

# Killing Public Memory Softly with Hitler's Song: Strategies of Ridicule and Denigration for the Social and Political Misappropriation of Hitler, the Nazis, and the Holocaust and its Rhetorical Cost

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*The digital age provides fertile ground for arguments that use analogies of Hitler, Nazis, and fascism. In this article we examine two specific types of Hitler analogies – arguments that ridicule and arguments that denigrate. We argue that both types of Hitler analogies malign the realities of World War II and the Holocaust, reducing Hitler and his atrocities to little more than a comedic punchline or political propaganda in contemporary public memory.*

**Keywords:** Denigration, Hitler, Holocaust, Nazi, Public Memory, Ridicule

In February 2022, two highly publicized, highly controversial arguments, were shared in the public sphere; one by business billionaire Elon Musk and the other by Russian President Vladimir Putin. What these seemingly disparate individuals have in common is their argumentative mechanism—they both attempted to make their points by using analogies to Hitler. While comparing people or policies to Hitler and the Nazi party are not new phenomena, the proliferation of high profile uses in the public sphere warrants further examination. When high profile individuals use Nazi analogies in the public sphere, they run the risk of normalizing such comparisons. By analyzing these two recent instances of highly publicized Nazi analogies, we discovered that these comparisons generally fall into one of two categories: arguments that *ridicule* and arguments that *denigrate*. Through an examination of Russia's war in Ukraine, and Elon Musk's comparison of Hitler and Justin Trudeau, we show how both types of Hitler analogies malign the realities of World War II and the Holocaust, reducing Hitler and his atrocities to little more than a comedic punchline or political propaganda in contemporary public memory.

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Before exploring these contemporary examples of Nazi analogies in public discourse, it is important to understand the term's historical meaning. After World War I ended with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, harsh penalties were imposed upon Germany, who had lost the war. In response to this defeat, many right-wing parties began to form and to imply that Germany lost World War I because of the Jews.<sup>1</sup> The Nazi party was founded in 1920. It was then that Hitler proposed a 25-point program for the Nazi party platform, advocating for extreme obedience to the state, antisemitism, and outrage at the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>2</sup> Also known as the National Socialist German Workers' Party, the party rose to power in Germany in 1933.<sup>3</sup> According to Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Nazi ideology was "a world view that claimed to explain everything about the world and how it functions."<sup>4</sup> The Party sought to move Germans away from socialism and communism and towards their anti-Semitic views. The Nazis systematically targeted the Jews, falsely accusing them of Germany's economic, social, and political troubles including the military losses experienced in World War I. The Nazi party advocated radical antisemitism, claiming Jews to be of an inferior race. The Nazi world view claimed that the Aryan race was biologically and morally superior to all other races, and thus rightfully should rule over every other race.<sup>5</sup> Under the Nazi regime, from 1933-1945, six million European Jews were murdered.<sup>6</sup> On May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered, bringing the war in Europe to an end. Following Germany's surrender, the Nazi party, the Hitler Youth, and League of German Girls were all outlawed.<sup>7</sup> While several groups tried to revive Nazi-oriented political parties in West Germany in the years following World War II, 1945 is effectively considered the end of the specific brand of German nationalism known as the Nazi Party.<sup>8</sup>

In the United States, The American Nazi Party was founded by George Lincoln Rockwell in 1959 and was succeeded by the National Socialist White People's Party in 1967, the year Rockwell was assassinated. Upon his death, the movement was renamed the National Socialist White People's Party.<sup>9</sup> Although the actual membership of both groups was small (estimated at less than 200), many scholars suggest contemporary "White Power" movements find their roots with Rockwell.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary political movements that attempt to ideologically align with antisemitic

<sup>1</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The Nazi Party," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, June 25, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nazi-party-1>.

<sup>2</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The Nazi Party Platform," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, October 15, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-party-platform>.

<sup>3</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The Nazi Party."

<sup>4</sup> David Silberklang, "Roots of Nazi Ideology," *Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center*, 2022, <https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-videos/video-toolbox/hevt-nazi-ideology.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Silberklang, "Roots of Nazi Ideology."

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars put this figure as high as 11 million. For more information see: "The Holocaust," *The National World War II Museum*, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/holocaust>; "FAQs. The Holocaust Research Center," *Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center*, <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/faqs.html>; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, December 8, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution>.

<sup>7</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Hitler Youth," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, December 10, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/hitler-youth-2>.

