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Comparisons that Hurt:
The Politics of Outrage from the Reformation
to the Holocaust

by

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Introduction

It is almost a truism to say that not only 'sticks and stones', but also words may break one's bones. 'Words can destroy a person too', as Reinhart Koselleck put it laconically.[1] The mere fact that words have the power to hurt is probably timeless. There are indications, however, that the excitability about abusive language has increased in recent decades. With the advent of social media, people in all walks of life—from global high politics down to local school playgrounds—appear to be ever more worried when confronted with aggression by means of language, and the same applies to the circulation of offensive visual images and symbols. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have contributed to the public interest in the mechanisms of, and the strategies to counteract, relevant phenomena such as 'hate speech', online controversies, or 'invective communication'.[2]

Researchers within that field have put a particular emphasis on name-calling and category-making—practices that are used to sustain depictions of enemies and the manifold expressions of racism, sexism, or classism. While it is broadly acknowledged that insulting others inevitably relies on those practices, much less attention has been paid to

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[1] Reinhart Koselleck, 'Linguistic Change and the History of Events' (1989), in Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, trans. and ed. Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Stanford, CA, 2018), 137–57, at 137.

[2] On 'hate speech' and how (not) to react to it see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York, 1997). For a linguistic perspective on online controversies see Konstanze Marx, 'Von Schafen im Wolfspelz: Shitstorms als Symptome einer medialen Emotionskultur', in Stefan Hauser, Martin Luginbühl, and Susanne Tienken (eds.), *Mediale Emotionskulturen* (Bern, 2019), 135–53. Historical constellations and dynamics of 'invectivity' have been explored in a collaborative research centre at Dresden University; for an overview see Dagmar Ellerbrock and Gerd Schwerhoff, 'Spaltung, die zusammenhält? Invektivität als produktive Kraft in der Geschichte', *Saeculum*, 70/1 (2020), 3–22.

the fact that giving names and applying categories can hardly be done, or even conceived of, without making *comparisons*. Calling someone else a 'Nazi' presupposes a comparison—with the National Socialists of Hitler's *Reich*, of course, but also with other persons or groups (usually 'we' groups) who are *not* Nazis. All such groups are (re)defined and (re)positioned through the operation of comparing. In the same way, claiming that a certain massacre amounts to, or is, a 'genocide' also requires a comparison with other violent killings that allegedly fall into or outside that category. To be sure, not all of these comparisons must be made explicit, in the sense that the objects of the comparison—for example, a 'we' group and the 'others'—and the *tertia comparationis* (the aspects with regard to which the comparison is made) are fully spelt out. The incomplete articulation of a comparison, however, does not affect its potential to hurt and enrage—as long as the direct addressees, as well as external readers, listeners, or bystanders, have a vague idea of who is being compared to whom and in what respect. Vagueness may even enhance the disparaging effect. Comparisons, therefore, should be seen as an essential part of invective communication, and as such they deserve to be studied in their own right.

The following remarks can be no more than a rough sketch aimed at exploring the phenomenon of 'comparisons that hurt'.[3] This will be done in a broad historical sweep underpinned by hand-picked examples from the Reformation period to the present. Such a long-term perspective is advisable to rebut the impression—all too understandable—that outrage about comparisons as such is a novelty. Given the ubiquity of polemical comparisons, especially with Hitler, the Nazis, or the Holocaust in recent times, and observing the intensity of the negative emotions they provoke, one might indeed be tempted to assume that we are encountering a new phenomenon. Even before the present resumption of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, hardly a week passed without another comparison of that kind making it into the headlines.

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[3] This lecture is a preparatory study for a book that I am writing together with Ulrike Davy, Professor of Constitutional and Comparative Law at Bielefeld University. The book's tentative title is 'Outrageous Comparisons—Contested Categories: Historical and Legal Perspectives, 1500–2000'. I would like to thank Ulrike Davy for several years of intensive discussion on comparison controversies and for numerous helpful comments and suggestions.

Just a few examples may suffice as a reminder. Consider former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson equating the European Union with Hitler during the Brexit campaign (2016).[4] Or US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez declaring that camps for immigrants at the Mexican border are 'concentration camps' (2019).[5] Or German anti-vaccination campaigners printing the Star of David on their T-shirts and thereby comparing their own inconveniences with the fate of Jews under Nazi oppression (2020).[6] Or former French presidential candidate Anne Hidalgo claiming that the language used in the 1930s against Jews is now being applied to Muslims in France (2021).[7] Or, more recently, Russian president Putin repeatedly calling Ukrainians and their Western supporters 'Nazis' to justify his war (2022). And finally, Israelis accusing Hamas of having carried out another Holocaust on 7 October 2023, and Palestinians answering with the reproach that the Israeli army is committing 'genocide' in Gaza. This list of comparisons put forward to hurt opponents and to generate outrage within or across national borders, or even on a global scale, could easily be extended.

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[4] Tim Ross, 'Boris Johnson: The EU Wants a Superstate, Just as Hitler Did', *The Telegraph*, 15 May 2016, at [https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/14/boris-johnson-the-eu-wants-a-superstate-just-as-hitler-did/], accessed 1 May 2024.

[5] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 'This administration has established concentration camps on the southern border of the United States for immigrants, where they are being brutalized with dehumanizing conditions and dying. This is not hyperbole. It is the conclusion of expert analysis' [Twitter post], 2.03 p.m., 18 June 2019, at [https://x.com/AOC/status/1140968240073662466?s=20], accessed 1 May 2024; for an extended discussion of this case see Willibald Steinmetz, 'Empörende Vergleiche im politischen Raum: Formen, Strategien, Geschichte', in Heidrun Kämper and Albrecht Plewnia (eds.), *Sprache in Politik und Gesellschaft: Perspektiven und Zugänge* (Berlin, 2022), 73–97.

[6] Example images at [https://images.tagesschau.de/image/f9431eb7-ae00-4a37-b2bf-878d86ed801b/AAABhnuvIKM/AAABibBx4co/original/ungeimpft-101.jpg] and [https://dubisthalle.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ungeimpft-520x245.png], both accessed 1 May 2024.

[7] Pierre Lepelletier, 'Hidalgo estime que "le langage des années 30" contre les juifs est aujourd'hui appliqué aux "musulmans"', *Le Figaro*, 13 Dec. 2021, at [https://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/presidentielles/hidalgo-estime-que-le-langage-des-annees-30-contre-les-juifs-est-aujourd-hui-applique-aux-musulmans-20211213], accessed 1 May 2024.

Despite the evidence of proliferating Nazi and Holocaust comparisons, I would still maintain that similar struggles over comparisons that engage (and enrage) not just a few individuals, but large groups of people or entire communities or nations, can be found in earlier periods of history. Yet there seems to be an overwhelming impression among the general public that such struggles have become more frequent in recent decades. An obvious point to consider in this context is today's media landscape. The multiplication of communication channels provides myriad opportunities for everyone to send and receive emotionally charged messages. This new 'hyperconnectivity' may be seen—to quote Rogers Brubaker here—as a kind of machinery that 'rewards the expression and mobilization of outrage and thereby contributes to . . . affective polarization'.[8] One might add that the awareness of speech acts' potential to hurt has long ago left the realm of expert linguistic discourses and become widely shared knowledge within the public sphere.[9] People everywhere in the world, not just on American university campuses, are now prepared to insist on what critics disdainfully call 'political correctness'—which again is only one manifestation of that apparently growing irritability over offensive speech.[10]

The following lecture is meant as an invitation to distance ourselves from the topicality of current controversies. The aim is to historicize, not to moralize or emotionalize. Extending the perspective by looking at a five-hundred-year period should help us to detect regular patterns, or cycles, of offending comparisons (and ensuing outrage) on the one hand, and substantial transformations of the practice on the other. Those transformations might concern the objects and topics of comparisons; their frequency and cycles of rise or decline; the reservoirs of images and references used; the linguistic forms of such comparisons and the actors involved in making them; the impact

[8] Rogers Brubaker, *Hyperconnectivity and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, 2023), 128.
[9] For Germany after 1949 see Kristoffer Klammer, 'Gewinn oder neue Hürde im politischen Alltag? Sprachreflexion als Element politischer Kommunikation und gegenwärtige Herausforderung (1949–2021)', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 317 (2023), 95–128.
[10] For the controversial discussions on 'political correctness' in Germany up to the early 2000s see Lucian Hölscher (ed.), *Political Correctness: Der sprachpolitische Streit um die nationalsozialistischen Verbrechen* (Göttingen, 2008).

of media constellations on their capacity to trigger emotions; and also the particular quality of those emotions. Should we speak of outrage? Anger? Humiliation? And why is it that certain comparisons made with an intent to hurt turn out to provoke laughter rather than indignation? Is it possible to describe the thin borderline between outrageous comparisons and ridiculous ones?

To approach these questions, I will start with a short section presenting some elements of a phenomenology of 'comparisons that hurt', before entering into the empirical analysis of exemplary cases. This analysis will consist of a very rapid historical survey in four steps, addressing contentious comparisons around religious issues in the period of confessional struggles in sixteenth-century Germany and seventeenth-century England; polemical comparisons in the British debate about the French Revolution of 1789; comparisons touching on feelings of national honour in the age of Anglo-German rivalry around 1900; and the (slow) problematization of comparisons with Nazis and the Holocaust in the early decades after the Second World War. In my concluding remarks I will suggest a couple of preliminary hypotheses concerning repeatable patterns and long-term transformations of 'comparisons that hurt'.

I. Elements of a Phenomenology

Typological Considerations

To start with, I would suggest a distinction between 'comparisons that hurt' and 'polemical comparisons'. The latter are overtly made and publicly communicated with an *intent* to hurt.[11] Whether those

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[11] For a thoughtful and detailed discussion of polemical comparisons—their modalities and effects—especially in the early modern age of confessional conflicts see Christina Brauner, 'Polemical Comparisons in Discourses of Religious Diversity: Conceptual Remarks and Reflexive Perspectives', *Entangled Religions*, 11/4 (2020), at [https://doi.org/10.46586/er.11.2020.8692]. See also Christina Brauner and Sita Steckel, 'Wie die Heiden—wie die Papisten: Religiöse Vergleiche und Polemik vom Hochmittelalter bis zur Konfessionalisierung', in Matthias Pohlig (ed.), *Juden, Christen und Muslime im Zeitalter der Reformation* (Gütersloh, 2020), 41–91.

making the comparisons achieve their goal, however, depends on many circumstances, not all of which are under their control. It may so happen, for instance, that the persons targeted do not even take notice of the comparisons because they do not understand the language or have no access to the communication media and networks available to the comparisons' authors. It may also be that the targeted persons *do* take notice, but react in unexpected ways—for example, by laughing at the comparison instead of getting angry or feeling ashamed. In both cases—that of a comparison remaining unnoticed and that of a comparison being ridiculed at the receiving end—the polemic misfires.

'Comparisons that hurt', on the other hand, are those that *do* hit the target. However, not all comparisons that hurt can be classified as polemical in the sense that their author meant to do harm in the first place. It is indeed not uncommon that comparisons produce injurious or upsetting effects without their authors having had any such intentions. In such cases, especially when the person making the comparison is a prominent public figure or a high-ranking politician, the ensuing public outcry is often directed more against this individual's lack of linguistic and emotional sensitivity than against the content of the comparison itself. A failure to perform adequate rituals of apology, and to do so promptly, will often result in the person's downfall.

Thus there is an overlap between 'polemical comparisons' and 'comparisons that hurt', but they are not congruent. For the purposes of historical research, the distinction is primarily a matter of perspective: in the former case we look at the intention of an author, and in the latter we focus on the reaction of the recipients—whether they be the persons directly targeted as an object of the comparison, or a wider public of more or less interested observers, or both at the same time.

The distinction is far from trivial, for it is actually much easier to identify polemical comparisons in the source materials than to trace negative emotions in *response* to comparisons which perhaps did not even have an injurious intent. Depending on the kinds of negative emotions triggered by a comparison, the search may become yet more difficult. Humiliation or embarrassment are often concealed by those who experience them, whereas outrage or anger are more likely to be expressed in public. An additional problem to consider is that of the time lag between the utterance of a comparison and a possible

reaction. Many potentially hurtful comparisons pass by unnoticed, or cause no negative reaction, at the time they are first made. However, if repeated again and again, then—years or maybe even decades later—people might start to react angrily. Historically speaking, such processes of slowly growing and suddenly erupting sensitivity are extremely interesting to describe, but not easy to explain. How and why is it that certain comparisons go uncriticized for quite some time before someone starts to take umbrage?

To make things more complicated, let me introduce one more class of comparisons closely connected to, yet still to be distinguished from, both 'comparisons that hurt' and 'polemical comparisons'—namely, 'scandalizing comparisons'.[12] The distinctive feature of scandalizing comparisons is that they are not primarily about attacking people (individuals, groups, communities, perpetrators, and so on), but about uncovering scandalous issues. A typical case would be a comparison made by an advocacy group to show that governments or international organizations treat certain minorities worse than others—for example, along racial criteria—despite previously accepted norms of equal treatment. In that case, it should not be the act (and content) of the comparison itself which causes outrage or indignation, but rather the scandalous issue which is publicly exposed *by* the comparison. Even so, such a scandalizing comparison may create feelings of shame or angry defiance in those who are held to be responsible for the 'scandal'. In such a case, a 'scandalizing comparison' for the authors becomes a 'comparison that hurts' for certain recipients. Again, there is an overlap between these modes of comparing, but not congruence. And once again, for the purposes of research the distinction is primarily a matter of perspective.

Modes of Comparing: A Linguistic View

My next point concerns the conceptualization of comparison in linguistic terms.[13] Put simply, one may distinguish four basic linguistic types of comparison, all of which may lend themselves to polemics, and all of which may cause negative feelings.

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[12] I am indebted to Ulrike Davy for this nomenclature and subtle distinction.
[13] For a more elaborate discussion of this aspect see Steinmetz, 'Empörende Vergleiche'.

