

**WEIMAR AMERIKA:
THE RISE OF POPULISM AND THE BIRTH OF
STRONGMAN LEADERS**

By

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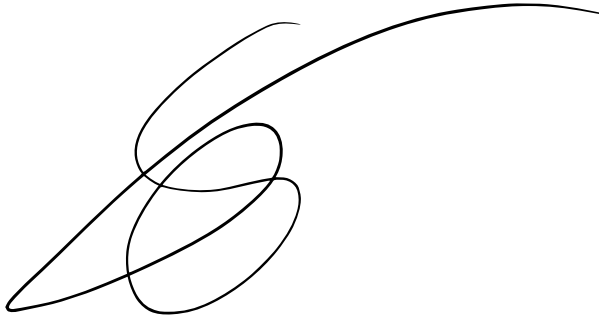
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ABSTRACT

The following thesis examines the parallels between the contemporary United States and the historical Weimar Republic. It compares Donald Trump and Adolf Hitler as manifestations of the zeitgeist of their respective eras and societal grievances and sentiments. The paper is based on the socio-political developments in the post-9/11 United States (as well as their roots in earlier decades), specifically encompassing the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden Eras. These developments are viewed vis-a-vis the events leading to Hitler's rise to power. This paper would close a literature gap in the academic canon by providing an unbiased comparison of the two leaders during periods of social upheaval. A thorough comparative analysis of societal sentiments and conditions, this thesis aims to highlight the similarities and differences between the rise of the two leaders to power.

Furthermore, I will supplement my analysis by comparing phenomena present in Hitler's time and present in the modern day with Trump, such as cultures of defeat, culture wars, and anti-establishment sentiment. The paper will show how leaders like these men are inevitable if the circumstances around them are ideal for the rise of such a leader. This thesis seeks to give the reader a deeper understanding of the circumstances surrounding Trump and Hitler, which led to their coming to power - as products of their time and circumstances.

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1. INTRODUCTION: BORN FROM THE ZEITGEIST - TWO STRONGMEN EMERGE

It is said that history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes. This phenomenon is evident in the case of Weimar Germany and the modern United States of America, which share striking similarities. Both countries have been plagued by elitism, economic crises, culture wars, societal decline, military defeat, civil unrest, political extremism, and widespread dissatisfaction with the government and its political system. The turbulent zeitgeist of these two periods gave rise to the political philosophies of National Socialism and MAGA. Nearly a century apart, two charismatic men came to power and altered the course of history. Neither of these movements came from a vacuum without social context; instead, for them to gain the level of prominence that they did, they needed powerful strongmen leaders, namely Adolf Hitler and Donald J. Trump.

“The findings confirm that President Trump and leaders like him did not emerge out of nowhere, but rather are the most recent incarnation of long-term political trends,” said Jamie Pennebaker, UT Austin psychology professor and co-author of the study. “Taken together, the trends suggest that voters may increasingly be drawn to leaders who can make difficult, complex problems easier to understand with intuitive, confident answers.” (Skidmore 2019) (Jordan et al. 2018, 3480)

This thesis examines the similarities and differences between Donald Trump and Adolf Hitler as charismatic leaders. It compares and contrasts them, providing an in-depth understanding of why each came to power. Moreover, this thesis seeks to analyze the commonalities between the societal conditions of the Weimar Republic and Modern America and examine if these similarities were essential to and/or influenced the rise of these leaders to power on the political stage. The thesis will illustrate how strongmen are

inevitable, given that the circumstances around them are ideal for the rise of such populist leaders. While there are a multitude of newspaper articles and op-eds comparing Trump and Hitler, most of these compare them ideologically rather than as products of their historical periods and are biased or insufficient in their analysis. This thesis seeks to fill a clear gap in academic literature in the analysis between the contemporary United States and the historical Weimar Republic using Trump and Hitler as conduits for this analysis while simultaneously filling the gap in the academic literature which presents an unbiased, academic comparison between Trump and Hitler's rise to power. While these two men are both polarizing figures of their time and the leaders of their respective populist movements, they are ideologically dissimilar; however, their paths to power almost mirror one another.

2. CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

The concept of a charismatic leader is as old as history itself. The images and stories of a captivating strongman leading his people to rise against their oppressors, save the nation from invaders, or regenerate the country into a great empire are universal throughout human society. Throughout history, a charismatic leader is often described as a military hero who was, in one way or another, a “founder” or “regenerator” of the nation and possessed traditional masculine qualities such as strength, bravado, dedication, and ability to make tough decisions, as well as a physically imposing masculine image. (Bell 2020, 13-14) “The appearance of confidence when facing a crisis has been recognized as an integral aspect of charismatic leadership.” (Jordan et al. 2018, 9) Images of leaders such as statesmen like Julius Caesar and Otto Von Bismarck or barbarian warlords such as Attila the Hun, Ghengis Khan, or Alaric may come to mind when considering these qualities. However, in the

modern era, Hitler and Trump have become unlikely charismatic leaders despite their lack of critical characteristics.