<sup>8</sup> "The Nazi Party and Hitler's Rise to Power," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nazi-Party/The-Nazi-Party-and-Hitlers-rise-to-power#ref348487>.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick J. Simonelli, "The American Nazi Party, 1958-1967," *Historian*, 57 (1995): 553-566. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1995.tb02019.x>

<sup>10</sup> Charles S. Clark, "An American Nazi's Rise and Fall: George Lincoln Rockwell Was the Son of Vaudeville, Comedians, Served in the U.S. Navy in WWII and Korea, Honeymooned at Berchtesgaden, Founded the American

views or that cite Hitler, Nazis, or the National Socialist party as inspiration are considered Neo-Nazi organizations and are not the focus of this analysis.<sup>11</sup>

Here we examine the growing phenomenon of using Hitler and Nazi labels and analogies in public discourse. Contemporary comparisons of individuals to Nazis in general or to the ultimate Nazi, Adolf Hitler himself, are plentiful in contemporary discourse. Although the political party was banned in 1945, popular culture references to Nazis abound, including Feminazis, Grammar Nazis, even the Seinfeld Soup Nazi – “no soup for you!”<sup>12</sup> We argue that using references to Hitler, Nazis and Fascism or National Socialism in today’s culture as a kind of generalized insult distorts public memory of World War II and the Nazi party, as well as Hitler and his agenda to achieve the “final solution” – the systematic eradication of the Jewish race.

Holocaust scholars agree that contemporary comparisons to Hitler, Nazism, and the Holocaust are a dangerous trend and should be avoided.<sup>13</sup> For example, Amy Lutz, a spokesperson for the St. Louis Kaplan Feldman Holocaust Museum, argues: “Contemporary comparisons to the Holocaust as a whole are inappropriate and should have no place in our public discourse.”<sup>14</sup> As we become further removed from the historical events, it becomes easier to distort World War II and Holocaust history for one’s own purposes. We do not see these kinds of comparisons to previous political movements. For example, we do not see a plethora of public comparisons between Germans and American Confederates. Or comparisons between Confederates and Redcoats. Hitler and the Nazi party hold a unique place in history as the worse end of any political continuum, adding a specific value and weight to Nazi and Hitler analogies. Edna Freburg, a historian at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, wrote about the danger of such comparisons in 2019: “American politicians from across the ideological spectrum, influential media figures, and ordinary people on social media casually use Holocaust terminology to bash anyone or any policy with which they disagree.”<sup>15</sup> Our analysis explores the implications of such analogies in two contemporary arenas – politics and business.

### ***Reductio ad Hitlerum* Arguments**

Although the development of the Internet and social media brings new public visibility to Hitler and Nazi analogies, they are not a new phenomenon. German philosopher Leo Strauss, in his 1953 book *Natural Rights and History*, coined the argumentative phrase, *reductio ad Hitlerum* (RAH), or “reduction to Hitler.”<sup>16</sup> Strauss’ term is a play on *reductio ad absurdum*, an argument form that

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Nazi Party, Promoted White Power, Baited Blacks and Jews, Ran for Governor of Virginia, Made It into a Bob Dylan Lyric Was Played on Screen by Marlon Brando and Was Assassinated in Front of His Neighborhood Laundromat While Fetching a Bottle of Bleach,” *American History* 40, no. 4 (2006): 61.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Jackson, “Transnational Neo-Nazism in the USA, United Kingdom and Australia,” *GW Program on Extremism*, February 2020, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Jackson%20-%20Transnational%20neo%20Nazism%20in%20the%20USA%2C%20United%20Kingdom%20and%20Australia.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> The Soup Nazi, *Seinfeld*, Season 7, Episode 6, November 2, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> See Edna Friedberg, “Why Holocaust Analogies Are Dangerous,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, December 12, 2018 <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/why-holocaust-analogies-are-dangerous>.

<sup>14</sup> Faith Karimi, “31 States Don’t Require Schools to Teach About The Holocaust. Some Laws Are Changing That,” *CNN*, May 29, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/29/us/holocaust-marjorie-taylor-greene-states-trnd/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Friedberg, “Why Holocaust Analogies Are Dangerous.”

<sup>16</sup> Allan Levine, “Nazi Analogies All Too Common.” *Winnipeg Free Press*, February 1, 2022, A7; Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 42.

attempts to prove the veracity of a claim by demonstrating that its opposite would be contradictory or logically absurd. As a response to his examination of the philosophies of Max Weber, Strauss argued that a view “is not refuted by the fact that it happens to have been shared by Hitler.”<sup>17</sup> In attempting to criticize a person or their argumentative stance as one that shares similarities with Nazi philosophy or Hitler, Strauss suggests that such similarities, if not completely fallacious, are at best, superficial. Both *reductio* arguments fall broadly under the larger category of *ad hominem* attacks, or attacks on a person (as opposed to their ideas).

