

The Cheapest Insult

The *reductio ad Hitlerum*: a refuge of tired minds

by Theodore Dalrymple



A specter haunts Europe—this time, not that of Communism, as the opening lines of *The Communist Manifesto* famously assert, but that of Adolf Hitler. Nearly three-quarters of a century after Hitler's death, the mere mention of his name instills fear in disputants' hearts and brings debate to a stop. The *reductio ad Hitlerum* is now the most powerful of rhetorical weapons; and the faintest, most far-fetched, or plainly false analogy of an idea or proposal to anything that Hitler said or did is often sufficient to discredit it. I doubt that there are many who, in the heat of an argument, have never scrupled to use it.

The *reductio ad Hitlerum* (or to Nazism, which, in effect, is the same thing, since without Hitler, there would have been no

Third Reich) can be insinuated into the most arcane discussions. A few years ago, on a lecture tour in Germany, I had dinner at the home of the local representative of the group that had invited me. He was a cultivated, friendly man, born after the end of World War II, who ran a forestry company. That very afternoon, he confided, he had held a staff meeting to try to devise a company motto. Someone suggested *Holz mit Stolz*—"Wood with Pride"—and a two-hour argument ensued as to whether the word "pride" represented the first step on a slippery slope to Auschwitz.

I was astonished, since no one present at the meeting could possibly have been personally responsible for Nazism; but there are those, no doubt, who think that Nazism was the apotheosis of German history and that, for reasons deeply inscribed in Germany's cultural DNA, it remains, and will forever remain, a danger there.

The story of the republishing of *Mein Kampf* in Germany is suggestive in this regard. Hitler's book was not formally banned in the country, but the state of Bavaria held the copyright and, until it expired in 2015, never allowed a reprint. To preempt a surge of republication interest and sales once anyone could put out the book, the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich, with a large subsidy from Bavaria, spent three years preparing a scholarly edition of 2,000 pages, with 3,500 footnotes. This edition was intended to achieve several contradictory ends: to limit purchases of the book by means of its high price while simultaneously satisfying and sapping demand for it, thereby discouraging publishers from putting forth other editions; to intimidate and perhaps bore readers with an overwhelming scholarly apparatus; and, finally, to demonstrate the absurdity, contradictions, nullity, staleness, and evil of Hitler's ideas.

This manner of dealing with *Mein Kampf*—discouraging its free circulation while not outright banning it—reveals a profound

nervousness, whether justified or not (I think not), about the continued appeal of Nazism to the German population. It assumes a large pent-up demand for the book, which, without detailed refutation of its empirical claims and exposure of its moral monstrosity, would convert a significant proportion of its readers to its worldview, leading to their resurrection of the Nazi party.

Traveling on a train in Germany, I happened to sit opposite a German doctor, a woman a few years older than I. Since I had just visited the Netherlands, we started to talk about euthanasia, now widely practiced there. "What would the world say," the German doctor asked, "if what was being done in Holland was being done in Germany?"

In the abstract, it should make no difference where euthanasia is being performed. If patients have the right to easeful death in the Netherlands, why should they not have the same right in Germany? Alternatively, if it is unethical in Germany, why should it be ethical in the Netherlands? Philosophers who argue about the question of euthanasia seldom include the historical context in their deliberations. Does the sensitivity of Germans about this topic—doctor-assisted suicide remains against the law in the country, and even the German term for euthanasia is rarely used—do them credit, or does it reveal deep doubts about themselves, or both?

Not that the Netherlands is completely at ease with its record under the Nazi occupation. Seven thousand Dutchmen volunteered for the SS, and a higher proportion of Dutch Jews died in the Holocaust—three-quarters of them, more than twice the proportion in Belgium, for example, and three times more than in France—than in any other occupied country of Western Europe. Whatever the reasons for this disproportion—the relatively unpropitious Dutch landscape for a life of clandestinity is surely one—unease about it is inevitable. According to one historian of the Holocaust in the Netherlands, Marnix Croes:

On the whole, the Dutch reacted to the German occupation, including the persecution of the Jews, with a high degree of cooperation, following their reputed tradition of deference to authority. This did not change when the deportations started, and it lasted until the beginning of 1943. . . . [T]here was for a long time little doubt that the bureaucracy would not sabotage German-imposed measures, and in fact these were thoroughly implemented.

