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From Leaflets to Tweets: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Propaganda Tools used by the Nazi Party
and Donald Trump

There's an old internet adage known as Godwin's Law, first posited by American attorney and author Mike Godwin, which says, "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one" (Godwin). With the Holocaust standing as, quite possibly, the most horrific and abhorrant set of events in the entirety of human history, a mere 75 years later we seem to have become far too comfortable making comparison to the perpetrators of such atrocities. This problem extends beyond just common conversation on the internet, as many mainstream sources have also become more liberal in their references to the Nazis and fascists, more broadly. Just within the last month, CNN contributor Joe Lockheart compared statements made by President Trump's attorney, Alan Dershowitz, to something you might hear "from Hitler, from all the authoritarian people who rationalized, in some cases genocide" (Schwartz, Dershowitz). Recently, MSNBC host Chuck Todd recited a quote on broadcast which referred to supporters of Bernie Sanders as a "Digital Brownshirt Brigade," and MSNBC host Chris Mathews likened Sanders' victory in the Nevada Caucus to the Nazi's occupation of France in 1940 (Schwartz, Brownshirts) (Terkel). The references to Senator Sanders and his supporters, in particular, point to the absurdity of this problem, considering that Sanders himself is a Jew who had family killed in the Holocaust.

This is not to say that there is not a genuine problem in the rise of right-wing authoritarians around the globe. There are plenty of nations where we have seen authoritarian right wing factions come dangerously close to the reins of power. In France, Marine Le Pen, the candidate for the National Rally party, was able to come second in the first round of the French election, only to eventually lose in the runoff to Emmanuel Macron. In Germany itself, the AfD, a far-right nationalist party, saw success in the last federal election, claiming 94 seats in the Bundestag and cementing themselves as the third largest party in the country. In other countries, these far-right authoritarians have actually found success in their campaigns to reach the highest levels of government. In a 2018 election in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro - an authoritarian with a history of calling for violence against and killing of his political adversaries, including during his 2018 campaign - was elected to the Brazillian Presidency. Since being elected President of the Philippines in 2016, Rodrigo Duterte has launched a brutal campaign to crack down on drugs in the Philippines, with more than 3,000 killings by police being attributed to this campaign within his first three months in office. But perhaps no other modern politician has received as many comparisons to Hitler and the Nazis as U.S. president Donald Trump. Though this label is nearly constantly applied to President Trump, it's not immediately clear how much this reflects a simple political pejorative or a more deeply rooted similarity. Donald Trump is, by nearly all definitions, a right-wing authoritarian. His policies have nearly all been in line with those of the political right, though perhaps varying on the severity of actions taken, and he has very clearly proven himself authoritarian by his frequent attacks on free speech and a free press, as well as by threatening to jail his political opponent during the second presidential debate in 2016 (Roberts). However, simply being a right-wing authoritarian does not make someone akin to Hitler and the

Nazis, a group responsible for the deaths of millions in the Holocaust. It is only through a deep analysis of the public statements and tactics of otherization used by both Hitler and the Nazi Party, as well as Donald Trump and his campaign, that we are able to find some disturbing similarities (as well as key differences) between them.

Now, before I actually begin with examination of the relevant documents, I'm going to limit my inquiry in two important ways. Firstly, I won't be going deeply into the actual policies and effects of each regime. The Holocaust was an atrocity of such scale and efficiency that it sits completely unparalleled from any other such genocide before or since. Let us be clear up front: The Trump administration has never engaged in any action even close to the effect of the Holocaust, nor has it shown any indication that it will. Some people argue, perhaps accurately, that the detention centers on the southern borders could be broadly defined as concentration camps. However, that does not mean they are in any way equivalent to the mass scale death camps in use by the Nazi regime. Part of the difficulty with discussing these detention centers is the Trump administration clearly does not want the conditions broadcast to the world, so information is limited. What we do know is that during the Trump administration, at least 2 dozen immigrants have died in ICE custody (Rappleye). When discussing these issues, we must be able to both recognize the brutal nature of the policies being implemented by the Trump administration, while also understanding that they are simply not the same as the efficient slaughter of millions carried out by the Nazis. Thus, my discussion will be primarily focussed on the rhetoric used by both groups, with the understanding that the tactic of otherization applied by both groups has the potential for such vicious actions, even if they aren't necessarily carried to their conclusion.

