# Historical events as 'Magic Yarn Balls': towards productive engagements with historical analogies

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# Historical Events as 'Magic Yarn Balls'
## *Towards Productive Engagements with Historical Analogies*

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## Abstract

Historical analogies are widely invoked to characterize contemporary events. As we argue that historians should play a central role in assessing these analogies, or at least, that history should offer organized models to think about them, we present a framework for productively engaging with historical analogies in the public debate, policy discussions and elsewhere. First, we introduce the 'magic yarn ball' as a central metaphor to capture the textured complexity of historical phenomena in terms of similarity and difference. Second, we propose a general framework inspired by this metaphor to engage with historical analogies, centered on interrogation, individuation, and prospection. We apply our model by assessing analogies between the appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor of Germany in 1933 and the inauguration of US president Donald Trump in 2017.

## Keywords

In recent years, historical analogies have been invoked widely to characterize key contemporary events. In 2019–2020, following the outbreak of Covid-19, many analogies were drawn to past pandemics, ranging from the 14th-century 'Black Death' to the 'Spanish flu' of 1918–1919.[1] In the Summer of 2021, the withdrawal of the US-led military coalition from Afghanistan led several commentators to characterize the latter as a 'graveyard of empires', a place where old and new empires were decisively defeated, precipitating their demise.[2] And following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, various actors invoked analogies with Nazi Germany and the Second World War. For example, while Putin spoke of an intended 'denazification' of Ukraine to legitimize the invasion,[3] European and American commentators alike referred to Putin's regime as a fascist dictatorship engaging in a colonial war of destruction reminiscent of Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.[4]

Since these and other analogies can significantly shape our understanding of contemporary events and influence public policy, a central task for historians lies in critically engaging with these analogies. Historians can do so by highlighting the longer history of the phenomena under discussion, while also demonstrating how the present is rooted in, but still distinct from, the past. However, this endeavor also can prove to be challenging, since, while historical analogies can illuminate important aspects of both the past and the present, they can also hamper a nuanced understanding of the situation at hand. A key challenge, therefore, lies in finding productive modes of engagement with historical analogies.

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1   See for example: G. Kolata, "Covid Will Be an Era, Not a Crisis That Fades." *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/12/health/when-will-covid-end.html, October 12, 2021 (accessed May 25, 2023); J.M. Barry, "What We Can Learn From How the 1918 Pandemic Ended." *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/opinion/covid-pandemic -end.html, January 31, 2022 (accessed May 25, 2023).

2   See for example: K. Baker, "The Old Cliché About Afghanistan That Won't Die." *Politico Magazine*, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/28/afghanistan-graveyard-bri tain-us-russia-506990, August 28, 2021 (accessed May 25, 2023).

3   M. Berger, "Russian President Vladimir Putin Says He Will 'Denazify' Ukraine. Here's the History behind That Claim." *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/ 2022/02/24/putin-denazify-ukraine/, February 24, 2022 (accessed May 25, 2023).

4   The highlighted analogies vary in quality and applicability. Example: whereas Putin's invocation of 'denazification' can clearly be identified as political instrumentalization, the observation that Russia is engaging in a colonial war of destruction reminiscent of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 bears a lot of merit. See for example the characterization provided by historian Timothy Snyder in his public lecture series on the history of Ukraine: T. Snyder, "Timothy Snyder: The Making of Modern Ukraine. Class 23. the Colonial, the Post-Colonial, the Global." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLfFmYWjHtc, December 7, 2022 (accessed May 25, 2023).

Inspiration for such an endeavor can be found in existing scholarship, especially concerning public policy making, where attempts have already been undertaken to promote critical engagements with historical analogies. A good example is the work of Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, who formulated recommendations on how to incorporate historical reflection in decision-making based on a critical assessment of domestic and international policy crises in US history.[5] However, most available studies, including this one, adopt a different focus than we do here: they provide a critical analysis of how decision-makers have adopted historical analogies in the past, sometimes including advice for doing so to decision-makers in the present who hope to 'learn from history'.[6] We, instead, focus on a methodological discussion of how historical analogies presented in the public debate, during policy discussions and elsewhere, can be used responsibly and productively. We introduce such a methodological discussion in light of the recent (re)emergence of applied historical scholarship, to offer historians, but also journalists, policy makers and the wider public, an organized framework for analogical historical reasoning.[7] We feel that such a framework is necessary to better inform policy discussions and the public debate, in light of the prevalence of, often misguided and deceitful, historical analogies, as highlighted above.

In what follows, we first introduce our overarching methodological framework, centered on a metaphorical intervention and three steps to take when engaging in analogous historical reasoning. Second, we apply this framework to an analogy that has featured prominently in North American and European discourse in particular over the past few years: the one between the election and inauguration of Donald Trump as US president on January 20, 2017, and the process toward the appointment of Adolf Hitler as German Reich chancellor on January 30, 1933.[8] Given that Trump's presidential inauguration and

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5   R.E. Neustadt and E.R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

6   See for example: A. Hehir, "The Impact of Analogical Reasoning on US Foreign Policy Towards Kosovo." *Journal of Peace Research* 43 (1) (2016), 67–81; K. Prémont, C.P. David and V. Boucher, "The Clash of Historical Analogies and Their Influence on Decision-Making: The Case of Iraqi Reconstruction Under George W. Bush." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 29 (2) (2018), 298–327.

7   See for example the editorial by Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum in the first issue of this journal: H. Kaal and J. van Lottum, "Editorial." *Journal of Applied History* 1 (1–2) (2020), 1–3.

8   See for example: CBS News, "Donald Trump Increasingly Compared to Adolf Hitler." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yr46_vWZJE, March 8, 2016 (accessed February 14, 2023); J. Onyanga-Omara, "German Magazine 'Stern' Criticized for 'Nazi' Trump Cover." *USA Today*, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/08/25/german-magazine-stern-criticized-trump-cover/601364001/, August 25, 2018 (accessed May 25, 2023). For an analogy between Donald Trump's contestation of the 2020 US presidential election and Hitler's political strat-

the rise of Trumpism has repeatedly been identified as a threat to US democracy similar to the one posed to German democracy by Hitler's rise to power in 1933, it is worth analyzing to what extent these developments are similar or different, and how that exercise can help assess to what extent US democracy may be on the verge of collapse, and where, specifically, one might want to fortify democratic institutions and norms. However, we want to emphasize that the Trump-Hitler analogy serves as an exemplary case first and foremost, and that our framework is open to any historical analogy, including other Hitler-analogies. Theoretically, we follow the Aristotelian definition of an analogy as premised on proportion ("A is to B as C is to D"), in which analogy is a comparison between two relations, and not between two terms. We also build on existing scholarship about what Andreas Leutzsch describes as forms of 'historical prefiguration', by identifying a historical analogy as a deliberately constructed relationship of similarity between a past and present occurrence, drawn for political or educational purposes.[9]

## 1        'Magic Yarn Balls': Towards a Framework for Productive Engagement with Historical Analogies

Considering the prevalence of historical analogies, in public discourse and beyond, we first want to introduce the 'magic yarn ball' as a key metaphor to discuss historical phenomena. A magic yarn ball comes from the world of craft knitting, where hobbyists and craft artists have introduced it as a creative way to engage with leftover yarn from earlier knitting projects (Figure 1). Whenever someone has completed a knitting project and is left with threads that are too short and no longer useful for a new endeavor, a way to avoid wasting these threads is to join them using invisible yarn joining techniques into new continuous and multicolored balls.[10] When discussing historical phenomena, as a broader category encompassing historical events, actors and processes, we

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egy, see the following contribution by American comedian and political commentator Bill Maher: Real Time with Bill Maher (HBO), "New Rule: The Slow-Moving Coup." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cR4fXcsu9w, October 9, 2021 (accessed February 14, 2023).

