Twitter Thread by Matthew Stiegler



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There's growing willingness to acknowledge the ways in which Trump's work of building and clinging to power resemble Hitler's. Good.

But this week the history that keeps flashing in my mind isn't Nazi Germany, it's pre-WWII Japan's May 15 Incident.

A thread. 1/

Japan after WWI was a two-party parliamentary constitutional democracy. The government functioned reasonably well into the 30s, weathering the depression better than its peers in the US and Europe. 2/

But a right-wing anti-democratic cancer took root in the lower ranks of the Japanese military. This cancer led to Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the assassination of a former cabinet minister in 1932. 3/

Then came the May 15 Incident in 1932. A group of young, low-ranking military officers and cadets launched a coup attempt and assassinated the prime minister. But the coup failed, and they turned themselves in and were tried for treason. 4/

The trial of the May 15 Incident perpetrators has come to be recognized as a key event in the disintegration of Japan's constitutional government and its descent into totalitarianism. 5/

The seditionist assassins were tried and convicted, but sympathizers flooded the court with demands for leniency. Some of these petitions were written in blood; one was submitted with a jar of 9 petitioners' pinky fingers. 6/

It worked. Many plotters were let off with reprimands. 4 ringleaders who originally were sentenced to death had their sentences reduced to 15 years, and 11 other coup perps got 4-year sentences. Within a few years, they all had been released. 7/

The May 15 coup failed. But Japan's failure to hold accountable those responsible for it accelerated its plunge into fanatical right-wing dictatorship. Party government was over, replaced by government by assassination. 8/

As one leading historian put it, "The failure to enforce the law by proper punishment naturally intimidated all sections of society, and made the task of government virtually impossible," and "from this time dates the gradual domination of government by the armed services." 9/

Pre-war Japan's experience illustrates that a coup doesn't have to succeed to inflict a grievous wound on constitutional order. Failing to find the will to hold its perpetrators accountable can, itself, deal democratic government a terrible blow. /10

For more on the May 15 Incident, see Toland's Rising Sun, Bix's Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan, Spector's Eagle Against the Sun, and Willmott's Empires in the Balance (the one I quoted in #9). And here's the wikipedia page. /end https://t.co/figNeR7vgi

PS, thanks @redneckleftу for pointing me to a good online piece @Noahpinion just wrote on this, "Japanese lessons for the American coup."

https://t.co/gW9ofYg8Ur

PS #2, here's a real historian, @ruthbenghiat, discussing the same lesson.

https://t.co/IGa5mdB3qw

> Historian of coups and right-wing authoritarians here. If there are not severe consequences for every lawmaker & Trump govt official who backed this, every member of the Capitol Police who collaborated with them, this "strategy of disruption" will escalate in 2021
>
> — Ruth Ben-Ghiat (@ruthbenghiat) January 7, 2021