ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE REPRESENTATION OF NAZI VILLAINY IN AMERICAN
                    COMICS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ONGOING STRUGGLE OF
                    GERMAN TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE "POST"
                    TRUMP ERA

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Over the past 80 years, Nazis have been cast as the ultimate prototype for villainy in popular culture, especially in American comic books. The fetishization of Nazis in global popular culture has impeded the difficult tasks of coming to terms with the past and establishing a new transnational identity in Germany. However, recent publications, such as *Freedom Fighters* (2019) from DC Comics and *Secret Empire* (2017) from Marvel Comics demonstrate how manipulation, propaganda, fearmongering, and indoctrination powered the Nazi Party and continue to run rampant in modern-day fascist organizations. If mainstream comic books begin to consistently showcase these less sensational aspects of Nazism, they could highlight the subtle dangers of contemporary fascism, including neo-Nazism and far-right extremism, which have recently experienced a resurgence in mainstream politics all over the world. By doing so, mainstream comics could begin to emulate the sophisticated critique of works like *Maus* (1986) by Art Spiegelman.

THE REPRESENTATION OF NAZI VILLAINY IN AMERICAN COMICS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ONGOING STRUGGLE OF GERMAN TRANSNATIONAL
IDENTITY IN THE "POST" TRUMP ERA

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
2022

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to Dr. Rose-Marie Oster, Professor Emerita of the

Department of German Studies at the University of Maryland because she sparked my love

and interest in the humanities with her vast knowledge, personal experience, and infectious

passion for the German language and the history it entails.

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Initial Considerations

Since the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, as well as the national chaos following his loss of the 2020 Presidential Election, the entire world has begun to reevaluate what is considered dangerous, hateful, racist, and fascist rhetoric. The social unrest and political division created by a single person—albeit the leader of an entire nation—in such a short period of time called to the minds of many the image of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party's abrupt rise to power during the precarious times of the Weimar Republic (Cole 3, Devega 8-12). Just as Hitler did in Germany during the 1930s, Trump has discredited oppositional media outlets, promoted racist ideology, and exploited the public through lies, fearmongering, paranoia, propaganda, and conspiracy theories, in order to gain support and deter political opposition. Throughout Trump's presidency and beyond, international concern has risen about America descending toward authoritarianism and becoming a modern-day Nazi Germany (Stanley 6-7). This concern has even reached the fantastical and supernatural world of mainstream comic books. Two publications, *Secret Empire* from Marvel in 2017 and *Freedom Fighters* from DC in 2019, have portrayed modern-day America being ruled by fascist organizations while casting their two iconic superheroes as Nazis or neo-Nazis. From the perspective of their super-villainous organizations, we see many aspects of Nazism and neo-Nazism continuing to run rampant in some parts of far-right political parties, including the Republican Party in the United States.

In the *Secret Empire* storyline, Captain America himself eventually becomes the fascist leader of the neo-Nazi organization of Hydra, ruling the entire United States military and government through fear and intimidation. During their most recent franchise reboot, DC Comics made an entire alternate universe, Universe X, where Nazi Germany won WWII and conquered the United States. This is made possible thanks to Superman landing in Nazi territory and being indoctrinated into the Nazi Party through brainwashing. Both of these

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publications coincide with the rise of far-right extremism in mainstream politics, echoing the nationwide awareness of fascist and racist rhetoric entering into mainstream society and politics (Ryan 4-8). Both of these comic books dramatically showcase fascist organizations ruling modern-day America by assuming control over all aspects of society and targeting groups of people deemed harmful in their new society under the guise of patriotism and nationalism through recognizable superheroes, supervillains, and contemporary American imagery.

The looming threat of a resurgent fascism in the current global landscape compels us to look backward over the past 80 years in order to reconsider how one monolithic figure has embodied the identity of absolute evil and provided an example of true villainy in literature, television, and film: the Nazi. The National Socialist German Workers' Party sounds like any other political party, but during the desperate and uncertain times of the Weimar Republic this party quickly became an organization with aims far beyond the political realm (Gay 163-164). After the economic and social turmoil of the global economic crisis of 1929, the Nazi Party used factual distortion through propaganda, as well as the exploitation of fears and anxieties, to increase their power and control over the public (Kitchen 284). Ironically, the worlds of media and entertainment have used these same strategies for their own profit by showcasing Nazis as villains in their stories, as the paragon of evil and true inspiration for fear. Once they ascended to power in 1933, the Nazi party began to regulate what they found acceptable and exterminate what they found unacceptable (Kitchen 290). The Nazis were an incredibly powerful force of evil and a terrifying enemy for the rest of the world, committing countless war crimes and inciting mass genocide. The entire organization was based on a structured hierarchy of fear, hate, paranoia, and lies in order to create a system of power and control (Kitchen 308-309). In this system, social, political and economic privileges were

given to those who spied on their neighbors, spread propaganda, recruited more Nazis, and blindly followed the orders of their superiors.

The identities of Germany and the German people themselves are still overshadowed and marred by the allure of Nazi villainy in popular culture and history. This is compounded by the fact that Germany has always struggled for a cohesive transnational identity, stemming from its late arrival to both parliamentary democracy and industrialization in comparison with the other superpowers in Europe and abroad (Storer 4). The country existed as a collection of individual kingdoms from the late 8th century until the mid-19th century, while unification and modernization were interrupted by constant warfare and political instability during the 19th and 20th centuries (Storer 10-20). The long tradition of the monarchy seems to have persisted in the subconscious of modern Germany, with the allure of nationalistic pride and militaristic authority constantly permeating Germany's social, political, and economic structures. Despite Germany successfully embracing democracy in recent decades, the horrific history of Nazism still looms large in the transnational identity of Germany. There is an imperative balance that must be achieved between moving forward with the Nazi past and not whitewashing history. It is also critical to establish an equilibrium between remembrance of their atrocities and a fetishized obsession with Nazism, especially in response to the outpouring of radical right-wing extremism entering the national landscape of both German and American politics and society in the past several years (Farivar 1-3, Schultheis 3-5). This equilibrium has been constantly disrupted by the onslaught of Nazi imagery and rhetoric consistently being connected to German characters and German transnational identity in popular culture.

