

ROUNDTABLE

A Reusable Past: The Meaning of the Third Reich in Recent U.S. Discourse

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It does not require great powers of observation to note the pervasiveness of Nazi Germany in contemporary U.S. cultural and political discourse. For better or worse, the discursive landscape is saturated with depictions of and references to Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Gestapo—an obsession visible everywhere, from the progressive left to the far right, from TV shows to Twitter feeds to video games. The allure of using the Third Reich as a rhetorical weapon may seem obvious enough in a hyperpartisan political climate, but the resonance of that historical period clearly extends well beyond politics. Indeed, National Socialism now functions as an all-purpose conceptual barometer that can be applied to conversations about all sorts of subjects. Over the past few years, scholars have sought to shape such discussions with an unusually heavy outpouring of projects that explore correlations between Nazi Germany and the United States. What they rarely address, however, is why Americans are so prone to invoking the Third Reich as a framework for thinking about life in their own country to begin with. No less important to consider are the implications of how that trend has taken on such a wide-ranging salience and sense of urgency lately. With these questions in mind, Bradley Nichols (History, University of Missouri) convened an interdisciplinary roundtable, composed not only of historians, but also scholars of U.S. politics and culture. He invited Jens-Uwe Guettel (History, Penn State University), Sabine Hake (Germanic Studies, University of Texas), Emanuela Kucik (English and African Studies, Muhlenberg College), Alexandra Minna Stern (English, University of California, Los Angeles), and S. Jonathan Wiesen (History, University of Alabama at Birmingham) to share their insights and reflect on the issues at stake.

1. The recent upsurge of scholarly interest in the relationship between Nazi Germany and the United States has mirrored a heightened level of popular curiosity in the topic. How do we explain the timing of this conjuncture? What, if anything, sets it apart from the long-standing current of fascination with parallels linking the two countries? Is there something unique going on here that transcends other overlaps in focus between academia and the public (past or present)?

Hake

The current fascination with the Third Reich can be summed up in one word: Trump. Given the close association of Trumpism with fascism—a favorite trope in anti-Trump rhetoric—

wonder to what degree the term *recent* is already historical itself. After all, the feared arrival of fascism was averted with the election of Joe Biden. The storming of the Capitol on January 6th did not end the rule of law or result in a constitutional crisis. Besides, neo-Nazi groups and right-wing militias have existed for a long time; they remain a fringe phenomenon. And the transformation of the Republican Party from a traditional conservative party into a right-wing party that exploits populist resentments, stokes racial fears, and thrives on wedge issues has been underway for a while. More useful comparisons for understanding the appeal of authoritarianism are to be found in U.S. history, including its history of racism, not German history.

Given my background as a film historian and my current research on culture in the Third Reich, I will limit my comments to the connection between the medialization and emotionalization of political discourse, but also argue how the tyranny of the tweet (and social media in general) has created conditions that far exceed the propaganda campaigns and mass spectacles orchestrated by the first media dictatorship. Let there be no doubt: the threat posed to liberal democracies by populist movements and the rise of new nationalisms and fundamentalisms is real. Both developments respond to growing social and economic inequality caused by the forces of global capitalism, the digital revolution, and the ecological catastrophe of climate change.

If the Nazi reference as a shorthand for authoritarian or populist tendencies makes sense in the U.S. context, it is because of the central role of World War II and the Cold War in the postwar legitimation and affirmation of U.S. global leadership. In political rhetoric and popular culture, the denazification of Germany and the Americanization of Europe served to “prove” the superiority of American-style democracy, individualism, and capitalism. If this narrative still prevails in the collective imaginary, it is because of the countless films and television series that have made “Nazis” the personification of the political enemy.

In other words, today’s comparisons between the United States and Nazi Germany are to be explained not through any ideological affinities, but through an eighty-year history of media representations (feature films, documentaries, television series) in which past and present, history and narrative, stereotype and identity have become inextricably intertwined. The continued relevance of the Third Reich in contemporary American political culture is therefore to be found through close attention to the performative and spectacular nature of a post-ideological politics and the pivotal role of mass media in producing, disseminating, and communicating political emotions. Republican Marjorie Taylor Green, for instance, has compared rules about mandatory mask wearing to the Nazis’ treatment of Jews during the Holocaust. Meanwhile, in Germany, coronavirus deniers and antivaxxers compare themselves to anti-Nazi resistance fighters. These are political performances that use Nazi references in full awareness of their media-driven shock potential and their common currency in the new attention economy.

Stern

For many Americans, the election of Donald J. Trump seemed like such an anomaly that they sought out contextual coordinates to make sense of the rise of a strongman to the White House. The comparisons that often surged to the surface were between the late Weimar Republic and incipient Nazism and the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement, which do share similarities in terms of xenophobia and the racial palingenesis associated with fascism. Some authors, like Timothy Snyder, employed such comparisons to raise alarm bells about intensifying authoritarianism and the threat of autocracy, and to call attention to the dire state of American politics and culture.

In many ways, Trump’s election should not have come as such a shock. Enabled by the perverse electoral college system, he was able to tap into an abyss of misogynistic animus toward Hillary Clinton and ride the alt-right wave of tweets and memes to the White House. At the same time, for many, Trump’s election exposed the vilest dimensions of

bigoted and willfully ignorant Americans. His election was propelled by and revealed the increasing right-wing radicalization of Republicans, who over the past two decades have become more xenophobic, particularly toward Latina/os (with little distinction between immigrants and citizens), against the backdrop of the expansion of conservative media.

There are many dimensions to the contemporary political environment in the United States, with the resurgence of the latest version of the far right being one of the most dramatic. It makes sense that scholars and observers want to understand current predicaments and threats to democracy, and thus search for resurfacing patterns from the past that can help orient us and help us understand the present.

Guettel

I am going to suggest that another event a little more than a decade after the end of the Cold War, namely the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, also helped push us into the current period of frequent comparisons between the United States and Nazi Germany, as well as Imperial Germany. Sabine rightly points out the role that media representations of a good, democratic America vis-à-vis a brutally genocidal Nazi Germany have played in legitimating U.S. political dominance after 1945, specifically in establishing the United States as a role model for the fledgling Federal Republic of Germany after 1949. Nevertheless, this legitimacy was never fully accepted. For many German observers, the need for a civil rights movement, followed by the Vietnam War, Watergate, and other developments, rendered this perspective unconvincing as early as the 1960s. And yet, only the end of the Cold War fully eliminated the often-unwitting propensity of scholarly analyses and general acknowledgments of the darker aspects of the American past to be self-tempered with the caveat that the United States still was better than the U.S.S.R.

During the 1990s, what Ronald Reagan had once termed an “evil empire” disappeared as a foil against which American misdeeds could be relativized. At the same time, the availability of new source materials moved eastern Europe, the object of Nazi visions of colonial conquest and the epicenter of the Holocaust, toward the center of English- and German-language historical scholarship. In 2003, parallels between Nazi Germany in 1939—or, in more convincing ways, between the German Empire prior to 1914 and the contemporaneous domestic situation in the United States—appeared to be more persuasive than they might have been under different circumstances. Multiple American and European historians, editorialists, and political commentators at the very least discussed such correspondences, even if they sometimes ultimately rejected them.

In 2003, the United States once again (after the Vietnam War, the invasion of Grenada, the Iran-Contra Affair, etc.) badly damaged the country’s ability to claim that it was acting—and had always acted—on behalf of the principles of democracy, international law, and human rights. This situation helped widen pathways for inquiring into America’s own colonialist, imperialist, and genocidal pasts and comparing or potentially linking them to those of other countries.

In the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, the conservative journal *National Interest* ran an unironic article entitled “Bismarck for President.” And indeed, before, during, and after the Iraq War, for those looking for parallels between the German past and the American present, U.S. domestic politics did begin to resemble key moments in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German history, among them German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck’s use of *Kriegsgefahr* tactics in 1887. When it became clear during the spring of that year that there was no majority in the Reichstag in favor of another seven-year army budget (*Septennat*), Bismarck forced new elections. These elections occurred in an atmosphere of international and domestic crisis, during which Bismarck castigated the *Septennat*’s opponents as unpatriotic and accused them of aiding the German Reich’s foreign and domestic enemies. The result of these tactics was a clear pro-*Septennat* majority in the new Reichstag. Similarities between this Bismarckian strategy and how the U.S. government

stoked fear of Iraq's alleged nuclear capabilities became readily apparent at the time. In addition, the Democrats' by-and-large acquiescence in the invasion of Iraq seemed to resemble the Social Democratic Party's assent to war credits in August 1914, after Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg had successfully created the impression that Russia was the sole aggressor.

In turn, the Iraq War overlapped with an increasing interest not so much in the peculiarities of German history, but in its international and transnational analogies, especially with respect to developmental vicinities and affinities between Germany and the United States in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many recent and important studies of Germany's nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century transnational connections are thus at least chronologically correlated with this conflict (see, among other works, Sebastian Conrad's *Globalization and the Nation in Imperial Germany* and Angela Zimmerman's *Alabama in Africa*; both 2005). These overarching studies were flanked by more targeted analyses that concentrated on U.S.-Nazi connections or parallels and likewise established Nazi Germany, directly and indirectly, as a historical vanishing point for racist and genocidal developments in colonial and American contexts.

Wiesen

This upsurge of scholarly and popular interest coincides with both the decline of American hegemony and the rise of illiberalism across the globe. The wars in the Middle East, the ascent of Trumpism, and the failure to respond adequately to the threat of climate change—all of these things have undermined the international standing of the United States. Simultaneously, there is now greater scrutiny of America's own history of ethnonationalism and its resonance with National Socialism. While anti-Black racism, red-baiting, and political violence in the United States emerged out of homegrown conditions, the similarities with the Third Reich are indeed there. Especially since the rise of Donald Trump, writers both within and beyond the academy are mining the Weimar and Nazi years for clues as to what might await the United States in an era of voter suppression, partisan gerrymandering, right-wing populism, and conspiratorial thinking (such as the "Big Lie" about the 2020 election).

