

The following is excerpted from an article entitled: **How American Racism Influenced Hitler** by Alex Ross. The article appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine's April 30, 2018 Issue

James Whitman's book, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*, with its comparative analysis of American and Nazi race law, joins such previous studies as Carroll Kakel's *The American West and the Nazi East*, a side-by-



Hitler, circa 1923. Five years later, he noted, approvingly, that white Americans had "gunned down . . . millions of redskins." Photograph from Hulton-Deutsch Collection / Corbis / Getty

side discussion of Manifest Destiny and Lebensraum; and Stefan Kühl's *The Nazi Connection* which describes the impact of the American eugenics movement on Nazi thinking. This literature is provocative in tone and, at times, tendentious, but it engages in a necessary act of self-examination, of a kind that modern Germany has exemplified.

The Nazis were not wrong to cite American precedents. Enslavement of African Americans was written into the U.S. Constitution. Thomas Jefferson spoke of the need to "eliminate" or "extirpate" Native Americans. In 1856, an Oregonian settler wrote, "Extermination, however unchristian-like it may appear, seems to be the only resort left for the protection of life and property." General Philip Sheridan spoke of "annihilation, obliteration, and complete destruction."

To be sure, others promoted more peaceful—albeit still repressive—policies. The historian Edward B. Westermann, in "Hitler's Ostkrieg and the

Indian Wars" (Oklahoma), concludes that, because federal policy never officially mandated the "physical annihilation of the Native populations on racial grounds or characteristics," this was not a genocide on the order of the Shoah. The fact remains that between 1500 and 1900 the Native population of U.S. territories dropped from many millions to around two hundred thousand.

America's knack for maintaining an air of robust innocence in the wake of mass death struck Hitler as an example to be emulated. He made frequent mention of the American West in the early months of the Soviet invasion. The Volga would be "our Mississippi," he said. "Europe— and not America—will be the land of unlimited possibilities." Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine would be populated by pioneer farmer-soldier families. Autobahns

would cut through fields of grain. The present occupants of those lands—tens of millions of them—would be starved to death. At the same time, and with no sense of contradiction, the Nazis partook of a long-standing German romanticization of Native Americans. One of Goebbels's less propitious schemes was to confer honorary Aryan status on Native American tribes, in the hope that they would rise up against their oppressors.

Jim Crow laws in the American South served as a precedent in a stricter legal sense. Scholars have long been aware that Hitler's regime expressed admiration for American race law, but they have tended to see this as a public-relations strategy—an "everybody does it" justification for Nazi policies. Whitman, however, points out that if these comparisons had been intended solely for a foreign audience, they would not have been buried in hefty tomes in Fraktur type. "Race Law in the United States," a 1936 study by the German lawyer Heinrich Krieger, attempts to sort out inconsistencies in the legal status of nonwhite Americans. Krieger concludes that the entire apparatus is hopelessly opaque, concealing racist aims behind contorted justifications. Why not simply say what one means? This was a major difference between American and German racism.

American eugenicists made no secret of their racist objectives, and their views were prevalent enough that F. Scott Fitzgerald featured them in "The Great Gatsby." (The cloddish Tom Buchanan, having evidently read Lothrop Stoddard's 1920 tract "The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy," says, "The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be —will be utterly submerged.") California's sterilization program directly inspired the Nazi sterilization law of 1934.

There are also sinister, if mostly coincidental, similarities between American and German technologies of death. In 1924, the first execution by gas chamber took place, in Nevada. In a history of the American gas chamber, Scott Christianson states that the fumigating agent Zyklon-B, which was licensed to American Cyanamid by the German company I. G. Farben, was considered as a lethal agent but found to be impractical. Zyklon-B was, however, used to disinfect immigrants as they crossed the border at El Paso—a practice that did not go unnoticed by Gerhard Peters, the chemist who supplied a modified version of Zyklon-B to Auschwitz.

Later, American gas chambers were outfitted with a chute down which poison pellets were dropped. Earl Liston, the inventor of the device, explained, "Pulling a lever to kill a man is hard work. Pouring acid down a tube is easier on the nerves, more like watering flowers." Much the same method was introduced at Auschwitz, to relieve stress on S.S. guards.