We have seen Nazi Stereotypes in American media and entertainment since the late 1930s and early 1940s, immediately following the Nazi rise to power in Germany. During this same time, the comic strip and comic book rose to popularity as an affordable alternative form of entertainment and information in the United States during the global economic crash

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in 1929, that concurrently allowed the foundations of Nazi fascism to emerge in Weimar

Germany. In print media, we saw the introduction of two superheroes, whose origins are

directly connected to Nazism: Captain America and Superman. From the pulp-fiction icons of

Timely and Atlas Comics, who would eventually become Marvel Comics, Steve Rogers

made his comic debut by punching Adolf Hitler on the cover of *Captain America Comics* #1

almost an entire year before America entered into World War II (Donnelly 1). Superman, on

the other hand, was created by two American teenagers in 1938 as a response to the spread of

Nazism in Europe (Schwartz 2-3). At their conception, Captain America embodied the

strength and heroism of America and their government, but Superman represented the honor,

pride, and courage of the American people themselves. "Thus, while Superman would fight

for America and American values, Captain America represented America itself" (This 225).

Despite critiquing the horrors of Nazism in different manners, both sets of creators

understood the importance of displaying the defeat of recognizable authoritarianism through

a burgeoning medium of news and entertainment.

As a result, since the 1930s the Nazi has been the prototypical villain and embodiment

of absolute evil in popular culture, while also fueling the creation of two iconic superheroes:

Captain America and Superman. Although Superman merely apprehends Hitler, Stalin, and

Tojo in comic strips in *Look Magazine* and on comic-book covers, Captain America combats

Nazi soldiers, officers, and even Hitler himself in the pages of his comic book from the very

first issue (Ritterbush 6, Bellato 5). Even though many other superhero comics existed at this

time (some also fought against the Nazis, including his robotic Timely Comics teammate the

Human Torch), Captain America stood alone because of the authenticity and realness of the

storyline and themes of *Captain America Comics* (Donnelly 16). During the unparalleled

worldwide military conflict of World War II, citizens were able to experience the military

struggle of American soldiers through *Captain America Comics* which allowed it to function as more than a mere comic book.
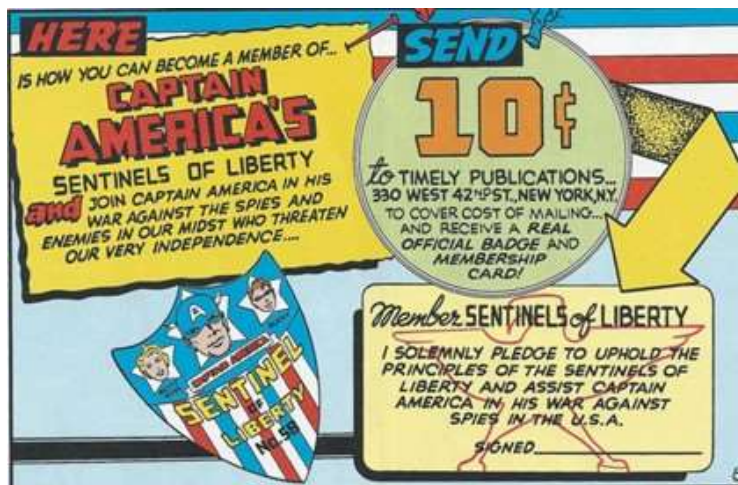
Figure 1: How to Become a "Sentinel of Liberty." From: *Captain America Comics* #1 (1941).

Readers of the comics could even send 10 cents to become a "Sentinel of Liberty" and vow to uphold the principles of Captain America and fight fascism "in his war against spies in the U.S.A." (see **Figure 1**). Early issues of *Captain America Comics* allowed citizens to feel they were directly involved with the war against Nazism, while the writers and editors exploited the unbridled fear and paranoia that surrounded the threat and allure of the Nazi Party infiltrating the United States before they entered the war (Miller 1-3). Captain America functioned as political and military propaganda through portraying an ordinary American citizen turned into a soldier, icon, war hero, and superhero by the American government in order to defeat Germany, Adolf Hitler, and preserve global peace and freedom.

By contrast, Superman only battled fascism once during the 1940s. In *Superman Archives* Volume 3 from 1941, Superman combats the Dukalian athletes at an event resembling the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, who introduce themselves using a "Heil Hitler" salute to their fascist leader (see **Figure 2**). Superman easily defeats them in this indirect attack on Hitler and the Nazi Party within the contents of his comic book in the 1940s. This singular instance prompted a response from Josef Goebbels in *Das Schwarz Korps*, a weekly Nazi newspaper. He degraded Siegel and Superman by stating: "Jerry

Siegellack stinks. Woe to the American youth, who must live in such a poisoned atmosphere and don't even notice the poison they swallow daily" (Ip 4). "Siegellack" is German for sealing wax, thus Superman bothered the Minister of Propaganda and high-ranking officer of the Nazi Party enough to make a pun of his name and insult him.

Figure 2: Superman versus the Dukalian Leader. From: *Superman Archives* vol. 3 (1941).

Although Superman did not fight directly against Nazis in his comics until 1987, his lone instance of dealing with a fascist regime resembling the Third Reich in the 1940s prompted a response from one of the most powerful and infamous leaders of the Nazi Party. This intermodal exchange, from American comic books to a German newspaper, indicates the immediate influence of Superman and comic books on international relations between Germany and the United States.

Flash-forward to today, where both Steve Rogers and Superman remain heroic and patriotic icons of their comic book franchises for over 80 years. However, the deliberate choice of Captain America and Superman, the two superheroes created for the sole purpose to defeat Nazism, as being the cause and enforcer of these contemporary authoritarian regimes, emphasizes and displays this recent growing transnational concern of America descending towards fascism The authors and artists of *Secret Empire* and *Freedom Fighter* carefully chose to publish major works involving fascist ideology and rhetoric rising to ultimate power

in America, to showcase the eerie similarities between modern far-right extremism that exists

in many parts of the United States to the historic evils and iconic villainy of Nazism. These

works also highlight the haunting similarities between the recent global economic, social, and

political uncertainty to the global circumstances in the 1930s, which led to the rise of Nazi

fascism in Germany.

Despite superhero and pulp-fiction comics combating the racist ideology and fascist

rhetoric of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party since the late 1930s, they have always relied on

fetishizing their evilness to make them the ultimate villain in their stories. The comics

emphasize their malevolent aspirations into the stereotypes of global domination and

systematic genocide, which are inevitably defeated by the patriotic American superhero.

These comics use the iconic imagery and infamous rhetoric of Nazism to create stereotypical

villains, who are often the sole representation of German people in these comics. However,

there is one genre-defying work from the late 1970s and early 1980s that is able to show the

atrocities of Nazism without fetishizing them through warfare or violence in the form of a

cartoonish black and white comic strip of anthropomorphized animals to represent different

races of people: *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Jewish Mice and Nazi Cats. From: *Maus* (1986).

