Nazism in Recent Alternate Histories

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Abstract: *Recent alternate histories of Nazism reveal a tendency to universalize the significance of the Third Reich in order to comment on contemporary events. This agenda is subtle in some works and more explicit in others, but it is never far from the surface. Given that all works of alternate history reflect the circumstances in which they are written - with writers' views of the present influencing whether they envision the alternate past as better or worse than the real past - it is no surprise that the works of the last decade reflect the complex realities of the post-9/11 world. The rise of Al Qaeda, the US invasion of Iraq, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the threat of a nuclear Iran have directly influenced the portrayal of the Nazi past in alternate history*.
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Alternate histories "exploit a point of divergence, a fork in the path of history which goes in a different direction" (Seed, 2011: 110). Performing a retrospective time loop that converges on the reader's present, their purpose is frequently to speculate on the contemporary world. Therefore, they are "inherently presentist" (Rosenfeld, 2005: 10).

The history of Nazi Germany has provided plenty of material for counterfactual speculation since the end of WWII. In Great Britain, the US, Germany, and elsewhere, hundreds of alternate histories have appeared in the form of science fiction novels and short stories. These diverse works have explored an equally diverse range of questions: What if the Nazis had won WWII? What if Adolf Hitler had escaped from Nazi Germany in 1945 and become an international fugitive? What if Hitler had been assassinated or had never been born? What if the Holocaust could somehow be undone? What if Holocaust I had been followed by Holocaust II?

According to some scholars, these alternate histories focusing on Nazism reflect the emergence of an increasingly normalized view of the Nazi era. By normalization, these scholars mean the process whereby an unusually sensitive historical legacy, such as that of the Third Reich, ceases to be viewed from an entirely moralistic perspective, being seen as a past like any other. This process can be

advanced deliberately through strategies of *relativization* (the past's uniqueness is minimized through comparisons to other historical events), *universalization* (the past's singularity is explained as merely an outgrowth of timeless forces continuing into the present), or *aestheticization* (the past's moral dimensions are neutralized through different narrative modes of representation) (Rosenfeld, 2005: 17-18).

While early post-war accounts of a Nazi victory in WWII bleakly portrayed a Nazi-ruled world as hell on earth, later narratives have depicted it less harshly, as a relatively tolerable place. Similarly, while early accounts of the world without Hitler showed it to be far better in his absence, later works have portrayed the world as being no better, if not worse. Finally, while early narratives of Hitler's survival depicted the fugitive *Führer* being brought to justice, later ones have shown him eluding justice's grasp. These diverging portrayals have reflected various motives, mostly related to the generational identities and political agendas of their authors, as well as the shifting social, economic, and political conditions in their respective countries. On balance, however, these fictitious representations reveal that the emotional impact of Nazism – especially the fears and fantasies it originally spawned – has begun to fade in Western consciousness.

How do recent alternate histories of Nazism compare? No unifying trend links the major narratives of the last several years, but many have exhibited a tendency to universalize the significance of the Nazi era. Produced, for the most part, by younger writers of left-liberal backgrounds, these accounts have explored alternate histories related to the Third Reich in order to comment on, and usually criticize, contemporary political trends, especially the growing turmoil in the Middle East in the wake of 9/11. In linking their narratives to present-day agendas, however, these accounts have diminished the Nazi era's singularity and have contributed to the larger process of normalization.

The Nazis' Victory

The most popular topic related to the Third Reich remains the nightmare scenario of the Nazis winning WWII. This premise is especially popular among Anglophone writers, several of whom have recently published novels exploring what life would have been like in England if the Nazis had triumphed in the war. The most prominent

example is the Welsh-born Canadian novelist Jo Walton's trilogy called *Farthing* (2006)*, Ha'Penny* (2007), and *Half a Crown* (2008). The series features a British detective named Peter Carmichael who becomes enmeshed in his country's descent into fascism after its leaders forge a separate peace with the Nazis.

As described in *Farthing,* the alternate history point of divergence is Rudolf Hess's flight to England in May of 1941, which succeeds in convincing

British leaders to sign a negotiated peace agreement. The novel is set in 1949 and centres on the murder of one of the agreement's main negotiators, a prospective candidate for prime minister. The sequel, *Ha'Penny,* shows England sliding deeper into fascism, and describes Carmichael's effort to prevent the assassination of the prime minister and his visitor, the *Führer* of Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler. The trilogy's final instalment, *Half a Crown,* is set a decade later, in 1960, and portrays England as having fully embraced fascist rule.