In today’s technologically-oriented society, the Internet provides a public and easily accessible space in which to make such rhetorical attacks. Gavriel Rosenfeld, in his book *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture*, claims that the Internet opens the possibility for the Nazi image to be “represented in countless new, and previously unimaginable ways.”<sup>18</sup> Mike Godwin, an American lawyer, asserted what became known as “Godwin’s Law.” Godwin’s Law refers specifically to online debates, and states that as online debates go on in length, it is inevitable that someone will make a comparison to Hitler and/or Nazis, effectively ending the debate.<sup>19</sup> However, if Uglit is correct, then perhaps the idea that “playing the Nazi card” effectively ends debate needs to be reexamined.<sup>20</sup> The frequency of arguers to “play the Nazi card” has proliferated in the digital media age. Tweets, Memes, Snaps, Reels, and public speeches are all prime locations for expressing one’s opinions, likes, and dislikes, and there has been an explosion of doing so through a lens of *reductio ad Hitlerum*.

*Reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments are used in a wide variety of contexts in modern society; politics, entertainment, business, just to name a few. Here we examine two specific instances of public argument invoking Hitler analogies: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and Elon Musk’s attack on Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s COVID policies. Two primary argument types emerged from our analysis: arguments that *ridicule*, and arguments that *denigrate*.

### Arguments that Ridicule

The first type of *reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments is those that ridicule. To ridicule is to subject “someone or something to contemptuous and dismissive language or behavior.” By involving an element of contempt ridicule invites us to feel superior while laughing at the inferiority of others. Thus, ridicule can be considered a subcategory of humor, “capable of exposing limits in audiences’ accustomed beliefs and fostering new meanings and practices.”<sup>21</sup> International politics scholar J. Michael Waller argues “Ridicule is a powerful tool to capture popular imagination,”<sup>22</sup> while Billig investigates ridicule as a force at the “centre of social life” with corresponding social power to influence and discipline.<sup>23</sup> While many examples exist of ridiculing Hitler in editorial cartoons, movies, and other media, here we focus on online communication.

<sup>17</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 42-43.

<sup>18</sup> Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 26.

<sup>19</sup> Rasmus Uglit, “The Nazi-Card-Card,” *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, 6, no. 3 (2012): 1-18.

<sup>20</sup> Uglit, “The Nazi-Card-Card.”

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Fiss, “Ridicule, Technical Communication, and Nineteenth-Century Women Performing College Math,” *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 30, no. 2 (2021): 143-156.

<sup>22</sup> J. Michael Waller, “Weaponizing Ridicule,” *Military Review* 97, no. 5 (2017): 49-59.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 3.

As Rosenfeld argues, “the representation of Nazism on the Internet has taken a comic turn.”<sup>24</sup> Ridicule of Hitler and Nazism takes many online forms, including video parodies, memes, and websites such as *Hipster Hitler*, and *Cats That Look Like Hitler*.<sup>25</sup> These are clear subsets of humor where Hitler is used as a punchline for comedic effect. Philip Oltermann, writing for *The Guardian* argues, “the Web is awash with Hitler humour.”<sup>26</sup> According to KnowYourMeme, some of the earliest Hitler-related internet material appeared in 2006, known as the “Downfall” parodies.<sup>27</sup> Downfall (*Der Untergang*) is a 2004 movie detailing Hitler’s final days in the bunker prior to his suicide. One particularly powerful scene comes toward the movie’s end, where Hitler is told that Germany’s defeat is imminent. Hitler then goes on a rant against his enemies. The Downfall scene has been parodied hundreds of times, turning it into “the generic story of a rabid blowhard brought low.”<sup>28</sup> Using the scene in its original German with new English-subtitles, parodies range from Hitler being frustrated at his xbox to Hitler ranting about his generals forgetting his birthday. Popular website Ranker.com even lists the “Top 10 Downfall Parodies of All Time.”<sup>29</sup> Mark Dery, in his analysis of the Downfall parodies argues: “digital technology allows us to loot recorded history, prying loose any signifier that catches our magpie eyes and repurposing it to any end.”<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon is also apparent in revisionist films such as *Inglourious Basterds* and *JoJo Rabbit*. What is the impact of reducing Hitler to comic effect? According to Klaus Cäsar Zehrer, a German satirist and historian, these ubiquitous comedic Hitler comparisons distort and diminish who Hitler was: “...he’s tilting over into caricature: he used to be the ultimate villain, now he is the ultimate idiot.”<sup>31</sup> The rhetorical effect of using arguments that use Hitler to ridicule move us further and further away from the very real horrors of World War II and the Holocaust. What happens when these strategies are used by public figures with social, political, and economic capital? To explore this question, we analyzed the implications of Elon Musk’s use of a *reductio ad Hiterlum* argument to ridicule Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

## Ridicule of Canadian Prime Minister

In October 2021, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that vaccination against COVID 19 would be mandatory for all federal workers and transportation employees working in federally-related industries.<sup>32</sup> The mandate included employees in air, rail, and marine transportation, as well as Canadians who travel via those industries. In January 2022, Trudeau’s government announced all truck drivers crossing the Canadian border must be fully vaccinated regardless of

<sup>24</sup> Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler!*, 305.

