

When Movie Magic Conjures 'Historical Amnesia':

The Over-Personalization and Simplification of the Origins of Nazi Antisemitism in Film

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Nazi anti-Semitic hate has fascinated many scholars, as evidenced by the amount of scholarship on the subject. However, popular history specials and documentaries have oversimplified the reasons behind Nazi policy and chose to focus on Adolf Hitler. After watching four television documentaries on the subject: *Mystery Files: Hitler*; *The Most Evil Men and Women in History: Adolf Hitler*; *Hitler & Stalin: Roots of Evil*; and *Evolution of Evil: Hitler, Benchmark of Terror*, I found that, in most cases, these documentaries over-personalize the origins of Nazi anti-Semitic policies. In doing so, the films ignore the social climate and popular political thinking of the 19th century, such as the rise in nationalist sentiment, the anti-Semitic political movement, and a belief in race 'science.' By personalizing the origins of Nazi programs, the films portray Adolf Hitler as an anomaly instead of a culmination of many factors grounded in the society in which he lived.

The discussion in this paper centers on these four television documentaries about Hitler and the Nazis. I will compare each of the films' stated reasons for Hitler's anti-Semitism, as well as examine widely circulated anti-Semitic writings which influenced Hitler and the greater German community. All of the documentaries discussed in this paper are available through one of the following services: Netflix, YouTube, or Amazon video. I feel this makes them most likely to be viewed by the general public and therefore, have the potential to shape widely held ideas on the subject of Nazi anti-Semitism.

The films' spotlight on Adolf Hitler is understandable because he was an imposing political presence in his time. Consequently, the fallout from many of his policies is still felt today. Hundreds of documentaries and films discussing his life and the Nazi party exist. Within many of these programs, Hitler is recognized as the epitome of evil, the ultimate monster. In

terms of the origins of Nazi anti-Semitism, this emphasis is misplaced. The viewers are supposed to believe that Hitler initiated the genocide of millions of Jews on the strength of his charisma alone. According to the films, he did this as revenge for what he believed were the wrongs done to him, and Germany, at the hands of the Jews. This personal hatred drove him to “convince a nation of sophisticated, civilized people to be complicit in his sickening crimes.”¹

In the four documentaries discussed in this essay, the filmmakers undoubtedly put Hitler forth as the driving force behind Nazi anti-Semitic policy. The films influence viewers to believe two common themes: Hitler’s anti-Semitism began during his time in Vienna, and that Hitler blamed the Jews (German or international) for Germany’s defeat in World War I. No matter how the films may present this information, they tend to come back to these common ideas in regard to the origins of Nazi anti-Semitism. Even though there may be truth in these statements, they usually derive from Hitler’s book, *Mein Kampf*, or his speeches, which present difficulties.

In my analysis, I found several problems with this personalization of Nazi policy origins. First, the filmmakers leaned heavily on *Mein Kampf* as a source. Although the book was written by Hitler, it is largely a work of propaganda seeking to influence public sentiment as well as pander to it. Using this book as the definitive source for Hitler’s feelings towards Jews is a mistake. *Mein Kampf* was written following Hitler’s failed coup of the Bavarian government in Munich, a part of the greater Weimar Republic. Hitler was jailed and had no political power at the time of its writing; but, as his failed ‘Beer Hall Putsch’ suggests, he was clearly seeking to gain some. Hitler had an agenda when writing the book; he wanted to create a clear political ideology for the Nazi party and gain political power. Because of his very specific goals and plan, Hitler’s words should be weighed carefully. In other words, anything within the book should not

¹ “Hitler: Benchmark of Terror,” *Evolution of Evil*, season 1, episode 2, directed by, aired July 23, 2015 (Amazon.com: Amazon Digital Services, Inc., 2015) Web Instant Streaming

be accepted as the whole truth and should be checked and compared against other sources. In historical research and historiography, it is commonly understood that a “historical fact is something that happened in history and can be verified as such through the traces history has left behind.”² The films offer little to no proof of any verification being done on the information they extracted from *Mein Kampf*.

