Who Was “Hitler” Before Hitler? Historical Analogies and the Struggle to Understand Nazism, 1930–1945

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ABSTRACT. Since the turn of the millennium, major political figures around the world have been routinely compared to Adolf Hitler. These comparisons have increasingly been investigated by scholars, who have sought to explain their origins and assess their legitimacy. This article sheds light on this ongoing debate by examining an earlier, but strikingly similar, discussion that transpired during the Nazi era itself. Whereas commentators today argue about whether Hitler should be used as a historical analogy, observers in the 1930s and 1940s debated which historical analogies should be used to explain Hitler. During this period, Anglophone and German writers identified a diverse group of historical villains who, they believed, explained the Nazi threat. The figures spanned a wide range of tyrants, revolutionaries, and conquerors. But, by the end of World War II, the revelation of the Nazis’ unprecedented crimes exposed these analogies as insufficient and led many commentators to flee from secular history to religious mythology. In the process, they identified Hitler as Western civilization’s new archetype of evil and turned him into a hegemonic analogy for the postwar period. By explaining how earlier analogies struggled to make sense of Hitler, we can better understand whether Hitler analogies today are helping or hindering our effort to understand contemporary political challenges.

I would like to thank Alvin Rosenfeld, Matthew Specter, and Kobi Kabalek for reading early drafts of this article, as well as the two anonymous CEH reviewers for their insightful suggestions.
Adolf Hitler has been dead for nearly three-quarters of a century, but he has gained immortality as a historical analogy. Over the course of the postwar period, but especially since the turn of the millennium, major political figures around the world have been routinely compared to the Nazi leader. Among the most recent examples are American Presidents (Donald Trump, Barack Obama, and George W. Bush); European politicians (Vladimir Putin, Marine Le Pen, and Angela Merkel); and nonwestern heads of state (Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Rodrigo Duterte, and Hugo Chavez). The comparisons of these figures to Hitler have emanated from both the left and right wings of the political spectrum. Their purpose has been both polemical and analytical. But whatever their differences, they confirm Hitler’s enduring appeal as an object of historical comparison.

Scholars, journalists, and other commentators have increasingly sought to explain the wave of Hitler analogies and assess their legitimacy. In so doing, they have offered diverging conclusions and sparked growing debate. Some observers have argued that Hitler analogies have great contemporary relevance. Alarmed by the global surge of rightwing nationalism, authoritarian populism, and neofascism, they insist that comparisons to the former Führer are both timely and necessary. Other commentators, by contrast, have skeptically dismissed Hitler comparisons as tendentious and counterproductive. Citing the caveats of “Godwin’s Law” (which asserts that the longer a debate drags on, the more likely participants will be to make polemical references to Hitler), they have refused to compare present-day political events to the Nazi era and instead drawn analogies to earlier periods in American and European history. Still other observers have dismissed the utility of historical analogies entirely, arguing that they are nearly always flawed. From their perspective, historians should avoid facile punditry and restrict themselves to historical analysis. The arguments employed by the various participants in the ongoing debate have their strengths and weaknesses. But it is too early to determine their respective validity. Since the debate about Hitler


2 Academics have increasingly begun to explore the merits of historical analogies. See the papers presented at a recent conference held at the University of Pennsylvania: “Inglorious Comparisons: On the Uses and Abuses of Historical Analogies” (https://www.sas.upenn.edu/germanic/events/inglorious-comparisons-uses-and-abuses-historical-analogy).


analogies continues to unfold in a rapidly changing political climate, it may be some time before we can determine whether they should be viewed as appropriate or alarmist.

In the meantime, we can better understand the debate by examining an earlier, but strikingly similar, discussion that transpired during the Nazi era itself. While commentators today argue about whether Hitler should be used as a historical analogy, observers in the 1930s and 1940s debated which historical analogies should be used to explain Hitler. In the decade and a half between the Nazis’ rise to power in the early 1930s and the collapse of the Third Reich in 1945, journalists, scholars, and ordinary citizens in the British Commonwealth, the United States, and Germany attempted to make sense of Hitler by identifying historical precedents for him. Searching across space and time, they looked to a wide range of settings—to Europe, Asia, and the Middle East; to the ancient, medieval, and modern eras—and found a diverse group of historical villains who, they believed, could help explain the Nazi threat. The group included notorious revolutionaries, religious fanatics, dictators, conquerors, and warlords—all of whom had well-deserved reputations for evil.

These figures constituted a ready reservoir of analogies for commentators seeking to understand the turbulent events of the late Weimar period and the Third Reich. In the years 1930 to 1933, journalists in Britain, the United States, and Germany sought to explain Hitler’s quest for power by looking to European political history and drawing comparisons to aspiring tyrants, such as Georges Boulanger and Maximilian Robespierre. Following Hitler’s seizure and consolidation of power in the years 1933–1939, the historical references changed. With German writers no longer able to draw historical analogies freely because of Nazi press censorship, Anglo-American observers were largely left to themselves to make sense of Hitler’s increasingly radical actions. Some writers continued to cite figures from political history, such as Napoleon III and Henry VIII, but others looked to pivotal events from European religious history, such as the Spanish Inquisition and the Wars of Religion. After the Nazis unleashed World War II and began pursuing their goals of conquest and expansion, British and American writers shifted their analogies yet again: they now looked to the realm of military history and pointed to the careers of such conquerors as Philip of Macedon, Attila the Hun, and Genghis Khan. Regardless of who was invoked, the analogies served the dual goals of description and prescription; by attempting to render Hitler intelligible, they sought to determine how he should be confronted.

Yet, as the war dragged on and the Nazis’ brutal crimes became common knowledge, an important development occurred: many observers found that the historical analogies they had selected to explain Hitler were no longer able to do so. Facing a comparative cul-de-sac, many commentators fled from secular history to religious mythology and associated the Nazi leader with the time-honored symbol of evil—the devil himself. In the process, Hitler was transformed into Western civilization’s new archetype of evil. Indeed, he became a hegemonic, master analogy. By 1945, the historical figure of Adolf Hitler had become rhetorically demonized into the admonitory signifier “Hitler.”

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6 This article draws mostly on English-language sources from Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia. It incorporates some German sources from the Weimar era, but not from the Nazi period, because of the regime’s suppression of the free press. Scattered observations from other countries are included where possible. The primary databases are Newspapers.com, The European Library (http://www.theeuropeaneportal.org/te4/), and the many individual newspaper databases at the New York Public Library, such as The Times of London Digital Archive, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, and others.
The history of how historical analogies were used to make sense of Hitler nearly a century ago may help us understand the use of Hitler analogies today. Ironically enough, the failure of the former helps explain the success of the latter. Because of the belief that wartime comparisons to earlier historical villains had failed to explain fully Hitler’s exceptional evil, the view gradually emerged after 1945 that Hitler should become a baseline standard for future historical comparisons. As a result, the diverse symbols of evil that had once defined Western historical consciousness were dramatically reduced by the near monopoly of the Nazi Führer. Thanks to this analogical version of natural selection, political trends today are often perceived exclusively through the historical prism of Nazism. This development is largely a postwar phenomenon—one whose history remains to be written—but its roots lie in the growing wartime recognition that earlier analogies had underestimated the danger represented by the Nazi movement. By identifying these earlier analogies and examining how they were used, we can better understand why they came to be regarded as inadequate, and why they were eventually replaced by comparisons to the Nazi era. In so doing, we can begin to determine whether Hitler analogies today are helping or hindering our effort to understand and respond to contemporary political challenges. In short, by examining who was “Hitler” before Hitler, we can illuminate an important, but thus far unexamined, development in postwar Western historical consciousness.7

Defining Historical Analogies

Like all analogies, historical analogies are defined by specific formal and functional traits. At the most basic level, an analogy is a linguistic statement, cognitive process, or mode of argumentation that compares two things—or sets of things—in order to reveal similarities between them. The comparison typically takes place between something familiar, known as the source, and something less well known, called the target. By mobilizing our knowledge of the former, we can make inferences about, and arrive at a deeper understanding of, the latter.8 A conventional analogy seeks to reveal structural and functional similarities between the objects of comparison.9 A historical analogy is different, insofar as the objects of comparison are historical. They may be individuals, events, or other phenomena. But in all cases, historical analogies compare new developments with historical precedents.10 People seeking to make sense of the Bolshevik Revolution in the years after 1917, for example, could easily consult the events of the French Revolution after 1789 and compare the actions of Vladimir Lenin and Maximilian Robespierre.

7I would like to acknowledge Colin Patrick for coining the phrase, “Who was Hitler before Hitler?,” which first appeared in 2011 in his short blog introduction to Brian Palmer, “Before Hitler, Who Was the Stand-In for Pure Evil?,” Slate, Oct. 4, 2011 (http://mentalfloss.com/article/28947/who-was-hitler-hitler).
9A duck’s wings and a fish’s fins, for example, are analogous insofar as they promote the function of locomotion. See Esa Itkonen, Analogy as Structure and Process: Approaches in Linguistics, Cognitive Psychology, and Philosophy of Science (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2005), 1.
In making such comparisons, historical analogies serve two main functions. First, they serve the descriptive goal of analysis; they compare historical phenomena in order to discover deeper truths about their relationship. The relationship may involve causes or effects, origins or consequences, but whatever their focus, analogies help us make sense of complex subjects through the means of simplification. In so doing, they appeal to our reason and satisfy our desire for historical understanding. Second, analogies serve the prescriptive goal of advocacy. Because they allow us to infer similarities beyond those of the original comparison, all analogies provide lessons for the future. They do so in different ways, however. On the one hand, historical comparisons can yield specific policy recommendations; they can invoke past successes and failures to show us what should be emulated or avoided in the present. On the other hand, comparisons can provide justification for already existing policy positions. It is difficult to answer the chicken-and-egg question of whether historical decisions are shaped, or merely justified, by analogies; it is equally hard to determine why people accept or reject them. In both cases, however, analogies display rhetorical dimensions by appealing to, and enabling us to express, our emotions. Whether the feelings are positive or negative, whether they seek to praise or condemn, to console or admonish, analogies allow us to voice our fantasies and fears about the present through comparisons to the past.