9   A. Leutzsch, "Introduction: Prefiguring Future by Constructing History." In *Historical Parallels, Commemoration and Icons*, ed. A. Leutzsch (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 1–11.

10  See for example: My Poppet Makes, "Make A Giant Magic Yarn Ball from Yarn Scraps." https://mypoppet.com.au/makes/make-a-giant-magic-yarn-ball-from-yarn-scraps/, February 24, 2020 (accessed February 14, 2023).

FIGURE 1
Example of a number of 'magic yarn balls'
(shown here in the form of a 'pom pom')
SOURCE: MY POPPET MAKES, "LET'S
MAKE SCRAP YARN POM POMS."
HTTPS://MYPOPPET.COM.AU/MAKES/
HOW-TO-MAKE-SCRAP-YARN-POM
-POMS/, NOVEMBER 5, 2020 (ACCESSED
MAY 25, 2023). © MYPOPPET, 2023

argue that a 'magic yarn ball' can serve as a compelling metaphorical manifestation of these, in a twofold manner.[11]

First, magic yarn balls illustrate how historical events, actors and processes can be characterized as inherently complex phenomena in which various historically contingent occurrences, unfolding through different temporalities, coalesce, in ways that are both similar and different from past and future events, actors and processes.[12] Magic yarn balls are made up of multiple threads that vary in terms of length, thickness and color, illustrating this complexity. In particular, it makes magic yarn balls interesting *visual* reference points when thinking about how historical phenomena compare, as is usually suggested through historical analogies. When placed next to one another, magic yarn balls

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11    For earlier conceptual work on the notion '(historical) event' in particular, see for example: W.H. Sewell, "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille." *Theory and Society* 25 (6) (1996), 841–881; R. Wagner-Pacifi, *What Is an Event?* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017); J. Sonnevend, *Stories Without Borders: The Berlin Wall and the Making of a Global Iconic Event* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

12    Here, we refer to the understanding of different temporalities as first introduced by French historian Fernand Braudel. See for example: F. Braudel and I. Wallerstein, "History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée." *Review* (*Fernand Braudel Center*) 32 (2) (2009), 171–203.

can be characterized as both similar and different: they can be made up of threads of similar colors and combinations, but at the same time, the hand-craft that is characteristic of hobbyist knitting results in yarn balls that are fully unique.

As such, magic yarn balls illustrate what historians aim to achieve when critically juxtaposing historical phenomena: they do not want to show whether the latter are straightforwardly similar or different. Instead, historians strive to systematically lay bare *layered configurations of* similarity and difference. From the perspective of applied history especially, this measured approach to historical analogies serves as a necessary starting point: even when keeping in mind the inherent tentativeness and fallibility of historical analysis, only a layered assessment of past phenomena can lead to proper understanding of contemporary challenges. In addition, using the 'magic yarn ball'-metaphor to demonstrate layered historical configuration is of particular significance when introducing this complexity to those unfamiliar with a historical perspective. By introducing a concept that at first seems disconnected from historical analysis, discussing historical phenomena in terms of magic yarn balls, can help build up the idea of a layered approach to historical analysis in people's minds from the ground up, potentially solidifying its significance.[13]

Second, from a deconstructionist historical point of view, a 'magic yarn ball' serves as a reminder that human understandings of historical phenomena are fundamentally constructed—turning any historical analogy into a tentative point of reflection at best.[14] Just as a magic yarn ball only comes into existence through a human knitting effort, historical phenomena do so as well, since they

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13    Here, we draw from Chris Anderson's argument about the significance of 'rebuilding an idea inside the minds' of a public: C. Anderson, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* (London and Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2018), 11–21. Anderson's argument builds on the work of neuroscientist Uri Hasson. See for example: G.J. Stephens, L.J. Silbert and U. Hasson, "Speaker-Listener Neural Coupling Underlies Successful Communication." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107 (32) (2010), 14425–30. This insight also connects to the observation made by historian J. Fernández-Sebastián, who highlights that "[...] great metaphors—by applying the characteristics of one object to another [to reveal] unsuspected aspects of the first via attributes of the second object—have the capacity [...] to unveil hidden meanings and, thus, construct new concepts through the kaleidoscope of analogical intuitions [...]." See: J. Fernández-Sebastián, "The Tapestry of History: Parallels, Analogies, Metaphors." In *Historical Parallels, Commemoration and Icons*, ed. A. Leutzsch (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 75.

14    For a discussion of a deconstructionist approach to history, which challenges, among other things, an empiricist epistemology and a correspondence between language and truth, see for example: A. Munslow, *Narrative and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

are actively identified by contemporaries and historians, and travel through time and space via efforts at transmedia narration and memorialization.[15] An interesting etymological connection can be established here, since expressions such as 'to spin a yarn', in the meaning of 'to tell a story', point to a long linguistic and cultural trajectory that frames storytelling in terms of spinning, knitting and weaving. For example, the words 'texture' and 'textile' are etymologically close to 'text', the product of metaphorical weaving.[16] Being aware of the constructed nature of historical phenomena serves as an important reminder of the significance of uncertainty in history, while it also urges scholars to carefully consider the inherent pitfalls of historical narration. As highlighted by Hayden White, Aroop Mukharji, James Wertsch and others, historical narration attributes coherence and imposes literary conventions on historical phenomena;[17] integrates 'explanation bias', i.e. a tendency to "assess greater certainty about historical causality than the evidence justifies;"[18] and relies on standardized narrative 'templates' and 'scripts', i.e. preconceived sequences of human action,[19] which are projected onto other events. Famous examples are narratives on the rise and fall of civilizations, politicians 'blindly wandering' into catastrophe (i.e. in 1914),[20] and the danger of 'appeasement' in light of dictatorial aggression (i.e. the 'Ghost of Munich').[21] A magic yarn ball serves as a visible reminder that these templates and scripts are constructions, and that historical analogies, even when introduced measuredly, are destined to only ever be tentative, in need of constant revision.

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15    Sewell, "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille"; Wagner-Pacifi, *What Is an Event?*; Sonnevend, *Stories Without Borders: The Berlin Wall and the Making of a Global Iconic Event.*

16    S. Schäfer, *Yankee Yarns: Storytelling and the Invention of the National Body in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 14.

17    See for example the seminal work: H.V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

18    For the notion 'explanation bias' and the quote, see: A. Mukharji and R. Zeckhauser, "Bound to Happen: Explanation Bias in Historical Analysis." *Journal of Applied History* 1 (1–2) (2019), 5–27.

19    For the notion '(narrative) template', see: J.V. Wertsch, *How Nations Remember: A Narrative Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). For a discussion of 'scripts' from the perspective of human knowledge structures, see for example: R.C. Schank and R.P. Abelson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures* (Hillsdale NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1977).

20    A key study to introduce this reading of World War I, also in particular in the context of international crises in the nuclear age, is: G.F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875–1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

21    F. Logevall and K. Osgood, "The Ghost of Munich: America's Appeasement Complex." *World Affairs* 173 (2) (2010), 13–26.

To productively engage with any historical analogy, then, in the public debate, policy discussions and beyond, we consider it key to use this understanding of historical phenomena as 'magic yarn balls' as a starting point. Once established, we propose a new framework inspired by our metaphor to reflect on historical analogies, centered around the following key three steps, which we discuss below: (1) interrogation; (2) individuation; and (3) prospection.