First, comparisons may be articulated in the form of a more or less direct *equation*: *x* is *y* (*x* is a Nazi; Luther is a heretic); *a* is like *b* (*a* is like a Nazi; Luther is like John Hus). Unsophisticated historical parallels and analogies fall into this class. Probably the greater portion of comparisons that hurt—though by no means all of them—appear in the form of an equation. This is important to stress because in public controversies the distinction between an equation (as one possible kind of comparison) and comparisons generally (as a generic concept) is often blurred. With astonishing stubbornness, participants in such controversies tend to proclaim that *x* and *y* 'cannot be compared' or are 'incomparable'. What they actually mean, however, is that *x* and *y* cannot be equated or put on a par. Yet a comparison that exposes similarities as well as differences is always possible.

Second, comparisons may be made by using *comparatives* to express a 'more' or 'less', a 'better' or 'worse': *x* is more wicked than *y* (the Lutherans are more dangerous than the Turks, the Calvinists are worse than the papists); *a* is less contemptible than *b* (even Hitler is less contemptible than *b*). In the Reformation period, for instance, this kind of polemical comparison was quite popular. For obvious reasons, such better/worse comparisons are thought to be especially outrageous when one of the objects being compared is Hitler or the Holocaust, for both are considered by most people the ultimate evil. Someone worse than Hitler or something more horrible than the Holocaust is hardly imaginable.

Third, comparisons can be expressed in the form of *contrasts*: *x* is this, whereas *y* is that ('we' are civilized, 'they' are barbarians). Polemical comparisons stressing contrast are very frequent in the contexts of national or imperial rivalry, gender antagonisms, and discrimination against supposedly 'lower' classes or 'inferior' races. Comparisons in the form of contrast can also appear in a *temporalized* form: 'we' are advanced, 'they' are backwards. And contrasting comparisons lend themselves particularly well to *visualization* in the form of juxtaposed images. An example that combines all of these things is David Low's famous *Evening Standard* cartoon of 11 October 1935, which critiqued Italian methods of warfare in the Abyssinian War.[14] The image inverts

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[14] The cartoon can be viewed on the website of the British Cartoon Archive at [https://archive.cartoons.ac.uk/GetMultimedia.ashx?db=Catalog&type=default&fname=LSE2237.jpg], accessed 14 June 2024.

the conventional ascriptions of 'barbarism' to Africans and 'civiliza-
tion' to Europeans, but does not fundamentally question the racialized
hierarchy of imperialism.

Fourth, comparisons can be made in the form of *claims to unique-
ness* or singularity: *x* is unique, utterly unlike everything else (the
Holocaust is a common example of this). It may appear paradox-
ical to discuss singularity claims as a form of comparison. However,
strictly speaking, one cannot claim uniqueness without referring to,
and rethinking, a previous comparison, which one may then reject.
It is evident that claims to uniqueness for one's own group may be
strongly resented by others. Today, the worldwide competition for
recognition among victims is probably the most pertinent case in
point.[15] Chauvinists' claims that their own nation is unique in a posi-
tive sense may be another example. And ideas that one's own people
is God's one and only 'chosen people' may be a third.

Comparisons and Categories

Let me proceed to a rather hidden aspect already mentioned above
and extremely relevant to 'comparisons that hurt': the interdependence
between comparing and categorizing.[16] Very often, categories are fab-
ricated, and then repeatedly used, in order to qualify and evaluate the
objects of a comparison. Those categories are usually introduced as if
they were 'natural'. People who make comparisons habitually resort to
categories such as 'heretics', or 'savages', or 'genocide', and assign those
categories to specific groups or events (to the Lutherans, to indigenous
peoples, to certain massacres). As a consequence, people frequently
react with anger or outrage when they feel that they themselves, or their
own experiences, or those of others, are maliciously or inadvertently

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[15] On the historicity of the category of 'victim' and the growing importance of
competitive claims for victimhood in the course of the twentieth century see
Svenja Goltermann, *Opfer: Die Wahrnehmung von Krieg und Gewalt in der Moderne*
(Frankfurt am Main, 2017); English translation: *Victims: Perceptions of Harm in
Modern European War and Violence*, trans. Belinda Cooper (Oxford, 2023).
[16] See Bettina Heintz, 'Kategorisieren, Vergleichen, Bewerten und Quantifizie-
ren im Spiegel sozialer Beobachtungsformate', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie
und Sozialpsychologie*, 73, suppl. 1 (2021), 5–47.

subsumed under a 'wrong' category. Both the fabrication and the application of categories are dependent on comparisons, yet those underlying comparative operations are rarely made explicit. A historian taking a long-term perspective, however, is likely to come across moments of contestation in which the comparative operations underlying both the fabrication and the application of such categories are up for debate.

Perpetrators and Victims

A considerable portion of comparisons that hurt revolve around the issue of who should be blamed as a perpetrator and who may legitimately be defined as a victim. Indeed, it seems hardly possible to compare different forms or degrees of victimhood without at the same time explicitly or implicitly comparing various groups or types of perpetrators—and vice versa. I propose to call this effect the close coupling of perpetrator and victim comparisons. The most familiar examples of this nexus are, once again, Nazi and Holocaust comparisons. Just two examples may suffice to illustrate the point.

In January 2005, deputies of the extremist right-wing National Democratic Party of Germany in the state parliament of Saxony coined the term *Bomben-Holocaust*,[17] and since then the term has been frequently used in protest marches to commemorate the bombings of Dresden in February 1945 (see Fig. 1). In this case, the Dresdeners of 1945 (mostly Germans) are portrayed as victims, and as such—and this causes the scandal—considered to be on the same level of victimhood as the Jews exterminated by the Germans during the Second World War. At the same time, the British and American bomber commands are accused of being the perpetrators, and as such—and this too evokes angry responses—equated with the Nazis.

My second example is a poster campaign by the animal rights organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA),

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[17] See Thorsten Eitz and Georg Stötzel, *Wörterbuch der 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung': Die NS-Vergangenheit im öffentlichen Sprachgebrauch*, 2 vols. (Hildesheim, 2007–9), i. 87–8 and 356–7; Aleksandar Soric, '"Bomben-Holocaust": Eine sprachkritische Analyse eines kontroversen Ausdrucks mit rechtsextremistischem Hintergrund', *Aptum: Zeitschrift für Sprachkritik und Sprachkultur*, 1/2 (2005), 178–89.

Fig. 1: Neo-Nazi memorial procession in Dresden, 2018. © ENDSTATION RECHTS.

launched under the slogan 'the Holocaust on your Plate' in 2004.[18] The campaign consisted of a series of dual images, one of which juxtaposed an iconic photograph of starving inmates of Buchenwald concentration camp in cramped bunkbeds on one side, and hundreds of chickens jammed together in cages on the other.[19] A caption straddling both images reads: 'Where animals are concerned, everyone's a Nazi'. The double message conveyed by the photographs in conjunction with the caption and the overall title of the campaign is unequivocal: mass livestock farming should be seen as equivalent to the Holocaust, *and* both farmers and consumers are directly addressed as Nazis.

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[18] Eitz and Stötzel, *Wörterbuch*, i. 350–1.

[19] The images from the PETA campaign can be found at [https://www.vgt.ch/news2004/040320.htm], accessed 1 May 2024. For legal reasons explained below, I have refrained from reproducing them here. On the iconic Buchenwald image and its post-1945 uses (but not that by PETA) see Cornelia Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung: Öffentlicher Gebrauch von Fotografien aus nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern nach 1945* (Berlin, 1998), 58–65, 76–8, 157–8; Habbo Knoch, *Die Tat als Bild: Fotografien des Holocaust in der deutschen Erinnerungskultur* (Hamburg, 2001), 148–50.

It is evident that twofold messages such as these, which are typical of Nazi or Holocaust comparisons, are almost certain to deeply worry more than just one particular group. This multiplication of antagonized addressees is a major reason why Nazi and Holocaust comparisons consistently create large and sustained outbursts of public outrage. Historically speaking, however, the phenomenon as such should not be limited to the post-1945 period. What I call the close coupling of perpetrator and victim comparisons might well be traceable in earlier periods of history, and probably belongs to the repeatable patterns I am interested in here.

The Legal Dimension

Let me add one last remark concerning the scope of historical inquiries into 'comparisons that hurt'. The example of the PETA campaign points to the fact that those who feel injured by a comparison sometimes do not content themselves with expressing their indignation in public media, but also resort to legal action in order to demand penalties for those who have made the comparisons, or compensation for themselves, or — perhaps most momentously — a court ruling that prohibits any further use or public distribution of the comparison in question. Thus, in 2004, the German Jewish Council (the Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland) successfully obtained an injunction from the Berlin Kammergericht (the highest court in the state of Berlin) that prohibited the public display of the aforementioned PETA images in Germany — a decision that, in 2009, was confirmed by the German Federal Constitutional Court at Karlsruhe, partly on the grounds that the PETA campaign banalized the sufferings of Holocaust victims.[20] Finally, in 2012, the European Court of Human Rights decided unanimously that the German judgement did not violate freedom of expression, as PETA's German branch had argued, and that the injunction should therefore be upheld.[21]

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[20] Katrin Richter, 'Karlsruhe verbietet PETA-Kampagne', *Jüdische Allgemeine*, 2 Apr. 2009, at [https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/allgemein/unvergleichbar], accessed 1 May 2024.

[21] *PETA Deutschland v. Germany* (App no 43481/09) ECHR, 8 Nov. 2012; an official notice of the case and the decision is available at [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int], accessed 1 May 2024.

Prolonged legal proceedings such as these provide highly informative source materials for a long-term historical study of 'comparisons that hurt'. Complementing other materials such as pamphlets, newspapers, parliamentary debates, and diplomatic correspondence, court cases allow particular insights into the fragile hierarchies between conflicting norms that are renegotiated in controversies triggered by contentious comparisons. There are indications that quite a number of historical cases of libel, slander, lese majesty, high treason,[22] and blasphemy[23] arose from comparisons that had caused outrage; having said that, the challenge here is finding them, for there has been no systematic legal historical study of cases from this point of view.

II. A Very Rapid Historical Survey in Four Steps

From the German Reformation to the Civil and Religious Wars in England

It is well known that the Bible served as the principal reservoir for polemical comparisons in Europe's religious—and by implication political—conflicts from late antiquity to the seventeenth century.[24] A good many of those comparisons were in the form of equations (parallels, analogies) with evil biblical figures, such as the apostate kings and queens of ancient Israel (Saul, Ahab and Jezebel, Jeroboam); brutal foreign emperors and their servants (Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Pontius Pilate); and of course the apocalyptic monsters and the

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[22] See the wide-ranging survey on English high treason trials by André Krischer, *Die Macht des Verfahrens: Englische Hochverratsprozesse 1554–1848* (Münster, 2017).

[23] On changing definitions of blasphemy from late antiquity to the present (with some examples of cases originating from comparisons) see Gerd Schwerhoff, *Verfluchte Götter: Die Geschichte der Blasphemie* (Frankfurt am Main, 2021).

[24] Numerous examples may be found in a collective volume by Andreas Pečar and Kai Trampedach (eds.), *Die Bibel als politisches Argument: Voraussetzungen und Folgen biblizistischer Herrschaftslegitimation in der Vormoderne* (Munich, 2007); very rich material for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and Scotland in Andreas Pečar, *Macht der Schrift: Politischer Biblizismus in Schottland und England zwischen Reformation und Bürgerkrieg (1534–1642)*, (Munich, 2011).

devil. Antithetical comparisons (contrasts)—with King David and above all Jesus Christ as shining lights—were also possible, as were comparisons in terms of 'better' or 'worse'.

The period of confessional struggles resulting from the Lutheran, Calvinist, and other Reformations saw an explosion in references to biblical examples—applied on all sides to support one's own or undermine the opponent's positions. Besides certain books of the Old Testament (Exodus, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah) and St Paul's Epistle to the Romans (especially chapter 13, dealing with civil obedience towards worldly authorities), St John's Revelation (the Apocalypse) was one of the most popular works referred to, particularly among Protestants. It would be easy to quote hundreds of pamphlets in which the Pope was called the 'Antichrist', the Church of Rome was depicted as the 'Whore of Babylon', and both ordinary and high-ranking papists (as well as pseudo-Protestant 'hypocrites' who were suspected of being crypto-Catholics) were condemned as her worshippers. In England alone, about one hundred such works were published between 1588 and 1628.[25]

In Germany too, very soon after Martin Luther had started to challenge the Pope and the established Roman Church by equating them with the 'Antichrist' and 'Babylon', such comparisons very quickly became almost routine among Protestants. Countless cheap single-leaf prints and series of wood engravings with dual images, such as Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Passional Christi und Antichristi* (1521), helped to further popularize these anti-papist comparisons (see Fig. 2).[26] They were repeated so often that one might wonder whether the Pope himself, and those who adhered to the Church of Rome, continued to be

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[25] Ronald G. Asch, 'The Revelation of the Revelation: Die Bedeutung der Offenbarung des Johannes für das politische Denken in England im späten 16. und frühen 17. Jahrhundert', in Pečar and Trampedach (eds.), *Bibel als politisches Argument*, 315–31, at 318.

