

Opinion **Populism**

Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and lessons from the 1930s

When is it right to sound the alarm about political turmoil?

GIDEON RACHMAN



Gideon Rachman YESTERDAY

A few weeks ago, I was sitting in the London office of a Conservative MP who was in despair at the prospect that [Boris Johnson](#) is poised to become leader of his party, and then prime minister. We chatted about politics and about what books we had been reading.

I mentioned that I had just finished Sebastian Haffner's memoir, *Defying Hitler*. "I've got it right here," replied the MP, reaching back into his shelves. "Isn't it brilliant?"

It struck me as significant that we had both been reading about the 1930s to try and make sense of 2019. Neither of us believe that Mr Johnson or [Donald Trump](#) are reincarnations of Hitler or Mussolini. But we had both found Haffner's memoir interesting for another, more subtle, reason. It provides an extraordinary insight into what it feels like to live through a period of political turmoil.

Haffner's memoir was written in 1939 — just before the outbreak of the second world war and the

Holocaust. He was seven at the start of the first world war in 1914 and left Germany to go into exile in 1938. His book (which was only discovered by his son in 1999, as he cleared up his father's papers after his death), provides a contemporary sense of what it felt like to watch the Nazis rise to power — and the fears, doubts and moral dilemmas that are thrown up as a new and disturbing kind of politics emerges.

Then, as now, political moderates were constantly having to ask the question, how serious is this? Is it just distasteful or is it truly dangerous? And is the right response to plunge into politics or to retreat into private life?

In today's Britain, the Conservative party has swung towards the [nationalist right](#), and the [Labour party](#) has been taken over by the radical left. That leaves many centrists politically homeless. Haffner captures that feeling, when he writes of, "We — that indefinite we, with no name, no party, no argument and no power."

The complaints by today's populists that a "deep state" in the US and Britain is thwarting the will of the people is reminiscent of Haffner's description of the far-right in Germany in the 1920s: "With deep hatred they coined the word 'system' for the impalpable force that held them within bounds . . . For the moment, at least, they were held within bounds."

A well-read young lawyer, Haffner nurtured a deep intellectual contempt for the Nazis and "their revolting jargon, every syllable of which implied a violent stupidity". But this contempt turned out to be a political trap because, "I was inclined not to take them very seriously — a common attitude among their inexperienced opponents, which helped them a lot."

At every turn, he wrestled with the question of how bad things would get. Shortly after the Nazis took power he "felt distinctly that what had happened so far was merely disgusting and no more. But what was in the offing had something more apocalyptic about it."

As events drifted in an ever more dangerous direction, Haffner and his friends adopted different psychological defence mechanisms. One strong temptation was simply to stop paying attention to the news and "shut one's windows tightly and withdraw into the four walls of one's private life."

Another was to take comfort in the things that had not changed — the parts of the state and of public life that still seemed solid and familiar. So, looking back to 1933, the year Hitler became German chancellor, Haffner notes that, "The chancellor could daily utter the vilest abuse against the Jews." But, on the other hand, "the process of the law was not changed at all." Germany's institutions and checks-and-balances were still in place.

So is it a mistake to believe that the violent rhetoric of an authoritarian leader matters less than the institutions of the state?

In retrospect, Haffner notes ruefully, "I must admit that I was inclined to view the undisturbed

functioning of the law, and indeed the continued normal course of daily life, as a triumph over the Nazis”.

But, in 1933, as he was working in a law library, storm troopers broke into the building and started expelling Jewish readers. To his shame, Haffner found himself having to reassure the interlopers that he was not Jewish.

Reading that passage now is shocking. But, searching for some perspective on 2019, it is also comforting, since it seems so remote from what is imaginable today.

The US president has just [told](#) black, Hispanic and Muslim congresswomen to “go back” to the “places from which they came”. Britain’s likely incoming prime minister has said that Muslim women wearing the niqab look like letter boxes. But it still seems unimaginable that storm troopers might one day drive minority groups out of public places.

But when do you sound the alarm? From exile in London, Haffner reflected: “It took me quite a while to realise that my youthful excitability was right and my father’s wealth of experience was wrong; that there are things that cannot be dealt with by calm scepticism.”

My instinctive reaction to the rise of Mr Johnson and the rhetoric of Mr Trump is still “calm scepticism”. But then again, I’m at roughly the same stage of life as Haffner’s father was in 1933.

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