Praise for *Erasing History*

"*Erasing History* is both sequel and prequel to Jason Stanley's invaluable *How Fascism Works*, a sweeping survey of this global fascist moment's anti-education tide. From India to Turkey, from Russia to Florida—and maybe soon in a classroom near you—gross declarations of supremacist nationalism are becoming awful substitutes for historical inquiry. *Erasing History*, fast-paced and up-to-the-minute, tells us how it's happening and why the past is a front line in the struggle for a future free of fascism."

—Jeff Sharlet, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War*

"Jason Stanley has been the essential voice for anyone seeking an unflinching account of the fascist dimensions of the current moment. In his latest contribution, Stanley turns his attention to the fascist attacks on institutions—in this case, schools and universities. *Erasing History* delivers a vital decoding of the wide-ranging effort of a small but well-organized and well-resourced faction seeking to consolidate power by censoring knowledge and rewriting the past. Their efforts to undermine faith in education weakens the role of institutions that have served as laboratories for democracy. Stanley has provided a clear-eyed account of how the survival of our democracy must be routed through a deepened literacy about our past and the myriad efforts to mystify and deny it."

—Kimberlé Crenshaw, cofounder and executive director of the African American Policy Forum and coeditor of *Critical Race Theory*

"I've never read a book that is as timely, urgent, and essential as this one. *Erasing History* is, at this moment, the only source of knowledge I know of that is a sort of battle plan for keeping this nation from falling into fascism. You must read this book."

—Khalil Gibran Muhammad, author of *The Condemnation of Blackness* and professor of African American Studies and Public Affairs at Princeton University

"Simply put, Stanley has laid out the blueprint for the worldwide fascist attack on history. A must-read to fight authoritarianism and disinformation."

—Anthea Butler, author of *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*

"Jason Stanley has done it again. This urgent, piercing, and altogether brilliant book exposes how the fight to learn from our past is ultimately a fight about the promise of our future. *Erasing History* unpacks the imperative story of our time: how authoritarianism aims to collapse history into a single drab, monolithic narrative. And how the fight for freedom is one that requires that we disrupt that telling through continued, collective reflection and reimagination."

—Jonathan M. Metzl, author of *Dying of Whiteness* and *What We've Become: Living and Dying in a Country of Arms*

"Why are so many actors on the radical right laying siege to our schools? Hint: it's far more serious than current reporting conveys. In this powerful book, Jason Stanley deftly interweaves his family's experience under Nazi rule with a far-reaching, lucid explanation of why authoritarians hate honest history. A must-read to understand how much truth-telling matters for multiracial democracy to withstand the siege."

—Nancy MacLean, author of *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*

"Jason Stanley's engaging work has taught people in the twenty-first century the anatomy of fascism as a political system. In *Erasing History*, Stanley dissects the ideological components of the fascist assault on historical teaching, memory, and analysis. He shows how everything from the antisemitic Great Replacement Theory to the vilification of gay people and feminists to the promotion of myths of national purity and historical innocence all work to demolish democratic agency and freedom. But he leaves us with the sense that those who fight for the past can save the future."

—Congressman Jamie Raskin (D-Md.), author of *Unthinkable: Trauma, Truth and the Trials of American Democracy*

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ERASING HISTORY

JASON STANLEY

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To my children, Emile and Alain

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PREFACE

> The Soviet system never commemorated the Holocaust. One reason for this is that once you define and identify one genocide, you can recognize other genocidal crimes. The Soviet empire didn't want us to learn our history.
>
> —Victoria Amelina, "Nothing Bad Has Ever Happened"[1]

One lesson the past century has taught us is that authoritarian regimes often find history profoundly threatening. At every opportunity, these regimes find ways of erasing or concealing history in order to consolidate their power. Why is this? What does history do that is so disruptive of authoritarian goals? Perhaps most importantly, it provides multiple perspectives on the past. Authoritarianism's great rival, democracy, requires the recognition of a shared reality that consists of multiple perspectives. Through exposure to multiple perspectives, citizens learn to regard one another as equal contributors to a national narrative. And they learn, *we* learn, to accept that this narrative is open to continued collective reflection and re-imagination, constantly taking into account new ideas, new evidence, new perspectives and

theoretical framings. History in a democracy is not static, not mythic, but dynamic and critical.