This impulse to study Nazi Germany and the United States together may feel more urgent today, but it is not new. From the moment Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, writers on both sides of the Atlantic explored each country in relation to the other. Journalists compared Hitler's measures to pull Germany out of the Great Depression to Roosevelt's New Deal, while FDR's political opponents associated the president with Hitler by branding both as dictatorial. Meanwhile, African American civil rights leaders likened Nazi antisemitism to Jim Crow laws in the U.S. South, and Jewish leaders condemned both the persecution of their coreligionists abroad and the pervasiveness of antisemitism in the United States. Throughout the United States in the 1930s, Nazi Germany served as a touchstone for diverse actors—a weapon used to advance an array of political and ideological positions.

These comparisons faded in the late 1930s as the growing assault on European Jews marked the Third Reich as exceptional in its sweeping brutality. The Cold War changed the narrative yet again. After 1945, the United States presented itself as the conqueror, savior, and protector of western Europe against Soviet communism. Into the 1960s, military histories and movies celebrated D-Day, *Hogan's Heroes* (1965–1971) and *The Producers* (1967) mocked hapless Nazis, and U.S. Cold War triumphalism was personified in rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, whose success in putting a man on the moon eclipsed his Nazi past. To be sure, as Emanuela knows well, some of the most trenchant critics of Jim Crow racism drew connections between the Nazi regime and racial hierarchies within the United States. But most white Americans paid little attention to these analogies.

With the end of the *Pax Americana*—which, as Jens pointed out, was long in the making—a taboo has been broken, and we have now returned to conditions that are not unlike those of

the 1930s. Then and now, economic dislocation, refugee crises, the transnational struggles of Black people against racism, the frightening global rise of antisemitism and Islamophobia, and a revival of right-wing populism and authoritarianism across diverse national contexts (the United States, Turkey, Russia, Hungary, Brazil, India) are challenging the notion of German exceptionalism and raising anew historical questions about the parallels between the United States and the Third Reich. These questions reflect both the urgency of the political moment and the collapse of the United States as a moral beacon for the rest of the world. As of this writing, the Biden Administration is attempting to rebuild the global standing of the United States in the wake of the chaos of the Trump years. The administration has recommitted itself to international organizations and treaties (such as NATO and the Paris Climate Accord) that Trump ridiculed, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine has reinvigorated the Cold War alliance between the United States and Europe. Images of war crimes in Ukraine provoke universal outrage and hark back to Nazi atrocities, only now the images circulate in real time on Facebook and Twitter. A product of an earlier political era, Biden is trying to restore the U.S. global position and revert back to a time before the Trump earthquake. But that project remains fragile in the midst of deep unease about the state of American democracy, imperiled voting and reproductive rights, and the intensification of political violence. Although I very much hope that I am wrong, the current landscape in the United States suggests that resonances and rhymes with the Third Reich will keep coming in the years ahead.

Kucik

Although there are numerous connections that can be—and have been—drawn between Nazi Germany and the United States, I would like to focus here on the relationship between Nazism and anti-Blackness in the United States. Donald Trump's presidency reflected and amplified white supremacist systems, and the blatant forms of racist rhetoric and actions that accompanied his regime have rightfully caused many to draw connections between his administration and the Nazi regime. The foundation for connecting the racism of the United States with that of Nazi Germany, however, was laid long ago by Black American communities, and it was a foundation built upon the concept of genocide. Conversations about parallels between the two nations during the postwar era have now carried over into our current moment.

Directly following World War II, the concept of genocide was primarily associated with the Holocaust, but Black Americans tried to use the term to render lynching and other anti-Black violence in the United States illegal under the United Nations' 1948 Genocide Convention. The purpose of reconceptualizing Black suffering through the lens of genocide was *not* to minimize Jewish suffering during the Holocaust—many people in Black communities continually denounced Nazism and expressed solidarity with Jewish victims of the Holocaust—but to find a way to end violence against Black communities under this new law.

In my work, I examine the role of Black newspapers in these conversations, as the Black Press was one of the main vehicles through which Black communities discussed anti-Black genocide. Many articles in the Black Press initially focused mostly on expressing hope that the Genocide Convention would outlaw lynching. Numerous articles in Black newspapers covered the Civil Rights Congress' (CRC) 1951 petition, *We Charge Genocide*, which asked the United Nations to charge the United States with genocide against Black Americans and presented as evidence harrowing accounts of lynchings, police killings, and other racially motivated murders of Black Americans. Despite the validity of Black American claims of genocide and the fervor with which the Black Press wrote about them in the immediate postwar period, white American media sources either suppressed those claims or dismissed them via accusations that Black activists (especially members of the CRC) were communist sympathizers—accusations that were particularly damaging during the Cold War. This suppression and dismissal meant that most of the American public

remained unaware of the Black community's attempts to use the concept of genocide to end lynching, which played a key role in the sanitization of the history of lynching. This sanitization produced decades of discourse in which the brutality of lynching was erased from conversations about the horrifying practice—and that erasure in turn produced a world in which the notion that lynching could be conceptualized as genocide was (and often still is) considered unthinkable.

Starting around 1955, the Black Press's engagement with the concept of genocide merged with the civil rights movement, as segregation, unequal access to health care, police brutality, and other forms of oppression were depicted as parts of an expansive, multifaceted system of anti-Black genocide. Many contemporary conversations maintain this idea, as dialogues around anti-Black genocide encompass discussions of continued police brutality, the Flint, Michigan, water crisis (and similar crises around the country), the continuation of mass incarceration in Black communities, and racism in the health-care system producing disproportionate deaths in Black communities (including from COVID-19). This continuity from the civil rights era to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is important to understand not only because it emphasizes an alarming lack of progress in combating anti-Blackness, but also because the minimal attention paid to this complex history indicates a decades-long attempt by white supremacist structures to erase or downplay it. Defining anti-Black violence as genocide would place the United States at the center of global conversations about violations of the UN Genocide Convention.

Put differently, much of the country has ignored this history because recognizing it would do exactly what the Black Press has been trying to accomplish for decades: force the United States to acknowledge that it has committed genocide against Black populations—and, as genocide is an international crime, to end state-sanctioned anti-Black violence. To ensure that these urgent conversations occurred in a variety of spheres, the Black Press forged connections between academic discourse and the public. Black newspapers and magazines often published work by famous Black figures and response letters from relatively unknown community members, which united the two groups in dialogue. The legacy of those overlapping conversations continues today in the work of contemporary activists. For example, the 1951 *We Charge Genocide* petition inspired young people in Chicago in 2014 to create a "We Charge Genocide" group dedicated to fighting police brutality. Similarly, Benjamin Crump, an attorney who has represented many families of Black Americans who have been killed by the police in recent years, wrote a book entitled *Open Season* (2019), in which he argues that genocide against Black Americans is present in systems ranging from mass incarceration to environmental racism. Crump's work is discussed in academic circles, but he is also an active public figure in the BLM movement whose arguments about genocide and anti-Blackness are at the center of a discourse that has garnered national and international attention and holds the potential for producing tangible change.

It is difficult to predict whether claims of anti-Black genocide will move to the forefront of the Black Lives Matter movement and other Black liberation movements of the twenty-first century, and equally difficult to predict whether those claims will be effective in ending that violence. Although we cannot predict the future, however, we can say that the reemergence during Trump's presidency of a particularly brazen, explicit type of anti-Black violence—along with a multitude of other forms of identity-based violence that must likewise be combated—has led more people to identify similarities between the language of Trump and his supporters and the language of genocidal dictators in the past. It is my hope that the fusion of public activism focused on ending this violence with academic discourse around the history of intersections between genocide and anti-Blackness will show the world that these intersections have been centuries in the making, as well as work to ensure that they do not exist in the centuries to come.

2. *Much of the literature on the "Nazi-America connection" consists of admonitory exposés that position the Third Reich as a cautionary tale for the United States, typically by emphasizing similarities between the two or highlighting the complicity of the latter in the crimes of the former.*

Why is Nazi Germany, and not some other authoritarian regime, the main touchstone for these kinds of analogical narratives? Can such an approach—“learning from the Germans,” in the words of Susan Neiman—be useful? Or does it inevitably result in interpretive problems and misconceptions? How so?

Guettel

So why Nazi Germany? In the early 2000s and while still in graduate school, I attended a talk given by my graduate colleague Benjamin Madley, who presented a paper on the genocide of the Yuki people in California during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. His research showed that calorie allocations for the imprisoned Yuki were lower than calorie allocations in Auschwitz. I vividly remember this U.S.-Nazi comparison to the detriment of the former causing outrage among members of the audience. Some of this research is included in Madley’s recent monograph, *An American Genocide* (2017). For genocide studies scholars, there is a clear purpose to referencing the Holocaust (and Nazi Germany more generally) to highlight similarities and differences among this and other genocides in North America, Australia, Africa, and elsewhere: the Holocaust is the most widely known and researched genocide. As a result, pointing out that certain murderous patterns, methods, and actions that occurred during the Holocaust also occurred during other genocides perpetrated by democratic or republican regimes and not fascist ones (see also Michael Mann’s 2005 *The Dark Side of Democracy* and Ben Kiernan’s 2007 *Blood and Soil*) highlights the horrors of these other instances of ethnically and culturally motivated mass murder.

“Using” Nazi Germany and the Holocaust more specifically is therefore valuable insofar as it provides a well-established historiographical backdrop that helps flesh out the specificities of other genocides and, at times, also their commonalities with the Holocaust. Despite reproaches to the contrary, that does not mean these scholars are equating the events they study with the Holocaust. Moreover, because it was the Holocaust that provided the impetus for the creation of an internationally binding legal definition (1946) and proscription (1948) of genocide, references to it when talking about or analyzing other instances of mass murder are hard to avoid entirely. Of course, using the Holocaust as a backdrop can cause problems when it presupposes “easy” causal links between, for example, genocidal massacres in the American West during the nineteenth century, or in other colonial contexts, and those perpetrated by the Nazi regime and its collaborators during the Second World War. This issue has been pointed out by several scholars, among them Matthew Fitzpatrick, Robert Gerwarth, and Stephan Malinowski.

