalitarianism," which artificially equates Nazism and Stalinism and obscures the complicity of Western liberal states in authoritarian practices (3). To avoid this dilution, this study synthesizes six defining elements of fascist governance derived from Paxton, Mondon and Winter, and Albertazzi and McDonnell: crisis-based national grievance, public willingness to exchange liberties for security, leader-centered mobilization of resentment, directed violence against scapegoated groups, systematic erosion of institutional checks, and the preservation of capitalist accumulation as a core objective (4–6). These criteria allow fascist logics to be identified even when they manifest without overt symbols, single-party rule, or explicit claims to fascist lineage. The emerging literature highlights three important strands that collectively expose the deep structural continuities between fascist formations and post-war liberal governance. First, revisionist historians have documented the integration of former Nazi networks into Western intelligence frameworks such as NATO and the CIA, revealing a deliberate recycling of fascist expertise in the service of Cold War geopolitics (7,8). Second, critical international political economy scholars illuminate how colonial racial hierarchies were reproduced through Bretton Woods institutions, embedding structural coercion into global development regimes (9,10). Third, cultural theorists challenge the ideological function of the "totalitarian" paradigm, arguing that it serves to absolve the West of its own authoritarian tendencies by externalizing the label onto its adversaries (11,12). Together, these perspectives underline the need to understand fascist continuity not merely as a political phenomenon but as a systemic relationship between coercion—covert operations, counterinsurgency, and militarized intelligence—and consent, often secured through debt-driven development and economic restructuring. In light of these conceptual and empirical gaps, this paper seeks to interrogate the extent to which post-1945 liberal institutions facilitated, rather than eradicated, the persistence and internationalization of fascist logics. The objective of the study is to critically examine fascism as a structural, recurring mode of governance embedded within the post-war global order, and to analyze how its mechanisms became integrated into both the coercive and developmental architectures that shaped global politics after 1945.

Structural Fascist Continuity

The post-war incorporation of fascist personnel and methods into Western intelligence structures represents one of the clearest demonstrations of systemic continuity rather than rupture. Operation Gehlen (1946–1956) is the most well-documented example of this phenomenon. Reinhard Gehlen, former Wehrmacht intelligence chief for the Eastern Front, negotiated immunity for himself and his network by offering the U.S. Army access to his entire intelligence apparatus. The resulting "Gehlen Organization" became the institutional nucleus of West Germany's Federal Intelligence Service (BND), employing more than 4,000 former SS and Wehrmacht officials by 1956 (1). Declassified CIA documents further indicate that Gehlen's operatives were tasked with "special operations" inside the Soviet Union that replicated SS methodologies, including targeted assassinations, sabotage, and psychological warfare (2,3). These transfers demonstrate that fascist operational logics were not dismantled but selectively repurposed within the emerging U.S.-led security architecture. A parallel development occurred within NATO through the creation of clandestine "stay-behind" armies under Operation Gladio. These units recruited neo-fascist militants in Italy, Belgium, and Greece to execute covert actions—most notably false-flag attacks intended to be blamed on left-wing groups (4). The 1969 Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan, initially attributed to anarchists, was

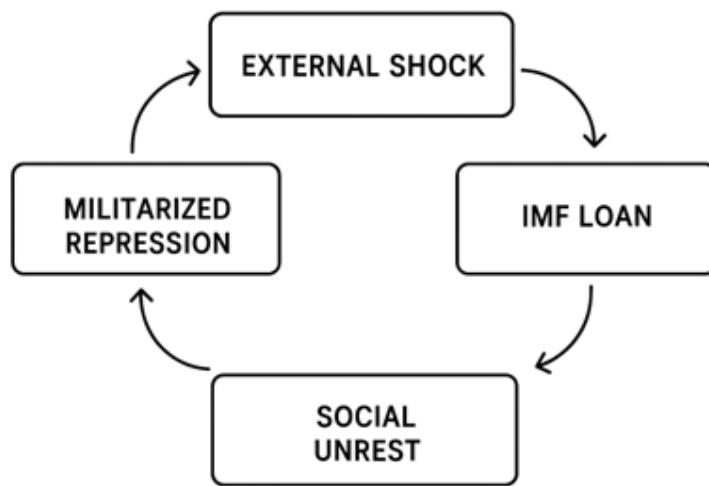
later linked to Ordine Nuovo, a neo-fascist organization embedded within Gladio's unofficial networks (5). Such activities reflect fascist criterion #4, wherein symbolic and material violence against scapegoated groups becomes a core governance strategy, even while being obscured by the institutional legitimacy of liberal democratic alliances.

