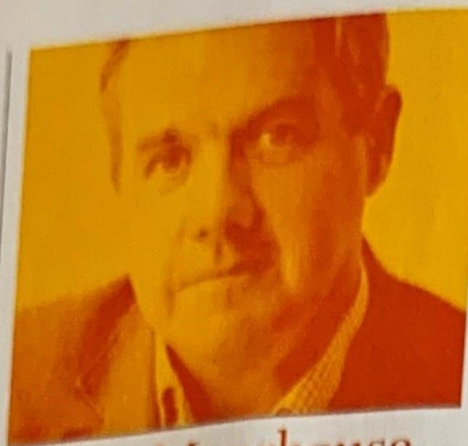


## HEAD TO HEAD

### WHY IS THE PUBLIC SO OBSESSED WITH THE NAZIS?

The history of the Third Reich remains as popular as ever. Why?



**Roger Moorhouse**  
'The level of fascination leaves many historians scratching their heads'

*Author of First to Fight: the Polish War 1939 (Bodley Head, 2019)*

The popular obsession with Hitler and the Nazis is at once wholly understandable and rather baffling. On one level, of course, as the instigator of the Holocaust, the Third Reich is very well worthy of our interest and attention. Yet, on the other, the level of popular fascination – seemingly at the expense of other, no less significant, subjects – must leave many historians scratching their heads.

To a large extent, that fascination has its origins in the binary world of wartime propaganda: a curiously one-eyed world view that, while lauding 'Uncle Joe' Stalin, saw Hitler and the Nazis as the personification of evil, the ultimate enemy, whose defeat was a moral imperative. Postwar presentations – academic and popular, literary, televisual and cinematic – have so built upon those simple stereotypes that the Nazis are now part of our cultural

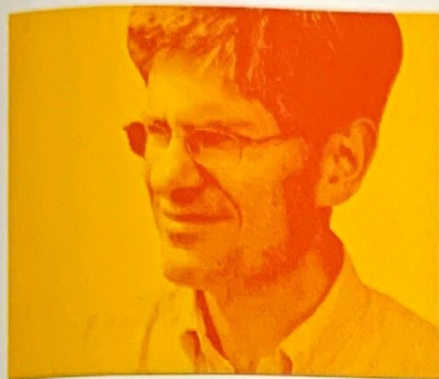
furniture; largely shorn of their historical significance they are reduced almost to a term of abuse, a 'boo-word' reserved for overzealous policemen or politicians of whom we disapprove.

That level of popular recognition, however superficial, is then amplified and reinforced by the unadventurous tastes of the public and by the imitative instincts of publishers and film makers. Interest generates content, content generates interest.

To those of a more contemplative bent, the reasons for the fascination lie a little deeper, perhaps, in the question of how the nation of 'thinkers and poets' became the nation of 'judges and hangmen'. Germany by the early 20th century was a cultural titan, one of the most advanced societies on the planet; the Weimar Republic, for all its political faults, had 16 Nobel Prizes to its credit. And yet, this was the very same nation that was seduced by Hitler and whose people went on to become the essential accomplices in the Nazi war machine, the architects of the genocide against the Jews. It is the question of how Germany can have fallen so far, how its people failed to 'know better', that spurs my interest. Nazi Germany is an object lesson in the human condition, in the very fragility of civilisation.

**How did the nation of 'thinkers and poets' become the nation of 'judges and hangmen'?**





## Alec Ryrie

**'There is no image that packs the same emotional punch as a swastika'**

*Professor of the History of Christianity at Durham University. Author of Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt (William Collins, 2019)*

Hitler and the Nazis have an indispensable role in our culture: they tell us what evil is. A century ago, the most potent moral figure in western culture was Jesus Christ. Christians and non-Christians alike generally agreed that his ethical vision was irreproachable and definitive. Now, our most potent moral figure is Adolf Hitler, who defines evil for us as Christ once defined goodness. If you try to question that, you put yourself beyond the pale, as Ken Livingstone discovered. The cross and the crucifix no longer have the honoured place they used to hold in our culture; but there is no visual image that packs the same emotional punch as a swastika.

Fair enough. If you're going to pick one human being as an embodiment of absolute evil, I challenge you to find a better candidate. But not every

cataclysmic event rewrites our collective ethics as the Second World War and the Nazi genocide did.

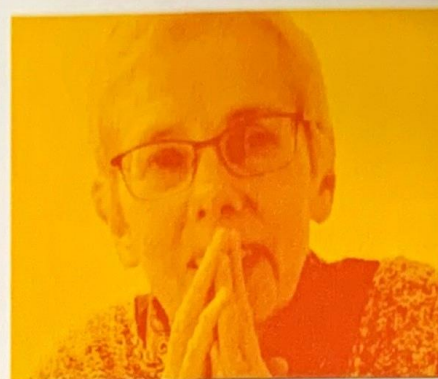
It was the struggle against Nazism which crystallised that great modern act of faith, 'human rights', which we all believe in even if we struggle to justify it philosophically. So when we retell that struggle, we reinforce and defend the sacred story on which our collective values depend.

And retell it we do. Have you ever heard any snatch of audio repeated more often than Chamberlain's broadcast of 3 September 1939 announcing that Britain was at war?