Secondly, filmmakers exerted little effort to expand outward from Hitler and those with a vested interest in furthering the Nazi Party narrative—people like Hermann Goering, Joseph Goebbels, and Heinrich Himmler. Because of this narrow focus, viewers are given the false impression that the Nazis invented and masterminded the anti-Semitic political platform. In fact, only one of the documentaries, namely *Mystery Files: Hitler*, attempted to refute any of Hitler’s claims in *Mein Kampf*, or to balance them with other information. The lack of historical context in the films is a problem. A filmmaker’s historical retelling of events needs to keep the environment in which the featured happenings took place in mind, or there is a risk of “violating the boundaries of...possible meanings in the service of their own particular interpretation.”³ It does not seem like context was fully appreciated or presented within these films.

Another issue that should be approached with skepticism is the films’ strategic use of top-notch professors and scholars for commentary. The films include interviews with prestigious figures within the academic community. However, the employment of these figures do not lend the films any more legitimacy when the final product was possibly edited by filmmakers to have a certain bias, thereby changing the intention of their statements. Even if the filmmakers did not intend wrongdoing, pertinent information could have been left out due to the time constraints of the program, thus further damaging the message of the academic. In the course of this research I

² Richard Evans, *In Defense of History*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000) 66

³ *Ibid*, 80

was not able to discover who set the parameters for the material presented. For instance, did any of the scholars who participated have input into the direction that the program would take? This would include issues such as what events to highlight as pivotal moments in Hitler's life, and how they shaped him or contributed to his later actions.

One such event the films consider pivotal is Hitler's move to Vienna. *Mystery Files* and *Hitler & Stalin: Roots of Evil* discussed the anti-Semitic and racist literature circulating the city from 1908-1913, while Hitler was a resident.^{4 5} *Evolution of Evil* largely ignored this literature and stated different reasons for the importance of Hitler's time in Vienna. The film theorizes that the violence used by the Nazis was modeled after the strategies of militant socialist and communist groups Hitler had contact with while there. The filmmakers believed that Hitler witnessed the effectiveness of these violent tactics and incorporated them into Nazi practices.⁶

However, the four films do not give any context to the anti-Semitic literature of the period, which is a huge failure on their part. This literature was widespread and often combined anti-Semitism with nationalism and a hostility to new wealth. This new 'modern anti-Semitism' contained a combination of anti-modernism, anti-capitalism, and anti-liberalism, therefore rooting it in the social conditions and constructs of the period well before Hitler was a political player in Europe.⁷

In Germany, certain political parties started to draw upon those deeply held fears and prejudices and use them for political gain. The Christian Social Party, a political party in

⁴ "Hitler," *Mystery Files*, season 2, episode 2, directed by Marc Tiley, aired June 6, 2011 on Smithsonian Channel, available on Netflix Instant Streaming, Web.

⁵ Kara Dusenbury and Anthony Potter, *Hitler & Stalin: Roots of Evil*, directed by Diane Lechtiz, (History Channel: 2002) YouTube, Web streaming. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6u7j3zDxWI8>

⁶ *Evolution of Evil*, 1:2

⁷ Marcel Stoetzler, *The State, the Nation & the Jews, Liberalism and the Anti-Semitism Dispute in Bismarck's Germany*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: 2008) 191

Germany, and the Berlin Movement, were crucial in carrying forward the ideas that Jews had infiltrated the business structure of the country. Negatively linking Jews to the fabric of business helped intensify anti-capitalism in Central Europe. The emergence of the new industrial economy contributed to the mistrust of both capitalism and modernity. As a consequence of the mistrust of capitalism, anti-modernism became prevalent because of its connection to investment and capitalism. This link also helped spread the theory of conspiratorial Jews attempting to undermine German workers and the German nation. It was helped along by the presence of international Jewish banking magnates, such as the Rothschild family, who owned banks throughout Europe. The idea of a conspiracy of Jews working against the German public gave people a sense that Jews were not really Germans, but were enemies of the state.

The nationalist tinge to the pamphlets and publications was an influential tool in captivating and drawing in readers at the turn of the century. In some circles a hostility already existed toward migrants from Eastern Europe living in Vienna. At the beginning of the 20th century, the city had one of the largest Jewish populations in Europe. In 1910 Vienna, only 48% of the population had actually been born there.⁸ In fact, Vienna was not unique in its hostility to new arrivals. Over the course of the 19th century, an important debate had taken place concerning the nature and meaning of a ‘nation.’ The argument focused on the central question: Was a nation determined by a common language, ethnicity, or a shared culture? During this period, nationalists began to “make sense of [nations] in radically new terms...from the nation as emblem to the nation as identity.”⁹ For example, in Central Europe, Slavic minorities strove for autonomy from the Hapsburg Empire. On this subject, Steven Beller discussed how Slovak

⁸ Rudiger Wischenbart. *Vienna: The World of Yesterday, 1889-1914*. Ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and F. Peter Wagner (New Jersey: Humanities Press: 1997) 36

⁹ Helmut Walser Smith. *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press: 2008) 7

“resentment against Jews in Hungary...had a real basis in the support of most Hungarian Jews for the...Magyar—national cause. Jews in these cases were...supporting the national enemy.”¹⁰

So, the enmity towards Jews and the ‘other’ happened all over Central and Eastern Europe, including Germany and Austria. In fact, the aggression felt by the Jews in Hungary, and the rhetoric used against them was similar to that deployed in other parts of Europe. The enmity, aggression, and rhetoric made up some of the key components at work within the literature to which Hitler had access. These debates over who did and did not belong had been going on well before German unification and Hitler’s birth.

Another social issue driving the anti-Semitism of the time was class divisions.

Throughout the Pan-Germanic Empire during the 19th century, involvement in the financial markets and banking caused problems for Jews when they “appeared to occupy a privileged position.”¹¹ Prior to Jewish emancipation, there was a contingent of Jews who worked as court bankers, putting them in close proximity to the ruling elite. Many Germans felt that Jews were able to overcome barriers that common Germans could not, and therefore would never find themselves in the places of distinction seemingly dominated by Jews. In addition, the idea of a “‘privileged’ Jew was complicated by the conflict of nationalities...the Jew appeared as an accomplice of the dominant historic nations...a member of the wealthy oligarchy.”¹² The problems of national identity coupled with class divisions mixed to create the ‘villain Jew.’ To protect themselves against the harmful influence of Jews, many Europeans found reasons to exclude Jews based on their perceived wealth, privilege, and influence. In Europe, the greater German population had discovered the tools which legitimized the marginalization of their

¹⁰ Steven Beller. *Anti-Semitism: A Very Short Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press: 2007) 65

¹¹ Peter Pulzer. *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany & Austria*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.: 1964) 296

¹² Ibid

Jewish neighbors, namely class strife and nationalist sentiment. Eventually, the employment of race science found its way within that demoting rhetoric as further justification for placing a limit on Jewish influence in society.

Racial science created another rationalization for anti-Semitism. It gave a scientific and academic foundation for the idea of minority inferiority. The discipline started in earnest with the work of Joseph Arthur, Comte de Gobineau, and the publication of his influential *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, in 1855. It was translated into German in 1897 as *Versuch über die Ungleichheit der Menschenrassen* by Ludwig Schemann for the Gobineau Society.¹³ Ludwig Schemann was a member of the Bayreuth Circle and a founding member of the Gobineau Society, along with Richard Wagner and others of the Circle.¹⁴ After Gobineau's work, the nature of anti-Semitic writings started to change. In the Post-Gobineau period, some anti-Semitic publications began including a racial bias against Jews based on this science, instead of concentrating solely on their religion or culture. It is important to note that these ideas about race were significant in providing a justification for the eugenic policies of the Nazis, but were popular long before Hitler came on the scene. Marcel Stoetzler argues that in turn of the century Vienna, racial anti-Semitism was a "deliberately offensive form of saying something that could also be said, and had been said, in other ways."¹⁵

Houston Stewart Chamberlain was another member of this group of racial separatists. He wrote the groundbreaking *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, which was still selling very well internationally, and was widely read in the early 1900s. In fact, a new edition and an

¹³ Elizabeth A. Drummond, "Schemann, Ludwig (1852-1938)" in *Anti-Semitism: A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution*, ed. by Richard S. Levy, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005) 640

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Marcel Stoetzler, *The State, the Nation & the Jews, Liberalism and the Anti-Semitism Dispute in Bismarck's Germany*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: 2008) 192

additional English translation of this influential text was published in 1912.¹⁶ Chamberlain wanted to substantiate the idea that humans were made up of separate races recognized by identifiable characteristics.¹⁷ By 1914, the book had sold over 100,000 copies and Alfred Rosenberg, a prominent Nazi ideologue, considered it “an indispensable accompaniment in the coming struggle for German freedom.”¹⁸ Through this book, Chamberlain managed to create a space for a largely middle class audience to engage in “respectable anti-Semitism” by using pieces of nationalist sentiment mixed with racial ideologies already present within German society.¹⁹ Chamberlain’s book was highly influential in the development of Nazi policy.

Other books that influenced racial science were Joseph Deniker’s *The Races of Man: An Outline of Anthropology and Ethnography* (1900), and William Z. Ripley’s *The Races of Europe* (1899). Deniker wrote of six, mostly European, races.²⁰ William Z. Ripley had a theory of three races. Ripley stated, “Race, properly speaking, is responsible only for those peculiarities, mental or bodily, which are transmitted with constancy along the lines of direct physical descent from father to son.”²¹ These ideas were another component used to justify the eugenics movement and helped validate Nazi Germany’s Nuremberg Laws. The fact that there was a proliferation of race scientists before and during Hitler’s early years, proves its popularity and pervasiveness in the culture prior to the Nazis.

¹⁶ Roderick Stackelburg, “Chamberlain, Houston Stewart (1855-1927)” in *Anti-Semitism: A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution*, ed. by Richard S. Levy, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005) 113.

¹⁷ Geoffrey G. Field, *Evangelist of Race: The Germanic Vision of Houston Stewart Chamberlain*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) 180

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 225

¹⁹ Ruth Rinard, Review of *Evangelist of Race: The Germanic Vision of Houston Stewart Chamberlain* by Geoffrey G. Field. *The German Quarterly* 56 (1983), 183–84. doi:10.2307/404860.

²⁰ Joseph Deniker, *The Races of Man, An Outline of Anthropology and Ethnology*, (New York: Walter Scott Publishing Co. Ltd., 1904) 325

²¹ William Z. Ripley, *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study*, (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1923) 1

Additionally, the films also considered Hitler's rejection from Vienna's Academy of Art as pivotal in his formation of Jewish hate. *Hitler & Stalin: Roots of Evil*, portrayed Hitler as believing his rejection was instigated by Jewish members of the Board of Admissions for the Academy.²² The film gives no information about how this conclusion was reached or the evidence it is based on, but I believe it has roots in *Mein Kampf*. *Mystery Files* speculated that his inability to get into the Academy fed into his sense of being an outsider, possibly leading him to look outward for social acceptance.²³ Lastly, *Evolution of Evil* hazarded that Hitler's rejection plunged him into a deep depression. He lived on the streets of Vienna and made contact with communists and socialists. According to the film, Hitler had a front row seat to the violent tactics these groups used, which showed him the effectiveness of violence as a political tool.²⁴