Throughout the post-war period, British alternate histories of a German victory in WWII have varied considerably in portraying the British people's behaviour in a Nazi-ruled world. While Noel Coward's 1947 play, *Peace in Our Time,* patriotically identified British collaboration as exceptionally rare, later works in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Len Deighton's 1978 novel, *SS-GB,* portrayed collaboration as commonplace. Walton's novels resemble these latter works in pessimistically affirming Britain's potential to turn fascist.

A similar theme can be found in alternate histories that appeared at about the same time. Philip Roth's *The Plot against America* (2004) has Charles Lindbergh, known as a Nazi sympathizer, defeat Roosevelt in his third bid for the US presidency to show the prevalence of anti-Semitism in the US. Roth analyzes the effect of larger historical forces on an individual, and the decision to make the story an alternate history destabilizes the happy ending (Nazism's defeat) that the reader thought he knew was to come. Owen Sheers' *Resistance* (2007) empathetically explores the circumstances that prompt the women of a Welsh farming village to collaborate with their German occupiers following the Nazi invasion of Britain in 1944. Sheers humanizes his main German characters, but includes numerous reminders of German brutality in occupied England to pre-empt charges of normalizing Nazi evil.

These narratives suggest that both "writers and readers have become more comfortable de-heroizing their own likely behaviour

under Nazi rule, a trend that may reflect the emergence of a more self-critical streak in the nation's identity in the years since 9/11." (Rosenfeld in Buttsworth and Abbenhuis, 2010: 7) Whatever the case may be, Anglophone alternate histories of a Nazi victory in WWII point to the ongoing normalization of memory.

A World without Hitler

Another popular question related to the Third Reich is that of Hitler being removed from history. One of the more prominent works to tackle this theme in recent years is French writer Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's novel, *La Part de l'autre* (2001). The novel juxtaposes two parallel narratives: one, a dramatic retelling of Hitler's real life story; the other, a speculation of how different his life would have been if he had been granted admission to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna in 1907. Schmitt's answer is that this lucky break would have been decisive in keeping the young man from embarking upon a life of political extremism. Thanks to his admission to art school, Hitler is able to undergo a profound psychological change, one that allows him to experience joy for the first time, arrive at a deeper sense of self-realization, and finally become a man.

At first glance, Schmitt's novel appears to be an exercise in normalizing Hitler's evil. The novel's alternate narrative humanizes Hitler to an extraordinary degree. It explains his evil as inherently circumstantial – the result of sexual dysfunction – and thus implies that it is easily treatable. Moreover, the author successfully convinces the reader to root for Hitler's redemption. And yet, due to its clever narrative structure, Schmitt's novel shrewdly avoids the charge of ethical relativism. It interweaves its portrayal of Hitler's alternative development with a loosely fictionalized account of his life as it occurred in real history. This juxtaposition of historical fiction with alternate history prevents readers from sympathizing too much with Hitler by reminding them of his real historical crimes.

On the other hand, Schmitt's universalization of Hitler's evil challenges the triumphalistic Anglo-American memory of the Nazi era. Ever since 1945, most British and US alternate histories of the world without Hitler have confidently asserted that his removal from history would have done little to improve its course. Works such as Norman Spinrad's novel, *The Iron Dream* (1972) and Stephen Fry's

novel, *Making History* (1996) have insisted that the structural realities of German nationalism, militarism, and racism would have produced a disaster even without Hitler. This claim reflects a sense of contentment with the course of real history among Anglophone writers and a corresponding lack of desire to wish it had happened otherwise.

Kenneth Brown's traditional realist novel *Hitler's Analyst* (2001) also goes against this sense of contentment presenting the CIA as capable of creating a Hitler double that convinces even a psychiatrist for a while that he is treating Hitler himself. While the novel exposes Hitler's character as the result of simple brainwashing, it suggests to the reader that Hitler's behaviour is culturally produced and not the manifestation of an ontological evil. Showing the US generating a Hitler of its own, the novel implies that, from an American perspective, it could happen in the US, too.

Holocaust II or No Holocaust

Alternate histories on the subject of the Holocaust have traditionally been few in number, but several important narratives have appeared in recent years. For example, David Charnay's *Operation Lucifer: The Chase, Capture, and Trial of Adolf Hitler* (2002) features Hitler being detained and tortured in Guantanamo. Moreover, the novel's epilogue, added after 9/11, seeks to associate them with the Holocaust, and Osama bin Laden with Hitler. The novel opens in 1952 when the CIA discovers that Hitler has escaped from the bunker. Having undergone plastic surgery, he now poses as a Jew, and, with all the money he has stolen from the victims of the Holocaust, he is now the richest man in the world. He sells weapons to North Korea, sponsors neo-Nazi groups throughout the world, and supports virtually every existing terrorist group, the Hamas as well as the ETA, the Basque separatist organization. That these organizations were, in reality, only founded after the events described in the novel (the ETA in 1959, the Hamas as late as 1987) indicates the narrative's presentist orientation from the outset: The novel projects concerns of the late 1990s back to the 1950s, reconfiguring Hitler as a terrorist and showing terrorist action as the continuation of WWII by other means.