Secondly, I will be narrowing my discussion specifically to the rhetoric used against one group. Hatred often takes different forms depending on the society within which it resides. While the primary target of the Nazis' ire was clearly Jews, they only accounted for a little more than half of those executed in the Holocaust. Other groups targeted by the Holocaust included ethnic minorities like Roma and Serbs, religious minorities like Jehovahs Witnesses, as well as those with disabilities and many LGBT people. Tactics of ostracism in America are somewhat more diffuse, with no one group receiving as much focus as the Jews did in Nazi Germany. However, if we were to find the one group that receives the most directed abuse from the Trump administration, that would surely be immigrants and, by extension, Latinxs. While Donald Trump has also made hateful remarks about plenty of other minority groups, quite notably Muslims, his campaign against Latinx immigrants has been the most consistent across his campaign and subsequent administration, and thus my analysis of ostracism will focus primarily on the rhetoric against Jews and Latinxs.

A final note should be made here that, while much of Trump's rhetoric has been directed specifically at "illegal immigrants" (hereafter referred to as undocumented immigrants), this has effectively come to mean anyone with heritage south of the Rio Grande. Whether intentional or not, the harmful effects of the ostracism by the Trump administration have affected a great many Latinxs in this country, regardless of immigration status. A Pew Research study found that 58% of Hispanics said that they have personally faced discrimination or have been treated unfairly because of their race (Horowitz 4) . This is not to say that the President and his actions have necessarily caused these opinions to form. Just as with anti-semitism, anti-hispanic sentiment has existed in America long before our current administration. However, that same study found that

75% of Hispanics said that it has become more common for people to express racist views since the President was elected and 69% believe the President is directly responsible for making race relations worse (Horowitz 2). Finally, the study also asked Hispanic participants to identify their own skin color along a scale and found that generally those with darker skin color were more likely to say they had experienced discrimination (Horowitz 1). This is all to show that, whether intended or not, the anti-immigrant rhetoric of Donald Trump has been equated with anyone of hispanic descent. As immigration status is not an outwardly visible trait, skin color has often been used as a stand in by those who take Trump's message to heart.

As to the primary topic of the actual rhetoric of otherization used by each regime, one point of commonality is the tactic of blaming their respective target groups for national disasters, particularly those of an economic nature. The Nazis, in particular, used this strategy frequently to explain away different national calamities. One such calamity was a period of incredible economic hardship following Germany's loss in World War I. Between the heavy costs associated with paying for a war of that magnitude and the heavy reparations imposed on Germany afterwards by the Treaty of Versailles, the economy of the newly born Weimar Republic simply couldn't handle it. By 1921, the German economy had begun to tailspin and entered a devastating period of hyperinflation. In a 1933 speech at the Nuremberg rally, Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, when discussing his view on the differences between Aryans and Jews, stated that

The fundamental differences between the two races were responsible for the repeated explosions during the November years [1918-1933]... We certainly do not hold the Jews solely to blame for the German spiritual and economic catastrophe. We all know the

other causes that led to the decline of our people. However, we have the courage to recognize their role in the process and to name them by name. (Goebbels)

This tactic of scapegoating such a large national calamity on minorities is an effective way of contextualizing and personalizing antisemitism to a larger audience. The economic collapse in Germany affected lots of people in deep and meaningful ways, so coming to associate their personal tragedy with a minority group might have reached people who may not initially have been prejudiced towards those minorities. If people start to associate their own personal or family's hardships and loss with a minority group, that could be an incredibly powerful motivating force for hatred. The Nazis scapegoating was not just limited to the financial crisis. There was also a very common notion within Germany that they had been "stabbed in the back" during the First World War. The idea went that it was not due to any failing of the Germans, either in combat or in strategy, that had led them to lose the War, but instead it had been internal forces at home - namely Jews - which had sabotaged the war effort. The Central Propaganda Office for the Nazi Party published a pamphlet which gave advice for Nazi speakers, essentially like talking points, which layed these assertions bare by claiming that:

As the initial enthusiasm passed, and the German army began its quiet and determined heroic battle on the fronts, as its superhuman exertions kept the enemy from the homeland, the Jew began carry on his previously concealed subversive work openly. He used his tools, the Marxist parties, to choke the heroic battle from behind the lines in order to throw Germany into chaos and prepare for Jewish rule. This subversive work bore fruit in November 1918. (Battle against Judah)

The First World War, as with the economic crisis, deeply affected nearly everyone living in Germany at this time. Scapegoating events like these likely had powerful effects on the opinions of many Germans, especially those who were more directly harmed by these events.