At the same time, there is another salutary effect to utilizing Nazi Germany, the Holocaust, and even the German Empire before 1914 as important points of reference in studies about mass murder committed by Americans or European powers. This approach challenges convenient postwar narratives that placed the United States and Great Britain squarely on the “right” side of history because of their opposition to Nazi Germany—a perspective that came in handy after Germany’s defeat and during the decades of decolonization and Cold War conflict that followed. How could the countries that had just defeated the most murderous *Unrechtsstaat* in world history not be just and good themselves? Discussions of the United States’s own current and past fascism, racism, and human rights violations, including genocide, could thus largely be tabled at least until the late 1950s. The same was true for similar considerations in France and the metropolises of other Western colonial powers, and, ironically, also in Germany itself (both the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany), despite the contemporary perception of West Germany’s exemplary *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (mastering or dealing with the past). This united reactionary front was attacked and weakened but not destroyed during the 1960s, and it has been contested ever since, with renewed force and energy since the early 2000s.

Kucik

Nazi Germany is consistently used as the touchstone for these narratives for a variety of reasons, but I focus here on two of the racialized ones: first, the perceived whiteness of most of the Nazis' victims, and, second, the idea that Nazi Germany represented Germany's decline from its status as a "civilized" nation—a notion that is inherently problematic due to the deeply racist history of the term *civilization* as well as the genocidal violences of colonialism and the slave trade that were unleashed in the name of purportedly "civilizing the uncivilized." Before continuing, it is critical to establish that this is *not* an argument against memorialization of the Holocaust. America, and the world, must remain outraged by the Holocaust and determined to protect the legacies of its victims by ensuring that the Holocaust is never forgotten. The issue addressed here is that the genocides of Black and Brown victims should also provoke consistent outrage and a commitment to ensuring that victims are never forgotten, but these genocides are often ignored.

As Peter Novick has established, the Holocaust is now a core part of American public consciousness, its centrality evidenced by a range of factors, such as schools across the country including Holocaust education in their curricula and American presidents routinely speaking about honoring the memory of the Holocaust. In questioning why other genocides have not been similarly memorialized, many scholars have noted that the disparity arises most notably when the victims of other genocides are Black or Brown. Pieter Lagrou has argued that the centrality of Holocaust discourse in Western genocide conversations is the product of a Eurocentric system. He notes how discussions of the supposed "duty" of white Europeans to "civilize" Black and Brown "savages" were not only invoked to justify genocidal violence against Black and Brown communities, but cited purported "violence" within those communities as evidence of their "need" to be "civilized." As such, white Europeans committing violence against Black and Brown populations was rarely seen as genocidal. Moreover, white Europeans committing violence against one another during the Holocaust was seen not as evidence of a need for them to be "civilized," but as an anomaly in the history of a nation (Germany) that was lauded in the West as one of the prime examples of "civilization" due to its contributions to European music, literature, art, and other spheres deemed significant. Although some might argue that the Holocaust cannot be considered in the context of white Europeans murdering white Europeans because Jewish populations in Nazi Germany were racialized as nonwhite, anthropologist Karen Brodtkin has identified a "whitening" of Jewish people in the postwar United States (excluding Black Jewish populations) that has distanced many Jewish communities from Blackness. This "whitening" is also central to understanding the "whitening" of the memorialization of the Holocaust, particularly when contrasted with how the suffering of Black populations has often been portrayed as "other" and unrelatable. Additionally, alongside those whom the Nazis murdered for not being "Aryan" or "white enough" (including Jewish, Black, and Roma communities), the Nazis murdered many white Europeans who were viewed as white during the Holocaust, including Slavic populations, political prisoners from across Europe, the mentally and physically disabled, and LGBTQIA+ persons. The presence of these white victims of the Holocaust has also played a role in the overall "whitening" of the memorialization of the Holocaust and the centrality of Holocaust discourse in global conversations about genocide.

Dirk Moses has argued that contemporary discourse often makes the Holocaust the barometer for genocide and requires that atrocities that resemble the Holocaust be categorized as genocide. If other episodes do not directly mirror the Holocaust, they are often deemed less horrific, and their victims are deemed less worthy of attention. Black authors from across the globe have long been cognizant of these dilemmas and engaged with them in their writings. For decades, they have tried to situate genocides against Black populations within the recognized framework of the Holocaust to elicit empathetic responses and commitments to tangible change. For instance, in her memoir about surviving the Rwandan genocide, *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* (2006), Immaculée

Ilibagiza continually emphasizes its similarities with the Holocaust. While she draws these parallels within the body of her memoir, she also makes similar connections through her book's title, which names the conflict the "Rwandan Holocaust" rather than the "Rwandan genocide," thereby placing the Rwandan genocide on par with the Jewish Holocaust. Additionally, Ilibagiza's dedication reads "in memory of holocaust victims everywhere," which, through the use of the lowercase "holocaust," likewise destabilizes the idea that the "Final Solution" is archetypal.¹ Although Ilibagiza's decision to frame the Rwandan genocide through the lens of the Holocaust can be construed as a commentary on the erasure of the Rwandan genocide from genocide discourse, it can also be interpreted as an example of Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory—the practice of using Holocaust consciousness to draw attention to other instances of racialized suffering by viewing memory "as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing."² Although there are clearly many angles from which to approach these conversations, I would argue that they cannot be disentangled from the history of colonialism, which must be addressed as a crucial element in the intersecting discourses of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and genocide.

Stern

There are benefits and drawbacks to the "compare and contrast" approach. Comparisons can be employed to raise alarm bells about increasing authoritarianism, especially when associations are made between the contemporary United States and Nazi Germany. As the title of one anthology published in the lead-up to the 2018 election proverbially asked, *Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America*. The virtues of the shock effect are that it can prompt people to see dangerous similarities at play when it comes to fascism and denaturalize them before they are normalized into quotidian life. Along these lines, scholars and journalists have asked what kind of nation cruelly separates families at national borders, removes hundreds of children from their parents with no plan for reunification, and detains them indefinitely in rudimentary camps rife with disease and abuse? For many, that is not the United States they know, or think they know, even though similar episodes occurred in the not-too-distant past, such as Japanese incarceration during World War II and the forced assimilation of Native children in boarding schools.

Yet the provocation approach has its limits. It can sound like crying wolf, and sensationalism can have a numbing effect. Moreover, such comparisons can be superficial and foreground outrage over deeper understandings. For example, as Jens and Emanuela noted, recent historical research has explored and emphasized other episodes of targeted mass death and human extermination, including the slaughter and dispossession of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and the horrors of the oft-forgotten Rwandan genocide. How much sense does it make to compare the United States in the 2010s and 2020s to Germany in the 1930s and 1940s when more recent or even contemporary examples might be more illuminating?

Something is lost when focusing too narrowly on the U.S.-German dyad, as such Eurocentrism can obscure a range of potentially valuable points of comparison. In terms of his bombastic media style and fake news showmanship, Trump has at least as much in common with Jair Bolsonaro, the outgoing president of Brazil, as with fascist dictators of the 1930s. Moreover, MAGA nationalism has deep resonances with the vengeful Hindu nationalism unleashed by Narendra Modi, the current prime minister of India, which has focused on demographic control and building walls around and against ethnic and religious Others.

¹ See the dedication page in Immaculée Ilibagiza, *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2006).

² Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

The fascination with comparing MAGA America with Nazi Germany is likely related to a stubborn belief in the exceptionalism of Western democracy, even though its fragility has been revealed again and again. It is simply hard for people who have not been paying attention to stirrings of bigotry, and old wine in nefarious new bottles, to accept that democratic nations can morph, whether through the ballot box or an armed seizure of power, into autocracies.

Much of my research has focused on the history of eugenics, including involuntary sterilization in the twentieth-century United States. Understanding the history of eugenics requires a global approach that recognizes that hereditarian ideas and policies flourished in places as distinct as Argentina, Sweden, and Iran, in addition to the United States and Germany. Interesting scholarship has delineated some of the key differences between the hardline eugenics that encouraged sterilization, segregation, and, most horrifically, euthanasia, and the softer eugenics that promoted baby care (puericulture), maternal health, and public health. The lines between these two brands of eugenics, however, are blurry, and even countries that rejected conceptions of “Nordic” or white purity, like Mexico, which celebrated the mestizo “cosmic race,” nevertheless adapted stricter ideas about the deleterious effects of “racial poison.”

Nevertheless, in this varied international context, it is clear that Germany and the United States overlapped significantly in their pursuit of “racial hygiene.” Notably, Germany followed U.S. models in the design of its exclusionary race laws and eugenic sterilization. The Nazis’ 1933 Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring, for example, was guided by legislation passed in Indiana in 1907 and California in 1909. Of course, Germany did not necessarily need these templates as prerequisites for its destructive eugenic campaigns, but American laws that targeted people with disabilities influenced the conceptualization and rollout of the Nazis’ sterilization program, which focused on children and adults with disabilities. The dehumanization of people with alleged disabilities allowed for the sterilization of more than 60,000 low-income people, persons of color, and other marginalized groups in the United States. In Germany, more than 400,000 people were sterilized, including Jews, Roma, and political dissidents, usually in regional centers, thus paving the way for the “Final Solution.” In addition, the segregation statutes and anti-miscegenation laws attached to Jim Crow racism provided templates for antisemitic and anti-Roma campaigns under the Third Reich, as James Q. Whitman has recently shown in his book *Hitler’s American Model* (2017).

