

There's a bleak historical explanation for why Columbia's capitulation to Trump is so concerning

There's a long history of authoritarians cracking down on their country's universities



Protesters rally outside of Columbia University on March 24. Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty Images

By [Marianne Hirsch](#) March 24, 2025

Columbia University's capitulation to a set of demands issued by President Donald Trump's administration is not, as many have claimed, unprecedented. But students of history might be hesitant to acknowledge that action's precedents, because they are terrifying.

We are not living in early Nazi Germany. But, although as a student of fascism and the Holocaust I have learned to be careful with such comparisons, some resonances are too obvious to ignore. The best word to describe Columbia's concession of its academic freedom and autonomy originated in that frightful era: *Gleichschaltung*, which combines the German *gleich* (meaning "same")

and *Schaltung* (meaning “circuit”). That term explained how German institutions were brought into line with the demands of Adolf Hitler’s regime — or, literally, how they synchronized or standardized their activities with those requirements in the immediate aftermath of the Führer’s election in 1933.

Examples of universities participating in *Gleichschaltung* abound. In one of the most famous instances, the philosopher [Martin Heidegger](#) joined the Nazi party right after he was appointed as rector of Freiburg University in the spring of 1933. True, he was in his short tenure able to prevent a book burning and the display of antisemitic posters on campus; he was deposed a mere year later and eventually prevented from teaching. But his work and his ideas were forever tainted by the readiness with which he engaged in *Gleichschaltung*.

And many authoritarian regimes since Hitler’s have engaged in similar political attempts to disempower students, teachers and intellectuals by controlling universities.

The Soviet Union; Latin American dictatorships; China during the cultural revolution; and contemporary Russia, Turkey and Hungary have all turned to the same *Gleichschaltung* playbook to crack down on the crucial intellectual independence fostered in the work of the university. They have done what Trump is currently doing: imposing outside oversight on universities’ admissions, hiring, research and teaching.

And in many of those cases, universities have done what Columbia chose to do late last week, and caved to government demands, often using lofty and mendacious rationalizations to justify their compliance. And yet, although neither the Trump administration’s demands nor Columbia’s agreement are unprecedented, I do find it shocking that academic freedom and faculty governance could be for sale. How do we mourn such a loss?

Whatever rewards might be offered in exchange for Columbia’s *Gleichschaltung* — and we are [waiting to hear](#) whether the university’s recent actions will result in the restitution of any or all of the \$400 million in federal funding the administration previously stripped from the

campus — will not offset the moral costs of surrendering the academic freedom that distinguishes U.S. universities. Nor will they compensate for the shame Columbia will carry for being the institution to first concede. Trump's administration has already put 60 other universities on notice, and I fear that Columbia's ready accommodation may serve as a precedent.

I have worked as a Columbia professor for two decades, and spent my whole career in academia. Throughout my academic scholarship, teaching and activism, I have never before been afraid that my colleagues and students would be punished or deported for their speech. Not during the student anti-war movement in the 1960s or the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s; not during numerous struggles for gender and racial justice; not amid protests for divestment of endowments from companies contributing to climate change.

Certainly, it has seemed unwise, at times, to espouse certain political positions, lest they alienate those in power when it comes to writing recommendations or voting on tenure or promotion. Our academic advancement is often tenuous, dependent on pleasing certain colleagues or superiors.

But never have I encountered the kind of fear that has enveloped Columbia at this time: fear of surveillance and of the consequences of speaking publicly, as well as fear of using institutional email platforms or social media to voice our opinions and engage in open discussion. Students, faculty and staff are, right now, faced with demands to engage in *Gleichschaltung*. The administration is urging us to stand with Columbia as it barter away our integrity.

I know firsthand that universities are capable of change without the government stepping in. I have taught in departments and units that have worked through their disagreements, though often with great difficulty, even enmity. The universities in which I worked have devised, and frequently revised, due processes through which to protect their students, faculty and staff from harassment and persecution.

Columbia's acceptance of the erroneous accusation that its campus is ridden by rampant, unchecked antisemitism — an accusation facilitated by reports issued by Columbia's own Antisemitism Task Force — is an alarming departure. These concessions have laid the groundwork for exposing activists opposing a brutal war and fighting for Palestinian liberation to the threat of incarceration and deportation. They have opened the door to the federal persecution of the university.

I do not dispute the rise of antisemitism on our campus, and in American society at large. But I worry that more is at stake in the Trump administration's repressive measures. Their efforts will divide Jews on U.S. campuses, and signal that only those who are ideologically useful to the administration's aims are worth trying to protect. This, in fact, is to practice and to foster antisemitism in the name of combating it.

Marianne Hirsch is professor emerita of comparative literature and gender studies at Columbia University and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She writes about the transmission of memories of violent histories across generations, a process she has termed "postmemory."

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