2.1 HITLER AS A FIGURE AND A LEADER

Hitler is arguably the most infamous political “strongman” in recent history. His name is synonymous with authoritarian leaders across most of the Western world. However, during the Interwar period in which Hitler’s rise to power occurred, he was an atypical candidate for a new, strong leader for a broken and humiliated Germany. Although Hitler had a masculine image, standing at an average height for the time of 175cm tall with a thin build, he was not a physically intimidating man and did not project a tough persona. (Flood 1985, 4) However, some of his predecessors, Otto Von Bismarck and Paul Von Hindenburg were more physically imposing and more of the typical strongman leader. (Astore and Showalter 2005, 6) (Steinberg 2012, 768) However, Hitler was undoubtedly a tenacious fighter and considered a war hero. During his service in the First World War, Hitler earned the Iron Cross second and first class for bravery and a wound badge. (Bullock 1962, 52-53) He was not an officer or a leader in any capacity: during his military career, he never rose past the rank of Gefreiter (private first class.) (Weber 2010, 100) Unlike other leaders who were members of the Junkers, the established elite of the German empire, as a young man, Hitler lived in poverty and was aimless, possessing little in the way of formal education. (Hitler 1925, 18-19) By all metrics, Hitler had little to no qualities that would make him stand out as a candidate for the authoritarian ruler of Germany. However, Hitler had a weapon that none of his predecessors or competitors possessed: his passion and skill as an orator. (Fishman 1964, 245) Hitler’s impassioned diatribes had a magnetic effect on those around him. First, he won over the small group of nationalists that composed the burgeoning

Deutsche Arbeiter Partei (DAP) in the beer halls of Bavaria and then captivated the large crowds of Stormtroopers and National Socialists at massive rallies across the country.

(Fishman 1964, 255) (Kershaw 2008, 82)

2.2 TRUMP AS A FIGURE AND A LEADER

Donald Trump is one of the most polarizing political figures in the United States. (MacCarthy 2018) Trump came from privilege and wealth; while Trump went to a military school, as stated by Gavriel Rosenfeld, “Trump, unlike Hitler, never served in the military or experienced the radicalizing effects of war.” (Rosenfeld 2019, 569) Although drafted to serve in the Vietnam War, he received multiple college deferments and, eventually, a medical disqualification. (Philipps 2016) Trump received a formal college education (University of Pennsylvania 1968, 21) and would go on to run his father’s real estate business (Eder 2016), which was an extremely successful multimillion-dollar enterprise. Trump continued to be successful and built his net worth to 7.1 billion. (Forbes 2024) His prominence in American society comes from his business and entertainment exploits, not politics. He was a celebrity from 2004 to 2017 on a reality TV show, starring in “The Apprentice” (IMDB 2004) as the powerful boss who would keep contestants or fire them. Trump is an unlikely candidate for a charismatic political leader; at the same time, he presents a masculine image and has proven himself extremely successful in business and entertainment. (Gabriel et al. 2018, 300) Trump has a highly unusual rhetoric and speaking style, which linguists have studied. According to Jennifer Sclafani, an associate teaching professor in Georgetown University’s Department of Linguistics, “he speaks like everybody else...and we’re not used to hearing that from a president. We’re used to hearing somebody speak who sounds much more educated, much smarter, much more refined than your

everyday American.” (Inzaurrealde 2017) Trump’s delivery style is both simple and confident when speaking in front of thousands of people and on live broadcasts. As stated in *Examining Long-term Trends in Politics and Culture Through Language of Political Leaders and Cultural Institutions*, “During his campaign and in the first years of his presidency, many have claimed that Trump’s simplicity and directness were keys to his popularity. Indeed, successful politicians are generally those who make use of simple rather than sophisticated rhetoric.” (Jordan et al. 2018, 3476)

3. MEN OF THEIR TIME

Hitler and Trump did not only come to power because of their skills as public speakers or their ability to draw and sway public opinion; if it had not been for the societal conditions of their respective eras, their movements would likely never have gained traction the way they did. Their rise to power is more likely to have resulted from “being in the right place at the right time.” (Ziegler 2022, 3) As stated by writer Timothy Ryback, “The Führer was a man who was possible in Germany only at that very moment,” the same can be said about Trump as well as he had previously sought office in 2000 but was unsuccessful. (Ryback 2024)(Associated Press 2000) The people of Weimar Germany and the 21st Century United States were receptive to these charismatic leaders and their rhetoric due to the existing flames of unrest, which created a perfect storm of the respective times' economic, political, and social conditions. There were currents of populism in both societies long before either leader entered the political arena.