As an American child of Polish immigrants and Holocaust survivors, Art Spiegelman deliberately chose to showcase the struggle against the Nazis through a simple yet provoking metaphor about the unbalanced power structure of their Nazi oppressors and their Jewish victims: the cat and mouse. The main character is a mouse, loosely based on Spiegelman's father, and the simplistic yet sophisticated comic accurately details the atrocities experienced by the Jews, the mice, at the hands of their vicious Nazi captors, the cats. Spiegelman highlights the difficulty of representing the struggle of the victims of the Holocaust without fetishizing their victimhood as a means of personal triumph, fame, or wealth within *Maus* by portraying himself as a human wearing a mouse mask as he struggles to write about the horrors they experienced. His work was so authentic, realistic, relatable, and groundbreaking that it went on to win the Pulitzer Prize and gain worldwide recognition despite being a comic book.

Meanwhile in Germany during the 1960s and 1970s, a new wave of literature about the horrors of Nazism emerged, focused on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (to confront one's past), forcing generations of Germans to think about the actions of their parents, siblings, relatives, and friends through reflection and self-examination (Wolff 2). Many authors experienced the horrors of World War II firsthand, and some directly participated in Nazi atrocities; through their work they explored how to come to terms with the burden of their own Nazi past (Wolff 9). Their work also suggests how Germany may be able to move forward as a nation while still remembering the events of the recent past. Themes found in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* literature from Germany also make their appearance in recent comic books that attempt to represent Nazi villainy in a historically and socially relevant manner, such as *Secret Empire* and *Freedom Fighters*. Persistent concepts of manipulation, lies, propaganda, brainwashing, indoctrination, and abuse of fear and power all play a large role in the dynamics of the Nazi-like organizations found in the popular culture of comic

books. However, most of them fail to emulate the genuine social relevance and personal

sincerity of *Maus* by relying on generic superhero fights against stereotypical Nazi villains.

The largest mainstream comic book companies, Marvel and DC, still showcase the

wickedness of the Nazi Party through the thin veil of the Hydra organization, seen in the

recent Marvel Cinematic Universe, and Earth X (referring to the Earth within the Universe X

that is dominated by the Nazis in the DC Extended Universe). Marvel also offered a clear

metaphor for the persecution and struggle of minorities in the 1960s with the introduction of

the X-Men. The archvillain turned antihero Magneto is a Polish Holocaust survivor, who

constantly struggles with his past against the Nazis as he ironically promotes the superiority

of the mutant gene in his war against humans (Baron 46-47). In the United States, films like

Indiana Jones and *James Bond* have used generic Nazi soldiers, officers, scientists, and

doctors for the role of the stereotypical villain with vague genocidal or world-dominating

aspirations for decades. Mainstream popular culture has constantly connected the identity of

German characters with Nazism over the past 80 years. In combination with the transnational

identity of Germany being continuously entrenched in the allure of the monarchy and the

power of fascism, it is easy to understand how Nazism has remained intertwined with the

imagery and rhetoric of German transnational identity from both domestic and transnational

perspectives, especially within the realms of media and popular culture as the paragon of

stereotypical villainy. This problem of not being able to move forward with their Nazi past

and establish a new cohesive transnational identity for the modern age is exacerbated by the

recent emergence of the far-right political party, the AfD, *Alternative für Deutschland*, which

has been gaining support and influence in national and local elections.

In the majority of television and film, the Nazis are shown as an archetype of control,

organization, precision, and efficiency, and are driven by the desires of racial genocide and

world domination. Hollywood focuses largely on the military might and political organization

of the Nazis to heighten their power and terror as antagonists to make the inevitable triumph over these villains all the more remarkable and heroic. As a result, film and television productions often omit the cultlike system of manipulation, indoctrination, propaganda, fearmongering and lies the Nazis used to prey on the insecurities of the citizens in a struggling nation, elements that may weaken the sensationalized appeal of their absolute malevolence. Consequently, the allure of Nazi evilness remains globally prevalent in media and popular culture, especially in the United States and Germany, while remnants of their fascist ideology lurk in the background of today's political and social landscape. In popular culture, the constant trope of German characters always being connected to Nazism either as a villain or as a part of their tragic backstory prevents the readers from fully understanding the lesser-known recruitment methods and cultlike power structure as the real foundations of the Nazi Party.

If the audience is only shown aspects of military conquest, systemic genocide, and other sensationalized themes of Nazism, they will never learn how and why the Nazi Party was able to ascend to power so quickly. The pervasiveness of fearmongering through political pandering, social manipulation, and exploitation of economic uncertainty in the 1930s must be understood in a modern-day context because it could easily happen again in the United States, Germany, or any other country that has recently seen a rise in far-right ideology into mainstream politics, society, and media, such as France, Italy, Brazil, India, Hungary, and Australia (Ouaissa 1-3, Burdeau 2-7, Boadle 2-4, Chattopadhyay 1-3, Krekó et al. 1-3, McSwiney 1-6). If Marvel and DC Comics can find more authors and artists, like Art Spiegelman, from around the world who have real-world knowledge and personal experience of contemporary struggles against the current rise of far-right political parties and neo-Nazi organizations, mainstream comic books could become an even more powerful vehicle for

cultural reidentification and social expression on an international level as well as teach their

readers about the existing threats of fascism may appear in modern times.

This widespread conflation of German identity and stereotypical Nazi imagery in

literature, film, and television almost fetishizes Nazism as the ultimate villain and

subsequently perpetuates a false history for entertainment and profit to a generally unaware

and susceptible audience. Although it is critical that popular culture highlights the systematic

genocide and brutal military conquest of Nazi Germany, they should also explain the manner

in which they gained power and influence through systemic manipulation and exploitation of

their own citizens. Popular culture cannot simply perpetuate the willful ignorance of the most

Especially after the recent rise of authoritarianism and fascism under the guise of nationalism

and conservatism, Popular culture has an obligation to now portray the horrors of fascism and

Nazism from more historically accurate and socially relatable perspectives is the only way to

truly convey the scope of both their ascension to power and eventual demise, to not only

entertain an audience, but to also properly educate them at the same time. This approach has

the potential to vault popular comic books into the spheres of higher education and cultural

diffusion, which popular culture has continually shown to have the capability of achieving,

especially in the United States, particularly from cultural institutions like Marvel and DC. It

is critically important that popular culture teach us about the horror and atrocities of Nazism

without idolizing or sensationalizing their atrocities and stereotyping all German people with

Nazi imagery and ideology in their work

Fortunately, popular culture has finally begun to display Nazi imagery and ideology in

a more realistic and sophisticated manner. Naturally, Captain America would begin this

recent trend, "Marvel's more recent, nuanced use of Nazi iconography went beyond the

simple tropes of Naziploitation to highlight the moral ambiguities of the more complex

times" (This 234). This thesis analyzes the storylines of the *Secret Empire* in Marvel Comics,

the *Freedom Fighters* in DC Comics, as well as the graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, while delving deeply into the imagery, rhetoric, and persistent themes within these stories to explore how they portray these classic stereotypes, while also embodying the more understated aspects of Nazism as fictional lens into real modern-day issues, such as the rise of fascism through neo-Nazi organizations and far-right political parties into mainstream politics across the globe recently. This thesis intends to highlight the positive and negative use of Nazi imagery as emblems of evil and villainy in a wide array of alternate world histories, possible futures for America, and even entire separate universes of comic books.