More than that, 9/11 is seen as another Holocaust, a direct consequence of the extermination of the Jews. The two events are

linked as cause and effect: Holocaust II could not exist without Holocaust I. Conceiving of 9/11 as a consequence of the Holocaust equates the American victims with the Jewish victims of the Nazis. It reaffirms the special relationship between the US and Israel, and casts the war against terrorism as a repetition of WW II – with the crucial difference that the Americans now do not come to rescue the victims but are victims themselves. Consequently, a new Holocaust can still happen anywhere, even on American territory, because the American borders are no longer impenetrable.

Ignoring the ideological roots of terrorism, the novel suggests that the reason for the attacks of 9/11 consists in the generic evil which bin Laden and Hitler share and which naturally turns them into America's enemies. Such an approach is problematic because it does not engage the roots of Islamist terrorism: "To reduce Nazism and Islamist terrorism to the evilness of Hitler and bin Laden, respectively, may be very reassuring for US culture, because it draws a strict boundary between its own goodness and the evil various others come to embody," but "it prevents it from taking into account the historical and political conditions that give rise to terrorism when devising strategies to combat it." (Butter, 2009: 140)

Another prominent exploration of an alternate holocaust is Michael Chabon's 2007 novel, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. The novel's alternate historical elements unfold on the margins of its main plot, a political thriller about the murder of a Jewish chess prodigy. The narrative is based upon a clear point of divergence: the decision of the US government in 1940 to establish a homeland for European Jewish refugees in Alaska. This decision ends up changing history in numerous ways. Thanks to President Roosevelt's passing of the Alaska Resettlement Act, two million Jews are able to escape from war-torn Europe to the US territory and establish a community full of social, cultural, and religious diversity. The Holocaust, as we know it in real history, never occurs. Although two million Jews fall victim to what is called the Nazi "Destruction," the lives of four million others in Europe are spared. The novel thus seems to endorse the fantasy that averting the Holocaust - or at least diminishing its magnitude - would have made history turn out for the better.

In reality, however, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* casts doubt on whether the course of alternate history would really have been superior to that of real history. On the one hand, far more European Jews survive the Nazi onslaught and many are privileged to take part

in the creation of a Yiddish-speaking homeland in Alaska. Moreover, the defeat of the Soviet Union by the Nazis (which takes place in 1942) means that there is no Cold War. On the other hand, however, the state of Israel is never created, as the Jews lose the 1948 War of Independence and are driven into the sea by the Arabs. The Jews of Alaska are themselves in a precarious situation. The Roosevelt administration's original granting of independence to the Alaskan Jewish settlement is only intended to last for sixty years, at which point it is supposed to be reconsidered.

At the time the action takes place – our present – the American president is inclined to have the territory return to the US (a process called "Reversion"), thereby ending the Jews' dreams of political autonomy. Against this background, the author spins out his main plot, a complicated conspiracy meant to destroy the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and prepare the groundwork for a massive Jewish return to Palestine.

At the novel's conclusion, the police discover the reason for the murder of the chess prodigy – he is killed because he is unwilling to play the role of the messiah in the conspiracy – and learn the distressing news that the Dome of the Rock has, in fact, just been bombed. Even without the occurrence of the Holocaust, the future looks bleak, with international strife on the horizon between Jews and Arabs. In short, alternate history is little better than real history.

Chabon's narrative aims to point out the tragic elements of the modern Jewish historical experience, especially those surrounding the Zionist movement. By portraying Jewish life as precarious even in the absence of the Holocaust, he shows how the effort to establish a Jewish national home was destined to cause problems wherever it was created, whether in Alaska or Palestine. In making this point, "Chabon does not so much explore the Holocaust's ramifications for their own sake as use them to comment on the challenges facing Israel." (Rosenfeld in Buttsworth and Abbenhuis, 2010: 17) In other words, he universalizes the Holocaust's significance for larger purposes, advancing the process of normalization.

Conclusion

Recent alternate histories of Nazism reveal a presentist tendency to universalize the significance of the Third Reich in order to comment o

contemporary events. This agenda is subtle in some works and more explicit in others, but it is never far from the surface. Given that all works of alternate history reflect the circumstances in which they are written - with writers' views of the present influencing whether they envision the alternate past as better or worse than the real past - it is no surprise that the works of the last decade reflect the complex realities of the post-9/11 world. The rise of Al Qaeda, the US invasion of Iraq, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the threat of a nuclear Iran have directly influenced the portrayal of the Nazi past in alternate history.

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