As Croes observed, “the Dutch bureaucracy assisted the Germans, primarily through population registration; the Dutch police helped, and Dutch bounty hunters, lured by blood money, tracked down Jews in hiding.”

It is still illegal to sell *Mein Kampf* in the Netherlands (as it is in Austria), and in 2014, a merchant of totalitarian memorabilia wound up prosecuted for having done so. He received no punishment (the prosecutor had demanded a fine of more than \$1,000) because his lawyer argued successfully that modern technology had overtaken the ban: anyone who wanted to read the book could get it on the Internet. But the court noted that *Mein Kampf* was a hateful book, inciting anti-Jewish violence, and thus should remain illegal to sell. In other words, for the court, the Dutch were still susceptible to the siren song of Nazism.

Mein Kampf has never been banned in France except under the occupation, when German authorities blacklisted it so as to avoid stirring up anti-German sentiment. But in 1979, a court ordered that it should be published with an accompanying warning—12 pages—about its content. The warning includes the following paragraph:

Mein Kampf, which is certainly an indispensable document for the understanding of contemporary history, is also a polemical and propagandistic work whose violent spirit is not foreign to the present era, and could still thereby

contribute, despite the inanity of its theories, to a renewal of racial hatred or to the exacerbation of xenophobia.

On the expiry of the book's copyright in 2015, a prominent French lawyer, Philippe Coen, founder of the Hate Prevention Initiative, wrote a new introductory warning, more or less repeating the earlier one and urging the public to report any edition that failed to carry an appropriate caution. It is hard to think of any other book—certainly not *The Communist Manifesto*, which could, after all, contribute to a renewal of class hatred—to which the fixing of such a warning might be considered necessary.

Even today in France, the occupation is a preoccupation. The torrent of books about it shows no sign of diminishing. And though those who experienced the occupation are rapidly dying off, their stories continue to exercise a powerful effect on the imagination.

My mother-in-law, for instance, who lives in Paris, and who lived through the occupation, was traveling on a bus, heading home. She began talking with an old woman sitting next to her, who asked her where she lived. My mother-in-law told the old woman the name of the avenue; the old woman asked about the building number, and then the number of her apartment. On being told, the old woman burst into tears, for it was exactly the flat in which she had remained hidden by Gentiles during the occupation, never knowing from one day to the next whether her presence might be discovered, the police station across the way having become the local *Kommandatur*.

In May 1944—just three months before the liberation—the brother of one of my mother-in-law's neighbors was taken from Drancy, the holding camp for Jews in the suburbs of Paris, and deported, with 899 others, to Estonia, from where only 22 returned alive, not including him.

One can easily imagine the appalling distress that those who

claim that the Holocaust never took place cause to people who lost relatives in such ways, but that is not the reason Holocaust denial is illegal in France (and in many other European countries). If it were, we could expect repeal when the last person with a living memory of the Holocaust has died. That won't happen, though, because the purpose of the law is not to prevent distress but to prevent repetition: in other words, the attraction to Nazism or to Nazi-like sentiments must lie just under the surface of European social democracies. Hitler could return.

The fear of Hitler and anything remotely to do with his legacy are evident in the story of Léon Degrelle and his cremation ashes. Degrelle was the leader of the Rex movement in Belgium before the war, and he was never very popular, even at his movement's apogee. At first, he was a Belgian nationalist, strongly Catholic, but he grew more and more extreme, eventually becoming an arch-collaborator and a committed Nazi during the German occupation of Belgium. He helped raise a Wallonian division of the SS and went to fight on the Eastern Front, part of the one-third of that division that survived. Hitler decorated him in 1944. Degrelle claimed, without corroboration, that the Führer told him that, if he had ever had a son, he would have wanted him to be Léon Degrelle.