Additionally, I examine the Captain America Marvel films (*Captain America: The First Avenger, The Winter Soldier,* and *Civil War*) and the DC television shows *Arrow* and *The Flash* that display the Nazi-themed villains in the storylines mentioned above. Finally, I investigate a more accurate and sobering graphic novel by an author whose family was directly impacted by Nazism and the Holocaust with *Maus*. Through examining the social influence and historical accuracy of more recent mainstream comic books from Marvel and DC, as well as the critically acclaimed work of Art Spiegelman, this thesis considers the positive and negative aspects of using Nazi imagery and ideology as the go-to representation of villainy in popular culture, especially during times of rising right-wing extremism in both the United States and Germany. I will also show how immensely wealthy franchises, such as Marvel and DC, utilize multimodal means of entertainment to spread their influence across digital media to not only increase profitability, but also to showcase their more significant themes and messages, such as the rising threat of neo-Nazi organizations like Hydra threatening peace, freedom, and equality, to a larger international audience.

Throughout this entire thesis, I explain the historic and societal implications of this prolific use of Nazism (both the accurate and inaccurate representations) in popular culture as a way of easily showcasing absolute evil and how it can actually perpetuate and even

fetishize Nazi ideology for an uninformed audience through the lens of media and popular culture surrounding comic books. I will also consistently emphasize the importance of popular media to include the less iconic aspects of Nazism, such as their capitalizing on the social, political, and economic uncertainty of Germany, using minorities as scapegoats for Germany's larger problems, and spreading lies and propaganda through controlled media and scientific institutions (Kitchen 288-299, Link and Hare 113-114). I will do this by showing how more recent depictions of Nazism from Marvel and DC Comics stress how the Nazi Party, and other fascist organizations, used lies, fear, and manipulation to pit their citizens first against one another and then against the world under the guise of brotherhood, triumph, and purity (Kitchen 314-315). I will also emphasize how popular culture should highlight the more realistic sides of the Nazis by showing them as vulnerable and desperate people still capable of tremendous evil when effectively manipulated, which will serve as a poignantly grim reminder to current audiences of how easily it could happen now amid the similar global uncertainties, such as the rise of Donald Trump's dangerous rhetoric and the recent military aggression of Russia against the sovereign nation of the Ukraine (O'Day 1-22). Despite the fictive universes and lack of realism commonly found in comic books, this paper will show examples of how this emerging form of popular culture can transcend into thought-provoking literature and emotionally-inspirational art through socially relevant storylines and historically accurate references, especially when associating the villainy and evil of Nazi imagery and ideology with the rising right-wing extremism permeating into mainstream society and politics of the United States, Germany, and many other countries around the world.

In Chapter 2, I outline Germany's unique historical struggle with both transnational identity and the allure of fascism as well as the immense difficulty of moving past Nazism while not whitewashing history for both Germany and the rest of the world. In Chapter 3, I

will showcase how comic books provide a unique perspective on history and society through blending the written word with profound imagery, while also being able to reach a wide audience, including young, poor, and working-class readers. I will also cite examples of how comic books have transcended the ordinary role of popular culture and promote self-exploration, social identification, and cultural expression in ways traditional art and literature cannot achieve. In Chapter 4, I will highlight how Nazism has been directly connected to Marvel Comics and Captain America since their origins of pulp-fiction as Timely and Atlas Comics, and how it continues into contemporary times by analyzing *Secret Empire* from an academic and contemporary perspective. In Chapter 5, I will showcase how the creation of DC Comics and Superman are also closely related to the threat of Nazi fascism and how they have also remained connected to Nazism for the past 80 years by analyzing *Freedom Fighters* from an academic and contemporary perspective. In Chapter 6, I will compare and contrast the manner in which Marvel and DC have historically and recently dealt with the horrors and atrocities of Nazism. I will then compare them both to *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and its simplistic, yet effective style in dealing with the Holocaust from a completely different perspective and what they could learn from each other. I will also articulate how media and popular culture could help Germany to move past Nazism without ignoring history by relating it to modern examples of similar situations that have arisen in recent times. Finally, I will provide ways for comic books, especially Marvel and DC, to continue and further their recent attempts to showcase Nazism and neo-Nazism from a more modern and relatable lens, in order to educate their readers of similar situations recently occurring in many different cultures and societies.

Chapter 2: Historical Background of Germany's Struggle with Fascism

The Holy Roman Empire through Unification

The Nazi Period dramatically affected world events in a very short period of time, 1933-1945, permanently changing the social, political, and military landscape of the entire world through the unprecedented horrors of World War II and the Holocaust. The thirst of absolute power through militaristic conquest, genocide driven by racist propaganda, and oppressive fascism of the Third Reich still impacts the transnational perception of Germany. Even after more than 80 years since the fall of Nazism, the current identity of Germany is still largely tied to their Nazi past because of its immense effect on the international landscape of politics and militarism. This influence is also exacerbated by the continuous linking of Nazi iconography and rhetoric with absolute evil and the paradigm of villainy in American media and popular culture since the late 1930s.