Erasing history helps authoritarians because doing so allows them to misrepresent it as a single story, a single perspective. But it is impossible to erase a perspective entirely. When authoritarians attempt to erase history, they do so through education, by purging certain narratives from the curricula taught in schools, and perhaps by forbidding their telling at home. However, authoritarians cannot erase people's lived experiences, and their legacies written into the bones of generations. In this simple fact lies always the possibility of reclaiming lost perspectives.

All of this is true of authoritarianism generally, but it is especially true of one specific kind of authoritarian ideology: fascism, which seeks to divide populations into "us" and "them" by appealing to ethnic, racial, or religious differences. In my previous book *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, I identified a set of tactics that characterize fascist politics, which include: the creation of a mythic past; the use of propaganda and anti-intellectualism to create a state of unreality; an effort to justify hierarchies of race or religion; the exploitation of feelings of resentment and victimhood; policies that prioritize law and order over freedom; appeals to sexual anxiety; an evocation of the myth of Sodom and Gomorrah, which holds that cities are decadent and crime ridden, and that rural areas are the heartland of a nation; and

finally, a value system that ranks groups according to their supposed capacity to work, encapsulated by the slogan the Nazis hypocritically used, *Arbeit macht frei*, or work shall make you free.[2]

The rise of contemporary fascism poses a grave threat and makes urgent the task of understanding its workings. Truly understanding fascism's success, however, requires discerning not just how it operates and seizes power but also how it achieves legitimacy. We must therefore turn the lens from fascist politics to the kind of education and culture that makes such a politics effective. This is where the topic of erasing history looms large.

In recent years, a debate has broken out among scholars and pundits about whether the term "fascism" appropriately describes the ascendant right-wing authoritarian movements we are seeing around the world. We can largely bypass this debate here. Whether we call them fascist or not, there is widespread agreement that the social and political movements we are witnessing today employ many of the same political tactics and rhetorical techniques that past fascist movements have—conjuring violent vigilante mobs to threaten those who oppose them, stacking courts with loyalists to a leader or a party, directing hatred against immigrants and LGBTQ citizens, dismantling reproductive rights, and using education to indoctrinate the young in a narrative of national greatness, rooted in a glorious past.

While some may disagree with my decision to call these movements fascist—including some who share my assessment of the danger they pose—I find the label apt, and will continue to use it in these pages when referring to those who engage in clearly fascist politics, with the aim of attacking democracy.

Because these anti-democratic movements are ascendant throughout the world, my scope here is international and will cover, at various points, fascist or authoritarian cultures in countries such as Russia, India, Turkey, Israel, and Hungary. However, with that said, I live in the United States, and my country will serve as a central example. Here, as elsewhere, an ideological war has been taking place in recent years that extends into nearly every aspect of our culture. The fight dips into our neighborhoods, our courts, and our bedrooms but ultimately, as I will show, finds its deepest expression in one of our most egalitarian public institutions: our schools. The sides in this war have largely been shaped by two opposing perspectives: those who wish to preserve hierarchies rooted in arbitrary factors like race, ethnicity, and gender—and those who wish to upend them.

✦ ✦ ✦

My grandmother Ilse Stanley, born in 1906, was raised in Berlin, in the shadow of the Fasanenstrasse Synagogue, one

of the largest congregations in Germany at the time, where her father, Magnus Davidsohn, was the chief Cantor. The Fasanenstrasse Synagogue practiced the German Jewish liberal tradition. Like a church, it had an organ. Its music was proudly in the classical tradition. My grandmother was the archetype of the assimilated German Jew, and as she saw it, German culture—the culture of Goethe and Heine—was her own. It was a beacon of enlightenment and humanism.

Before becoming a Cantor, Magnus Davidsohn was an opera singer. He is mentioned in a biography of the composer and conductor Gustav Mahler, which quotes from a conversation between the two about their shared Jewish heritage and my great-grandfather's decision to leave the opera for the synagogue.[3] At the time of that conversation, he was singing a central part in an 1899 production of Richard Wagner's *Lohengrin* that Mahler was conducting. His brother Max would later sing in the same opera, as part of the Bayreuth Festival in 1908.

Ilse, descended from this family of Wagner singers, became an actress and trained with the great Berlin theater director Max Reinhardt. She also acted for director Fritz Lang in his groundbreaking 1927 film, *Metropolis*.[4] She lived in one of the great intellectual and cultural capitals of the world, home to a renowned university, which hosted such luminaries as W. E. B. Du Bois, Albert Einstein, Max Planck, Erwin Schrödinger, and Max Weber.