Additionally, since the First World War and the ensuing economic crash were essentially the two largest disasters in recent German history, there is a further implication from these accusations that the Jews are essentially responsible for everything bad that has happened in Germany.

This tactic of scapegoating is also one that features heavily in Donald Trump's playbook. While Trump's use of scapegoating is perhaps less clearly articulated and specific, it does certainly bear similarity to the tactic used by the Nazis. Trump's scapegoating argument essentially boils down to this: Undocumented immigrants are taking jobs from American workers and leading to our financial hardship. Now, it's not exactly clear what financial hardship specifically he is referencing, in part due to the fact that the American economy has been on a steady increase for a decade now. He could be making reference to the financial crash of 2008, or perhaps more plausibly the larger trend we have seen of wage stagnation over the period of about the last 40 years. Regardless, Trump hammers this message home frequently, often in different ways. Sometimes the claim is just made clearly at face value, such as at his nomination acceptance speech when he said, "Decades of record immigration have produced lower wages and higher unemployment for our citizens, especially for African-American and Latino workers" (Cariz).

Other times when this claim is made, it's not so straight forward, such as when, during a June 2015 rally in Phoenix, Trump said, "Mexico... They're taking our jobs, they're taking our manufacturing, they're taking our money, they're taking everything and they're killing us at the

border” (Trump Phoenix). One of the issues with studying this kind of authoritarian propagandist rhetoric techniques is it often isn’t exact, because it doesn’t need to be. We can have legitimate discussions over the definition of the words “Jew” and “Jewish,” but ultimately, for the purposes of the Holocaust, Jews were who the Nazis said were Jews. In that same vein, Trump often will conflate “undocumented immigrants” with immigrants in general and often even Mexican citizens and the Mexican Government. In the case of this Phoenix speech, Trump is ostensibly talking about the country of Mexico, however the phrase “They’re killing us at the border” hints that this is largely tied to illegal immigration. And at the end of the day, that’s all he needs to do. He doesn’t need to lay out some well thought-out case for the economics of immigration - he just needs to tie the issue of illegal immigration to people’s individual economic hardships and you have created the emotional link that scapegoating is designed to do. This connection is hammered home so many times so that Trump can Tweet something like this: “Ohio is losing jobs to Mexico, now losing Ford (and many others). Kasich is weak on illegal immigration. We need strong borders now!” (@realDonaldTrump, Ohio). Without this prebuilt connection, this would just seem like a non sequitur about two completely separate policy areas. However, since he spends so much time making this connection, the point can land among his base. Overall, while this strategy of scapegoating isn’t used to the same severity that it was in Nazi Germany - i.e. Trump isn’t blaming immigrants for a total economic collapse or a devastating loss in a war - its effect is largely the same. The tactic of scapegoating serves to personalize the hatred towards the outgroup and tie it directly to people's actual suffering.

Another further similarity between Trump and Nazi rhetoric is what I will refer to as warning of an immanent threat. One way which the Nazis would often stress the importance of

their campaign against the Jewish people was by making the claim that Jews were currently plotting to spark another war against them. In Hitler's 1939 speech before the Greater German Reichstag he said, "should international financial Jewry in and outside of Europe succeed in plunging the nations once again into a world war, the result will not be the Bolshevization of the world and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe" (Hitler 15). In this case, Hitler is clearly trying to place blame onto Jews for the impending war, one that was unequivocally started by the Nazis through their invasion of Poland. There is also the implicit assumption in this quote - as it says "once again" - that the Jews were responsible for the First World War. By claiming the Jews are currently planning an all out attack on Germany, Hitler is adding an incredible urgency to the situation. This sense of urgency and impending threat can be another powerful tool in a propagandist's arsenal. When people are worried about and distracted by an impending existential threat, whether real or fabricated, they are far more likely to turn a blind eye to the persecution of minorities around them. In fact, some might even be more likely to take part in the persecution themselves in hopes that that will somehow stop the threat. Hitler then goes on to say that