Exporting the Model

Beyond Europe, the circulation of fascist governance strategies occurred through U.S. Cold War interventionism. Between 1947 and 1989, the CIA attempted regime change in 72 sovereign states, targeting many elected, socialist, or communist governments and replacing them with right-wing authoritarian regimes that reproduced all six fascist criteria (6). Several illustrative cases highlight the pattern. In Iran (1953), the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh facilitated the consolidation of the Shah's rule, accompanied by the rise of the SAVAK secret police known for widespread torture (7). In Guatemala (1954), U.S.-backed forces toppled Jacobo Árbenz, leading to decades of counter-insurgency violence that claimed over 200,000 Indigenous Mayan lives (8). Similarly, in Chile (1973), the coup against Salvador Allende established Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, which disappeared thousands and imprisoned tens of thousands (9). Indonesia's anti-communist purge of 1965, supported by U.S. intelligence, resulted in the massacre of between 500,000 and one million alleged communists (10). Taken together, these interventions demonstrate that when popular sovereignty threatened U.S. geopolitical or economic interests, the preferred alternative was not democratic accommodation but the installation of regimes grounded in fascist mechanisms of repression and oligarchic consolidation.

Debt Trapping, the IMF, World Bank, and Neo-Colonial Fascism

Economic governance institutions—particularly the IMF and World Bank—also reproduced fascist logics through ostensibly technocratic interventions. By the late 1970s, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) became mandatory conditions for loan access, compelling states to implement austerity, privatization, and currency devaluation. The resulting socioeconomic transformations mirrored classical fascist configurations in which corporate power expands while vulnerable populations face intensified coercion and criminalization. Zambia's copper-sector reforms between 1991 and 1996 provide a stark example. IMF-mandated privatization transferred roughly 80% of government revenue streams to multinational corporations; when miners protested deteriorating conditions, the government, highly dependent on Paris Club creditors, deployed military units, resulting in the deaths of 11 workers (11). Paxton's stage model of fascist escalation is discernible in this pattern: an initial economic crisis, followed by elite-driven mobilization, the use of state force, and the consolidation of oligarchic interests. As illustrated in Figure 1, this cyclical dynamic reveal that global financial institutions played a significant role in embedding coercive economic discipline within nominally post-colonial states.



Anti-Totalitarianism and the Red Scare

The ideological justification for these practices was facilitated by the Cold War discourse of "totalitarianism," which conflated fascism and communism while obfuscating authoritarian tendencies within liberal democracies themselves. Although popularized by Arendt in 1951, the concept was rapidly weaponized by U.S. policymakers, cultural elites, and media institutions to portray leftist movements as existential threats requiring extraordinary state powers (12). Hollywood films such as *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951) and *The*

Red Menace (1949) reproduced depictions of communists as subhuman infiltrators, legitimizing both foreign interventions and domestic surveillance (13). At home, legislation such as the Smith Act of 1940 criminalized political dissent, leading to the imprisonment of 215 Trotskyist trade unionists and the blacklisting of over 300 artists through HUAC (14). Despite functioning as a multi-party democracy, the United States demonstrated fascist criteria #5 (scapegoating and demonization) and #6 (systematic erosion of civil liberties), showing that authoritarian practices emerged not as anomalies but as integral components of Cold War governance.