<sup>25</sup> See <http://hipsterhitler.com/> and <http://www.catsthatlooklikehitler.com/cgi-bin/seigmiaow.pl>.

<sup>26</sup> Philip Oltermann, “Germany Asks: Is It OK to Laugh at Hitler?” *The Guardian*, March 23, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/23/germany-finally-poke-fun-hitler-fuhrer>.

<sup>27</sup> “Hitler’s ‘Downfall’ Parodies,” *Know Your Meme*, May 3, 2021, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/hitlers-downfall-parodies>.

<sup>28</sup> Virginia Heffernan, “The Hitler Meme,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 24, 2008, [https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/26/magazine/26wwln-medium-t.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/26/magazine/26wwln-medium-t.html?_r=1).

<sup>29</sup> Alan Lewis, “The Top 10 Hitler Downfall Parodies of All Time,” *Ranker*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.ranker.com/list/top-10-hitler-downfall-parodies-of-all-time/the-master>.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Dery, *I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts: Drive-by Essays on American Dread, American Dreams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 101.

<sup>31</sup> Oltermann, “Germany Asks.”

<sup>32</sup> “Prime Minister Announces Mandatory Vaccination for The Federal Workforce And Federally Regulated Transportation Sectors,” *Prime Minister of Canada*, October 6, 2021, <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2021/10/06/prime-minister-announces-mandatory-vaccination-federal-workforce-and>.

whether or not they were Canadian citizens or foreign nationals.<sup>33</sup> Trudeau's new mandate was not well received, and protests began shortly after the announcement. The "Freedom Convoy" was organized by truckers to show their frustration and displeasure with the vaccine mandate and "overreach" in telling non-Canadians they must be vaccinated.

In February 2022, approximately two weeks into the Freedom Convoy protests, Elon Musk tweeted a meme ridiculing Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau by comparing him to Hitler. The tweet contained a picture of Hitler in a military uniform, staring straight ahead with a serious look. Accompanying the photo was the caption "Stop comparing me to Justin Trudeau. I had a budget." Although the tweet was deleted 24 hours later, it generated a storm of controversy. Many organizations, like the American Jewish Committee said he "must apologize."<sup>34</sup> The Auschwitz Museum tweeted: "Using the image of Adolf Hitler & therefore exploiting the tragedy of all people who suffered, were humiliated, tortured & murdered by the totalitarian regime of Nazi Germany created by him is sad & disturbing."<sup>35</sup> Musk's *reductio ad Hitlerum* tweet implies that Trudeau's political leanings are equivalent to perhaps the most extreme embodiment of political evil in the modern world, minus any factual evidence of violent intent, a necessary component of a true comparison between these two. The Musk tweet even goes a step further, implying that Hitler although murderous and systematically oppressive, possessed positive characteristics, such as keeping a budget. In a sense, Musk is arguing that Hitler as a government leader is preferred over Trudeau and even possessed admirable qualities. Praising Hitler for fiscal responsibility while contrasting him with Trudeau in order to criticize his politics does little to advance any real support for Canadian truckers, and legitimizes using Hitler's image as political propaganda. In ridiculing Trudeau, Musk sets himself apart as superior – in his understanding of history and of Canada's current political situation. However, in reality the Canadian Prime Minister's COVID-19 policies bear little more than a superficial resemblance to fascist political policies of the 1930s.

The fact that this tweet, which garnered so much criticism, did not ridicule Hitler, but rather used the image of Hitler to ridicule Trudeau, represents a disturbing twist on the use of *reductio ad Hitlerum* not normally seen in mainstream social media discussions. A worldwide public business leader legitimizing the use of a Hitler analogy on a public platform implies we have entered a new rhetorical era. When Elon Musk, a billionaire with economic, political, and social status, dares to employ such an argument as a personal attack, we have gone beyond the type of ridiculing present and generally accepted on the Internet. The swift negative reaction to Musk's tweet, coupled with Musk deleting the tweet, shows the disciplining function of rhetoric and public opinion. Musk's use of ridicule is apparently a step too far in Hitler humor.

### Arguments That Denigrate

The second type of *reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments is those that denigrate. To denigrate means to attack one's reputation, to defame, or belittle. Using *reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments that denigrate is a common rhetorical tactic in the political arena. Framing one's political opponent as Hitler, the

<sup>33</sup> Mark Gollom, "Trucker Vaccine Mandate Raises Questions About Risk Posed by Unvaccinated Drivers," *CBC News*, January 18, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/truck-driver-vaccine-mandate-canada-1.6315936>.