At the moment, Jewry may, in certain states, pursue its smear campaign under the protection of press, film, radio propaganda, theater, literature, etc., which are in its hands. But should that people succeed once again in driving the nations' masses of millions into a struggle that is entirely senseless for them and serves only Jewish interests, we shall see the effectiveness of an education in Germany to which Jewry has completely succumbed within a few short years. (Hitler 15)

Again Hitler paints Jews as some kind of malicious force pulling the strings behind the international order and driving countries around the world into another war. The effect of this rhetoric would likely only be bolstered by the fact that a war did eventually break out. Though the cause of that conflict was unequivocally due to Germany's aggression and had nothing to do with the "international Jewry" Hitler blames, many Germans certainly would not have seen it that way.

Donald Trump is also a frequent user of this tactic of imminent threat. In late 2018 and early 2019, Donald Trump saw an incredible propaganda opportunity in a caravan of migrants coming from Honduras which was heading towards the U.S. border. Trump and his administration tried to seize upon this opportunity to secure funding for his border wall. When the Democrats refused to oblige his request, the government entered the longest government shutdown in U.S. history. During this period, Trump would continue to fearmonger about the Caravan by Tweeting things such as, "Humanitarian Crisis at our Southern Border. I just got back and it is a far worse situation than almost anyone would understand, an invasion!" (@realDonaldTrump, Humanitarian Crisis). Trump would use this word invasion often to describe not only this specific caravan, but the situation at the southern border more broadly. Trump would Tweet again just after the end of the government shutdown to say, "More troops being sent to the Southern Border to stop the attempted Invasion of Illegals, through large Caravans, into our Country" (@realDonaldTrump, More troops). This kind of rhetoric bears a striking similarity to that used by Hitler warning of an impending attack from Jewish forces conspiring abroad. Not only would Trump himself use this language of invasion, but his campaign would make frequent use of it, too. The New York Times found, in an article

published in October of 2019, that, “Since January, Mr. Trump’s re-election campaign has posted more than 2,000 ads on Facebook that include the word ‘invasion’” (Kaplan). Clearly there must be some evidence this rhetoric is effective, if Trump himself and his well-funded re-election campaign continue to use it. While we don't know the full extent to which this language has been effective as a propaganda tool, we do know it has been effective on some. The El Paso shooter, who killed 20 people, mostly of Latinx origin, cited this exact rhetoric in his manifesto claiming, “this attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas” (Baker). While this does not serve as conclusive evidence for the effect of Trump’s rhetoric - as the shooter also stated in his manifesto that his views predate Trump - it does go to show the extreme measures some are willing to use when they believe they are under attack by these minority populations. While it would be grossly unfair to assume that Trump or his campaign wanted an atrocity like the El Paso shooting to happen, we cannot simply ignore the incredibly damaging effect this kind of rhetoric can have and the similarities it shares to that used by Hitler and the Nazis.

So, having established some points of tactical similarity in the rhetoric used by the Nazi Party and the Trump administration, it is now crucial to note that there are also some major differences. Perhaps the most significant difference is in the tactic of dehumanization. Dehumanization was another tactic used by the Nazi Party in order to further ostracize the Jewish people and to desensitize the population at large to the violence being perpetrated against Jews. This tactic of dehumanization was a powerful one. If it is executed effectively and people actually buy into it, it allows for potentially far greater persecution of minority populations than if they were perceived as fundamentally different, but still human. One of the more famous examples of Nazi dehumanization appears in the film *Der Ewige Jude* sponsored by the Nazi

Ministry of Propaganda. In the film, one sequence “compares Jews to rats that carry contagion, flood the continent, and devour precious resources” (Holocaust Encyclopedia). Not only are Jews being compared to animals, but to vermin - rats - which carry heavy connotations of disease and squalor. While the comparison to rats was certainly the most prominent example of dehumanization, it was not the only one. In a pamphlet published by the Nazi Party that would eventually be distributed among German Soldiers, Jews are compared to literal parasites. In the pamphlet “The Jew as World Parasite,” there is a discussion of the role that actual parasites play in nature, followed by an extensive attempt to compare Jews to parasites. Among the arguments made in the pamphlet were that Jews were averse to physical labour and, more specifically, that a Jew “does not create value, but rather his goal is to heap up money” (Parasite). Both of these aforementioned pieces of propaganda were published very late into the Nazi regime in 1943. This tactic of dehumanization is one of the most drastic and is one of the final steps on the road to genocide.