### 1.1     *Interrogation*

Historical analogies are often deliberately drawn for political purposes, without a genuine interest in whether or not they hold up. This renders many analogies instantly invalid from a historical perspective. More generally, historical analogies in public discourse, policy discussions and beyond, are often affirmative, without considering uncertainty and the pitfalls of historical narration, or interrogation of whether one's knowledge is valid, that is, the problem of confirmation bias.[22] When drawing analogies, people often adhere to the storylines, scripts and understandings, or metaphorically, tightly woven 'tapestries', they have constructed before, without subjecting them to scrutiny. We therefore first want to establish the use of historical analogies as a *mode of investigation*, rather than a *moment of assertion*: when historical analogies surface, they can be used as a meaningful starting point for inquiries into similarity and difference, and subsequently, more carefully calibrated (policy) recommendations for the present.

Methodologically, this approach translates into a need to identify and critically interrogate one's prior understandings—i.e., to tear apart the preexisting 'tapestries', which have often, unconsciously, become part of the weft of our common-sense knowledge of everyday life.[23] This can best be achieved by initiating an effort of what we will identify as 'dialogic mapping': historical analogies are best assessed by teams of at least two historians, and by extension, journalists, policy makers and others, who, through dialogue, render explicit their assumptions about the topics involved in the analogy, as well as what they, tentatively, consider to be points of similarity and difference between them.[24]

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22    For the notion 'confirmation bias', see for example: R. Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises." *Review of General Psychology* 2 (2) (1998), 175–220.

23    German philosopher Edmund Husserl identified this universe of common-sense everyday knowledge as one's 'Lebenswelt' or 'lifeworld'. See: E. Husserl, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendentale Phänomenologie: Ein Einleitung in die Phänomenologische Philosophie*, vol. 6 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976).

24    This approach connects to the one adopted in, for example, this collection of essays written jointly by specialists in German and Soviet history: M. Geyer and S. Fitzpatrick, eds.

Once this initial interrogation has been completed, one can move on to the next phase of the analysis.

## 1.2 *Individuation*

Having identified the initial presuppositions about a given historical analogy, it becomes necessary to newly construct, or thread together, substantiated (partial) 'magic yarn balls' of similarity and difference for the phenomena involved in the analogy. To do so, we want to introduce *individuation* as a core interpretative approach.[25] The concept of individuation has been used in various fields, including analytical psychology, where it was adopted by Carl Jung to describe the process whereby human beings develop a sense of 'self' out of undifferentiated (un)consciousness.[26] Here, we draw from the use of the concept in epistemology, where it refers to the cognitive ability of 'singling out' objects as "distinct objects of perception, thought and linguistic reference."[27] Overall, we argue that a better, more layered understanding of any historical phenomenon can be gained via a *confrontational* analogical approach to individuation. By juxtaposing historical phenomena through the identification of similarity and difference, presented via an analytical narrative, one can develop a better understanding of both in their historical uniqueness.

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*Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

25    For inspiration, one could also draw from a rich tradition of comparative historical research, for example on the Holocaust and genocidal violence: D. Bloxham, "Organized Mass Murder: Structure, Participation, and Motivation in Comparative Perspective." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22 (2) (2008), 203–245; A. Weiss-Wendt and U. Ümit Üngör, "Collaboration in Genocide: The Ottoman Empire 1915–1916, the German-Occupied Baltic 1941–1944, and Rwanda 1994." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 25 (3) (2011), 404–437; L. Vastenhout, *Between Community and Collaboration: "Jewish Councils" in Western Europe under Nazi Occupation*, *Between Community and Collaboration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). However, we do not do so directly here, because comparative historical research sometimes draws more directly from a positivist rather than an interpretative tradition, by for example emphasizing the significance of the synchronicity of the compared phenomena, as well as the need for a selection of uniformly demarcated variables when carrying out the comparison. See for example: P. Griffioen and R. Zeller, "Vergelijking van Jodenvervolging in Frankrijk, België en Nederland, 1940–1945: Overeenkomsten, Verschillen, Oorzaken" (PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2008).

26    For a discussion of the notion 'individuation' as used in the field of analytical psychology, see: L. Schlamm, "Individuation." In *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, eds. D.A. Leeming, K. Madden and S. Marlan (Springer International Publishing, 2020), 430–433.

27    Edward J. Lowe, "Individuation." In *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics*, eds. M.J. Loux and D.W. Zimmerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 75–95.

In practice, this can be achieved by taking the following steps. First, based on the initial dialogic mapping-effort discussed above, the people carrying out the analysis need to cluster their preliminary observations on similarity and difference into broader categories. These categories should, in the words of Michael Patton, be *internally homogeneous* and *externally heterogeneous*: they need to reference topics that both cohere in a meaningful way, while also being distinct from one another.[28] For these emergent categories, broad analytical labels need to be identified, which serve as present-day frames that allow for comparison, while also taking into account the significance of societal and discursive change. For example, when assessing whether a contemporary regime is 'fascist', the ones carrying out the analysis could, depending on their earlier observations, choose categories such as 'worldview', 'political organization' and 'system of rule', as these point to shared elements of 20th/21st-century (fascist) political movements and regimes, while also being broad enough to acknowledge the transformations that global politics and fascism have undergone since the latter first appeared around 1918/19.[29] A key characteristic of such categories is that they are inevitably presentist: they are always co-determined by the lived reality and positionality of the people carrying out the analysis. However, this does not mean that such categories should be avoided. Instead, this positionality should be openly acknowledged, while active efforts should be undertaken to engage in careful semantic calibration, to assess how the meaning of these and other categories and concepts has evolved over time, in line with the premises of the subfield of conceptual history.[30]

Second, in light of this effort, tailored characterizations need to be provided per identified category. These characterizations serve as the newly spun 'threads' for the historical phenomena involved in the analogy. Especially here, distinct configurations and temporalities need to be identified as points of similarity or distinction, based on a broad analysis of the available scholarship. To do so, one should adopt an approach that is rooted in a *falsifying sensitivity*; is categorically *sensitizing*; and embraces *iteration*: it should depart from efforts to

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28    M.Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods: Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE publications, 2014). See also: V. Braun and V. Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2) (2006), 77–101.

29    See for example: R.O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004); R. Griffin, "Studying Fascism in a Postfascist Age: From New Consensus to New Wave?" *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 1 (1) (2012), 1–17.

30    See for example: R. Koselleck, "Social History and Conceptual History." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 2 (3) (1989), 308–325.

*refute* one's assumptions;[31] use the originally identified categories as revisable and guiding, rather than definitive;[32] and be embedded in efforts at refinement through continued interaction between the two or more people involved in the analysis.

### 1.3 *Prospection*

From the perspective of applied history, a final step when analyzing historical analogies is to reflect on venues for future action in light of the presented assessment. Especially here, various limitations can of course be highlighted, and many efforts will eventually prove to fall short. Policy recommendations can also not be detached from the value systems in which historians and others assessing analogies operate. Here, however, we want to highlight that a carefully calibrated analysis of an analogy made in the public debate, during policy discussions or elsewhere can significantly enrich (political) action, especially by avoiding decisions inspired by lazy straightforward historical interpretations. Even when tentativeness is inevitable, we therefore recommend that historians and others who assess historical analogies based on the guidelines discussed above, engage in informed prospection. They can do so by rendering their values explicit, and by formulating select action points directed at decision makers at the appropriate (local, national, global or other) level.