Historical analogies have many virtues. Ever since Aristotle, scholars have recognized the epistemological value of analogical thinking. Analogies are employed in many different cognitive tasks, but they are particularly useful in perception and decision-making. Because analogies help render complex subjects intelligible through simplification, they have been praised as “vital” analytical tools that help people “make sense of the world.” Historical analogies, in turn, are particularly useful in “retrieving lessons from history.” Some historical analogies have become noted aphorisms— for example, Karl Marx’s comparison of Napoleon Bonaparte with his underachieving nephew, Louis Napoleon, in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte of 1851, which inspired the famous idea that history always happens twice: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Beyond being analytically important, analogies also serve a positive psychological function. They provide people with a sense of comfort, solace, and orientation when they are confused by new circumstances. Analogies satisfy the popular desire for familiarity, for “reassurance that history follows a patterned … course.” People thus welcome analogies that make “the present and future recognizable.” When Leon Trotsky lost his power struggle with Joseph Stalin in the mid-1920s, for instance, he drew comfort by looking to the French Revolution in interpreting

11 In keeping with its etymological origins in the Latin word *analogia*, or proportion, an analogy is often a simplified, scaled-down version of the more complex thing that it is seeking to explain—for example, Isaac Newton’s likening of the universe to a machine. See A. F. Scott, *Current Literary Terms: A Concise Dictionary of Their Origin and Uses* (London: Macmillan, 1965), 12.
12 Macdonald writes that we can infer that, “if two things … are similar in certain respects, then they are also similar in other respects.” The lessons can come in “micro” and “macro” forms; they can imply specific policy prescriptions or support general principles: “Master analogies” offer “a broad, general lesson.” See Macdonald, *Rolling the Iron Dice*, 3-10.
13 If an analogy is mentioned before a policy is devised, then it is possibly an influence. See ibid., 11-12.
Stalin’s ascent as a “Thermidorian” or “Bonapartist” turn in the Bolshevik revolutionary experiment.16

Historical analogies also have drawbacks, however. For one thing, they are often viewed as simplistic.17 Analogies are essentially “cognitive shortcuts”; they are substitutes for, rather than expressions of, detailed analysis.18 Their simplicity, however, makes them tempting for both producers and consumers. Academic theorists often identify the “repetition” of historical events in order to create “elegant laws and generalizations.”19 The general public, meanwhile, prefers “brief, uncomplicated, and racy formulations” to those that are more complicated.20 As a result, analogies can “short circuit critical reflection” and lead to “superficial thinking.”21 Historical analogies are also unverifiable. They are not facts, but interpretations—ones whose validity is determined by the forces of “rhetorical pragmatism” rather than by any proximity to objective truth.22 It is difficult, therefore, to prove one analogy superior to another.23 All analogies, moreover, are highly subjective. Because they are emotionally comforting, they can become self-serving. Once they become lodged in the “public mind,” analogies can become “resistant to correction.”24 Skeptics worry that, when analogies are “transformed into law-like statements, [they] … promote a sense of false certainty.”25 Analogies can thus be misleading, insofar as they can cause us to misinterpret the past.26 In some instances, this outcome is unintentional. Analogies can inadvertently, but nevertheless falsely, convince us that a new event is merely a repetition of a past event. They can cloud our judgment and limit our ability to respond rationally to a new situation. E. H. Carr noted the ironic fact that many Bolshevik leaders in the mid-1920s rejected Trotsky as Lenin’s successor because he looked more like Napoleon than Stalin did.27 Analogies can also be deliberately abused for tendentious purposes. As Arno Mayer has written, they can be used to incite, to alarm, to defame, and to exalt rather than to orient, clarify, and to stimulate critical thought.”28 Yet, as Ernest May and others have shown, political elites have often abused

25 Portes, “Hazards of Historical Analogy,” 517.
28 Mayer argues that analogies are couched in different “rhetorical forms.” See Mayer, “Uses and Abuses of Historical Analogies,” 224.
this potential—for example, the US government’s overuse of the “Munich” analogy to justify ill-advised interventions in Vietnam and Iraq. To counteract this pitfall, policymakers should avoid relying on single analogies and instead consult a diverse range of “alternative analogies” for guidance.

Hitler: Patterns of Representation

These observations should be kept in mind in examining how Western observers employed analogies to make sense of Hitler and the Nazi movement during the Weimar Republic and Third Reich. In the English-speaking world, Germany, and other countries, writers, scholars, journalists, and other commentators suggested comparisons between Hitler and a wide range of historical figures. They included: 1) ancient tyrants and conquerors, such as the pharaohs of Egypt, King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon, Haman of Persia, the Seleucid King Antiochus IV, King Herod of Judea, Julius Caesar, Emperor Nero, Philip of Macedon, and Alexander the Great; 2) “barbarian” warlords, including Hannibal of Carthage, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Alaric the Visigoth, and Genseric the Vandal; 3) medieval and early modern religious fanatics, such as Girolamo Savonarola, Tomás de Torquemada, Jan Bockelson, Henry VIII, and the French Catholic perpetrators of the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre; 4) modern dictators, either actual or aspiring, such as Oliver Cromwell, Maximilian Robespierre, Napoleon Bonaparte, Napoleon III, and Georges Boulanger; 5) mythical figures drawn from different religious and cultural traditions, including Christian theology (Satan), Greek mythology (Icarus, Sciron), and Nordic lore (Wotan, Loki).

Commentators drew upon all these figures to explain Hitler’s actions during different phases of the Nazi movement’s existence. But whatever events they were meant to explain, the analogies served several common functions. First, they tried to make the events of the Third Reich comprehensible by comparing them to familiar precedents. Second, the comparisons sought to reassure people that the events they were experiencing were merely new versions of older ones. Third, the comparisons attempted to show how past precedents could provide guidelines for present-day action. For a time, the analogies used to explain the Nazi regime were thought to function effectively. Yet, as people began to sense how the regime’s extremity was surpassing older precedents, the analogies began to lose credibility. As the act of comparing Hitler with previous historical villains increasingly revealed more differences than similarities, the analogies ironically underscored his novelty. Partly as a result of this trend, growing numbers of observers recognized the futility of analogies and concluded that Nazism represented a unique phenomenon. By war’s end, the belief in Hitler’s singularity helped transform him into a hegemonic analogy.

Hitler Before 1933

Prior to the Nazi “seizure of power” in 1933, relatively few historical analogies were employed to make sense of Hitler. There was little need for them, since he was not taken very seriously in the early years of the Nazi movement. It is true that, around the time of the failed Beer Hall Putsch in Munich on November 9, 1923, Hitler was frequently likened to a “German” or “Bavarian” version of Benito Mussolini, who, the year before, had marched on Rome and compelled King Victor Emmanuel III to name him prime minister.32 This analogy, however, was more contemporary than historical.33 Between 1923 and 1930, most observers described Hitler in prosaic rather than historical terms. Journalists routinely depicted him in belittling fashion as a former “house painter,” an “adventurer,” and a “charlatan.”34 These comments, together with the tendency of observers to highlight Hitler’s failure to seize power in 1923, revealed that contemporaries viewed him as unworthy of serious analysis.35

This pattern began to change, however, following the NSDAP’s success in the Reichstag elections of September 1930, when the party dramatically improved its performance from the election of 1928, increasing its share of the vote from less than 3 percent to over 18 percent. From this point on, journalists and other observers began to take Hitler more seriously and began to subject him to historical comparisons. One of the most common was to the nineteenth-century French general and political rabble-rouser, Georges Boulanger. Between 1886 and 1889, Boulanger amassed considerable political support in the Third Republic by exploiting the French citizenry’s desire to exact revenge against Germany for its victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Boulanger repeatedly attacked the Third Republic’s democratic leaders and flirted with seizing power by force. Because he repeatedly hesitated to act, however, his movement quickly dissipated and he ended up committing suicide at the grave of his lover in 1891. In the early 1930s, comparisons between Hitler and Boulanger were frequent. In 1931, for example, the Brooklyn Eagle underscored Boulanger’s present-day relevance, observing that he was “the ‘Hitler’ of his day and almost turned the French Third Republic into a dictatorship.”36 Other comparisons, by contrast, optimistically asserted that Hitler’s fate would resemble that of the failed French putschist. In October 1930, the Decatur Press stressed that, “when Boulanger became a menace, … it was not difficult to secure an alignment of parties strong enough to bring about his downfall.”37 Other comments, however, were more cautious. A reviewer of German writer Bruno Weil’s 1931 book, Glück und Elend des Generals Boulanger, noted that, while France’s relative stability had helped defeat the general’s coup plans in 1889, Germany’s

33 The same was true of the many comparisons made between Hitler and other contemporary dictators in the 1930s, such as Joseph Stalin.
current “national despair” made it likely that “Hitler will have a far more favorable field than Boulanger.” Yet, after Hitler refused an offer of the vice chancellorship from Paul von Hindenburg and Franz von Papen on August 13, 1932, commentators once again displayed newfound optimism. In October 1932, the *Hamburger Anzeiger* called Hitler a “little Boulanger,” described his refusal as a “missed opportunity” reminiscent of the French general, and predicted that the NSDAP would “decline” in future elections.

Around the same time, Hitler was also compared to the French revolutionary leader, Maximilian Robespierre. On September 25, 1930, as the Nazi leader was testifying as a witness at a trial of three SA men in Leipzig accused of disseminating Nazi propaganda in the *Reichswehr*, he was quoted as predicting that “heads will roll in the sand” after he took power. The exclamation received considerable media attention and sparked analogies to Robespierre’s use of the guillotine during the Terror. Most such comparisons of the Jacobin and the Nazi leader were meant to be disparaging, with one newspaper quipping that comparing the two men’s minds was “not a flattering measurement” with regard to their respective “mental stature.” Other comparisons sought to provide reassurance. In September 1930, the *Reno Gazette Journal* noted that Robespierre had only been thirty-six years of age during the Terror phase of the French Revolution, but asserted (erroneously) that Hitler was “fifty-two—too many years for a man who proposes to fight the world.” The newspaper added that, because Germany was a “land … of extreme conservatism,” it was “no land for French revolutions to come into being [and was] thoroughly capable of dealing with the Hitlers.” One month later, the *Detroit Free Press* reminded readers that, after Robespierre had executed enemies on the guillotine, “then … came his turn.”

This claim would be merely the first of many misjudgments. The comparisons of Hitler to Boulanger and Robespierre interpreted the Nazi leader in conventional terms and underestimated his radicalism. Only a few observers were prescient enough to recognize the Nazi leader’s exceptionality. In October 1930, following the NSDAP’s unexpected success in the *Reichstag* elections, the leftwing German writer, Ernst Toller, bluntly declared that “analogies no longer function” with regard to Hitler. At this point, however, Toller’s voice was in the minority.

**Hitler’s Seizure and Consolidation of Power**

Following Hitler’s appointment as chancellor on January 30, 1933, journalists in Britain and the United States sought new analogies. The first were inspired by the arson attack on the *Reichstag* on February 27, 1933. This event, and the accompanying suspicion that the

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43“Hitler, the German Fascist,” *Detroit Free Press*, Oct. 15, 1930.
44Scholdt adds that leftist critics underestimated the threat posed by Hitler because they had a hard time imagining Weimar becoming worse than it already was. See Scholdt, *Autoren über Hitler*, 485-87.
Nazis had set the fire themselves as a pretext for eliminating their opponents, led some observers to find precedents in the history of ancient Rome. As the *New York Times* put it, the claim that the “Hitlerites set fire to the Reichstag for the purpose of blaming it on the Communists harks back to the time of Nero and burning Rome and the early Christians.”

This observation drew on the belief, recorded in the writings of Tacitus, that the Roman Emperor had set the fire for ulterior motives (clearing space for a new construction project) and blamed the city’s Christians in order to divert attention from his own culpability. Similar comparisons appeared in Britain. As the London Observer reported in December 1933, a popular joke at the time portrayed Hitler’s interior minister, Hermann Göring, chatting with Nero in Hades about “who was responsible for the bigger massacre. Whereupon Göring leaned forward and whispered something into Nero’s ear. ‘Quite good,’ replied Nero aloud: ‘but I burnt Rome!’” The influence of the Nero comparison, however, was limited. Because the analogy was widely promoted by communist groups eager to claim that the fire had been a Nazi “frame up,” some Western journalists granted credence to the Nazi regime’s version of events and rejected the Roman precedent.

After Nero, the historical figure to whom Hitler was most frequently compared at this early stage of the Nazi regime was Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (the later emperor, Napoleon III). Some writers invoked the French ruler in order to counsel wariness about Hitler’s trustworthiness. In February 1933, the *Brooklyn Eagle* reminded its readers that, just as “Hitler took the oath to defend the constitution, [so] did Napoleon III.” Others sought solace in comparing the two men. In March 1933, the *Middletown Times* wrote, “The German nation is suffering from a temporary aberration. Hitler is merely a symptom, [just] as Napoleon III [was a] symptom … of feverish French progress from the First Empire to the Third Republic. It is a physical and mental illness that has serious aspects but is not necessarily fatal.” Finally, when Hitler staged a plebiscite to validate his decision to have Germany leave the League of Nations in November 1933, commentators found reassuring similarities to the career of Napoleon III, noting that, shortly after he had held a plebiscite in the spring of 1870, “his empire was overthrown and the republic reestablished.”