The over-arching and persistent allure of the monarchy and its absolute authority, along with the equally long struggle of forming a German transnational identity, existed long before Germany existed as a nation. Even before the Nazi era, then, an unstable duality of entrenched power structures and a lack of cohesive identity had existed for centuries; this instability remains a problem for Germany into the modern age. Originating from individual kingdoms ruled by the Holy Roman Empire since around the 9th century, the people of the lands that would eventually become Germany have been continuously influenced by the absolute power of emperors and monarchies. These people were subjected to the rule of not only the Holy Roman Emperor, but also the local German prince-electors (*Kurfürsten*) (see **Figure 4**), who were high-ranking noblemen of the empire until 1806 (Storer 5). As a result, the awe- and fear-inspiring authority experienced by the German people during the Holy Roman Empire instilled a deep-seated fascination with monarchical rule that persisted for centuries and provided the requisite foundation for Nazism to ascend so quickly in Germany amid the pervasive uncertainty and desperation of the Weimar Republic.
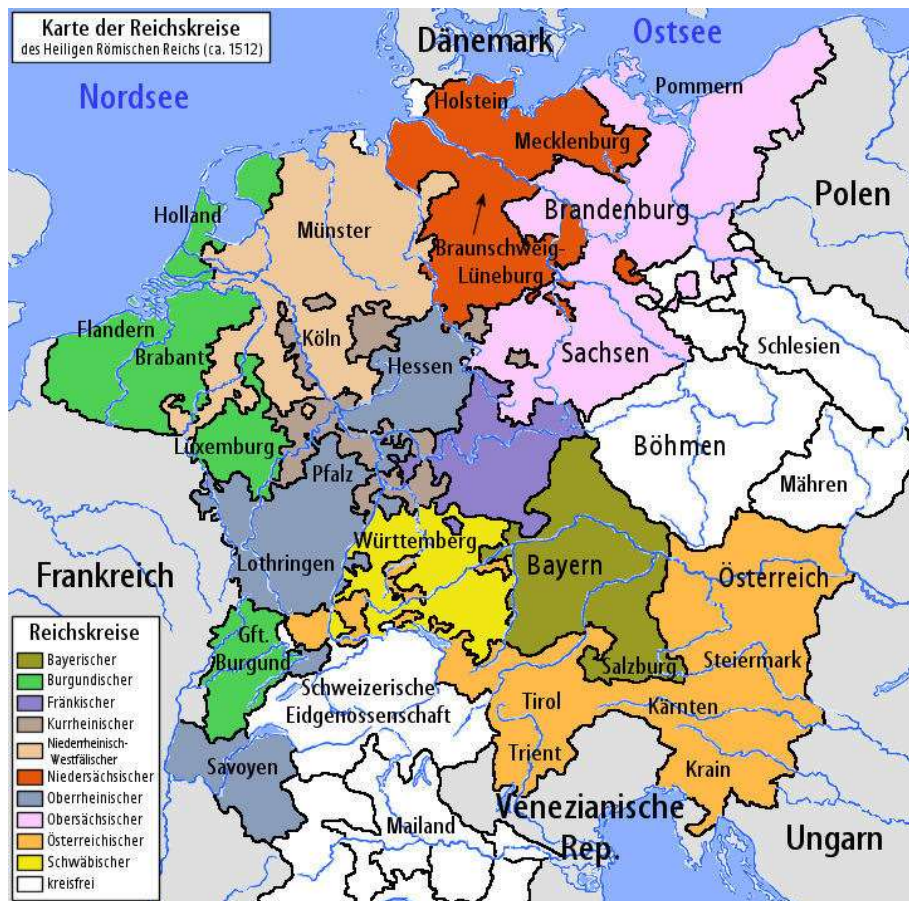
Figure 4: The Holy Roman Empire and the Germanic Kingdoms ca.1512. From: *Wikipedia*.

After the fall of the Holy Roman Empire during the early 19th century (1806), these

prince-electors remained as the leaders, often assuming titles that were more powerful. The

title of the Great Elector became Emperor (*Kaiser*) after negotiations with the Habsburgs of

Austria, and the descendants of this first Emperor would rule the Kingdom of Prussia for over

200 years (Storer 7). Then the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) accepted the title of grand

duke for these territories, but the title of king of these lands was rejected. Germany remained

a collection of territories subjected to individual rule until Friedrich Wilhelm I, also known as

the Great Elector of Brandenburg, who began consolidating political power after the ravages

of the Thirty Years War (Storer 6). Subsequently, the Wars of Liberation (1813-1814) led by

Friedrich Wilhelm III were the first step towards a unified Germany to escape the

imperialistic rule of Napoleon (Storer 11).

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However, it was not until the Revolution of 1848 that a preliminary parliamentary government (*Vorparliament*) was installed at the behest of 574 delegates from a wide array of German states (Storer 13). The end for the German imperial monarchy was presaged by Friedrich Wilhelm IV refusing the crown, which allowed the various princes to reclaim power by disbanding the parliament in the summer of 1849. Effective unification did not begin until the appointment of Otto von Bismarck as Minister President in 1862 and his arranging the Wars of Unification against Denmark in 1864, Austria in 1866, and France in 1870 (see **Figure 5**) (Storer 14). Bismarck used these victories to convince the unstable King Ludwig II of Bavaria to cede the German throne to Wilhelm I on January 18, 1871, creating the country now known as Germany.

Figure 5: German Territory during the Unification Process from 1815-1871. From: *Oxyi.org*.

Germany installed a parliamentary government through the imperial constitution of 1871, but the country was still comprised of a loose collection of four kingdoms, six grand duchies, five duchies, seven principalities and three free cities. Due to this fragmentation, Germans have struggled to form a sense of cohesive transnational identity ever since (Storer 15). Not only was German unification belated compared to their rivals France and England, but it also remained incomplete and contested because the German Constitution reserved many powers to a seven-year term minister president that was elected by popular elections. This office was a symbol of authority from the days of the monarchy with powers to dissolve the parliamentary government (Gay 151). These two factors along with the numerous military conflicts with France, Denmark, and Austria stifled any legitimate conversion to an official parliamentary democracy. Ultimately, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, which originally only implicated Serbia and Austria, brought every European superpower into a single military conflict, known at the time as the Great War. Germany lost this war and suffered complete political, military and economic collapse as a result of overfunding the war as well as massive sanctions as terms of its complete capitulation.

The Weimar Republic

Following World War I was the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), which began a period of overwhelming political, economic and social hardship for the entire country. During the Weimar era, Germany experienced the full tumultuous effects of modernization and industrialization while installing an entirely new government and recovering from the economic sanctions of the war. This created rampant economic and political disparity among the working class as well as prolific crime and corruption on all levels of society (Gay 153-155). The subsequent failed installation of a parliamentary government, along with the problematic duality between the allure of the monarchy and the struggle with transnational identity created the perfect recipe for disaster for a desperate and vulnerable Germany.

During this precarious period of German history, the people still had no unified or cohesive sense of transnational identity because the aristocratic families were losing influence and the political parties of the parliamentary government were largely novel and controlled by foreign powers. Although a parliamentary government was briefly installed in Germany after World War I, hesitance from the general public, political squabbling, and inexperience of the multitude of political parties caused a political standstill among Germans themselves and the foreign diplomats (Gay 151). This political polarity would reach a breaking point during this period as many Germans from every social standing still yearned for the power and unity provided by the reign of the monarchy (*Kaiserreich*) from the years before unification, especially after the humiliating defeat in World War I.