3.1 IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS: NATIONAL SOCIALISM

In the German context, the Nationalist movement that would develop into National Socialism began in the early 19th century as the Völkisch Movement, which was an ethno-nationalist movement that advocated for a pan-German state composed of territories inhabited by ethnic Germans in both the German and Austrian empires. (Camus and Lebourg 2017, 16) While Völkisch Nationalist ideas existed in German/Austrian society, they were still considered fringe positions and would not become prominent until the aftermath of the First World War. Writers such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Georg Ritter Von Schönerer, and others brought Völkisch Nationalist thought into public discourse. (Whiteside 1975, 66) (Mitcham 1996, 82) Völkisch Nationalism remained, for the most part, sidelined in the German Empire, where it was superseded by Prussian-led “Kleindeutschland” patriotism, which had a much more statist rather than pan-ethnic outlook. (Vermeiren 2011, 208) However, it was much more prominent in the multi-ethnic Austrian Empire, where anxiety about Pan-Slavism and general ethnic separatism was much more pronounced. While Hitler spent his young adulthood aimless and impoverished in Vienna, he became heavily influenced by the Austrian strand of Völkisch Nationalism. He would carry it with him into the trenches of the First World War as a soldier, where the ideological foundations of National Socialism would foment. (Whiteside 1975, 66) Germany’s defeat in WWI and the subsequent Treaty of Versailles created the ideal conditions for a nascent form of nationalism to coalesce. The Treaty of Versailles required Germany to cede territory (which still had a majority ethnic German population) to Belgium, France, Denmark, and the newly created nation of Poland (Allied Powers 1919, Article 27), as well as forbidding a union with Austria, much to the chagrin of pan-

Germanists. (Allied Powers 1919, Article 80) The treaty also required Germany to severely limit its army to a minuscule 100,000 men (Allied Powers 1919, Article 163) (In contrast to the previous size of thirteen million, which was the number of men who had served from 1914 to 1918) and to disband the German Air Force. It forbade them from creating another Air Force (Allied Powers 1919, Article 198) and forced a reduction in Germany's Navy to thirty-six ships and no submersibles. (Allied Powers 1919, Article 181) Most importantly, the Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to accept the blame for starting the war (Allied Powers 1919, Article 231). Additionally, they were forced to pay reparations of 132 billion gold marks (approximately thirty-three billion dollars today) to the victorious allies. (Marks 1978, 237) These terms were meant to be, as John Maynard Keynes described them, a "Carthaginian Peace" which would cripple Germany so heavily that the population would never have the capability to return to militarism or pose a threat to the allies again. (Keynes 1920, 59) However, the treaty had the opposite effect, enraging the already war-weary German population and spurring resentment towards the allies and leftists who were unsupportive and subversive of the war effort. This humiliation via the Treaty of Versailles, combined with Germany's economic ruin, mass communist insurrections, and an intensive culture war of German conservatism and traditional values versus Weimar debauchery and liberalism, created the right amount of anger and dissent for the likes of Adolf Hitler to come to power. A similar scenario would play out almost one hundred years later.

3.2 IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS - MAGA

The movement that would become MAGA is a direct descendant of the Tea Party of the late 2000s-mid 2010s. However, even before that, the Tea Party movement traces its origins to the 1992 presidential campaign of Ross Perot and his subsequent Reform Party.

(Carioti and Kabaservice, 2020) Ross Perot was a billionaire businessman who had never previously held public office. (McFadden 2019) Perot openly expressed populist, anti-elitist sentiments, suggesting that the system had become rigged against the middle class. He further stated that mainstream American political parties were run by incompetent elites who were unconcerned with ordinary people's needs and wanted only to spend taxpayer dollars on policies and projects materially benefitting these elites. (Perot 1992, 13) (Perot 1992, 23) (Kabaservice 2019) Perot openly voiced opposition to the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) free trade treaty supported by both of his political opponents (Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush) and suggested that free trade and globalization only benefit the rich to the detriment of the American working class. (ABC 1992) (Perot 1992, 16) Perot put forth a notion shared by many average Americans that the country was in decline and needed to head in a new direction that served the good of the American people. (Perot 1992, 60) (Kabaservice 2019) While Perot did not win the 1992 election, he received around 18% of the popular vote, a first in American politics. (The American Presidency Project and UC Santa Barbara 1999) Perot ran again unsuccessfully in 1996, only achieving 8% of the popular vote and eventually retiring from politics. (The American Presidency Project and UC Santa Barbara 1999) While Perot never held public office, his ideas would influence another grassroots populist movement, the Tea Party. (Kabaservice 2019) The Tea Party movement began during the 2007-2008 financial crisis, which rocked America and the rest of the world. (Weigel 2010) It would, however, explode to prominence on February 19, 2009, when CNBC reporter Rick Santelli gave an impassioned rant on the floor of the Board of Trade in Chicago, proclaiming he did not want to bail out his fellow Americans who were not fiscally responsible in obtaining home loans,

rallying traders to cheer and coining the phrase “Tea Party” for this movement. (CNBC 2009) The Tea Party was a decentralized group comprising smaller groups with varying agendas across different sects. However, several of the same vital issues united the disparate sects of the Tea Party Movement. (Rauch 2010) The Tea Party’s broad platform was similar to the one espoused by Ross Perot in the 1990s. It sought to balance the federal government’s budget, roll back perceived overbearing government regulations, and oppose new taxes, gun control, and excessive government spending. (Price Foley 2010, 751-764) The Tea Party gained momentum in opposition to then-President Obama’s economic and foreign policies, such as Obamacare, TARP, and The Recovery Act. (Zernike 2010, 65-66) By 2016, as an organized movement, the Tea Party had dissolved due to many of its ideas and its platform being folded into mainstream conservative thought. The party’s core ideals would be absorbed into the MAGA movement, which became prominent during Donald Trump’s 2016 election campaign. (Jossey et al. 2016)

