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Far Far Away and Close to Home: Fascism and Resistance Through Star Wars

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Introduction

Star Wars has been a pop culture phenomenon for nearly five decades. Between the twelve feature films, over a dozen television shows, countless toy lines, and a massive extended universe of books and comics dating back to the 1980s, no generation born in the West since the 1960s has been spared from its influence. Whether children and adults become lifelong fans or merely pick up bits and pieces by simply existing in pop culture, most children and many adults can name one character, movie, or influence from the franchise. At its heart, however, *Star Wars* has been predominantly made for an audience of children and teenagers, boiling down complex themes to make them easier to digest, often at the expense of nuance. Most who watch quickly understand the main theme of light vs dark, good vs evil, but deeper themes and connections to history can fly over the heads of many children, and some adults, in the face of spectacular space battles, fantastical aliens, and space magic. Through this unit, I hope to open the more complex themes that arise in the franchise and use those to teach students the broader ideas of fear, power, and resistance as it relates to the rise of authoritarianism and fascism and into the modern day. This unit will discuss the themes of *Star Wars*, juxtaposed against the rise of Nazi tyranny and moments of resistance to that tyranny. It will utilize scenes from *Star Wars: Episode I – IV*, but primarily focus on scenes from *Star Wars: Andor*.

Rationale

It has been eighty-one years since the fall of Nazi Germany. The generation that fought to end Nazism is nearly gone and right-wing extremism, including neo-fascism, is on the rise once again across Europe and the Americas. Part of this shift can be attributed to the loss of living memory of the horrors of fascism, growing uncertainty of the future, and the disconnect modern young people have with the past, in part due to the speed of the modern world, the rate of technological progress, and the rise of social media. Between 2014 and 2026, support for extreme right-wing politicians and platforms, including neo-fascists, has risen between 5 and 15% across Europe. Over three billion dollars has been used to support extreme-right wing politicians in the United States alone.[1] Increasingly, these politicians, and the business leaders who support them, have

grown increasingly bold in their use of Nazi speech references, iconography, and through the adoption of policies similar or identical to those of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, as seen in 2025 by world's richest person Elon Musk's use of the Nazi salute and his quote that, "the fundamental weakness of Western Civilization is empathy."

However, the words "fascism" and "Nazi" have been thrown around a lot in American history when someone references a politician they do not like, and thus the words have lost connection to their true meanings for many. This weakening of the term has aided the true fascists in that people have tuned out of the rhetoric. It has become increasingly clear that in-depth education on what fascism is, and what it could mean for society, is lacking; the speed of high school history rarely allows for such in-depth learning to take place. And with many colleges doing away with gen-ed requirements that would have forced non-humanities students to take a few humanities classes, many college graduates never receive a decent education on the subject.

Therefore, it is vital, more than at any point in decades, for students to understand and recognize the markers of fascism and the role they play in fighting against it. To do this, students must also understand that Nazi Germany was not a single coherent mass of goose-stepping murderers lost to a past that they may never fully understand. The Nazis only gained 38% of the vote in the last free election before they were handed power. Many Germans spoke and fought against the rising tide before and during the regime. Lastly, students should understand that the Nazi takeover was not inevitable, and they exploited fear, anger, economic uncertainty, and *some* legitimate grievances with the Weimar government to gain power.

Background Knowledge & Content

This unit is designed to take approximately 7-10 days (assuming 90-minute classes). It is meant as an *extension and realignment* to your World War II unit and is not meant to fully replace your unit on WWII and the Holocaust. The unit covers the rise of fascism in the interwar period and the expansion of tyranny and authoritarianism under the Nazis, as well as examples of internal resistance to the Nazis within Germany during WWII. By drawing comparisons between the Nazis and the fictional Galactic Empire from *Star Wars*, this unit aims to show how tyrannical regimes arise, how those regimes expand their power, and how people accept, ignore, or resist such tyranny.

The unit is meant to act as a springboard to teach tyranny and resistance in general; its lesson can be applied to other conflicts and civil rights movements throughout history. As such, it does not discuss the battles and campaigns of WWII, other than in how they relate to resistance and tyranny within Germany and Italy; therefore, you should teach background context related to the campaigns and battle where appropriate. Additionally, although the unit touches on the Holocaust, it mainly serves as an introduction to the ideology that led to it; a more extensive lesson on the Holocaust is still required.

Defining Fascism

Any unit of fascism must begin with defining the ideology. It is vital for teachers and students alike to understand the complexities around arriving at a single definition of fascism, as well as the ongoing debates between the differences of Italian Fascism and Nazism. Before beginning, make sure your students understand the outcomes of WWI, the Bolshevik Revolution, and communism, as students will not be able to

understand fascism without understanding it as partially a response to communism.

Fascism is one of the most difficult ideologies to define, specifically because one cannot define it simply. Ever since the fall of Nazi Germany in 1945, the word 'fascism' has been thrown about as a rhetorical weapon against one's political opponents so much that it has lost connection to the ideology that wrought so much horror in the twentieth century. It is difficult for teachers to define the term in a way that students can easily grasp because, unlike ideological and economic systems like democracy, communism, capitalism, and authoritarianism, which can be simplified and taught in one or two class periods, easy definitions of fascism are elusive. Teachers instead focus on the specific "quirks" of individual fascist movements, mainly Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, and may offer terms like "nationalism" and "militarism," or concepts like the "sense of superiority" and "targeted hate." The teacher then may think these definitions are "good enough."

But these definitions fail to go beyond the basics of identifying fascism with militarist nationalism. Robert Paxton, whose definition of fascism we will use for this unit, emphasized that, "Some even doubt that the term *fascism* has any meaning other than a smear word. The epithet has been so loosely used that practically everyone who either holds or shakes authority has been someone's fascist." [2] And all someone must do to prove such a statement is spend time on the internet, where a second does not go by that someone somewhere does not call someone they dislike a "fascist." In fact, so elusive has a *simple* definition for fascism been in the mainstream that many on the Left *and* Right use the term to disparage those in the opposite camp. On the Left, the word is often thrown at every conservative, moderate and extremist alike, to the point that the word has become white noise with no meaning. While, on the Right, many big names in politics have put forth arguments that fascism was Left-wing, simply because the word 'Socialism' appears in the National Socialist People's Workers' Party' (Nazi). Yet, fascism *originated* as the opposite alternative to socialism and communism, and therefore is and always was a product of the far right.

Most people understand that fascism is a nationalistic and militaristic ideology; some may even know that it is anti-socialist, but none of those describe the doctrine of fascism – many ideologies have nationalistic, militaristic, and anti-socialist tendencies. One issue is that, "unlike 'conservatism,' 'communism,' or even 'national-socialism', the word 'fascism' offers no immediate statement of aims or principles. It was commonplace for fascist writing that the movement precedes the doctrine, and not vice-versa." [3] In essence, the ideology behind the movement developed over years, not simply through words and writings, but also through action, first in Italy and then in Nazi Germany and beyond; however, no single doctrinal definition had emerged, unlike the writings of communists and Enlightenment champions of liberal democracy. Each fascist nation has put their own spin on the ideology. This, again, makes it difficult to teach, because if historians cannot come up with a clear definition, how will students understand?

This unit uses Robert Paxton's nine "mobilizing passions" of fascism for its definition. However, it is important that students understand the ideology's complexities; teachers should not give into temptation by boiling down the definition into a single-sentence that students can write on tests. His definition will be provided at the end of this section, as like to I lead students through the process before defining it. I start by analyzing a symbol without context, the *fasces*. Then through notes or short readings, I teach students the background of the rise of Italian fascism and German Nazism. Then, and only then, do I give them the definition.

The Fascio

I like to start with the etymology of the word. *Fascism* comes from the Italian *fascio*, a bundle or sheaf, and related to the Latin *fasces*, "an axe encased in a bundle of rods that was carried before the magistrates of Rome...to signify authority and unity of the state." [4] The original *fasces* was meant to signify *authority*, and

the magistrate's power over life and death in ancient Rome (the axe represented the power of execution). However, during the Renaissance, the symbolism of the *fascis* was inextricably linked with a renewed popularity of Aesop's *Fables*, specifically the story of "The Old Man and His Sons" by the Greek Author Babrius. Over twelve centuries later, the fable of reeds being stronger together than as individuals mixed with Renaissance era morality. By the time of Mussolini, the symbol of Roman magisterial power had become a symbol of strength through unity. And it is this "Renaissance-era" view of the symbol I use for this unit, because that's why Mussolini chose it.[5]

When the unit begins, I show an image of the *fascis* on the projector (figure 1), *without* giving students the name of the symbol or its context. I want students to determine the meaning from the symbol alone. I have them point out individual elements – like the rods, the ties, the axe. Next, I show images of the *fascis* used in the United States (figure 2); here I use the Lincoln Memorial statue, but there are hundreds of examples found through a quick internet search of it appearing on buildings and currency in the United States.

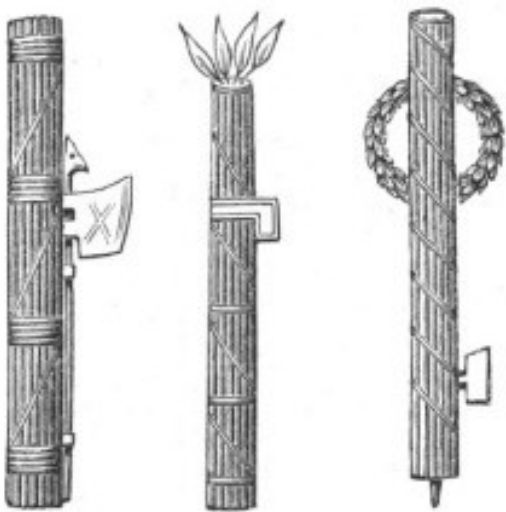


Figure 1: The *fascis*, illustrated 1895, before the rise if Italian Fascism.[6]



Figure 2: The Lincoln Memorial Statue with *fascis*; they are found on the two sides of the chair.[7]

I have students analyze the use of the symbol in U.S. art and architecture, and possible interpretations of its use in such a context, like as a symbol of unity. Finally, I want students to come up with a belief system that

might use the *fascis* as their symbol, and discuss whether such a belief system can be used for good or lead to something bad.

After the analysis of the symbol *without* a name, I give students the name *fascis* and ask if it might sound familiar to anyone; perhaps a few students would link it to fascism. The term and symbol have been used by various political groups, organizations, and nations for centuries, both within and out of Italy, to signify groups on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. In the 19th century, the symbol had appeared on various U.S. government buildings and memorials to signify the unity of the nation. During World War I, the symbol and term were used to describe several Italian groups from across the political spectrum. Mussolini “coined the term *fascismo*” for his nationalist and pro-war revolutionaries, and chose the symbol for his party (figure 3), but he had no monopoly on the word *fascio*, which was used by various activist groups in Italy at the time.[8]

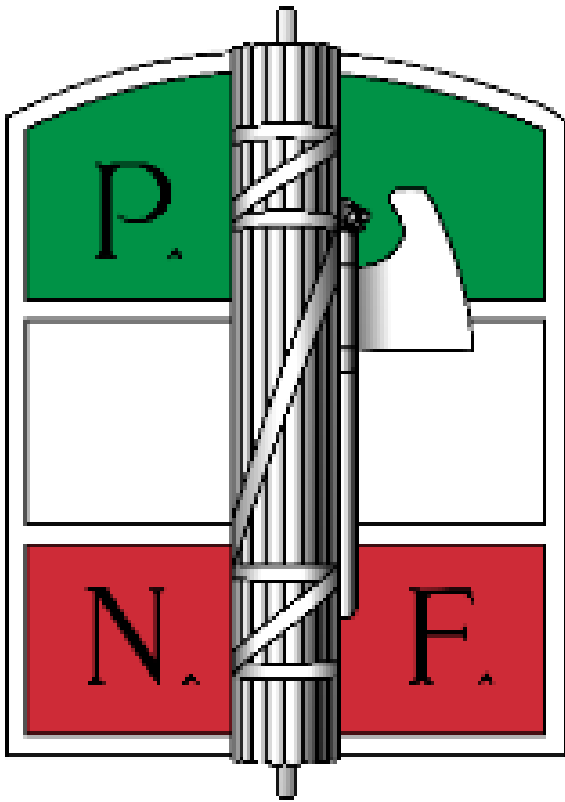


Figure 3: The emblem of the National Fascist Party of Italy, 1921.[9]

I use the *fascis* to talk with students about the importance of symbols and how symbolism can change over time. This can also be adapted with the much more infamous Nazi swastika, which had been used for thousands of years before Hitler, and with much different meanings. Interestingly, the *fascis* has not been ostracized from use in the same way as the swastika, due to the latter greatly overshadowing the former; as a result, the *fascis* has not been removed from art and architecture in the West in the same way as the swastika. You can still find the *fascis* on government buildings and memorials around the United States.

Origins of Italian Fascism

This unit will heavily focus on Nazi Germany, but it is important to discuss the Italian origins of the term and ideology, so here I will provide some background context. Although ideological roots of fascism emerged as

early as the 19th century, and most commonly in France, the twentieth century Fascist movement itself stemmed from the nationalism of World War I. People often repeat how Benito Mussolini was a socialist at the start of the war, which makes it easier for some to paint socialism and fascism with the same brush. And, in a way, Mussolini's turn from the left to the extreme right stems from his impatience of action with socialism, and his overriding sense of nationalism that developed as Italy geared up for and fought the Great War. At the start of World War I, many of the Socialist and Social Democratic Parties in Europe abandoned the usual socialist calls of peace through international worker solidarity to support their home nation in a wave of nationalism. A few groups maintained their anti-war calls in the face of the imperialism of World War I, like Lenin's Bolsheviks, but they were few and far between.[10]

As World War I erupted in July and August of 1914, and Italy remained neutral though officially aligned with the Central Powers through the Triple Alliance of 1882, Mussolini was originally against the war like most socialists. But soon, like many others, he was swept up by nationalism and a long-standing Italian hatred of Austria; many, including Mussolini, called for Italy to side with the Entente against Austria and Germany, specifically because of this hatred. After the war began in 1914, Mussolini published a pro-war article in the Socialist paper *Avanti!*, where he decried neutrality as ultimately aiding the Germans and Austrians, and called for Italy to side with the Entente. That got him fired as editor from the Socialist Party paper, but undeterred, he started his own, which got him kicked out of the Socialist Party altogether in November of 1914. It was then he formed *fascio d'azione rivoluzionaria* (group of revolutionary action), which advocated for the destruction of the German and Austro-Hungarian regimes. Although the group had begun to abandon Socialism, and was nationalist and militarist, it had yet to fully develop the doctrine that would become Fascism in the years following World War I.[11]

When Italy declared war on the Central powers, in May of 1915, Mussolini was delighted. However, the war did not go particularly well for anyone, and even the victors were horrendously battered. In 1917, Italy suffered a disastrous setback at the hands of Austria & Germany at the Battle of Caporetto, after which Mussolini called for the banning of socialist papers (because they decried what they saw as an imperialistic war and called for peace), the suppression of anyone not giving their all for the war, the end of parliamentary government, and proclaimed that, "We, the survivors, we who have returned, demand the right of Governing Italy..."[12] Following the war, when Italy was a victor but a second-class victor, and it became clear that they would not claim all their imperial ambitions, Mussolini and other veterans of the war sought a change. And thus, Mussolini founded what became the Italian Fascist party in Milan in March of 1919, where he "[declared] war against Socialism...because it opposed nationalism." [13] Fascism was born: it was nationalist, it was militarist, it was anti-socialist, it was right-wing, but many of its doctrines were not set.

It is important to emphasize with your students that Fascism had gained power as a *response* to the perceived failures and inadequacies of socialism *and* liberal democracy, which fascists considered to be corrupt, weak, and embodying mob rule; not to mention the fear of Bolshevism spreading out of Russia. In 1919 and 1920, in the aftermath of World War I, the European economy was in shambles, while the Italian economy had taken one of the largest hits amongst the war's victors. Inflation skyrocketed and the socialist parties and labor unions won huge gains in elections. As the economy faltered, socialist organizations occupied Italian factories in large numbers, and aligned themselves further with the Bolshevik cause in Russia, which terrified the middle class, the landed elite, and factory owners. Huge swaths of Northern Italy had essentially become 'Red Zones' by 1920 and, with dire news and stories of atrocity coming out of the Russian Civil War every day, the middle class feared an Italian Bolshevik Revolution. Mussolini's Fascists, although originally hoping to align *with* the socialists, took advantage of the fear of the socialists and began to diverge greatly while also claiming to be champions of the people. They became the party of law and order, despite their constant street

violence with the socialists.[14]

Mussolini used the bad economy, the growing resentment of the socialist parties, who bickered with each other and could not adequately address the nation's problems, and the international fear of Bolshevism to rapidly gain power. In 1921, Fascists attracted large numbers of veterans angry over post-war outcomes, disaffected youth, and members of the middle class; fascist squads attacked socialist papers and labor groups throughout Northern Italy. Mussolini's Fascists gained parliamentary power, initially framing themselves as moderates to gain support from more of the middle classes, posed themselves as the right-wing alternative to socialism, and rose gradually to total control of Italy. Mussolini rapidly expanded the party, merging it with other right-wing groups and then came his march on Rome in 1922, which led to him becoming Prime Minister in 1923, after which he consolidated power and became the ultimate dictator of Italy by 1928.[15]