But this is not really about history. We don't just tell the stories: we rewrite them. Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglorious Basterds* tells us how Hitler should have died, not how he did. And the modern myths on which our children raise themselves, from Tolkien through *Star Wars* to Harry Potter, are unmistakably all versions of the anti-Nazi struggle, transposed into timeless ideals.

It's not unproblematic. It means we're better at knowing what to hate than what to love. And these myths may not really be enough to hold back resurgent authoritarian nationalism. But until something better comes along I'm happy to reaffirm the modern creed which the great ethicist Indiana Jones taught us: 'Nazis. I hate these guys.'

**It means we're better at knowing what to hate than what to love**



## Elizabeth Harvey

**'Let us talk more about the war's aftermath'**

*Professor of History at the University of Nottingham and co-editor of Private Life in Nazi Germany (Cambridge, 2019)*

Is it odd for a British historian of Nazism to be concerned about excessive British public interest in her subject? One can only welcome the number of visitors to exhibitions and museums about the Second World War and the Holocaust, and salute and support the efforts of Holocaust educators. But some facets of contemporary British culture do point to an obsession with the Nazis that diverts from critical historical enquiry.

One aspect of the long-standing obsession with the Nazis is the narrative of the Second World War that plays up Britain's contribution to the Allied victory. The wish to honour the British war dead and the remaining veterans has been overlaid by ceremonies, flypasts and re-enactments on the anniversaries of D-Day and VE-Day with accompanying media frenzy. All this cements a popular self-image of Britain standing alone and united in face of tyranny. This is a comforting and powerful

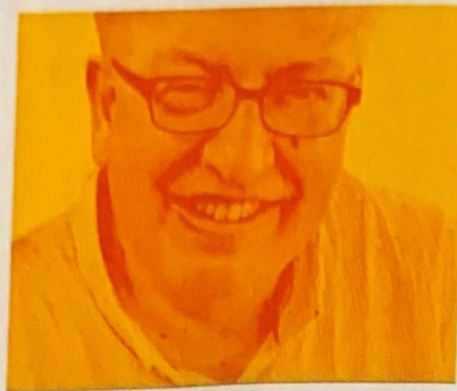


national myth. Now, fatefully, and in conjunction with right-wing Germanophobia, it is used by some to justify Brexit. How can it be challenged? Teaching the Second World War with more focus on its global dimension and its entanglement with decolonisation would be a start. And let us talk more about the war's aftermath and how supranational institutions in western Europe helped build a stable peace.

Meanwhile, 'the Nazis' as the embodiment of evil, fanaticised robots in uniform, are a staple of mass entertainment, in documentaries and films to computer games. Much of their power lies in the reproduction or imitation of Nazi footage of its own staged spectacles. In today's image-soaked environment, disrupting the hold that Nazi propaganda exerts over the popular imagination is a challenge. But exposing the mechanics of Nazi visual 'framing' and 'capturing' could also prompt viewers to ask more critical questions about how they 'see' the world.

Can popular obsessions with 'the Nazis' as code for Britain's enemies or timeless evil be channelled back into serious engagement with the question how and why democracies succumb to authoritarianism and fascism? We can only try.

**Some facets of British contemporary culture do point to an obsession with the Nazis**



## Martyn Rady 'How would we behave in such circumstances?'

*Masaryk Professor of Central European History at UCL. His Habsburgs: The Rise and Fall of a World Empire is published by Allen Lane in May*

Audiences across the world lap up TV programmes on mass murderers, well-dressed vampires and 'boys' toys'. The Nazis had all three. They had the Messerschmidt six-engine Gigant with gun turrets on its wings, the V-2 rocket, the *Tirpitz* and the Tiger tank. Designed by Ferdinand Porsche, the Tiger has the solid clunk of German engineering and a raciness which fires imaginations. American PBS and National Geographic TV play up the size of Nazi engineering with their (endlessly repeated) series 'Nazi Megastructures' and 'Nazi Mega Weapons'.

The Nazis knew about appearances, too. Hitler may have stolen freedom from Germans, but he gave them the geometry of the parade square, with SS uniforms produced by, among others, the Hugo Boss company. The British humourist Arthur Marshall recalled how in 1945 he took the surrender of four German

officers on board a yacht at Flensburg on the Baltic. Immaculately turned out, the Germans looked with disbelief at their British counterparts: "Whatever is this riff-raff", they were thinking? "What on earth went wrong? How could we possibly have lost the war?" Thinking it over later, I found I was as perplexed as they. Sartorially, the Nazis were winners.

Some Nazis were homicidal maniacs. Most Germans did what they were told. As in the infamous Milgram Experiment, they pushed responsibility onto others and inflicted deadly suffering, but with real people and not actors as their victims. This challenges us: how would we behave in such circumstances? But it also challenges the entire premise of the Liberal Enlightenment project on which our civilisation rests. The idea that education or *Bildung* will make better people is cruelly subverted by the Nazi experience. Between one fifth and one quarter of the officer corps of the SS, the SD and Death's Head units were not just graduates but had PhDs from ancient German universities. Their subsequent conduct as super-educated, elegantly attired mass murderers is as mind-boggling and incomprehensible as the story of Britain's greatest serial killer, Dr Harold Shipman.

**The idea that education will make better people is cruelly subverted by the Nazi experience**