3.3 VOTING FOR AN IDEA NOT A MAN

Both of these populist movements existed far before their leaders came to prominence. In the case of Germany, Hitler had significant competition for the position of leader. Other organizations, such as the DNVP (Deutschnationale Volkspartei) under Alfred Hugenberg Der Stahlhelm under Franz Seldte, were sources of competition for Hitler, whom he later folded into the NSDAP and dissolved (Beck 2009, 288) (Bracher 1970, 222). The German people were not necessarily supporting or voting for Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP; they were voting for a renewed, more robust, greater Germany, and Hitler and the Nazis won out against the multitude of other populists who were active in the Völkisch movement. When Mussolini's fascist movement took power in Italy, it set a precedent for other fascist

movements in Europe to follow suit. (Childers 2001) Mussolini's movement gave Hitler an edge over other populist ideologies, such as Monarchism or a more vague general National-Populist sentiment, which had attempted coups carried out in their name, such as the case of the 1920 Kapp Putsch) which collapsed within four days. (Haffner 1991, 226) Hitler's Putsch attempt also failed; however, it was a propaganda victory nonetheless for the NSDAP. (Koonz 2003, 24) While in prison, Hitler began writing his manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, National Socialism's first founding text and communicated to the German people a clear idea about what he sought for the country, which was rebuilding Germany into a world power. (Hitler 1925, 606) According to historian Ian Kershaw: "Hitler stood for at least some things they [German people] admired, and for many had become the symbol and embodiment of the national revival which the Third Reich had in many respects been perceived to accomplish." (Kershaw 2008, 71)

In the American context, a similar story is present. There were other right-wing populist leaders, such as Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot of the Reform Party and Ron Paul of the Tea Party movement, but neither were successful in their campaigns. (Edsall 1999) (Green 2010) On the left end of the political spectrum, the Occupy Wall Street Movement and Bernie Sanders espoused many of the same sentiments regarding economic (mainly regarding bailouts of banks during the economic crisis of 2008 and NAFTA) policies as right-wing populists did. (Pilkington 2011) (Sanders 1993) The American people were voting for a set of populist stances. Donald Trump simply recycled a phrase from Ronald Regan (Reagan 1980) to define and organize those ideas: "Make America Great Again." This slogan helped organize it into a movement.

4. CONDITIONS ARE THE SAME

While there are a variety of specific factors that lead to the rise of a populist charismatic leader, the ones that are relevant in the German and American cases are a culture of defeat, anti-elitism, culture wars, economic struggle, media revolutions, and perhaps most importantly, a feeling of not being represented or heard by the established political order.

4.1 CULTURE OF DEFEAT

As stated by Robert Gerwarth and John Horne in *Vectors of Violence*:

Paramilitarism in Europe after the Great War, 1917–1923: “Defeat should be seen not just in terms of the balance of power but also as a state of mind (including the refusal to acknowledge the reversal).” (Gerwarth and Horne 2011, 491) Academic Wolfgang Schivelbusch described this phenomenon as a “Culture of defeat.” (Gerwarth and Horne 2011, 491) Cultures of defeat are present in both the modern United States and the Weimar Republic. In the aftermath of the First World War, Germany was decimated. Sailors of the Kriegsmarine mutinied against an order to attack the British Royal Navy in what they saw as a futile effort. (Schmidt 1981, 106) Revolutionaries across Germany staged revolts, setting up *Räterepublike* or “Soviet republics” across Germany. (Winkler 1993, 21) This forced Kaiser Wilhelm to abdicate and the new provisional government to negotiate an armistice with the Allies, ending in unfavorable terms of the Treaty of Versailles. (Haffner 1991, 86) The German public and, most importantly, the Imperial German Army felt that they had not been defeated on the battlefield but rather betrayed by communists and liberals on the home front. (Kershaw 2016, 118-119) The citizens of a humiliated Germany developed a deep bitterness towards the allies and those unsupportive of the Empire during

the war. Their desire was not just for a reclaimed, rebuilt, and stronger Germany but also for revenge. Revenge on those within Germany who had betrayed it and revenge outside Germany - the allied nations who plundered Germany and took advantage of its fragile position (instead of defeating Germany on the battlefield honorably) to impose a brutal “Carthaginian Peace.”

A similar current can be felt in the American context, although it is much more multifaceted than a simple military defeat. Donald Trump famously remarked about America’s status in the world, “We aren’t winning anymore.” (PBS 2016) The notion of “American Declinism” has existed continuously in American political discourse since the 1990s. (Weisbrode 2016) In contemporary America, the disastrous 2021 pullout from a 20-year involvement in the Afghanistan conflict led to a swift Taliban takeover, further cemented a notion of American decline. It reminded many Americans of the Fall of Saigon and America’s previous 20-year unsuccessful military adventure in Vietnam. (Jakes 2021) (Mills 2021) (Al Jazeera 2021) Academic James Skidmore states regarding this culture of defeat concerning Donald Trump:

“Trump’s supporters are not calling for the extermination of whole peoples or cultures. But like those who supported Hitler at the polls, they are angry and frustrated. They think they’ve been shortchanged. They feel threatened by a world that is changing in ways that they don’t understand, much less like. They fear losing their jobs, their country, and their culture.” (Black, Kay, and Murphy, 2016).