## 2      Comparing 'Magic Yarn Balls': Hitler and Trump as Politicians in Context

In what follows, we apply our model for analogical assessment, informed by our 'magic yarn ball'-metaphor. We do so by interrogating whether analogies drawn between the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president in 2017 and the appointment of Adolf Hitler as German Reich chancellor in 1933 hold merit, and to what extent this can realistically be understood as an indication that US democracy could be on the verge of collapse. First, we briefly discuss our interrogation and individuation process, e.g. by introducing and weighing our

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31    We refer to an overall 'falsifying sensitivity' rather than 'falsification' in a strict sense (as made famous by Karl Popper), due to the logical/epistemological problems related to falsification. See for example: G. Andersson, "The Problem of the Empirical Basis in Critical Rationalism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Popper*, ed. J. Shearmur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 125–142.

32    Here, we refer to the notion, first introduced by sociologist Herbert Blumer, that concepts should be tentative, or 'sensitizing', rather than definitive: H. Blumer, "What Is Wrong with Social Theory?" *American Sociological Review* 19 (1) (1954), 3–10.

broader categories. This is intended to communicate explicitly about how we arrived at our assessment, an important step that many historians and other scholars leave out of their public engagement. Second, based on this discussion, we provide a self-reflexive analytical narrative, or metaphorical 'tapestry', on what we identify as key similarities and differences between Donald Trump and Adolf Hitler in Germany prior to 1933 and the US prior to 2017, respectively. Based on our assessment, we engage in tentative prospection by formulating a number of policy recommendations.

### 2.1      *Interrogation and Individuation: Towards Analytical Categories*

As noted, we initially framed our analogy around the question whether Donald Trump was somehow 'doing the same thing' as Adolf Hitler, primarily because we have regularly been asked this question as historians. Clearly, this was, and to some extent continues to be, a question that is on the public's mind, but we also found it vexing, in part because it is ill-defined. We believe the question comes from a place of (legitimate) concern about the failure of democracy, so in assessing our analogy we initially narrowed 'doing the same thing' down to two potential categories: 'using violence to overhaul politics', and 'undercutting democracy through media strategy'. However, during the interrogation- and individuation-phases, we found that both categories needed broadening to do justice to the role of the societal context of the interwar period and the first decades of the 21st century; the significance of different temporalities to, for example, understand violence in Germany and the US; and the distinct personae of Hitler and Trump. Through iteration and sensitizing reflection, we therefore arrived at the following two broad categories as a baseline for key threads in our (partial) 'magic yarn balls': Germany and the US as 'polarized societies', and Hitler and Trump as 'political figures in context'.

### 2.2      *Germany (–1933) and the United States (–2016/2017) as Polarized*
###          *Societies*

When studying polarization and violence in Germany prior to 1933, we argue that World War I and its aftermath serve as necessary focal points. Both in general and for Germany specifically, the war can be characterized as a cataclysmic event.[33] According to the most recent estimations, approximately thirteen million Germans served in the military during the war. More than two million

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33      B. Ziemann, "The First World War and National Socialism." In *A Companion to Nazi Germany*, eds. S. Baranowski, A. Nolzen and C.-C.W. Szejnmann (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 47–48.

soldiers lost their lives, while approximately 2.7 million soldiers were left physically or psychologically wounded. Around 913,000 civilians died because of the naval blockade imposed by the Allied powers from 1914 to 1919 and the 'Spanish flu'.[34] Overall, due to the mass mobilization of German society in light of total warfare, World War I impacted nearly all of Germany's approximately sixty-five million inhabitants, either through direct military involvement or mobilization at the home front.[35] In terms of scale, this surpasses the relative impact of any international conflict involving US citizens since the Second World War.[36] Therefore, although conflicts such as the 'War on Terror' have certainly contributed to a radicalization of sections of the US population, we argue that the roots of today's polarization and violence in the US should to a significant extent be sought beyond the direct impact of international warfare.[37]

Apart from the human toll of World War I for Germany, the conflict also engendered radical political transformations that undermined the stability of the German state, something we consider to be a precondition for the ensuing interior violence. Whereas the Armistice of November 11, 1918, marked the end of the combat operations on the European Western Front, the war continued on the Eastern Front and in the Middle East, resulting in an interlocking process of revolution, imperial collapse, and the emergence of a new political order centered on nation-states. In 1917–1918, the Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman

34    Robert Weldon Whalen, "War Losses (Germany)." In *1914–1918 Online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, eds. U. Daniel, P. Gatrell, O. Janz, H. Jones, J.D. Keene, A. Kramer and B. Nasson, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_losses_germany, October 8, 2014 (accessed March 4, 2023).

35    See for example: J. Sensch, "histat-Datenkompilation online: Geschichte der deutschen Bevölkerung seit 1815 (A1.02 Bevölkerung zum Zeitpunkt der Volkszählungen nach Geschlecht, Familienstand, und Alter (1871–1939))." https://histat.gesis.org/histat/de/data/themes/1, December, 2002 (accessed March 4, 2023).

36    According to the data provided by the US Department of Defense's Defense Casualty Analysis System (DCAS), the major international conflicts involving the US from the Revolutionary War (1775–1783) to the war in the Persian Gulf (1990/91) have resulted in 1.004.026 total deaths. See: Defense Casualty Analysis System, "Summary Data." https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/app/summaryData (accessed March 4, 2023). Estimations published by researchers of the 'Costs of War'-project, hosted by the Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs at Brown University, on September 1, 2021, put the number of US war deaths during post-9/11 wars at approximately 15.250 (including US military personnel, civilians, and military contractors). See: N.C. Crawford and C. Lutz, "Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones." https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20War_Direct%20War%20Deaths_9.1.21.pdf, September 1, 2021 (accessed March 4, 2023).

37    See for example: K. Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

empires disintegrated, giving way to a prolonged series of transnationally res-onating (border) conflicts fought by the successor states of these empires and various emergent states and ethnic groups, as well as an ever-looming threat of revolutionary violence following the success of the Bolshevik revolution.[38]

This process of collapse and revolutionary violence also reached Germany, in a manner and degree that we do not observe in the US prior to 2016/17. Fol-lowing the reversal in the military successes of the Central powers in late 1918, the German Kaiser and military command introduced a top-down democratization, to secure favorable peace terms and curtail revolutionary sentiment at home. This effort failed when a popular movement overtook the 'revolution from above', bringing about the end of aristocratic rule in the constituent German states and the proclamation of a German Republic on November 9.[39]

The establishment of a republic gave way to an atmosphere of civil war, whereby attempts to solidify the transformed republican state clashed with unleashed revolutionary energies, bent on implementing radical change.[40] Efforts of the German social democratic party in particular to preserve the par-liamentary gains were challenged by the revolutionary left, which sought to establish a councils' republic, and, more extensively, by ultranationalist groups, who wanted to destroy the republic and (re)establish an authoritarian state. As a result, the period 1919–1923 witnessed several episodes of violent confronta-tion between the republic and these radical left- and rightwing groups.[41] In the process, the state turned to military action and irregular, mostly rightwing, paramilitary violence to reestablish control, resulting in the killing of thou-sands of, especially leftwing, radicals. This decision of the republican state to adopt inward (para)militarism to reclaim its monopoly on violence in light of fears of revolutionary collapse, combined with rightwing resentment among paramilitaries vis-à-vis the republican state, contributed to a brutalization of German political life, whereby physical violence, and military performativity, came to be embraced as legitimate political tools, including by pro-republican

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38   For the entire paragraph, see: R. Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923* (London: Penguin Books, 2017).