Hake

At this point, the central role of mass media in the representation of the Third Reich, the attendant processes of historicization and mythologization, and the ongoing transformation of politics into a performative, spectacular, and emotional phenomenon are beyond dispute. The status of the Third Reich as the first media dictatorship and the various phenomena described through terms such as *aestheticization of fascism* (Walter Benjamin) and *fascinating fascism* (Susan Sontag) attest to the complicated constellations linking aestheticization and emotionalization to antidemocratic, if not authoritarian, tendencies. But aestheticization is not limited to any particular totalitarian aesthetic; it must be thought of as a relational category, a subject-object relationship produced within certain hierarchies and power structures. The question posed by Scott Spector more than twenty years ago—“Was the Third Reich Media-Made?”—can thus be modified for this context to ask: Are comparisons between Nazi Germany and the United States media-made? In both cases, an affirmative answer must address difficult questions about history as fiction, politics as spectacle, and news as entertainment. Moreover, discussions must include references to the role of film as a commodity, the effect of media convergence, the ubiquity of social media, and the power of large global news, media, and telecommunications companies. Last but not least, the discursive function of “Nazi” or “fascist” as overdetermined signifiers requires us to consider what these

nation-based narratives also seek to hide: namely, that the contemporary media landscape is dominated by global companies that control social media and digital content and, by extension, political culture. It is this connection, rather than any superficial similarities (such as populist habitus, antidemocratic rhetoric, authoritarian tendencies, or cults of personality), that obliges us to pay closer attention to the ascendancy of media-produced, performance-based, spectacle-driven, and emotionally charged political cultures in the United States, Europe, and beyond. The use of the Third Reich “as a cautionary tale for the United States” is not only unproductive; the implicit focus on the nation-state blinds us to wider structural transformations going on worldwide.

In that vein, the shift in German film studies toward transnational perspectives and the attendant return to the archives has opened up new perspectives on Nazi cinema in international contexts. Of greatest relevance for this discussion is the recognition that films are not just works of art, forms of entertainment, or means of propaganda, but above all commodities made for profit. Studies on the restructuring of the German film industry under Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels tend to emphasize the political effects of the hierarchical chamber system, new censorship laws, and the antisemitic membership rules for film professionals. The equally important connection between state control and economic growth has only recently been acknowledged. Case studies on the gigantic UFA studio, with its foreign subsidiaries, theater chains, and distribution networks, on German and Austrian exiles in Hollywood, and on the international reception of Nazi-era films have confirmed the degree to which national traditions have always been an integral part of the international film trade. Recent studies by Thomas Doherty and (more controversially) Ben Urwald have uncovered close ties between Hollywood and Babelsberg, as well as documented the considerable influence the Reich’s representatives had on American studio heads and opinion leaders. That these contacts indicate widespread pro-Nazi sentiment remains debatable, however. What is beyond doubt is that most studios thought of the film industry as apolitical until that was no longer beneficial. The difficulties faced by the first anti-Nazi films confirm that these positions only changed with the U.S. entry into the war.

After 1933, Nazi companies continued to distribute feature films and documentaries in U.S. markets, catering to large German immigrant communities on the East Coast and in the Midwest. Often shown in the original German, these films did play a crucial role in the advancement of pro-Nazi sentiments, yet less through their content—the majority were musical comedies, melodramas, and love stories—than through the unspoken values and beliefs shared with parts of white America at the time. Asserting their identities within a racialized hierarchy of early and late arrivals, these first- and second-generation German American communities provided a major recruiting ground for the pro-Hitler German American Bund and its evocations of *Volk* and *Heimat*, now in their Americanized versions. Meanwhile, most Hollywood studios had subsidiaries in Berlin that supplied German audiences with a (heavily curated) stream of box office hits. Famous Hollywood stars and iconic figures, including Mickey Mouse, proved the adaptability of an Americanized global mass culture across ideological divides until 1941, when new alliances between Hollywood and Washington, D.C. were formed with the U.S. entry into the war.

Wiesen

Most of us are aware of Godwin’s law, which posits that the longer an internet debate goes on, the more likely we are to encounter a reference to Hitler or National Socialism. This adage is a sardonic commentary on the omnipresence and abuse of Nazi analogies, but it is also astute in its recognition that Nazism occupies a singular place in the contemporary political imagination. Antiabortion activists compare the termination of pregnancies to the genocide of European Jews. Antigovernment protesters liken mask mandates to German Jews being forced to wear the yellow star. Antivaxxers describe Dr. Fauci as Dr. Mengele. The political right compares Obama’s and Biden’s “socialism” to National Socialism.

Meanwhile, some (though not all) American liberals see Trumpism as either a harbinger of American fascism or its apotheosis.

The ubiquity of Nazi references signals both the perilousness of the U.S. present and the enduring resonance of Hitler's crimes. One reason that Nazi Germany, as opposed to other authoritarian regimes, is so often analogized in contemporary political discourse is because the abuses of the regime were so varied and vast. Xenophobia, voter suppression, attacks on the press, the rhetoric of national awakening, the mobilization of antisemitism and anticommunism, the loss of a faith in democracy, a cult of personality, conspiracy theories, political sclerosis, talk of "internal enemies"—individually, none of these are unique to either Hitler's Germany or contemporary America. It is the confluence of all these assaults during the Trump years, and their continuation in the present, that has invited comparisons to the Nazi past.

Whether these analogies shed more heat than light has itself become a subject of debate. When New York congressional representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez referred to detainment facilities at the U.S. southern border as concentration camps, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum issued a press release stating that it "unequivocally rejects efforts to create analogies between the Holocaust and other events, whether historical or contemporary."³ Within the academy, the reaction to this declaration was swift, with hundreds of scholars issuing a statement that broke with the museum's position. Not all the signatories agreed with the congresswoman's original comparison, but many questioned how an organization that regularly sponsored broad programming on genocide, racism, and mass killing in the name of "never again" could reject Holocaust analogies *tout court*.

The analogizing between the contemporary United States and Nazi Germany does two things at once: it raises alarm about escalating dangers, as Alexandra mentioned, while illuminating the considerable gulf between our vision of America and its reality. In this regard, I disagree with Sabine's assertion that Third Reich analogies are unproductive. From slavery to Jim Crow to McCarthyism and the "lavender scare," the United States has been plagued by virulent strains of racism, ethnonationalism, homophobia, and anticommunism, which at their worst resemble the very authoritarian regimes that the United States defines itself against in official discourse. If it takes sometimes-clumsy comparisons with Nazism to draw attention to this history, then so be it. In a more scholarly vein, books about Hollywood's coddling of Hitler, American universities' welcoming of Nazis in the 1930s, German spy rings on the West Coast, and the U.S. government's deficient response to the Holocaust (something also explored in Ken Burns's recent documentary, released earlier this year) remind us that the ideologies that drove Nazism were also present in the Ku Klux Klan, the German American Bund, and the Silver Shirts, as well as in the nativist and antisemitic politics of interwar America. And whether or not you see fascism in America's present and future, Jennifer Evans's brilliantly curated "New Fascism Syllabus" has been a site of deeply researched discussions of these very themes.

With the rise and endurance of Donald Trump, the United States is itself becoming an analogical point of reference. Spanish politician Isabel Díaz Ayuso, for instance, was called a *Trumpista* for her defiance of pandemic restrictions. In Brazil, President Bolsonaro prides himself on following Trump's antidemocratic playbook. And in an ironic example of multi-directional memory—a concept Emanuela brought up earlier—the United States has become a touchstone for Germany's contemporary struggles with political extremism.

3. *Over the last two decades, a substantial body of research has situated Nazi Germany and the United States together within the broader transnational context of settler colonialism (a factor several contributors have mentioned already). In this case, it is the impact exerted by America's history of frontier genocide and racial oppression that takes center stage, not as a parable, but as a means of conceptualizing the violence of the Third Reich. Why has the colonial*

³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Statement Regarding the Museum's Position on Holocaust Analogies," Press Release, June 24, 2019.

turn proven to be such an attractive stimulus for reassessments of the Holocaust, particularly among English-speaking scholars? Does reversing the direction of posited influence in this way offer constructive avenues of inquiry? What, if any, are its potential disadvantages?

Guettel

In recent years, there has indeed been a surge of both scholarly as well as more general interest in questions about potential links between Nazi Germany and the United States with respect to the topic of settler colonialism. This attention is not entirely new. At the very least, Stefan Kühl's 1994 book on eugenics in Nazi Germany and the United States should be mentioned here as an early example of scholarship that explores related questions. In addition, in the late 1990s, several shorter essays were published—by Alan Steinweis and Helmut Walser Smith, for instance—that focused on connections among the German Empire, Nazi Germany, and the United States as they pertained to the twin issues of colonialism and genocide. Historian Thomas Kühne has suggested that the opening of eastern European archives after the end of the Cold War was one of the main reasons for the surge of interest in Nazi expansionism in eastern Europe and the concurrent application of a colonial paradigm to these analyses in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The colonial turn has been extremely fruitful in offering new perspectives not only on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, but also modern German history in general. Moreover, while English-speaking scholars have played decisive roles within the framework of this far-reaching reinterpretation, some of the most important contributions have in fact come from German scholars, among them Sebastian Conrad, Birthe Kundrus, Jürgen Zimmerer, and Susanne Kuss. Zimmerer and Kuss represent the two opposing sides of the debate over causal connections between colonial genocides and the Holocaust: on one end, we find Zimmerer, who linked colonial genocides and the Holocaust, whereas Kuss situates herself on the other end of the spectrum by laying out the specificities of German colonial violence and genocide before 1914, thereby revealing the absence of a straightforward arc from pre-1914 atrocities to the mass murder perpetrated by Germans between 1941 and 1945.