The promise that: “America is going to win so much, you’re going to get tired of winning” by Donald Trump (CNN 2016) resonated with many Americans who felt that they had been marginalized by the system and as Skidmore outlines: “People who feel hard done

by want change, they want results, they've identified the sources of their problems and they think they have found the man who can deliver.” (Black, Kay, and Murphy, 2016)

4.2 FOREIGN AID/TREATY OF VERSAILLES

In the context of Weimar Germany, the Treaty of Versailles imposed debts upon Germany towards foreign nations that Germans could never hope to pay off in their lifetime, creating an immense resentment towards both the Allied Powers and the Weimar elites. In the context of the United States, an issue that is directly linked to the rise of the MAGA movement and anti-establishment populism from both sides of the political spectrum is foreign aid. On average, the United States Federal Government gives Israel 3.3 billion dollars in foreign aid annually. (Congressional Research Service and Sharp 2023, 7) In 2024, the US Congress passed an aid package that gave Israel an additional 26 billion in military aid. (Jalonick, Groves, and Amiri 2024) In the case of Ukraine, since 2022, the US Government has given a total of 175 billion dollars to Ukraine, 61 billion of which was recently given in 2024. (Maizland and Djurica 2024) (Jalonick, Groves, and Amiri 2024). While these are the two biggest recipients of the United States foreign aid, the federal government gives out an additional 70 billion dollars of foreign aid to many other nations across the globe. These numbers infuriate many working and middle-class Americans struggling to pay rent (Ludden 2024), battling inflation daily (The New York Times 2024), and living in cities with crumbling infrastructure (Schaper 2021). There has been very vocal opposition to foreign aid on both the political right and political left. On the left, many critics of Israel oppose foreign aid to Israel (Soloender 2024), suggesting that the Israel-Palestine conflict will not end until aid is cut off (Soloender and Scott 2023). On the right side of the political spectrum, many oppose foreign aid to Ukraine because of their

ideological support for a return to American isolationism, favoring addressing the abundance of problems on US soil rather than continuing to be the world's policeman. (Mann 2023)

4.3 CULTURE WAR

A significant condition in the coalescence of these movements was the culture war in both respective societies. In the case of Weimar Germany, this manifested itself in many ways. The city of Berlin was well known for its decadence, with prostitution (both male and female), drug dealing, bootlegging, crime, and debauchery. (Gordon 2006, 16) (Gordon 2006, 242) This decadence was seen by many in German society as immoral and fueled a conservative backlash that aided the NSDAP's rise to power. (Whisnant 2016, 200) Another significant point of contention in Weimar society was homosexuality. Paragraph 175 of the German Constitution formally criminalized homosexuality. (Reichstag 1871) Homosexuality was, however, prevalent in the Weimar Republic, especially in large cities. Magnus Hirschfeld's controversial Institut für Sexuellewissenschaft was also founded during the Weimar period in the city of Berlin, which performed some of the first transgender surgeries and research on the subjects of homosexuality and transgenderism. (McCallum 2022, 423-433) The NSDAP disdained homosexuality and homosexual rights as un-German, and even those within the German communist party labeled homosexuality as "Unproletarian." (Oosterhuis 1995, 231) (Marhoefer 2015, 152) The Sturmabteilung and other NSDAP members actively targeted Hirschfeld, he was physically attacked on many occasions and even shot at. (Tamagne 2006, 59-104) Once the NSDAP finally took power, these practices swiftly ended. The Institut für Sexuellewissenschaft was raided, its materials confiscated and burned in what would become the famous book burning at Opernplatz.

(Whisnant 2016, 209-210) (Marhoefer 2015, 174-175) The German culture war had a violent end due to the NSDAP's seizure of power and preference for violent methods. (Whisnant 2016, 209) However, they would not have been able to use these methods with impunity without the broad support of the socially conservative German public against such phenomena, which they saw as running contrary to their civilized values. (Marhoefer 2015, 193)

In the case of the United States, the culture war is more multifaceted and diverse than that of Germany. Points of contention in the American culture war are abortion, homosexuality, gender issues, national identity, immigration, racial issues, and Second Amendment rights. According to pundit Bill Maher, regarding the culture war and Donald Trump: "What is going to get him elected is this woke stuff that a lot of people in this country just don't go for." (*The View* 2024) A clear example of this is the transgender/LGBTQ issue. Many from across the political spectrum oppose trans-women in women's sports (Laviates 2023), transgender people using bathrooms/locker rooms not corresponding to their biological sex (Public Religion Research Institute. 2023, 27), the teaching of LGBTQ curriculum in schools (Meckler 2022), and drag queen storyline (which 60 percent of US adults find inappropriate for children.) (Rasmussen Reports 2022) Particularly within the feminist movement, there has been a considerable debate about the issue of transgenderism (Goldberg 2014), which has caused division, and many feminists have sided with Republicans on this issue. (Griffin 2023) Working-class voters of all backgrounds find themselves increasingly alienated from the Democrats due to the party being incredibly focused on culture war debates that do not align with their values. (Rabbani 2024)