When Hitler praised American restrictions on naturalization, he had in mind the Immigration Act of 1924, which imposed national quotas and barred most Asian people altogether. For Nazi observers, this was evidence that America was evolving in the right direction, despite its specious rhetoric about equality. The Immigration Act, too, played a

facilitating role in the Holocaust, because the quotas prevented thousands of Jews, including Anne Frank and her family, from reaching America. In 1938, President Roosevelt called for an international conference on the plight of European refugees; this was held in Évian-les-Bains, France, but no substantive change resulted. The German Foreign Office, in a sardonic reply, found it “astounding” that other countries would decry Germany’s treatment of Jews and then decline to admit them.

Hundreds of thousands of Americans died fighting Nazi Germany. Still, bigotry toward Jews persisted, even toward Holocaust survivors. General George Patton criticized do-gooders who “believe that the Displaced person is a human being, which he is not, and this applies particularly to the Jews who are lower than animals.” Leading Nazi scientists had it better. Brian Crim’s “Our Germans: Project Paperclip and the National Security State” (Johns Hopkins) reviews the shady history of Wernher von Braun and his colleagues from the V-2 program. When Braun was captured, in 1945, he realized that the Soviets would become the next archenemy of the American military-industrial complex, and cannily promoted the idea of a high-tech weapons program to ward off the Bolshevik menace. He was able to reconstitute most of his operation Stateside, minus the slave labor. Records were airbrushed; de-Nazification procedures were bypassed (they were considered “demoralizing”); immigration was expedited. J. Edgar Hoover became concerned that Jewish obstructionists in the State Department were asking too many questions about the scientists’ backgrounds. Senator Styles Bridges proposed that the State Department needed a “first-class cyanide fumigating job.”

These chilling points of contact are little more than footnotes to the history of Nazism. But they tell us rather more about modern America. Like a colored dye coursing through the bloodstream, they expose vulnerabilities in the national consciousness. The spread of white-supremacist propaganda on the Internet is the latest chapter. As Zeynep Tufekci recently observed, in the *New York Times*, YouTube is a superb vehicle for the circulation of such content, its algorithms guiding users toward ever more inflammatory material. She writes, “Given its billion or so users, YouTube may be one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the 21st century.” When I did a search for “Hitler” on YouTube the other day, I was first shown a video labelled “Best Hitler Documentary in color!”—the British production “Hitler in Color.” A pro-Hitler remark was featured atop the comments, and soon, thanks to Autoplay, I was viewing contributions from such users as CelticAngloPress and SoldatdesReiches.

In 1990, *Vanity Fair* reported that Donald Trump once kept a book of Hitler’s speeches by his bed. When Trump was asked about it, he said, “If I had these speeches, and I am not saying that I do, I would never read them.” Since Trump entered politics, he has repeatedly been compared to Hitler, not least by neo-Nazis. Although some resemblances can be found—at times, Trump appears to be emulating Hitler’s strategy of cultivating rivalries among those under him, and his rallies are cathartic rituals of racism, xenophobia, and self-regard—the differences are obvious and stark. For one thing, Hitler had more discipline. What is worth pondering is how a demagogue of

Hitler's malign skill might more effectively exploit flaws in American democracy. He would certainly have at his disposal craven right-wing politicians who are worthy heirs to Hindenburg, Brüning, Papen, and Schleicher. He would also have millions of citizens who acquiesce in inconceivably potent networks of corporate surveillance and control.

The artist-politician of the future will not bask in the antique aura of Wagner and Nietzsche. He is more likely to take inspiration from the newly minted myths of popular culture. The archetype of the ordinary kid who discovers that he has extraordinary powers is a familiar one from comic books and superhero movies, which play on the adolescent feeling that something is profoundly wrong with the world and that a magic weapon might banish the spell. With one stroke, the inconspicuous outsider assumes a position of supremacy, on a battlefield of pure good against pure evil. For most people, such stories remain fantasy, a means of embellishing everyday life. One day, though, a ruthless dreamer, a loner who has a "vague notion of being reserved for something else," may attempt to turn metaphor into reality. He might be out there now, cloaked by the blue light of a computer screen, ready, waiting.