In May 1945, Degrelle fled to Spain. He was condemned to death in absentia but was protected by Spanish authorities, including the brother of the future queen of Belgium, Fabiola. Later, the socialist prime minister of Belgium and subsequent secretary general of NATO, Paul-Henri Spaak, made no efforts to have Degrelle extradited (in part because of Spaak's own political equivocations regarding the occupation, at least until he fled to London to form a Belgian government-in-exile). Until his death at 87 in 1994, Degrelle lived in Spain, writing apologetics and Holocaust-denial tracts, including one directed at Pope John Paul II, demanding to know why, if the pope had been a resister, he had not himself ended

up in Auschwitz, where he would have seen that the extermination camp was nothing of the kind—that it was a myth concocted by Jews and Freemasons.

It was Degrelle's wish that his ashes be returned to Belgium, near his birthplace; but a government decree mandated that his remains should never be allowed on Belgian soil, doubtless to avoid them becoming an object of veneration or pilgrimage. Underlying this rational argument, however, one senses an elemental apprehension, inspired by the legend of Dracula, that somehow Degrelle's ashes would emanate and spread evil.

Degrelle had been a prolific and talented journalist—of the sarcastic-abuse school. Before the war, he deplored the moral decay of his society, the pettiness and corruption of its parliamentary politics, and society's domination by financial interests—what he might have called, but did not call, the 1 percent. He did, however, coin and use the term “banksters” for those he viewed as hybrid financiers and gangsters. According to a recent biography of Degrelle by Arnaud de la Croix, the memory of Degrelle is used in Belgium today by those who seek to divert attention from current financial scandals: since Degrelle denounced financial scandals, those who now denounce financial scandals must be like Degrelle. This is the *reductio ad Hitlerum* at one remove, for just as there would have been no Nazi regime without Hitler, so there would have been no Degrelle, at least other than as the leader of an evanescent, extremist groupuscule.

The *reductio ad Hitlerum* can reach remote or arcane places. In 1999, Robert Proctor, a historian of science, published *The Nazi War on Cancer*, which raised the possibility that the man usually most credited with discovering that smoking cigarettes caused lung cancer, the eminent British epidemiologist Sir Richard Doll, had developed his ideas during a prewar visit to Nazi Germany, where the connection between smoking and cancer was first investigated scientifically. Doll neither acknowledged nor cited the German research until 30 years

after the publication of his own work on the subject. It is unlikely, though possible, that Doll, who knew German, became aware of that research only late in the intervening period; his few published recollections of his time in Nazi Germany seem evasive, and he was at pains to point out the scientific defects of the German research by the standards of modern epidemiology.

It is likely that Doll feared that an early and frank acknowledgment of any inspiration that he might have drawn from work carried out in a similar field in Germany during the Nazi period would have discredited it; the *reductio ad Hitlerum* would have been brought to bear against it. Even without such an argument, he had to struggle hard enough against those who did not want to accept the irrefutable evidence (this was a time, after all, when Camel cigarettes were advertised as the brand that doctors preferred).

One of the most important German papers that Doll would not have read until after the war—it was published in 1943, when German medical literature rarely reached the Allies—was translated into English only in 2001 and published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, whose editor, George Davey Smith, another eminent British epidemiologist, said:

The abhorrent legacy of the Nazis, and especially the memory of the medical experiments of Mengele and his collaborators, means that we have overlooked any positive scientific contributions from this era, and this is one such example. . . . While we distance ourselves from the immorality of Nazi medicine, it is ironic that in many ways in Britain and America we now view smoking as the Nazis themselves did in the 1930s and 1940s—we view it as on the one hand a public health pariah, and on the other as an important means of tax revenue. Similarly, the tobacco industry has tried to use the fact that the Nazis were against smoking to discredit the clear evidence that smoking is highly detrimental to health.