Case Study: The Post-Soviet Instillations of Fascism

The collapse of the Soviet Union offered a renewed arena for the re-institutionalization of fascist governance mechanisms under the guise of market liberalization. Between 1991 and 1998, the IMF and U.S. Treasury provided approximately USD 28 billion in loans to former Soviet republics, conditioned on rapid privatization and fiscal austerity. The most extreme outcome occurred in Russia, where voucher privatization (1992–1994) produced an oligarchic class that came to control around half of national GDP, while male life expectancy plummeted from 65 to 57 years (15). The political consequences were equally severe. In 1993, President Boris Yeltsin ordered the shelling of the Russian parliament in response to legislative resistance, an act applauded by the Clinton administration as a defence of “democratic reform.” This episode illustrates how neoliberal restructuring provided ideological cover for fascist criteria #3 (charismatic authoritarian leadership) and #6 (executive exceptionalism), enabling the concentration of political and economic power in ways that undermined democratic accountability.

Table1: Summary of Case Studies Demonstrating Structural Fascist Continuities in Post-War Global Governance

Case Study / Country	Year(s)	Intervening Actor(s)	Mechanism of Intervention	Key Outcomes	Fascist Criteria Reflected
Operation Gehlen (Germany)	1946–1956	U.S. Army, CIA	Recruitment of former SS/Wehrmacht officers; integration into BND	4,000+ ex-Nazi personnel absorbed; covert operations in USSR using SS-style tactics	#4 Violence as governance; #6 Preservation of capitalist order
Operation Gladio (NATO / Europe)	1949–1990s	NATO, CIA, local far-right groups	Stay-behind armies; false-flag operations; covert sabotage	Piazza Fontana bombing (1969) linked to neo-fascists; suppression of left-wing forces	#4 Targeted violence; #5 Institutional erosion under secrecy
Iran (CIA-sponsored coup)	1953	CIA, MI6	Overthrow of elected PM Mossadegh; installation of the Shah	Expansion of SAVAK; torture of dissidents; suppression of sovereignty	#3 Leader authoritarianism; #4 Violence; #6 Elite preservation
Guatemala (Overthrow of Árbenz)	1954	CIA	Paramilitary invasion; psychological warfare	Replacement with right-wing dictatorship; 200,000 Mayans killed	#4 Mass violence; #5 Destruction of democratic structures
Chile (Pinochet coup)	1973	CIA, Chilean military	Military destabilization coup; campaigns	3,000 disappeared; 80,000 detained; neoliberal dictatorship	#3 Authoritarian leader; #4 Violence; #6 Corporate oligarchy
Indonesia (Anti-communist purge)	1965	Indonesian Army, supported by U.S. intelligence	Coordinated mass killings; provision of hit lists	500,000–1 million killed; establishment of military dictatorship	#4 Systematic extermination; #6 Elite consolidation

Case Study / Year(s)	Intervening Actor(s)	Mechanism of Intervention	Key Outcomes	Fascist Reflected	Criteria
Country					
Zambia (IMF-mandated reforms)	1991–1996	IMF, World Bank	SAPs forcing privatization & austerity	80% revenue shifted to multinational corporations; military crackdown killing 11 miners	#4 State violence; #6 Corporate capitalism strengthened
United States (Red Scare & McCarthyism)	1940s–1950s	U.S. Government, HUAC, FBI	Anti-communist laws; surveillance; blacklisting	215 unionists jailed; 300 artists blacklisted; erosion of civil liberties	#5 Scapegoating; #6 Erosion of institutional rights
Russia (Post-Soviet privatization)	1992–1994; 1993 coup	IMF, U.S. Treasury, Yeltsin administration	Shock therapy privatization; executive militarization	Oligarchs captured 50% of GDP; male life expectancy fell to 57 yrs; parliament shelled in 1993	#3 Authoritarian leader; #6 Executive exceptionalism