The Role of Hate in Italian Fascism

When it comes to fascism and World War II, most teachers and students learn a little of Italian Fascism and then immediately focus on the rise of the Nazis and their atrocities. However, it is important to teach students that fascism, in all its forms, relied on hate, "othering," and a sense of superiority in every country it arose. Although it is true that Italian Fascism did not *start* with a fully-realized sense of racial superiority, as did Nazi Germany, Italy *did* develop one. Following the initial Italian conquest of Ethiopia, Fascist Italy passed laws establishing strict segregation and outlawing sexual relations between Italians and Africans, over concerns that Africans would "pollute" the Italian race. At home, Italians were encouraged to be "less nice" and more in keeping with a romanticized view of Roman masculinity. Mussolini hoped to raise Italian standards, harkening back to Imperial Rome, and hoped to imbue Italians with the love of the ruthlessness of war as demanded by their race; some examples include policies like declaring the Anglo-Saxon handshake as soft, instead pushing for the Roman Salute, while forcing civil servants to wear uniforms as some of many new changes.[16]

Although Italy did not have as many Jews as the rest of Europe, almost 50,000 resided in Italy at the start of World War II and, it must be said, that some of them were ardent supporters of the Italian Fascist party at the start. Yet, Fascist Italy passed their first antisemitic racial laws in 1938. This is often seen as a direct result of Hitler's official state visit in May of 1938 and the growing ties between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, "but no direct pressure was ever applied by Berlin." [17] In July 1938, the Italian government published a 'manifesto' outlining the 'bases of Fascist racism,' and "that the overwhelming majority of Italians were of 'Aryan origin'... and called on Italians to 'proclaim themselves...racists' in a way that would elevate them 'to an ideal of superior consciousness of themselves and of greater responsibility' and stated bluntly that the Jews did not belong to the Italian race." [18] Mussolini extolled the virtue of racism by comparing it to ancient Rome while Catholicism's base in Italy, and the historical antisemitic sentiment of the church, made it easier for many Italians to swallow. [19] In late 1938, Mussolini proclaimed to his mistress: "These Revolting Jews, they need to be destroyed...I will slaughter them...I imprisoned 70,000 Arabs: I will be able to imprison 50,000 Jews...they are scum, enemies and cowards. I regret not being brutal enough...I will destroy them." [20]

Antisemitic propaganda flourished in Italy after 1938; in May 1942, Italy conscripted Jews for heavy manual labor. [21] After the war began to go poorly and Sicily fell to the Allies, Mussolini was deposed by his own Council of Fascism in late July 1943; Italy surrendered to the Allies the following September. Germany was prepared: they rapidly took over Italy, rescued Mussolini and placed him back in charge as a puppet, but Italy's antisemitism had already been primed. The Nazis began to liquidate Italy's Jews soon thereafter, with the aid of many Italian Fascists.

In class, it is important to emphasize that fascists rely on hate to focus their ideological fervor. Hate can have

multiple targets and is predominantly hate toward left-leaning groups and religious or ethnic minorities. For the Italians, it was largely the socialists and communists, but they did adopt race laws following the war in Ethiopia and eventually antisemitism. Spanish fascists relied on hating socialists and communists. It is a matter of debate as to whether Portugal was truly fascist, but Salazar was a conservative Catholic and had the backing of the church; they focused their hate on non-Catholics and Africans through their colonial wars...as well as socialists and communists. American fascists of the 1930s focused their hate on socialists, communists, Jews, Catholics, and African Americans.

Were the Nazis Fascist?

I must address this debate before arriving at the definition. Were the Nazis Fascist? This unit uses Robert Paxton's definition from his book *The Anatomy of Fascism*. However, historian Zeev Sternhell, among others, argued that although the ideologies were linked, Nazism stood apart from Italian Fascism specifically because of its antisemitism and frames Nazism as, first and foremost, a racial ideology. They argue that the Italians did not advocate for such things in the same way, which set Fascism apart from Nazism; however, the reality was more complicated.[22] For one, what is nationalism but a sense of superiority? And two, although Italian Fascism did not orchestrate its own Holocaust on the scale of Nazi Germany's, it was a participant in the Nazi Holocaust. And no one should forget the genocide of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians in Italy's war on Ethiopia, or how Italians considered themselves superior to the Africans they were conquering.[23]

Yet, fascists did not have a monopoly on racism, and focusing on simply the intensity of the racism ignores the many other similarities between Italian Fascism and Nazism. Nor did fascism have a monopoly on war crimes or genocide – one only need look at the vast array of evidence from other imperialist, communist, or democratic regimes to prove that point – but hate and “othering” is an ideological cornerstone of fascist ideology, rather than a byproduct of governing decisions. If the Nazi obsession with racial superiority and the orchestration of the Holocaust is why some argue that Nazism stood apart from Fascism, I do not consider that strong enough evidence; I agree with Robert Paxton's central argument that “all fascisms mobilize against one enemy, internal as well as external, but that the national culture provides the identity of that enemy.”[24] Advocates of Nazism being different from fascism tend to ignore all the similarities in action between the two ideologies.

Hitler's antisemitism was there long before his rise to power, but both Italian Fascism *and* German Nazism gained power through their opposition to Marxism and not through Hitler's belief in racial superiority. Once gained, Hitler used his power to spread his racism to its terrifying end, yet it was no coincidence in that he had to minimize his racist rhetoric during the process of gaining power in 1932-34 and was only able to do so through his opposition to Marxism and by stoking conservative fears of a Bolshevik revolution in Germany. And lastly, Hitler himself framed his ideology in the lens of Italian Fascism. He framed his rise after Mussolini's, kept a bust of the Duce in his office, and wrote in 1942 how he was a “deep admirer and disciple” of the founder of Italian Fascism.[25] And if Hitler himself considered himself to be a Fascist, how are we to argue?

I am not going to go deep into Hitler's initial rise and the creation of the Nazi Party here. Although I will discuss later how teachers can use *Star Wars* to teach Hitler's appointment as Chancellor. But it is vital to address one issue that often arises in any modern discussion about the Nazis: if the Nazis were right-wing, why did they use the word ‘socialist’ in their name? I have received this question from a student on occasion, but it is often seen on the internet, usually by the extreme right, trying to paint Nazism as a product of the extreme left. This can sometimes be from students regarding Hitler's use of the word “Socialism,” so it is important to know how to answer.

To put it simply: Hitler used the word as a recruitment tool for the Nazis. First, it must be emphasized, Hitler despised social democracy, socialism, and Marxism. Look no further than his own writings. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler discussed how he was at first drawn to the social democrats, as they claimed to be for the German worker, but then said, “what most repelled me was [social democracy’s] hostile attitude toward the struggle for the preservation of Germanism.” [26] He went on to compare the social democrats to, “a pestilential whore, cloaking herself as social virtue and brotherly love, from which [he] hoped humanity will rid this earth with the greatest dispatch, since otherwise the earth might well become rid of humanity.”[27] Throughout *Mein Kampf*, Hitler attacks the policies and ideologies of the social democrats, socialists, Marxists, and the entire left as a whole. So then, why did he call his party National Socialists if he despised socialists? And why would he use the red on the Nazi flag and propaganda posters, if red was already associated with the socialists and Marxists? First, Hitler’s view of socialism is different than Marx’s and the Democratic Socialists; second, he hoped that unsuspecting Germans, not understanding the difference between National Socialists and the Marxists, would enter Nazi Party meetings. Hitler stated that, “We chose the red color of our posters after careful and thorough reflection, in order to provoke the Left, to drive them to indignation and lead them to attend our meetings if only to break them up, in order to have some chance to speak to the people.”[28] Lastly, in the early days of the party, there was a more left-leaning side, in part as a result of this recruitment tool, and centered around Ernst’s Röhm’s *Sturmabteilung* (SA). Once Hitler gained power, however, the SA had outlived its usefulness and was eliminated in the Night of the Long Knives in 1934.

The Definition of Fascism

Robert Paxton’s definition of fascism, which he calls the “mobilizing passions,” provide a relatively simple framework for fascist action and doctrine, most of which can be applied to all fascist governments in history. These nine concepts will be applied to some of the activities for this unit. This can be broken down into simpler language for those students who need it. I found that the full definition can be difficult for low readers and English-language learners, yet it is important to fully explain each concept.