After further interventions, it seems fair to say that this debate has now largely been settled, with those arguing against clear causal links between the pre-1914 colonial context and the Holocaust having carried the day. At the same time, eerie parallels between the Holocaust and other genocides in more “traditional” colonial contexts do exist, whether along the American frontier, in Australia, or elsewhere. One of these parallels is the fact that, in many instances, social dehumanization preceded physical extermination, as exclusion, Othering, demeaning, and depreciating usually moved from discourse to increasingly radical and murderous practices. Scholars have pointed to additional parallels between the Nazis' genocidal and colonialist expansionism and other instances of Western colonialism, among them the Nazis' use of their own hyper-racialist version of the “civilizing mission”—a topic the convenor of this forum, Bradley Nichols, explores in his research. As a result, the fact that there existed few if any direct causal links between specific practices of Nazi expansionism and Western colonialism should not lead us to the conclusion that Nazi expansionism was not in more general ways linked to the European–Western colonial archive. One could ask whether we even need direct links to determine the coloniality of the Third Reich given the many parallels.

At the same time—and this brings us to the aforementioned question of the potential disadvantages of the colonial turn for scholarly Holocaust inquiries—we need to be careful not to limit our examinations to colonial trajectories and frameworks, which is not the same as saying they should be avoided. In my view, one pitfall of applying colonial angles to research on the Third Reich is that colonial frameworks have tended to replace rather than complement considerations of mass death and violence during the First World War and its aftermath as determinative of Nazi practices. To give just one example, much has been made

of the (obvious and indisputable) colonial origins of the term *concentration camp* and its use (and the practices linked to it) by the Nazis in and after 1933. And yet, even during the early 1920s, Prussian and Bavarian police and German newspapers used the term *Konzentrationslager* as a designation for internment camps for illegal (and often Jewish) immigrants from Poland and Russia.

As long as we avoid monocausal explanatory models, the colonial turn offers clear benefits for scholarly inquiries into the Third Reich and the Holocaust. It illuminates the parallels and at times connections between the Holocaust and other genocides, thereby highlighting both its uniqueness and shared patterns. Likewise, colonialism is no longer treated separately from German and European history. Approaching Nazi Germany and the Holocaust from this vantage point affords a multitude of advantages, among them a more careful consideration of who it is we actually study (perpetrators versus, increasingly, those targeted by them). It also opens up the possibility of stepping outside the compartmentalization of outdated national historical narratives and entering a decolonized, transnational epistemological framework, which can allow us to determine the shared European and transatlantic (Western) roots of fascism and racism more easily through the comparative study of ethnic essentialism, expansionism, and genocide.

Wiesen

The colonial turn has indeed generated a new set of questions for historians. How did European imperialism in Africa and Asia inspire Nazi dreams of *Lebensraum* in eastern Europe? Did concentration camps during the Boer War and the genocide in German South West Africa actually presage the Holocaust? Did European and American imperialists' obsessions with "space and race" provide a mental framework for the Nazis to envision a continent "free of Jews"? This recent attention to settler colonialism is crucial. Without diminishing the horrors of the Holocaust, the search for historical continuities allows us to test new theories and place the Shoah within a longer global history of genocide, displacement, colonial warfare, and racial ideologies. Its focus on *longue durée* continuities makes for good history, and it is also timely. Climate refugees, the erection of barriers to immigration, the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya in Myanmar and Uyghurs in China, Israeli occupation policies—all of these factors and processes raise sensitive questions about the persistence of colonialism, spatial segregation, and practices of biosocial engineering.

Scholars have pushed back against these approaches on various grounds. Some see them as challenges to the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust, whereas others argue (at times, relatedly) that Israel is being singled out and unfairly labeled as a colonial power. Still others contend that current approaches elide or diminish the specific virulence of European antisemitism that enabled the "Final Solution." My own critique of the colonial turn hinges on the linguistic slipperiness of this enterprise. Was colonialism a "model," a "precursor," an "antecedent," or an "inspiration" for Hitler's crimes? What does it mean to explore the "nexus," "relationship," "connection," "kinship," and "affinities" between the two world-historical phenomena? As we look at Nazi crimes through the lens of colonialism, there is a risk of relying on terms that can confuse as much as they elucidate. We look for traces, correlations, congruences, convergences, analogies, echoes, equivalencies, analogues, parallels, and patterns, and we measure commensurability, uniqueness, and singularity. These are key terms in our historiographical toolbox, but they do often still leave us searching for causal links between events.

This is not to gainsay the considerable achievements of comparative genocide studies, which sees ideological and structural commonalities among instances of mass killing. Many scholars have drawn on the work of Hannah Arendt, whose *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), in Russell Berman's words "was not about some abstractly comparative brutality (of which she was of course aware)," but about "the assertion that European imperialism contributed to the erosion of the political category of the nation-state viewed as the

primary guarantor of civil rights.”⁴ Along these lines, it is worth noting how the modern state, and dreams of national awakening, have prompted ethnic cleansing, genocide, and the persecution of the Other in the last two centuries.

One illuminating approach is to recover the histories of those actors who themselves compared racial persecution across national boundaries. Jens and I have followed the career of German law student Heinrich Krieger, who used a year abroad at the University of Arkansas in 1934 to research Jim Crow and antimiscegenation laws in the United States, eventually returning to Germany to work for Nazi Walther Gross’s Office of Racial Policy and pen books on racial laws in the United States, South Africa, and Brazil. Here it is not only contemporary scholars detecting linkages, but historical actors *themselves* finding inspiration and useful tools in transnational color lines and legal systems of separation like apartheid. The Nazi lawyers who designed the Nuremberg Laws read Krieger’s study of racial law in the United States, and this fact alone opens new avenues for transnational approaches to the Holocaust and settler colonialism: How did historical actors understand their eliminationist and exterminationist policies in a global context? How have transnational connections among right-wing ideologies (both in the past and again today) enabled the globalization of ethnic violence? These questions move beyond debates about causality and imitation (“Were the Nazis’ ‘copying’ Jim Crow racism?”) and instead reveal how National Socialism—to its own satisfaction—operated in a world of multiple racial regimes. Such questions also allow us to move beyond debates about “uniqueness” in order to understand how the Holocaust was both *sui generis* and the product of a global project that entailed the classification, forced removal, and elimination of racialized and political Others.

Stern

If we reverse the question and ask how the United States has influenced Nazi Germany, there are some interesting results. First, for the eugenics era, we see how stereotypes of undesirability and disability were integral to dehumanization and attempts at demographic control rooted in the history of settler colonialism and white supremacy in America. When the Nazis turned to the United States for racist and ableist inspiration in the early twentieth century, they had many examples to choose from. The language of Germany’s 1933 law, for example, targeted people with ostensible physical or mental disabilities understood to be hereditary. It thus mimicked the two dozen sterilization laws passed by that time in the United States, which were also predicated on categories of disability. For example, Michigan’s law targeted individuals who were “mentally defective, insane,” Indiana’s legislation focused on those categorized as “hereditarily insane, feeble-minded, or epileptic,” and California’s law, which paved the way for the sterilization of more than 20,000 people, identified “feeble-minded, habitual criminals, the insane, idiots, [and] mental defectives” as eligible for legal sterilization.

It is imperative to recognize how these disability frameworks worked to create categories of normal and abnormal, human and subhuman, as well as how they enabled and amplified antisemitism, racism, and xenophobia, while placing particular reproductive burdens on women as future mothers of the “race.” In current configurations, when Nazi Germany serves as a touchstone for contemporary forms of exclusion and Othering—against immigrants or refugees, for instance—the foundational role of disability injustice is often forgotten and should be remembered. In her book *Unlearning Eugenics: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Disability in Post-Nazi Europe* (2018), Dagmar Herzog explores the fraught intersections of ableism, reproductive rights, and political rights, underscoring that the vicious ableism of the Third Reich, including its sterilization program, receded from view and has not received significant recognition. This has resulted in contorted discourses around disability that veer

⁴ “Forum: The German Colonial Imagination,” *German History* 26, no. 2 (2008): 251–71, esp. 269.

from the progressive rhetoric of inclusion to more conservative and antiabortion rhetorics of protection.

Moving into the postwar era, scholars have shown that neo-Nazism in late-twentieth-century Germany was galvanized by American neo-Nazis who operated without the legal limitations on speech and symbols put in place in Europe after World War II. Most recently, conspiracy theories connected to COVID-19 and QAnon—which have strong antisemitic overtones—have traveled from the United States, largely across the raucous domain of social media, to Germany, and were evident when the Reichstag was breached in an extreme right action in the fall of 2020.

Kucik

As my fellow contributors have so helpfully articulated, the colonial turn in genocide discourse has prompted complex and crucial conversations and debates. Across their responses, we see necessary cautions against unintentionally diminishing our focus on the specific injustices and violences that have comprised various atrocities. I agree that, as we discuss the expansive potential of the colonial turn, we must make sure we do not unintentionally oversimplify. As Jens and Jonathan have asserted in their remarks, many of these conversations remove nuance and inadvertently blur colonialism and the Holocaust into one indistinguishable category that erases specific violences, racisms, and other forms of systemic oppression. If we fail to discuss the peculiarities of antisemitism that undergirded the Holocaust or the particularities of anti-Blackness that produced the transatlantic slave trade as well as colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean, then we not only fail to honor the memory of all those who were affected by these atrocities, but might also fail to dismantle their reverberations today because we are not tracing the specific details through to their current manifestations.

That said, there are numerous beneficial aspects of the colonial turn, two of which are worth highlighting here. First, the colonial turn has opened the door for a more expansive understanding of the Third Reich that includes its oppression of groups that are often ignored in discussions of the Holocaust. In his groundbreaking 2003 book, *Hitler's Black Victims*, Clarence Lusane sheds light on the underexplored experiences of Black populations during the Holocaust, the ways in which Nazi Germany was influenced by anti-Blackness in the United States, and how that anti-Blackness became central to the Nazi regime. The colonial turn in genocide studies creates room for highlighting Lusane's work (and that of other scholars such as Raffael Scheck and Chigbo Arthur Anyaduba), as he brings the role of anti-Blackness to the forefront of our understanding of colonialism and Nazi Germany as well as the past and present United States.