<sup>34</sup> Yvonne Lau, "Elon Musk Mysteriously Deleted a Tweet Comparing Trudeau to Hitler," *Fortune*, February 17, 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/02/17/elon-musk-tweet-hitler-meme-canada-freedom-convoy/>.

<sup>35</sup> Rupert Neate, "Elon Musk Criticised For Likening Justin Trudeau To Adolf Hitler In Tweet," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/feb/17/elon-musk-criticised-for-comparing-justin-trudeau-to-adolf-hitler-tweet-auschwitz>.

ultimate evil, has been on the rise, particularly since the 2000s.<sup>36</sup> George W. Bush, Donald Trump, Angela Merkel, Marine Le Pen, Hugo Chávez, and other world leaders have all been compared to Hitler.<sup>37</sup> Comparisons come from the political right and the political left, demonstrating Hitler's staying power as a historical analogy. While arguments that ridicule Hitler are a subcategory of humor, arguments that denigrate do not have humorous components and are a serious attempt to show how a particular public figure is "like Hitler." By positioning Hitler as history's greatest villain, such arguments are often made as part of a fear appeal to justify particular political behavior. Here we examine how *reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments that denigrate have been used in relation to the Russia-Ukraine crisis. In order to examine these issues, it is necessary to understand some of the geographic and political history of the Soviet Union and Ukraine.

As part of the former Soviet Union, Ukraine has a unique relationship to Holocaust history. According to modern-day borders, one out of every four Jewish victims of the Holocaust was murdered in what is now present-day Ukraine.<sup>38</sup> Babi Yar (Babyn Yar) in Kyiv was the site of one of the largest mass shootings of World War II. Over 30,000 Jews perished during the two-day massacre in September 1941.<sup>39</sup> Ukraine declared its independence in 1991 upon the breakup of the Soviet Union. However, that independence has been fraught with controversy, protest, and violence. While a complete review of the history of the Ukraine and the Soviet Union would be impractical, the rhetoric used to explain Russia's annexation of Crimea provides a critical example of a denigrating *reductio ad Hitlerum* argument.

### The Annexation of Crimea

In 2010, Pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich was elected as Ukraine's President.<sup>40</sup> Yanukovich hastily suspended ongoing trade talks with the European Union, opting instead to revive economic ties with Moscow, which led to widespread protests and rallies.<sup>41</sup> In February 2014, Parliament voted to remove Yanukovich from power, resulting in the taking of Parliament in Crimea by force, and a raising of the Russian flag. Crimea was officially "annexed" into Russia on February 20, 2014. Both Crimea and Russia signed a "Treaty of Ascension" in March 2014.<sup>42</sup>

In a 2014 speech celebrating Russia's annexation of Crimea, Putin justified the annexation by claiming that Russia was "fighting fascism" in Ukraine, comparing those who protested against then-Ukrainian President Yanukovich's rollback of planned agreements with the European Union to "Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites."<sup>43</sup> Putin justified his political action by comparing those who favored a relationship with the European Union over Russia to a host of

<sup>36</sup> Gavriel Rosenfeld, "Who Was 'Hitler' Before Hitler? Historical Analogies and the Struggle to Understand Nazism, 1930–1945," *Central European History* 51 (2018), 249–281.

<sup>37</sup> Rosenfeld, "Who Was 'Hitler' Before Hitler?" 249.

<sup>38</sup> Jennifer Popowycz, "The 'Holocaust by Bullets' in Ukraine," *National World War II Museum*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/ukraine-holocaust>.

<sup>39</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Mass Shootings at Babyn Yar (Babi Yar)," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, September 29, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kiiev-and-babi-yar>.

<sup>40</sup> "Timeline: The Events Leading Up to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/events-leading-up-russias-invasion-ukraine-2022-02-28/>.

<sup>41</sup> "Timeline."

<sup>42</sup> Steven Pifer, "Crimea: Six Years After Illegal Annexation," *The Brookings Institution*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/17/crimea-six-years-after-illegal-annexation/>.

<sup>43</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

despicable historical figures. While this does not fit squarely into a *reductio ad Hitlerum* framework, Putin's arguments of denigration were attempts to delegitimize concerns of the Ukrainian people about re-establishing Russian ties rather than solidifying a relationship with the European Union.

## Russia Invades Ukraine

*Reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments that denigrate were used in several key speeches in 2022 by Vladimir Putin as Russia began massing troops on the Ukrainian border under the guise of conducting "training exercises." First, he laid the groundwork by positioning Ukraine as an illegitimate independent nation. On February 21, 2022, in a televised speech, Putin ordered Russian troops into two areas of Eastern Ukraine, recognizing the independence of the "breakaway regions"<sup>44</sup> and bemoaned the breakup of the Soviet Union and suggested that Ukraine, and all former Soviet republics, are illegitimate.