Evolution of Evil and *Hitler & Stalin: Roots of Evil* both agreed that Hitler's time in Vienna was his first exposure to Eastern European Jews.^{25 26} The films differ on what impact this exposure had on Hitler. *Hitler & Stalin: Roots of Evil* believed it pushed him towards racist and anti-Semitic publications.²⁷ *Evolution of Evil* used Hitler's words in *Mein Kampf* to establish how he became an anti-Semite in Vienna. It claims that the large Jewish population in Vienna bothered Hitler. Another quote from *Mein Kampf* is used to illustrate Hitler's hate for the Jews of the city. "Wherever I went I now saw Jews. The more I saw, the more sharply they set themselves apart in my eyes from the rest of humanity. I had ceased to be a weak kneed cosmopolitan and became an anti-Semite."²⁸

²² Dusenbury and Potter, *Roots of Evil*.

²³ *Mystery Files*, 2:2

²⁴ *Evolution of Evil*, 1:2

²⁵ *Evolution of Evil*, 1:2,

²⁶ Dusenbury and Potter, *Roots of Evil*

²⁷ Dusenbury and Potter, *Roots of Evil*

²⁸ *Evolution of Evil*, 1:2. This is the quote as it was taken from the film. A text of *Mein Kampf* is not available to check the quote for accuracy. The book has not been published in many years due to its contentious nature.

A problem exists with narrowly focusing on Hitler's *Mein Kampf* writings. There were many newly arrived Eastern European Jews in Vienna at this time, but there were also many assimilated Jews who did not 'set themselves apart.' Sigmund Freud, Stefan Zweig, Gustav Mahler, and Karl Kraus were all important figures in Austrian society, and none of them segregated themselves from the non-Jewish Viennese community. In the *Evolution of Evil's* featured quote from *Mein Kampf*, Hitler drew attention to the newly arrived immigrants, but never mentioned the Jewish scholars, journalists, composers, or writers who were thriving in Vienna who looked no different from the rest of the population.

Mystery Files addressed Hitler's *Mein Kampf* claims through Dr. Richard Evans. This was the only film which attempted to balance the material from *Mein Kampf* with other information. Evans stated that despite Hitler's assertions, the historical record shows no proof he demonstrated any signs of anti-Semitism before 1914 (Hitler left Vienna in 1913).²⁹ Dr. Evans conceded that Hitler read anti-Semitic literature while in Vienna, but points out that reading this literature was not unusual during that time period.³⁰ Dr. Evans' statement was the only indication in any of the films that widespread anti-Semitism existed before the rise of the Nazi party, although this fact was not explicitly stated.

In terms of anti-Semitism, the other shaping life event the films referred to was World War I. The effect it had on Hitler's world views must be scrutinized carefully. The lasting effects of war on all parts of a population can be significant. According to *Mystery Files*, in *Mein Kampf* Hitler wrote of his belief that in 1916-1917 Jews were no longer supportive of the War. Dr. Evans addressed this claim, telling viewers that instead of a lack of support, Jewish soldiers were

²⁹*Mystery Files*, 2:2

³⁰*Mystery Files*, 2:2

overrepresented in the war effort.³¹ The percentage of Jewish soldiers serving in the military was well over the percentage of Jews in the general population. Again, *Mystery Files* was the only film of the four that tried to give a balanced treatment to the subject matter. On the subject of World War I, *The Most Evil Men and Women in History* gives its only contribution to the origins of Hitler's hate. This film posited that Germany's defeat in World War I angered Hitler, who believed a conspiracy of Jews responsible.³² The film did not give any other information about the origins of Nazi anti-Semitic policies or of Hitler's personal anti-Semitism.

But if Hitler believed there was a lack of effort or support from Jews, he was not the only one. In October 1916, the Prussian War Minister ordered the Judenzählung, or 'Jew Count,' a count of Jewish soldiers serving on the front as opposed to those serving in the rear in non-combat roles. A belief existed that Jews found ways of evading front line combat service. Anti-Semitic groups pressured the government to do something to put the 'shirking Jews' to work. Commanding officers were required to determine how many Jewish enlisted men, officers, and medical personnel were in their regiment. They also counted how many Jews had been decorated or killed, as well as the number serving in the rear but fit for forward combat.³³

John H. Morrow cited the beginnings of this governmental census as concerns with the food supply in Germany.³⁴ The problems with food distribution were put into the Prussian War Ministry's hands. Therefore, civilians and the military were reliant on the War Ministry to meet the demands of both populations. The War Ministry created the War Food Office to deal

³¹ *Mystery Files*, 2:2.