Yet just a few years later, my German Jewish family in Berlin would be ejected from this cosmopolitan paradise. How could this be? How could it come to pass that my grandmother, whose talents had earned her a place of prominence within the German culture, would be banned from the theater, her artistry deemed dangerous and alien?

When the Nazis came to power in Germany, they placed at the ideological center of their political movement a fictional view of the country and its people: a land inhabited by a pure race of Aryans, which had been infiltrated by Jewish foreigners, who were seeking to undermine German institutions and topple the dominance of the German race.

At the heart of fascist ideology broadly, and Nazi ideology specifically, is this conspiracy about the replacement of a dominant group. The Nazis enacted laws that stripped German Jews of citizenship, casting them as a dangerous internal enemy, and took as their target the very cosmopolitanism that my grandmother exemplified. Her identification with German culture did little to protect her because it contradicted the Nazi narrative in which her role was predetermined and unchangeable. Her assimilation was not what the Nazis wanted, but precisely what they were trying to prevent. As the Nazis saw it, Germany's greatness was based not on its broad humanism and commitments to experimentation and intellectual innovation, but on its Aryan character.

Germany in the 1920s had some of the best universities

in the world, many of the world's leading intellectuals, and was at the leading edge of modernity. For that reason, a study of the fascist sacking of Germany, and the ideology's successful mutation of the nation's self-conception, has much to tell us about the rising threats we face today. That nation's self-understanding of its history and identity, preserved through its schools and its culture, was proven to be far less protective than many believed. We would be wise to avoid the same misapprehension.

✦ ✦ ✦

For some, the United States' ethos of openness and freedom may seem incompatible with fascism's project of erasing history until it is reduced to a single perspective. But this impulse to eliminate historical narratives can have many different motivations, some of which may be more palatable than others. Consider the era of the Red Scare in the United States during the late 1940s and 1950s, often referred to as the McCarthy era after the red-hunting senator from Wisconsin. This was a time when leftists in higher education, the arts, and other fields were publicly humiliated, denounced by Congress, and fired from their jobs in sensational fashion. This campaign of censorship and intimidation, led by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), was principally concerned with hunting down communists, socialists, and anyone who

might harbor sympathy for the country's adversary in the Cold War, the Soviet Union.

In this instance, the HUAC's effort to erase leftist perspectives from the academy and elsewhere was motivated, at least in part, by opposition to the Soviet Union's authoritarianism—which, of course, in no way excuses its destructive overreaches. The Red Scare of the 1940s and '50s was a betrayal of the very ideals of freedom that the United States purported to represent in the Cold War. However, the episode does at least partly explain how and why the fascist project of erasing history can take root in a distinctly American context.

Today we are unquestionably returning to something like the era of the Red Scare. Right-wing activists and politicians are targeting educators at all levels for their supposedly leftist ideologies, with the goal of suppressing any teaching that challenges racial hierarchy or patriarchy. But this assault on history goes far beyond local school boards, state departments of education, or even national elections. It is, in fact, a transnational movement with deep historical precedent. And it is symptomatic of a larger global attack on liberal democracy.

A liberal democracy is a system that centers the values of freedom and equality, in which all citizens have equal political value—and are thus entitled to equal respect and dignity. With that freedom comes responsibility, including the responsibility to safeguard and improve the institution of

democracy. Progressive educational movements within liberal democracies have long served to draw out this sense of responsibility in young people.

Education, however, does not always serve this purpose—it can also be wielded against democracy and in service of hierarchy. And this is precisely where so many of the recent battles over education have been waged. In a liberal democracy, there will always be (and should always be) debates between different visions of how education should work—over questions such as the proper balance between the pursuit of secular ideals and the preservation of shared traditions, or whether to place greater emphasis on liberal or vocational education. But education can also support an anti-democratic agenda. In the cases of Russia and North Korea today, we can see how education systems help to cultivate an unhealthy reverence for leaders, placing them above the rule of law. In other countries, such as India, the education system is used to place Hindu Indians over Muslim Indians. In each case, education functions to undermine the basis of democratic equal citizenship.