39   R. Gerwarth, *November 1918: The German Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1–19.

40   For a discussion of the factors that contributed to the emergence of paramilitary violence in Europe during the period 1917–1923, see: R. Gerwarth and J. Horne, "The Great War and Paramilitarism in Europe, 1917–1923." *Contemporary European History* 19 (3) (2010), 267–273.

41   For the entire paragraph, see: C. Storer, *A Short History of the Weimar Republic* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 27–56; Gerwarth, *November 1918: The German Revolution*, 130–221.

organizations. This violent legacy would linger in varying levels of intensity until the national socialist takeover of power in 1933.[42]

Concerning violence in the US around 2016/17, we identify both a longer genealogy and a different configuration. First, we follow the argument of Pieter Spierenburg that in the US, democracy 'came too early': whereas in European countries in the 19th and 20th century, citizens had grown accustomed to being disarmed, inhabitants of what would become the US were not. As a result, following the American Revolution, ideas on a state monopoly on violence remained contested, in a democratized form. Not only were regional elites, such as slave owners, allowed to maintain their violent prerogatives as quasi-medieval dukes; also major sections of the population came to both accept the legitimacy of central state institutions while equating 'democracy' with a right of armed self-protection.[43]

Second, these conceptions were amplified from the mid-19th century on-wards, for several reasons. On the one hand, an influx of European migrants, the expansion of the slave economy and later, white resentment over the abolition of slavery, were accompanied by an uptick in xenophobic and racial violence. On the other hand, gun manufacturers started to cheaply mass produce firearms, while disseminating romanticized images of gun ownership, closely connected to mythologies about 'Frontier'-life during a period of violent US westward expansion, through mass marketing.[44] These efforts cemented gun ownership as a significant identity marker in the US.

Third, while gun legislation in the 1930s had reduced violence in the US, the latter again escalated during the mid-1960s. Exploiting anxieties about the societal transformations of the decade (see below), the Nixon administration initiated a militarization of US policing, especially in support of a 'war on drugs'.[45] This militarization has only increased since. It was accompanied by

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42  E.g., M. Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1–26; Ziemann, "The First World War and National Socialism," 51–56; D. Schumann, *Political Violence in the Weimar Republic, 1918–1933: Fight for the Streets and Fear of Civil War* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009).

43  P. Spierenburg, "Democracy Came Too Early: A Tentative Explanation for the Problem of American Homicide." *The American Historical Review* 111 (1) (2006), 104–114.

44  See for example: P. Haag, *The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

45  See for example: R. Balko, *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2021); S. Schrader, *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Oakland CA: University of California Press, 2019).

an emergent opposition against the regulation of gun access and -ownership in the US in light of rising anti-government conservatism and lobbying by gun manufacturers and -organizations, as exemplified by the efforts of the National Rifle Association (NRA) since the 1970s.[46] Together, this has resulted in a wider accessibility of firearms and increased levels of violence in the US.

Overall, we argue that, whereas World War I and the November Revolution in Germany opened the door to a culture of political violence aimed at taking control of the central state, the US has known a broader baseline for violence since the settler era, stemming from an interaction of democratized notions of self-protection, xenophobia and racism, romanticized gun mythologies, and policies that have exacerbated private and interior state violence since the 1960s. In this context, a militia movement developed during the 1980s and 90s, consisting of diverse groups with varying ideological backgrounds, ranging from resistance against perceived government 'tyranny' (e.g., the 'Three Percenters') to white supremacy.[47] Many of these groups were given extra oxygen due to conspiracies peddled following the election of Barack Obama (see below), and later, of Donald Trump.[48]

Apart from a culture of violence and the German republic's paradoxical efforts at reestablishing control, we also find it important to highlight the significance of the broader disillusionment with a democratic republic, as a new political system, in Germany in 1918/19. Whereas the republic at first garnered significant popular support, this support soon received a major blow in light of the Versailles Peace Treaty of 1919. The severe territorial, financial and moral conditions imposed by the Treaty led to widespread humiliation, indignation and resentment among the German population, and tainted the republic with

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46    For the entire paragraph, see: C.S. Murphy, *The Violence Inside Us: A Brief History of An Ongoing American Tragedy* (New York: Random House, 2020).

47    See for example: D. Gartenstein-Ross, C.P. Clarke and S. Hodgson, "Militia Violent Extremists in the United States: Understanding the Evolution of the Threat." https://icct.nl/publication/militia-violent-extremists-in-the-united-states/, May 20, 2022 (accessed March 4, 2023).

48    See for example: D. Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (London and New York: Verso, 2017). A striking feature of these militia groups, and by extension other highly conservative, often anti-government organizations such as the 'Tea Party'-movement, is that their names themselves gesture towards a number of historical analogies. For example, the name 'Three Percenters' refers to the contested claim that only 3% of American colonists actively participated in the fight against the British during the American Revolution (see: Anti-Defamation League, "Three Percenters." https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/three-percenters, July 13, 2020 (accessed March 4, 2023)). As such, these organizations discursively embed their activities in events and mythologies that go back to the origins of the American republic.

its legacy.[49] The notion 'democracy', already discredited during the war in especially rightwing and conservative circles as 'alien' and 'treasonous' due to Allied propaganda, evolved into an unpatriotic term that came to be associated with the social democrats in a narrow party-political manner, as well as the Versailles 'Diktat' as its major legacy.[50] This would add to broader transnational sentiments during the 1930s that a representative democracy as political system was too weak and inadequate in tackling the major societal challenges of its time.

The revolutionary unrest in Germany waned after 1923, when a hyperinflation crisis was stabilized through international collaboration. However, this newfound stability was again shattered when Germany was struck by a severe economic crisis in 1928/29. Following the US stock market crash, the short-term US loans upon which the German economy had come to rely dried up, resulting in a domino effect of bank insolvencies, and eventually, an overall collapse of economic trust. This led to a deep and enduring crisis in all sectors, as demonstrated by the German unemployment rate, which rose from one million in 1928 to 6.1 million in 1932.[51] Overall, we highlight that within a timespan of merely a decade, Germany was cumulatively hit by both a near total implosion of its central state apparatus and a collapse of its entire economy.

In light of the renewed crisis in 1928/29, which re-activated the revolutionary energies of 1918/19–1923, two interconnected developments enabled the national socialist takeover of power in 1933. On the one hand, the resignation of the sitting cabinet in 1930 gave president Paul von Hindenburg the chance to steer Germany away from parliamentarism towards authoritarian government. A de facto "three-year presidential dictatorship" was established, whereby German chancellors increasingly governed by presidential decree.[52] The aim was to form a 'government of national concentration', which would

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49    For the entire paragraph, see: Gerwarth, *November 1918: The German Revolution*, 184–211.

50    See for example Pasi Ihalainen's research on wartime parliamentary debates about democracy and how the notion was conceptualized differently in Great Britain, Germany, Sweden and Finland: P. Ihalainen, "The First World War, the Russian Revolution and Varieties of Democracy in Northwest European Debates." In *Democracy in Modern Europe: A Conceptual History*, eds. J. Kurunmäki, J. Nevers and H. te Velde (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018), 160–181.