Second, Putin made specific rhetorical choices that paralleled language commonly used during World War II. In discussing the situation in Eastern Ukraine, specifically the Donbass region, Putin accused the "Kiev elites" of "trying to orchestrate a blitzkrieg in Donbass..."<sup>45</sup> The word "blitzkrieg" (literally "lightning" and "war") is commonly associated with the military tactics used by Nazi Germany in World War II to inflict fear, shock, and defeat upon their opponents.<sup>46</sup> Such phrasing denigrates the leaders of Kiev by comparing them to those who masterminded the blitzkrieg military tactic and used it to devastating effect against Europe and England in World War II. These references are not central to Putin's two key messages in this speech that the Ukraine is an illegitimate state (and rightfully part of Russia) or that Russia must protect itself from the eastward expansion of NATO. However, these comparisons serve as a legitimizing tactic and set the stage for the events to come.

A mere three days later, on February 24, 2022, Russian forces, under the direction of Russian President Vladimir Putin, invaded Ukrainian borders as a "special military operation."<sup>47</sup> That same day Putin gave another televised address to Russian citizens, this time investing considerable effort in this February 24 speech demonstrating how efforts of the United Nations Security Council, of which it is a permanent member, have been distorted or ignored to the world's detriment. In a dizzying explanation of geopolitical affairs, Putin took his listeners on a historical journey through Belgrade, Libya, Syria, and Iraq. The implication was that the United States, and by extension NATO, cannot be trusted when they promise not to expand NATO eastward, culminating in labeling the United States and the Western bloc as an "empire of lies."<sup>48</sup>

After establishing that the West cannot be trusted, Putin used a *reductio ad Hitlerum* argument, claiming history as a guide and justification for Russia's actions. Recounting how Nazi Germany invaded Soviet borders in June 1941 without declaring war, and citing the tremendous loss of life

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Osborn and Dmitry Antonov, "Putin Orders Troops to Ukraine After Recognizing Breakaway Regions," *Reuters*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/kremlin-says-no-concrete-plans-summit-with-biden-over-ukraine-2022-02-21/>.

<sup>45</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*, February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

<sup>46</sup> Raymond Limbach, "Blitzkrieg," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/blitzkrieg>.

<sup>47</sup> "Timeline."

<sup>48</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*, February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.



and territories that were required to defeat the enemy, he stated “we will not make this mistake the second time.”<sup>49</sup> Putin justified Russia’s presence in the Donbass region by claiming he is stopping a “genocide” and that Russian compassion compels him to “recognize the independence of the Donbass people’s republics.”<sup>50</sup> Putin attempted to justify his behaviors by invoking Hitler and Nazi Germany’s previous actions as the ultimate evil that must be stopped at all costs. Further, Putin positioned Russia as a compassionate military force of freedom-fighters.

Next, Putin claimed that NATO countries are supporting far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine, comparing them to the killing squads that murdered over a million Ukrainian Jews during World War II: “They will undoubtedly try to bring war to Crimea just as they have done in Donbass, to kill innocent people just as members of the punitive units of Ukrainian nationalists and Hitler’s accomplices did during the Great Patriotic War.”<sup>51</sup> By comparing modern Ukrainian citizens to the mobile killing squads that decimated the Jewish population in this region during World War II, Putin deliberately distorted the historical record for his own purposes, making it appear that his invasion should be seen instead as a rescue mission. Comparing far-right Ukrainian nationalists with mobile killing squads from World War II is a clear reputational attack that seeks to defame the people of Ukraine for Putin’s political gain. His *reductio ad Hitlerum* argument framed his cause as just, presumably to increase his chances of winning the widespread support of the Russian people for the invasion.

Towards the end of the speech, Putin summarized his justification for the invasion of Ukraine as a calling to “protect people who...have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine...”<sup>52</sup> Putin provides no evidence to show a groundswell of Nazism, or even neo-Nazism, present in Ukrainian politics. Putin’s *reductio ad Hitlerum* argument suggests the mere comparison to Hitler and Nazis is all the evidence he needs to justify his actions.

Although the bulk of Putin’s February 24 speech focused on the United States and the danger of eastward expansion of NATO, his references to Nazi Germany and denazification (along with the invasion itself) garnered immediate widespread criticism and condemnation. On the same day as the speech and subsequent invasion, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum issued a statement “condemning Putin’s exploitation of Holocaust history as a pretext for war.”<sup>53</sup> Foreign-policy.com summarized the speech in this way: “Putin vowed to ‘demilitarize and denazify’ the country and urged Ukrainians to lay down their arms.”<sup>54</sup> *The Guardian* characterized Putin’s justification for invading Ukraine as “having the goal to ‘denazify’ Ukraine” and arguing that the justification is “not tenable.”<sup>55</sup> Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, himself a Russian-speaking Jew who had family members killed in the Holocaust, responded with his own Nazi argument, stating: “Russia treacherously attacked our state in the morning, as Nazi Germany did

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<sup>49</sup> Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” February 24, 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” February 24, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” February 24, 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” February 24, 2022.