To be clear, hierarchies are not inherently oppressive. In a medical school, for example, an attending physician stands in a hierarchy over medical students. This is an example of an epistemological hierarchy, one based on *knowledge*. Knowledge can certainly be employed to mask subjugation and control—a doctor can be directed to diagnose an anti-

colonial rebel or a political protestor as mentally unstable—but ideally, at least, epistemological hierarchies guide rather than dominate. A hierarchy of value is different, serving to place one group of people above another or one individual over all others, and is typically used to justify the domination of certain groups or individuals. Hierarchies of value violate the fundamental ideals of liberal democracy—and, indeed, cannot tolerate the equal moral and political status of all people.

✦ ✦ ✦

Because this is a book about fascist culture, it is worth saying a bit more about what exactly cultures are and how they work. Taking up a proposition of the Swiss philosopher Rahel Jaeggi, we can think of a culture as *a form of life*—a coordinated web of practices, orientations, and myths.[5] Cultures of hierarchy—such as colonialism, nationalism, or fascism—involve practices that place one group above others. And as is the case with all other cultures, or forms of life, these practices are in large part shaped and reinforced by schools.

Every education system involves erasure—one simply cannot teach everything. There are, however, certain *kinds* of erasures that are constitutive of authoritarian systems. For example, erasures of social movements for democracy, such as the Chinese government's erasure of the Tiananmen Square

protest and massacre of 1989, or the state of Florida's erasure of the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings from a social studies curriculum.[6] By removing the history of uprisings against the current status quo from the curriculum (or never allowing that history to be taught in the first place), authoritarians leave students with the impression that the status quo has never been—and cannot be—challenged.

1

How to Create an Autocracy

Wars are won by teachers.

—Vladimir Putin[1]

In a prescient 1995 address at Howard University titled "Racism and Fascism," the Pulitzer Prize–winning author Toni Morrison warned of forces within the United States "interested in fascist solutions to national problems."[2] These fascist solutions, she explained, involve both representations and practices—in other words, what fascists say or believe and what they do. As Morrison pointed out, representations and practices can be mutually reinforcing. Representations can make practices that would otherwise be unacceptable seem normal and justified, while practices can make representations seem retrospectively apt. The representation of immigrants as dangerous criminals justifies the practice of penning them in large prison-like centers; once they are there, the fact that they are imprisoned leads some to conclude that they must be dangerous.

To understand the power that fascism can wield in the

realm of education, it is first necessary to understand some of its representations and practices. According to the Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt, "[t]he specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."[3] Which is to say, for fascists, being political means defining oneself against an enemy. As such, fascist regimes selectively disenfranchise certain segments of their population and violently cast them into what the political philosopher Elizabeth F. Cohen calls "semi-citizenship," in order to emphasize the virtue and worth of the dominant group.[4]

Fascist regimes are also typically organized around a charismatic leader—and form social and political cultures centered on that leader, who is taken to be the violent and powerful protector of the nation. Russia's Vladimir Putin is a clear contemporary example. All of Russia is centered around Putin's rule, and Putin is represented as the powerful male leader upon whose shoulders Russian greatness rests. But fascism can also be leaderless. The southern United States under the Jim Crow system of segregation, for example, was governed by a form of racial fascism premised not on a single powerful leader, but on decentralized groups of vigilantes and terrorists. To fully understand the imminent threat of fascism today, we must pay careful attention to fascist movements that are not necessarily based on reverence for the leader.

Regardless of how it is led, a fascist culture, or form of

life, often has certain features that make it an ideal environment for fascist politics. These cultures will, for instance, elevate an already dominant group of people to a mythic status, exalting them as "the people" who constitute the nation, while relegating others to second-class citizenship. From a fascist perspective, egalitarianism is a threat because it promises to upset this hierarchy. The threat is felt so acutely that fascists are led to take joy in cruelty against those outside this group, and others who stand to benefit from greater equality. A fascist form of life is suffused with fear that others will achieve equal status, a possibility cynically exploited in fascist politics.

A fascist form of life also has certain requirements. Perhaps most importantly, it requires an education system that can validate the dominant group's elevated status as a justified consequence of history rather than the fabricated result of intentional choices. It does this, as we will see, by selectively doctoring the historical record, erasing perspectives and events that are unflattering to the dominant group, and replacing them with a unitary, simplified account that supports its ideological ends.

In recent years, for example, the United States has seen a wave of right-wing political interference in education focused on banning certain concepts, authors, and books from schools' libraries and curricula. The unstated goal of these bans is to erase the perspectives and histories of marginalized