Additionally, the colonial turn moves European and American violence against Black and Brown populations from the periphery of conversations about genocide and into the center. Lagrou, for instance, emphasizes that discussions of settler colonial genocides not only downplay the murderous crimes of white Europeans, but further stereotypes about the purported "savagery" of those who were murdered. As noted in my earlier responses, a false—and, to be blunt, racist—dichotomy is also often established between the "civilization" of pre-Nazi Germany and notions of "savagery" that are frequently associated with Black and Brown populations. Hence, treatments of the Holocaust frequently revolve not so much around the question "How could this happen?" but "How could this happen *in Europe*?"

Although the problematic attribution of mass violence to "uncivilized" perpetrators was also present in discussions of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s (a European conflict but ostensibly not a Western one), this line of questioning is almost entirely absent when it comes to genocidal episodes in predominantly Black and Brown countries, despite the rampant violence white Europeans enacted against their native populations for centuries. When genocide occurs in Africa, it is often falsely attributed to "tribal conflict" that led to what Western governments and media call "civil wars" and describe as inevitable. These

stereotypical responses to violence involving Black populations are rooted in white supremacist ideologies. In addition to ignoring the reality that genocide is just as likely to occur in Europe or the United States as in Africa, they ignore another devastating truth: colonialism frequently resulted in genocidal slaughter.

Although American settler colonialism and frontier genocide now often stand at the center of the colonial turn, new conversations have begun to repair omissions on a broader scale too. The German government, for instance, has finally labeled what was done to the Herero and Nama peoples of Namibia as genocide and not just “colonialism.” This apology, however, has not resulted in a formal admission of legal responsibility or the promise of individual reparations, thereby illuminating the need for urgent discussions concerning the steps that must come after public acknowledgment. Although these discussions are complex and multifaceted, they usually anchor colonialism in genocide discourse, which is a crucial step in the fight for converting recognition into tangible acts of restitution. Along the same lines, many Black African genocide survivors have used their memoirs to illustrate how contemporary genocides in Africa are tied to the legacies of colonialism—and to contest the “savagery” stereotypes that occupy many Western readers’ minds, however subliminally. In Ilibagiza’s aforementioned memoir, she explicitly links the roots of the Rwandan genocide to Belgian colonial race policies, without which the genocide in her country could not have happened. She describes her idyllic childhood not only to emphasize the peace and joy that defined it, but to underscore that the shocking destruction of that peace and joy came from a genocide born of colonialism.

To apply the colonial turn effectively in a way that works to eradicate systemic inequities in place today, we must use it in an expansive manner that does not erase nuance or collapse difference. We need not forfeit attention to detail to show that colonial systems were genocidal or that there are similarities in the notions of white supremacy that allowed both colonialism and the Holocaust to occur. We can elucidate these similarities and then take care to explain that noting their existence is not the same thing as saying the atrocities in question were identical in every aspect. Connecting those parallels is a step toward challenging the Eurocentrism that has dominated genocide discourse since Raphael Lemkin coined the term. When conducted with an empathetic focus not only on differences between the Holocaust and colonial genocides, but also on differences *within* those categories—that is, on how in each case various groups were persecuted in distinctive ways by and in a variety of nations—the comparisons evoked by the colonial turn can unravel the ramifications of the white supremacist systems that have shaped so much of our world, as well as confront the racist violence that continues to cover it in blood.

4. *As the conversation thus far has amply demonstrated, contemporary understandings of National Socialism in the United States are heavily informed by the prevalence of its representation in mass media. How has this trend served to mask or obfuscate fascistic tendencies in American history and political culture? To what extent does it reflect the strength of commitments to democratic pluralism and multicultural tolerance? To what extent does it signal the weakening of these values? Has it contributed to a decline in Holocaust awareness, as some scholars have suggested? If so, what do you see as indicators of this?*

Hake

Images and stories from the Third Reich have promoted—in fact, constructed—an ideal image of America by depicting the Nazi dictatorship as the embodiment of absolute evil and a direct threat to American exceptionalism. The fact that these representations also contributed to the equation of fascism and communism during the Cold War gave them additional currency. Starting with the first anti-Nazi film, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), Hollywood films about the Third Reich presented a foil against which to affirm the core American values of liberty, equality, and self-government. The resultant dynamic, in

which a nation-state or political system defines itself against its Others, can also be found in European films about the Third Reich, with the German case obviously following a different pattern.

But just as the understanding of National Socialism changed with historical scholarship on, and widespread teaching about, the Holocaust, and with the closely related emergence of Holocaust literature and film, the function of Nazism (or fascism) as a referent in American public debates and political imaginaries changed accordingly. Given the binary nature informing most filmic representations of the Third Reich (Self versus Other, good versus evil, democratic versus totalitarian), it is fairly easy to trace American appropriations of the Nazi narrative as part of the twin postwar projects of denazification and Americanization. For several decades, the Nazi regime functioned as the antithesis of American liberal democracy, Western capitalism, and the primacy of individual rights and freedoms. A different paradigm of identification emerged during the 1960s that facilitated the exploration of more ambiguous and ambivalent relations via the context of new film forms and styles: the survival of Nazis and Nazi tendencies in the United States, the sexualization diagnosed by Susan Sontag under the heading of “fascinating fascism,” the complicated dynamics of the victim-perpetrator relationship, and so forth.

In the new millennium, references to fascism primarily support diagnoses of crisis and expressions of disillusionment about the fragility of democratic commitments and institutions, the depth of social and economic divisions, the pervasiveness of racism and nativism, and the disappearing sense of community and belief in the common good. Even more, the discursive function of the Third Reich as both a political enemy and abject Other as well as an object of fascination and desire remains contradictory, with the history of the audiovisual fantasy (the signifier) having become almost more important than the historical reality (the signified).

Kucik

Although discussing depictions of National Socialism in the United States might seem like a straightforward conversation, it is a fraught one. On the one hand, some argue that American mass media has prioritized representations of Nazism to hide its own racial crimes. Countless students have told me that they learned about Nazism and the Holocaust in detail in high school, but learned comparatively little about the American genocides committed against Indigenous and Black populations through settler colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Students often note that conversations about Nazism and the Holocaust in their high school classes painted the United States as morally superior to Nazi Germany. At the same time, the prevalence of depictions of Nazism that led to widespread Holocaust consciousness in the United States has been critiqued for decades for an entirely different reason that centers on the ethics of representing genocide. Peter Novick has argued that the 1978 broadcast of NBC’s miniseries *Holocaust* was an integral component in catapulting the Holocaust to the heights of its role in American public consciousness. However, Novick notes that the miniseries also prompted pushback—from Elie Wiesel, for instance, who claimed that it was offensive because the Holocaust could not be represented and could only be understood by people who were there.

Although Wiesel was responding to a television series, his comments represent broader arguments that the Holocaust can only be understood and depicted (in any form) by those who experienced it. In the decades since World War II, Holocaust literature in particular has received significant attention. In her 2011 text, *A Thousand Darknesses*, Ruth Franklin discusses Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum, which she translates as “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric,” thereby challenging the conventional interpretation that reads the quote as “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Franklin insists that this distinction is critical because stating that writing “a” poem after Auschwitz is barbaric

locates the barbarity not in the act of writing poetry about the Holocaust, but in the assumption that a single poem could possibly encapsulate the experiences of millions of people.⁵

I focus on literature here, but the idea of representing collective tragedy via art (and I am including memoirs and documentaries like Burns's *The U.S. and the Holocaust* as art) characterizes various forms of mass media. Because most Holocaust survivors have passed away, art is now one of our best ways of ensuring that we do not forget the horrors of the Holocaust or the dangers of Nazism. Just as survivor memoirs and the NBC miniseries contributed to the rise of American Holocaust consciousness, the absence of the Holocaust in contemporary art forms could lead to the decline of that consciousness. The art we produce, and our analysis of that art, must be nuanced and rooted in specificity and attention to detail. To create a world without genocide, we must continue to study the Holocaust in depth *as well as* produce and publicize more stories about victims and survivors of other genocides, including genocides carried out by the United States.

Stern

I want to supplement our discussion of this topic, and refer back to Sabine's insights on medicalization, by foregrounding an interesting and pervasive dynamic wherein neo-Nazism both overtly and cryptically circulates on social media, galvanizing the far right, and reinforcing growing trends of Holocaust denialism. In 2020, the Anti-Defamation League released a report card on the moderation and regulation of Holocaust denial; they analyzed a handful of social media platforms and graded them from A to F. As it turns out, no platform earned an "A," and the highest grade, a "B," was given to the lesser-known site Twitch. YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok received "C" grades, and Facebook, Reddit, and Discord received "D" grades.⁶

This grading exercise points to the difficulty inherent in regulating content on platforms where users are anonymous and traffic generates dollars. It also suggests the importance of tracking new forms of media—namely social media—in the rise of the far right and the toxic politics associated with twenty-first-century authoritarianism. One of the complicating aspects of invocations of Nazism and the tropes associated with Hitler is how protean they can be, mobilized by left, right, and center to condemn and malign. As Sabine also mentioned earlier, extreme right congresswoman and QAnon conspiracy theorist Marjorie Taylor Greene, for example, has a predilection for labeling public health measures, such as mask mandates for protection against COVID-19, so oppressive as to be akin to the Holocaust. Those on the right do not shy away from calling those on the left fascists bent on anarcho-tyranny. Thus, any comparisons between contemporary authoritarianism and earlier iterations of fascism are distorted in a hall of discursive mirrors where things are not what they seem.

For the extreme right, left-wing "fascism" represents what they view as liberal totalitarian control of education, media, and politics, in which diversity, egalitarianism, and inclusion are mandated with no opportunity for dissent. On the other side, discussions of "fascism" are more historically grounded, but often rely too heavily on Nazi Germany as the holy grail against which all contemporary manifestations are compared. For example, white nationalists refer to the January 6 insurrection as their "Bastille Day," whereas left-wing academics refer to it as America's "Beer Hall Putsch."