³² "Adolf Hitler," *The Most Evil Men and Women in History*, season 1, episode 3, aired October 1, 2001, (Discovery Channel: 2001) YouTube, Web streaming. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMwnz36L4as>

³³ Michael Geheran, "Judenzählung (Jewish Census)" in *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel et al. (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2015) doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10684>.

³⁴ John Howard Morrow. *The Great War: An Imperial History*. (New York: Routledge, 2004) 164

separately with civilian needs. However, this largely toothless agency had no power to enforce any of the policies or restrictions it put into place. As hunger and frustration grew, so did a need to focus anger outward, and it fell on the traditional enemy of the state, “the Jew, the middleman, the shirker, as the source of all their woes.”³⁵

The Hindenburg Program, and its goal to co-opt as many men as possible from all other areas as manpower for the front was also a contributing factor in conducting this ‘census,’ but these two things do not exclude the fact that pressure from anti-Semitic groups was the reason that only the Jewish population was counted. The results of the Judenzählung were never published to general public, in part because of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s anti-Semitic leanings, and the fact the results did not present political gains for anti-Semitic groups. The news that Jewish soldiers and civilians were exonerated of impropriety was not the hoped for result. The findings were kept within the upper echelons of the military and government. Even though these claims against Jews proved untrue, the failure to publish the results gave a false legitimacy to the charges against them, and helped reinforce prejudices against Jews.

Contrary to the films’ portrayals, hostility toward Jews was not new in Germany and Austria. In the late 19th century, political parties on the Right who were proponents of anti-Semitism, such as the Christian Social Party, began their rise in prominence. These political movements enjoyed popularity among the common people, but it did not translate into elective successes. The radicalism of these parties was not appealing to the masses even if many of their fundamental anti-Semitic ideas were.³⁶ However, the Christian Social Party and the Berlin Movement managed to effectively instill their anti-Semitic ideas culturally, despite their lack of political success.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Beller, *Anti-Semitism*, pg. 64

In Vienna, one of the most noted figures of political anti-Semitism was the mayor of the city, Karl Lueger. Consequently, he was also the founder of the Austrian Christian Social Party. Lueger's tenure as mayor covered the years 1897-1910, which puts Hitler in the city during his time as its leader. Lueger was successful because he depicted his Liberal adversaries as Jewish, utilizing the widespread ethnic prejudices present in Vienna at the time.³⁷ In short, anti-Semitism had been ingrained into the political framework for over thirty years before Hitler was in Vienna, or a member of the Nazi party. The Nazis were able to recycle and rework the concept of political anti-Semitism to their own ends.

However, even though anti-Semitism was present, its popularity and the utilization of anti-Semitism in politics, and society, depended on the social struggles taking place at a particular time.³⁸ When there was widespread social friction, anti-Semitic feelings seemed to rise, only to fall when conditions got better. Therefore, there were times when anti-Semitism was more pronounced and worked as a constricting force against Jews, as opposed to others when it was present, but less outspoken.

