

## LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

### MASHA GESSEN & JASON STANLEY: IS IT DOOMSDAY FOR U.S. DEMOCRACY?

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LAURA FLANDERS: "We're faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We're confronted with the fierce urgency of now. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written, the pathetic words, too late." Those are the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking against a war that he believed would lead to catastrophe, both for civil rights and humanity at large. Today, we're gonna consider that question of urgency, but in relation to the promise of US democracy and its loss. Is fascism close or still far off? How about authoritarianism? Is it here? When as he did on the 27th of March, the president issued an executive order called Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History that singled out for correction, a Smithsonian exhibition promoting the view that race is not a biological reality, are we entering fascist territory? How about when masked men abduct teachers and students apparently for their views? Or when the White House asserts that some people do not deserve trials? To help us think about this moment, we have invited two experts whose families have escaped totalitarian regimes before and who our sounding alarm bells here, now. [Masha Gessen](#) is an acclaimed Russian American journalist, a Polk Award-winning opinion writer for the "New York Times," and the author of "Surviving Autocracy," as well as the "Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia," which won a National Book Award. Forced to leave Russia twice, in 2024 a Moscow court [convicted](#) Masha in absentia to eight years in prison for their reporting on the war in Ukraine. [Jason Stanley](#) is a best-selling author and professor whose books include "Erasing History: How Fascists Rewrite The Past To Control The Future" and "How Fascism Works." He's a child of Jewish refugees who fled Nazi Germany and has recently left his teaching position at Yale University to relocate to Canada with his family. He will be joining the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy this fall. I am very glad to welcome you both Masha Gessen, Jason Stanley to Laura Flanders and Friends. I believe this is the first time you've spoken together. Is that true?

JASON STANLEY: I think so.

MASHA GESSEN: Anywhere.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, it's my treat. Let's start, as I sometimes do when I feel the conversation is particularly both urgent and heavy with just sort of centering ourselves. One of our first questions is, you know, what's the history that you bring to this moment and how does that affect your understanding of what's going on, Jason?

JASON STANLEY: Well, my mother was a court stenographer in Manhattan criminal court for 33 years. And she always, she was eight years old when she came to the United States from Poland in 1948. She grew up in a Siberian, in the Gulag as one of the Polish Jews that Stalin took to Siberia. And was repatriated back to Poland in 1945 and underwent all this antisemitic abuse that Jan Gross writes about in his book, "Fear." And then she came to the United States and she recognized, essentially the American racist police state as a court stenographer, and always drew my attention to that. She always drew my attention to the dangers that these forces of racial hierarchy, though she wouldn't have put it in that way. She thought that racial hierarchy, that scapegoating was a natural part of any human society and drew attention to the fact that it wasn't us here and we should be lucky. But my kids are Black, so that fear of the United States the one both my parents, my father came in 1939 at age seven from Berlin, and both my parents grew up in fear. And my mother communicated that fear about the United States with respect to its racial hierarchies. And now sort of if you think about fascism is when they do to white people what they've always done to Black people. That kind of, that family history together with that theoretical understanding brings me to my sort of understanding of the current moment.

LAURA FLANDERS: And how about you, Masha? How does your history inform your observations today?

MASHA GESSEN: Well, Jason and I do overlap in our origin stories. My grandmother was one of those Jews who were taken from Poland to Siberia, which is how she survived. But my grandmothers who were also best friends long before my parents met, were two women who both survived totalitarian regimes and thought deeply about the price of that survival. And so my first book was actually called "Ester and Ruzya: How My Grandmothers Survived Hitler's War and Stalin's Peace." That book was published more than 20 years ago, but I've been thinking about that question longer than that.

LAURA FLANDERS: So this question of flight has come up recently, specifically in your case, Jason, where you [got a lot of grief](#) for once it got announced that you were gonna be leaving the United States for Canada, for Toronto. How have you responded to your critics on that and I've heard from some people, well, if the fascism experts going, should we all flee?