Robert Paxton’s Nine “Mobilizing Passions” of fascism:[29]

1. a sense of overwhelming crisis beyond the reach of any traditional solutions;
2. the primacy of the group, toward which one has duties superior to every right, whether individual or universal, and the subordination of the individual to it;
3. the belief that one’s group is a victim, a sentiment that justifies any action, without legal or moral limits, against its enemies, both internal and external;
4. dread of the group’s decline under the corrosive effects of individualistic liberalism, class conflict, and alien influences;
5. the need for closer integration of a purer community, by consent if possible, or by exclusionary violence if necessary;
6. the need for authority by natural chiefs (always male), culminating in a national chieftain who alone is capable of incarnating the group’s historical destiny;
7. the superiority of the leader’s instincts over abstract and universal reason;
8. the beauty of violence and the efficacy of will, when they are devoted to the group’s success;
9. the right of the chosen people to dominate others without restraint from any kind of human or divine law, right being decided by the sole criterion of the group’s prowess within a Darwinian struggle.

Teaching Through *Star Wars*

Before diving into the *Star Wars* portion of this unit, I highly recommend discussing with your class what they

know of the franchise. Do not assume your students know much about it as pop culture is far more fragmented than it was when the originals or even the prequels were released. You do not need to go into depth, but students should at least know about the Galactic Republic, the Jedi, the Galactic Empire, and Emperor Palpatine. Students should brain-dump everything they know of the franchise as a class before diving deeper into the themes. Speaking of which, do not assume that students, even those who watch *Star Wars*, understand the themes of the franchise. They may simply have watched it for the action. This unit requires students to make deeper connections between history and the pop culture they consume. In the end, one of the classroom activities presented at the end of the unit has students answer the question: Is *Star Wars*' Galactic Empire Fascist?

Themes of Star Wars

Star Wars was largely made for kids and teenagers, so nuance is often lost and the worst atrocities of fascist regimes are minimized. We see in *A New Hope* an entire planet, Alderaan, destroyed by the Death Star with a single command; billions are killed...but off screen and in a spectacular flash of light. That is a genocide, but one 'palatable' for children. A side effect of that approach is that it renders the atrocity as a moment of excitement, rather than a brutal massacre of an entire people. Princess Leia barely grieves at losing her family, friends, and home, nor does she showcase any form of PTSD, which further minimizes the tragedy. Therefore, I do not recommend using *Star Wars* to teach the Holocaust; although aspects of the topic will be touched on in this unit, the topic is too heavy to be taught entirely through such a medium. However, you can use *Star Wars* to teach fascist scapegoating, racism, and atrocity in a more general sense. The Galactic Empire shows hate and creates propaganda toward various groups throughout *Star Wars* canon and commits atrocity and massacre against them.

The original *Star Wars* was first released in 1977, thirty-two years after the fall of Nazi Germany. George Lucas grew up with World War II footage and films. The dogfights in the original trilogy were all based on World War II footage of aerial combat. So much so that WWII newsreel footage was used as special effect placeholder during early cuts of *A New Hope*.^[30] But it was not simply the war footage, it was the ideological underpinning of the war that also influenced Lucas. One need not look further than the use of "Stormtroopers," the Galactic Empire's elite soldiers, to understand the connection. Although the term was largely used for elite German soldiers, trained to assault trench lines during World War I, Hitler adopted the term for his SS and SA paramilitary units in the twenties.

A running joke in *Star Wars* discussions is how bad Stormtrooper performance and marksmanship are, but that was not originally the case. In the opening scene of *A New Hope*, we see Stormtroopers rapidly clear a ship of rebel resistance with minimal casualties, before committing war crimes on Tatooine. In the Battle of Hoth in *Empire Strikes Back*, the Stormtroopers quickly overwhelm rebel defenses and capture the rebel base, and then later seize control of Cloud City with quick precision. It was only the main characters, who had plot armor, that the Stormtroopers consistently missed; this began the long-standing joke of Stormtrooper incompetence, which was cemented by their farcical performance in the Battle of Endor in *Return of the Jedi*. However, Stormtroopers were originally meant to allude to the infamous Nazi SS and were never meant to be a joke. It was not until *Star Wars: Andor* (2022 - 2025), where the Stormtroopers reclaimed their fearsome reputation.

Although George Lucas heavily used the imagery of Nazi Germany for the evil Galactic Empire in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, Lucas himself stated that "the prequel trilogy is based on a back-story outline [he] created in the mid-1970s for the original three *Star Wars* movies, so the themes percolated out of the Vietnam War

and the Nixon-Watergate era.”[31] Additionally, he said “he patterned his story after historical transformations from freedom to fascism, never figuring when he started his prequel trilogy in the late 1990s that current events might parallel his space fantasy.” Those current events, at the time of the 2005 interview, before the third prequel’s theatrical debut, were 9/11 and the subsequent Iraq War. And we saw those themes arise again in 2026, with the events surrounding Straits of Hormuz heavily mirroring the trade conflict from *Star War: Episode I: The Phantom Menace*.

Finding and Clipping Your Star Wars Scenes

This unit utilizes *Star Wars: Episodes I – IV*, as well as the Disney+ show *Star Wars: Andor* to teach moments of authoritarianism, fascism, and resistance in fascist Europe. It is recommended that teachers watch the entirety of *Andor* before teaching this unit, as most of the scenes are from there. Scenes are timestamped and all can be found on Disney+; view each clip and pick and choose which they want to focus on, as using all the clips in class will take time you may not have, and you may want to focus on specific moments. The clips range from only a couple of minutes to twenty minutes. I will tie each group of clips to an aspect history of Nazi Germany, with suggestions of how to use it.

The best way to use the clips in your classroom will be through screen-recording from your computer using your computer’s built in software (windows+shift+S on Windows PC). Depending on what browser you use, the recording may not come through and show as a black screen; to circumvent this issue on Chrome you can go to Settings > System > turn off graphics acceleration. Once you grab the scenes you want to use, you can save them to your computer and upload them to a PowerPoint or Google Slide. This will allow you to quickly flip from scene to scene without having to continuously load new media in Disney+ and scroll to the specific clip you want to use.

All scenes come with brief explanations of the scenes followed or preceded by the related history. It is important to have students take notes on the historical background throughout, which they can reference later. Additionally, I have grouped certain scenes together, as they relate to a single point or event. When scenes are discussed, I will reference scenes 1, 2, 3, etc., rather than say the name of the scene. The scenes are numbered and timestamped based off Disney+ streaming timecodes. Timestamps are listed as ‘hour: minute: second’.

Scenes From *Star Wars* and the History they Evoke

I can see teachers using these scenes in one of three ways: one, the scene can be shown *before* the deeper discussion of historical context, i.e. attempt to get students to surmise the underlying point (why are we watching this?); two, students can learn the context and then view the clip and try to assign meaning now that they understand the context; or three, scenes can be tied to a primary source document where students analyze and compare them. Great discussions can be had on how things are similar or different between the worlds of science-fantasy and the harshness of Fascist Europe and how pop-culture can mimic history. Since there are multiple clips timestamped in this unit, a teacher could go back and forth between the three approaches.

The majority of scenes come from *Andor*, the most “adult” of *Star Wars* media; it shows what I call “creeping fascism” (how fascist ideas slowly take over society). Fascism overwhelms people with small inconveniences and hardships, making it difficult to foment resistance against that process when the majority of people simply just want to get by. Additionally, *Andor* shows how many will be drawn to opportunities for self-advancement within empire, rather than to precarious rebellion; the character of Cyril Karn models this behavior in the

show.

This unit tackles three central themes as they relate to tyranny and fascism: first, fascism's use of scapegoats and fear to create a crisis to seize power; second, how authoritarian regimes slowly tighten that power, often using scapegoats, and third, how different forms of resistance grow from within the fascist state as a response to growing authoritarianism. For this third point, I primarily use the historical example of the *White Rose*, but there were thousands of resistance movements in Germany and occupied Europe, both violent and nonviolent; I would do them a disservice to simply touch on them here, but you can easily find a wide range of resistance sources to "plug" into these *Star Wars* scenes.

The Corruption of the Republic

The German Weimar Republic arose in the aftermath of German defeat during World War I. It was left weak in the wake of Versailles – economically, militarily, and politically. Furthermore, the German military saw themselves as being stabbed-in-the-back by the civilians and politicians at home; in their eyes, the military had been winning the war (it was not, but high-ranking officers tended to lie to their troops about how the war was going) only for those at home to force Germany's surrender. This led to scapegoating, both against communists and Jews. Although antisemitism had always been a staple of Hitler's ideology, and had been prevalent in Europe for centuries, his extreme version of antisemitism turned many away from Nazism in the early years. It was the communists and socialists that Hitler and the Nazis used as their primary scapegoats to seize power. The economic crisis of the early Weimar era saw waves of successive governments rise and fall, which made it easier for opponents to paint the Republic as failing or corrupt. Hundreds of political organizations, from the left and right, clashed in the streets trying to wrest control of regions or the entire country.