A shift in the way anti-Semitic hatred manifested itself took place at the turn of the 20th century. Typically, animosity toward Jews had exhibited itself through discrimination, threats, and violence, but systematic murder was rare.³⁹ Before this period, pogroms and violence against Jews and 'others' had been mostly spontaneous, driven by the populace, and had not been state-sponsored.⁴⁰ But as the 19th century wore on, nationalism and race permeated into anti-Semitic

³⁷ Ibid, 66

³⁸ Peter Pulzer, Review of *Exclusionary Violence: Antisemitic Riots in Modern German History* ed. by Christhard Hoffman et. al in *Central European History* 36, no. 2 (2003): 288-289

³⁹ Helmut Walser Smith, *The Continuities of German History*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 8

⁴⁰ Jay Howard Geller, Review of *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town*, and *Exclusionary Violence: Antisemitic Riots in Modern German History* in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 2 (2004) 320-321

rhetoric and the nature of the violence changed.⁴¹ Societal conditions in Central Europe were also changing, which triggered an ebb and flow of anti-Semitic tensions. By the early 20th century, the numbers of State and government sanctioned ‘exclusionist’ style murder rose, which indicated a shift in the way these acts of hatred were carried out. Therefore, despite what many might believe, Hitler was not the architect of state sponsored murder or genocide. This trend began in the late 19th century and was carried into the 20th century by others.

The most remarkable of these early acts of government endorsed violence was the Ottoman genocide of Armenians in Turkey, which began in 1915.⁴² The historical record shows that Hitler was aware of the atrocities committed against the Armenians. While Hitler’s reaction to the massacres at the time is unclear, in 1939 he was quoted as saying, “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?”⁴³ Because of the context in which this rhetorical question was given, there are many who believe he felt this lack of attention justified the killing of Slavs in Poland and elsewhere in 1939.⁴⁴ My own analysis leads me to believe that Hitler took what he perceived as the world’s lack of attention, as a signal that his own orders and actions would be quickly forgotten, allowing him to ‘get away with murder.’ Although Hitler was not referring to Jews, but to the people of Poland when he made these statements, the words still demonstrate his understanding and knowledge of government sponsored killing, as well as the possibility that memory was temporary or could be managed. When Hitler spoke, he was pointing out what David Myers called “historical amnesia.”⁴⁵ This is the same concept that is

⁴¹ Helmut Walser Smith, *The Continuities of German History*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 117

⁴² Tim Anderson, "Chapter One: Background," *Armenian Genocide 1*, (*Book Collection Nonfiction: High School Edition*, 2009)

⁴³ Kevork B. Bardakjian, “Hitler and the Armenian Genocide,” (Cambridge: The Zoryan Institute, 1985) 1

⁴⁴ Louis Paul Lochner, *What about Germany?* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1943) 2

⁴⁵ David Myers, Review of *Hitler and the Armenian Genocide* by Kevork B. Bardakjian, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies: An International Journal* 2 (1987), 177

being propagated through these four films. A lack of sufficient context and an oversimplification of the subject matter creates an environment where such an ‘amnesia’ can thrive.

Although there is a great deal of coverage on World War II and the Third Reich in these films, the origins of Nazi anti-Semitism are over personalized and under contextualized. These films give entertaining, but largely speculative information based on dubious primary sources, such as *Mein Kampf*. Each presentation exhibited a definite slant and bias, demonstrated by the information it included and excluded. This is true even when allowances are made for the time constraints of television and film programming. Largely missing from the films are: the prevalence of racist, anti-Semitic literature in Central Europe, the rise of nationalism, and the importance of race science in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. None of the *credible* information the films mentioned was out of the ordinary for the time period.

Without the proper context being provided viewers are misled into believing a simplified version of events. Almost every Nazi policy had a precedent that was unoriginal to the Nazis, they were not inventing anything new. Presenting Hitler’s personal anti-Semitism as the only driving force behind Nazi policy is misleading. It disregards the widely held beliefs of the masses, and their social context. Nazi policies would not have been successful without the deep rooted social beliefs of the time. The focus must be taken off of Hitler’s personal anti-Semitism as the driving force behind Nazi policy. Because as this paper demonstrates, widespread bias and discrimination against Jews was common all over Europe during this time period, particularly in Germany and Austria where anti-Semitism had been used politically. However, if a focus *must* be placed on Hitler, it should be on his willingness to find and administer an efficient, industrialized way to carry out large scale, state-sanctioned murder, which was actually original to the Nazis.

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