Through the political inefficiency of the moderate social democrats and splintering of the political left by the communist idealists, the traditionalists and conservatives of the political right finally consolidated their power into the National Socialist Party in the elections of July 1932 (Gay 162). Despite being arrested for political treason less than a decade earlier in 1923, Adolf Hitler emerged as the devoted and charismatic leader many Germans were waiting for to lead them into prosperity. His party was devoted to reigniting the lingering desires for a return to nobility, military prowess, and absolute power using a platform of strength, unity, and purpose, which finally provided a sense of national identity for a desperate and vulnerable Germany. The Nazi Party capitalized on this lack of national identity and defined what it meant to be German based on purported genetic superiority and a fanatical devotion to authority. Despite the brevity of the reign of the Third Reich and Nazi fascism (1933-1945), it changed the course of history for the entire world. Since the 1940s, Nazism and its horrendous effect on the world have been thoroughly documented in movies, television, literature, and the media while also forming a key subject of fascination within the world of popular culture as the archetype for villainy and absolute evil.

The Nazi Period and the Third Reich

The rise of the Nazi empire is similar to the tyrannical conquests throughout world history, like Alexander the Great or the Khan Dynasty of Mongolia in their lust for power, domination and expansion. However, the incredibly expeditious advancements of technology allowed for industrialization and modernization to rapidly create a military force able to concurrently fight enemies on several different fronts (Kitchen 314-315). This provided the smoldering fire of Germany and their desperate people still devastated by defeat and ready to prove themselves as a nation through the spark of warfare, serving as an international powder keg. The Nazi Party was able to control the definition of German identity under the guise of unity, purity, and acceptance (*Volksgemeinschaft*). They quickly gained support by promoting the working-class and military through swift economic actions, unfettered by political squabble or foreign influences of the previous administrations, while also attacking the social democrats for political dishonesty and the communists for not having a feasible political agenda (Gay 159).
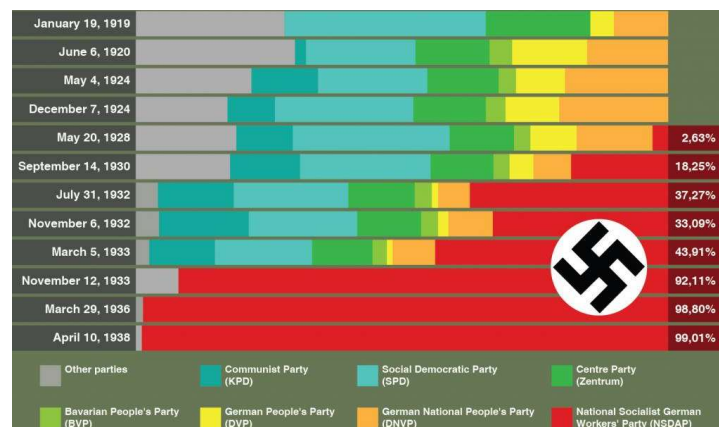
Figure 6: German Election Results from 1919-1938. From: *The Montreal Holocaust Museum.*

The main goal of the Nazi Party was to consolidate power and form a hierarchy of order and control, where social influence was only gained through listening to and executing the orders of your superiors. Once he successfully ascended to a position of authority after being appointed as Chancellor of Germany in 1933, Adolf Hitler quickly consolidated power by disbanding the parliamentary government (*Reichstag*) (see **Figure 6**).

Hitler used the Weimar Constitution, which was worded in favor of conserving the political

influence of the aristocratic families of the old monarchy, and then completely dismantled it:

> Hitler made his way into the government… through the authoritarian gap in
> the Weimar Constitution, and immediately set about destroying the
> Constitution he had just taken an oath to defend. That formally correct oath he
> regarded as a symbol and end of his successful policy of legality. Now the
> seizure of power began. Now the tactics of legality had to be combined with
> the strategy of revolution to form the specific technique of seizing power that
> in a short time was to outplay, eliminate, or regiment all safeguards or
> counterforces, political, social, and intellectual. (Gay 163)

Tragically, this ominous, yet technically legal abuse of power was only a minor prelude to the

atrocities Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party would commit under the guise of legality and duty

within the Third Reich.

The Nazi Party abruptly changed the entire outlook of German politics, and it became

clear the focus on rearming the military exceeded the scope of bolstering the economy and

national pride of Germany. The Nazis also had malevolent ambitions of restructuring German

society and mandating a very specific identity of what it meant to be German. The objectives

of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party quickly changed from reestablishing German strength and

pride to forcibly infiltrating their neighboring European countries to spread the power and

influence of Nazism and conquer new territories that would provide space for the expansion

of the Aryan race (*Lebensraum*). Like other maniacal dictators and conquerors before him,

but with the terrifying addition of the technological and industrial advancements of

modernization, Adolf Hitler yearned for his empire to extend beyond the realms of his current

homeland to begin his global conquest.

Figure 7: The Nazi Empire Grows from 1936-1939. From: *historycrunch.com.*

In the late 1930s, he claimed he merely desired only to regain the German lands that were lost due to the sanctions and annexations as a part of their humiliating defeat of World War I (*Anschluss*). However, the European superpowers quickly learned that the appeasement of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Sudetenland (see **Figure 7**) would only whet the immense appetite of an emerging dictator with the ingrained urge for military conquest that was shared by a large part of the newly defined nation (Patel and Reichardt 16). It also showed the world that the majority of Europe was quite hesitant to begin another military conflict so soon after World War I (Kitchen 295-296). Hitler and the Nazi Party also exploited tragedies of their defeat in World War I as well as the troubles of the Weimar Republic and shifted the blame to the foreign diplomats, Jews, and other minorities in German society. Nazism defined distinct enemies for the German people to rally against as well as help define what it meant to be "truly" German. This escalated into a horrific quest of international genocide and world domination that became synonymous not only with the Third Reich and Nazi Party, but with Germany as a whole.