Other observers found precedents for Hitler in the reign of the British dictator, Oliver Cromwell. The comparison actually originated with the Nazis themselves. Prior to the Reichstag elections of July, 1932, the British press reported that Nazi campaign posters were invoking the seventeenth-century British revolutionary by polemically declaring: “Three hundred years ago Oliver Cromwell who helped to make England great broke up an inefficient Parliament. In Germany it is also time to put an end to the frivolous play of...”

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48 “Whither Germany?,” *The Advertiser* (Adelaide, Australia), March 2, 1933.
50 “German Turmoil,” *The Middletown Times* (NY), March 29, 1933. Another paper declared that, “with a majority in the Reichstag, [Hitler] might find it more expedient to bring about his revolution gradually, on the model of Napoleon III, who was President before he became Emperor.” See “The German Contest,” *St. Cloud Times* (MN), March 3, 1933.
51 “Napoleon III and Hitler,” *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 19, 1933. A few weeks later, the *Detroit Free Press* wrote, “It may be prudent for Hitler to remember that Napoleon III used to have successful plebiscites, too.” See “Hash,” *Detroit Free Press*, Nov. 26, 1933. See also Scholdt, *Autoren über Hitler*, 440; Lucien Bourgeois in *Petit Parisien*, cited in “Hitler to Create a New Germany,” *Nottingham Evening Post*, Nov. 13, 1933.
the parties. Therefore, vote for Hitler who can lead the nation to world greatness.”

One year later, Hitler again compared himself to Cromwell, explaining that “he saved England in a crisis similar to ours … by obliterating Parliament and uniting the nation.”

Many British and American critics bluntly refuted this analogy, pointing out that Cromwell had actually saved parliament from the despotic King Charles I and thereafter “invited the Jews to return to England.”

This objection notwithstanding, writers found other parallels between Cromwell’s reign and Hitler’s early actions as chancellor. As Hitler was beginning to remove non-Nazi officials from government positions, the press found precedents in the events of the English Civil War, specifically “Pride’s Purge.” In 1648, Colonel Thomas Pride ordered troops belonging to Cromwell’s New Model Army to remove political opponents from the Long Parliament, thereby setting up a rump parliament and the basis of what became Cromwell’s military dictatorship. In February 1933, the Philadelphia Inquirer discussed “the wholesale dismissal by the Prussian Minister of the Interior … of officials belonging to the republican parties,” noting that “Pride’s Purge in the England of Cromwell’s Day was not more effective.”

These and other similar comparisons were meant to be warnings, but comparisons to Cromwell’s legacy also provided reassurance, since, as one observer noted, the dictator’s regime did not last and was eventually replaced by “the return of Charles II.”

Less than one year later, Anglo-American journalists found themselves searching for new analogies as Hitler moved to consolidate power by purging the SA on the “Night of the Long Knives.” Some commentators characterized the purge—which was launched on June 30, 1934, and involved the murder of Hitler’s SA chief, Ernst Röhm—as a return to the barbarism of the Middle Ages. One American newspaper referred broadly to “Hitler’s medieval methods of getting rid of those whom he wanted out of the way.”

In Britain, the Times of London was more specific, declaring that “Germany has reverted back to the times of Richard III.”

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, meanwhile, drew comparisons to the infamous St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572, when mobs of French Catholics massacred thousands of French Huguenots in Paris and the surrounding provinces.

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55 “Gesture Against German Republic,” Philadelphia Inquirer, Feb. 19, 1933. For the claim that Hitler did the same thing as Cromwell had when he sent “troops under Colonel Pride to arrest” certain “recalcitrant members” from the House of Commons, see “Pride’s Purge—Hitler Version,” Philadelphia Inquirer, May 17, 1933.


58 For another reference to Richard III, see “‘Purge’ Destroyed Nazi Socialism,” Philadelphia Inquirer, July 15, 1934.

The most common analogies, however, came from the French Revolution. Some saw
the purge as a sign of Jacobin-style violence. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch made this clear
with the following headline: “Hitler, in Robespierre Role, Has Begun Killing and
Germans are Asking Where It Is Going to Stop.” The Boston Globe argued that Hitler
had reached the same point that the “incorruptible” Robespierre had in the French
Revolution, when he purged his allies because they “lacked virtue,” by getting rid of the
SA’s “immoral” rank and file. Some papers cited the precedent of the Terror for admon-
itory purposes. The Minneapolis Star wrote that the Nazi leader’s “record of slaughter is not
very impressive when compared to Robespierre,” but it noted that “Hitler’s secret police
may grow … for exactly the same reason, [namely,] to deal with the indignant … opponents
of his psychiatric government and cover up its endless blunders.” Others saw the purge as
a sign of conservative reaction. The New York Times compared Hitler’s victory over Röhm to
the victory of the Rightist Girondists against the … socialistic Jacobins,” whereas Leon
Trotsky described it as an instance of “Bonapartism.”

The comparisons to Robespierre and the Terror expressed the hopeful belief that Hitler
would meet the same fate as the Jacobin leader. The Boston Globe conceded that “prophecy is
a risky business,” but it nevertheless noted that Robespierre lasted only a few weeks before
the great terror carried him to the guillotine”—and then asked, “will … Hitler experience a
like fate?” In answering this question, one newspaper optimistically predicted that the Nazis
would founder on the resistance of the “German people,” who would “surely resist this mad
butchery of its present fanatical rulers.” Others looked to the German Army, encouraged
by reports that “there is already much talk of a military dictatorship in Germany. Her
Napoleon may be yet to come.” Yet, by October, others arrived at the sober conclusion
that “Hitler has had … his Brumaire and he is still there.”

Following Paul von Hindenburg’s death on August 2, 1934, Hitler’s bold decision to
merge the positions of chancellor and president once again prompted observers to locate
appropriate historical precedents. Some compared Hitler—or the Führer, as he was now
called—to Julius Caesar, but most again pointed to Napoleon III. Commentators

60Hitler, in Robespierre Role, Has Begun Killing and Germans are Asking Where It Is Going to Stop,”
St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 2, 1934. The Minneapolis Star found a parallel in the drama of personal betrayal,
noting that, just as Hitler had killed his best friend, Ernst Röhm, so had Robespierre sent “to the guillotine
his lifelong friend and schoolfellow Camille Desmoulins.” See Edwin C. Hill, “Hitler’s Career Similar to
That of Robespierre,” Minneapolis Star, July 12, 1934.

61Handing Hitler His Hat,” Boston Globe, July 8, 1934.


belief that “the Hitler system represented the Gironde epoch of the German Revolution.” See Strasser,
Deutsche Bartholomausnacht, 227; Bergman, “The Perils of Historical Analogy,” 94.

64Handing Hitler His Hat,” Boston Globe, July 8, 1934. Another paper observed that “Robespierre met
the fate he dealt out to his enemies”; see “Hitler, in Robespierre Role,” St. Louis Dispatch, July 2, 1934.


Gazette (IA), July 17, 1934. Another article predicted that there might be someone “waiting in the
wings”—perhaps a Napoleon or a “Red revolution.” See “Hitler and Robespierre,” Baltimore Sun, July
4, 1934.


68References to Caesar appeared in “Germany’s ‘Leader’ Stands Doubtfully at Europe’s Crossroads,”
argued that Hitler’s calling of a plebiscite on August 19 to gain popular approval for assuming the presidency resembled the French dictator’s use of plebiscites to solidify his position in the years 1851–1852. They did so mostly to take heart from the knowledge that Napoleon III’s dictatorship ultimately collapsed following France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* openly wondered whether Hitler would “perceive the parallel” with Napoleon III’s eventual demise, and recommended that he “should read the analogy to the bitter end.” By contrast, others found grounds for concern. As the *Los Angeles Times* put it, once Napoleon III became emperor, “he told the world that the empire meant peace,” yet proceeded to launch a series of “foreign war[s].”

Hitler’s subsequent efforts to consolidate power called forth still other analogies. His effort to assert control over Germany’s Catholic and Protestant churches, for example, drew comparisons to the English king, Henry VIII. In early August 1933, Hitler made the comparison himself when he cited the English monarch in asserting that “the church expects protection from the state which, in turn, is entitled to expect allegiance from the church. A church which is unable to support the state is just as worthless to the state as a state which does not protect the churches is to the church.” In 1934, the Australian press echoed this point, declaring that Hitler was “following the old time methods of Henry VIII” in establishing a “purely national religion without regard to its … traditions.” One year later, British journalists interpreted Pope Pius XI’s canonization of two English martyrs as “a hint to Herr Hitler, who … resembles Henry VIII in the persecution of Roman Catholics.”

Finally, as Hitler was consolidating power, scattered German commentators compared him to the fanatical Anabaptist religious leader, Jan Bockelson. Although not well known in the Anglo-American world, Bockelson was notorious in German history for his role in the tumultuous events in the city of Münster in the years 1534–1535, when he and other Anabaptist radicals imposed a terroristic, theocratic system of government upon the city before being defeated by Catholic forces. As early as 1926, Hitler was being compared to Bockelson, when the Berlin *Volkszeitung* described the two men as self-styled “prophets” who were...

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69 “Germans Are Now Ruled by Reichsfuehrerschaft,” *New York Times*, Aug. 5, 1934. Napoleon’s first plebiscite took place following his coup in December 1851; the second occurred in November 1852, when he persuaded the French Senate to appoint him emperor.


71 “Germany Faces Either War or Bolshevism,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1934.

72 As he put it, “‘Henry VIII said practically the same thing.’ See “Hitler Control of Religion,” *Ashbury Park Press (NJ)*, Aug. 5, 1933.


convinced of the “absoluteness of their principles” and who displayed the “fanaticism of … zealot[s].”75 After Hitler’s so-called seizure of power, anti-Nazi observers extended the comparisons. In 1933, the scholar and later resistance figure Albrecht Haushofer privately likened his disdain for Hitler to Erasmus’s “inability to come to terms with the Anabaptists.” Around the same time, German and Austrian writers, such as Franz Csokor, Alfred Kerr, and Paul Zech, produced allegorical plays and poems portraying Hitler as “the brutal reincarnation” of Bockelson.76 These works culminated in 1937 with writer Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen’s novel, Bockelson—Geschichte eines Massenwahns, which managed to pass Nazi censors, despite the ease with which readers could interpret his portrayal of the “illegitimately born” Bockelson as a veiled attack against Hitler.77 Like the era’s other anti-Nazi texts, Reck’s novel offered the reassuring message that engaged resistance could overthrow tyranny.

As they watched Hitler assume and consolidate power in the years after 1933, Western observers were unsure how to assess him. Many who drew parallels to previous historical figures did so in the quest for reassurance. While they recognized that Hitler had asserted control over Germany, they hoped that he would follow in the tradition of previous autocrats and eventually be removed from power. These commentators urged a wait-and-see approach and preferred to defer from making broad conclusions. As late as November 1934, the former American ambassador to Germany, Jacob Gould Schurman, said that “Hitler should not be judged yet” because, like “Julius Caesar … prior to the war in Gaul,” he was someone who merely “had a national standing … as a mob orator.”78 By contrast, other observers used analogies to underscore Hitler’s exceptionality. In 1933, the London Observer declared that Hitler had amassed power “in a manner never known under Bismarck … nor Frederick the Great,” concluding that “German history has known nothing like it.”79 This division of opinion, like the competition of analogies, would continue in the following years.