51    For the entire paragraph, see for example: M. Stibbe, *Germany, 1914–1933: Politics, Society and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 165–173; T. Straumann, *1931: Debt, Crisis, and the Rise of Hitler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

52    For the quote, see: S. Baranowski, "The Collapse of the Weimar Parliamentary System." In *A Companion to Nazi Germany*, eds. S. Baranowski, A. Nolzen and C.-C.W. Szejnmann (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 69.

bring together major rightwing parties while relying on broad popular sup-
port. When Hindenburg's inner circle and the traditional power elites ran out
of options to establish a stable anti-leftist government, this opened the door
for Hitler's chancellorship. On the other hand, the crisis and failed government
responses to it, motivated voters to abandon moderate parties and turn to rad-
ical alternatives in a dispersed party landscape. The NSDAP, which had built
up a nationwide organization, managed to present itself as "a catch-all party
of social protest, appealing to a greater or lesser degree to virtually every social
group in the land" through convincing use of propaganda.[53] Through electoral
success in 1930 and 1932, this enabled it to take over power.[54]

Apart from the distinct historical configuration of violence in the US, we
want to highlight two additional elements to understand polarization, as a core
analytical 'thread', in the US ca. 2016/17: the long-term impact of a societal 'slow
crisis' since the 1960s/70s, reinforced by the domestic impact of international
warfare, as well as the emergence of a bipartisan media ecosystem, and increas-
ingly, 'gamified' political interaction on social media platforms.

During the 1960s, civil rights activists and other emancipatory groups pro-
pelled a transformation in race relations, gender roles, and personal morality
in the US. The energies underpinning these social movements were galvanized
during nationwide protests against the Vietnam war. This development was
met by a conservative countermovement, aimed at reducing the role of central
government, opposing the expansion of civil rights and promoting traditional-
ist values.[55]

This confrontation gave way to many of the fault lines that continue to shape
US politics today. Not only did the Vietnam war—and later, the Watergate
scandal—lead to a decline of trust in government (particularly on the right).[56]
The confrontation also led to a political landscape that, since the 1970s, has
become increasingly divided along partisan lines, in an asymmetric manner.
Whereas the Democratic party moved away from the center, but has remained
committed to achieving tangible political goals for the various social groups

53    For the quote, see: R.J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Books,
      2004), 264.
54    For the entire paragraph, see: Baranowski, "The Collapse of the Weimar Parliamentary
      System," 63–76; Storer, *A Short History of the Weimar Republic*, 171–198; Stibbe, *Germany,
      1914–1933: Politics, Society and Culture*, 166–200.
55    For the entire paragraph, see: M. Isserman and M. Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War
      of the 1960s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
56    Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958–2022." https://www.pewresearch
      .org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/, June 6, 2022 (accessed
      March 4, 2023).

that make up its base, the Republican party has evolved into a vehicle for an ideological movement driven by adherence to conservative doctrine.[57]

This happened in light of the rise of a divided information landscape, as the conservative movement stoked the 'culture wars' of the 1980s and built up an alternative ecosystem of think tanks and media outlets such as Fox News, to counter a perceived liberal bias in 'mainstream' journalism and academic research.[58] Both developments have radicalized the Republican party to adhere to doctrinal purity and adopt increasingly confrontational strategies, normalized and exemplified in the 1990s by Newt Gingrich, then Republican chair of the US House of Representatives, and later escalated by the emergence of the radically conservative 'Tea Party'-movement in 2009.[59] The development has only become more exacerbated since the emergence of social media, and has led to what Arlie Hochschild calls an 'empathy gap', a stark affective divide between two polarized groups that even divides families.[60] As such, however, we want to emphasize that the wider impact of this polarization remains limited. Whereas over half the US population thinks the US political system needs major to complete reform, this has not led to fundamental renegotiations of the underlying basis of the political system.[61]

The transformation discussed above occurred in light of processes of deindustrialization, which created the 'rust belt' in the Great Lakes-region, and an increasing shift towards a service economy that provided less security to lower and middle class workers, as well as government deregulation and increasing income inequality, worsened by the global financial crisis of 2007/8. In this context, Donald Trump attracted 'small government' conservatives and free marketeers, *as well as* voters in favor of higher taxes. Economic factors interacted with cultural ones, as a (perceived) loss of privilege and status led especially

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57    M. Grossmann and D.A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

58    Grossmann and Hopkins, 129–197.

59    See for example: J.E. Zelizer, *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020); R.M. Blum, *How the Tea Party Captured the GOP: Insurgent Factions in American Politics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).

60    See for example: J.S. Hacker and P. Pierson, *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020). For the notion 'empathy gap', see: A.R. Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016), 15.

61    Pew Research Center, "Many in U.S., Western Europe Say Their Political System Needs Major Reform." https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/03/31/many-in-us-western-eur ope-say-their-political-system-needs-major-reform/, March 31, 2021 (accessed March 4, 2023).

white voters to favor Trump, who they believed would address the economic downturn while upholding the racial hierarchy.[62]

Overall, we present the following assessment. In Germany prior to 1933, the population was cumulatively hit by the catastrophic impact of total war, a near implosion of the central state in its aftermath, and a total collapse of its economy in 1928/29. This led to a (more widely supported) authoritarian turn from above and an electoral victory of the NSDAP as a protest party in a system of proportional representation. In the US prior to 2016/17, the asymmetrical polarization that grew out of the turmoil of the 1960s/70s within a binary political system, propelled Donald Trump to the presidency. This happened against the backdrop of a historically more democratized configuration of violence, whereby violent anti-government tendencies have gained prominence, but remain dispersed and limited.

### 2.3    *Adolf Hitler and Donald Trump as Political Figures in Context*
To grasp how Hitler succeeded in seizing the chancellorship in 1933, we find it important to highlight his convictions and strategies.[63] Hitler can best be characterized as an ideologically driven propagandist embedded in the distinct media ecosphere of the interwar period, when the dissemination of information via newspapers, film, photography and radio broadcasts was subjected to extensive gatekeeping, especially in comparison to today's saturated media landscape.[64]

Ideologically, by 1933, Hitler held a relatively consistent 'worldview' which had crystallized over time. As stated by Doris Bergen, this ideology was centered on the notions 'race' and 'space': "Hitler was obsessed with [the notion] that humanity was engaged in a gigantic struggle between 'races' [...] and that 'pure Germans' needed space to expand [...]. Any race that was not expanding, [Hitler] believed, was doomed to disappear."[65] However, as these notions were

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62    See for example: Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*; L. Baccini and S. Weymouth, "Gone For Good: Deindustrialization, White Voter Backlash, and US Presidential Voting." *American Political Science Review* 115 (2) (2021), 550–567.

63    For the entire paragraph, see: I. Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889–1936 Hubris* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998); I. Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936–1945 Nemesis* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

64    For an overview of the media- and information landscape in Germany prior to and under the Nazi regime, see for example: B. Heidenreich and S. Neitzel, eds. *Medien Im Nationalsozialismus* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010).