In *Star Wars*, we see this in Senator's Palpatine's painting of the Galactic Republic as corrupt and then blaming the Jedi for an "assassination attempt" and "attempt to seize power." In much the same way, Mussolini and then Hitler painted their governments as corrupt or weak, attempting to erode central authority and gain some for themselves. For Mussolini, this was quick, merely as span of a few years. For Hitler, following the failures of his Beer Hall Putsch in 1923, it took over a decade. Then comes the crisis, where the fascist group gains power by scapegoating another group. For both Mussolini and Hitler, that was the communists and socialists. I already discussed how Mussolini used the economic crisis in Italy, and the rise of socialist groups, to seize power; but Hitler's Nazis did the same, by aligning with the conservatives and moderates through fear of the left's power in the Reichstag. Again, Hitler's antisemitism played a role in his scapegoating, but it was by scapegoating the communists that he was able to gain complete control of Germany.

Additionally, both the real Weimar Republic, and the fictional Galactic Republic from *Star Wars*, had deep-rooted issues and corruption. Both Hitler and the fictional Palpatine exploited these problems to secure power. Fascist regimes have never developed out of fully-functional political systems. Fascists and authoritarians can use both the weaknesses and freedoms of democracy to wedge open underlining societal issues and use them to show that the "system is broken and only I (or we) can fix it"!

I explore these ideas further with my students through an analysis of Karl Popper's *Paradox of Tolerance* and freedom of speech. *The Paradox of Tolerance* was written in 1945, as part of Popper's large work, *The Open Society and Its Enemies Vol. I.*, at the end of World War II. It explains how tolerant societies can lead to the intolerant gaining or seizing power. The excerpt I use in class is shown below:

Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them... In this formulation, I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be most unwise. But we should claim the right to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of their fists or pistols. We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. We should claim that any movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, in the same way as we should consider incitement to murder, or to kidnapping, or to the revival of the slave trade, as criminal.[32]

The Weimar Republic was one of the more open societies in Europe by 1929. It was a democracy with comparatively more freedom than most countries in Europe at the time. And yet Hitler was able to use that openness to take power and, once in power, destroyed the system that gave him the freedom to come to power in the first place. This is important to emphasize with your students; there is an activity concerning the *Paradox of Tolerance* in the activities section. Another good source showing this in the Weimar Republic is the first half of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's video *The Path to Nazi Genocide*. You can find a video guide on their website; the video is posted on YouTube. Both are cited in the bibliography.

The *Star Wars* examples below can be used as a comparison to the Weimar Republic, showing the weakness of the Republic and how an authoritarian can exploit those weaknesses:

Group 1 Scenes: Palpatine becomes Chancellor.

1. *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* [1:20:25 — 1:24:17]: Showcases how Palpatine is seeding the “corruption” of the Senate.
2. *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* [1:26:48 — 1:29:26]: Showcases how the legislature is framed with an inability to respond to a crisis; they must elect a new Chancellor, a “strong” chancellor.

Group 2 Scenes: Palpatine gains emergency powers.

3. *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* [opening crawl — 7:00]: This clip shows the crisis and threat of attack that allows Chancellor Palpatine to “justify” his gaining of emergency powers in the next scene.
4. *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* [1:33:39 — 1:35:26]: This clip shows Palpatine gaining his emergency powers.
5. *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* [2:12:53 — End]: Showcases the suspicions of the Jedi and ominous nature of the coming Clone Wars, which in *Star Wars* canon is the “crisis” allowing the fascist regime to takeover.

“A sense of overwhelming crisis beyond the reach of any traditional solutions”

In 1923, Mussolini was able to use both Italian anger at post-war outcomes and the fear of bolshevism during

Italy's post-WWI economic crisis to seize power. In 1933, Hitler was able to exploit anger at Germany's defeat in the Great War, the Great Depression, *and* a singular event: the Reichstag Fire of February 27, 1933.

The Reichstag fire ushered in the immediate crisis moment for Hitler and his Nazis. Although Hitler had already been appointed Chancellor, he did not yet have total control; Hindenburg was still president and the moderate conservatives in government still thought they could control Hitler. However, when the Reichstag burned down, and it was found that a communist did it, Hitler had his scapegoat. The aged and soon to be dead president Hindenburg passed what became known as the Reichstag Fire Decree, which essentially suspended civil liberties across the waning days of the Weimar Republic. This was ostensibly to preserve law and order, but it predominantly targeted socialists and other political enemies, whom the moderate conservatives feared more than anyone else. It opened the door for Hitler to arrest and ban socialists and communists in the government...but also suspend civil liberties across Germany.[33]

So crucial was the burning of the Reichstag to Hitler's rapid suppression of freedoms that many assumed that the Nazis were behind it in a sort of false-flag operation, yet there is no evidence of this, and most historians agree that Hitler merely took advantage of the event rather than orchestrating it. This brings to mind another point about resistance to fascism. Fascists, and authoritarians in general, will oppress groups to the point that those groups start to use violence to fight back, which then gives the fascist regime the "legitimacy" for further oppression by using propaganda to call attention to the oppressed group's "violence." I will discuss more of this later.

We see a version of the Reichstag Fire in *Star Wars*, with Palpatine's scapegoating of the Jedi and painting them as enemies of the state. The Jedi's "assassination attempt" on Palpatine is used as the Star Wars universe's Reichstag fire, combined with the image of the destruction of the Jedi temple in a literal fire. The scenes used to show this to your students are found below in Group 3.

Group 3 Scenes: Palpatine scapegoats the Jedi.

6. *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* [34:43 — 40:17]: Showcases the meddling of the chancellor in independent bodies (the Jedi); the Senate allows the Chancellor to stay in office after his term expired.
7. *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* [43:00 — 46:03]: This sets up the Jedi as more of a scapegoat.
8. *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* [1:10:52 — 1:19:43 (extension to 1:25:14)]: This is a long scene, and can be trimmed, but it is the full scapegoating of the Jedi and burning of the Jedi temple.
9. *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* [1:34:00 — 1:36:23]: This shows Palpatine taking full control; Padmé delivers one of the most memorable lines in the prequels: "This is how liberty dies, with thunderous applause."

Creeping Authoritarianism

The last group of scenes of this section shows the creeping of the authoritarian state. Soon after Hitler took power, the Nazis passed laws that made it easier to arrest suspected dissidents and sentences were extended for seemingly minor crimes. In addition, sentences of those already in prison could be easily extended. With your students, you should focus on how a rebel action "allows" the authoritarian state to gain legitimacy to further oppression.

Group 4 Scenes: Fascism spreads in the Galactic Empire

10. *Star Wars: Andor* – Season 1, Episode 7 [02:51 – 06:47 (extension to 10:56)]: Skipping approximately fourteen years into the reign of the Empire, this takes place immediately after a major rebel raid on an Imperial payroll depot, and the Imperial response. The extension shows the rebel response.
11. *Star Wars: Andor* – Season 1, Episode 7 [40:46 – 45:48]: Following the previous, this shows the “creeping” of fascism, where justice becomes injustice.
12. *Star Wars: Andor* – Season 1, Episode 9 [37:01 – 43:01]: A longer scene; can be trimmed. This shows a scene inside an Imperial work camp and shows how sentences were often extended in fascist states.
13. *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* [56:59 – 59:11]: A classic scene that sums up the previous three scenes. “The more you tighten your grip.”

“We Rebel”: Resistance within the Authoritarian State

It is difficult to teach students about forms of resistance to fascism, and tyranny in general, while also saying typical teacher lines like, “violence does not solve anything.” For, out of the three fully realized fascist states of the 20th century (Italy, Germany, and Spain), two were brought down through unimaginable violence and only after they launched brutal wars of conquest against their neighbors. The other, Spain, had to wait for Franco’s death, after decades of fascist oppression, before change could be had. And it would be difficult to argue whether internal resistance within Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany would have brought down those regimes if they had not invaded their neighbors and brought on the anger of the world. Yet, millions of people resisted the Nazis, and not all of them through violence. It is important to teach students that *every* act of resistance is important when fighting tyranny, and one does not necessarily need to “pick up a gun” to resist. Resistance builds upon itself.

As before, this next section describes a selection of scenes, all from *Andor*, and how they show the difficulties and bravery of resistance; they will be tied to moments of resistance to Nazi oppression. Think of these as “points of analysis,” that will allow you to teach through them in class. And, as before, you can have students try to connect these moments to the nine benchmarks of fascism started earlier, but now through the lens of resistance.

Scenes used for this section:

Introductory Scene:

14. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 1, Episode 10 [30:57 — 38:28]: This scene, of an imperial agent feeding information to the resistance, is a great way to start the resistance part of the unit. Luthen’s speech at the end is *Star Wars* at its best.