JASON STANLEY: No, we shouldn't all flee. I mean, I had an offer at the University of Toronto and academia is a kind of meritocratic, partly meritocratic thing where, you know, the University of Toronto stands to benefit from the crushing of US universities. So plenty of academics are going to go to find other opportunities. My students were challenging me about this today in my course on fascism and patriarchy that, you know, it's a sort of, there's a social meaning of certain actions and it occurred to me that there'd be a social meaning of Jewish intellectuals leaving. That was an important social meaning to send.

LAURA FLANDERS: Masha , your thoughts?

MASHA GESSEN: Well, I've left a few too many times in my life so I'm going to stay put for as long as it's safe, but I'm not at all convinced that it's gonna be safe for a long time. I'm a naturalized citizen, I've been quite outspoken against this administration and against its friend, the Putin administration, which has a warrant out for me. And I'm trans, so I kind of check all the boxes. I'm not a big fan of leaving my built-in bookshelves. And I have three kids in this country. But look, the fact that we're talking about it seriously, less than 100 days into this administration is shocking.

LAURA FLANDERS: Maybe it wasn't soon enough though. I mean, one of the issues raised by all of your work is that we needed to be talking about this much sooner, not about leaving per se, but about what was happening in this country in front of our eyes. And I was very struck by Maria Ressa, the Filipino journalist and Nobel Prize winner who talked about the speed with which the Duterte regime was able to destroy Philippine democracy. And I guess I wonder how each of you is recognizing this moment. Where on the clock of fascism are we at this time, Masha?

MASHA GESSEN: So speed is an important concept and as is democracy. So let's try to unpack this, right? Because I think that I have very little tolerance for the wailing about our American democracy that is being destroyed. But what I would propose is that democracy is never a state of being. Democracy is a vector of development. And this country has been on a rollercoaster for the last 24 years at least. At the same time, we're not living through more terrible Republican policies. We're living through a catastrophic acceleration. That, and the difference I think, between what this country has experienced before and what we're experiencing now is that it is very likely irreversible. If it's not past the point of no return now, it's getting very close to the point of no return.

JASON STANLEY: Masha is exactly right that democracy is, as political philosophers say, it's a practice, it's an ideal, as Dewey said, it's an ideal. And you know, you're in a democracy when you at least take yourself to be engaged in the project of realizing that ideal. But when you don't have, when you're not following those democratic ideals anymore, when they're not the center of your self identity, then you can't appeal to those ideals to criticize authoritarianism. And what I see now is this regime shifting the self understanding of America from having these democratic ideals, however, imperfectly and if God knows, you know, they've been imperfect, to, you know, self identity as loving the United States because we've had great, we have these great men in our past and we've conquered the West and we can punch you in the nose. And that's not a democratic project.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, I mean that goes back to that executive order I mentioned at the top the [Smithsonian](#). The other part of that order is instituting the idea that everything in that museum needs to tell American history as a story of constant progress. Centuries of this country's existence, there's been forward movement and back. Now Masha you just said we are in a potentially irreversible moment. Can you elaborate on that?

MASHA GESSEN: So I find very useful, the model that was worked out by Hungarian political scientist named Bálint Magyar. And he divides autocratic transformation to three stages, autocratic attempt, autocratic breakthrough, and autocratic consolidation. And the difference between an autocratic attempt, or rather an autocratic breakthrough happens when it is no longer possible to reverse the autocratic attempt through electoral means. So that's what I think we're living through. And among the many executive orders that are very important, I would of course mention the executive order on elections, which is terrifying. And which really lays out a framework for excluding the maximum possible number of people from participating in elections. And that's just one aspect of making elections meaningless. There's also pressure on the media, there's also just the evisceration of the party system as we have known it. But all of these things, in addition to the way that Trump is just usurping executive power, makes me think that we're very close to the point where existing electoral means will be insufficient to reverse what Trump is doing.

LAURA FLANDERS: So we're now in the realm of talking about ideas and understanding, and naming phenomena that we're seeing ahead of us. And that takes me to the attacks on education, which I think I've heard you Jason say recently, the attacks on DEI, and the name of antisemitism are really being weaponized to stop the thinking about power at all.