4.4 THE MEDIA REVOLUTION

What was crucial in both Hitler's and Trump's rise to power was the fact that they came about during a media revolution. As stated in the text *Men on Horseback* by David A. Bell: "Media revolutions tend to have powerful political consequences, because they so fundamentally alter the way ordinary people and their rulers perceive and relate to one another." Jordan et al. further stated in their 2018 study that "changes to communication technology and mass media present new opportunities and challenges for the president and other leaders in persuading the public and communicating their messages." (Jordan et al. 2018, 3480) In Hitler's case, he used radio and film to communicate his message to the masses. The advent of the Volksempfänger (people's receiver), a low-cost radio commissioned by propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, was crucial to the success of the NSDAP in capturing all of Germany's support. (Rathkolb 2019, 146) It provided an inexpensive, widely available tool for Goebbels and the propaganda ministry to disseminate the National Socialist message to the nation. (Smith 1989, 153) Hitler also saw the propaganda value of film early on and, after he took power, created a film department solely for making propaganda films. (Boland, 2010, 1) (Bytwerk and Calvin University 2023) Hitler enlisted the help of Leni Riefenstahl, a talented female filmmaker who created films such as *Der Sieg des Glaubens* and *Triumph des Willens*, which chronicled the Nuremberg Rallies. (Riefenstahl 1933) (Barsam 1975, 21) (Petro 2010, 278) These films not only encapsulated Germany with the image of Hitler but dazzled the world. Hitler's image and persona were primarily derived from film to those who had never seen him in person and were a crucial element in the development of Hitler's personality cult. (Kershaw 2008, 69-70)

In the case of MAGA, it was a movement born and sustained using social media. While Trump was already a media figure before he ran for president, starring in *The Apprentice* and heavily using press conferences and news coverage for his campaign, MAGA flourished on the internet. The advent of the internet democratized information and allowed Trump to spread his message more efficiently and widely, and his followers spread it of their own accord. Creating memes by individual supporters of the movement helped spread the MAGA message. Specifically, supporters of Trump congregated on 4chan, Twitter, and The Donald Trump dedicated subreddit “r/TheDonald” to carry out numerous online “operations” to assist Trump in winning the 2016 election. (Lagorio 2016) (Tait 2016) (Herrman 2016) This was done by posting pro-Trump memes, posts, and other online media, such as videos or songs, to sway public opinion in support of Trump (especially in the case of the youth vote.) (Herrman 2016) (Tait 2016) (Lagorio 2016) The conflict between these “keyboard commandos” and opponents of Trump online was dubbed “The Great Meme War.” (Dafaure 2020, 2)

CNN’s journalist Van Jones described Trump as “possibly the first 'social media' and 'reality TV' president.” (Jones 2015) He was known for his prolific use of Twitter, having tweeted over 26,000 times during his presidency (Hickey 2020) (Dimock and Gramlich 2021). However, before and during his presidential campaign, Trump extensively used Twitter to express his political views and get his message to the masses. Trump’s Twitter use increased heavily once he was the US President. (Hickey 2020) Trump continued using his personal Twitter to communicate with the American people. Trump often made provocative, humorous, and critical statements about his political opponents, which were not well received by many on the left but celebrated by his supporters. Trump used Twitter to

threaten hostile nations to the United States, such as North Korea. (Johnson 2017) He also used it to comment on political happenings worldwide, using both criticism and praise. Trump was suspended from Twitter after the January 6th incident and later restored to Twitter once Elon Musk purchased the company. (Smith and Birnbaum 2022) However, after this ban, Trump set up his own social media platform, Truth Social, and continues to post from there, although his Twitter account is unsuspended. (Choi 2021) The only time Donald Trump posted on Twitter after being unsuspended was when he posted a picture of his mugshot, which immediately went viral and spawned a slew of memes that took the internet by storm. (Kim 2023) Social media was crucial in Trump's rise to power, and Trump utilized it in a revolutionary way that no American leader had before.

5. CONTRASTS

Trump and Hitler used similar techniques and methods as orators and public personas to ingratiate themselves to the public. They both used tools such as immense rallies, new forms of media (film/radio/social media), and campaign slogans to build support at a grassroots level. These techniques helped them clear a path for a relatively quick rise to political power - even so, it is imperative to acknowledge how divergent their ideologies remain. The economic policies of Hitler and Trump are opposed to one another. As stated by Gavriel Rosenfeld in the Text *An American Führer? Nazi Analogies and the Struggle to Explain Donald Trump*: “Trump avoided fascist economic and social policies, preferring individualism over collectivism...Trump was not “left-wing enough” in his economic policies “to be a fascist” because the latter embraced a “corporatist” kind of state-directed planning, whereas the former supported laissez-faire capitalism.” Trump’s economic policies champion individual tax cuts and lower corporate tax rates to stimulate jobs and

return capital housed in foreign banks to the United States. (Rappeport 2017) The fundamental aspect of Trump's economic policy, protectionism, became a significant priority in his first term; Trump wanted to raise tariffs on non-US goods, decrease the US trade deficit, and engage in a trade war with China. (Reuters 2019) (Swanson 2018) Trump also reformed the NAFTA agreement, which Ross Perot opposed decades prior, and restructured it into the USMCA (US-Mexico-Canada) trade agreement, which had much more favorable terms for the United States. (Tankersley 2018) Overall, Trump's policies were and are very pro-free market capitalist, although they are still protectionist and from an American-first standpoint.