Furthermore, it takes no more than a few clicks on mainstream platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook, and on unregulated platforms, such as Gab or Telegram, to find neo-Nazi memes. Typically, these memes include antisemitic references to George Soros, the Rothschilds, or "globalists," numbers such as 88—which refer to the eighth letter of the alphabet (H) to signal

⁵ Ruth Franklin, *A Thousand Darkneses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19. The original quote is from Theodor W. Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," in *Soziologische Forschung in unserer Zeit*, ed. K. G. Specht (Cologne and Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1951), 7–26.

⁶ Anti-Defamation League, "Online Holocaust Denial Report Card," January 26, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/holocaust-denial-report-card>.

“Heil Hitler”—and images such as the black sun and Othala or Elgiz runes, popularized among neo-Nazis after World War II. The proliferation of both overt and cryptic neo-Nazi memes is a defining feature of ethnonationalism in the United States and Europe, whether promoted by organizations such as Generation Identity or social media influencers, and it plays a key role in Holocaust denialism that has proven difficult to combat with traditional educational means.

Wiesen

An abiding fascination with the Third Reich cuts across genres and platforms. Sensationalist titles on Netflix and Hulu such as *Hunting Hitler* (2015–2018), *Revenge on the Nazis* (2018), and *Nazi Megastructures* (2013–2019) are juxtaposed with comedic fare, such as stand-up routines about Hitler’s dog, *Jojo Rabbit* (2019), and *He’s Back* (2015), to list a few examples. The latter two films were inspired in part by Charlie Chaplin’s 1940 depiction of Hitler as a feckless buffoon. In this vein, many of us have watched YouTube spoofs of the film *Downfall* (2004), which frame Hitler’s April 1945 rantings with subtitles about the Führer getting COVID-19, bemoaning the lack of cupcakes in the bunker, and discovering that a member of his entourage has farted.

Such content reveals both the persistence of a post-1945 triumphalist narrative of American good guys defeating the clownish Nazi bad guys and a growing comfort level with satirizing the Nazi past as it recedes further into history. The American obsession with Nazism can go to absurd lengths. It was with some bemusement that I contributed a 2016 Hitler documentary that aired on the American Heroes Channel. Hitler? An American hero? As ridiculous as this sounds, as a historical figure, Hitler does perform a kind of patriotic work in the United States by posthumously absorbing our own national sins. The Nazis allow us to channel America’s fascist tendencies into a historical personification of evil. Whatever dark elements are contained within our national history, Americans take comfort in the insistence that our collective crimes have never risen to the level of Hitler’s.

And yet to see this popular fare solely in terms of psychological deflection overlooks how mass media engagements with the category of Nazism can also enable a reckoning with America’s past. Television series about American Nazism, such as *The Plot against America* (2020) and *The Man in the High Castle* (2015–2019), along with the bio-fascist dystopia of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017–present), reflect a growing fear that the United States might be heading down an illiberal, even fascist, path. If you search for the term *Nazi* in movie streaming services, you will find documentaries about American prisons and the mass incarceration of Black people. Nazi-themed popular culture now intersects with a wider contemporary discussion of structural racism, policing, and the history of anti-Black violence. To mark the hundredth anniversary of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, President Biden spoke about the need to reckon with this repressed event, much as West German President Richard Weiszäcker called on Germans in 1985 to do the same with the Shoah. As many Americans learned about what happened in Tulsa for the first time, they saw images of burned-out buildings and Black people being rounded up and sent to detention centers. Such images cannot help but resonate with *Kristallnacht*.

In short, depictions of National Socialism in mass media can obfuscate American racial crimes in some instances, while enabling discussions of these same crimes in others. It is worth asking in each case whether the Shoah will remain central to American collective understandings of evil, especially as Holocaust survivors pass away. Recent polling suggests that public awareness of the Holocaust is alarmingly low, especially among young people. A 2020 Claims Conference survey revealed that 63 percent of millennials and members of Generation Z lacked knowledge of key events in the Holocaust, with 20 percent believing that Jews had caused it.⁷ These distressing statistics speak to the passing of time—it has

⁷ Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany, “First-Ever 50-State Survey on Holocaust Knowledge of American Millennials and Gen Z Reveals Shocking Results,” September 16, 2020, <https://www.claimscon.org/millennial-study/>.

now been more than seventy-five years since the end of World War II—and to an urgent need to step up our efforts to educate the public with all means at our disposal, often through reference to illiberal strains in our own political culture.

Guettel

It may be useful here to reflect on the role of the press, specifically print media journalism, in addition to cultural representations in film, television, literature, and on the internet. The recent publication of the German translation of Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* has sparked a debate that is directly related to these sociopolitical dimensions of Holocaust memory in Germany—that is, which political or cultural group embraces or rejects what kind of memorialization of the Holocaust for and within German society. Criticism of Rothberg on German editorial pages has been vitriolic, malicious, and often uninformed, especially by Thomas Schmid of the conservative Springer daily *Die Welt*, who accused Rothberg of wanting to do away with the universalist legacy of the Enlightenment. Schmid and other editorialists have in turn been taken to task by Jürgen Zimmerer and Rothberg himself, and most recently also by Dirk Moses. Moses harshly criticizes editorialists like Schmid and German politicians—particularly those who voted to condemn the pro-Palestinian BDS movement (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) as antisemitic—for their effectively essentialist understanding and utilization of Holocaust memory. The caustic tone of this debate highlights the relevance of our roundtable forum, as the U.S.-focused perspectives on Nazi Germany and German colonialism discussed in response to the previous question are clearly linked to the growing presence of globalized scholarly takes on German history as well as the Holocaust.

I have two at times competing reactions to this situation. On the one hand, I agree with many points raised by Moses. I also realize that those upholding what Moses calls the “German catechism” have real power that can make life hard for those targeted by them (for examples, see Anna-Esther Younes’s article in the April 2021 issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research*). On the other hand, I am concerned that aggressively confronting the proponents of this “German catechism” (even if just verbally) might be as politically problematic as it is intellectually sound. Then again, having just reread Schmid’s review of Rothberg, I very much understand the impulse to be angry. In his response to the debate, historian Dan Stone correctly points out that Rothberg’s critics are “very far” from representing the radical right. For that reason, would it not make more sense to have rational and *unaufgeregt* arguments with proponents of the “German catechism,” even if the tone of their opinion pieces and their disparagement of decades of relevant scholarly research are both deeply aggravating? What makes me ask this question is the fact that outside of our limited academic, political, and cultural circles, the Holocaust, regardless of whether it is viewed from global or essentialist perspectives, is often forgotten, ignored, or actively denied—together with Germany’s colonial crimes. Yes, Germany just officially acknowledged the Herero and Namaqua genocide. But among the broader German public, there is little to no awareness of this event in German history.

Alexander Gauland, the chairman of the extreme-right AfD (Alternative for Germany), has thus called the Nazi years “a speck of bird feces” on thousands of years of (otherwise presumably pristine) German history. In addition, the tens of thousands of Germans who have been coming together weekly under the banner of PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamification of the Occident) purportedly position themselves against the *Zivilisationsbruch* of Muslim terrorism and Sharia law, while conveniently forgetting that, because of the Holocaust, their own identification with an “Occidental,” “civilized,” Western culture was not accepted outside of Germany for decades after 1945. To make matters worse, in 2019, antisemitic hatred—not “just” Holocaust denial, but its valorization—motivated the domestic terrorist Stephan Balliet to attempt to kill sixty-eight Jewish worshippers in the city of Halle on Yom Kippur. Unable to enter the synagogue, Balliet killed two passersby instead. This

kind of terrorism is growing in Germany; later that same year, police arrested a potential copycat in Dortmund. Given that murderous antisemitic attacks on individuals are also assaults on German democracy—and really democracy anywhere, as the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in 2018 demonstrates—it seems to me that scholarly, ideological, and political rifts among those of us who want to defend democratic systems of government should be bridged rather than deepened. Alas, I am unsure whether that is actually possible.

Outside of academia and newspaper editorials in Germany, the United States, and the global north more generally, there clearly exists a strong unwillingness—at times manifested in lethal terrorist activity—to recognize and reckon with the West’s long-standing love affair with fascism, racism, and genocidal expansionism. This phenomenon, which will take much more than scholarly monographs, journals, or features in major newspapers to correct, currently contributes to a quasi-Orwellian situation in which the meanings of terms such as *fascism* and *Nazi* are forcibly inverted. From Trump and the Republican Party to UKIP (the UK Independence Party) and the pro-Brexit Tories in Great Britain, from Germany’s AfD to efforts by the nominally liberal French government to brand entire academic fields as “Islamofascism,” the New Right is unwilling to admit that the legacies of racially motivated violence lie at the core of the national frameworks within which these political parties and groups so comfortably situate themselves. Instead, they use accusations of “fascism” or “Nazism” against those who try to address these old injustices, as Geoff Eley has recently pointed out.

Considering these developments, it is indeed necessary that historians and genocide studies scholars continue to research and identify overlaps, parallels, and in some cases direct links between the Holocaust and genocidal violence in colonial contexts, including that of the United States. To amplify Jonathan’s suggestion, I would argue that this has to be done by increasingly engaging nonspecialists through different forms of media, public history projects, and other outreach ventures directed at broad audiences.

5. None of the phenomena under discussion are absent from the curricula of American universities. On the contrary, higher education is an ideal environment for illuminating the presence of the Third Reich in modern American life and historical memory. How would you describe our role as teachers in guiding public perception on this front? Has the Trump era changed how you tackle issues such as fascism, white supremacy, and racial violence in the classroom? Have you noticed any differences in the content of student responses? What do these tell us about relevant dynamics in the production of knowledge going forward?