Nazi Antisemitism: 1933–1939

At the same time that Hitler was busy consolidating power, he began a long, antisemitic campaign against Germany’s Jewish population. Between 1933 and 1939, the Nazi regime pursued a wave of symbolic, legislative, and physical violence against German Jews that prompted foreign commentators to seek precedents in earlier eras of Jewish history. Most commentators, whether Christian or Jewish, gravitated to the medieval and biblical eras. Their goal was twofold: to sound the alarm about the threat posed by Nazi antisemitism, and to provide reassurances that Jews had weathered similar attacks in the past.

The first measure that called forth historical comparisons was the notorious book burnings of May 10, 1933. In response, the Chicago Tribune pointed to the infamous actions of the Roman Emperor Theodosius and the Coptic archbishop Theophilus who, in the year 391,
“led a mob of fanatical Christians to destroy by fire the great library of Alexandria.”

Other observers echoed the *Saturday Review*’s claim that Hitler’s “holocaust of books … follow[ed] … in the footsteps of Savonarola who … consigned “The Divine Comedy” to the flames lest it corrode the public mind of Renaissance Florence.”

These and other comparisons clearly expressed horror at the Nazis’ actions, but they were also meant to have the consoling message that burning books was a futile activity. Thanks to Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press, the *Detroit Free Press* argued, “it is impossible ever again for any Hitler … to destroy the thought of mankind.”

The *Chicago Tribune* agreed, noting that, while “Savonarola had a bonfire in Florence, … the works he burned are still available.” Finally, the *Boston Globe* affirmed that “the burning of Germany’s books cannot rob the Jew of … His Book,” and predicted that the Jews “would continue to outlive their oppressors.

Jewish commentators, by contrast, expressed greater anxiety in pursuing analogies for the book burnings, arguing that they were part of a radically new form of antisemitic persecution. Jewish journalists sought precedents in the Middle Ages, especially in the fiery *auto da fés* organized during the Spanish Inquisition, but they claimed that the Nazis’ actions surpassed the medieval persecutions. As the *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle* put it, the Nazis are “doing things in Germany … that would have been … unthinkable even in the Spain of Torquemada,” adding that, “compared to the ‘cold pogrom’ of Nazi Germany, … the Jew in Spain … was at least given an opportunity to escape the terror [by] renouncing Judaism.”

Taking the same position, journalist Fanny Goldstein of the *Boston Globe* observed that Hitler’s “fanaticism has rendered … auto da fé[s] of the past but a smoke curtain,” thanks to his creation of an “Index Expugatorius” condemning literary works to destruction.

Beyond citing medieval precedents for Nazi antisemitism, Jewish observers continued a longstanding tradition of typologically interpreting present-day persecutions in light of biblical precedents. Jewish commentators identified a range of ancient enemies as models for


82 Walter Lippman compared the bonfires to the “darkest days of the French Revolution, to Robespierre, … who set out to ‘awaken’ France with a new state religion, under which it was said that ‘all were atheists who did not think like Robespierre.’” See Walter Lippman, “The Burning of the Books,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1933.


86 According to a paper in Hawaii, Hitler had “started a sort of medieval crusade of Jewish persecution which is hardly worthy of a great enlightened people.” See “Germany Taken to Task for Persecution of Jewish People,” *Honolulu Advertiser* (HI), Aug. 8, 1933.

87 “No Alternative for the German Jews,” *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, April 28, 1933. Later that same year, the paper observed that, “for the Jews, 1933 is the saddest year since 1492, when the entire Jewish population of Spain was expelled from that country. In tragic comparison, the German pogrom of Hitler in 1933 is probably of greater magnitude.” See “1933—An Eventful Year in History,” *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, Dec. 29, 1933.


89 See Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 36.
Hitler. The most commonly invoked were the Egyptian pharaoh at the time of the Exodus, the Persian courtier, Haman, from the Book of Esther, and the Seleucid King, Antiochus IV. These figures were typically mentioned around the time of the holidays that chronicled their anti-Jewish deeds: Passover, Purim, and Hanukkah. In keeping with longstanding Jewish practice, the Jews’ biblical oppressors were described as malevolent, but ultimately failed, tormentors. At the time of the Nazi economic boycott of Jewish businesses in April 1933, for example, Jewish rabbis and writers described Hitler as a “perfect disciple” and “modern-day revival” of Pharaoh. But when Passover arrived one week later, journalists issued the hopeful declaration that, whereas “Pharaoh was the first” of his kind, Hitler would “probably [be] the last,” for just as “Pharaoh and his Egypt are no more,” so, too, will “Hitler and his kind of Germany … soon be no more. And the Jew will live on.”

Around the same time, Jews also drew analogies between Hitler and Haman. References to “Haman Hitler” and “Hitler, the modern Haman,” appeared already in 1933 in the American Jewish press. Jews in Germany made similar comparisons, with the Frankfurt Jewish press declaring that “today, Haman is … educated, has studied anthropology, and determined that the Jews are a foreign race.” By the time of Hanukkah in December 1933, Jews compared Hitler to Antiochus, who, according to one rabbi, had tried but failed to “persuade the Hebrews to exchange the … principles of Judaism for … idolatry.”

This hopeful sentiment was encapsulated in Philip M. Raskin’s 1933 poem, “A Jew to Hitler,” which included the following stanzas:

Hitler, we shall outlive you
As we outlived the Hamans before you;
Hordes of slaves may crown you chief
Throng of fools—adore you …

Hitler, we shall outlive you
However our flesh you harrow;
Our wondrous epic shall only add
The tale of Another Pharaoh.

91 “Three Thousand Years After Pharaoh,” Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle, April 7, 1933. Another paper opined that “Hitler might do well to investigate the case history of … Pharaoh.” See “Your Column,” Sentinel (Chicago, IL), Aug. 10, 1933.
92 See also “Jews Celebrate Purim By Holding Special Services,” Reading Times (UK), March 13, 1933.
93 “Random Thoughts,” B’nai B’rith Messenger, May 5, 1933; “Correspondence,” Sentinel, April 11, 1933; “Hitler Denounced in Purim Sermons,” New York Times, March 13, 1933. One year later, the Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle marked the holiday of Purim by noting that it “gives us hope that the Jewish people of Germany … will be saved” by the actions of a “another ‘Queen Esther’ who will expose the evil of race hatred … and condemn the modern Hitlers to the ash heap of history.” See “Purim,” Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle, Feb. 23, 1934.
94 “Zur Feier am Heinedenkmal,” Aufbau def. Feiern denken, March, 1933 (http://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/cm/periodical/pageview/39519169). In 1935, Aufbau opined that “today there is once again a Haman who reminds us that we are Jews.” See “Zur Feier an Heine denkmal,” Aufbau, Feb. 1, 1935. According to The Sentinel, Nazi newspapers cited Jewish analogies between Haman and Hitler as evidence that Jews were “planning to murder Hitler in the same way.” See “Two Jews Brutally Murdered in German Provinces,” Sentinel, April 21, 1933.
96 “A Jew to Hitler,” Sentinel, June 1, 1933.
Christian commentators often echoed these analogies, though for different reasons. Some did so in order to show empathy for the Jews’ plight. In 1935 in Scotland, Reverend J. Peltz called Pharaoh the “first Hitler” and said that “what is taking place today in Germany and Poland is simply an experience that is duplicated in Jewish life.” He added, however, that “the pogroms of the past were as nothing compared with the cultural persecution in Germany to-day.”97 In 1936, the African American press compared Hitler to the “Pharaoh of Moses’s time” for threatening Jews with “still harsher plagues of … persecution.”98 By contrast, other Christian observers saw Nazi antisemitism as an attack not only against Judaism but also against Christianity. In March 1933, the Evening Independent opined that Hitler’s persecution of the Jews compared to “the persecution of Christians blamed for burning Nero’s Rome.”99 One year later, Reverend James Gillis, editor of Catholic World, wrote that “‘one Hundred others, back to the days of Caligula, Nero, and Tiberius tried to play the part Hitler is trying to play … in the drama ‘Baiting the Pope,’ [but] they all failed ignominiously, [for] you can’t persecute the Jews without persecuting Jesus Christ.”100 These comments sought to forge solidarity with Germany’s persecuted Jews. But by universalizing Nazi antisemitism, they failed to note its radically new character.

The competition between particularistic and universalistic analogies for Nazi antisemitism intensified following the eruption of the so-called Kristallnacht pogrom of November 9–10, 1938. Both the Jewish and mainstream presses invoked familiar examples of anti-Jewish persecutions, citing everything from medieval ones to Tsarist pogroms.101 Yet, they sensed that the comparisons could not explain the Nazi regime’s antisemitic fury. Declaring that they had “exhausted our vocabulary” and are at a loss … just how to give expression to our feelings” about the pogrom, the editors of the Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle asserted: “history, modern, medieval, or ancient, does not record any parallel … in depravity…” The pogrom has been “likened to the persecutions [of] Alleric, Attila, Pharaoh, Haman, Torquemada, Nero, St. Bartholomew … But these comparisons are meaningless, because they occurred in times when cruelty in government was the rule rather than the exception.”102 The fact that the otherwise “civilized” nation of Germany was perpetrating barbaric crimes meant that the Kristallnacht assault represented something dramatically new.

Yet, whereas some journalists saw the assault’s anti-Jewish dimensions as unprecedented, others called Kristallnacht a “pogrom against … Christian civilization as well.”103 To emphasize this point, many writers drew parallels between Hitler’s persecution of the Jews and the role of Roman rulers in persecuting Christians. On November 21, 1938, one commentator declared that, “not since the Neros of Rome has the world witnessed such Pagan disregard for the spiritual ideals of Christianity.”104 Still others invoked the Roman puppet king of Judea,

102“Pogrom Marks the Nazi Crisis,” Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle, Nov. 18, 1938.
103“Organized Intolerance,” Inquirer (KY), November 16, 1938.
104See the front-page article in Medford Mail Tribune (OR), Nov. 21, 1938.
Herod the Great, who was notorious for ordering the “massacre of innocents” (i.e., the killing of all young children near Bethlehem) in order to prevent the emergence of Jesus as the “King of the Jews.” On Christmas that year, newspapers commonly invoked this historical analogy to provide a defiant message of spiritual resistance. The Des Moines Register commented, for example, that Herod’s lesson in the era of Hitler was that “tyrants … must die [while] the Prince of Peace will still remain.” A Vermont newspaper editorial agreed, noting that the present-day “hatred [of] the helpless” will come to the same end as Herod, “for what was born in Bethlehem was a spirit that no dictator yet has been able to kill.” Even Jewish journalists spoke of the pogrom’s anti-Christian dimensions, declaring that this tack would convince “every American citizen” that it was in their own “self-interest” to protest the “Nazi attack on the Jews.”

The analogies that Jews and Christians employed to make sense of Nazi antisemitism came with a set of trade-offs. The claim that Hitler resembled previous villains in Jewish history reassured Jews that Nazi persecution was nothing new. The claim that Nazi policies were as much anti-Christian as anti-Jewish promoted interfaith unity. But in offering consoling messages, both claims underestimated the ruthlessness of Nazi antisemitism.

Wartime Analogies: Conquerors and Warlords

The outbreak of World War II dramatically affected the analogies that were adopted to “explain” Hitler. By the fall of 1939, the Nazi leader was being increasingly compared to historic conquerors and empire builders. Some were European, but most were “barbarians” from other continents. These comparisons were meant less to explain than to mobilize; they were less about descriptive analysis than prescriptive advocacy. The analogies helped to demonize Hitler, underscore the seriousness of the threat he posed, and bolster the resolve of the Western Allies to defeat him. At the same time, they also sought to console and, in so doing, engaged in wishful thinking that misjudged the radical nature of Hitler’s expansionist agenda.