JASON STANLEY: First of all, the DEI stuff is anti-Blackness. I mean we, I think with LGBTQ, and people of color, both of these phrases hide that the target is T in one case, and the target is Black people in another case. The legacy media has a lot of responsibility here along a lot of these dimensions. If you look at the "New York Times" Op-Ed page, for a decade, the "New York Times" Op-Ed page has been concern trolling about Leftists on campus, just constantly not recognizing that the war on woke is a calling card of the international far-Right attack on democracy. So that was like, the legacy media gave also last year with the misrepresentations of the protests, the erasure of the Jews for ceasefire, the large number of Jews on our campuses who were in the protests. So all of that is a structure of weaponization and exploitation of stereotypes, anti-Black stereotypes, antisemitic stereotypes to destroy institutions.

LAURA FLANDERS: I was recently talking to professors all across the country who have been trying to sounding alarm about what's happening, who have been sounding an alarm about what's happening on their campus. And one of them described the resistance as a linked-arm underground, which I really appreciate that phrase. And I think it's a good one. At the same time,

Masha, I know that you've written that what actually needs to happen is universities need to be less underground. They need to come out more. They need to be more visible, less bureaucratic, less capitalist, less commodified.

MASHA GESSEN: My [argument](#) is basically if universities want to have a university to go with their endowment in some future, at some future point, the not distant future point, right? In five or 10 years, then they need to radically change their model and start spending their endowments on producing and disseminating knowledge. If universities at least want to maintain themselves as independent thinking centers, then they need to do what they need to do. And the other thing that will, that they need to try to do is build a movement, a popular movement that includes the people that they are serving, and for that they have to stop serving their trustees, and start serving people that they educate.

LAURA FLANDERS: Many people have made the point that we are dealing with some new phenomena here as well. And I wanna just play for people a clip of the Guardian reporter, Carole Cadwalladr's recent [TED Talk](#) where she talked about the role of AI and specifically compared the capacity of AI today to do what the old file keeping spies of the East German Stasi, the secret police did in terms of record keeping on the citizens. Here's Carol.

CAROLE CADWALLADR: You know, the first thing that Elon Musk did was to send his cyber troops into the US Treasury to get access to the data. That is not a coincidence, it's a hack. That data is now feeding AIs that are choosing who to sack and who to replace, sorry, eliminate fraud and waste. When we broke the Cambridge Analytica story about the harvesting 87 million people's Facebook data, people freaked out, rightly. This is chicken feed compared to that. But it is the blueprint. It's always the data, which is why it's so important that you start thinking about your private life. The "Broligarchy" doesn't want you to have one. This is the old headquarters of the East German secret police. They kept detailed files on almost one in three of their citizens. That is nothing compared to what Google has on every single one of us and hundreds of other companies. The entire business model of Silicon Valley is surveillance. It harvests our data in order to sell us stuff. We are already living inside the architecture of totalitarianism. It may not have been deliberate but we now have to start acting as if we live in the East Germany and Instagram is the Stasi.

LAURA FLANDERS: As we are talking, I feel I have two people who have been declaring us to be living in a absolute situation of crisis, calling on people to act more, more quickly, more radically. What I've heard in some of the pieces that each of you have shared is that this is the window in which action needs to happen. And that goes back to the Dr. King quote, is "There is such a thing as being too late." The question is what, what needs to happen?

MASHA GESSEN: So I don't know that I want to say that the window is now. But the window is getting smaller every day. As you know, in less than 100 days, we have gone to the territory of unmarked cars, people in plain clothes snatching people off the street. A couple of months ago, we knew that people who don't have legal status in this country were in danger. We're so far past that now, and of course it's going to expand to include naturalized citizens and other citizens. So we need to be doing the maximum amount possible at any given moment. Now is not the time to act underground. The problem with the last eight years is that the Democrats, while Trump has proposed a revived empire, a return to an imaginary past, the Democrats have proposed the way things are now, which are deeply unsatisfying and horribly anxiety provoking for a very large number of people. So we need a vision of a future that is more appealing than the imaginary past. I don't actually think it's that hard, but that needs to be the task.