However, many facets of the Nazi Party are not as well known or as sensationalized in popular culture. With eerily similar characteristics to a budding religion or fanatical cult, the Nazi Party demanded absolute devotion, subjugation, and admiration from their followers under the guise of political efficiency and economic production. Within the Third Reich, the Nazi Party controlled the political and social purposes of all institutions within Germany (*Gleichschaltung*), ensuring unquestioned authority over every aspect of society, including the dissemination of science and media to the public (Patel and Reichardt 10). The only way to gain any form of social prosperity was by adhering to the ideals and mandates of the Nazi Party. In addition, they quickly employed a widespread system of recruiting those who were either inclined to the ideology of Nazism or those desperate for any form of influence in society, while at the same time reporting anyone suspected of not conforming to these ideals

or actively working against the ambitions of the Nazi Party (Kitchen 264-265). Utter and complete subjugation of humanity was the goal for Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, through subduing their adversaries by force and mesmerizing their allies with false promises of opulence and salvation. Like countless religions and cultlike organizations before them, the Nazi Party specifically targeted the outcasts and rejects of society, because they would prove the easiest to convert, as they were eager to shift the blame of their failures onto someone else and have a chance to achieve social and economic prosperity.

Whether it was gathering information on neighbors, family, and friends, or turning strangers into the authorities for violating the ideals of the Nazi regime, incessantly recruiting those deemed acceptable (*Volk*), or systematically eliminating those deemed unacceptable (*Fremdrassig*), the duty of the followers of Nazism was to the nation and the Nazi Party above all others. Not only did the ambitions of the Nazi Party quickly move beyond the domestic sphere of just Germany and into the realm of global conquerors, but they also metamorphosed into a maniacal organization beyond the scope of politics and into controlling every aspect of society. This change allowed the Nazi Party to control the dissemination of information, in an attempt to regulate the knowledge of every German citizen:

> The Nazis did not rely on self-appropriation by individuals, but rather coupled their social planning with incentives and fear. And although biopolitical and social engineering techniques frequently began with the individual, they ultimately targeted the entire population, which was to be classified, organized, and optimized. (Patel and Reichardt 8)

In combination with the complete overhaul of the German education system and systematic attacks on independent media outlets, it was clear that Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich desired uncontested subjugation of all people, including their own citizens.

Despite the fact that the Nazi Party and Third Reich were ultimately unsuccessful in their quest for world domination and were soundly defeated in World War II, their implementation of a horrendous system of genocide and world conquest made them the

prototypes for true evilness and ultimate treachery in the modern age. In the years after World War II, the Germans became the face of villainy in film, television, and literature. In addition, it made for profitable and patriotic entertainment to have the on-screen heroes repeatedly defeating stereotypical villains of Nazi generals, scientists, doctors, etc. with aspirations of conquest through genocide. The more sensationalized aspects of Nazism, the world-conquering and genocidal aspirations, are constantly emphasized and even fetishized in mainstream popular culture. While the less sensational facets of the organization, the corrupt cultlike power structure and recruitment system, which allowed them to ascend to power so quickly are often largely disregarded or completely ignored. In order for an audience to gain a more complete understanding of the evilness behind the Third Reich, the inherent power structures and lingering identity crisis embedded in the sociopolitical history of Germany as well as the Nazi Party's pervasive systems of manipulation, fear, lies, and control must be examined.

Figure 8: Anti-Semitic Nazi Propaganda. From: *worldwartwo.filminpsector.com.*

Although the concept of propaganda is often attributed to communist/socialist regimes in popular culture, the Third Reich had an entire organization (*Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda*) solely dedicated to ensuring Nazi propaganda was being spread throughout the nation (see **Figure 8**). This Nazi-era poster seeks to exploit the existing

fears of the German people by fusing the two main targets of the Nazi empire into a single

"enemy," suggesting that Jews were controlling foreign powers from behind the scenes.

Ironically, this is exactly what the Nazis were doing inside of Nazi Germany, controlling

every aspect of life from behind the scenes, The Nazi Party also infiltrated the top levels of

academic and professional institutions from sociology and city planning to science and

eugenics, in a significant attempt to control all social and scientific developments in Germany

(Patel and Reichardt 10-11). From controlling marriage, race relations, and job creation to

yearning for absolute power over life and death itself, Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich

aspired to be omnipresent and all-powerful rulers controlling a homogenous, subjugated and

unified populace of fanatical worshippers bent on world domination.

Not only did Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party have a maniacal lust for absolute control

of the manmade world of society, politics, and the military, the Third Reich even extended its

empire into the worlds of the supernatural. The unceasing obsession for supreme power over

all things in all worlds seeped into the psyches of the Nazi Party, especially Adolf Hitler, and

they began to explore the worlds of the occult and fringe-science (*Grenzwissenschaft*). The

utilization of the occult also facilitated the use of border-sciences to conduct genetic and

racial experiments on minorities (Schellinger, et al. 171-172). Alfred Rosenberg, the head of

the NSDAP Office of Foreign Affairs, acknowledged that understanding the mystical and the

occult was essential to the establishment and success of National Socialism:

> The success of National Socialism, the unique appearance of The Führer, has
> no precedent in German History… The consequence… is that many Germans,
> due to their proclivity for the romantic and the mystical, indeed the occult,
> came to understand the success of National Socialism in this fashion.
> (Kurlander 132-133)

The Third Reich consistently explored pseudoscience and the supernatural to spread their

false ideology and propaganda to ensure absolute authority over all possible avenues of

thought and belief. They consistently used uncorroborated pseudoscientific experiments, such

as racial phrenology to highlight the fabricated physical and mental superiority of the German race and employing astrology or biodynamics to showcase how the Jews and other minorities would cause the end of the world. The ideology and obsession of National Socialism was designed to suffocate any form of individual or contradictory thought in their followers to ensure absolute control. Whether it be through suppressing conventional modes of thought such as the realms of media and political competition or exploiting the deep-seated esoteric beliefs of astrology and other conspiracy theories, the Nazi Party silenced any form of independent thinking conflicting with their ideology, to engrain their own system of ideas and beliefs into the entire population under the reign of the Third Reich.

It is within this bizarre intersection of obsession with absolute tyranny and the supernatural that the stereotypical Nazi villains reign supreme in popular culture, especially within the realm of superhero comic books. The popularity of pulp-fiction comics depicting Nazis in the late 1930s and early 1940s in a hyperbolic style emphasizing their heinous rhetoric and racist aspirations of genocide and world domination to clearly identify them as the villains of the story and the enemies of American peace, freedom and democracy. Captain America himself was created by the pulp-fiction franchise of Timely Comics (who would become Atlas Comics by the 1940s and eventually Marvel Comics), whose early depictions of Germans and Japanese are portrayed in a highly racist and stereotypical manner. The early *Captain America Comics* emphasize the importance of defeating Nazism through detecting potential Nazi spies at home and defeating them abroad through military might, which are hallmarks of early pulp-fiction comics. Although Superman was created by two Jewish teenagers from Cleveland in 1938, they quickly adopted many pulp-fiction themes, such as depicting Japanese and German people in a racist and offensive manner, which is highlighted by him manhandling Axis leaders on covers of his earlier comics. The unparalleled maliciousness and horrendous scientific experimentations rumored to be key parts of Nazism

allowed for them to assume the role of the absolute malevolence and the paradigm of military, scientific, and supernatural villainy in popular culture.