<sup>53</sup> “Museum Condemns Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Memorial*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/museum-condemns-russias-invasion-of-ukraine>.

<sup>54</sup> Christina Lu, “Putin Faces Global Criticism Over Ukraine War,” *Foreign Policy*, February 24, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/24/russia-ukraine-war-invasion-global-reaction/>.

<sup>55</sup> Jason Stanley, “The Antisemitism Animating Putin’s Claim to ‘Denazify’ Ukraine,” *The Guardian*, February 26, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/25/vladimir-putin-ukraine-attack-antisemitism-denazify>.

in World War II...As of today, our countries are on different sides of world history.”<sup>56</sup> Here we see a public battle of political will – who will claim the “right” to a Hitler comparison? Zelensky or Putin? Holding Hitler up as the ultimate evil, and denigrating those that are compared to him, provides political clout to both leaders, particularly since both Putin and Zelensky are speaking to audiences that contain members who actually lived through World War II.

In Russia, which lacks a guaranteed freedom of the press, Putin’s arguments may bring to the fore emotional and perhaps even nostalgic memories of fighting back the Nazis. Journalists have reported that the Russian people are being fed a steady diet of propaganda that the Russian army is fighting Nazism “across the globe.”<sup>57</sup> Thus his arguments might serve as a rallying cry for those with family histories of loss during World War II. The goal of “denazifying” Ukraine may even be viewed by the Russian people as noble and necessary. For Ukrainians, Russia’s invasion may bring back the painful memories of the killing squads and massive loss of life. These memories also have a heavy and emotional component. Perhaps this is one reason for the large number of volunteer Ukrainian fighters and the seemingly unbreakable spirit of the Ukrainian people. Putin, through his false appropriation of Hitler and Nazi analogies, may have done more to unite the Ukrainian people than even the Ukrainian President. Both Putin’s and Zelensky’s *reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments may function as respective rallying cries for their people.

The use of *reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments that denigrate by invoking World War II, Hitler or the Nazis, as a justification for present-day political decisions are particularly dangerous due to the high political stakes that often accompany them as is evident in the Russia-Ukraine crisis. As Nathan Robinson writes, “We cannot be casual about labeling people Hitlers, because it may determine how we respond, and the wrong response may be needlessly fatal to millions.”<sup>58</sup> While Putin’s arguments clearly distort historical memory, Zelensky attempts to sharpen/clarify the present circumstances. Perhaps all arguments that denigrate by invoking Hitler are oversimplifications, but to varying degrees.

## Conclusion

Our analysis explores what we argue is a new phase of varied uses and consequences of *reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments in contemporary discourse: world leaders and high-profile business moguls using Hitler comparisons in the public sphere. The public reactions and condemnations show the very real and heightened emotions that such analogies provoke. We have demonstrated the perils of using either of the two main argumentative frames – arguments that *ridicule*, and arguments that *denigrate*.

The first type, arguments that invoke Hitler to ridicule an opponent, not only belittle the historical facts, but also the few living survivors of World War II and the Holocaust that remain. As we have shown, arguments that ridicule abound in the social media sphere, exploiting the memory of World War II and the Holocaust. As we become more comfortable with images of Hitler that make us laugh, we are in danger of changing public memory of his actions from the systematic

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<sup>56</sup> John Haltiwanger, “Auschwitz Museum Says Russia’s War in Ukraine is an ‘Act of Barbarity That Will Be Judged By History,’” *Business Insider*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/auschwitz-museum-says-russias-war-in-ukraine-is-an-act-of-barbarity-2022-2>.

<sup>57</sup> Félix Krawatzek and George Soroka, “Ukraine War: People Are Fighting and Dying for Vladimir Putin’s Flawed Version of History,” *The Conversation*, March 22, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-people-are-fighting-and-dying-for-vladimir-putins-flawed-version-of-history-178925>.

<sup>58</sup> Nathan Robinson, “Beware Thoughtless Hitler Comparisons,” *Current Affairs*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2022/03/beware-thoughtless-hitler-comparisons>.

destruction of European Jewry to a kind of superiority complex that allows us to see others as inferior to ourselves.

The second type, arguments that use Hitler to denigrate an opponent or enemy, are widely used as strategic tools of geopolitical conflict. Here we examined how such arguments have factored into the Russia-Ukraine conflict. By invoking Hitler, both Putin and Zelensky demonstrate how prevalent and volatile Nazi analogies can be in the sphere of geopolitical affairs. In our analysis we have shown how comparison to Hitler, fascism, and Nazis are used to legitimize military incursions and attack political leaders.