Thankfully, this tactic of dehumanization that was used so effectively by the Nazis is essentially nowhere to be found in Trump’s rhetoric. At one point during his administration there was a controversy about Trump saying “You wouldn’t believe how bad these people are. These aren’t people, they are animals” (Animals). Allegedly, this remark was made in reference to undocumented immigrants. However, the White House later claimed that this comment was specifically in regards to members of the MS-13 gang (Davis). It can often be difficult to parse issues like this, due to President Trump’s rather irregular speech pattern. However, it seems decently clear in this instance that Trump was talking more specifically about the gang members. Even considering the phenomenon I discussed earlier in which language about immigrants, both

documented and undocumented, and Mexican citizens can be conflated, because there are no other significant cases of Trump using anything close to a tactic of dehumanization, I think it can be fairly concluded that Trump was speaking specifically in regards to the gang members.

Overall, the tactic of dehumanization is an incredibly dangerous one. So while other Trump rhetoric may mirror that of the Nazis, it is certainly a good sign that it doesn't in this instance.

To some extent, it remains unclear exactly how effective the Nazis tactics of propaganda actually were. Historian Ian Kershaw describes the disagreement between early historians about how effectively Nazis were able to shape public opinion by saying, "On the one hand - especially outside Germany - the emphasis was laid upon enthusiastic mass backing. On the other hand - among Germans themselves - the stress fell upon the helplessness of a population which for the most part rejected the regime but in the face of unparalleled terror and repression could do little but engage in 'passive resistance'" (Kershaw 119). Since then, the conversation has become more nuanced than those diametrically opposed opinions, but scholars still disagree. To some extent, at least for the purposes of this argument, I'm not sure it is entirely relevant exactly how much of the German people were taken in by the Nazi propaganda. Whatever the percentage was, it was enough to be a sizable percentage of the population able to intimidate the rest into submission. The same can likely be said for the Trump administration. The President has never had a positive approval rating. While individual polls may turn up here or there which show him with positive approval, the average has always been negative for the entirety of his presidency thus far (Job Approval). And yet it was enough to get him elected. Even if the rhetorical tactics of the Trump campaign and administration haven't been effective on a majority of Americans,

they have been extremely effective on some minority of Americans, which has allowed him to fulfill certain major planks of his platform, up until this point.

Ultimately, I believe these comparisons should serve as a warning to some, but a relief to others. Donald Trump is not a Nazi. While there are certainly lots of similarities that are shared, they are simply not the same. As I previously stated, there is simply no comparison when it comes to the area of policy. While I personally believe that the policies of the Trump administration have harmed a great many people in the past 3 years, they have done nowhere near the damage that Nazis did to Jews and the whole of Europe during World War II and the Holocaust. However, in the area of rhetoric, there are certainly many worrying similarities. In this discussion, I have outlined three rhetorical tactics which I view as some of the more pervasive, effective and damaging tactics used by the Nazis, and two of them were heavily used by Donald Trump. Needless to say, this should be concerning. Though the Trump administration and the Nazi regime may not be employing the same kind of policies while in power, their politics have a lot of the same roots. Whether or not you agree with President Trump's tax cuts or his border wall, we should all be able to condemn this kind of politics, founded upon hatred and otherization. However, it is certainly relieving that Trump has not adopted the tactic of dehumanization, as that tactic is incredibly reprehensible and often one of the final steps on the path to genocide. Nevertheless, we should keep a watchful eye to ensure neither he, nor any other American politician, start to adopt this tactic, as that could be the canary in the coalmine for something far worse to come. Regardless of our political leaning, it is imperative that we hold our leaders accountable for their words, as well as their actions. Ultimately, it was this kind of

rhetoric which allowed the atrocities of the Holocaust to happen and, thus, it is our responsibility to learn from history and ensure that nothing like that ever happens again.

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