In contrast, Hitler's economic policy was vastly different. Hitler favored a mixed corporatist economy, intended as the middle ground between the Soviet centrally planned command economy and the United States Free Market model. (Overy 1995, 252) Hitler sought to achieve absolute Autarky, complete economic self-sufficiency, for Germany. The National Socialist economy, rather than being based on trade and commerce, was centered around the rebuilding and rearmament of the depleted German military for future military conquests. (Tooze 2006, 55) Hitler specifically stated that: "the future of Germany depends exclusively and only on the reconstruction of the Wehrmacht. All other tasks must cede precedence to the task of rearmament." (Tooze 2006, 38) To finance this, the German government significantly increased spending on military projects funded by Mefo (Metallurgische Forschungsgesellschaft.) (Overy 1996, 42)

Mefo was a front company set up by the German government to finance rearmament covertly with bills, which were promissory notes given to German companies that could be traded with other companies. (Overy 1996, 42) These bills significantly increased the

German national debt. (Götz 2007, 39) According to academic John A. Tooze: “Nazi Germany increased its military spending faster than any other state in peacetime, with the share of military spending rising from 1 percent to 10 percent of national income in the first two years of the regime alone.” (Tooze 2006, 66) Hitler also privatized many formerly state-owned industries, such as banks, shipyards, shipping lines, industrial plants, and railways. (Bel 2004, 2) The NSDAP preached that private ownership was preferable to state ownership unless an industry was necessary for the war effort. However, private firms were only extended such privileges because they were a source of fundraising for the German state (which had an ever-increasing debt.) (Buchheim and Scherer 2006, 401) All private corporations had to prove their political loyalty to the party and prove that their firms were acting in the interests of Germany; otherwise, they would become state-owned enterprises. (Hayes 2006, 32) Later in the regime, corporate policies would be whatever monetary incentives and fear of penalization fueled the preferred path of the government. (Hayes 2006, 31) While Hitler preached a certain level of free markets, there was tight government control and influence over big business in Germany to the point where it was not truly a free market. (Hayes 2006, 41) Rather than impose tariffs on foreign goods, Hitler heavily limited its trade partners and began almost exclusively to trade with countries within the German sphere of influence, exchanging German manufactured goods for raw materials and making states such as those in Southern Europe and the Balkans increasingly dependent on Germany. (Braun 1990, 101-102)

5.1 FOREIGN POLICY

Another very distinct point of divergence is the one of foreign policy. Hitler’s foreign policy was driven by the expansionist imperial policy of “Lebensraum,” or living

space. (Smith 1989, 84) Hitler intended to undertake an expansionist military campaign throughout Eastern Europe to conquer new territory for the German people to settle while simultaneously expelling (or exterminating) the Slavic populations in those territories. (Moses 2008, 20) Hitler also sought to conquer Western Europe and place those states under either German puppet governments or direct military control. (Rich 1974, 401-402) Hitler's foreign policy was to build a new German empire through conquest aggressively, and wished to see German influence spread worldwide.

Trump's foreign policy, on the other hand, is diametrically opposed to Hitler's. Trump was staunchly against neoconservative ideas that governed the foreign policy of both the George Bush Jr. and Obama Presidencies. As stated in the text, *An American Führer? Nazi Analogies and the Struggle to Explain Donald Trump* By Gavriel D. Rosenfeld "while interwar "fascists routinely ... sought military solutions to political issues," Trump did not "blithely recommend military action" and often criticized "incompetent military adventurism." (Rosenfeld 2019, 569) Trump's foreign policy was twofold: he espoused "Peace through Strength," a moniker of the Regan era, while simultaneously becoming semi-isolationist and pulling back from foreign conflicts. (Barbarak 2016) Trump's policy caused conflict with the military-industrial complex in the United States, with Trump stating: "I'm not saying the military's in love with me – the soldiers are, the top people in the Pentagon probably aren't because they want to do nothing but fight wars so that all of those wonderful companies that make the bombs and make the planes and make everything else stay happy." (Trump 2020) As outlined by Rosenfeld: "Trump's "America First" slogan was "neo-isolationist" rather than interventionist because it sought to shrink the United States's global military footprint." (Rosenfeld 2019, 569) Trump stated in an address to

