

THE CONVERSATION

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Hailing Hitler: why Godwin's law never gets old

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Putting the jackboot into Assad. Freedom House

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Where would we be without Godwin's Law? This law, formulated for the internet, dictates that as a discussion progresses, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1. And, as we have seen, Godwin's applicability is not confined to the internet but crops up time and time again in common parlance.

The most recent example is the spat between George Clooney and Boris Johnson about what should happen to the Elgin Marbles. Johnson, to belittle his opponent, accused Clooney of "advocating a Hitlerian agenda" because the actor suggested it might be time to consider restoring the plundered antiquities to Greece.

Clooney, no babe in arms when it comes to the cut-and-thrust of debate on the celebrity-political stage, must nonetheless have been somewhat taken aback when his polite suggestion that returning the marbles to Greece: "wouldn't be a bad thing" was met with a force-10 Johnsonism.



"Someone urgently needs to restore George Clooney's marbles," thundered Boris. "Here he is plugging a film about looted Nazi art without realising that Göring himself had plans to plunder the British Museum. This Clooney is advocating nothing less than the Hitlerian agenda for London's cultural treasures."

Third Reich revisited

'Ich bin ein Londoner.' Back Boris 2012, CC BY

Why do we, as a nation, seem to relish every opportunity to drag out a reference to Hitler and Nazi Germany? Ten years ago, Ian Kershaw, author of several books on the subject,

wrote on the 70th anniversary of the Nazi leader's rise to power:

It seems as if scarcely a day goes by without Hitler and the Nazis in one way or another – in newspapers, films, books, on radio and television – entering into our public consciousness.

A full decade after Kershaw's assertion (which doesn't even mention the internet) the peculiar British fascination with the Führer and Nazi culture continues to flourish. Late summer saw a glut of stories and I report here only a few of the many that have caught my eye. In August the *Daily Mirror* told us of the discovery of "the must-have toy for kids in Nazi Germany" (the Adolf Hitler play figures with an adjustable arm for seig heil salutes have now been sold at auction in Bristol).

The *Daily Telegraph* told us about the Nazi's sinister "bride schools" and even the normally sober-sided and aloof *Guardian* got in on the act with a puppy that looks like the German leader (presumably because it allowed them to introduce the rather cute catchphrase: "Heel Hitler").

Russell Brand instinctively knew that he could score Brownie points for being controversial (even offensive) when he was thrown out of the GQ awards for highlighting that Hugo Boss, the event's sponsor, had links to the Third Reich. "If anyone knows a bit about history and fashion, you know it was Hugo Boss who made uniforms for the Nazis ... But they looked f***ing fantastic, let's face it, while they were killing people on the basis of their religion and sexuality."

No shortage of 'Nazi treasure'

The fact is, there is simply so much material available upon which to draw. Unlike the regimes of Stalin, Pol Pot or Mao Tse-tung, the Nazis left behind troves of documentary evidence and, to this day, further proof of the depravity and strangeness of their time in power continues to emerge and be lapped up by Fleet Street.

The defeat of Hitler and the liberation of Europe from tyranny represents a golden period in British history. In times of hardship or austerity we can look back at a time when the reputation and capability of Britain on the world stage was tangible and effective. The war against Nazi Germany was simple to understand for the populace in the sense that the battle was against an identifiable evil intent on invasion and subjugation. The war needed to be fought and the country came together in a variety of shared experiences, from rationing and conscription to the threat of the Luftwaffe. Generally speaking, the war united people of all classes and Hitler, with his curious, ludicrous appearance and behaviour was clearly the anti Briton, the savage threat to our civilisation. The embodiment of iniquity.



Modern face of totalitarianism? Anthony Devlin/PA Wire

So reading about the Hitler toys and the swastikas on Christmas trees not only highlights the degeneracy of the Nazis, it also reinforces our sense of superiority about the strangeness of foreigners and Germans in particular. We can implicitly relive the victory of 1945 while marvelling at how an industrial, educated democratic country such as Germany allowed itself to be so completely corrupted in 12 short years.

Hitler is a recognisable reference point for all generations of Britons that history's other tyrant simply don't provide. In 2006 there were concerns over schools' "Nazi obsessions" and there is the view, popular among university admissions tutors, and discussed by Niall Ferguson, that there is significant over-emphasis on the Nazis.

Benchmark of horror

But the relationship that we have with Hitler, Nazism and fascism is multi-dimensional. On one hand we can recognise the need to combat the rise of neo-fascism and the need to communicate the horrors of the Holocaust. On the other, we can open the Daily Mail and laugh at a house in Swansea which looks like Hitler, "complete with naff side parting".

It's no coincidence that Hitler and Nazi Germany still provides the benchmark against which to measure other despotic regimes, which is what US secretary of state, John Kerry did when he said last year about the Assad regime's alleged use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians: "In times of war the only people who have used them are Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein. Until Bashar al Assad."



Kerry: I blame Hitler.

This is a provably untrue statement (Britain used mustard gas, for example, in World War I at the Battle of Loos and Mussolini deployed it against the Ethiopians in the 1930s). But it serves a purpose: it moves Assad into the premier league of history's tyrants. By doing this it becomes – almost – justification for taking action against him. Certainly it provides all the justification Kerry needs for insisting that he be removed as Syria's head of state.

 Syria UK politics Nazism Adolf Hitler Boris Johnson UK press George Clooney Elgin Marbles Bashar al-Assad