One of the first figures to be invoked was Philip of Macedon. Anglo-American supporters of military intervention against Nazi Germany gravitated toward this analogy in the late 1930s to express opposition to isolationism, pointing out that, when Philip was mobilizing his forces to invade Greece in the fourth century BCE, the city states of Athens, Sparta, and Thebes failed to heed the Athenian orator Demosthenes’s admonitory “Philippics” to unite against the Macedonian threat; as a result, they went down in defeat and lost their freedom. Letters-to-the-editor of American newspapers often invoked this precedent in the years 1938–1940, noting that Winston Churchill’s warnings against Germany resembled Demosthenes’s orations and deserved to be heeded by isolationists such as Charles

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108 The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle declared that the pogrom was also “an assault upon Civilization itself, an assault upon Christianity, … upon law and morality.” See “Pogrom Marks the Nazi Crisis,” Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle, Nov. 18, 1938.
Lindbergh. In 1941, the Amarillo Daily News invoked Demosthenes’s call to unite against Alexander and highlighted his present-day relevance by calling him “Hitler of Macedon.” These and other articles sought to promote intervention against the Nazis, but once the United States was at war with Germany, the parallels between Philip and Hitler assumed a different function. In 1942, the Baltimore Sun tried to cut the Nazi leader down to size, saying that he was “just a throwback to Philip” and concluding that “there is nothing new under the sun—not even Hitler.” This observation, like the claim that the subsequent conquests of Philip’s son, Alexander the Great, “were all in vain,” sought to reassure Americans that the fight against the Nazis could be won.

The twin goals of admonition and consolation were also visible in comparisons between Hitler and the sixteenth-century Holy Roman emperor, Charles V. In March 1939, following Nazi Germany’s annexation of Bohemia and Moravia, the American press reported that the French premier Leon Blum had underscored the threat posed by Hitler by pointing out that his empire now “exceeds in force” that of Charles V. By contrast, other journalists around the same time tried to adopt a more hopeful perspective, writing that the absorption of Bohemia and Moravia into the Reich would duplicate the role that the territories had played in breaking up “the first great empire of modern times,” that of Charles V, by unleashing the “handicap that always confronts empire builders,” namely, “nationalism.” One American newspaper even entertained the fanciful possibility that Hitler might duplicate the example of Charles V—who famously tired of war and “abdicated the cares of state” in order to “retire … to a monastery”—by stepping down from power and turning over the government to Hermann Göring. All these analogies engaged in wishful thinking. But following the invasion and defeat of France and the Low Countries, journalists again grew pessimistic, warning that Hitler “hoped to succeed where … Charles V [had] failed,” and would probably try to set up an “up-to-date Holy Roman Empire” that would seek to “reestablish … its odious institutions, religious fanaticism, and intolerance … all over the world.” This claim was clearly admonitory, but, by drawing an analogy to the religious wars of the early modern era, it failed to grasp the racial mission behind Hitler’s quest for “living space” (Lebensraum).

The most common comparison made during the war years was, by far, the one between Hitler and Napoleon Bonaparte. Many Anglo–American observers initially compared the two leaders to reassure themselves that they need not fear the Nazi regime. In the immediate wake of the Sudeten crisis in 1938, certain American commentators called Hitler the “Dry Napoleon,” because, as the Aberdeen Press and Journal reported, “hitherto he has made his
conquests without loss of blood.” The paper confidently predicted, however, that, just as Napoleon was betrayed by the Central European soldiers he had dragooned into his army, the Czechs and Slovaks whom Hitler had incorporated into the Reich would reprise their historic role in “the downfall of the Austrian Empire”—and thereby undermine Germany.\(^{118}\) Other commentators made a similar point on the eve of the war, when they optimistically suggested that Hitler had miscalculated Great Britain’s likely response to an invasion of Poland. As the Des Moines Register noted: “what the British are going through today is an old experience … Hitler changes direction, makes and breaks promises no more quickly than Napoleon did. Napoleon misjudged catastrophically … the character of the British. It begins to look as if Hitler had made the same mistake.”\(^{119}\)

By 1940, as Great Britain was facing the prospect of a German invasion, journalists used historical analogies to try and calm the public’s nerves. In June, one writer for the Aberdeen Press and Journal claimed that, “if you are inclined to feel too pessimistic about the situation in Europe today, let me remind you that it has all happened before.” Just as “Napoleon never realized the hate and deep-seated horror that he engendered,” Hitler had “created a mass of hatred and loathing which will one day express itself in an explosion that will make Leipzig and Waterloo seem toy battles.”\(^{120}\) Similarly, the Essex News wrote that “Britain is not fighting a Dictator alone for the first time. In 1806, Napoleon, like Hitler to-day, was preparing to invade this country. He met his Waterloo in 1815. It will not take nine years for Hitler to meet his.”\(^{121}\) Major Allied leaders echoed these points. In September 1941, Churchill pointedly compared Hitler to “the threats of Napoleon, the Spanish armada, and other [attacks] against the British isles,” all of which had failed.\(^{122}\) The Polish prime minister in exile, General Władysław Sikorski, dismissed Hitler “as aping Napoleon,” and predicted that “his fate would be quite similar thanks to Britain.”\(^{123}\) Stalin, for his part, polemically declared in November 1941 that “Hitler resembles Napoleon as much as a kitten resembles a lion.”\(^{124}\)

By contrast, other comparisons between Hitler and Napoleon emphasized the seriousness of the Nazi threat and sought to mobilize forces to defeat it. Anglo-American observers invoked Napoleon’s longstanding reputation for evil in order to stress that Hitler was even worse.\(^{125}\) In 1940, the Chicago Tribune reminded readers that, unlike Napoleon, who was

\(^{118}\) The Dry Napoleon,” Aberdeen Press and Journal, March 17, 1939. See also “Hitler’s Bloodless Conquests,” Advocate (Australia), March 17, 1939.

\(^{119}\) Ernest Lindley, “Is History Repeating Itself?” Des Moines Register, Aug. 31, 1939.

\(^{120}\) “It Has All Happened Before,” Aberdeen Press and Journal, June 24, 1940. See also “When Britain Faced Worse Ordeal,” Aberdeen Press and Journal, Oct. 18, 1940.

\(^{121}\) “Reflexions by Reflex,” Essex News (UK), July 13, 1940. Will Durant claimed that Hitler was like Napoleon because his military build-up had compelled him to develop a war economy that produced “no wealth [but] merely the necessity for more war.” And, he added, just as Napoleon’s endless invasions had led to his defeat, so, too, would Hitler’s: it was “inevitable that their careers should be linked tightly … to hastily dug graves.” See “Is Hitler Similar to Napoleon?,” Star Tribune (MN), May 27, 1940. See also “Two Dictators,” Albatry Advertiser (Albany, Australia), Sept. 30, 1940.

\(^{122}\) “Germans Mass Ships: Churchill,” Oakland Tribune (CA), Sept. 11, 1940.

\(^{123}\) “Hitler Aping Napoleon,” Courier and Advertiser (Dundee, Scotland), July 23, 1940.

\(^{124}\) Adam Ulam, Stalin: The Man and His Era (Boston: Viking, 1973), 556.

\(^{125}\) In the early nineteenth century, the German nationalist Ernst Moritz Arndt described Napoleon as “the devil incarnate.” See Stefan Bodo Würffel, “Reichs-Traum und Reichs-Trauma: Danielmotive in deutscher Sicht,” in Europa, Tausendjähriges Reich und Neue Welt: Zwei Jahrtausende Geschichte und Utopie in der Rezeption des Danielbuchs, ed. Mariano Delgado, Klaus Koch, and Edgar Marsch (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003), 416.
initially “regarded less as the military adventurer than the liberator,” Hitler was “hated and feared … by all nations.”\textsuperscript{126} In 1941, the \textit{Times} of London called Hitler “Napoleon’s more evil successor.”\textsuperscript{127} Other commentators made comparisons to Napoleon in order to encourage American intervention against the Nazis. In September 1941, American pundit Dorothy Thompson rejected Herbert Hoover’s isolationist opposition to fighting Hitler by reminding readers of the disastrous consequences of the US failure to fight against Napoleon in the early nineteenth century. Thomas Jefferson’s refusal to join Britain against Napoleon, she noted, had ultimately led to conflict between the United States and Britain; as a result, “Washington was invaded and burned.”\textsuperscript{128}

As the war turned in the Allies’ favor, the comparisons between Hitler and Napoleon changed function. In 1944, Churchill rejected comparing the two men: “it seems an insult to the great Emperor … to connect him in any way with the squalid … butcher.”\textsuperscript{129} Other comparisons focused more on the future. In 1943, the \textit{St. Louis Post-Dispatch} confidently declared that “Napoleon was exiled to Elba after his abdication, escaping in 1815 to undertake a comeback which ended at Waterloo. Here the Hitler-Napoleon analogy ends. Hitler is not likely to have the chance to undertake a Waterloo.”\textsuperscript{130} By 1945, with victory in sight, Curt Riess worried in his book, \textit{The Nazis Go Underground}, that Hitler’s reputation could be rehabilitated after the war, just like Napoleon’s, noting that, in the same way that the French leader “will always be remembered as … a man who brought glory … to his country,” the German \textit{Führer} could well “be remembered for precisely the same things” if the Allies were not careful.\textsuperscript{131}

In addition to such comparisons to Napoleon, other observers likened the German dictator to “barbarian” invaders.\textsuperscript{132} The list was a long one, including Hannibal, Alaric the Visigoth, Genseric the Vandal, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane.\textsuperscript{133} The function of these comparisons varied. Most avoided objective analysis in favor of impassioned advocacy: by likening Hitler to an array of older conquerors, the analogies were used to motivate people to defend civilization from barbarism. At the outset of the war, some analogies sought to win support for American intervention against Germany. In September 1939, American newspapers often called Hitler a “modern” or “twentieth-century” version of Attila; the following year, the \textit{Indianapolis Star} underscored the “peril” Hitler posed to the United States by quoting unnamed government officials who had supposedly claimed that “Attila is again leading his Huns to conquest in Europe under the swastika banner.”\textsuperscript{134} Around the same time, the Canadian press, appalled that America was pursuing “business as usual” while Britain was in “mortal combat” with Germany, tried to mobilize US support by referring

\textsuperscript{126}Bismarck or Napoleon?,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, June 4, 1940.
\textsuperscript{127}“In Britain To-Day,” \textit{Times}, Oct. 15, 1941.
\textsuperscript{128}“Thompson Can’t Share Hoover Belief of Quick Allied Victory,” \textit{Atlanta Constitution}, Sept. 20, 1941.
\textsuperscript{129}“Hitler, the Squalid Caucus Boss and Butcher,” \textit{Derby Evening Telegraph} (UK), Sept. 28, 1944.
\textsuperscript{130}“Wellington to Eisenhoewer,” \textit{St. Louis Star and Times}, May 7, 1943.
\textsuperscript{131}Curt Riess, \textit{The Nazis Go Underground} (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1944), 188.
\textsuperscript{132}Attila’s “depredations” were attributed to the “barbarity of the times” in which they had transpired. See “Gov. Lehman Opens New York Drive for German Jews,” \textit{Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle}, June 23, 1933.
\textsuperscript{133}According to Guedalla, “the true analogy … we are facing” is with “Attila, Tamerlane, Genghis Khan.” See Philip Guedalla, “If Napoleon Couldn’t, Can Hitler?,” \textit{New York Times}, Feb. 2, 1941.
to Hitler as the “modern Genghis Khan.” Not all observers accepted these analogies, of course. In 1939, Charles Lindbergh rejected comparisons of Hitler to Asiatic despots, claiming that “there is no Genghis Khan … marching against our western nations.” Scattered letters-to-the-editor voiced similarly doubts, wondering whether “Genghis Hitler” was really in any position “to conquer America with his base of operations 3,500 miles away!”