West Point graduates that “We are ending the era of endless wars” and that it was not the job of America “to solve ancient conflicts in faraway lands that many people have not even heard of.” (Holland 2020) Trump also wanted a massive rollback of US involvement in overseas military conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere (with the exclusion of East Asia and the Pacific). (Burns and Miller 2020) (Nagasawa and Miyasaka 2020) Trump masterminded the Abraham Accords to bring peace and closer cooperation between multiple Middle Eastern Arab States and Israel. (Forgey 2020) Trump criticized NATO members for not paying their fair share in the alliance. (The Guardian 2024) He suggested that the United States reform the NATO alliance, which he stated was an “obsolete” Cold War relic, or leave the alliance altogether. (Sanders and Douglas 2018) As asserted in the text *An American Führer? Nazi Analogies and the Struggle to Explain Donald Trump*: “Nothing in Trump’s foreign policy vision bore “even a vague resemblance” to fascism. Trump did not “emulate the Hitlerian goals of wars of conquest.” (Rosenfeld 2019, 569)

5.2 RACE & ETHNICITY

Another critical distinction between Trump and Hitler is their vastly different policies on race and ethnicity. Hitler and the NSDAP developed and preached an ideology of “Aryan” supremacy, suggesting that the “Aryans” were the *Herrenvolk* or master race who were destined to rule over all others, not only in Europe but the entire world. Peoples such as Romani, Africans, Slavs (Poles, Russians, and Serbs in particular), Jews, and what the Party deemed “Mischlinge” (mixed race) were classified as *Untermenschen* or sub-humans who were only suitable for use as slave labor or extermination. (Mineau 2004, 180) The German government would pass the Nuremberg laws based on these theories, which were incredibly discriminatory and oppressive against the German Jewish population,

eventually leading to the horrific and tragic Holocaust. (Kershaw 2008, 345) (Longerich 2010, 52)

As suggested in *An American Führer? Nazi Analogies and the Struggle to Explain Donald Trump*: “Although Trump might not be a fascist, many of his supporters were. Not long after he announced he was running for president in the summer of 2015, right-wing extremists enthusiastically greeted Trump’s candidacy. The most notorious was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) leader David Duke, who endorsed him in August 2015, and so-called alt-right figures, such as white nationalist Richard Spencer and neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin.” (Rosenfeld 2019, 563) Further stated in the text, “when Trump responded to the violent clashes between right-wing extremists and counter-protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 by remarking that there were “very fine people on both sides...around the same time, Trump sent numerous “dog whistles” welcoming these right-wing endorsements.” This response prompted critics to redouble their insistence that the president had a soft spot for his fascist supporters.” (Rosenfeld 2019, 564)

While it is undeniable that Trump has flirted with his Fascist supporters, Trump has specifically condemned racism, white supremacy, and national socialism, stating that: "Racism is evil—and those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs, including KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other hate groups are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans." (Merica 2017) Trump did not enact any law or executive order that was explicitly discriminatory against any racial group while in office, in direct contrast to Hitler.

Under the Trump presidency, unemployment rates for African Americans and Hispanic Americans reached record lows. (Fitzgerald 2019) Poverty rates for African Americans and Hispanic Americans reached record lows, and African American homeownership increased from 47 percent, a high not seen since 2008. (Creamer 2020) (Turner et al. 2021) Trump signed a bill permanently restoring funding for Black Colleges in the United States. (Binkley 2019) Trump has condemned the Holocaust, moved the American embassy to Jerusalem, and affirmed his support for Israel and the Jewish people on many occasions. (Landler 2017) (Salama and Superville 2017) The Trump Administration also worked to pass the First Step Act, which granted early release to thousands of non-violent offenders incarcerated in American prisons, and the data showed that the primary beneficiaries of this act were black men. Trump has made immense inroads with the African American community. Recent polls have shown his approval among Black voters has risen to 22 percent in 2024, compared to 2020, when Trump had the support of only 9 percent of the Black voter demographic. (Cirrone 2024)

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis finds that, despite being separated by nearly a century, the Weimar Republic and modern America shared many economic, cultural, and social characteristics. In their respective eras, the Populist movements of National Socialism and MAGA sprung from comparable zeitgeists. Both Hitler and Trump rose to prominence during periods in history when the ruling class disregarded the voice of the people. If the conditions are right for the emergence of charismatic strongman leaders, they will inevitably emerge. The Allied countries created the social and economic circumstances that led to Adolf Hitler's rise to power. The Weimar elites did little to solve the problem or bring Germany out of the terrible

state it was in, being more concerned with their well-being. As a result, the German people's resentment grew. They found a charismatic leader who promised to restore Germany to its glory and swiftly enact policies that benefited the people. The German people voted for the idea of a greater Germany. They believed Hitler was the leader who could and would deliver it to them in the worst of times.

In the case of contemporary America, elite governmental policies and a change in cultural norms paved the way for Trump's ascent to the presidency. Policies that benefited the political elites and their corporate allies worked against the lower and middle classes. Elected officials refused to hear these classes' cries for reform and changes in policy to benefit everyday Americans. They turned to Trump, who they believed finally listened and understood their voice, asking for a return to their idea of a better America. These two cases, Weimar Germany and modern America, show that ignoring the people's will and pursuing a policy of elite rule almost always end in some form of populist uprising. So long as elites refuse to acknowledge the desires of their citizens, populism and strong charismatic leaders as its champions are here to stay.

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