[26] On Lutheran policies of naming and polemicizing with binaries (as in the *Passional Christi und Antichristi*) see Lyndal Roper, *Living I Was Your Plague: Martin Luther's World and Legacy* (Princeton,, 2021), 5–6, 94–102. See also Thomas Kaufmann, *Geschichte der Reformation in Deutschland*, 2nd edn. (Berlin, 2016), 465–72. A digital copy of the *Passional Christi und Antichristi* is available at the SLUB Dresden at [https://digital.slub-dresden.de/werkansicht/dlf/174230], accessed 1 May 2024.
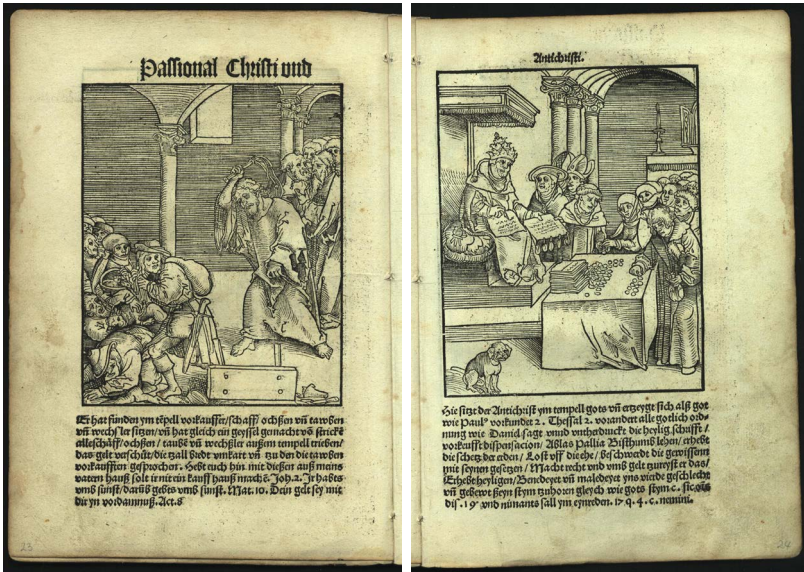
Fig. 2: Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon, *Passional Christi und Antichristi* (Wittenberg, 1521), 24–5. SLUB Dresden, Hist.eccl.E.319,2, at [https://digital. slub-dresden.de/werkansicht/dlf/174230/24]. Public Domain Mark 1.0.

genuinely outraged by them after Luther and other protagonists had shot their first salvos.

It is, of course, hardly possible to assess whether Catholics in their hearts felt truly injured by Luther's comparisons. What is certain, however, is that Catholic pamphleteers reacted with no less extravagant counter-comparisons designed to provoke and hurt their opponents. One method was to simply deflect the 'Antichrist' label back onto Luther and his adherents.[27] More often, Catholic polemicists resorted to another, already well established repertoire of comparisons, namely the catalogues of notorious heresies in the long history of the Church, beginning with the Arians of late antiquity, continuing with the medieval Waldenses and Albigenses, and ending with the more recent Wycliffites and Bohemian Hussites. There are signs that in the very first stages of his conflict with Rome, Luther was worried about being equated with former heretics, most notably John Hus. Yet, as Thomas Kaufmann has shown, as early as 1520, when he was

27 Roper, *Living I Was Your Plague*, 98–9.

publicly fighting against the papal bull of excommunication, Luther began to proudly adopt the label for himself. 'We are all Hussites', he wrote in a private letter.[28] And in the German version of his verdict against the Pope's bull, published in 1521, he told his followers that John Hus' articles of faith at the Council of Constance had all been right and the Pope wrong in condemning him to be burnt at the stake as a heretic:

> Therefore I now say that not various particular articles, but all of John Hus' articles, condemned at Constance, are entirely Christian, and I confess that the Pope and his devotees acted here as a true Antichrist and that they indeed condemned, together with John Hus, the holy Gospel and replaced it with the doctrine of a hellish dragon.[29]

Thus what the Pope's spokesmen had meant as a polemical and potentially deadly equation—calling Luther a John Hus *redivivus*—was transformed by Luther into a positive self-description, proclaimed with a strong gesture of defiance.

These episodes demonstrate the usefulness of my distinction between 'polemical comparisons' and 'comparisons that hurt'. Both the routinization of a comparison (as in the case of the equation with the 'Antichrist') and the defiant adoption of a defamatory equation (as in the case of Luther's assumption of the label 'Hussite') may defuse hurt feelings on the part of the targeted groups. Even so, the comparisons in question continued to be used widely by both sides.

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[28] Kaufmann, *Reformation*, 254.

[29] 'Alszo sag ich itzt: Nit etlich allein, szondernn alle artickel Johannis husz, zu Costnitz vordampt, seynn gantz Christlich, und bekenne, das der Bapst mit den seynen als ein rechter Endchrist hie gehandelt, das heylig Euangelium mit Johanne husz vordampt und an sein stat des hellischen tracken lere gesetzt hat.' Martin Luther, *Grund unnd ursach aller Artickel D. Marti. Luther, szo durch Romische Bulle unrechtlich verdampt seyn* (1521), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesammtausgabe,* vol. vii (Weimar, 1897), 309–457, at 431. The German text was an exacerbated version of an earlier Latin rejection of the Pope's bull, published in 1520: *Assertio omnium articulorum per Bullam Leonis X. novissimam damnatorum* (Wittenberg, 1520); see Jan-Hendryk de Boer, 'Aus Konflikten lernen: Der Verlauf gelehrter Kontroversen im Spätmittelalter und ihr Nutzen für die Reformation', in Günter Frank and Volker Leppin (eds.), *Die Reformation und ihr Mittelalter* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 2016), 209–50, at 239–40.

Yet their main purpose changed. Although they no longer served to irritate, they were still useful in strengthening the belief in the righteousness of one's own cause. As a general rule, one might postulate that routinized polemical comparisons, although on the surface directed at the 'others', are primarily devices to stabilize the identity of one's own group.

The period of confessional conflicts saw many other strategies involving comparisons to biblical figures or events in Church history, which often met with strong emotional, and sometimes violent, responses. A prominent strategy was (self-)portrayal as a saint or a martyr for the true Christian faith or, more scandalous still in the eyes of the opposite party, the presentation of one's own life path as a re-enactment of Jesus Christ's Passion.

Again, Martin Luther's early struggles prior to, and around, the Diet of Worms (1521) are a case in point. In the weeks preceding and immediately after his hearing before Emperor Charles V (17–18 April, 1521), the avalanche of anti-papal prints supporting Luther's cause reached its peak. Not only Luther's message but also his image was widely distributed all over the Holy Roman Empire through several indefatigable printing presses.[30] Portraits of Luther were published as separate sheets or on the covers and frontispieces of printed pamphlets. Most of these portraits were based on a 1520 engraving by Lucas Cranach the Elder that depicted him as an Augustine monk with a tonsure, an open book in one hand, and the other hand raised in a gesture of speech.[31] While this Cranach portrait gave Luther a rather modest, albeit self-confident appearance, there were at least two redesigned versions of this portrait circulating in Worms (and beyond)—one by Hieronymus Hopfer, the other by Hans Baldung Grien—which caused great consternation among Catholic critics. Both

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[30] On Luther and his supporters as the first generation of 'printing natives' (analogous to today's digital natives) see Thomas Kaufmann, *Die Druckmacher: Wie die Generation Luther die erste Medienrevolution entfesselte* (Munich, 2022), esp. 141–51 on the Diet of Worms and the image campaign.

[31] Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg (ed.), *Martin Luther und die Reformation in Deutschland: Ausstellung zum 500. Geburtstag Martin Luthers* (Frankfurt am Main, 1983), 175 (cat. no. and fig. 215); see also Roper, *Living I Was Your Plague*, 16 (fig. 1.4).

Fig. 3a: Hieronymus Hopfer, *Portrait of Martin Luther as an Augustinian Friar* (1519). Inv.-Nr. K763, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremburg.

artists had changed Cranach's portrait in a significant way by placing a dove—signifying the Holy Spirit—above Luther and surrounding his head with an aureole. In this way, Luther's image metamorphosed into that of a saint (see Figs. 3a and 3b).[32]

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[32] See also Roper, *Living I Was Your Plague*, 15–17. On a parody of these images by a Catholic artist see Marina Münkler, 'Invektive Verkörperungen: Luthers metonymischer Körper in antireformatorischen Invektiven', in Uwe Israel and Jürgen Müller (eds.), *Körper-Kränkungen: Der menschliche Leib als Medium der Herabsetzung* (Frankfurt am Main, 2021), 296–334, at 319–21.

Fig. 3b: Frontispiece portrait of Martin Luther by Hans Baldung Grien. From Martin Luther, *Acta et res gestae D. Martini Lutheri in Comitiis Principum Vuormaciae* (Strasbourg, 1521). Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Munich, Res/H. ref. 750 k. Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 [https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0].

Hieronymus Aleander, the papal nuncio in Worms, was appalled by these images, and even more by what he had to listen to in the streets of the city, where Luther's supporters venerated him as someone allegedly without any sin, to be valued even higher than St Augustine himself. These 'villains', Aleander wrote, bought those portraits of Luther and kissed them—just like they had formerly

kissed holy figures displayed in churches. In a dispatch from Worms to Rome dated 18 December 1520, Aleander vented his anger:

> And the veneration these villains show for Luther is so great, that some of them, in a public disputation with a Spaniard before a large crowd in the middle of the market square, dared to say that Luther is free of sin and thus has never erred, [and] that he must therefore doubtlessly be placed above St Augustine, who was a sinner who could and did err. He has thus recently been depicted with a dove over his head and with the cross of the Lord, or elsewhere with an aureole; and they purchase this image, kiss it, and even carry it into the palace. Your Magnificence may recognize the sort of people into whose hands we have fallen: this is no longer the Catholic Germany of former times! God grant that worse is not in store for us![33]

In his dispatches of late 1520 and early 1521, Aleander described his own position in Worms as that of a powerless, sometimes even physically threatened man on a dangerous mission. According to him, the Lutherans had already fully attained what one might call, in today's terms, discourse hegemony. So much so that he, Aleander, would not utter his outrage publicly in order not to endanger the Pope's and Christendom's cause.[34] In his dispatches Aleander even went so far as to imagine himself as a martyr, 'stoned or cut to pieces by those people':

> I cannot and do not want to list all of the many and great dangers to which I am hourly exposed: I am unlikely to be believed until, God forbid, I am stoned or cut to pieces by those people, who, when they see me on the street, unfailingly reach for their swords, gnash their teeth, and threaten me with death using a German curse.[35]

Aleander's dispatches are filled with similar complaints, which may be read as requests to be recognized almost as a martyr — in this case by his master in Rome, the Pope himself.

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[33] Girolamo Aleandro, *Die Depeschen des Nuntius Aleander vom Wormser Reichstage 1521*, ed. and trans. Paul Kalkoff, 2nd enlarged edn. (Halle/Saale, 1897), 58–9, see also 79–80.

[34] Ibid. 73, 78 (8 Feb. 1521).　　　　　　　　[35] Ibid. 81 (8 Feb. 1521).

The tables turned, however, once Luther had left the Diet, and once his doctrines had been condemned by the Edict of Worms (26 May 1521) and his writings burnt symbolically, with Nuncio Aleander in charge (29 May 1521).[36] Now it was up to Luther's partisans to exalt him as someone who had gone through a dreadful ordeal for the sake of the true Christian faith. Some of his admirers went as far as publishing—anonymously—the *Passio Doctoris Martini Lutheri*, an account of Luther's deeds at the Diet of Worms in the form of a pastiche of Jesus Christ's trial in Jerusalem. This parallel between Luther and Christ apparently met with great interest; three Latin and eight German versions were printed in 1521. The modern editor of these versions, Johannes Schilling, doubts that Luther himself would have appreciated this refashioning of his deeds in the form of a re-enactment of Christ's Passion.[37] Even so, one of the most restless Catholic polemicists, Johannes Cochläus, somewhat later, yet without directly referring to the *Passio*, accused Luther of having done precisely that, presenting himself 'like another Christ [*uelut alter Christus*]'—conduct that Cochläus judged to be not only utterly presumptuous, but approaching most dreadful blasphemy.[38]

Several decades later, in England, the depiction of ardent Protestants as 'martyrs' for the true religion became possibly even more popular than during the German Reformation, particularly after English Protestants had undergone a period of persecution and suffering under the reign of Queen Mary I (1553–8), referred to as 'the Catholic'. John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, first published in 1563, acquired quasi-canonical status. As in Luther's case, however, there was always a risk that parallels with early Christian martyrs, and even more so analogies with Jesus Christ's life and Passion, would be interpreted as blasphemous by opponents. John Foxe was well aware of that danger. Thus, in the second edition of his *Book of Martyrs* (1570), he felt the need to explain that his stress on similarities between the death of one of his figures (Edward Seymour, the duke of Somerset) and that of

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[36] Aleander hoped, in vain, that burning Luther's writings would 'dissuade the people from admiring this Arius'. Ibid. 252 (26 May 1521).

[37] Johannes Schilling, *Passio Doctoris Martini Lutheri: Bibliographie, Texte und Untersuchungen* (Gütersloh, 1989), 173–4.

[38] Ibid. 156–7.

Jesus Christ was 'not to be expounded as though I compared in any part the duke of Somerset with Christ'.[39]

Despite the risk, some were still tempted to play with this comparative strategy. A notorious case was that of the radical Quaker James Nayler, who, in 1656, was charged with blasphemy for having entered the city of Bristol in the manner of Jesus Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Even during his trial, when cross-examined, Nayler did not hesitate to answer questions with the same words Jesus himself had used when examined by Caiaphas: 'You said so. I am a prophet'. It did not help Nayler that later, when questioned before Parliament, he backtracked and affirmed that he was nothing but a human being. Nayler was condemned, branded with a 'B' (for blasphemy) on his forehead (see Fig. 4) and pilloried, before being sentenced to three years of prison and hard labour.[40]

One reason why this kind of self-approximation to Jesus remained an attractive option was that it allowed those who saw themselves as victims to equate their opponents—at least implicitly, and sometimes explicitly—with Jesus Christ's persecutors. A trend-setting example was provided by the Leveller John Lilburne, who, when charged with high treason in October 1649, compared his own trial to that of Jesus, saying that the Pharisees and Pontius Pilate had tried to 'insnare' Jesus with questions in the same way the judges were now doing in Lilburne's own case.[41] Lilburne's strategy in court may be taken as a seventeenth-century illustration of what I referred to above as the close coupling of perpetrator and victim comparisons.

In the confessional conflicts of late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, this was a strategy available to all sides. Catholic defendants also made use of it to describe their own martyrdom, as happened in the case of the Jesuit Edmund Campion, executed in 1581 for high treason under Elizabeth I.[42] And it was employed with

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[39] Quoted from Thomas S. Freeman, '"Imitatio Christi with a Vengeance": The Politicization of Martyrdom in Early Modern England', in Thomas S. Freeman and Thomas F. Mayer (eds.), *Martyrs and Martyrdom in England c.1400–1700* (Woodbridge, 2007), 35–69, at 51.

[40] On Nayler's case see Schwerhoff, *Verfluchte Götter*, 224–5, quotation at 224.

[41] For more details of Lilburne's case see Krischer, *Macht des Verfahrens*, 193–228, quotation at 220.   [42] See ibid. 106–23, at 119.

IAMES NAYLOR

Of all the Sects that Night, and Errors own
And with false Lights possesse the world, ther's none
More strongly blind, or who more madly place
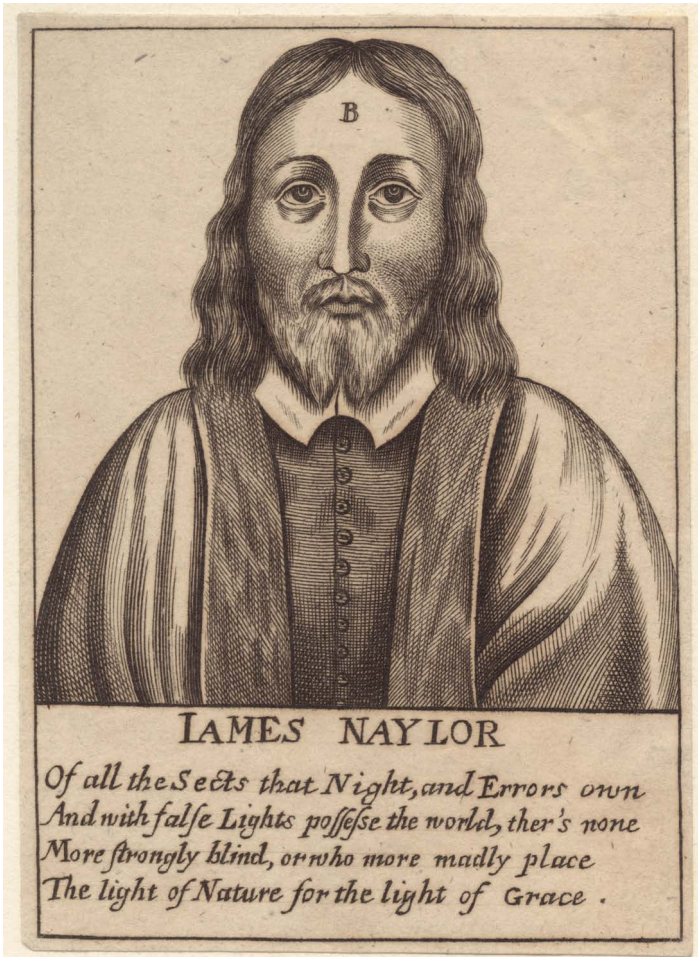*The light of Nature for the light of Grace.*

Fig. 4: Unknown artist, *James Naylor* (*c*.1656–62). © National Portrait Gallery, London.

an even broader impact by monarchists such as Henry Leslie, who—shortly after the execution of Charles I—celebrated the late king's life and death as a 'martyrdom' and a veritable imitation of Christ's Passion.[43] Another example is the *Eikon Basilike*, attributed at the time

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[43] Henry Leslie, *The Martyrdome of King Charles, or his Conformity with Christ in his Sufferings* (The Hague, 1649); on this and several other similar monarchist treatises see Freeman, 'Imitatio Christi', 58–9.

Fig. 5: Title page and frontispiece portrait of Charles I as a divinely appointed monarch. From Charles I, *Eikon Basilike: The Pourtraicture of His Sacred Maiestie in his Solitudes and Suffering* (London, 1649). King's College London, Foyle Special Collections Library.

to Charles I himself, and more particularly its famous frontispiece, where the king is shown grasping a crown of thorns while looking up to the heavenly crown (see Fig. 5).[44]

To summarize this section: in the age of Reformation and religious wars, references to the Bible and to Church history (up to and including the most recent events) provided a huge repertoire for polemical comparisons. Not all of those comparisons reached their targets—some were ridiculed, others ignored—but most of them were taken seriously enough to become, in fact, 'comparisons that hurt'.

Controversies about the French Revolution in England

All over Europe—and beyond—the French Revolution has been possibly the most divisive issue since the confessional schism of the sixteenth century. Soon after 1789, disputes about how to assess its

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[44] See Andrew Lacey, '"Charles the First, and Christ the Second": The Creation of a Political Martyr', in Freeman and Mayer (eds.), *Martyrs and Martyrdom*, 203–20.

achievements and aberrations escalated into a new war of faith which, at the same time, catalysed the emergence of modern ideologies that are still with us: conservatism, liberalism, socialism, and also feminism. Although the late eighteenth century is generally deemed an age of enlightenment and rational discourse, the controversies about events in France were anything but dispassionate intellectual exchanges. Mutual insults, abusive language, name-calling, and unfriendly depictions of opponents were routine, and in such a climate there was a high frequency of outrageous comparisons.

In the British context, one person dominated the debate in terms of putting forward contentious topics and setting the emotional tone: Edmund Burke. When it came to the French Revolution, Burke wrote and spoke as a master of calculated outrage. A memorable event was his famous 'dagger speech' of 28 December 1792 in the House of Commons. In the course of a debate on the second reading of the new Aliens Bill, he suddenly 'drew out a dagger which he had kept concealed, and with much vehemence of action threw it on the floor'. What followed was a polemical comparison, and Burke's theatrical action served to underline his words with a performance:

> This, said he, pointing to the dagger, is what you are to gain by an alliance with France: wherever their principles are introduced, their practice must follow. You must guard against their principles; you must proscribe their persons. He then held the dagger up to public view, which he said never could have been intended for fair and open war, but solely for murderous purposes. It is my object, said he, to keep the French infection from this country; their principles from our minds, and their daggers from our hearts.[45]

French principles were like daggers that threatened Britain, and they operated unfairly, from behind; that was the message Burke conveyed through the comparison. Aliens therefore had to be better controlled or kept out altogether; that is why Burke wholeheartedly supported the Bill in front of the House. And those people within Britain who, in late 1792, were still arguing for an alliance with France (like Burke's

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[45] *The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, vol. xxx (London, 1817), 189 (28 Dec. 1792).

former political friend and now opponent Charles James Fox) had to be condemned for naively or maliciously supporting that stab in the back. This was the polemical part of the speech's dramatic climax.

Only two days later, on 30 December 1792, James Gillray published a cartoon called *The Dagger Scene, or, The Plot Discover'd* (see Fig. 6) capturing the moment when Burke threw the dagger on the floor. William Pitt, seated on the treasury bench to the left, is shown observing the scene with complete bewilderment, while the body language of several opposition members to the right—Charles James Fox among them—portrays them as utterly frightened. It can be assumed, however, that the reaction of most contemporary viewers of Gillray's cartoon would have been one of amusement rather than fright. To many members of the public, Burke's comparison of French principles with a dagger probably verged on the ridiculous. This episode points to the difficulty of precisely evaluating the nature of the emotions triggered by comparisons which their authors had apparently intended as polemical. Only in very rare cases were those emotions unanimously shared by large communities. Moreover, one should always allow for a good deal of theatricality and artificial excitement on all sides—on the part of the person making the comparison, on the part of the persons immediately targeted, and on the part of an onlooking, commenting, or more distant reading public.

When the dagger scene took place in the House of Commons, the British controversy about the French Revolution had been well under way for more than two years. Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, first published in November 1790, is generally seen as its initial spark. Hardly any book or pamphlet published afterwards could avoid taking a stance towards Burke's diatribes against the Revolution.[46]

For any researcher of polemical comparisons, Burke's *Reflections* are a treasure trove. A good number of Burke's injurious comparisons were made in reply to an earlier pamphlet by Dr Richard Price, a Presbyterian minister and enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution in its early stages. On 4 November 1789, the anniversary of the English

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[46] For an overview of the whole debate see Gregory Claeys, *The French Revolution Debate in Britain: The Origins of Modern Politics* (Basingstoke, 2007).

Fig. 6: James Gillray, *The Dagger Scene, or, The Plot Discover'd* (London, 1792). Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

Glorious Revolution, Price had given a sermon at a meeting of the Revolution Society, published afterwards under the title *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*.[47] In the peroration of his *Discourse*, Price

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[47] Richard Price, 'A Discourse on the Love of our Country' (1789), in Richard Price, *Political Writings*, ed. D. O. Thomas (Cambridge, 1991), 176–96.

thanked the Lord, quoting from the Gospel of St Luke,[48] that he (Price) had 'lived to see thirty millions of people . . . spurning at slavery, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice, their king led in triumph, and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects. After sharing in the benefits of one Revolution,' Price continued (alluding to the Glorious Revolution), 'I have been spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious' (alluding to the American and the French Revolutions).[49]

It was this parallel between the English Revolution of 1688 and that of France in 1789 and, even worse, Price's rejoicing at the scene of the French king 'led in triumph' by his subjects that enraged Burke. In his *Reflections*, Burke drowned his opponent with invective. But it was one comparison in particular that hurt Price. Burke compared him with Hugh Peters, a radical preacher who, in 1660, had been accused and executed as one of the regicides of Charles I. Dr Price's sermon, Burke wrote, was

> in a strain which I believe has not been heard in this kingdom . . . since the year 1648, when a predecessor of Dr Price, the Reverend Hugh Peters, made the vault of the king's own chapel at St James's ring with the honour and privilege of the Saints, who . . . were to execute judgment on the heathen, and punishments upon the *people*; to bind their *kings* with chains, and their *nobles* with fetters of iron.

And Burke went on to explain 'that when King Charles was brought to London for his trial, the Apostle of Liberty in that day conducted the *triumph*.'[50] Burke also stressed that, back in 1648, 'this precursor, the same Dr Peters', had used the very same prayer from the Gospel of St Luke as Price had. Peters however, Burke added maliciously, 'had not the fruits of his prayer; for he neither departed so soon as he wished, nor in peace. He became . . . himself a sacrifice to the triumph which he led as Pontiff.'[51]

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[48] 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation' (Luke 2:29–32).

[49] Price, 'Discourse', 195.

[50] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth, 1969), 94.   [51] Ibid. 158.

Dr Price felt hurt indeed by Burke's parallel. In the preface to the fourth edition of his *Discourse* (1790) Price singled out Burke's comparison with Hugh Peters as the only attack on him that required an explicit rejoinder. He lamented in particular about Burke's 'intimation that like him [Peters], *I may not die in peace*', and accused Burke of a 'horrid misrepresentation and menace'.[52] Apparently, Price felt not only injured but positively threatened.

Burke's parallel contained many more resonances. Besides calling the regicide Hugh Peters a 'predecessor' of Dr Price, he put both of them on a par by applying to them the labels 'Apostle of Liberty' and, worse still, 'Pontiff'—the latter placing both of them in the vicinity of the Pope. And indeed, Burke even called Price 'this archpontiff of the *rights of men*' and accused him of proclaiming kings all over the world usurpers 'with more than the boldness of the papal deposing power in its meridian fervour of the twelfth century'.[53] In other words, Price (a Presbyterian) was behaving even worse than the popes in the Middle Ages.

Reading this invective, one might think that Burke's rage was at least in part driven by religious feelings in favour of the established Anglican Church. Yet for Burke this was at best a side issue. His main concern was to encourage clergymen, of whatever creed, to refrain from using their spiritual authority to interfere in politics: 'politics and the pulpit', he wrote, 'are terms that have little agreement . . . The cause of civil liberty and civil government gains as little as that of religion by this confusion of duties.'[54] When Burke compared Price with the Pope or with a Puritan like Hugh Peters, then, his aim was not to revive the confessional struggles of earlier centuries, but to reject the idea that religious creeds were in any way relevant to matters of state. For Burke, any such interference in the name of religion was akin to fanaticism. And he in fact used the noun 'fanatic' as a label (a category) to compare—and dismiss—both the 'old fanatics of single arbitrary power', that is, those who had maintained 'that the crown is held by divine, hereditary, and indefeasible right', *and* 'our new fanatics of popular arbitrary power', that is, radical preachers like Dr Price who maintained 'that a popular election is the sole lawful source of authority'.[55]

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[52] Price, 'Discourse', 177.
[53] Burke, *Reflections*, 96.   [54] Ibid. 94.   [55] Ibid. 111.

These quotations illustrate the way in which category-making interlocks with comparisons to suggest value judgements—in this case, a derogatory judgement with a temporalizing component. By categorizing his opponents as 'pontiffs' or 'fanatics' and by drawing parallels between them and historical figures of the twelfth or seventeenth centuries, Burke managed to relegate them to a bygone age of religious warfare and, at the same time, to assume for himself the position of an enlightened, rational man of the present.

Burke's clever rhetorical devices did not spare him the reproach of being a backward-looking figure himself. There was an obvious mismatch between his accusations that other people were guilty of outdated 'fanaticism' and his own excessive reverence for the antiquity of the English constitution, for prejudice and inherited privilege, and for an 'age of chivalry' which, in perhaps the most famous passage of his *Reflections* about the queen of France, he lamented had vanished.[56] Burke's opponents did not wait long to point out his inconsistencies.

For Mary Wollstonecraft, one of his earliest critics, the *Reflections* came across as an assemblage of 'gothic notions of beauty' and blind adoration of a constitution that had been 'settled in the dark days of ignorance'.[57] Taking Burke's principles seriously, she argued, it would be impossible to 'justify the reformation' or to 'defend American independence', and 'the slave trade ought never to be abolished'.[58] His arguments might even 'be used in India . . . to prove that a man ought never to quit the cast that confined him to the profession of his lineal forefathers.'[59] Burke's inconsistencies were such that Wollstonecraft did not accept that he could truly believe in them himself. In fact, she unmasked him as a vainglorious hypocrite. With great 'indignation', she commented upon the 'witty illustrations' and 'factitious feelings' behind which he concealed his hard-hearted 'contempt for the poor', for whom he had nothing to offer but a wait for consolation in eternal justice. Directly addressing him, Wollstonecraft replied: 'It is, Sir, *possible* to render the poor happier in this world, without depriving them of the consolation which you gratuitously grant them in the next.'[60]
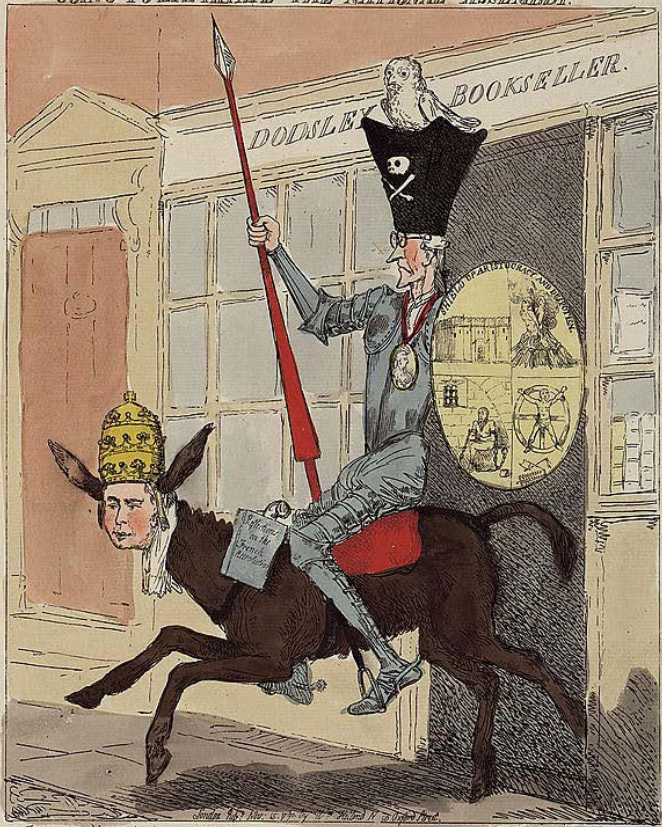
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56 Ibid. 170.

57 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 2nd edn. (London, 1790), 10, 19.

58 Ibid. 21, 23, 24.   59 Ibid. 130.   60 Ibid. 142, 144.

Fig. 7: *The Knight of the Woeful Countenance Going to Extirpate the National Assembly* (London, 1790). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, ppmsca 05424.

In a more humorous tone, Burke's futile quest for the 'age of chivalry' was picked up by an anonymous cartoonist in a satirical print that came out on 15 November 1790, very shortly after the *Reflections* were published (see Fig. 7). Entitled *The Knight of the Woeful Countenance Going to Extirpate the National Assembly*, the cartoon exposes Burke as a figure resembling Don Quixote, complete with armour, lance, and shield, and riding a donkey that has a human face and wears the triple-tiered crown of the Pope. Burke himself is depicted as a grim-looking, quasi-papist knight errant in a black hat with a skull and crossbones, about to embark on a crusade against the French and their friends in Britain. When Thomas Paine published the first part of *Rights of Man* in February 1791, he might have had this cartoon in mind, for he also described Burke's dramatic longing for the 'age of chivalry' as a Don Quixote-like fight: 'In the rhapsody of his imagination, he has discovered a world of windmills, and his sorrows are, that there are no Quixotes to attack them.'[61]

To summarize this section: in the age of the French Revolution, the vocabulary, the imagery, and the narratives of earlier religious wars were still familiar enough to offer themselves as one possible repertoire for polemical comparisons. Those comparisons now appeared embedded in new ideological struggles about political and social issues, such as ideal constitutions, property regimes, poor laws, or women's rights—struggles which most participants no longer perceived as religious in character, yet continued to conduct as wars of faith.

Attacks on National Honour in the Age of Anglo-German Rivalry around 1900

Historical studies of the politics of emotions have identified the period of fierce imperial rivalry between European powers in the decades before the First World War as a high point in sensitivity over questions of national honour.[62] For European imperialists, their own

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[61] Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (1791–2), ed. Henry Collins (Harmondsworth, 1969), 72.
[62] See Ute Frevert, *Die Politik der Demütigung: Schauplätze von Macht und Ohnmacht* (Frankfurt am Main, 2017), 170–90; Ute Frevert, 'Die Gefühle der

nations were involved not only in a worldwide struggle for power and resources, but at least as much in a competition for prestige in the eyes of an increasingly global public.[63] Hence, what administrators and army officers did in the colonies was closely scrutinized at home and abroad, and no less attention was paid to what kings, emperors, and leading politicians had to say about their own imperial pursuits and those of rival nations. Imperial protagonists, seconded by national press organs, incessantly drew comparisons between themselves and rivals, mostly of course in their own favour, using the common rhetoric of a supposed European civilizing mission as a yardstick.[64]

In such a climate, provocative or maladroit comparisons between nations and their empires, or those representing them, were likely to fuel adverse feelings. One type of comparison in particular was highly conducive to hurting national sentiments. This was a comparison that exposed the atrocities or brutalities committed by other nations' armies or civilian actors in order to relativize—or even praise—the conduct of one's own forces. For brevity's sake, I propose to call this kind of comparison the 'blame game'. Typical figures of speech were: 'We don't do such bad things, but others did', or 'What others did in x, was far worse than what we are doing now in y.'

The rise of Anglo-German antagonism around 1900, exacerbated by the naval race and relentless press wars, provides telling examples

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Staaten: Völkerrecht und politische Praxis', in Hélène Miard-Delacroix and Andreas Wirsching (eds.), *Emotionen und internationale Beziehungen im Kalten Krieg* (Berlin, 2020), 25–43.

[63] Tobias Werron, 'Global Publics as Catalysts of Global Competition: A Sociological View', in Valeska Huber and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *Global Publics: Their Power and Their Limits, 1870–1990* (Oxford, 2020), 343–66; see also Valeska Huber and Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Introduction: Global Publics', ibid. 1–60.

[64] Alex Middleton, 'European Colonial Empires and Victorian Imperial Exceptionalism', in Willibald Steinmetz (ed.), *The Force of Comparison: A New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World* (New York, 2019), 164–190; with a focus on colonial scandals: Frank Bösch, '"Are we a cruel nation?" Colonial Practices, Perceptions, and Scandals', in Dominik Geppert and Robert Gerwarth (eds.), *Wilhelmine Germany and Edwardian Britain: Essays on Cultural Affinity* (Oxford, 2008), 115–40.

of such blame games.[65] As a case in point, I shall single out just one remark, made rather casually in a speech by the British colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain in October 1901. The case is significant because it had major repercussions on the rapidly deteriorating relations between the two countries.[66]

On 25 October 1901, during the parliamentary recess, Chamberlain delivered a lengthy speech in Edinburgh before 8,000 supporters of his Unionist Party in which he defended the British war effort in South Africa against criticism at home and abroad. Those criticisms had been brought forward vociferously by British pacifists like Emily Hobhouse and by radical Irish MPs in the House of Commons, and were echoed all over Continental Europe. They targeted, above all, certain methods of warfare against the Boers, most notably the practices of burning the Boers' farms and confining women and children in so-called 'concentration camps'.[67] Against this background, it was one single phrase within Chamberlain's speech, reported in its entirety in *The Times* and widely paraphrased in the international press, that caused a tremendous uproar in Germany. Here is what Chamberlain

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[65] The classic study remains Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism 1860–1914* (London, 1980); the best study on Anglo-German press wars is Dominik Geppert, *Pressekriege: Öffentlichkeit und Diplomatie in den deutsch-britischen Beziehungen (1896–1912)* (Munich, 2007).

[66] For an extensive discussion of Chamberlain's speech, the press wars that followed, and the diplomatic context see Geppert, *Pressekriege*, 132–41, 151–77. See also Ute Daniel, 'Einkreisung und Kaiserdämmerung: Ein Versuch, der Kulturgeschichte der Politik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg auf die Spur zu kommen', in Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger (ed.), *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen?* (Berlin, 2005), 279–328, at 309–14.

[67] Emily Hobhouse, *To the Committee of the South African Distress Fund: Report of a Visit to the Camps of Women and Children in the Cape and Orange River Colonies* (London, 1901); a German translation appeared in 1901: *Bericht von Fräulein Emily Hobhouse über die Zustände, welche sie in Süd-Afrika in den Lagern der Boerenfrauen und -Kinder gefunden hat: Erstattet an das Londoner Hülfscomité* (Hamburg, 1901). On the Irish protests see Donal P. McCracken, *The Irish Pro-Boers, 1877–190*2 (Johannesburg, 1989); on echoes on the Continent see Vincent Kuitenbrouwer, *War of Words: Dutch Pro-Boer Propaganda and the South African War (1899–1902)* (Amsterdam, 2012); Steffen Bender, *Der Burenkrieg und die deutschsprachige Presse: Wahrnehmung und Deutung zwischen Bureneuphorie und Anglophobie 1899–1902* (Paderborn, 2009).

said in defence of British warfare in South Africa, and also in response to the reproach that the government had not 'dealt with the rebels or with the guerilla [*sic*] bands with sufficient severity':

> I think that the time has come—is coming—when measures of greater severity may be necessary ('Hear, hear,' and cheers), and if that time comes we can find precedents for anything that we may do in the action of those nations who now criticize our 'barbarity' and 'cruelty,' but whose example in Poland, in the Caucasus, in Almeria, in Tongking, in Bosnia, in the Franco-German war, whose example we have never even approached. (Cheers.)[68]

The last part of that sentence was immediately picked up on in Germany: Chamberlain had unfavourably described the conduct of German warfare in France in 1870–1, claiming that the British forces operating in South Africa had as yet 'never even approached' its excesses. The phrase was an example of what I call the 'blame game'. Even for those Germans who, despite widespread Anglophobia, still sympathized with the British position in South Africa—as the German government led by Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow officially did—it was difficult not to interpret Chamberlain's phrase as intimating that the German army in France had behaved badly—and indeed worse than Lord Kitchener's army in South Africa. In view of the widespread knowledge of farm burning and concentration camps, this was hard to digest for the vast majority of Germans who held the victorious army of 1870–1 in high esteem. It did not matter that Chamberlain, when he spoke of 'precedents', most probably had anti-guerrilla military actions against belligerents in mind, not measures against civilians. The immediate context of the phrase might have admitted such a benevolent interpretation. But, as usual in such controversies, Chamberlain's comparison was very soon and repeatedly quoted out of context.

Whatever Chamberlain might have intended, his comparison was widely understood to be an attack on the honour of the German army, and hence on the German nation as a whole. Within less than twenty-four hours, German nationalist, conservative, and liberal newspapers reacted vehemently. One example among many is a

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[68] *The Times*, 26 Oct. 1901, 9, col. 4.

quotation from the evening edition of the liberal *Berliner Tageblatt* on 26 October 1901. The commentator called it

> utterly impossible to trump the *brutal ways of warfare* already practised by the *'butcher' Kitchener*. The allusion to *precedents* for Kitchener's butcheries in the *war of 1870* is an effrontery [*Unverschämtheit*] which we have to reject emphatically, and the more so, since Mr Chamberlain has not been able to name a single precedent for the *cruel cramming together of defence-less women and children in the murderous English concentration camps*.[69]

Comments such as these continued to appear in German papers for several weeks, and the agitation was further fuelled by a wave of protests with hundreds of participants, again widely reported upon in the local press. These meetings were mostly organized by local veterans' associations (*Kriegervereine*) or members of the Pan-German League (Alldeutscher Verband) and held even in small German towns such as Gotha, Hamm, and Meiningen.[70] In Gotha, for instance, a resolution of 700 'citizens and farmers' rejected

> unanimously any comparison of the German campaign of 1870/71 with the kind of warfare practised by the English, contrary to international law, in their war of extinction [*Aus-rottungskampfe*] against the Boers, as being a grave insult to our most holy memories, a defamation of our brave fallen soldiers, and a vituperation against our national honour.[71]

In light of the broad and sustained outrage at Chamberlain's comparison, it was all the more striking that the two most important semi-official press organs in Germany, which were generally recognized as mouthpieces of the government—the *Kölnische Zeitung* and the *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*—did *not* join the chorus of attacks on Chamberlain. Both papers reported the speech, but refrained from commenting on it. Almost a week passed before the

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[69] *Berliner Tageblatt* (evening edition), 26 Oct. 1901, 2. Emphasis original.
[70] For a collection of those meetings' proceedings see Anon., *Der Lügner Chamberlain: Deutsche Volksproteste gegen die Verleumdungen des englischen Colonialministers Chamberlain* (Leipzig, 1901).   [71] Ibid. 14.

Kölnische Zeitung allowed a very marginal critical note, yet only in the form of an indirect quotation from another journal, the *Magdeburger Zeitung*, in which Chamberlain's comparison was called a 'brazen assertion [*dreiste Behauptung*]'.[72] Meanwhile, the *Norddeutsche Allgemeine* continued her policy of keeping silent, and the *Kölnische Zeitung* also fell back into her attitude of abstaining from negative comments.

Liberal papers attentively registered that conspicuous silence and interpreted it as a diplomatically motivated move by Bülow's government not to stir up Anglophobia over and above the level already existing in Germany. However, the pressure on Chancellor Bülow to reply to Chamberlain grew. 'Why does the Reich's Chancellor stay silent?', the left-liberal *Hagener Zeitung* asked in her leading article of 5 November 1901. A sharp and clear answer from the government was necessary, the journal argued, not least because otherwise the antisemites would gain a further boost by exploiting pro-Boer enthusiasm and anti-English agitation for their party purposes. Official neutrality should not go so far as to condone an insult to national honour. A 'cold jet of water', the commentator suggested, directed towards London in one of the 'official organs of the *Reich's* government', just as Bismarck had done on earlier occasions, should sufficiently serve the purpose.[73]

Bülow's position became increasingly uncomfortable. While he wished to uphold Germany's official politics of neutrality towards Britain, not least out of respect for the Kaiser's family relations,[74] German right-wingers, moderates, and left-liberals, for different reasons, pressured him to issue some sort of reply. The problem was how to frame it in a way that would not further antagonize the British government and public opinion, but still satisfy the desire of German nationalists and liberals to see 'national honour' restored with a 'cold

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[72] *Kölnische Zeitung* (morning edition), 1 Nov. 1901, 1.

[73] 'Warum schweigt der Reichskanzler?', *Hagener Zeitung*, 5 Nov. 1901, 1.

[74] On Wilhelm II's attitude in the critical phase of 1901–2 see John Röhl, *Wilhelm II: Der Weg in den Abgrund 1900–1941* (Munich, 2008), 227–33; John Röhl, '"The worst of enemies": Kaiser Wilhelm II and his Uncle Edward VII', in Geppert and Gerwarth (eds.), *Wilhelmine Germany and Edwardian Britain*, 41–66, at 56–7.

jet of water' against Chamberlain. As an additional irritant, Bülow had to keep in mind that earlier, in 1900–1, the Social Democrats had been keen to expose the brutality of German troops in China by publishing (and reading out loud in the Reichstag) so-called *Hunnenbriefe* ('Hun letters') written by German soldiers who glorified themselves for having committed the kind of atrocities advocated by the Kaiser himself in his infamous *Hunnenrede* ('Hun speech').[75] Thus there was a risk that similar comparisons with an even more unfavourable foray against members of the German army might be repeated and ventilated nationally and internationally.

In the face of this situation, Bülow started diplomatic efforts to obtain some sort of apology from the British government, which he then hoped to be able to use in the German Reichstag to assuage public resentment towards Britain. A formal apology, however, or at least an informal affirmation that Chamberlain's comparison had not been made with an intent to hurt German feelings, was out of the question for Lord Salisbury's government. The mere request for such an apology was considered an impertinent demand to admit that there had been something wrong with what Chamberlain had said—which the British government denied—and thus to accept losing face.[76]

The Reichstag speech, then, which Chancellor Bülow eventually felt obliged to deliver in the context of a budget debate on 8 January

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[75] See Ute Wielandt and Michael Kaschner, 'Die Reichstagsdebatten über den deutschen Kriegseinsatz in China: August Bebel und die "Hunnenbriefe"', in Susanne Kuß and Bernd Martin (eds.), *Das Deutsche Reich und der Boxeraufstand* (Munich, 2002), 183–201; Ute Wielandt, 'Die Reichstagsdebatten über den Boxerkrieg', in Mechthild Leutner and Klaus Mühlhahn (eds.), *Kolonialkrieg in China: Die Niederschlagung der Boxerbewegung 1900–1901* (Berlin, 2007), 164–72; Dietlind Wünsche, 'Feldpostbriefe aus China: "Jeden Zehnten mindestens Kopf ab in den aufrührerischen Gegenden . . ."', ibid. 153–61.

[76] The diplomatic negotiations—highly interesting, but too complicated to discuss in detail here—are to be found in Auswärtiges Amt, *Die grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette 1871–1914*, vol. xvii: *Die Wendung im deutsch-englischen Verhältnis*, ed. Johannes Lepsius et al. (Berlin, 1924), 109–10, 183–237; and *British Documents on Foreign Affairs, Part 1: From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the First World War, Series F: Europe, 1848–1914*, vol. xix: *Germany 1898–1907*, ed. David Stevenson et al. (Bethesda, MD, 1990), 92–8.

1902, and in which he sharply rebuffed Chamberlain's comparison as unjustified, did not have the desired effect. Here is the speech's key phrase:

> It was quite comprehensible that the general feelings in a people that has become so closely connected to its glorious army as the German people, should revolt against any attempt or even the appearance of misrepresenting the heroic character and moral basis of our national struggle for unity. But the German army stands far too high—and its escutcheon is too bright—for it to be affected by distorted judgements.[77]

Bülow's speech was a failure in several respects. First, it did not help to calm the agitation against Chamberlain within the German parliament and beyond; on the contrary, the Reichstag debate went on for several days and required a second statement by Bülow, this time to defend the honour of the British army in response to an extremely aggressive and insulting Anglophobic speech by an antisemitic member.[78] Second, the Social Democrat leader August Bebel not only repeated the attacks on German military conduct in China, but added that the British war in the Transvaal could very well be put on a par with it, and—more embarrassing from Bülow's perspective—went on to intimate that, after all, Chamberlain had not been entirely wrong in pointing to the German war in France when searching for precedents:

> And, gentlemen, do you wish to dispute that in the second half of this war, after [the Battle of] Sedan, when on the French side it started to become a 'people's war' [*Volkskrieg*] in every sense of the word, on the German side a series of violent acts occurred of a terrible, truly terrible nature? Back then, after Sedan, the French were in the same situation as the people of the Transvaal are in today: they waged a people's war . . . Then the French *francs-tireurs* came, they destroyed German railway lines, shot German sentries, and did everything that the Boers, who likewise do not make up a regular army, are doing to the English. In 1870 the strictest orders were issued,

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[77] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags: X. Legislaturperiode. II Session. 1900/1902*, vol. iv, 8 Jan. 1902, 3209–10, at 3209.

[78] Ibid. 10 Jan. 1902, 3270–9 (Liebermann v. Sonnenberg); 3279–80 (Bülow).

and many *francs-tireurs* were shot. Whenever German soldiers were gunned down in villages and the municipal authorities refused to identify the culprits, the villages were burnt to the ground. That happened in very many cases. So one should not speak as if things of the most terrible kind did not also take place there![79]

Bebel was playing the comparative 'blame game' here with a different intention, one that was unusual at that time: not to relativize one's own misdeeds by pointing at others, but to condemn war and warmongering per se as inevitably leading to atrocities. Once again, Chancellor Bülow felt obliged to intervene. He called the reports about German cruelties in China 'either wildly exaggerated or flatly invented' and repeated his declaration of honour with regard to the German army's exemplary 'humanity' in the war of 1870–1.[80]

If Bülow's speech did not satisfy all parties within Germany, it also failed — more momentously — in view of its reception in Britain. Even radical-liberal opposition papers criticized its 'exceedingly patronizing tone', which was 'touching the limits of international courtesy' (*Daily News*), while more hostile comments qualified the speech as 'a snub to Great Britain' (*Pall Mall Gazette*), 'a bad day's work for the promotion of the friendly relations between the two countries' (*The Times*), or even 'a formal affront, delivered with all possible deliberation' that required 'some reparation' (*London Evening Standard*).[81] Several commentators went further, articulating the view that the German Chancellor, by dismissing Chamberlain's words, had in fact positively espoused the criticisms levelled against the British army — and thereby implicitly made an unfavourable counter-comparison himself. It appears that this subtle interpretation was partly inspired by French newspaper comments on Bülow's speech, which were attentively referred to by the British journalists. Thus, in an article on the reception of the speech on the Continent, the *Morning Post*

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[79] Ibid. 11 Jan. 1902, 3301–18, at 3312.

[80] Ibid. 11 Jan. 1902, 3318–19, at 3319.

[81] 'The Reichstag (From our Correspondent)', *Daily News*, 9 Jan. 1902, 5; 'Germany & the Powers: An Anglophobe Victory (From our Correspondents)', *Daily News*, 10 Jan. 1902, 5; 'The Retort Discourteous', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 Jan. 1902, 1; *The Times*, 9 Jan. 1902, 7; *London Evening Standard*, 10 Jan. 1902, 4.

quoted from the *Journal des Débats*, in which it was said that Bülow had

> practically associated himself with the critics who accuse Great Britain of waging war in a cruel and barbarous manner. He [Bülow] says, in short, to the British: 'You insult us by comparing yourselves to us.' That, in our opinion, is the most important and a very serious feature of Count von Bülow's speech.[82]

In a similar vein, the *London Evening Standard*, without referring to a particular French paper, echoed what the commentator called, not without sympathy, the 'line of comment' in France to the effect that 'Mr. Chamberlain's comparison between the troops of Lord Kitchener and the troops of William of Prussia was unduly flattering—to the Germans.'[83]

There was yet another remark in Bülow's speech that raised considerable irritation in Britain—not only in the press, but also in the House of Commons. In his attempt to assuage anti-British resentment, the chancellor had expressed a belief that Chamberlain had not in any way intended to hurt the feelings of others—a belief, Bülow said, he could not but adopt 'after the assurances given to me by the other side'.[84] What kind of 'assurances'—if any—had been given by British ministers or diplomats to Bülow was hotly debated in the press, but most journals were certain, as the *Westminster Gazette* put it, that they could not have been 'given to him in the sense which he seemed to imply of excuses and apologies'.[85] Several MPs also asked in the House of Commons on 17 January 1902 whether any 'assurances' or even 'apologies' had been made. Arthur J. Balfour, answering for the government and evidently labouring to avoid any further diplomatic crisis, said that '[n]o

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[82] 'International Relations: Count von Bülow's Speech. Continental Comment (From our Correspondents)', *Morning Post*, 10 Jan. 1902, 5.

[83] *London Evening Standard*, 10 Jan. 1902, 4.

[84] *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags: X. Legislaturperiode. II. Session. 1900/1902*, vol. iv, 8 Jan. 1902, 3209–10, at 3209.

[85] 'Anglophobe Feeling in Germany', *Westminster Gazette*, 11 Jan. 1902, 7; see also *London Evening Standard*, 9 Jan. 1902, 4; *The Times*, 9 Jan. 1902, 7. A different position was articulated, no doubt with a provocative intent, in the *Daily News*, 9 Jan. 1902, 5: 'It appears from what Count von Bülow said that an apology must have been made in some form or other from the British side'.

assurances have been officially asked for on the subject' and that the Foreign Secretary, Lord Lansdowne, had pointed out in an 'unofficial conversation' with the German Ambassador that there were 'no charges of barbarities made by my right hon. friend [Chamberlain] against the German or any other army'.[86] In other words, there was nothing in Chamberlain's speech that required an apology.

To summarize this section: in the age of imperial rivalry around 1900, comparisons were most likely to hurt when they could be interpreted as attacks on national honour. What I called the 'blame game' was (and still is) a mode of comparison particularly conducive to generating feelings of outrage. Playing down or covering up one's own misdeeds by pointing to the 'atrocities' or 'barbarities' allegedly committed by others almost inevitably resulted in counter-comparisons, even if, as in the case of Chamberlain's speech, the comparison was not fully spelt out or made with an intention to provoke. In fact, as Bülow's reply makes clear, it was next to impossible to reject such allegations without indirectly accusing the opposite side of having behaved at least as badly as—or worse than—oneself. In more general terms, the 'blame game' had the potential to end in a spiral of mutually resented comparisons. Demands for apologies, or refusals to give them, or denials that there was anything to apologize for, could further exacerbate feelings.

The power of unfavourable comparisons to hurt and enrage national publics was further enhanced by the media landscape around 1900. In Europe at least, and increasingly so in other parts of the globe, the speed with which newspapers, consumed by millions, reported almost simultaneously on speeches and press reactions abroad was not so very different from what we encounter in today's world of social media. The degree of subtlety with which the potentially offensive language of opponents or rivals was analysed and used to create scandals was possibly even greater than today. An incidental remark made in a speech outside Parliament by a British minister, or a reply in the Reichstag by a German chancellor, were capable of generating public outcry abroad and serious diplomatic crises.

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[86] Hansard, HC vol. ci. 17 Jan. 1902, cols. 169–71, at 171.

Comparisons with Nazis and the Holocaust after 1945

Comparing political opponents of various ideological backgrounds with Hitler, or with Nazi organizations such as the SS or the Gestapo, has been common practice since 1945. The rise of this polemical strategy was by no means limited to Germany, although for obvious reasons Germans have untiringly resorted to it.[87] In his study of West German election campaigns after 1949, Thomas Mergel speaks of the astounding 'brazenness' and 'lack of restraint' with which politicians of all parties attacked each other by means of Nazi comparisons. Thus, in 1957, an SPD election poster warned against another term of office for Federal Chancellor Adenauer with the slogan 'Hitler ruined Germany within 12 years. Don't give Adenauer 12 years' time!', and in 1958 the SPD party whip Herbert Wehner even called Adenauer an 'afterbirth of the Führer'. Conversely, in the 1961 campaign, CDU right-winger Richard Jaeger mocked the SPD candidate Willy Brandt for having changed his name (from Frahm), drawing a parallel with Hitler's name change (from Schicklgruber) and extending the analogy to the effect that Brandt and Hitler both wished to make their mark on world history under a false name.[88]

East German propaganda, too, was relentless in using Nazi comparisons. Generalized accusations of 'fascism' against the West German state went along with more head-on verbal and visual equations. Thus a GDR poster from 1953 that denounced plans for a European Defence Community was captioned 'Adenauer is today's

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[87] There is rich material for the 1940s to the 1990s in Eitz and Stötzel, *Wörterbuch*, vols. i and ii; see also Georg Stötzel, 'Der Nazi-Komplex', in Georg Stötzel and Martin Wengeler (eds.), *Kontroverse Begriffe: Geschichte des öffentlichen Sprachgebrauchs in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Berlin, 1995), 355–82. For a linguistic study based mainly on e-mails to the Israeli embassy in Germany and to the German Jewish Council between 2002 and 2014 see Linda Giesel, *NS-Vergleiche und NS-Metaphern: Korpuslinguistische Perspektiven auf konzeptuelle, strukturelle und funktionale Charakteristika* (Berlin, 2019); see further material, mainly for the 2000s and 2010s, in Frederik Weinert, *Nazi-Vergleiche und Political Correctness: Eine sprach- und kommunikationswissenschaftliche Analyse* (Baden-Baden, 2018).

[88] Thomas Mergel, *Propaganda nach Hitler: Eine Kulturgeschichte des Wahlkampfs in der Bundesrepublik 1949–1990* (Göttingen, 2010), quotations at 286–7.

Hitler'. It showed Adenauer in Nazi uniform performing the Hitler salute; however, Adenauer was simultaneously depicted as a puppet on a string controlled by an obese capitalist figure smoking a cigar (with a dollar sign on the cigar band) and wearing sparkling rings—a figure manifestly similar to images that had been used by the Nazis to vilify Anglo-American Jewish capitalists.[89] During the Berlin Crisis in August 1961, West Berliners retaliated by protesting with placards on which Walter Ulbricht, leader of the East German communist party, was equated with Hitler.[90] And on the very day on which the Berlin Wall was erected (13 August 1961), Willy Brandt, then West Berlin's mayor, declared that the new barrier, with its 'concrete pillars, barbed wire, death strip, watchtowers, and machine pistols, had all the marks of a concentration camp'.[91] After 1961, the equation of the GDR as a whole with a concentration camp became quite popular for a while, though it was used less frequently from the 1970s onwards.[92]

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[89] This poster and similar Nazi comparisons (with antisemitic undertones) are analysed in Thomas Haury, 'Von "den Finanzkapitalisten" zu "den Zionisten"—das "werktätige Volk" und seine Feinde: Spezifika des Wechselspiels von kommunistischem Selbst- und Feindbild in der frühen DDR', in Silke Satjukow and Rainer Gries (eds.), *Unsere Feinde: Konstruktionen des Anderen im Sozialismus* (Leipzig, 2004), 107–26; the image of the poster can be found on p. 117. See also the other contributions in the same volume for more examples.

[90] One such placard carried by protesters can be seen on a photograph taken on 16 August 1961 and published by the *Deutsche Presse Agentur*, at [https://www.alamy.de/stockfoto-eine-banner-die-adolf-hitler-mit-ddr-lineal-walter-ulbricht-vergleicht-ist-wahrend-einer-massenkundgebung-von-mehr-als-250000-menschen-in-west-berlin-am-16-august-1961-statt-drei-tage-nach-der-versiegelung-aus-ost-berlin-von-den-machthabern-der-ddr-kritisierte-die-demonstration-zone-laune-und-den-bau-der-mauer-74097136.html], accessed 1 May 2024.

[91] Willy Brandt, 'Erklärung des Regierenden Bürgermeisters von Berlin, Brandt, vor dem Berliner Abgeordnetenhaus, 13. August 1961', in Willy Brandt, *Berliner Ausgabe*, vol. iii: *Berlin bleibt frei: Politik in und für Berlin, 1947–1966*, ed. Siegfried Heimann (Berlin, 2004), 324–33, at 333; see also Ilse Dorothee Pautsch, 'Von "unvorstellbarer Katastrophe" zu "Flohbiss an einem Elefanten": Gefühlsäußerungen in verbaler und nonverbaler Kommunikation von Politikern und Diplomaten in den Tagen des Berliner Mauerbaus', in Miard-Delacroix and Wirsching (eds.), *Emotionen und internationale Beziehungen*, 125–41, 129–31.

[92] Eitz and Stötzel, *Wörterbuch*, i. 396–417.

It is striking that those who made such comparisons barely entertained the idea that such parallels might hurt the victims of Nazi crimes or their descendants, especially Jews and other survivors. In both German states, and in the GDR perhaps even more than in the Federal Republic, there was an almost complete ignorance of the potentially relativizing effects of such comparisons. Apparently, what I referred to earlier as the 'close coupling of perpetrator and victim comparisons'— in other words, the fact that equating someone with a Nazi almost inevitably implies that someone else is a victim comparable to those who suffered under Nazi rule (and vice versa)—rarely occurred to people in the first two decades after 1945. It is as if the ideological antagonism during the early stages of the Cold War swept aside all other considerations.

This lack of sensitivity was not confined to Germans. Non-Germans, too, wantonly resorted to Nazi comparisons. A salient example was proffered by the heroic British wartime prime minister Winston Churchill himself, who, in a BBC election broadcast on 4 June 1945, prophesied that the Labour Party, if it came to power, 'would have to fall back on some form of Gestapo'.[93] In this case, the polemic misfired. Labour politicians and newspapers reacted with irony and scorn rather than outrage. Labour's chief ideologue Herbert Morrison set the tone when he commented, as quoted the next day in the *Daily Herald*, 'that the speech would go down in history as "Churchill's Crazy Broadcast"'; and he added: 'The passage is childish and well below the level that should be maintained by one holding the high office of Prime Minister.'[94] Non-partisan papers, and even those that were generally more unfavourable towards Labour, such as the weekly *The Economist*, dismissed the speech as an 'astonishing performance' and called the Gestapo charge 'complete nonsense'. The decisive 'central mass' of voters, the commentator in *The Economist* opined, would be 'puzzled':

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[93] Winston Churchill, BBC election broadcast (4 June 1945), in *The Speeches of Winston Churchill*, ed. David Cannadine (London, 1989), 274; on the context and effects of the speech see Richard Toye, 'Winston Churchill's "Crazy Broadcast": Party, Nation, and the 1945 Gestapo Speech', *Journal of British Studies*, 49/3 (2010), 655–80.

[94] 'Churchill's Crazy Broadcast: Morrison Hits Back Point by Point at "Scurrility"', *Daily Herald*, 5 June 1945, 1, 4.

'And one of the things that puzzle them is whether Mr Churchill, who has proved himself so great a war leader, will be a good peace leader.'[95] If Churchill's warped Gestapo comparison was not decisive for the Conservatives' election defeat, it certainly contributed to the demise of the prime minister's personal image. That comparisons such as these might be seen as an affront to those who really had suffered from Gestapo persecution, however, did not worry anybody at the time. Churchill's comparison was rejected because it was too obviously absurd, not because it was seen as belittling Nazi crimes.

It is remarkable that Jewish survivors themselves did not refrain from occasionally using Nazi comparisons, even against those who had helped to rescue them from imminent death. Thus a photograph taken in a camp for 'displaced persons' near Munich in 1947 or 1948 — a photograph now displayed at the Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism — shows Jewish inmates protesting against British measures that prohibited their emigration to Palestine (see Fig. 8).[96] In the course of that protest, as documented by the photograph, the Jewish protesters held up a Union Jack with a swastika stitched on to it, thereby equating their own present situation with their imprisonment in the Nazi camps *and* equating the British, their liberators, with their former oppressors, the Nazis. In this case, the close coupling of perpetrator and victim comparisons was used as a deliberate strategy. I have as yet been unable to find evidence of how — if at all — the US authorities who were in charge of the Bavarian displaced person camps reacted to that symbolic action, or whether — and if so how — the British forces in Germany took any notice of it. The Nazi comparison was not unusual, though, in regard to the situation of Jewish displaced persons waiting to emigrate. As early as August 1945 it was used prominently and self-accusingly by Earl Grant Harrison in his report submitted to US President Harry

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[95] 'Churchill and Attlee', *The Economist*, 9 June 1945, 757–8.

[96] The photograph is an item on loan from Yad Vashem (shelf mark 158AO6) and displayed at the Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism in a case numbered 28.6 and entitled 'In the Country of Perpetrators — Munich as a Waiting Room'. The caption at the Documentation Centre reads: 'Demonstration by the Jewish residents of DP camp Neu-Freimann for the unrestricted right to emigrate to Palestine, undated (probably 1947/48)'.

Fig. 8: A demonstration in favour of unrestricted immigration to Eretz Israel, Neu Freimann displaced persons camp, Germany. Courtesy of Yad Vashem.

S. Truman (published in full in the *New York Times* on 30 September 1945):

> As matters now stand, we appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them except that we do not exterminate them. They are in concentration camps in large numbers under military guard, instead of the S.S. troops. One is led to wonder whether the German people, seeing this, are not supposing that we are following or at least condoning Nazi policy.[97]

By 1947, the historian Atina Grossmann writes, 'much of official Jewish wrath had been transferred from the Germans to the British, who were refusing to open the gates of Palestine'; during one protest, British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin was even 'burned in effigy and excoriated as a "hangman" on Zionist banners'.[98]

Whatever the reaction was in these cases, the incidents serve as examples to support my argument that, unlike today, those who used

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[97] Quoted in Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, 2007), 138.   [98] Ibid. 219–20.

Nazi comparisons during the early decades after 1945 consistently did so without worrying very much that their comparisons might be interpreted as a banalization of Nazi crimes in general, or the Holocaust in particular. The same was true—more astonishingly from today's viewpoint—of those who, without being victims of the Nazis themselves, drew parallels between their own calamities and those of the Jewish people under the Third Reich.

Soon after 1945, such comparisons were no longer limited to Europe, but extended into many parts of the world. As the American Holocaust and genocide scholar Michael Rothberg has shown, the decolonization struggles of the 1950s and early 1960s—the Algerian War of Independence in particular—saw many instances of analogies between what since the late 1970s has been known as the 'Holocaust' on the one hand, and the brutalities experienced by colonized peoples who were about to free themselves from European imperial rule on the other.[99] Rothberg provides ample evidence to prove that such analogies, instead of being problematized, as they certainly would be today, were most of the time positively endorsed, even by Jewish Holocaust survivors or their descendants, in the name of a shared feeling of solidarity which linked their own past memories to others' present experiences of suffering.[100] 'Never again' was the common denominator under which such parallels and analogies were considered acceptable or even commendable.

The propagandistic use of parallels to 'Auschwitz', or of visual images referring to it, outlasted the decolonization wars in the strict sense and continued into more recent post-colonial conflicts within or between newly established nation states. An early and paradigmatic case was the rebellion of the Igbo, also known as the Biafrans, in the Nigerian Civil War of the late 1960s. The historian Lasse Heerten has demonstrated how the Igbo, who sometimes called themselves

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[99] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA, 2009), 175–226.

[100] See also, with further evidence from Israel and Palestine, Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, 'Introduction: The Holocaust and the Nakba. A New Syntax of History, Memory, and Political Thought', in Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg (eds.), *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History* (New York, 2018), 1–42, at 8–20.

the 'Jews of Africa', together with humanitarian helpers led by fig-ures such as the French medical doctor Bernard Kouchner (founder of Médecins Sans Frontières), were able to mobilize international sympathy and solidarity.[101] That solidarity was generously accorded in Western countries, not least by relief organizations in the United States, including Jewish humanitarian support groups. Thus, an 'American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive' issued a flyer, also printed as an advertisement in newspapers, with a photograph of starving African children in the centre that clearly reminded viewers of simi-lar photographs showing emaciated concentration camp inmates. The inscriptions in bold letters—'6 Million' and 'Dear God, not again'—brought home the message.[102] Nothing is known of protests by Jewish groups against this or similar campaigns in favour of the Igbo. The watchword 'never again' still functioned as a bridge for mobilizing solidarity across national borders and communal divides.

On the basis of post-1945 examples such as these, Michael Rothberg has argued that what he calls 'multidirectional memory' has been for quite some time, and should continue to be, a viable option for overcoming today's dominant form of unilateral, ethno- or group-centric remembering. One may sympathize with such a position. Yet there is no getting around the fact—and this is also acknowledged by Rothberg—that remembering (and one should add, its instrumentalization for propaganda purposes) is now more often conceived as what Rothberg calls a competitive 'zero-sum struggle for preeminence' in which quests for the recognition of one's own past or present victimhood leave no space for empathy with others.[103] Within that competitive model, comparisons between victim groups no longer assume the form of sympathy-evoking analogies, but appear—in my own terminology—as comparisons in terms of 'more' or 'less' (be it evilness on the part of perpetrators, or suffering on the part of victims), or ultimately as claims for absolute uniqueness (of one's own fate compared to all others). Analogies, too, still play a role

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[101] Lasse Heerten, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering* (Cambridge, 2017), 175–204 (on 'Auschwitz' as a reference point) and 322–7 (on Kouchner).

[102] An image of the advertisement can be found ibid. 182.

[103] Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 3; see also 6 and 10.

in such contests, but in most cases they are now brought forward solely to accuse others of being perpetrators ('like the Nazis'), not to foster mutual understanding.

Undoubtedly then, there has been an enormous shift in attitudes and sensitivities since the 1950s and 1960s. How, when, and why this shift occurred is an intriguing question for historians, one that is far from being resolved. An important element of any possible answer to that question is to explain the global ascendancy of the 'Holocaust' as the epitome of absolute evil and the (so far) unequalled reference point and yardstick for all other genocidal events, massacres, and crimes against humanity. Much has been written on the claim that the Holocaust is 'unique' or 'unprecedented', often with a moralizing or polemicizing intent.[104] However, when and how that claim emerged, who used or contested it for what purposes, and when and why it came to prevail in debates on the comparability of genocides—in other words, a discursive history of the uniqueness claim *in the larger public realm*, not just in academia—still remains to be written.

Any such history should distinguish between at least four variants of the claim, which are usually mixed up in everyday language.[105] First, 'absolute uniqueness'—the thesis that the Holocaust is a quasi-metahistorical event and as such incommensurable with any other event in history and ultimately incomprehensible. Second, 'kindlessness'—the proposition that the Holocaust cannot be subsumed under any category, most notably the category of genocide. Third, 'unprecedentedness'—the idea that the Holocaust is not an outcome of, and should not be put on a par with, anything that happened before it. Fourth, 'singularity', 'specificity', or 'distinctiveness'—a more attenuated assertion that the Holocaust is singular in

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[104] It is impossible to review that vast literature here. In the German context, the latest upsurge in that ongoing debate is of course the so-called *Historikerstreit 2.0*. Among the more nuanced interventions, I found that by Sybille Steinbacher particularly helpful: Sybille Steinbacher, 'Über Holocaustvergleiche und Kontinuitäten kolonialer Gewalt', in Saul Friedländer et al., *Ein Verbechen ohne Namen: Anmerkungen zum neuen Historikerstreit über den Holocaust* (Munich, 2022), 53–68.

[105] The following typology partly follows Nigel Pleasants, 'The Question of the Holocaust's Uniqueness: Was it Something More than or Different from Genocide?', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 33/3 (2016), 297–310.

the sense that it has, like other historical events, certain special features that prohibit flat equations and that require, if comparisons are to be made, an adequate consideration of differences. The second, third, and fourth variants do not exclude the possibility of something very similar to the Holocaust happening in the near or remote future; these variants are therefore compatible with a kind of analogical reasoning that is meant as a warning under the watchword 'never again'.[106] Variants two, three, and four also do not prevent comparisons in principle, and should therefore be open to the articulation of 'multidirectional memories'. To postulate, then, that the idea of the Holocaust's 'uniqueness' prohibits comparisons with other genocides is imprecise, unless it is clearly spelt out that it is the first variant only ('absolute uniqueness') that one has in mind. Historically speaking, however, and focusing on the period from the 1960s until today, I would contend that only a very small fraction of what has come across as a 'uniqueness' claim does in fact fall under the first variant. The second variant, 'kindlessness', is also rarely advocated.[107] Careful assessments of the meanings (in a pragmatic sense) of what has been said are necessary in each case. One should not expect linguistic or epistemic precision when analysing past (and present) public utterances on 'uniqueness', 'unprecedentedness', 'singularity', or supposed 'incomparability', especially when such statements are made in the heat of ongoing political conflicts.

Having said that, and pending further research on the period from the 1960s onwards, I would suggest as a hypothesis that the insistence on the Holocaust's 'uniqueness' (in all its variants) among Jewish communities within and beyond Israel came as a reaction to an *overdose* of undifferentiated, oversimplified, or flatly propagandistic analogies with past Jewish sufferings—analogies that were drawn in order to increase support for all sorts of 'subaltern' concerns which, however justified in and of themselves, often had very little in common with what had happened to the Jews between

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[106] On this aspect see David Cesarani, 'Does the Singularity of the Holocaust Make it Incomparable and Inoperative for Commemorating, Studying and Preventing Genocide? Britain's Holocaust Memorial Day as a Case Study', *Journal of Holocaust Education*, 10/2 (2001), 40–56.

[107] See Pleasants, 'The Question of the Holocaust's Uniqueness', 303–7.

1933 and 1945. To put it differently, the very success of attempts to mobilize solidarity through such analogies in the 1950s and 1960s, and the subsequent routinization of such claims (as for instance in the Biafra case), made it ever more imperative for Jews within and beyond Israel to insist on the specificity, unprecedentedness, and uniqueness of what their own people had experienced in Germany and German-occupied Continental Europe. The tipping point was probably reached in the early 1970s when Palestinian terror groups and West European terrorists trained in Palestinian camps, such as the West German Rote Armee Fraktion, used analogies that equated Israel with the Nazis (and their own situation with that of victims or resistance groups under Hitler) in order to justify attacks on Israeli citizens and Jewish institutions.[108] Very understandably, such analogies caused outrage among Jews in Israel and many other people around the world.

Thus, my argument is that it was the inflationary use of ill-considered or dubious Holocaust analogies from the late 1960s onwards which caused a stiffening of attitudes and heightened sensitivity towards Nazi and Holocaust comparisons, even if the intention behind such comparisons was to support harmless causes on which many people could otherwise agree. The kinds of comparison that had been acceptable — for example, using Stars of David to raise awareness of the stigmatization of minorities or migrants — were now interpreted as 'comparisons that hurt'.

The rough narrative presented here is of course incomplete and in need of broader contextualization. Many more factors have contributed to the growing unease about Nazi and Holocaust comparisons. To name but a few: there has been an expansion in thorough historical research and a broadening of public knowledge about the Holocaust since the 1970s. There has also been an upsurge in the use of the term 'Holocaust' itself, triggered not least by the 1979 TV series *Holocaust*,

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[108] See Martin W. Kloke, *Israel und die deutsche Linke: Zur Geschichte eines schwierigen Verhältnisses*, 2nd edn. (Frankfurt am Main, 1994); Wolfgang Kraushaar, *Die Bombe im Jüdischen Gemeindehaus* (Hamburg, 2005); Evelyn Runge and Anette Vowinckel, 'Es bleibt kompliziert: Israel, Palästina und die deutsche Zeitgeschichte', *Zeithistorische Forschungen*, 16/3 (2019), 421–41; also the other contributions in this special issue.

which singled it out as a specific historical event.[109] This was given further momentum by the German *Historikerstreit* of the late 1980s and controversies about the 'red Holocaust' in France and elsewhere in the late 1990s.[110] To this was added the increasing awareness of the power of words to do harm, and the insistence on 'political correctness' in many social spheres from the 1980s. Finally, the media revolution since the early 2000s, which I have already referred to in the introduction (Brubaker's 'hyperconnectivity') also played a role by rewarding the articulation of outrage. These are some of the factors that need to be further investigated when inquiring into how and why irritability about debasing or relativizing comparisons, especially with regard to the Nazis and the Holocaust, has massively increased since the 1960s.

Conclusion

Let me conclude my historical survey with a couple of unsystematic remarks on (a) repeatable patterns that characterize the communicative practice of 'comparisons that hurt', (b) long-term changes in terms of their frequency, topics, and reference points, and (c) an abstract model for what one might call the life cycle of specific comparisons and their capacity to hurt.

Repeatable Patterns

We have seen that comparisons are likely to be resented and seen as harmful when they deal with questions of *victimhood and perpetratorship*. The dichotomy as such is certainly timeless and frequently appears in the aftermath of wars and other violent conflicts. In such situations it is hardly possible to define oneself or others as victims without making comparisons with other groups whose victimhood is then said to be

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[109] On the impact of the TV series *Holocaust* see Frank Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979: Als die Welt von heute begann* (Munich, 2019), 363–95.
[110] For accounts of the latter see Jens Mecklenburg and Wolfgang Wippermann (eds.), *'Roter Holocaust'? Kritik des Schwarzbuchs des Kommunismus* (Hamburg, 1998); Horst Möller (ed.), *Der Rote Holocaust und die Deutschen: Die Debatte um das 'Schwarzbuch des Kommunismus'* (Munich, 1999).

'more' or 'less' serious, 'more' or 'less' heroic, or possibly even 'unique'. At the same time, definitions of victimhood are rarely articulated without perpetrators being named explicitly or alluded to implicitly. Holocaust analogies are the most salient example, but I have shown that the mechanism as such can be observed in completely different contexts, such as interrogations and high treason trials in the period of early modern confessional struggles, which were staged as instances of martyrdom or re-enactments of Jesus Christ's trial in Jerusalem. Even so, the coupling of perpetrator and victim comparisons is not automatic; the coupling can be more or less close, as has been shown with respect to the polemical uses of Nazi comparisons in the initial decades after 1945, when hardly anybody considered what such comparisons might do to the victims of Nazi crimes. If the coupling becomes closer however, as has happened since the 1960s, the potential of such comparisons to hurt increases dramatically.

The *blame game*, the functioning and emotionalizing impacts of which I described in detail when looking at the Chamberlain–Bülow controversy in 1901–2, is another candidate for a repeatable pattern. The practice of diverting attention from one's own guilt or bad behaviour in the past by pointing to what 'others' had done earlier on, or are about to do just now, is surely not limited to the period of imperial rivalry, when colonial scandals and war atrocities were the issues at stake. Very similar language games were at work, for example, in the German debate about 'collective guilt' after 1945[111] and in the German and transnational controversies, briefly mentioned above, about Holocaust relativization in the late 1980s (*Historikerstreit*) and 1990s ('red Holocaust'). One might point out that the blame game, in order to function properly, requires a sufficiently developed public sphere that serves as a space of resonance and a forum for the apportionment of shame and blame. Seen from this angle, there are good reasons to argue that highly emotionalized disputes about who should be held more 'guilty' than others have been more likely to occur in the era of fast-reacting and widely consumed mass media inaugurated in the late nineteenth century. The pattern as such, however, does not seem to be bound to a certain structure of the

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[111] See Heidrun Kämper, *Der Schulddiskurs in der frühen Nachkriegszeit: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des sprachlichen Umbruchs nach 1945* (Berlin, 2005).

public sphere; it can function just as well in more limited face-to-face encounters among elite groups, typical of premodern times.

Another regular feature to be observed in many controversies triggered by comparisons is the polemical *use of categories*. Very often this results in contests about their applicability in the particular case, or their validity in general. The patterns of such contests may vary depending on whether the categories are applied to groups of human beings or to historical events and objects. If applied to persons or groups, disparaging or offensive (and potentially life-threatening) categories such as 'heretic', as in Martin Luther's case, or 'fanatic', as in the British debate about the French Revolution, may either be flatly rejected, deflected back onto their authors, proudly adopted as a self-description, exposed to ridicule, or even denied any meaningfulness at all. None of these strategies seem to be bound to any specific historical period; each is an attempt to defuse the polemical force of such categorizations, the latter strategy being the most ambitious one and therefore rarer. I have not provided an example of this strategy (denial of meaningfulness) in my brief historical survey, whereas I have shown the others at work in the sections on the Reformation and the French Revolution debate. If categories are applied to historical events or objects, as discussed with regard to 'genocide', the ensuing contests are usually more directly concerned either with the category's applicability to the concrete case in question or, more challengingly, with the practical functionality or epistemic validity of the category as such. The latter kind of contest, for which no example has been discussed here, is usually confined to small elite groups in academia and intellectual circles for quite some time before entering—with long time lags and in diluted forms—ordinary public and political life.

Frequency, Topics, and Reference Points

Given the difficulty of finding 'comparisons that hurt' in historical source materials, it would be unreasonable to expect exact quantifications. Only rough estimates are possible. Having said that, my findings so far suggest that, in Western and Central Europe, the Reformation and the age of confessional/civil conflicts that followed saw a long and deep wave of hurtful comparisons. The wave receded towards the end

of the seventeenth century, and the early and middle decades of the eighteenth century may be seen as a cooling-down period. The density and intensity of hurtful comparisons reached a low point and they had less mobilizing force in the political sphere; polemical exchanges remained confined to literary and philosophical quarrels between intellectuals. Comparisons with an intent to hurt were resumed and gained new political resonance with the French Revolution and its aftermath, going up again all over Europe with each new wave of revolutions and conflicts between nations and nationalities during the nineteenth century. From the late nineteenth century onwards I have found a steady rise in occurrences, which became more accentuated after 1945 and ramped up from the 1960s to the present.

These rises, peaks, and falls coincide, quite obviously, with the upsurge in comparisons connected with controversial and emotionally charged topics. The first wave in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was dominated, if not monopolized, by comparisons related to *religious* issues, which all parties in those disputes took extremely seriously. The Bible and Church history provided the principal reference points, with figures and events from Roman antiquity coming second. In the eighteenth century up to and into the French Revolution, polemical comparisons still continued to be expressed in vocabularies that referred to earlier religious conflicts, with languages of patriotism coming second. However, references to the religious wars now served to denigrate opponents as backward and not to be taken seriously, while the problematic issues at stake were no longer religious, but *ideological* disputes about political and social order. As the nineteenth century progressed, national concerns and above all *national honour* rose to become the most critical point whenever comparisons sparked off controversies. This remained so until the end of the Second World War. From 1945 onwards, we observe the irresistible rise of the ultimate reference point for polemical and hurtful comparisons: the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. The wave of Nazi and Holocaust comparisons is as yet unbroken, and they are applied to an ever broadening variety of public controversies and topics—not only to competing memories, treatment of minorities, and struggles against colonial powers and racism, but also to seemingly unrelated fields such as health management in the face of a pandemic, climate change, and animal welfare.

Besides shifting topics, we have to consider changing media constellations as another variable in the successive waves and sudden increases in polemical and hurtful comparisons. The impact of print, including graphic arts, on the invigoration and polarization of religious feelings is now established wisdom in all research on the Reformation period.[112] A similar argument can be made for the correlation between the rise of excessive nationalism and the advent, from the 1880s onwards, of a mass reading public catered for by a broad variety of popular and quality newspapers.[113] The introduction of photojournalism in the interwar years and the proliferation of applied visual arts, as used for example in the production of election posters, may have helped to emphasize and emotionalize contrasting comparisons between nations and ideologies. I am less sure about the specific impact of film, radio, and television as such on the rise and decline of various comparisons that hurt, except that these new mass media once again helped to broaden possible audiences. Perhaps more significant for the rise of polemical comparisons since the 1960s, at least in West Germany, has been the replacement of the 'consensus journalism' that had been prevalent in the 1950s with strategies of creating scandals in newspaper and TV reportage around the early 1960s.[114] The worldwide privatization (and expansion) of TV channels and broadcasters since the 1980s has further enhanced this trend and can also be seen as a prelude to the inauguration of today's media landscape, with its fractured audiences specifically targeted by news (and fake news) providers. This should not obscure the fact, however, that the Internet and social media represent a decisive innovation with regard to the proliferation of invective and potentially hurtful language, including comparisons. Under the present conditions of

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[112] See Kaufmann, *Druckmacher*, for a new perspective and a summary of earlier research.

[113] See Geppert, *Pressekriege.*

[114] See Christina von Hodenberg, *Konsens und Krise: Eine Geschichte der westdeutschen Medienöffentlichkeit 1945–1973* (Göttingen, 2006), 183–228 (on 1950s consensus journalism) and 270–5, 293–360 (on critical and scandalizing reportage in German newspapers and television during the early 1960s); but see also Ute Daniel, *Beziehungsgeschichten: Politik und Medien im 20. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg, 2018), 208–36 on the comparatively cautious British press in the same period.

hyperconnectivity, nearly everyone all over the globe may become an author or addressee. One no longer needs to be prominent to initiate, or earn, a public furore by means of a provocative or inadvertent comparison that hurts someone else. One might call this, borrowing a term from Reinhart Koselleck, the 'democratization' of the practice.

A Life Cycle of Comparisons that Hurt?

Is it possible to discern any patterns in the medium- and long-term rise and fall of certain thematic clusters of hurtful comparisons? In answer to that question, I would suggest an abstract model of five phases, but this should be understood more as a thought experiment for heuristic purposes than as a one-size-fits-all approach to the problem. Keeping that precautionary note in mind, it might be useful to assume (1) a *latency phase* in which the comparison is used inadvertently and only occasionally creates excitement; next (2) a *thematization phase* in which the offensive potential of the comparison is discovered and publicly discussed; then (3) a *dynamization phase* in which public sensitivity to the comparison grows and—subsequently—its use value for provocative purposes also increases; this might be followed by (4) a *routinization or ritualization phase* in which the practice is continued for a while, but its use value decreases because more and more people now regard it as mere word play, or satire, and ultimately become bored; which might lead (5) to a *vanishing phase* in which the comparison in question loses its potential to hurt and—possibly—disappears.

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