To increase the analogies’ effectiveness, some commentators portrayed the Nazis as worse than the barbarians of earlier eras. In describing the Nazi “orgy of … murder” in Poland, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote in January 1940 that Hitler’s actions would even “appall” Attila or Genghis Khan. One year later, a Nebraska newspaper declared that, whereas the ancient Germans had come “in awe of Roman civilization” and “sought to blend together the Roman and German,” the Nazis sought merely to impose their will “over subjected inferior slave races.”

In 1943, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* declared that “Alaric and his Goths; Genseric and his Vandals; Attila and his Huns—they were all pikers in barbarism … compared to the one and only Hitler, prize brute of all time.” Just after the launching of Operation Overlord on June 6, 1944, the *Detroit Free Press* declared that Hitler was “but a symbol of the long line of monsters in human form who have blighted the earth since time began,” but added that, in the annals of humanity, “Nazi brutality” was worse than that of “Alaric, Attila, Tamerlane, [and] Genghis Khan.”

While many of these comparisons grimly underscored the urgency of fighting Nazi Germany, others provided a sense of hope. In 1942, an American newspaper compared the Nazi destruction of Lidice to the Mongol destruction of Baghdad, but drew the upbeat conclusion that the Mongols’ excessive violence had eventually led their “empire [to] fade … away to nothingness and they themselves survive only as an evil name. In this can be read the future of the Nazis.”

Around the same time, the *Des Moines Register*

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138 “Nazi Fury in Poland,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 30, 1940.
140 “They are Huns!,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug. 31, 1943. In 1942, a letter-to-the-editor at the *Fresno Bee* rejected the comparison of Hitler to Napoleon, claiming that he resembled instead “Genseric, the Vandal,” for his Teutonic tribe “destroyed for the love of destroying.” See “Hitler is Likened to Vandals, not Napoleon,” *Fresno Bee* (CA), March 6, 1942. Hitler was described elsewhere as “Genseric’s modern counterpart.” See “A Predecessor for Hitler,” *Manchester Guardian*, Nov. 29, 1940. Other observers tried the opposite approach, i.e., diminishing Hitler’s status relative to earlier warlords, in order to boost Allied morale. In 1943, *The Los Angeles Times* claimed that Hitler was a “dwarf” trying “to follow in the footsteps of a giant,” Genghis Khan, “who ruled the world from the saddle.” See “Hitler Trying to Emulate Great Mongol, Genghis Khan,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 1943.
141 “We Stand at Armageddon and We Battle for the Lord,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 7, 1944.
declared that the “Pages of History Doom Hitler,” for they showed that the conquests of all earlier warlords—“Alexander the Great, Attila, … Tamerlane, Genghis Khan”—had proved “temporary,” and that they were eventually defeated by the “terrible … vengeance” of the “unconquered nations.”144 As a Pennsylvania paper put in 1942, “If Hitler is capable of understanding the philosophy of history, he knows that his doom is inevitable.”145

**Hitler and the Holocaust**

By contrast, few observers were able to take away any hope from Hitler’s intensified persecution of the Jews. The failure of historical analogies to help people make sense of the unfolding genocide contributed to the sense of bleakness. Initially, commentators tried to find precedents for Hitler’s antisemitic actions. Following the Nazis’ violent expulsion of Jews from western Poland in the fall of 1939, various observers drew comparisons to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II, who had famously deported the Jews of Judea to Babylon in the years 597–586 BCE. In 1939, the Bishop of Gloucester declared that “nothing more tyrannical has been done since the days of Nebuchadnezzar,” while, in 1940, a Pennsylvania reverend called Hitler the “Nebuchadnezzar of modern times.”146

But, as the *Times* of London went on to note: “Hitler has far surpassed his exemplar; for Nebuchadnezzar carried away no more than ten thousand captives, and at least he left behind ‘the poorest sort of the people of the land.’ Hitler has displaced a far larger multitude and the poor have been the greatest sufferers.”147

As reports of the Holocaust increased in number, they were seen as eclipsing previous instances of antisemitic violence.148 In 1942, a Missouri newspaper said that “the great persecutions of the dark ages are as nothing compared to Hitler’s new order in Europe”—one in which “so many Jews have been killed” that it can only “defy the imagination.”149 That same year, the archbishop of Canterbury was quoted as saying that “the records of the barbarous ages scarcely supply a parallel” to “the extermination of the Jews.”150 In 1943, Israel Cohen, writing in the *Contemporary Review*, declared that, “in all the annals of human wickedness since the beginning of time,” there was no comparison to “the colossal slaughter” of the Jews.151 In 1944, an Australian Jewish paper said that the Nazi extermination plans for the Jews were “beyond comprehension” and “transcend … anything in

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144“Pages of History Doom Hitler,” *Des Moines Register*, Sept. 30, 1941.
146 *Gloucestershire Echo*, Nov. 1, 1939. See also “200 Hear Dr. Plummer at Adult Rally,” *News-Chronicle* (Shippensburg, PA), Sept. 24, 1940.
149“Germany’s New Order in Europe is Pictured in Horrible Detail,” *Neosho Daily News* (MO), June 1, 1942. The *Los Angeles Times* agreed, noting that “the records of history can be searched in vain for any parallel to this Nazi savagery.” See “Plight of the Jews Under Hitler Truly Terrible,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 3, 1942.
history.”152 The liberation of the camps in the spring of 1945 made other analogies appear inadequate. Writing about his visit to Buchenwald in the New York Times, Harold Denny declared that, while “Tamerlane built his mountain of skulls,” Hitler has committed the “worst horrors history records … on a scale which dwarfs all previous crimes.”153 Other observers noted that Hitler’s “atrocities” had eclipsed the horrors of the Roman Emperor Nero by inflicting “suffering on a scale without a single parallel in history.”154 By the end of the war, the New York Times described the Nazis’ antisemitic crusade as “the greatest catastrophe in the history of the Jewish people.”155 These comments pointed to a dawning cognitive crisis: people hoped that history could help them assess the Nazis’ crimes, but they increasingly feared that it was incapable of accurate measurement.

Hitler’s End: From History to Myth

As the war reached its violent climax, the unprecedented destruction prompted journalists to abandon traditional historical comparisons in favor of myth. In the spring of 1945, Hitler’s imminent downfall inspired many comparisons to Richard Wagner’s 1876 opera, The Twilight of the Gods—which, as the fourth and final part of the The Ring of the Nibelung, was particularly appropriate, for it depicted an array of Norse gods bringing the world to an end in an apocalyptic act of destruction known as Ragnarok. In the spring of 1945, American newspapers frequently mentioned the power of the “ancient [Norse] myth [to] foretell … the doom now raining upon Germany,” with many comparing “Hitler and his henchmen” to “the gods who [had once] looked on the ashes of Valhalla” and now “see a burned, blackened, and destroyed” country.156 Among the many articles bearing the headline, “The Twilight of the Gods,” some specifically compared Hitler to the malicious Norse god, Loki, who set in motion the key events in the opera that led to Ragnarok; the Arizona Republic, for example, declared: “Just as Lok[i] … led the hosts of ‘Hel’ into battle, so did Hitler lead his legions” against Poland, Britain, France, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Greece, Russia, and the United States.157 Most observers, though, compared Hitler to Wotan, the figure who initiates Valhalla’s final destruction. In February 1945, William Shirer wrote that “Hitler undoubtedly sees himself as Wotan, who … atones for his guilt by setting Valhalla in flames.”158 Similar comparisons appeared in other newspapers, with the Philadelphia Inquirer concluding that, while “Wotan went down to the crash of symbols … Hitler is going down in the thunder of Allied guns.”159

152 “Hitler’s Barbarism,” Hebrew Standard of Australasia (Sydney), April 6, 1944.
154 “Nazi Women Took Part in Camp Cruelty,” Times (Shreveport, LA), April 26, 1945; “Hitler’s End,” Gloucestershire Echo, May 2, 1945. For this reason, “Nero was not the object of so wide a detestation” as Hitler. See “Hitler’s Acts Spread Bloodshed,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 2, 1945.
Other commentators alluded to Greek mythology. Already at the start of the war, some journalists began to draw parallels between Hitler and ancient mythological villains to underscore the evil nature of the Nazi leader. One observer in 1939 invoked the figure of Sciron—an outlaw son of Posideon who killed travelers by kicking them off a cliff—by declaring that “Hitler would make a good duplicate.” Other commentators invoked the figure of Icarus, who famously tried to reach the sun by forging waxen wings that melted short of his destination, catapulting him into the sea. Close to the war’s end in 1945, the Wilkes-Barre Times Leader observed that the myth of Icarus “should not be forgotten by the overly-ambitious,” adding that, “It would have been better” if Hitler had “dropped in the … sea and been drowned … Wretched indeed are they who … forget that ‘pride goeth before a fall.’” Other writers found solace by imagining Hitler being punished like ancient Greek figures. An Ohio newspaper declared, for example, that “Hitler’s next job should be to spell” Sisyphus, that “old fellow in Greek mythology who spent eternity rolling a stone up a hill.”

By the war’s end, Hitler was bluntly being equated with Western culture’s archetypal villain: the devil himself. Already at the start of the war, Hitler had been compared to Satan, Lucifer, Beelzebub, and the Antichrist. Many observers initially compared the Nazi leader to the devil in order to associate the Allied cause with the defense of Christianity. On Christmas day of 1941, the Brookville Democrat called World War II a “religious war … between the Religion of Jesus Christ” and the “Devil Incarnate.” Earlier that year, when the Wehrmacht had invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Australian press mocked Hitler’s attempt to depict himself as Christianity’s defender against Bolshevism: “Satan is once more reproving sin; Beelzebub is quoting scripture; Lucifer is posing as a militant saint.” Similar comments continued through 1945. In May of that year, the Binghamton Press condemned Hitler as a “diabolical,” “clenched hooved” figure who ranked as “the vilest killer of

either would win or disappear as a nation appears no longer … the mere wagging of a psychopath’s tongue.” See “Capitol Comment,” Journal News (White Plains, NY), Feb. 24, 1945. Some objected to Wagnerian comparisons, arguing that Wagner “never could have endured … Nazi Germany.” See “Not Wagnerian,” Democrat and Chronicle (Rochester, NY), March 18, 1945.


Scattered references to this effect appeared at the beginning of the Third Reich. In 1933, for example, Reverend J. W. Ham delivered a sermon on “Hitler and Satan” that insisted that “Satan plays his trump card when he urges a soul to delay the matter of his soul’s salvation.” See “Plans Maturing for Final Program of Ham Meetings,” Daily Times News (Burlington, NC), Oct. 13, 1933. In 1940, the Times of London declared that Hitler “bears a strange resemblance to … Lucifer.” See “Hitler and Lucifer,” Times, July 24, 1940.

“Christmas and War,” Brookville Democrat (IN), Dec. 25, 1941.

“Satan Reproves Sin,” Argus (Melbourne, Australia), June 28, 1941. In 1943, the Australian press called Hitler “another Lucifer … who has brought upon the world a torrent of evil.” See “The Gethsemane of Easter,” Lithgow Mercury (Australia), April 21, 1943. That same year, Jewish observers provided their own interpretation on this perspective, with one historian calling Hitler the “anti-Christ,” who was using anti-semitism to undermine the “authority of the entire Christian Church.” See Jacob Rader Marcus, “Hitler Is Imposter—Christ, Harvard Students Hear,” Cincinnati Enquirer, July 31, 1941.

history.”