LAURA FLANDERS: In an upcoming episode, I speak with Astra Taylor and Naomi Klein about exactly this, where they say an alternative vision to the nihilistic one coming from the end times fascist, as she'd call it, needs to be countered by a life-affirming vision of staying here, of being here, of appreciating what's here and cultivating the good that's here. Jason. Form? Content? How do we resist?

JASON STANLEY: We live in a country where the civil rights movement happened. So, you know, the civil rights movement is a model of anti-fascist resistance. It's one of the only times fascism has been halted nonviolently. So that kind of concerted attempt to elicit empathy, to awaken a dominant majority, in this country's case, white people to what was happening was essential. So we live in that country, we live in that place. Everywhere you go, people have heard of Martin Luther King, they've heard of the Civil rights movement and for a reason. So I think it's quite clear that we need something like that to happen.

MASHA GESSEN: And we live in a country that celebrates having invented itself, and having basically said we're going to create a society like no society that has ever existed before. That's a pretty great history to build on.

LAURA FLANDERS: And as queer people, we have certainly lived change in our lifetime that I don't think is going back in any bottle. So I would, oh, well, Masha, you disagree, you think we're going back in a bottle? I don't see us receding back into our closets, do you?

MASHA GESSEN: I don't know, ask me in a couple years.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right, I'll come back to you if I know where to find you. Masha, Jason, it's been really a pleasure having you both with us and we have a question we ask all our guests at the end of every episode, and I'll ask you. If there's a future, which I believe there is,

what do you think its story will be of what we did now? Looking forward, I don't know, 50, 100 years, take your pick, Jason.

JASON STANLEY: Whoa, well, I think, the story that I've been thinking about is this sort of betrayal, this sort of buying and not recognizing that many things were strategies, that antisemitism on campus was a strategy, that hysteria about Leftists on campus was a strategy to destabilize democracy. And now belatedly, but hopefully not too late, the people who were fought, who were responsible for legitimizing that strategy are now hopefully not too late recognizing what they legitimized. And maybe now there'll be more of a uniform recognition of the threat.

LAURA FLANDERS: Masha?

MASHA GESSEN: Well, if there is a future, then it will have to be a reinvention of the American idea, as a re-embrace of this idea of a democracy, a multiethnic, multi-religious, multilingual democracy that has plenty to offer all of its people. And I'm deliberately not using the word citizens. If that doesn't happen, then there's no story because there will be nobody to tell a story because this is happening here in the most powerful, wealthiest country in the world.

LAURA FLANDERS: Masha Gessen, Jason Stanley, thank you so much for your work and for sharing so many of your thoughts here with us today.

What was the scariest thing about Donald Trump's rally in Michigan? The one he held to celebrate his first 100 days in office? Was it the repetition of the stolen election lie? Or his outright reversal of his standing in the public opinion polls recently? Was it his misrepresentation of the economy as great when it seems to be nearing recession? Or his effort to divide the rank and file order workers there in Michigan by promising them returning jobs from their union leader? A guy who's not only been responsible for some of the most successful organizing campaigns in recent history, but who's also been out there critiquing the Trump administration as part of the Fighting Oligarchy Tour with Bernie Sanders, a man who Trump calls crazy, and whose crowds size clearly gets his goat. Was it the calling out of the Blacks for Trump guy in the crowd? You know, the former cult leader who was charged in relation to two murders and convicted in relation to one? Or was it the chilling ICE propaganda video that looked like a kind of mashup of Abu Ghraib torture tape and cop flick? Was it that? Or was it the red-baiting of the judges? I'll tell you what was the scariest part for me. The scariest part for me of Donald Trump's triumphal list rally was the part where he said, "Nothing will stop me." And democracies aren't supposed to work like that, especially not this one. You can find my full uncut conversation with Jason Stanley and Masha Gessen through subscribing to our free podcast. All the information's at the website. Till the next time. Stay kind, stay curious. For Laura Flanders and Friends, I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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