

From Nazi Germany to Japanese Internment Camps: Here's the Disgusting History Behind Trump's 'Infest'

Donald Trump's defenders will say he didn't mean to dehumanize immigrants when he said they're "infesting" the United States. He did.

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Global Research, June 20, 2018

[AlterNet](#) 19 June 2018

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Donald Trump on Tuesday elected—nay, made the political calculus—to use the word “infest” while describing real, human beings (“illegal immigrants”) who allegedly “pour” into our country and presumably must be stopped.

“Democrats are the problem,” [the president wrote in Twitter](#). “They don’t care about crime and want illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and infest our Country, like MS-13.”

“They can’t win on their terrible policies, so they view them as potential voters!” he exclaimed.

Critics were [quick to jump](#) on Trump’s use of the word “infest,” which typically refers to insects or animals and immediately conjures images of disease and death. And with good reason; using such dehumanizing language to describe living, actual human beings has precursors in Nazi Germany and World War II Japanese Internment Camps, among other instances of human rights abuses.

Writing for Forward, columnist **Aviya Kushner** [notes of the 1940 German Nazi propaganda Film “Der Ewige Jude”](#) (“The Eternal Jew”), “one of the film’s most notorious sequences compares Jews to rats that carry contagion, flood the continent, and devour precious resources.”

Kushner adds:

What is happening now is “defining the enemy. Substitute “continent” for “Country,” capitalized, and you get the picture. The roots of the particular word “infest” are also telling. The English word comes from the French *infester* or Latin *infestare* ‘assail’, from *infestus* ‘hostile’. So yes, it’s a word rooted in hostility.

David Livingstone Smith, the director of the Institute for Cognitive Science and Evolutionary Psychology at the University of New England and author of the 2011 book “Less Than Human,” told NPR the [Nazis explicitly referred to their victims as Untermenschen](#)

("subhumans") to make it easier to carry out atrocities against them.

"It's wrong to kill a person, but permissible to exterminate a rat," Smith explained. "To the Nazis, all the Jews, Gypsies and others were rats: dangerous, disease-carrying rats."

In a 2008 article on the [dehumanization of Muslims following the 9-11 terror attacks](#), professors **Erin Steuter** and **Deborah Willis** explained the role of language in presenting the enemy as "less than human" and thus making it "psychologically acceptable to engage in genocide or other atrocities."

"Historical precedents include Nazi propaganda films that interspersed scenes of Jewish immigration with shots of teeming rats," Steuter and Willis write. "Jews were also compared to cross-bred mongrel dogs, insects and parasites requiring elimination; Nazi propaganda insisted that "in the case of Jews and lice, only a radical cure help."

According to Steuter and Willis, the human-beings-as-pests metaphors "have antecedents in Western media treatment of the Japanese in WWII, who were also systematically presented as vermin, especially rats, bats and mosquitoes - representations that were expanded from Japanese soldiers to include Japanese citizens."

"Perhaps inevitably, the rhetoric of pest and infestation slipped into the rhetoric of extermination and eradication, as in the popular poster found in U.S. West Coast restaurants during World War II that proclaimed, 'This restaurant poisons rats and Japs,'" they note.

Remarkably, the comparisons aren't just metaphorical; as Steuter and Willis explain, the creators of chemical insecticides used against infestations "also created poison gas" and led "to the use of chemical defoliants as weapons"—the literal extermination of humans.

The process of dehumanization is essential to "to overcome the very deep and natural inhibitions they have against treating other people like game animals or vermin or dangerous predators," Smith explained to NPR.

"We all know, despite what we see in the movies that it's very difficult, psychologically, to kill another human being up close and in cold blood, or to inflict atrocities on them," Smith said.

Which brings us back to Trump's use of the word "infest," a calculated attempt to mitigate reasonable concerns over his administration's barbaric "zero tolerance policy" by lumping in the innocent children of undocumented asylum seekers with the "vermin" Americans so desperately want to keep out.

Defenders of the president will say it's just a word; they'll say he meant only to dehumanize the real, living people who rape and murder and steal as opposed to the real, living people fleeing poverty and violence and death. They'll feign outrage over [comparisons to Nazi Germany](#) or Japanese Internment camps [like they feigned outrage](#) over the [accurate description of children in "cages."](#)

But words have meaning and historical context and historical significance. One can only hope that when Trump takes his rightful place in the history books, we'll be reminded of who the real vermin are.

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