Scene 14 is a good introduction to the section on resistance, where Luthen’s monologue about resistance defying generational boundaries, and how he is building a world he will never see, resonates across history and through hundreds of resistance movements. In the original three *Star Wars*, we get a simplified view of resistance: there is the evil Galactic Empire and the militarized, scrappy but well-organized, rebellion against it. We get some grey characters (like Han Solo and Lando), who start as criminals resisting the Empire for personal gain, only to later “find their heart” and commit to the cause altruistically, but mostly we see a heroic rebellion fighting back against the Empire in pitched battles. But resistance is often more nuanced than that; *Andor* shows that nuance.

Group 5 Scenes: Sparks of Resistance and the Power of Words

15. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 1, Episode 5 [10:29 — 13:01]: In preparation for the rebel raid, which we see the aftermath in scenes 10 – 12, Cassian is working as a mercenary, not yet all-in on the rebellion, where he meets the character of Nemik with a “manifesto.” Nemik dies during the raid, but his words endure.
16. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 2, Episode 12 [26:01 — 28:54]: In the last episode of the series, nearly five years after scene 15, Imperial attempts to stem the tide of anti-imperial propaganda fail. News of the Death Star is leaking, and an imperial officer is at the end of his line. Nemik’s manifesto is everywhere.
17. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 1, Episode 10 [2:35 — 6:39]: This takes place immediately following scene 12, when Andor is imprisoned in an imperial work camp.
18. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 1, Episode 12 [full Scene: 25:00 — 39:10; just the speech: 32:25 – 36:30]: This longer scene shows a planet at the heart of season one waking up to rebellion during the funeral of one their old leaders.

One of the most basic but vital forms of resistance is resistance through truth. Fascist regimes depend on propaganda and controlling the narrative to maintain order. If the people do not know of the atrocities committed by the state, or if they have been indoctrinated to accept the atrocity, then they will not resist. If those living under tyranny are trained to accept that there are echelons of people, and some are second-class citizens, then it is easier to paint groups as villains and for people to dismiss or minimize atrocity against them. In *Andor* we are introduced to the character of Nemik as a member of the fledgling rebellion and, like many revolutionaries of history, has a “manifesto.” There are two pivotal scenes related to this document.

The first is conveyed in scene 15, where Nemik discusses his ideas to the central character of the show, Cassian Andor, who at this point was only a reluctant mercenary on the run from a warrant. Nemik discusses the tyranny of the Galactic Empire. He states, “the pace of oppression outstrips our ability to understand it...it is easier to hide behind forty atrocities than a single incident.” And in history, we can see what Nemik is talking about. One of the key “arguments” of Holocaust deniers is that there was no way for the Holocaust to have happened because it was “too big.” In the aftermath of WWII, the allies had a massive task on their hands, both in rebuilding Germany, but also in forcing Germans to understand the extreme nature of the atrocities committed by the fascist state. Modern students may struggle to understand how it would have been possible to not see the Holocaust happening around them, but in class I will mention modern atrocities happening around the world, where we have a wide array of evidence emerging every day, and yet people deny or minimize those atrocities. I will sometimes show examples of this on the screen and then have students imagine what it would have been like before the internet.

Nemik dies shortly after creating his “manifesto;” Cassian Andor then makes sure the manifesto is disseminated far and wide; it’s heard on occasion throughout the remainder of the series and, at the end of the series, a recording of Nemik’s manifesto is being broadcast in the headquarters of the ISB (Imperial Security Bureau), where two officers discuss the impossibility of reigning it in any longer (scene 16). The word is out and it cannot be contained. Through this, we can pose several questions to our students: “How can we resist through words?” “What is the importance of literacy to resistance?” “Why are authoritarians afraid of words?”

Nemik’s manifesto states how “the smallest act of insurrection pushes our lines forward.” In scene 17, we see that it often takes people to realize that they are going to die anyways and thus conclude that they might as well die resisting. The imprisoned leader of Andor’s work force, who had believed his sentence was almost over, just learned his sentence was extended indefinitely, and he would probably die in prison. And so, he decides on an escape attempt. One can imagine thousands or millions of these acts of resistance independent

of one another.

On a larger scale, teachers can show scene 15. I have time-stamped the full scene, which shows the incitement from peace to violence, as well as simply the speech at the heart of the scene. This scene speaks for itself, but shows the planet Ferrix on the brink, following the growing control of the Empire across season 1. An interesting way to go about this scene is not through a comparison to fascist Europe, which can be done, but through a deeper analysis of the nature of tyranny itself. I suggest using excerpts from Aristotle's *Politics*: "And it is a device of tyranny to make the subjects poor, so that a guard may be kept, and also that the people being busy with their daily affairs may not have leisure to plot against their ruler." [34] In the speech from scene 18, the deceased character of Maarva, a former community leader, talks about how their planet had been "asleep," going about their day, taking the Empire's money and keeping their heads down. It is important to emphasize that this is a relatively spontaneous uprising, rather than sustained, organized resistance. Ferrix seems to use tropes of representing Ireland: a place with strong folk traditions and solidarity that can, the empire knows, erupt at a moment's notice.

Group 6 Scenes: Resistance through protest and truth-telling. This is the longest sequence.

19. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 2, Episode 1 [part one: 23:21 — 26:30; part two: 27:34 – 29:14; part three: 30:08 – 30:55; part four: 33:14 – 34:53; part five: 35:47 – 38:07]: This is a 5-part scene, all from the same episode.
20. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 2, Episode 5 [part one: 20:14 — 23:10; part two: 29:05 – 35:39; part three: 43:05 – 44:48]: This three-part scene shows the beginnings of a Ghorman resistance to the imperial plan from scene 19.
21. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 2, Episode 7 [15:16 – 17:10] A brief scene highlighting anti-Ghorman imperial propaganda a year after scene 20.
22. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 2, Episode 8 [7:22 – 10:25] This entire episode highlights the Ghorman massacre, which is impractical to show all in class. I have picked out a small scene near the beginning, showing how protest can be used against the protesters. You can watch the episode and determine if there are other parts you would like to highlight.
23. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 2, Episode 9 [Full Scene: 00:15:55 — 00:37:32; Shorter Version: 00:20:32 — 00:31:24; Just the Speech: 00:27:18 – 00:31:24]: This scene shows Senator Mon Mothma, one of the leaders of the resistance, give up her position in the Imperial Senate by giving an impassioned speech about the atrocities on Ghorman from the previous scenes.

The final group of *Andor* scenes (Group 6) focus on the Ghorman storyline, which is the main Imperial atrocity storyline of season 2, whereby the Empire manipulates the people of Ghorman, turns them into a galactic scapegoat, and then proceeds to murder them while they protest. Unlike earlier *Star Wars*, with the genocides brought on by the Death Star, the Ghorman storyline is more visceral, where viewers get to know the people involved. The Ghorman storyline showcases a powerful idea: that perhaps the best time to protest an authoritarian takeover is before it takes place. Once authoritarianism takes root, protest can often serve as a means for the state to clamp down further and paint the protestors as the villains.

In Nazi Germany "there were relatively few incidents of popular protest, not only because of Nazi terror, but also because many, many Germans were invested in the belief that Hitler was a good leader." [35] In *Star Wars*, you see the Imperial propaganda machine spin the Ghorman people as villains for years, so by the time they protest and resist, it's too late. But this does not mean there was no protest at all in Nazi Germany, it was simply that the protests were not against Hitler or Naziism, but against specific criteria. For example, with

most of the men at war, women were left with very little food, so there are records of food protests and other protests against specific inadequacies in the standard of living. The Nazis allowed *certain* protests to occur, if they were not against the state or the leader; it was a way for the Nazis to manage push back against *certain* policies. But then, “resistance...is different from protest. Resistance implies some sort of political activity.”[36] The Nazis considered any unsanctioned organization or leaflet to be political activity, and thus “resistance,” whereas complaints against specific state policies that affected everyday “good” Germans could be a “protest” that was allowed, though closely monitored, by the Gestapo.[37] Protests in Nazi Germany, regardless of context, were still brave, and often dangerous, and are still considered resistance.

The Ghorman story arc in *Andor* highlights the process of scapegoating that may lead to protest and atrocity. Additionally, the Ghorman resistance is meant to mirror the French Resistance of World War II. Scene 19 shows the Empire setting up a propaganda machine to be able to exploit the resources of the planet Ghorman, and eventually commit genocide against its people, like how the Nazis justified their invasion of Eastern Europe during World War II. The scene is modeled after the German Wannsee Conference, which ushered in the Final Solution in 1942; this *Andor* scene is shot nearly identically to the 2001 HBO film *Conspiracy*, which is about Wannsee. Scene 20 highlights the growth of the Ghorman resistance and how their inexperience has led to imperial infiltration. In the end, the head of the Ghorman resistance has a heated conversation with Andor about “letting [the oppression] continue,” when Andor suggests Ghorman is not ready to resist. Eventually, the resistance does form, and the Empire increasingly broadcasts anti-Ghorman propaganda, labeling them as terrorists; this is highlighted by Scene 21. Finally, after years of imperial propaganda and Ghorman resistance, it boils over in scene 22. A protest begins against the acceleration of Imperial resource extraction on Ghorman, and how the Empire is trying to show that the protestors are violent, which “justifies” imperial violence in return. We can see this throughout history and in the modern day: protestors are often labeled as violent in order to justify violence against them and further crackdowns on individual freedoms. Following the Ghorman Massacre, Senator Mon Mothma speaks out against the Empire in the middle of the Senate in an impassioned speech (scene 23), showing how brave acts do not need to be violent to be powerful.

