

Historical Comparisons, Understanding Donald Trump

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Global Research, February 17, 2017

Region: [Europe, USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

History may not be as useless as art, but it certainly performs a function that is almost without utility. George Santayana may well have crowed about the warnings of repeating historical mistakes if not learnt - the errant pupil ill-read would simply re-invent the same wheel of folly - but the point was not entirely accurate.

What tends to happen is that history is abused, rather than ignored, to serve current purposes. The Holocaust is used as a cudgel against Palestinian self-determination and Iran's nuclear ambitions. The Munich Analogy is somehow used to suggest that not standing up to an authoritarian figure will, eventually, lead to legitimised land snatching, property theft and butcheries.

Which brings us, rather appropriately, to the meaningless chitchat that has been preoccupying the terrified and the discombobulated in this supposed age of chilling darkness. A central book club theme: is Donald J. Trump a turmeric variant of Adolf Hitler, the US version in search of a Reichstag fire? Discuss.

This somewhat nauseating, if meaningless comparison, has kept circles of commentary busy, when the far better question to ask is how an existing system (let us call it the US Republican model) can withstand a nepotistic, wealthy individual who has essentially never done work outside his family.

With the Trump train gaining momentum last year, comparisons with Hitler started filling the scrap book compendium. Sebastian Schutte was resigned to suggest that Godwin's Law "tells us that any sufficiently long discussion will produce a Hitler analogy".

Schutte did recommend a close look at what Trump will do with, for instance, efforts to consolidate power, be it through media co-optation (Gleichschaltung); professional and fanatical scapegoating culminating in an imagined yet gripping global conspiracy (the Jüdisch-Bolschewistische Weltverschwörung); the use of paramilitary organisations (the Sturmabteilung); and that old favourite, the enacting of emergency laws.[1]

A few of those points suggest that need for an inventive mind in pushing Trump into a Hitler orbit. There are too many structural handicaps on organisation, vision, and application. Democracy, or, in the US case, a Republic, is an untidy affair with inbuilt, sacralised impediments.

None of these prevented the regime of unwarranted surveillance or the use of extra-legal measures on torture or rendition (think Bush, and then elements of the Obama administration) which flowered in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, but their presence

suggests that Trump will be left frustrated in certain areas of policy.

A person whose brains have been picked over on the subject is Sir Richard Evans, who has ridden the back of Hitlermania for decades. The diet for the Austrian's record seems undimmed in the corridors of Cambridge, where students remain enchanted and forced, in equal measure, to study the rise, rule and fall of industrialised fanaticism, varnished with more than a good share of providential mysticism.

Evans does the merry jig about those comparisons, and as any historian has to be careful to treat history as it is: a letter of the past existing in another country rather than a fully comprehensible living document of the present. Signs of mimicry can be deceptive. This leads to necessary exercises of qualification: Germany in the ailing days of the Weimar Republic was not the United States in 2016. (A far better parallel would be the populist movement of the 1890s.)

That said, Evans claims to seeing "echoes" which are alarming. Take the "stigmatization of minorities". The point strikes Evans as notable because at no point were Jews mentioned in the context of Holocaust Remembrance Day. The omission ignored the "special quality" of the genocide against the Jews, who were deemed a supreme threat to the German polity.

Other minority groups, while eliminated as nuisances, were not seen as direct existential monsters in need of slaying. Similarly, for Evans, Trump has targeted "extremist jihadis" in the same way. "They are an existential threat to America. They will defeat, dominate, and destroy America." [2]

Assaults on the judiciary and the very idea of a credible factual record are also deemed to have Hitlerian overtones. Hitler's propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbles, was a great believer in inventing the news, though he also believed propaganda should be rationed.

Hitler also succeeded, in large part, because established authorities, after initial opposition, were either taken over, banned or abolished. The Reichstag fire claim was essentially rubbished by judicial fiat, a point that encouraged Hitler to "set up a parallel system of justice, the so-called special courts and the people's courts." The Reichstag Fire Decree of 1933 paved the way for a total police state.

Trump is cantankerous about the courts; he is indifferent to the separation of powers, if not oblivious to it. The art of the deal hardly makes for philosophically fine politics. But he lacks one fundamental aspect Hitler tended to breathe and feast upon: ideology. Occasional outbursts of misanthropy do not qualify for a political programme, and primitive notions of the infidel are only set pieces of hideous populist entertainment.

What matters is whether that entertainment is digestible for the US populace. There is Trump, shocking an entire system, and providing one of its finer tests. There will be little need for the smoky conspiracy of a Reichstag fire in all of this.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

[1]

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/11/22/trumphitler-comparisons-are-o>

verstated-but-here-are-4-warning-signs/?utm_term=.b9a31dc7a162

[2]

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/interrogation/2017/02/historian_richard_evans_says_trump_s_america_isn_t_exactly_like_the_third.html

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#), Global Research, 2017

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Dr. Binoy
Kampmark](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca