JOACHIM PRINZ, THE SOUTH, AND THE ANALOGY OF NAZISM

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Posterity has been unfair to Joachim Prinz (1902–1988). As president of the American Jewish Congress, he was assigned a slot on the program of the March on Washington in 1963. An electrifying orator, he was considered so suitable for prime time that he was granted the penultimate speaking slot on the program, which meant that to top his effect upon an audience required the thundering eloquence of Martin Luther King Jr., who gave the speech of his life. It might also have seemed mischievous (though hardly intentional) for the program committee to have scheduled Prinz immediately after the equally dazzling gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. Such arrangements may help to explain why few remember or know the name of the speaker who immediately preceded King. Typical of such exclusion is the “I Have a Dream” anniversary issue of *Time*. It emphasized how “integrated” the gathering was and stressed that “speaker after speaker — the young John Lewis, the aged A. Philip Randolph — made the case for racial justice.” Yet the only white orator in the lineup was Prinz, whom *Time* did not mention in its retrospective account of the August 28, 1963, event. Not even the Smithsonian Institution website, which provides an excellent, brief oral history of the march and its program, refers to Prinz.

Obscurity has dogged him in other ways as well, consigning to near-oblivion the German-born rabbi who escaped Nazi Germany to find a home in the United States. He was an icon of embattled liberal Judaism under the Third Reich, an exemplar, based in Berlin, of the compatibility of a historic religion with the advances of modernization. But in this respect Leo Baeck, who chaired the Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland in the 1930s, continues to eclipse him. He officiated at the wedding of Prinz’s parents in 1901, and it is Rabbi Baeck’s name that adorns the cultural institution that remains dedicated to preserving the legacy of surely the most scrutinized of the modern Diaspora communities devastated in the Holocaust. That Baeck had also survived the concentration camp of Theresienstadt fortified his status as the personification of German Jewry in all its tragic grandeur. In 1958 Prinz became president of the American Jewish Congress, and at its annual meeting that year he insisted that Reverend King be the keynote speaker. Because the convention was

held in Miami, the arrangement was unprecedented; never before had King spoken to a predominantly white audience in the South. Yet in public memory the refugee rabbi most associated with the civil rights movement is not Joachim Prinz but Abraham Joshua Heschel. In 1965 Heschel famously marched in the front line from Selma to Montgomery and is sprinkled with the stardust of a close personal connection with King himself. Both Baeck and Heschel exhibited the dignity of erudition as well as an aura of self-abnegating saintliness.

Prinz also suffers in another way when compared to Heschel, who was celebrated for his skill in portraying the condition of souls on fire, with the injection of divine mysteries into the mundane texture of experience. Prinz’s vocation was also religious. But he could not convincingly convey the intensity of the interior life; nor does a posthumously published memoir report whether Prinz waged any struggle with the inner demons that test the authority of faith itself. The rational features of liberal Judaism had dominated his approach to the demands of faith. The most profound religious experience that Prinz claimed to have ever felt was a civic rather than a sacred occasion, and it was the March on Washington.

Prinz served for nearly four decades in the pulpit of Temple B’nai Abraham in Newark and then in nearby Livingston. But did that make him the most prominent Jewish clergyman in New Jersey? That distinction belonged to another foreign-born rabbi, Arthur Hertzberg, of Temple Emanu-El in Englewood. Like Prinz, Hertzberg served as president of the American Jewish Congress and also as vice-president of the World Jewish Congress. A more prolific writer and scholar, Hertzberg was a public intellectual, an academic, and a controversialist who contributed to the *New York Review of Books*. His works, especially on Zionism, are still cited and assigned.

Yet Prinz did lead a remarkable public life, and Philip Roth rendered it in a fictional guise in rewriting Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935) in the form of a chilling counterfactual history. *The Plot against America* (2004) is a novel in which Prinz makes a cameo appearance as a fierce and gallant opponent of homegrown fascism. He is depicted as confronting Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, a figure so sordidly submissive to fictional President Charles A. Lindbergh that the beleaguered Jewish minority is betrayed. “Before Rabbi Bengelsdorf’s rise to national prominence, Rabbi Prinz’s authority among Jews throughout the city, in the wider Jewish community, and among scholars and theologians of every religion had far exceeded his elder

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colleague’s,” Roth wrote, “and it was he alone of the Conservative rabbis leading the city’s three wealthiest congregations who had never flinched in his opposition to Lindbergh.” At least the novelist got Prinz’s political consciousness right, for he had indeed publicly opposed the shortsighted isolationism of the America First Committee, which had opposed efforts to intervene in a global war that the United States was presumably unprepared to win against the Axis.4

Prinz’s own Judaism was charmingly heterodox. He cared much less for personal observance than for democratic commitment. He doubted the efficacy of prayer, and he promoted education in the Jewish heritage more energetically than he championed the primacy of religious law. He sought to instill an appreciation of peoplehood, but he did not articulate a notion of the chosenness of any particular nation. His religion was temperate and rational instead of romantic or pietistic. Temple B’nai Abraham was formally unaffiliated with any denomination, although in ritual the synagogue was generally Conservative; and there even the observance of the Sabbath tended to bleed rather seamlessly into the rest of the week. The laws of kosher food were a way of separating Jews from their neighbors. Despite the dietary prohibition that historically classifies shellfish as unclean, Prinz loved eating lobsters.5

That delicacy, it is safe to speculate, was unavailable in the tiny Upper Silesian village of Burkhardsdorf (now Bierdzan), where he was born. His was the only Jewish family. Although his parents were thoroughly assimilated, Prinz was somehow inspired while still an adolescent to become a rabbi. As he grew to manhood, his resistance to an obtuse patriarchy, to bourgeois smugness, and to the bellicose patriotism of his native land activated an impassioned commitment to emancipatory modernism. Formally ordained in 1929, he had already begun his career preaching and teaching three years earlier at the Friedenstempel in Berlin. But as early as 1915, Max Weber had devised a term applicable to Prinz’s talent: charisma. Thousands flocked to hear him speak; the synagogue was usually packed. Yet while imbibing Weimar culture, he was fascinated with the United States and became “Americanized” long before he could have seriously imagined becoming an American. In the 1920s he had already learned English. Without apparently having read the works of John Dewey, Prinz became a champion of experiential learning. As a teacher (which is, of course, what “rabbi” means), he inserted within the Jewish cultural history that he taught figures who were usually
considered to be on the margins of the community, like Jesus and Spinoza. Prinz was also clean-shaven when all of Berlin’s other rabbis wore beards. To sum up the persona of this dashing and informal young rabbi, Weber may have devised a word. But postwar America would have termed Prinz, a rabbi born in the twentieth century, hip. He was a man of faith, a man of the cloth, but he was also — to put it bluntly — a man. Despite the moral clarity of the Seventh Commandment, he persuaded his wife, the former Lucie Horovitz, to agree to an open marriage. The couple scorned bourgeois sexual hypocrisy. After all, they lived in a city that, among all the European capitals of the 1920s, ranked second only to Paris in celebrating such freedom. His memoirs include a fond reminiscence about one bout of sex in an open field, during which he claims to have recalled a key passage in Kant’s *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. Such philosophical influences, it might be added, were not unique to Prinz, who was hardly alone in feeling the immense authority of German learning. For instance, even former Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann, when he was put on trial in Jerusalem in 1961, though a high school dropout was able to give a reasonably accurate definition of the categorical imperative.

The patrimony of Germany included a dense and formidable high culture, and Prinz therefore exalted in it. He loved his native language too. But his rebellious nature exempted him from delusions that, for so many other German Jews, would prove deadly. He refused to sing the German national anthem. Something about the Fatherland antagonized him — perhaps its history of an excessive appreciation of authority. Resisting that political legacy, Prinz became an early and lifelong Zionist and regarded Jewish nationalism as indispensable to Jewish resilience and resistance. Yet he did not consider settling in Palestine, possibly because of the cosmopolitanism that animated his own religious sensibility as well.

His private life underwent transformation even as democracy was emitting its death-rattle. Prinz’s wife died in 1931, and he married Hilde Goldschmidt the following year. They had five children. Prinz also foresaw, even as many of his fellow Jews were luxuriating in the anything-goes aura of the Weimar Republic, that their existence on German soil was doomed. They could flourish only temporarily under conditions that Martin Heidegger pejoratively described in 1929 as an injection of Jewishness (*Verjudung*), an atmosphere that upended the rigidities as well as the verities of prewar Germany. But Prinz foresaw that the republic was dancing on the edge of a volcano. After
it erupted in 1933, he was taken several times to the offices of the
Gestapo and was twice taken into custody and jailed. In 1937, when
together with his second wife and their children he bade farewell to
the Jewish community in Berlin, Eichmann sat in the audience to
monitor him.\footnote{Prinz, \textit{Rebellious Rabbi}, 86, 92, 168-69.}

The nation that granted Prinz and his family refuge elicited ambiva-
lence, however. His feelings did not consist only of gratitude and ad-
miration. He was aware that the United States was considerably east
of Eden, and he dismissed the culture of his new asylum as philistine.
Formed in the crucible of Weimar modernism and avant-garde art,
Prinz found disappointing even the furniture in the homes he visited.
He considered it unfortunate that the chairs and tables showed no
evidence of the influence of Bauhaus. He found “hardly any knowl-
gedge of art in architecture, sculpture, and painting.” Newark itself was
“very ugly,” and the search for beauty was easily frustrated. Prinz’s
dispirited reaction to the “very empty” character of the United States
could not be disguised, and his new neighbors “resented the fact that
we did not admire America more openly and profoundly than we
did.”\footnote{Prinz, \textit{Rebellious Rabbi}, 161, 191, 192, 214.} But he did enjoy the support of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, who
was the de facto leader of American Jewry. Wise impressed Prinz with
his sonorous oratorical power, his ardent Zionism, and his political
astuteness, as well as his attentiveness to desperate refugee families
such as Prinz’s own. Wise helped Prinz to obtain a job at Temple
B’nai Abraham when he was so destitute that he had to borrow the
railroad fare to Newark and back to New York City. But he often
scorned other Jews whom he met as uncultivated, vulgar, and even
bigoted. Too few were curious about the outside world, in his view.
Prinz thought they were ignorant of Hebrew, and shockingly devoid
of the trappings of \textit{Bildung}, the ideal of self-cultivation and refined
breeding that had bewitched Germany Jewry for a century.\footnote{Prinz, \textit{Rebellious Rabbi}, 190-96, 211-14.}

Perhaps the most demoralizing encounter occurred in 1937 in At-
lanta, long before its business and political leaders boasted that it
was a “city too busy to hate.” There Prinz was invited to speak
to Zionist groups. Before the event, he had wanted to meet Willis
Jefferson King, an African American specialist on the poetry of the
Hebrew Bible and a former student at the American School for Ori-
ental Research in Palestine. King was a Methodist bishop who was
serving as president of Atlanta’s Gammon Theological Seminary, and
Prinz suggested that they dine together at his hotel. “He hesitated,”
Prinz recalled, “saying that it would be more advisable if we would
take dinner in my room rather than in the hotel dining room. I did not quite understand the meaning of his words.” Prinz was too naïve to grasp how systematically segregation was enforced. But when he met afterwards with his Jewish hosts, one of them made that code clear to their German-born guest: “I understand that you visited that nigger in the black seminary, and somebody told me that you invited him to have dinner with you tonight.” Prinz was stunned. But he was not entirely speechless, and he told his hosts how appalled he was that Jews, who were “the classic victims of racial persecution,” could be racist. He also compared the fate of southern blacks to what the Jewish people were then experiencing in Europe. Embarrassment and silence followed, an atmosphere that one member of the Jewish group tried to remedy by offering Prinz a drink. He accepted the gesture, and under the circumstances expected — and needed — a very strong beverage. Instead, he was rather ungenerously given a glass of Coca-Cola. Prinz’s memoir claims that he never again sipped a Coke.14

One year later, the Wehrmacht marched into Austria, and then into the Sudetenland, and then conquered the rest of Czechoslovakia. During that period Prinz promoted U.S. interventionism, from the pulpit and through the American Jewish Congress. But he sensed that too few American Jews shared his sense of urgency, and his appeals could gain little traction. And the war came. The account in Prinz’s memoir of the impact of the global conflict is surprisingly brief. That he had managed to survive while so many of his own relatives and millions of his co-religionists were exterminated was a horror that haunted him. His warnings had been unheeded, his worst nightmares realized. But like even the most astute and best-informed American Jews of his time, Prinz did not devise any means to try to decelerate the slaughter; and on the home front he devoted himself to ministering to his congregants in Newark and increasingly to the organizational agenda of the American Jewish Congress, the most progressive of the Jewish defense agencies. In the postwar era, even after decades of living in New Jersey, Prinz and his wife continued to speak German to one another; and their summer vacations were spent in Europe.15

Weimar culture had promoted a spirit of forbearance and a rejection of rigid moralism, and such stances were evident in Prinz’s attitude toward the best-known member of his synagogue. That congregant was also Newark’s most notorious Jew: Abner Zwillman, the 6’2” mobster who had been a charter member of Murder,
Inc., the loosely organized syndicate that specialized in bootlegging, drug-peddling, numbers-running, vice, and other crimes. Murder, Inc., emerged during Prohibition and included enforcers whose tasks were homicidal — usually against other gangsters. Zwillman’s boyhood nickname, “Longy,” may have been derived from Jewish pushcart peddlers, whose vulnerability to marauding Irish toughs compelled these merchants to yell for help from the tall one and his gang (“Ruf dem Lang!” in Yiddish). Zwillman “was one of the most interesting men I ever met,” Rabbi Prinz recalled. “Soft-spoken, well read, very hospitable, and charitable, he governed city and state and many others affairs with some degree of dignity, and certainly no signs of violence.” For virtually every immigrant group, crime had offered the prospect of upward mobility; and Jews like Zwillman were sometimes seen as protectors of the community when legal processes were dubious or corrupt. In 1959, when the king of the New Jersey underworld was found hanged under very mysterious circumstances, Prinz felt obliged to perform the funeral. Whatever Longy Zwillman’s crimes, Prinz believed he merited Jewish rites. The deceased had been born and had died a Jew and had been generous when financial help was needed. Prinz did skip the eulogy, which he said would have required “mentioning facts … that were not flattering.”

Four years later Prinz stood before the Lincoln Memorial, as the personification of the connection between the recent German past and southern race relations. He began by announcing to the crowd of at least two hundred thousand: “I speak to you as an American Jew.” But he was not only that; and he claimed to have learned that, while serving as a rabbi under the Nazis, silence “in the face of brutality” was “shameful” and “disgraceful.” Prinz therefore urged America not to repeat the sin of indifference and neutrality. His remarks were pithy and salient, a harbinger of increased attention that scholars and ethicists would give to the problem of the bystander. Prinz thus suggested an affinity, a symbolic link that can be understood as lending special poignancy to his speech in Washington in 1963. He exemplified an enduring progressivism that the nation’s First Lady had recognized when Rabbi Wise’s daughter, Justine Wise Polier, stayed overnight as a guest in the White House. “When people are in trouble,” Eleanor Roosevelt remarked to her in the fall of 1941, “whether it’s the Dust Bowl or the miners — whoever it is, and I see the need for help, the first people who come forward and try to offer help are the Jews.”

By 1963 the momentum of that liberalism, which Prinz had first enunciated in Germany, was not depleted; and younger Jews in particular were conspicuous in the struggle for racial equality. During Freedom Summer in 1964, about half of the volunteers who worked on voting rights and similar causes in Mississippi are estimated to have been Jews. The decade of the March on Washington would end in turmoil, however, with heightened Jewish fears of the implications of black radicalism and black anti-Semitism, as well as the rising threat of black crime. In a letter to King in the aftermath of rioting in Newark, Prinz reasserted his commitment to civil rights. But he urged King to join others in “the responsible Negro leadership ... to speak up clearly and unequivocally on the tragic crime of Negro anti-Semitism.” At the National Mall four years earlier, Prinz reminded King, “I condemned silence of the American white community. I now condemn silence on the part of the Negro leadership.” But with regret Prinz reported that Temple B’nai Abraham would be moving away from Newark, the home of the synagogue for over a century.

Prinz’s congregation could scarcely have remained immune to pressures that were affecting so many other synagogues and to the larger pattern of white flight. But Temple B’nai Abraham managed to persist as the most resistant of Newark’s major synagogues to the process of suburbanization, which marked not only the growing affluence of congregants but also offered them a measure of security. The social problems associated with the inner city, which had been building for generations, stood no chance of being immediately solved; nor was there sufficient political will to do so. Thus, the relocation to the suburb of Livingston took on a glum air of inevitability, well before Prinz died. That move occurred a decade after the March on Washington. While still in Newark, on his way to the synagogue, Prinz himself had become the victim of a holdup. He tried to placate the mugger by telling him, “I’ll have you know I marched with Dr. King.” The response was (and here I must paraphrase): “I really don’t care who your physician is; just hand over the money.” He did.

The March on Washington deserves its place as a milestone in the progression toward greater democratic inclusion. In the decades immediately after the Second World War, grisly evidence had been accumulating about the policies of the Third Reich; and the implications for the United States could not be entirely suppressed. Postwar racism came with a warning label, which Rabbi Prinz had incarnated in 1963. By coincidence the only other Jew who participated in the

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20 Joachim Prinz to Martin Luther King, Jr., September 8, 1967, in Joachim Prinz Papers, MS-673, Box 3, Folder 7, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.
program that day, troubadour Bob Dylan, also invoked the recent German past, though much more indirectly. That same month he had composed a song that he (and Joan Baez) sang at the Lincoln Memorial, “When the Ship Comes In,” a song almost certainly indebted to the vengeful fantasy that “Die Seeräuberjenny” reveals in Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s cynical conflation of respectability and criminality, Die Dreigroschenoper (1928).22 Whatever the Weimar antecedents of Dylan’s verses, with its warnings of retribution and apocalypse, new questions were posed about the implications of the evil indigenous to the Third Reich. Would its history also affect consciousness of the evil of Jim Crow? How could the persecution of one minority in Europe provoke outrage while discrimination against another minority at home could induce passivity, silence, and rationalization?

Segregation was once believed to be impregnable, and southern white attitudes were presumed to be immutable. Hadn’t Alabama Governor George C. Wallace warned in 1963 that, if the civil rights bill that Congress was contemplating were passed, American troops would have to be withdrawn from West Berlin and from Indochina to keep order among his fellow southerners?23

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But soon what was once deemed impervious to political, legal, and social change became unacceptable. In the dichotomy of the sociologist William Graham Sumner, the “folkways” of the region yielded to the “state-ways” irradiating from Washington. The impossibility of reconciling the value of equality with the practice of Jim Crow instigated the crisis of civil rights that erupted in the 1960s. In that decade the federal government demanded that the region live according to the American Creed and conform more closely to the civic patterns of the rest of the republic. Because the spokesmen for the South — as well as those who claimed to know its habits so intimately — had commonly anticipated the most violent sort of resistance, the mystery that historians must solve is how such expectations were invalidated. Several reasons can be given. But perhaps awareness of the genocide that had been perpetrated against European Jewry must be factored in. The influence of the Shoah cannot be conclusively proven. No single figure or institution pushing hard for racial justice was decisively shaped by the knowledge or the memory of the Final Solution. Scrupulous scholars may well conclude that the evidentiary base of


23  J. Hoberman, The Dream Life (New York, 2003), 84.
the argument is thin. Indeed, it is more a matter of atmospherics, of inference rather than induction. But a case is tenable.

That is the symbolic importance of Joachim Prinz. At the National Mall he alone cited and represented the parallel that was becoming expressed, the link between Nazi Germany and Jim Crow. He alone specified the danger, based on his background in the Third Reich, of inaction in the face of racial injustice. He alone issued the reminder that systemic prejudice and discrimination had a lethal precedent. The speech that Prinz delivered at the Lincoln Memorial was therefore symptomatic of the growing realization that the consequences of passivity were not unimaginable; historic evidence could be marshaled.

In making such connections, the date that constitutes the most decisive year in the argument presented here is 1960. That was when Israeli agents captured Eichmann in Argentina, and the process by which he was forced to stand trial inaugurated the genuine emergence of Holocaust consciousness. It has become a fundamental feature of the sensibility of Western nations, including the United States as well as Israel. Unlike the war criminals who were prosecuted and convicted in Nuremberg, this particular defendant was associated specifically with the Final Solution — and only with the Final Solution. He therefore embodied the genocide that has never vanished from public memory. The year 1960 is noteworthy for other reasons as well. Elie Wiesel’s memoir of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, *Night*, was also published then (translated from the French). Living mostly in New York, and writing mostly in French, Wiesel happened to have visited the South as a tourist in 1957. The future Nobel laureate wrote of being “struck by its citizens’ courtesy, and the unforgivable humiliation of its blacks. Looking at the ‘Whites Only’ signs,” Wiesel recalled, “I felt ashamed of being white.”24 The first of the sit-ins to attract genuine national attention also began in 1960; what happened in Greensboro became a movement. The civil rights organization that flirted with the greatest danger in the struggle against racial segregation was also founded in 1960: the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Something was happening to establish a kind of synchrony, a sort of symmetry. The civil rights revolution revealed the truth of what William Faulkner’s village lawyer asserts: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” The memory of the Holocaust could not be entirely expelled from the consciousness of those who struggled for racial justice in the South.

It was also no accident that *Life*, the most popular mass magazine of the era, commissioned Harry Golden to cover the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem. The Charlotte journalist lacked any expertise on the history of the Third Reich (unlike Hannah Arendt, the *New Yorker*’s correspondent in Jerusalem); and in his autobiography Golden admitted that his consciousness of his own ethnicity was thin until the rise of Nazism. Hitler had, in effect, jolted Golden into becoming a Jew. His three best-selling collections of feuilletons, *Only in America* (1958), *For Two Cents Plain* (1959), and *Enjoy, Enjoy!* (1960), address the phenomenon of anti-Semitism; but he barely mentioned the Nazi version. In 1956, his newspaper, the *Carolina Israelite*, had indirectly anticipated the sit-ins by observing that white southerners had no objection to standing next to blacks. Sitting down was an offense to proper race relations, however. Famous for his satirical moral criticism of racial segregation in the region where he lived, Golden was assigned to tell the readers of *Life* how lethal (and not merely how amusing) bigotry could be. He portrayed a defendant who — “despite his ordinary appearance,” indeed the “drabness” of his persona — was “really a stranger, a stranger to the human race.” The trial that Golden covered was bound to raise questions about the commonplace character of evil and to raise doubt that it was a phenomenon confined to the contours of German history.

1960 was significant for yet another reason, because the juxtaposition of the Third Reich and the American South that Prinz would enunciate at the Lincoln Memorial was made explicit in a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* has sold more than 30 million copies since its publication in 1960, and even in the new century continues to sell about 750,000 copies annually. By 1988, according to the National Council of Teachers of English, this novel had been taught in three out of every four public schools in the United States. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been translated into more than forty languages and was named the best American novel of the twentieth century by the nation’s librarians.

In setting her first published book in small-town Alabama in the depths of the Great Depression, Lee did not intend for the evidence of racial injustice to be peripheral. The narrator, Scout Finch, is a motherless 8-year-old girl who realizes the cruelty and sadness that pervade the world that the adults will bequeath to her. One instance is Nazi anti-Semitism, which one of Scout’s teachers, Miss Gates, denounces. The German policy of discrimination against the Jews...
makes no sense, Miss Gates explains, because they “contribute to every society they live in, and most of all, they are a deeply religious people. Hitler’s trying to do away with religion,” she adds, “so maybe he doesn’t like them for that reason.” The teacher cannot acknowledge that the motive behind Nazi policy might not be anti-religious but “racial” prejudice instead, and tells the children, with heavy authorial irony, that the Third Reich differs from the United States because “over here we don’t believe in persecuting anybody.” The sensitive daughter of Atticus Finch, an attorney and honorable man, realizes, however tentatively, that Miss Gates, like other respectable whites in the town of Maycomb, is a hypocrite. Scout has overheard her teacher expressing concern that local blacks are getting uppity, “an’ the next thing they think they can do is marry us.” Such self-delusion, passing for conventional wisdom, was certainly ripe for exposure. Samuel Johnson had done so as early as 1775. Ever since Virginians had led the demand for national independence during the American Revolution, the South had, after all, lived in an active state of hypocrisy. “How is it,” Johnson famously wondered, “that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?” Such paradoxes can often be found in the mind of the South, and To Kill a Mockingbird deftly exposes the effort to distinguish racial from religious prejudice.

Scout’s father cannot even bear to listen to Hitler on the radio and dismisses him as “a maniac.” The town’s one Jewish family, named Levy, qualifies as “fine folks,” and has no reason to any fright in Maycomb akin to the horror that their German coreligionists know. Sam Levy even stands down the Klan with impunity. But no white adult in the town seems able or willing to connect the Nazi cult of “race” to the plight of the black citizens there. The subtle recognition of that cognitive short-circuiting makes To Kill a Mockingbird the canonical text for the argument of this essay, especially because the actual chasm was wider than in this work of fiction. The model for Atticus Finch was the author’s father, a Monroeville lawyer and Methodist elder named A. C. Lee. For most of his life, he regarded segregation as the most congenial way to manage race relations. Sermons that he listened to in church were not so certain; and in 1952 A. C. Lee was urging his own minister to “get off the [preaching of] ‘social justice’ and get back on the Gospel.” But by the time that To Kill a Mockingbird was published, he could not help becoming more aware of the racial injustice surrounding him, and that his daughter’s novel was revealing.
The film adaptation nevertheless makes no reference whatsoever to Nazism. Robert Mulligan’s 1962 movie also muffles the issue of the double standards of Alabama’s whites when the topic of persecution is raised. The cinematic version nevertheless widens even further the distance from historical actuality, because the local attorney whom Gregory Peck played is so idealized. When the American Film Institute ranked the greatest cinematic heroes, Atticus Finch came out #1, ahead of Indiana Jones, for example. Even Harrison Ford, the actor who played Indiana Jones, named To Kill a Mockingbird his all-time favorite film.

Curiously enough, the autobiography of David Duke, the most prominent of recent leaders of the Ku Klux Klan, also cites the impact that Harper Lee’s novel exerted upon him. Duke absorbed its spirit as an eighth grader in New Orleans and claims to have become “a racial egalitarian” who “sympathized with the plight of the Negro.” However, Duke confides that later in adolescence he “saw the light” and achieved notoriety by redefining himself as a Nazi (and still later as a Grand Wizard of the Klan). In 1991, when Duke became a gubernatorial candidate on the Republican ticket, the Louisiana Coalition Against Racism and Nazism was formed to help torpedo his political ambitions. The explicit coupling of those two ideological targets of racism and Nazism might be understood as a replay of the Double-V campaign that civil rights advocates promoted during the Second World War in demanding that the defeat of the Axis could not be separated from the dismantling of Jim Crow. The cofounder of the Louisiana Coalition (and David Duke’s chief adversary within the Republican Party) was a white conservative named Elizabeth Rickey. She happened to be the niece of the Brooklyn Dodgers’ general manager Branch Rickey, who brought an army veteran named Jackie Robinson into major league baseball. They desegregated the national pastime in the very era when the wartime struggle against fascism had raised significant doubts about the acceptability of white supremacy. In the 2013 film about Robinson, Harrison Ford plays Branch Rickey.

The astonishing popularity of To Kill a Mockingbird reinforced such episodes as the speech that Joachim Prinz delivered in Washington. They pointed to the realization, by the early 1960s, that if the ideology of the Third Reich was wrong, then racial discrimination — especially in the South — was wrong. The explosive decade that began with the sit-ins in Greensboro consolidated that deepening awareness. In 1961, in the same year that Adolf Eichmann was put on trial in

Jerusalem, political scientist Raul Hilberg’s monumental study, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, was published. 1961 also marked the release of Stanley Kramer’s *Judgment at Nuremberg*. Kramer was Hollywood’s most staunchly liberal Jewish filmmaker, and he interpreted the moral of his didactic but compelling movie as follows: “An individual is responsible” for what his government does, or fails to do.36 To be sure, no Jewish characters appear in *Judgment at Nuremberg*. Instead, it explores the failure of conventional society to mount an effective resistance to barbarism. Whether apolitical domestics or well-educated judges, German citizens are shown to be so eerily passive as to be virtually paralyzed when the Nazi juggernaut menaces them. Instead of offering resistance, they were bystanders.

Early in 1965 *Judgment at Nuremberg* was shown as ABC’s Sunday Night Movie. But at 9:30 p.m., the telecast was interrupted, as fifteen minutes of shocking footage from Selma, Alabama, was injected into the nation’s living rooms. There Sheriff Jim Clark and his men were shown attacking peaceful civil rights demonstrators. Clark was, according to SNCC chairman John Lewis, “basically no different from a Gestapo officer during the Fascist slaughter of the Jews.” Clark could be heard shouting to the posse: “Get those goddamned niggers. And get those goddamned white niggers.”37 In an era when some Jews were formulating the slogan “Never Again” as the lesson of the Holocaust, Sheriff Clark wore a button on his uniform proclaiming: “Never.” To underscore the need for civil rights legislation, Kramer’s film could not have come at a more fortuitous moment. About 450 clergymen soon descended upon Selma; and Charles Morgan Jr., the southern director of the American Civil Liberties Union, overheard many of the ministers making statements like “*Judgment at Nuremberg* was on for the first time on television,” and “I was watching *Judgment at Nuremberg*, and I just couldn’t stay away. I just had to come.” Among the clergymen who had seen the film on ABC and came to Selma from Boston was the Reverend James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister whom white thugs in the Alabama town beat to death outside an integrated restaurant. They were acquitted,38 as was usually the case when southern whites committed crimes intended to maintain the racial hierarchy.

If the accusation John Lewis made against the constabulary of Selma was overstated, the climate of intimidation and fear was hardly a figment of Lewis’s imagination. Nor was he alone in drawing such a link, which extended from the actualities of the movement to the


precincts of popular culture. In the 1960s the connection between the ideologies of Jim Crow and German Nazism was made even more explicit and was extended to the musical stage. In 1966 *Cabaret* opened on Broadway and would win eight Tony Awards, including the prize for Best Musical. Its connection to the battle for civil rights went beyond the shared initials of Berlin’s tawdry (and fictitious) Kit Kat Klub and the Ku Klux Klan. Producer Harold Prince had initially wanted to end a musical about the collapse of the Weimar Republic with a film clip that showed the demonstrations in Selma, an idea that he scrapped as too obvious. But set designer Boris Aronson came up with something much more imaginative, an immense tilted mirror that reflected the audience itself. Theatergoers were thus forced to stare at themselves as they contemplated the contemporary parallels with the systematic hatred that had triumphed in interwar Germany.

In *Cabaret* the realization of one of the inhabitants of the recreated atmosphere of Berlin (“If you’re not against all this, you’re for it — or you might as well be”) echoes the warning against the price of neutrality that Prinz had issued three years earlier from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. 39

Another indictment of the indifference that Prinz had underscored as ethically repellent came from the University of Mississippi. There historian James W. Silver was operating on the same track of making an analogy between past and present. Silver concluded his book on the stifling orthodoxy of segregationist belief and practice with a plea for awareness; other Americans needed to know the extent of the injustice to which Mississippi was expecting its black citizens to submit. “When present-day German children ask their parents about the Jews, the concentration camps, and the most awful atrocities of this or any century,” he wrote in 1966, “the answer is always the same: ‘We didn’t know these things were going on.’” Silver was dubious, because the violent Judeophobia of Hitler and his National Socialist Party was not disguised. And by recording how wretchedly white Mississippians mistreated the blacks who lived among them, Silver’s book was designed to make that rationale implausible in the rest of the United States. If his state were to confront its past honestly, history textbooks had to be drastically revised to counter the bias that was hardwired into the public memory of white residents. One response to Silver’s plea was *Mississippi: Conflicts and Change* (1974), a high school text written by historians at Tougaloo College and elsewhere. This volume constituted an early effort to correct the myths that comforted generations of whites in the state. The battle

was uphill, and the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund had to file a lawsuit to ensure that the text would be considered for adoption. A dozen publishers rejected the work. But André Schiffrin, a French-born Jew whose family had escaped German occupation in 1940, was hospitable; and he served as the managing director of Pantheon Books, based in New York. *Mississippi: Conflicts and Change* thus became a key text in the regional imperative of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, the struggle to master the past. This volume happened to be the only textbook that Schiffrin ever published, and the following year *Mississippi: Conflicts and Change* won the Lillian Smith Award from the Southern Educational Conference for the best work of nonfiction.\(^4\)

The award was aptly named. During the Depression decade and during the Second World War, Lillian Smith was quite exceptional among white southerners in her willingness to highlight resemblances between the tyranny of the Third Reich and the oppression that was very much closer to home. Her most famous polemic against Jim Crow, *Killers of the Dream* (1949), mixed “concentration camps” like Dachau with “burning crosses and the KKK” to demonstrate “man’s broken faith with himself.”\(^41\) Smith did not merely equate, in a casual way, the Klan and the Brown Shirts, as other white southerners — including editorial writers — occasionally did. She experienced a shock of recognition with what the Nazis were doing to crush dissent and to demonize the enemy within, even though Smith later conceded that she had greatly underestimated the unprecedented turpitude of National Socialism. No jackbooted secret police had come to power in America, after all, as she acknowledged in a 1944 essay. Nevertheless, Smith added, “We make a Gestapo of our fears and become cowards at the sound of our own heart-beat.”\(^42\)

Her sense of foreboding was more forceful than what Wilbur J. Cash, for example, could muster. In *The Mind of the South*, a classic work published in 1941, he called the Klan “an authentic folk movement” that displayed some “kinship” with the German Nazis. But with much of Europe under German rule (or about to be), his gnawing fear was the military threat posed to Western civilization. Cash, who wrote editorials for the Charlotte *News*, did not care to construct parallels, as Smith did, with the *Herrenvolk* philosophy at home. Her sense of dread would be echoed by the North Carolina-born Edward R. Murrow, who had achieved fame at CBS Radio by covering the advance of the Third Reich. By 1961 Murrow had become director of the U.S.

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\(^{41}\) Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (Garden City, NY, 1963), 206.

Information Agency and thus an official propagandist for the Kennedy administration. And yet that year he acknowledged that the climate of intimidation and prejudice in Birmingham reminded him of Nazi Germany.43

Certainly the rise of the Third Reich was not required to expose the problem of how to reconcile white behavior with the ideals of equality and liberty. Yet as early as 1944, with the publication of Gunnar Myrdal’s canonical work on race relations, *An American Dilemma*, doubt had been cast on the prospect that the South could continue to violate the American Creed. Just as Robert Penn Warren would foresee the end of segregation when white southerners realized that they “cannot live with themselves anymore,”44 Myrdal had suspected that the South could not continue indefinitely to violate the American Creed. It therefore does seem reasonable to surmise that the shadow of the Holocaust quickened an awareness of what was wrong and made it easier to attach a stigma to racial segregation in the South.

Of course demagogues and other politicians continued to express defiance. From Virginia, where public officials toyed with the discredited antebellum doctrine of interposition, through the hoisting in the Deep South of the tattered battle flag of “nullification,” down to the truculent motto emblazoned on license plates in the Lone Star State (“Don’t Mess with Texas”), the former Confederacy certainly did not yield easily or gracefully to the Constitutional requirement of desegregation. Admittedly, white supremacists showed no inclination to die for the principle of state sovereignty. But some of them were willing to kill to preserve the privileges of white skin. Time had run out, however. The racial policies of the South had become so indefensible that bipartisan federal legislation was enacted to prevent the region from continuing to pursue its *Sonderweg*. The United States could no longer countenance a distinctive set of racial mores; and these domestic disgraces had to be eliminated, or at least moderated.

A paradox nevertheless needs to be noted. By the end of the 1960s, the deepening distaste for the escalating war in Vietnam dramatically undercut the prestige of the military; and its virtues no longer seemed as attractive as in the past. Yet the following historical curiosity needs to be recorded: the region that was being increasingly compared to elements of Nazism had also produced many of the very soldiers who were decisive in crushing the Third Reich. To be sure, few of the troops who had landed in North Africa and Italy and France

presumably did so in order to extirpate racism, which Allied leaders had not declared to be an official war aim. Very few of the GIs who marched through Germany had read about Nazi racial doctrine in Mein Kampf (which had not been fully translated into English until 1939). American military commanders generally took for granted the durability of the structure of white supremacy. At least they declined to champion the cause of desegregation, whether in the armed services or in civilian life. The architect of victory in the Second World War was a Virginian, George C. Marshall; and to lead the crusade in Europe, he picked a Texan, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Neither of these commanders could be considered an advocate of racial equality. As Army Chief of Staff, Marshall had at first resisted the reorientation of the military to solve “a social problem” that civilians had failed to redress. “Experiments” like desegregation of military units, Marshall added, would endanger “efficiency, discipline, and morale.” Eisenhower would also testify against the policy that President Harry Truman initiated to desegregate the armed forces, and neither in nor out of uniform did “Ike” demonstrate any sympathy for black Americans in their efforts to end discrimination.45

The paradox merits emphasis. One of the acquitted murderers of Emmett Till, who had reportedly whistled at a white woman in Mississippi in 1955, was J. W. Milam. He was a much-decorated combat veteran of the European theater of operations. “For heroic achievement in action” during the week that began on D-Day, Strom Thurmond of South Carolina was awarded a Bronze Star; he also fought in the Battle of the Bulge. Thurmond also entered the concentration camp of Buchenwald not long after it was liberated,46 and three years later he would become the Dixiecrats’ candidate for the presidency. George Wallace had served in the Pacific theater. But at least privately he took a revisionist stance toward the Second World War that makes his role equivocal: “I’m sorry it was necessary for us to fight against those anti-Communist nations. I thought that back then. Hell, we should have been in those trenches with the Germans … fightin’ them Bolsheviks.” Perhaps any American who would have preferred his fellow combatants to join on the side of the Third Reich in the no-holds-barred bloodbath of Operation Barbarossa deserved no less than the swastika that caricaturist David Levine drew on Wallace’s chin.47 But the role of white southerners in liberating Europe from Axis occupation should nevertheless be credited, even though they stemmed from a region that would find its racial policies increasingly difficult to justify.


46 Jack Bass and Marilyn W. Thompson, Of! Strom: An Unauthorized Biography of Strom Thurmond (Atlanta, 1998), 75-76.

The Second World War must be understood as, in part, a propaganda battle that pitted the ideals of Western democracy against the twisted malice of Aryan doctrine. The repugnance generated by what the Nazis did should not be identified as the single most important pressure point in corroding the defense of racial segregation, but the rules of engagement between blacks and whites would thereafter be altered. The connection that Joachim Prinz adumbrated at the March on Washington in August 1963 constituted only one factor in that shift in attitudes, and it was not decisive. But the shadow of Nazism did help ensure that the once-solid South — cohesive and defiant in its opposition to desegregation — became more receptive to change than had earlier been imagined.

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