The White Rose: A historical comparison to Nemik’s Manifesto and the power of words.

To help our students examine the role of truth-telling in resistance, we can look at the examples put down by the White Rose. The White Rose was a German anti-Nazi resistance group founded by Hans Scholl and Alexander Schmorel in Munich Germany in the summer of 1942. Its core group also included Willi Graf, Kurt Huber, Christoph Probst, and Hans’ younger sister Sophie Scholl; she became the face and name most associated with the group, due to her being the youngest and due to her outspoken bravery and determination at her own show trial. The White Rose distributed six leaflets in two waves in 1942 and 1943, decrying the Nazi regime, disparaging Hitler, and speaking against the war. Hans, Alexander, and Willi all served for a time on the Eastern front. They returned with stories of German atrocity and the mistreatment of Jews. The second wave of leaflets largely spoke out against the war and brought to the public reliable information on the German defeat at Stalingrad, which the Nazis were downplaying and using it as a recruitment tool.[38]

Hans and Sophie Scholl, as well as Christoph Probst, were all captured distributing flyers in February 1943, soon after the dissemination of their sixth flyer. They were immediately put on trial by a special judge flown from Berlin for the occasion. The trial was short, its outcome already sealed, during which Sophie Scholl made several statements in defense of their actions and against the Nazi state; witnesses say she did not show fear and spoke with confidence. But there was nothing they could do to save themselves; all three were executed by guillotine immediately following the trial. The other three core members were captured and executed by

the summer.

What terrified the Germans, what terrified Hitler, was that these were students, raised entirely in the “New Germany”; they were considered “good, pure Aryans”; they were members of the Hitler Youth; Hans marched at Nuremburg; they went to school in Munich, the cradle of Nazism. How could this happen?[39] It was for that reason that they were dealt with so quickly. The speed of their interrogation, trial, and execution was dizzying. These were *not* the Nazis’ typical scapegoat or enemy of the state; they were supposed to be pinnacles of fascism, the gleaming beacons of indoctrination. Yet, they had spoken out against the party, against the war, and against the Fuhrer. They became a cancer within the fascist state that had to be removed immediately lest it spread. The Nazis tried their best to get rid of the writings of the White Rose, yet they spread beyond the confines of Nazi Germany, appearing in Allied broadcasts and leaflets against Germany within only a few months. The White Rose called out the war and brought news of Nazi atrocities and the ongoing Holocaust to the public. Their second leaflet discussed these atrocities in detail, with sources, and citing hundreds of thousands of Jews killed in Eastern Europe, at a time when the allies had yet to understand or agree on the extent of Nazi brutality (often dismissing reports as “exaggerated”).

Although the White Rose was one of the most famous resistance cells within Germany, they were not alone; others spoke out, or resisted where they could, and others were executed for far less. One example being Wilhelm Lehmann of Berlin, who was arrested and executed for simply writing, “Hitler the mass-murderer must be murdered” in bathrooms.[40] He was executed for seven words on a bathroom wall.

Optional Extensions

I want to briefly highlight two optional extensions. First concerns complacency and the banality of evil; *Andor’s* Syril Karn is a case study. Syril serves as the shows personification of what Hannah Arendt called the “Banality of Evil,” where she referred to Eichmann, the Nazi logistician who led the removal of Jews to Concentration Camps, as a banal, middle management man who was “just following orders.” I do not agree with her assessment, as Eichman knew what he was doing and enjoyed his job; however, plenty of other low and mid-level Nazis do fit that description. Syril begins the show as a low-level corporate security officer who discovers that two security officers were killed (by Andor in self-defense) and Syril wants to bring their killer to justice. From this moment, Syril becomes obsessed with maintaining order and eventually ends up in a bureaucratic middle management position with a role in the imperial aims on Ghorman. He considers himself a good guy and the rebels to be terrorists. He is a banal person who works in the massive bureaucratic machine of the Empire. His story arc is a fascinating case study in the type of person who often makes up the majority of authoritarian regimes, without whom the regime would fall. I do not have the time to discuss it all here, but I recommend watching the show to get the full view of Syril. I highlight the banality of evil and the rigid bureaucracy of authoritarianism in the two following scenes from group 7:

Group 7 Scenes: The Bureaucracy of Empire and the Banality of Evil

24. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 1, Episode 1 [17:15 – 20:42]: This shows Syril’s introduction. He spends the rest of the show chasing Andor and entering the Imperial bureaucracy. His arc brings him to Ghorman in season 2, where he serves as the double agent within the Ghorman resistance; he is a complex character though and eventually realizes what the Empire is doing on Ghorman; unfortunately, in history, many Nazi bureaucrats did not.
25. *Star Wars: Andor* Season 1, Episode 7 [36:14 – 40:45]: This shows the bureaucracy of the Imperial Security Bureau and the rigid structure of the Empire’s security apparatus.

A second optional extension involves the Death Star. It is worth mentioning to students that the Death Star in *Star Wars* shows how real authoritarian regimes seek super weapons in order to better maintain power. Sure, the Death Star is impossibly destructive, but it is based in real history. Hitler desperately sought a nuclear weapon, and it was his attempt at making one that led Einstein to warn Roosevelt, thus jump-starting the Manhattan Project. Hitler also expended vast resources, much like the fictional Galactic Empire, to develop super weapons like the V1 and V2 rockets, jet engines, and over-engineered tanks. It is a trope in *Star Wars* that there is a super weapon at the heart of five of twelve feature films (Rogue One and episodes 4, 6, 7, and 9), as well as several books in the extended universe. Yet, the Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, North Korea, and many other authoritarian regimes in history have sought super weapons, nuclear or otherwise, as a way to maintain power within their own nation and prevent other nations from overthrowing them. The Galactic Empire expends vast resources to make a second Death Star after the first is destroyed simply because they are desperate to maintain order.

Teaching Strategies

Image Analysis

When analyzing images (symbols, cartoons, paintings, posters, photographs, etc.), I often do it through blind analysis, though cartoons usually require some context. The image is presented to the student with little to no context; students write down every detail they see without trying to ascribe a meaning to that detail; next, they guess a meaning; finally, we learn the context and have a discussion on the deeper meaning, connecting the image to history. This fosters critical thinking skills by forcing students to think of the symbolism and composition of an image before understanding the thoughts that went into it. It is good to have students analyze the image individually or in small groups, before discussing it as a class. Some questions to consider for any part of the image analysis:

1. What individual details do you see?
2. What could those details represent?
3. What do you think is the meaning of this symbol/cartoon/poster?
4. What could be the goal or purpose of this image?
5. What is the audience for this image? How do we know?
6. How does this image relate to what we have been discussing in class?
7. What more would you like to know about the events surrounding this image, in order to gain a better understanding?

Primary Source Analysis

The cornerstone of any good history classroom is a primary source analysis. To analyze primary sources, I use Digital Inquiry Group's Historical Thinking Chart. The framework offers a series of questions teachers and students can use when analyzing primary sources; these questions are categorized by whether they help a student source, contextualize, corroborate, or closely read the source. Additionally, many good resources related to teaching primary source analysis are available on their website (you need to create a free account to access these resources).[41]

Socratic Seminar

The best way to analyze the scenes and sources used in this unit is through Socratic seminar. While students are reading or watching a source, I have them write down their initial thoughts, understandings, and questions about the source or scene. A good way to ease students into Socratic seminars is by surveying their prior opinion through a series of simple questions; these can be agree/disagree statements. Afterward, I facilitate discussion by having students share *their own* thoughts and questions. The goal is to get students to discuss the topic with each other and not simply have a series of back-and-forth with the teacher. This can be difficult, so starting in small groups, where one student acts as facilitator for each scene or source, can be beneficial. The role of facilitator may even rotate between scenes. Yet, it may still be difficult to either get students to formulate questions, because often when a teacher asks, “do you have any questions,” students will grumble and say “no,” or to get students to understand what types of questions they should be asking. A good way to jumpstart their critical thinking for Socratic seminars is to put them in the role of a teacher by asking them, “If *you* were teaching this document or video, what questions would *you* ask your students?”