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicated that fascist imperatives did not require actors who openly identified as fascist, nor did they depend on explicit ideological declarations. Instead, the six fascist criteria appeared to be activated by a wide spectrum of political administrations, including liberal, social-democratic, and technocratic governments, once these governments operated within international security, financial, and legal frameworks that structurally enabled such practices. This interpretation aligned with earlier scholarship that described fascism as a mode of governance rather than a historically isolated ideology, and it supported the broader argument that authoritarian logics persisted through institutional continuity rather than political rupture (16-18). The study's synthesis demonstrated that policies and interventions viewed as routine components of Cold War statecraft mirrored the same mechanisms of coercion, executive concentration of power, racialized exclusion, and economic corporatism documented in interwar fascist regimes, thereby extending existing literature on the embeddedness of authoritarian strategies within liberal international orders. The results carried several important implications (19,20). First, they suggested that the so-called "golden age of democracy" functioned less as a period of genuine democratic consolidation and more as a discursive shield that enabled Western states to deflect scrutiny by projecting fascism onto communist adversaries. This narrative allowed liberal democracies to preserve a self-image of moral superiority while simultaneously authorizing covert operations, austerity regimes, surveillance, and militarized interventions that reflected the very imperatives they outwardly condemned. Second, these findings demonstrated the importance of evaluating political systems not solely according to formal institutional labels but through an examination of whether their practices reproduced the operational criteria historically associated with fascist governance (21-24). This perspective advanced a more nuanced understanding of authoritarian continuity by highlighting how financial institutions, intelligence agencies, and foreign-policy structures collectively shaped global political outcomes.

The study possessed several strengths, particularly its integration of diverse bodies of scholarship and its ability to draw connections across geopolitical contexts and historical periods. The comparative approach strengthened the interpretive depth of the findings by showing that the recurrence of fascist logics followed consistent patterns across different regions and institutional arrangements. Additionally, the alignment of case-based evidence with established theoretical frameworks enhanced the analytical credibility of the conclusions. However, certain limitations were acknowledged. The study relied on historical and archival literature, which, although rich, depended on the availability and accuracy of declassified documents and secondary analyses. Variability in data quality across regions and periods may have introduced bias into the interpretation of events. Furthermore, as the study focused primarily on state-level interventions and international institutions, it did not fully incorporate grassroots or subnational variations in authoritarian responses. Future research would benefit from expanding the empirical base to include localized resistance movements, comparative quantitative datasets, and contemporary analyses of emerging populist formations to assess whether similar structural dynamics remained operative in the present geopolitical climate (25,26). Despite these limitations, the findings offered important insights into the

continuity of fascist mechanisms within systems often assumed to be antithetical to authoritarianism. They underscored the need for more critical engagement with the institutional foundations of liberal governance and encouraged future research to examine the conditions under which democratic states adopt coercive strategies that align with historical fascist criteria.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrated that a reinterpretation of the post-1945 international order revealed a persistent continuity of fascist logics rather than the rupture often celebrated in mainstream narratives. The integration of former Nazi cadres into NATO structures, the global deployment of covert operations by intelligence agencies, the imposition of financial conditionalities that reshaped post-colonial economies, and the cultural marginalization of leftist movements collectively illustrated how a liberal-fascist hybrid emerged within institutions widely regarded as pillars of democracy. These findings contributed to existing knowledge by highlighting that contemporary authoritarian resurgence did not introduce foreign ideological elements but instead reactivated long-embedded mechanisms within the post-war liberal framework. Further research was needed to deepen empirical understanding of how these dormant imperatives evolved over time and how modern political actors continued to mobilize them in new forms. The overarching takeaway underscored that addressing the authoritarian undercurrents of the liberal order required moving beyond the self-congratulatory “totalitarian” dichotomy and engaging more critically with the structural legacies that shaped present global governance.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author	Contribution
Daud Rafi*	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published

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