Wiesen

Since the 2016 election, students have without prompting drawn comparisons between Trump’s America and the Third Reich. I taught a class on Nazi Germany in the fall of 2020, when the U.S. presidential campaign was in full swing. With angry rallies and talk of rigged elections in the background, I did not have to connect the dots. The students themselves reflected with great insight on the mobilization of xenophobia and the fragility of democracy in both 1932 and 2020. They also did so a few years earlier, during the Unite the Right Rally in 2017, when a cadre of white supremacists—made up of alt-rightists, Ku Klux Klan supporters, and ethnonationalists—converged on Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. There, swastikas were on prominent display, and protesters chanted Nazi slogans like “Blood and Soil” and held signs that read “the Jews are Satan’s children” and “Jews will not replace us.”

This convergence of anti-Black violence, defenses of the Confederacy, and Nazi antisemitism in places like Charlottesville prompted rich classroom discussions about the transnational, comparative histories of racial ideologies. My students and I explored multiple questions that would not have been part of my classroom discussions even a few years earlier: How did the Nazis view anti-Black racism in the United States? What did African

Americans, chafing under Jim Crow segregation and racial terror lynching, say about the antisemitism of the Third Reich? How did Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany bring their experiences to their appointments at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and their role in the Black Freedom Struggle? What led the German government to acknowledge the mass murder of the Herero and Nama as a genocide, and how did the country's post-Holocaust memory work inform this declaration? How can Americans, to repeat Susan Neiman's words, "learn from the Germans," as we struggle with our own legacies of racial violence?

Comparative racism and the "universalization" of the Nazi past do carry risks, to be sure. Without our guidance, students might lose sight of the specific factors that brought about the Third Reich and the unique historical trajectory of racism in the United States. We also encounter accusations of biased, liberal indoctrination in the academy when we explore links between Trump and fascism in the college classroom. But we must resist any temptation to censor ourselves when we see historical patterns. Like no other time in the recent past, the troubling legacies of American history and Nazi history are colliding, and it is our job to teach students the critical thinking skills they need to navigate our times. Where Sabine sees the Trump threat as having passed, with our institutions of democracy holding on and after January 6, 2021, my students and I are not so sanguine. The election of Joe Biden and the recent electoral weakening of some European populist parties should not lull us into a false sense of security. As long as students of history remain unsettled by the growth of ethnopopulism, we will continue to see sometimes compelling, often inapt comparisons with Nazi Germany.

I return to the question of language. When the Centers for Disease Control lifted its mask mandate for vaccinated people, some likened their sense of relief to that of Jews being liberated from Auschwitz. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell reacted with the words "Free at Last," crudely appropriating the words of Martin Luther King Jr. for political effect. As teachers, we can contextualize these gestures and explain *why* Nazi crimes and the civil rights movement serve as ethical metaphors. We can trace the historical etymology of Holocaust analogies or McConnell's appropriation of African American history and teach about transhistorical struggles against injustice. For example, MLK's words were inspired by those of Ghana's founding father Kwame Nkrumah, who had once studied in Pennsylvania at Lincoln University, a historically Black college. And it was at Lincoln University, in the days after the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, that President Harding called for racial justice: "God grant that in the soberness, the fairness, and the justice of the country, we shall never again have a spectacle like it."⁸

Hake

As someone who has taught courses on Nazi culture in various disciplinary constellations, I have noticed considerable changes in students' spontaneous reactions to, and critical discussions of, films made in or about the Third Reich. For the longest time, Nazi cinema served as the bad object of film history, the most despicable kind of film as propaganda, and the most effective manipulation of the collective unconscious. The reception of *Triumph of the Will* (1935) perfectly illustrates the constitutive tension between boredom and seduction through which U.S. students signal their immunity or susceptibility to the aesthetic and emotional appeal of the fascist mass ornament. American and European films about the Third Reich allow them to feel good about the last so-called "just war" and to make sense of U.S. leadership in the creation of the postwar global order. Throughout, the pathology of Nazism as embodied by its mad leaders, sick villains, and pathetic followers provides the perfect test case for students' ability to recognize evil and show their immunity to its base attractions. The enduring preference for classical narratives goes hand in hand with familiar patterns of

⁸ "Harding Exhorts Negroes to Study; Shocked at Tulsa Riots," *New York Times*, June 7, 1921.

(empathetic and sympathetic) identification: with members of the German resistance, Jewish victims of Nazi racial policies, or American soldiers fighting for freedom and democracy during and after the war. Here the very different perspectives on the Great Patriotic War offered by Soviet films or the narratives of antifascism prevalent in east European cinemas offer important correctives to mainstream interpretations of the historical period and can be used to challenge dominant patterns of interpretation. How German films about the Third Reich and the Holocaust participate in public debates about history, democracy, memory, and commemoration would require a separate discussion.

Much of this has changed over the last few years. During the Trump presidency, two kinds of arguments have made an appearance in classroom discussions at the University of Texas at Austin. Demographics matter here; the majority of undergraduates come from Texas, including its conservative suburbs and provincial small towns. At the same time, the state's large metropolitan areas have ethnically diverse and politically progressive populations. Thus, on the one hand, media representations of the Third Reich have become conventionalized as a spectacle of terror and violence that engenders either horror, laughter, or ironic self-referentiality. The model for the latter is Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), where the Third Reich is reduced to an all too familiar spectacle that has nothing in common with, and poses no threat to, the presumably universal values of individual freedom, limited government, and the pursuit of happiness.

On the other hand, Nazi cinema and films about Nazism function increasingly as projection screens for the kind of political paranoia and catastrophic thinking that results in somber pronouncements about the end of American democracy. The films thus enlisted in decidedly contemporary readings do not simply serve as a warning for the return of fascism in the country that defeated it at mid-century. Here the Nazis on the screen offer proof that fascism has already arrived in the United States—in the contempt for democratic institutions and processes, in the cult of the authoritarian leader, in the embrace of ethnonationalism, and in the populist manipulation of rage and resentment. The alternate histories presented in *The Plot against America* and *The Man in the High Castle* offer political narratives where the didactic intent of a worst-case scenario goes hand in hand with a more troubling attitude of resignation wrapped in the nostalgic retro look of the 1940s and 1950s, respectively. Building on the countless other films that constitute the corpus of Nazi-related stories, types, images, and imaginaries, these most recent alternate histories add yet another layer to the projections, appropriations, and interpretations concocted by American politicians, activists, and agitators since the 1930s. Interestingly, Holocaust films continue to be discussed within a framework of philosophical questions and humanistic values; students sometimes require trigger warnings. The conditions of film reception and the terms of acceptable speech could not be more different: moral outrage, ethical concern, and empathic identification in response to Holocaust representations; ironic detachment or political paranoia as part of the signifiatory universe marked by the Third Reich.

Without doubt, references to the Third Reich—as an expression of fear and paranoia, but also of pure provocation—have become more ubiquitous and normalized during the Trump presidency. But the deep political divisions in the country, from an exclusionary populism and Christian nationalism to a post-ideological authoritarianism, are also a product of the ongoing commercialization of the public sphere and the radical transformation of public life in the age of digital technologies and media conglomerates. The Nazi media dictatorship and the hyper-medialization of fascism are both historical phenomena; although closely related, one is to be clearly distinguished from the other. Recent political developments have indeed instilled a new sense of urgency in many students; politically energized, they have become aware of the dangers to democracy and do see the Third Reich as a cautionary tale for the erosion of social trust and national unity in the present. Whether aligned with the Republican or Democratic Party or associated with new movements, students today tend to reproduce the polarization that is haunting political debates by drawing on the Third Reich as a convenient shorthand, a diagnostic tool, and a discursive fantasy. To them, the

“fascism” trope either proves that America is winning or that it has already lost. Whether the Biden administration can counter the attraction of “fascism” as a marker of everything that is wrong (or right) with America remains to be seen; the desire for politics as emotion-based entertainment and performance will certainly not disappear. But we need to be aware that the inflationary usage of “fascist” in public debates also functions as a distraction from other threats to Western democracies, including global capitalism.

Kucik

As educators, one of our roles in impacting public perceptions of the Third Reich is to ensure that students are exposed to the many nuances of these conversations, including the details of how genocides begin and why they persist. To guarantee that every student who passes through our educational systems learns about these atrocities, we must push for courses on racism, antiracism, genocide, and systemic violence to be required for graduation. Students in every field need to know how racism functions—for example, pre-med students must be equipped to tackle racism in health care, pre-law students must be able to do the same in the legal system, and artists must have the frameworks necessary to create art that challenges racialized violence. This widespread distribution of knowledge can create a society in which there are multifaceted conversations about white supremacy, racialized violence, and fascism in a multitude of spheres, not just in higher education and academia.

Teaching during and after the era of Trump, I too have noticed that students have a sense of urgency about these issues; they feel the weight of the present and its atrocities. Amid the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, a global pandemic, and continued support for the systems of oppression and marginalization that precipitated the BLM movement and amplified the devastation of COVID-19, the world can feel impossible to navigate—and to change—without a road map. Although pieces of that map are scattered across a variety of places, many of them can be found in literature, which plays a significant role in both reflecting and shaping everything around us. I encourage students to put literature and current events in constant dialogue and to allow literature to transport them into the lives of people from across the nation and the globe who possess a variety of identities and experiences. We use these stories to have conversations about systemic racism, transphobia, xenophobia, homophobia, classism, and so forth, all the while acknowledging that they are not distinct, but consistently overlapping parts of violently hierarchical systems.

Despite the overwhelming nature of these systems, I ensure that we also discuss ways to dismantle them—because they *can* be dismantled. It is our job to teach students not only how to identify the horrors of the past, but also how to stop the horrors of the present and prevent those of the future. To emphasize students’ agency in prompting tangible social change, I assign a “Grassroots Proposal” assignment, for instance, in which students work toward cultivating their own ideas for combating injustice. Students craft a proposal for the creation of a grassroots organization whose aim is to help the victims of genocide or racial violence and to stop further instances of such violence. This assignment is designed to encourage students to think about how they (and all of us) can actively unlearn the racist, Eurocentric modes of thinking that have structured our world. At its core, it is one example of how we can cultivate a learning process in which students are in charge of devising solutions and allowed to realize that they possess all the tools they need to build a better world.

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