Just as there is a positive argument from authority (it is right to do something because X did it), so there is a negative argument from authority (it is wrong to do something because X did it); and I have more than once heard people argue that bans or restrictions on smoking are wrong because they are the first step on the slippery slope to Nazi totalitarianism. The problem with this argument is that one can use it to prove that anything can lead to anything else.

The *reductio ad Hitlerum* is an argument from historical analogy, and analogy is, by definition, always inexact; otherwise, it would be repetition. As no less a person than Karl Marx put it, "history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce"—that is, it does not, and cannot, repeat itself exactly. While analogical historical reasoning cannot be altogether eliminated, therefore, it must be used with judgment, discretion, discrimination, and care. History teaches neither nothing nor everything; and it is as dangerous to use it wrongly as to disregard it altogether.

When the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, decided to take in 1 million migrants and refugees (the precise numbers have yet to be established and probably never will be), it is difficult to believe that thoughts of Hitler and Nazism were far from her mind. Hitler believed that the German national interest was the touchstone of morality; anything that served it, in his opinion, was justified. So catastrophic was this monstrous ethic that for a long time, it seemed virtually impossible for anyone other than a neo-Nazi to speak of the German national interest. When Germany won the soccer World Cup in 2014, the nation exploded in joy and celebration. Newspapers suggested that Germany had finally overcome its postwar feelings of guilt, so that it was possible for Germans to express an unapologetic pride in their country. This, however, seems false: everyone understands that, in this context, sport is unimportant, a distraction. A rally to celebrate the German trade surplus as a vindication of the German people compared

with its neighbors would be another thing entirely—and it is inconceivable that it would take place.

One can imagine no policy more distant from Hitler's than Merkel's acceptance of the million migrants. Her gesture says: we Germans are as far from Hitler as it is possible to be. We need not think whether the policy is wise or just; it is sufficient that it should distinguish us from what we were before.

It is not only in Germany, however, that the national interest may not be mentioned for fear of appealing to Nazi-like sentiments; indeed, any such appeal routinely winds up labeled as "far right," a metonym for Hitler or Nazism. The identification is a means of cutting off whole areas of inquiry, nowhere more so than in the question of immigration.

One of the justifications for the European Union that I have often heard is that it brings peace to the continent. This, usually unbeknown to its proponents, is an argument *ad Hitlerum*, for the likeliest source of war on the continent is Germany: Portugal would never attack Denmark, for example, or Sweden Malta. No: what is being said here is that the Germans, being Germans, are inherently militaristic and racist nationalists, and the logical consequence or final analysis of these traits is Nazism; and that unless Germany is bound tightly into a supranational organism, it will return to violent conquest. I personally do not believe this.

Recently, with Donald Trump's election as president, the *reductio ad Hitlerum* has crossed the Atlantic. The comparisons of Trump with Hitler are (as I write) coming thick and fast. Here is what New York mayor Bill de Blasio's former press secretary, Karen Hinton, wrote in the *Daily News*:

Normally people hesitate to compare any violator of human and civil rights on a grand scale to Hitler for fear of minimizing what Hitler did. And, while most Americans can

never know what it was like to be Jewish in the time of Hitler, perhaps we—after ten days of Trump—can start to imagine, especially if we recall what we know about Germany in Hitler’s adolescent days.

As a matter of observable fact, people are *not* reluctant to compare others with Hitler in a non-metaphorical way, or to espy full-blown Nazism on the faintest of analogies. In France, I would sometimes see the following graffito sprayed on buildings: SARKOZY = HITLER. I have little doubt that the graffitists, through ignorance and a lack of perspective, meant it literally, or thought that they did so.

There is, moreover, a vast and extensive literature to help Americans (and others) to know “what it was like to be Jewish in the time of Hitler,” much of it of sufficient quality to supply the imagination; and if really we can “start to imagine” it after ten days of Trump, this would be testimony either to our ignorance or to our lack of imagination, or both—the very ignorance or lack of imagination that allows us to make such outrageously far-fetched comparisons in the first place.

If you insist on fighting specters, you may well fall prey to monsters.

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