Both *reductio ad Hitlerum* strategies of ridicule and denigration attempt to reduce and simplify Hitler into a metonymy of either the ultimate idiot, or the ultimate evil, damaging and distorting our public memory of World War II. When world leaders casually draw connections to Hitler to further their own strategic goals, what is the impact on how future generations understand our collective past? As living memory of World War II recedes, we must ask ourselves the consequences of such retooling of history for laughs or political gain.

Godwin reflected on the implications of such retooling, when discussing the “law” he had created over 20 years ago:

The purpose of Godwin’s Law was primarily to underscore what it really means to ‘never forget,’ and what it really means to remember the Holocaust. What it means is that you don’t invoke it liberally as a so-called ‘trump card’ in a public debate. Hardly any politician alive is like Hitler. So, you don’t want to see that comparison trotted out routinely.<sup>59</sup>

Unfortunately, in today’s digital age, these comparisons are prolific and ultimately diminish the impact of Hitler’s actions in World War II at a time when Americans know little about the historical facts. Perhaps this is the biggest consequence of the prolific use of *reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments in the modern public sphere: the impact on what we “know” and “remember.”

Research shows that as we become further removed from the actual events of World War II that fewer and fewer Americans are well versed in this time period. A nationwide survey from 2020 revealed that among adults 40 and younger, over 1 in 10 respondents had not ever heard the term Holocaust.<sup>60</sup> 22 percent of respondents thought the Holocaust was associated with World War I, and 63 percent did not know that six million Jews perished in the Holocaust.<sup>61</sup> Only 20 US States require teaching the Holocaust in public schools, with 3 additional states “encouraging” Holocaust education.<sup>62</sup>

According to the National World War II Museum, of the 16 million World War II veterans, only 240,329 remain, with veterans dying at a rate of 234 daily.<sup>63</sup> Claims Conference, a Holocaust nonprofit, estimates there are 300 to 350-thousand Holocaust survivors still living around the

<sup>59</sup> Omer Benjakob, “‘You Nazi!’: The Man Who Wanted the Internet to Stop Invoking Hitler Has a Plan to Save Social Media,” *Haaretz*, August 8, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2020-08-08/ty-article-magazine/.premium/he-wanted-the-internet-to-stop-invoking-hitler-heres-his-plan-to-save-social-media/0000017f-e486-d9aa-afffddee7b40000>.

<sup>60</sup> Kit Rampgopal, “Survey Finds ‘Shocking’ Lack of Holocaust Knowledge Among Millennials and Gen Z,” *NBC News*, September 16, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/survey-finds-shocking-lack-holocaust-knowledge-among-millennials-gen-z-n1240031>.

<sup>61</sup> Rampgopal, “Survey Finds ‘Shocking’ Lack of Holocaust Knowledge.”

<sup>62</sup> “U.S. States Requiring Holocaust Education in Schools,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/u-s-states-requiring-holocaust-education-in-schools>.

<sup>63</sup> “WWII Veteran Statistics: The Passing of the WWII Generation,” *The National World War II Museum*, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/wwii-veteran-statistics>.

world.<sup>64</sup> As we lose the first-hand accounts of our veterans and Holocaust survivors, we face the possibility of a generation creating and consuming Nazi analogies in the public sphere that bear no material resemblance to the historical, political party. Such decontextualizing of Nazism and the Holocaust ushers in new collective interpretations of these important historical events.

Our collective understanding of World War II and the Holocaust are at an all-time low. Using Hitler and the Holocaust as comedic relief or political propaganda trivializes the unspeakable horrors of World War II. The casual and prolific use of *reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments by world leaders collectively damages public memory of World War II by making comparisons to Hitler commonplace and socially acceptable. According to Brown University history professor Linford Fisher “Simplistic historical analogies do a sort of epistemic violence to the past and to ourselves.”<sup>65</sup> While publicly invoking Hitler or Nazi analogies still draws public criticism, it also draws some supporters. The very act of invoking Hitler and the Nazis in the public sphere contributes to a lack of true knowledge and understanding of these historical events and the actual historic Nazi party. The prolific use of *reductio ad Hitlerum* arguments oversimplifies the historical people and events we are using as our basis of comparison.

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<sup>64</sup> Dana Arschin, “The Last Generation of Holocaust Survivors, a FOX 5 special,” *FOX News*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.fox5ny.com/news/the-last-generation>.

<sup>65</sup> Linford D. Fisher, “Your Hitler Analogy is Wrong, and Other Complaints from a History Professor,” *Vox*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/4/19/11450526/trump-is-hitler>.