65    D.L. Bergen, *War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 36.

extreme in light of mainstream public opinion, they did not offer a suitable basis for broader popular appeal. Therefore, the NSDAP leadership embarked on manufacturing a public persona for Hitler once he rose to prominence in the national socialist movement during the 1920s. This public persona, centered on religious and quasi-feudal notions of a heroic 'people's leader', resonated directly with older longings in nationalist and 'völkisch' rightwing circles in Germany since the turn of the 20th century.[66]

While manufacturing Hitler's persona, gatekeeping became a core consideration, as careful attention was given to which image-building efforts could be disseminated. An example thereof are the photographs made by Heinrich Hoffmann. Hoffmann, one of Hitler's close confidants, became Hitler's personal photographer in 1923. As part of the arrangement, Hitler demanded that photographs could only be disseminated once he had given approval. This resulted in careful selections that were also characterized by a high level of consistency. Only a limited supply of photographs from Hoffmann's photo bank were allowed to be used, to build up a consistent Nazi 'brand' with Hitler as its figurehead.[67]

Efforts at image-building were also at the core of Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2016, but we argue that these are fundamentally distinct from those undertaken by the NSDAP during the 1930s. Trump gained notoriety during the 1970s as a real estate developer when he became involved in the construction of the Hyatt Grand Central in New York. To advance his business success, Trump not only relied on family capital, a growing political network and government incentives in a neoliberal economic climate.[68] He also started to develop a public persona tailored towards a commercialized, attention-driven media ecosphere. As described in Trump's book *The Art of the Deal*, these strategies revolved around hyperbole and generating controversy:

> One thing I've learned about the press is that they're always hungry for a good story, and the more sensational, the better. […] if you do things that are bold or controversial, the press is going to write about you. […] The

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66    I. Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

67    For a 'visual biography' of Adolf Hitler, see: E. Somers and R. Kok, *Adolf Hitler: De Beeldbiografie* (Amsterdam: Hollands Diep, 2022). For a discussion of the propaganda of the Nazis as a 'branding'-effort, see: N. O'Shaughnessy, *Marketing The Third Reich: Persuasion, Packaging and Propaganda* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 15–25.

68    C.V. Bagli, "A Trump Empire Built on Inside Connections and $885 Million in Tax Breaks." *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/nyregion/donald-trump-tax-breaks-real-estate.html, September 17, 2016 (accessed March 4, 2023).

funny thing is that even a critical story, which may be hurtful personally, can be very valuable to your business.[69]

Trump has expanded this image of a grotesque business magnate via the show *The Apprentice*, of which he was the host between 2004 and 2015. Here, successful one-liners appeared such as the one that ended every episode—'You're fired!'—which became a staple of Trump's presidential campaign, in the form of short powerful slogans ('Make America Great Again') as well as ridiculing and humiliating nicknames ('Lyin' Ted', 'Crooked Hillary'). Trump's efforts to aggressively mirror criticism voiced against him by news outlets ('YOU are Fake News!') align with his 'any press is good press'-approach. Trump's strategy of dominating the news cycle has only expanded since the emergence of social media. Trump extensively used Twitter in particular to 'hijack the attention landscape',[70] as exemplified by a disproportionate level of coverage given to him during the presidential campaign in response to controversial tweets.[71]

From the mid-1920s onwards, Hitler developed an increasing power base, in close interaction with his public image. This placed him at the head of a sizeable political movement, including a potent paramilitary force, before he became chancellor in 1933. Upon his release from prison in 1924, following the failed 'Beer Hall Putsch' in 1923, Hitler reestablished his position as the leader of the NSDAP, which had fallen apart due to internal strife during his imprisonment. He strengthened his leadership in 1926, when he thwarted an attempt by factions of the party to revise the party program.[72] The intervention definitively established Hitler's personal views as leading over specific points of dogma, and turned Hitler's public image into a "central motor for integration, mobilization, and legitimation" for the national socialist movement. While strong centrifugal forces continued to exist within the movement, the latter were overcome by the shared belief in Nazism as an 'idea', as "embodied in the image of the Führer." This laid the foundation for Hitler's personalized rule, first within the party, and later, from 1933 onwards, within the state.[73]

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69    D.J. Trump with T. Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, 1st mass market ed. (New York: Random House, 2005 (1987)), 56–57.

70    For the notion 'hacking the attention landscape', see: M. Goerzen and J. Matthews, "Black Hat Trolling, White Hat Trolling, and Hacking the Attention Landscape." *The Web Conference 2019—Companion of the World Wide Web Conference, WWW 2019*, May 13, 2019, 523–528. http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3308560.3317598

71    See for example: V.F. Hendricks and M. Vestergaard, *Reality Lost: Markets of Attention, Misinformation and Manipulation* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 19–34.

72    For the entire paragraph, see: Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889–1936 Hubris*, 255–311.

73    Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth"*. For the two quotes, see: Ibid., 257 and 259.

Hitler's expanding power base prior to becoming chancellor, as head of a political party bent on destroying the German republican state from within, we argue, can be contrasted with Donald Trump's position during the 2016 US presidential election. Trump has toyed publicly with the idea of running for the presidency since the 1980s, but for a long time primarily acted as a donor for candidates of both the Democratic and Republican parties. His desire to run for president became more outspoken during the Obama administration, when he became a proponent of the 'Birther' movement. This movement, driven by white supremacist animus and online activism, peddled the conspiracy that Barack Obama was supposedly not born on US soil and therefore not legitimate as president.[74] Trump's support for the 'Birther' movement can be viewed as opportunistic. Although Trump and the Trump organization have a history of racist allegations since the 1980s,[75] he mostly followed popular demand by playing into the ideological sentiments of those parts of American culture that would most support him. He did so with the Birther movement as well.

When Trump announced his presidential candidacy in 2015, this still came as somewhat of a surprise, a little over a year prior to the Republican primaries, and later, the election. Trump managed to claim the Republican nomination, but he did so as an 'outsider' in a dispersed field of 17 candidates and in light of explicit internal opposition.[76] This is illustrated by Trump's political platform, which explicitly adopted anti-establishment rhetoric ('drain the swamp!'), as well as a continued positioning as a businessman who, under the 'America First'-agenda, would be able to get 'better deals' for the US.[77] In other words,

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74  See for example: A. Serwer, "Birtherism of a Nation." *The Atlantic*, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/birtherism-and-trump/610978/, May 13, 2020 (accessed March 4, 2023).

75  For example, in 1989, Trump publicly demanded the death penalty for the 'Central Park Five', a group of black teenagers accused of murder who later turned out to be innocent. The Trump organization has also been accused and sued for racist housing policies several times. See: C. Itkowitz and M. Brice-Saddler, "Trump Still Won't Apologize to the Central Park Five. Here's What He Said at the Time." *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-still-wont-apologize-to-the-central-park-five-heres-what-he-said-at-the-time/2019/06/18/32ea4d7e-9208-11e9-b570-6416efdc0803_story.html, June 18, 2019 (accessed March 4, 2023).

76  For further info on the gradual expansion of Trump's support base during the 2016 US presidential campaign, see: Pew Research Center, "For GOP Voters, a Winding Path to a Trump Nomination." https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/07/18/for-gop-voters-a-winding-path-to-a-trump-nomination/, July 18, 2016 (accessed March 4, 2023).

77  See for example: S. Mollan and B. Geesin, "Donald Trump and Trumpism: Leadership, Ideology and Narrative of the Business Executive Turned Politician." *Organization* 27 (3) (2019), 405–418. The phrase 'America First' is a direct reference to the isolationist and pro-

we argue that the following key distinction can be identified: whereas Hitler personally gave shape to a movement that would eventually hoist him into the position of power from which he could become a dictator, Trump only became the leader of 'his' movement following his ascension to the presidency.[78] In a sense, he was a relatively coincidental character to step into the role that had opened up after internal radicalization, driven by politicians such as Newt Gingrich, and, ostensibly, from below by the Tea Party-movement, had dramatically reshaped the Republican Party. Trump has only really become a leader to a group of violent militias at the very end of his (first) presidential term. Within these militias, democracy as a core value and concept is at least rhetorically never challenged, even if it is under constant fire in practice.

### 2.4        *Prospection: America on the Brink?*

Above, we engaged in individuation to lay bare the layered 'tapestry' of similarity and difference in the level of polarization and violence in Germany prior to 1933 and the US in 2016/17, as well as Adolf Hitler and Donald Trump as political figures. These served as central 'threads' in what we identified as two historical events—two 'magic yarn balls': the appointment of Adolf Hitler as German chancellor in 1933, and the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president in 2017. As such, we primarily highlighted key differences between the two, resulting in different historical backdrops for polarization.