Around the same time, horrific stories about concentration camps prompted a Nebraska newspaper to declare that Hitler bore “all the earmarks of the anti-Christ.”

These comparisons culminated with Hitler being equated with pure evil. Comments to this effect had already accompanied Nazi Germany’s launching of World War II in 1939, and the Times of London writing that “the aggression of Hitler was evil in itself.” Similar observations appeared in the years that followed. In 1943, Dorothy Thompson wrote that Hitler resembled Mephisto, insofar as he had wrought “total evil.” In the spring of 1945, the Boston Globe argued that Hitler had created a radically new kind of evil, for, while it had always existed on an “incidental” basis in earlier eras, the Germans under Hitler had “collectivized evil” and “made [it] efficient.” These comments proliferated after Hitler’s suicide on April 30, 1945. In the Nazi leader’s obituary, the Times of London declared: “Few men in the whole of history … have been the cause of human suffering on so large a scale as Hitler, who died in Berlin yesterday … From the time he became master of Germany … he became in the eyes of virtually the whole world an incarnation of absolute evil.”

Around the same time, American newspapers called Hitler an “evil, sinister thing that possessed no redeeming spark of humanity,” asserting that he was “as evil a man as history has ever known.”

**Hitler as an Abstraction: The Origins of an Archetypal Analogy**

Hitler’s transformation into a hegemonic analogy during the war was further promoted by new polemical forms of comparison and discourse. First, Hitler was not only placed at the top of the hierarchy of historical villains, but he was also portrayed as having exceeded their criminality. Second, Hitler was turned into a “two-way” historical analogy, one that served not merely as a “target” to be explained by older “sources,” but also as a source to interpret targets from earlier eras. Finally, Hitler was linguistically transformed from a noun into a verb and incorporated into new idiomatic expressions. All these developments helped transform him from a human being into an abstraction.

Over the course of the war, observers increasingly made explicit what had previously been implied: Hitler had made old symbols of evil obsolete. If early Hitler comparisons emphasized his similarity to other figures, those that appeared by the end of the war underscored his exceptionality. Many comparisons were phrased sarcastically and portrayed older symbols of evil as benign in comparison to the Nazi leader. In 1945, one American newspaper called Hitler “the most inhuman monster known to history. Compared with him, …
Genghis Khan, Robespierre, and Ivan the Terrible were humanitarians.”¹⁷⁴ The Des Moines Register wrote: “We think of the great Babylonian conqueror Nebuchadnezzar as the very epitome of cruelty and … his sack of Jerusalem … as the crowning disaster of Jewish history. But … how mild were his ancient … atrocities compared to the modern … atrocities of the Nazis!”¹⁷⁵ Similar claims were made about Nero, who was now described as “an angel compared to Hitler.”¹⁷⁶ The last German kaiser, Wilhelm II, was similarly called a “Sunday school teacher” and a “gentleman,” compared to Hitler.¹⁷⁷ King George III, who had been viewed in America as the antichrist in the eighteenth century, was now described as “a benevolent guardian compared to Hitler.”¹⁷⁸ In England, Guy Fawkes—long regarded as the paradigmatic British symbol of evil for his failed attempt to blow up the House of Lords and assassinate King James I in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 —was now called a “saint,” compared to the “blood-stained murderer, Hitler.”¹⁷⁹ Finally, the devil himself came off well in comparison to Hitler. In April 1945, a Maryland newspaper “apologize[d] to Lucifer” for “likening Adolf to him,” declaring that “human justice has no appropriate word with which to express the summation of its moral condemnation” of Hitler’s crimes.¹⁸⁰ On May 8, 1945, the day the armistice was signed in Europe, journalist H. I. Phillips wrote a satirical essay depicting Hitler encountering Satan in hell, which culminates with a description of Satan preparing a “special oven” for Hitler. When the Führer sniffs the air and exclaims, “I smell something burning!,” Satan replies that a “couple of boys”—Genghis Khan and Attila—have “saved a place [in the oven] for you.” When Hitler is then shoved into the oven, Attila and Genghis Khan both exclaim: “And we thought we had stood punishment enough!”¹⁸¹

Another sign that Hitler had eclipsed previous historical villains in the popular imagination was the tendency of commentators to describe his wartime crimes with the rhetorical phrase, “Out-Heroding Herod.” In English usage, this idiomatic expression dated back to the early seventeenth century and referred to the act of surpassing Herod in one’s evil behavior.¹⁸² As early as 1933, Hitler was accused of “out-heroding Herod in his despotic decrees,”

¹⁷⁴“The Reported Death of One of the World’s Greatest Monsters,” Berkshire Eagle (MA), May 2, 1945.
¹⁷⁵“Worse Barbarism in Our Time,” Des Moines Register, Oct. 29, 1944.
¹⁷⁷“Near Capture of Kaiser: Told by American 21 Years Later,” The Amarillo Daily News, May 3, 1940; “Money Well Spent,” Tallahassee Democrat, Oct. 4, 1939. See also the claim that “the wanton destructiveness of the Kaiser’s troops is as nothing compared to the activities of Hitler’s retreating armies” in Russia, in “Nover’s Notations,” The Anniston Star (AL), Sept. 28, 1943.
¹⁷⁹In 1940, a British reverend declared that commemorating Fawke’s deeds on November 5 would, in the future, yield “to the burning in effigy of a far bigger villain than Guy, who by comparison, is a saint to the blood-stained murderer, Hitler, whose name will [go] down in infamy and execution.” See “Give Guy Fawkes a Rest,” Bath Weekly Chronicle and Herald, Nov. 9, 1940. In 1936, Scottish children stopped dressing up as Guy Fawkes for the annual holiday celebration and instead began wearing costumes alluding to “the living model,” Adolf Hitler. See “New Guys for November 5,” The Evening Telegraph and Post (Dundee, Scotland), Oct. 27, 1936.
¹⁸⁰“A New Guys for November 5,” Morning Herald (Hagerstown, MD), April 28, 1945. Hitler was also called an “emissary of Satan,” who had “presumably perished amid the ruin … of Berlin.” See “Half-Way House to Peace,” Times, May 16, 1945.
¹⁸²www.meriam-webster.com/dictionary/out-Herod; www.finedictionary.com/out-herod.html. The phrase became a synonym for doing something bad or good excessively. See, for instance, how the organizer of a “magnificent” dinner party was praised as having “out-heroded Herod,” in an issue of London Observer on Jan. 11, 1829.
and similar remarks appeared in the years that followed. In December 1942, when the British House of Commons observed a moment of silence to mark Hitler’s “disgusting barbarism” toward the Jews, the British press declared that Herod had been “Out-Heroded.” On other occasions, variations of the phrase appeared with claims that Hitler had “out-Pharoahed Pharaoh” or “out-Napoleon Napoleon.”

The suggestion that Hitler had eclipsed previous villains was further confirmed by his transformation into a “two-way” analogy. Over the course of the Third Reich, the Nazi leader’s name was increasingly projected back in time to describe earlier historical villains. At the beginning of the war, for example, Pharaoh Thutmose III was called an “ancient Hitler,” as was the Carthaginian conqueror, Hannibal. In 1943, Haman was renamed “the Hitler of ancient days.” Hitler was also projected back into the Middle Ages. In 1934, for example, one writer described the medieval world as a time when “one medieval Hitler after another drove out the Jews,” while another argued that, in the perennial battles between church and state, medieval popes always “dealt with Hitlers of a sort.”

There were references to Hitlers in colonial America, with the Virginia governor, Sir William Berkeley, being called a “seventeenth-century Hitler” whose “cruelty [had] brought on Bacon’s Rebellion.” Napoleon Bonaparte was called “the 18th century Hitler.” Similar claims were made about civilizations outside of the West. In 1943, one newspaper observed that “Russia, too, once had a Hitler, whose name was Ivan the Terrible.” Another newspaper called the Japanese ruler, Hideyoshi, a “16th Century Jap Hitler.”

And, in 1944, the Abilene Reporter wrote that, following a seventy-five-year war, China had been “unified by a Chinese Hitler.”

An important example of the tendency to universalize Hitler was Louis Golding’s 1939 book, Hitler through the Ages. The book’s premise was simple: every age from antiquity to

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187. Medieval examples include Alfons Goldschmidt, Whither Israel? (New York, 1934), 15. A 1940 essay about Pius XII trying to contend with Hitler includes an analogy to the investiture conflict of the late eleventh century: Henry IV is compared to an “ancient Hitler” for driving Pope Gregory VII from Rome (after he had paid penance to the pope at Canossa) and setting up an “anti-Pope,” Clement III, in 1084. See “Vatican Facing Grave Problems,” Minneapolis Star, Aug. 4, 1940.

188. The Berkeley reference is found in the article, “Gutenberg’s Type,” Tipton Daily Tribune (IN), April 13, 1940. On Napoleon and Ivan the Terrible, see “Pettengill,” Santa Ana Register (CA), June 25, 1940; “The Two Terribles,” Daily Notes (Canonsburg, PA), April 30, 1943. On Japanese and Chinese precedents, see “16th Century Jap Hitler,” Callman Democrat (AL), Feb. 19, 1942; “West Never to Conquer East Again, Rotary Speaker Avers,” Abilene Reporter News (TX), Feb. 15, 1944. Other claims were made about other features of the Nazi regime, e.g., the “Gestapo system” of Cardinal Richelieu, the “Concentration camps of Babylon,” the Red Sea engulfing Pharaoh’s “Nazi chariots.” See “Hitler is Only an Imitator,” Aberdeen Press and Journal, April 11, 1940; “Migrant Peoples,” The Times (London), Nov. 7, 1939; Rabbi Israel Weisfeld, “Passover—Its Modern Significance,” Sentinel (Chicago), April 14, 1939.

Germany must be Hitler in years to come.

produce "Herr Titus in the shades. Greet Herr Torquemada."

sors failed before you that had produced him. Ordinary newspaper readers in the Midwest were quoted as agreed that Liberate yourselves from all Hitlers of every era!

paper proclaimed: The New York-based German Jewish newspaper Hitler …

had lived in … Hitler, …

in the book Hitler among the Crusaders, and we have survived them, as we will survive this one. As Golding declared in the book’s introductory “Inscription to Adolf Hitler”: “You will fail … as your predecessors failed before you … We will persevere, Herr Pharaoh, Herr Führer. Greet in our name Herr Titus in the shades. Greet Herr Torquemada.”

Besides becoming a “two-way” analogy, Hitler was also “pluralized.” Many people may have been consoled by the belief that “other Hitlers” had existed in the past, but they remained concerned that “other Hitlers” might crop up in the future. On May 11, 1945, the New York-based German Jewish newspaper Aufbau exorted readers “never to forget Hitler … do not deceive yourselves that it has come to an end because he is gone … Liberate yourselves from all Hitlers of every era!” Around the same time, a midwestern newspaper proclaimed: “There will be other Hitlers and they will create trouble again in the world.” We need to be on guard against “the Hitlers of the future.” The British press agreed that “there will be other Hitlers ready to arise if there is no antidote” to the causes that had produced him. Ordinary newspaper readers in the Midwest were quoted as saying that “the world will have another Hitler someday,” and that Germany might actually produce “Hitler the Second.” One British paper spoke for many when it declared that Germany must be “thoroughly tamed … if we are to prevent the emergence of another Hitler in years to come.”