Supplemental Sources

There are thousands of images and primary sources related to resisting fascist tyranny, too many to lay out here. You may want to bring in additional sources to show students the breadth of resistance, that multiple modes of resistance, and that resistance did not always mean violence. I suggest looking into the various methods of the French Resistance, which was not always violent, as well as Jewish resistance to the Holocaust. The unit serves as a steppingstone toward teaching resistance in general. It would be worthwhile, if time allows, to bring in examples from other conflicts or the Civil Rights Movements.

Classroom Activities

Paradox of Tolerance Analysis

Although you can have students complete this on paper, this is more of a short Socratic exercise that should be paired with discussion of the fall of the Weimar Republic and the *Star Wars* scenes related to the fall of the Galactic Republic. Using the Paradox of Tolerance cited earlier in the content section, students must analyze and form an opinion on it. Before students read the Paradox, I ask an introductory question: should there be limits on the freedom of speech and assembly and, if so, what should those limits look like? After discussing that question, I have students read the Paradox and answer the following comprehension questions. Remember, it is important that teachers do not offer their own opinion during this activity, as this is a paradox with no clearly “correct” answer; let students discuss it themselves with you merely as facilitator.

According to Popper...

1. what would happen if the tolerant were not prepared to defend a tolerant society from the intolerant?
2. should a tolerant society ALWAYS suppress the intolerant? What two ways does Popper say should “check” the intolerant?
3. at what point, and for what reasons, should a tolerant society suppress the intolerant?
4. what right should the tolerant claim with regard to intolerance?

After analyzing these questions, I offer the two following questions to foster classroom discussion:

5. What is the “paradox” in Karl Popper’s *The Paradox of Tolerance*?
6. Do you agree with Karl Popper’s argument? Why or why not?

And close with answering the introductory question again:

7. Should be limits on the freedom of speech and assembly and what those limits should look like if they existed?

Fascism Definition Timeline

This is a useful note taking tool throughout the unit. Students will have a simple graphic organizer for a definition of fascism timeline. I will have three columns: benchmarks of fascism, related historical events, and explanation. The left column, “benchmarks,” will be for Paxton’s nine “mobilizing passions” (called benchmarks hereafter) of fascism; students will copy them down during notes, or you can provide them already on the page, or a little of both. The center column, called “related historical events,” will be reserved for events in the history of Nazi Germany and/or Fascist Italy that tie to each benchmark. This can be done in one or two ways. The simple version is through matching: students are provided with a timeline of events in the rise of fascism already filled-out, and then students align those events to each of the mobilizing passions in the graphic organizer. The more challenging way is for students to align events to the graphic organizer through active note-taking, as the historical context is discussed in class. For example, when I teach the appointment of Hitler to chancellor, students should put that in the “sense of overwhelming crisis” row. The third column, explanation, will be where students explain how each event related to their chosen fascist benchmark. There should be enough space available for students to add multiple events and explanations to each benchmark.

Tyranny & Resistance Note-Taking Journal

This is the cornerstone of the unit. It will consist of a multi-page graphic organizer. The cover page will have spots for students to write two definitions each for tyranny and resistance. The first definitions are written *before* diving into the unit; I want students to come up with these definitions as a class and without the content of the unit. We will brainstorm what students think both words mean, with no teacher input other than to direct discussion. Students may need a basic understanding of tyranny if they never came across that word before, but I want them to focus on what tyranny *looks like* from their point of view and not simply a textbook definition. Same goes for resistance, what does resistance mean to them? What does it look like? After the brainstorm, students should write down the definition of each term that the *class* decided on; this initial definition should be short, try to keep it at one sentence. The second definitions for each term will be written *after* the main content of the unit and could be longer.

The bulk of the journal will be an analysis of tyranny and resistance in *Star Wars*. I will have a graphic organizer with four columns: “explanation of the scene,” “questions and observations,” “historical examples,” “tyranny or resistance”? As students are introduced to the scenes from *Star Wars*, they fill out the organizer via Socratic seminar. I recommend splitting students into small groups of three or four (four being ideal). One student in each group will be designated the facilitator, and another the note-taker; these roles should rotate between every scene. As the scenes play out, the note-taker focuses on briefly explaining what is happening in the scene in the first column (explanation of the scene). Everyone else fills out the second column (questions & observations), where students write down anything they found interesting about the scene as it

relates to tyranny, resistance, or fascism. The facilitator also writes down questions they want to ask their group about the scene; you might want to provide students some example Socratic questions: “what is happening in this scene?”; “why do you think we were shown this scene?”; “how does this show tyranny?”; “how does this relate to what we’re learning?”; “how does the Empire/Resistance justify their actions here?”; “how does this change our view on resistance?”; etc. Next, students are given 1-3 minutes to discuss the scene as a group, during which the facilitator asks their questions to foster discussion. The next column (historical examples) can be filled out during small group discussion, if students were taught the context before the scene, or can be used as a space for notes if teaching the context after the scene. The final column (tyranny or resistance) is filled out as a class; after small group discussion, I will have groups share out their observations and then we decided how to briefly explain the scene as an example of tyranny or an example of resistance. After analyzing the scenes, students return to their cover page and create new definitions of tyranny and resistance: how did the scene and historical analysis alter their perceptions of the two terms?

White Rose Primary Source Analysis and Resistance Leaflet

The translated leaflets of the White Rose can be found online in multiple places with a quick search. I recommend analyzing the second and sixth leaflets, but any can be used. I will use the historical thinking chart from Digital Inquiry Group to create primary source analysis assignment using at least two of the leaflets. The questions you ask from the chart depends on your students, but I use the following: for sourcing, I ask, why was this written? and have students identify the author’s position on the historical event and evaluate the author’s purpose in producing the document. For contextualization, I ask when and where the document was created? and have students understand how context/background information influences the content of the document. For corroboration, I ask “what other possible documents?”; you may also want to discuss the official Nazi party line related to the Battle of Stalingrad and the ongoing Holocaust to show that the White Rose was challenging party dogma. For close reading, I ask what claims the author makes?, what evidence does the author use?, what language (words, phrases, images, symbols) does the author use to persuade the document’s audience?, how does the document’s language indicate the author’s perspective?, and have student evaluate the evidence and reasoning the author uses to support claims. It is important that students understand that the leaflets were a form of non-violent resistance, resistance through truth-telling.[42]

Using their analysis of the leaflets as a guide, students can create their own resistance leaflet related to anything they want. It could be related to current events, where students find something a government or leader says and disproves it through a White Rose-style leaflet they research. Or a student can make a fictional leaflet related to *Star Wars*, or any other fictional franchise they choose, as long as it shows the power of resistance through words and the importance of truth-telling.

Opinion Essay: Was the Galactic Empire fascist?

This activity should be paired with the Tyranny & Resistance Journal and saved for the end of the unit. Through an opinion essay, students must argue whether *Star Wars’* Galactic Empire was fascist or simply authoritarian. I would start with a classroom discussion where I do not give my own opinion, but rather have students share and debate theirs. Students then write an opinion essay, answering the question in the context of Paxton’s definition of fascism (his “mobilizing passions”). Students should use their Resistance Journal as a guide, determining whether the Galactic Empire had showcased enough of the benchmarks of fascism to qualify as fascist, citing how the Empire represented each tenet or not. They may use the scenes shown in class or use additional scenes from other *Star Wars* media they find on their own. There are no right or wrong

answers, so long as students showed their understanding of tyranny and, specifically, fascism. Understandably, you might have students who have never seen the movies or shows before this unit and may not feel like they know enough. Even after seeing the scenes incorporated into this unit, a few students may feel as if they do not have a full “view” of the franchise to make an informed argument; therefore, you can extend this question to other franchises that they may be interested in, like *The Hunger Games*. It is a fun end-of-unit paper or project topic that checks their understanding of the term itself; the dystopian, fantasy, or science-fiction setting they choose is secondary.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards.

Standards – State of Virginia, 2023: Virginia and United States History, 11th Grade. These can easily be cross-referenced with other standards, especially World History, 1500 – Present.

VUS.12.b – The student will apply history and social science skills to understand key international and domestic events, interests, and philosophies of the 1920s and 1930s by analyzing the connections between the Bolshevik Revolution and the First Red Scare, anarchist bombings, and the Palmer Raids; This unit discusses fascism as a response to communism, including the Bolshevik Revolution. Comparisons can be made between the fear of communism in Europe and the Red Scare in the 1st United States.

VUS.14.a,c,f – The student will apply history and social science skills to analyze the United States’ involvement in World War II by comparing and contrasting totalitarianism in Imperial Japan, communist Soviet Union, fascist Italy, and Nazi Germany...analyzing the Holocaust, beginning with the history and role of antisemitism in the persecution of Jews, the persecutions of other targeted groups, challenges related to the immigration of Jews, and Hitler’s “Final Solution.”

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Wikimedia Commons. Used to access the three public domain images in this unit.

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