First, we highlighted significant differences in terms of scope and time span. From 1914 onwards, Germany was cumulatively hit by several society-wide crises, including a large-scale war involving total mobilization and massive death, a revolution and near collapse of its central state apparatus and, after a brief recovery, a collapse of its economy, all within two decades. This also happened within a culture where 'democracy' was increasingly seen as a failing political system. In the United States prior to 2016/17, the violence and polarization primarily needs to be understood as a coming together of several more or less interconnected elements unfolding through different temporalities. These include: a broader and differently configured baseline of violence, of which some roots go back to the settler era; a layered socio-cultural, political

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German 'America First'-movement of the 1930s, and gestures towards an affinity between Trump and the isolationism and race theories of that era. See: K. Calamur, "A Short History of 'America First'." *The Atlantic*, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/trump-america-first/514037/, January 21, 2017 (accessed March 4, 2023).

78      This can be further illustrated by the use of the term 'Trumpism' as a Google search term, which only became prominent after Trump's presidential campaign announcement in June 2015: Google Trends, "Trumpism (United States, 2004-Present)." https://trends.google.nl/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=trumpism (accessed March 4, 2023).

and economic 'slow' crisis that has increased tensions in the US since the 1960s and 1970s; and, as an expression of the latter, a divided information landscape that has become increasingly binary and confrontational, exacerbated by the growth of social media and individualized 'bubbles' over the past two decades.

Second, we highlighted a number of key differences between Hitler and Trump as political figures, in terms of goals, strategies, political power and the contexts in which they operate(d). Whereas both Hitler and Trump can be characterized as 'charismatic leaders' that function(ed) in a modern state apparatus and engage(d) in mass politics, the former did so by engaging in political action that was ultimately meant to contribute to the fulfillment of a narrow, but relatively clearly crystallized racist, genocidal worldview. Trump and his entourage have primarily presented the latter as an outsider businessman who can restore lost opportunities for various groups, resulting in policies that have contradicted and undermined these group's interests. In addition, we demonstrated how both Hitler and Trump engage(d) in propagandistic mobilization, but by adopting strategies tailored to the media ecospheres of their time. Hitler and the NSDAP relied on a carefully cultivated and curated image of heroic leadership during a period that enabled stricter gatekeeping, while Trump has extensively engaged in 'attention hacking' in a commercialized media landscape, intentionally resulting in coverage both supportive and damaging to his personal reputation, to build up his business, brand, and eventually, political appeal. In terms of political power, we highlighted how Hitler had laid an essential foundation for personalized dictatorial rule years prior to his appointment as chancellor, and led a militarized movement into government to destroy a political system from within. Trump garnered most of his ardent political support following his election as US president.

Overall, the analysis results in a configuration whereby, despite similarities, the differences feature prominently, at least in relation to the categories analyzed and 'threads' presented in this article. A key observation therefore becomes that, while broader cautionary analyses, such as those presented by historian Timothy Snyder on the nature of tyranny,[79] can serve as significant broad touchstones for democratic vigilance, more specific historical assessments, as presented here, serve as a necessary complementary undertaking to open the way for more carefully calibrated (policy) responses.

Which prospective recommendations can be formulated, in light of our analysis? Here, it is first relevant to remember that, when people draw analo-

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79    T. Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017).

gies to Hitler or the Nazi regime, they often (implicitly) do so in reference to the regime's genocidal violence—an escalation that, in the current situation, is not likely in the US. This does not mean that the situation, from a democratic perspective, is not worrisome. The configuration of violence in the US discussed above has grown increasingly deadly, and has become further intertwined with forces openly challenging America's government institutions, as demonstrated on January 6, 2021. Authoritarian tendencies have been further reinforced over the past decade, as demonstrated by renewed efforts to enact state-level voting restrictions, disproportionally affecting non-white communities.[80] Disinformation about the 2020 presidential election has gained a foothold, serving as a toxic source for continued resentment and mobilization. And given that the US information landscape remains divided and geared towards confrontation, polarization will most likely increase rather than decrease in the coming years.

Possible interventions are varied, but should include a multilevel approach to curtailing physical violence, including efforts to deradicalize sections of the militia landscape willing to enact physical anti-governmental violence.[81] They should also include efforts to strengthen the public functions of the existing information landscape, including both 'legacy' and social media, which have been too strongly driven by market forces and political partisanship. Particular attention should be given to efforts at curtailing attempts at 'attention hacking'. And finally, interventions should include a multi-level, and preferably bottom-up, strategy to counter authoritarian tendencies within the US' government institutions.[82] These general premises, of course, require further elaboration and political operationalization. A key element remains that we do not know whether the Trump era is 'past', or also future. If Trump's presidential campaign for 2024 is successful, then a key difference noted above, that he was only really paramilitarily buoyed up by 'his' militias at the end of his presidency, falls flat. In that case, a further tendency towards authoritarianism and violent confrontation seems very probable. In the case of an autocratic

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80      See for example: Vox, "What Long Voting Lines in the US Really Mean." https://www
        .youtube.com/watch?v=al3qY8ZMHEc&ab_channel=Vox, September 17, 2020 (accessed
        March 4, 2023).
81      See for example: Gartenstein-Ross, Clarke, and Hodgson, "Militia Violent Extremists in the
        United States: Understanding the Evolution of the Threat."
82      For an effort to formulate recommendations along these lines to strengthen the US' demo-
        cratic institutions, see for example a 2020 report by the American Academy of Arts
        and Sciences: "Our Common Purpose" (Cambridge MA: American Academy of Arts &
        Sciences, 2020), https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report (accessed March 4,
        2023).

(Trump) presidency, a rhetoric of democracy will most likely be upheld, but it will potentially be accompanied by repressive means towards have-nots, in particular minorities, to deny the latter access to necessities, rights and commodities. This is violent in itself and can easily lead to localized violence 'from below' by existing and new militia groups.

## 3      Conclusion: Towards Productively Assessing Historical Analogies

In her book *The Uses and Abuses of History*, Margaret MacMillan, a foundational figure in the field of applied history, wrote:

> History, by giving context and examples, helps when it comes to thinking about the present world. It aids in formulating questions, and without good questions it is difficult to begin to think in any coherent way at all.[83]

This premise is directly applicable to historical analogies, and effectively what we mean by *interrogation*—the first step in practicing our model to critically engage with parallels drawn between historical phenomena as, what we characterized as, 'magic yarn balls'. Even before asking what the analogy might bring, we should interrogate what we are looking for, since history tends to be used in various ways: as a model, a reference point, or to be appropriated for political purposes. For us, it is a strategy to dislodge assumptions and fixed scripts about the past, and to try and arrive at measured assessments of similarity and difference. The second step, *individuation*, is intricately linked to this. By contrasting historical phenomena and using that as a starting point for reflective analytical narratives that highlight shared structures and key distinctions, we can try to better understand both past and present simultaneously. The final step, *prospection*, is a step that historians increasingly should dare to take, even if it will never amount to more than a tentative leap into the unknown. The present can only ever be understood as resting on the deposits of the past, and can only be addressed in light of the past, if the relation is appropriately questioned and differentiated. We therefore call on others to employ the method outlined above proactively and in response to requests from the public, to think through the historical analogies that present themselves.

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83      M. MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile Books, 2010), 67.

### Disclosure statement

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