Finally, Hitler was transformed from a proper noun into a verb. Over the course of the Third Reich, commentators made increasing reference to the act of Hitlerization. Initially, the term referred to the Nazis’ forcible coordination and subordination of independent institutions to state control (the process commonly known as Gleichschaltung). In the English language press, the NSDAP was described as attempting to Hitlerize “all state governments,”

190 Ibid., 35-36. According to another passage, Titus and Caligula were both “Hitlers.” See ibid., 32.

191 Ibid., 48. Torquemada’s Inquisition and racial discrimination were compared to Julius Streicher and Der Stürmer. There were also “lesser Hitlers” in Russia, such as the Tsarist adviser, Vyacheslav von Plehve, and the White Russian commander, Anton Deniken. See ibid., 114, 156.

192 Ibid., 170, 90. These “lesser Hitlers in Germany … were the forerunners of the man who was to become Lord and Master of them all.” See ibid., 174.

193 Ibid., preface (no pagination).

“the German Lutheran Church,” “Labor Organizations,” “Danzig,” and “Austria.”195 American observers also applied the term to developments in the United States. Some worried that right-wing figures, such as William Dudley Pelley and Huey Long, wanted to “Hitlerize” the United States.196 Others saw a threat coming from Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s left-leaning administration, worrying in 1933, for example, that the National Recovery Administration (NRA) wanted to “Hitlerize the newspapers,” and fretting in 1938 that he wanted to “Hitlerize” the entire “democratic government.”197 When the US Senate debated whether to give the president enhanced war powers in 1940, one newspaper objected to a possible power grab, claiming that there was less danger of losing “freedom by a Hitler invasion [than] building up a Hitler system at home.”198 One year later, isolationists declared that, “if a war against Hitler is going to Hitlerize America, there is not much point in fighting Hitler.”199

The verb assumed other variations. Some adapted the phrase “Out-Heroding Herod” to Hitler. In the spring of 1941, for example, isolationists declared that Roosevelt’s plan to enter World War II “out-Hitlerizes Hitler.”200 One year later, an American journalist criticized the British Labour Party of trying to “out-Hitlerize Hitler” by pursuing a “union form of Nazism” and nationalizing all private industry.201 Some projected the term back into earlier eras of American history. General Hugh Johnson wrote in 1941 that the Supreme Court had stopped President Abraham Lincoln when he had “attempted to Hitlerize the civil processes of the … Constitution and … send to concentration camps whoever opposed his war policies.”202 Some even universalized the term into a generic signifier of bad behavior. One Michigan sportswriter decried a growing trend at basketball games of spectators booing opposing players as “an attempt to Hitlerize … the state tournament.”203 Late in the war, the term also surfaced with a negative connotation in articles about the need to “de-Hitlerize” German prisoners in American prisoner-of-war camps and “un-Hitlerize” teenage Hitler Youth members after the war.204

Hitler’s transformation into a verb was significant for several reasons. In the first place, it became such a prevalent phenomenon that linguists took note of it as early as 1940, with one commenting that “the inescapability of Hitlerian news has caused the word Hitler to leap onto our tongues with stubborn frequency,” leaving a “permanent mark on our

195“Hitler Brings Business Life into Nazi Fold,” Minneapolis Star, April 7, 1933; “The Lily or the Sword?,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 16, 1933; “Storm Troopers Take Charge of German Unions,” Freeport Journal-Standard (IL), May 2, 1933; “Austria, Danger Center,” Oakland Tribune, Aug. 29, 1933.


198“Must We Hitlerize to Fight Hitlerism?,” Postville Herald (IA), Oct. 2, 1940. In September, a Wisconsin Republican politician, Glenn Frank, said, “I don’t want to see us Hitlerize our democracy … in defend[ing] against Hitlerism.” See “Accuses New Deal of ‘Scare Stories,’” Stevens Point Daily Journal (WI), Sept. 3, 1940.

199“If We Copy Hitler,” Des Moines Register, May 25, 1941.


203“Something About Sport Booing,” The Ironwood Times (MI), April 2, 1941.

204“German Prisoners Want to Work,” Morning Herald (Hagerstown, MD), Aug. 14, 1944; “Frank, Powerful Film is ‘Hitler’s Children,’” Lansing State Journal (MI), Feb. 21, 1943.
Although linguists did not say so at the time, the advent of the word *Hitlerization* was an instance of “conversion,” the process through which nouns are converted into verbs. In English, the phenomenon is quite common and usually expresses a desire to avoid long explanations in favor of shortcuts in communication. In doing so, the practice of conversion obeyed the same impulse as analogies, which also seek to simplify complexity. In the 1930s and 1940s, the verb “to Hitlerize” provided a quick way of describing the complicated process in which existing German institutions and policies were being forcibly coordinated to fall into line with Hitler’s Nazi principles. It may have been a sensible method of achieving linguistic brevity, but, at the same time, it hastened Hitler’s conversion from a person into an abstraction.

Conclusion

Between the years 1930 and 1945, Adolf Hitler became the Western world’s archetype of evil. Thanks to nearly two decades of historical comparisons, he ceased being a mere historical figure and became transformed into a historical analogy. Hitler did not become an ordinary analogy, however, but rather a hegemonic one: he was not merely added to the list of earlier historical figures who represented evil, but shattered it. Because of the unprecedented crimes committed by the Nazis during World War II, Hitler rendered previous analogies nearly unusable. Like Jean-François Lyotard’s metaphor about an earthquake that destroys the instruments used for measuring it, Hitler’s unprecedented crimes destroyed the utility of existing historical comparison for assessing him. By eclipsing and rendering irrelevant the deeds of prior historical villains, he established himself as the new benchmark of evil. Although Hitler had failed to eradicate diversity from European society, he succeeded in doing so in the realm of historical analogies. In this sense—to paraphrase Emil Fackenheim—Hitler was not denied a “posthumous victory”: having originally emerged, in analogical terms, as a “target” that people sought to explain by consulting older “sources,” Hitler was now transformed into the “source” to which all future “targets” would be compared.

Hitler did not create the archetype of “Hitler” by himself, however, in some act of auto-genesis. He was intentionally turned into an archetype of evil by large segments of Western society, which responded to his crimes by making him the new standard of villainy. The reasons for this process lie mostly in the postwar period. But they can be traced back to the growing wartime belief that Hitler’s crimes should never be repeated. To achieve this, postwar society tried to learn the lesson taught by the flawed use of historical analogies during the Third Reich. More often than not, people during the Nazi era used historical analogies for the purpose of consolation; for the reassurance that history unfolded in familiar, predictable patterns, that tyrannical oppressors were eventually overthrown. Although this outcome ultimately held true for Hitler, the unprecedented crimes he perpetrated and the

unprecedented effort needed to defeat him convinced many people that prior analogies had underestimated his malevolence and capacity for destruction. The response after 1945 was never to underestimate evil again. Every new threat would, therefore, have to be compared to Hitler.

It is difficult to say whether or not this impulse has been a positive or detrimental development. The history of postwar Hitler analogies—how they have been employed and how successfully they have assessed political threats since 1945—remains to be written. But the story is a mixed one at best. It is true that the admonitory lessons of the Nazi era have, at least thus far, kept the Western world from repeating the era’s tragic events. It is equally true, however, that, at the global level, remembering Hitler’s legacy has hardly been a panacea. Postwar comparisons to Hitler and the Nazis have not prevented the rise of dictators, the eruption of wars, or the perpetration of genocides. They have furthermore stoked an alarmist mentality that has often inflated the severity of postwar threats. The fear that these threats represent a “new Hitler” has, on more than a few occasions, prompted ill-advised foreign policy adventures in an effort to avoid another “Munich.” On still other occasions, the fear of a “new Hitler” has not been borne out by subsequent events, thus leading to charges of “crying wolf.” The endless comparisons to Hitler have, finally, contributed to the broader normalization of the Nazi era by relativizing and universalizing its exceptionality. For all these reasons, Hitler comparisons have lost credibility for some and given rise to a broader Hitler “fatigue.”

These liabilities partly explain why commentators continue to disagree about the utility of drawing analogies between the Nazi era and present-day, right-wing political trends, a debate that has recently become particularly acute in the United States, where journalists and scholars remain divided about comparing Hitler with Donald Trump. On the one hand, some commentators have cited the two leaders’ similarities—their authoritarian tendencies, narcissistic personalities, scorn for the mass media, and electoral constituencies—in order to remind us that “it” (i.e., fascism) “can happen here.” On the other hand, more skeptical observers have sought the origins of contemporary rightwing trends in American sources, ranging from the nineteenth-century Know-Nothings and populists, to twentieth-century demagogues like Huey Long, Joseph McCarthy, Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, and Patrick Buchanan. These competing positions reveal a growing disagreement about whether

208 Gavriel Rosenfeld, Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2105), 336–37.

209 On the other hand, more skeptical observers have sought the origins of contemporary rightwing trends in American sources, ranging from the nineteenth-century Know-Nothings and populists, to twentieth-century demagogues like Huey Long, Joseph McCarthy, Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, and Patrick Buchanan.
we should interpret contemporary political trends by looking back to the precedent of Hitler, or to a more diverse roster of historical figures.

As we continue to debate this question, we would do well to consider the lessons of the interpretive struggles that raged from 1930 to 1945. First, they reveal the limitations of historical analogies for explaining contemporary events. Comparisons between Hitler and previous historical villains were well intentioned but often flawed; their pursuit of objective analysis was often compromised by their pursuit of emotional consolation. Many explanations of Hitler thus ended up being expressions of wishful thinking—which only became clear in retrospect, of course. It was difficult to know during the Nazi era how events would unfold and how accurate any particular analogy might be. One should not be unduly critical of these earlier analogies, therefore, by employing unfair backshadowing practices. Indeed, one can draw a cautionary lesson for today: because we recognize the contingency—and cannot know the outcome—of contemporary political events, it is difficult to know which analogies make the most sense at the moment.

Precisely because of this difficulty, it is important to be open-minded and nondogmatic about how one uses historical analogies. This recognition provides another lesson from the interpretive struggles of the years 1930–1945: by recalling how people tried to make sense of Hitler, one remembers that there was a time before Hitler, a time when the reservoir of historical analogies was deeper and more abundantly stocked with diverse historical figures than is the case today. In that era, writers and readers alike had deep familiarity with these figures and could easily employ them to make sense of the world. Hitler’s rise to analogical dominance has impoverished our historical vocabulary, reduced our historical literacy, and limited our ability to understand present-day events. This development is especially problematic, for, as Ernest May has argued, people misapply the lessons of the past to the present when they rely upon a narrow rather than broad range of historical analogies. By recognizing the existence of other historical figures besides Hitler, we can improve our intellectual flexibility and enhance our capacity to glean insights about the contemporary world.

This recognition may, in the end, provide us with the best answer to the question, “Who was ‘Hitler’ before Hitler?” The simple answer is: no one. There was no “Hitler” before Hitler. There was no single figure denoting evil in the same uncontested way that the former Führer does today. The world before Hitler was one in which evil was plural rather than singular. It is worth keeping this fact in mind, for, if we can find our way back to that world, we may be able to better equip ourselves to master present and future challenges. We need not reject Hitler analogies. In fact, we dare not do so. But we can end their monopolistic hold on public attention and ensure that they supplement, rather than supplant, other historical comparisons. Before reacquainting ourselves with history’s diverse villains, however, we should be aware of one final paradox: no matter how much we may want to challenge Hitler’s centrality in Western consciousness, we should nevertheless hope that, in one specific sense, his singular reputation persists into the future. We should hope that Hitler’s crimes are never eclipsed by anybody else and that they remain the benchmark of evil. In other words, we should hope that Hitler remains “Hitler” forever.

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