The foundations of Nazism and the horrific events they would cause began in the precarious times of the 1920s and 1930s after the worldwide repercussions of World War I. The turning point of this fragile period was the Global Stock Market Crash of 1929, which threw the socially, politically, and economically vulnerable nation of Germany into utter chaos and into the grips of the Nazi Party. Fatefully, an entirely new medium of popular culture emerged in the United States during the same time of global economic uncertainty due to its ability to disseminate both news and entertainment in an affordable and accessible manner to a vast audience: the comic strip. Due to their immense popularity, comic strips quickly evolved into a unique form of popular culture that combined qualities of art and literature into a single medium: the comic book. Due to their simultaneous convergence into mainstream society in the late 1930s, the success of early comic books, especially those from America, often relied on Germany being the representation of pure evil, mainly through the German people being ruled and controlled by a stereotypical allusion of a Nazi officer, doctor, scientist, or Adolf Hitler himself, whose fiendish ambitions are subsequently defeated by the iconic, heroic, and patriotic American military hero.

Chapter 3: Transnational Impact of American Comic Books

The Concurrent Rise of the Comic Book and Nazism

During the Weimar Republic, the nation of Germany was still reeling from the social, political, and economic struggles resulting from the international sanctions of WWI and the Global Stock Market Crash of 1929. Across the Atlantic Ocean, the United States of America was also experiencing economic woes. Amid this widespread poverty arose the need for a form of media able to provide, news, entertainment, and other information in an affordable and convenient manner to a wide-reaching audience. Thus began the rise of the newspaper and with it the comic strip; eventually the comic book emerged and swiftly became immensely successful:

> By 1935, in the midst of the Depression, the comic book established itself as a medium of mass entertainment and communication. As a result, comic-book reproduction of previously printed material in newspapers and magazines was superseded by the regular publication of original material. (Mambrol 2)

The first official comic book publication in the United States is credited to *Famous Funnies #1* in May of 1934, which began the Golden Age of comic books (1938-1956), followed by the Silver Age (1956-1970), Bronze Age (1970-1985), and the Modern Age (1985-present) (Gauvreau 2). The global economic crisis of the 1930s created not only the foundations for the rise of Nazism in Germany, but also the dawn of the age of the comic book in the United States.

In March of 1941, in the middle of the Second World War, Marvel Comics introduced its own superhero, Captain America, whose first mission was to defeat Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich. The introduction of Captain America was meant to bolster both patriotism and the national economy in one heroic strike. Since his debut, Captain America has remained an icon associated with defeating Nazi fascism, and served as a paragon of freedom, heroism, and America itself (Donnelly 1). His superpowered adversary, the Red Skull, came to embody for the United States not only the malefic aspirations of the Nazi Party, but even the

perceived desires deeply seated within many Germans. Additionally, in the early 1930s, two teenage Jewish immigrants living in Cleveland, Ohio, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman, originally deemed the Champion of the Oppressed, as an artistic and therapeutic response to the rise of Nazism and their current reign of terror (Schwartz 2). These two iconic, patriotic, American superheroes would continue to fight against fascism, tyranny, and any threat to American freedom into the modern day, as a result of Nazism and the immense terror it represented to the world over 80 years ago. The multimodality of comic books come from the unique fusion of art and literature, "semiotic modes of words, images, and sequence in comics are combined [to create] a semiotic product on the material level… [just as] a film adaptation of a comic or graphic novel would also foreground issues of intermediality" (Kukkonen 35-36). The intermedial properties of comic books were understood early, as Captain America quickly transcended the confinement of print media and began to appear in live-action television and film by 1944 (Licari and Rizzo 19), serving as an early example of the transmedia capabilities of superhero comic books. Over three decades later, Christopher Reeve would showcase the story of Superman in movie theaters for millions of Americans with *Superman I* (1978), *Superman II* (1980), *Superman III* (1983), and *Superman IV* (1987).

Self-identification and National Stereotyping through Comic Books

In *Understanding Comics* (1994), Scott McCloud explains how the simplistic drawing of characters within comic books allows the readers to insert themselves and their own identities into the story (see **Figure 9**). This is done to create an immersive and realistic experience for the reader. A modern example of this phenomenon is the portrayal of Arab people as another archetype for villainy after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States and the subsequent failure to establish a Muslim or Arab superhero in mainstream comic books. This failure was largely because the storylines and characters revolved around the racial stereotypes of Islamic and Middle Eastern culture (Stein, Meyer, and Edlich 518).

Figure 9: The Process of Self-identification in Comics. From: *Understanding Comics,* p. 36.

Despite the stereotypical, communist, Eastern European or Russian spy becoming the go-to villain during the Cold War from the 1950's through the 1980's and then the racially and religiously infused Middle Eastern/Muslim warlord taking the mantle in the 1990's through the new millennium, Germany and Germanic people are still associated with Nazism as the identity of evil in the modern age of popular culture. Jack Kirby, who was a major innovator for both Marvel and DC Comics, along with Stan Lee, who helped Marvel become an icon of American mainstream popular culture, pioneered the style of blending surreal iconic imagery with contemporary themes and realistic forms into the contents of their comic books (see **Figure 10**). It is through the continuation of this unique intersection of the fantastic and realistic, where more modern depictions of Nazism and neo-Nazism (from DC and Marvel) are able to highlight the lesser-known aspects of these organizations from the perspective of their supernatural villains. It is understandable how harmful and stereotypical identities could be created and popularized through the prolific association with villainous imagery and storylines in popular comic books, like Marvel and DC Comics. We have seen the real harm of media and society labeling an entire race as harmful or dangerous to the health and safety of America as recently as 2020, and the rise of Asian-related hate crimes

because of their falsely purported connection to the origins of the COVID-19 illness

perpetrated Donald Trump, his followers, and some media outlets (Cabral 9-15).

Figure 10: The Impact of Mainstream Comics. From: *Understanding Comics*, p. 55.

We have also witnessed the danger of popular culture, including comic books, using

stereotypical Islamic and Middle Eastern warlords and dictators as the prototypical villain in

the early 2000s. Thus, the prolific and consistent use of Nazi rhetoric and imagery as the

over-arching paradigm and exemplar of absolute evilness and villainy in American popular

culture over the past 80 years has certainly influenced the global identity and transnational

narrative of Germany and has made the already immensely difficult task of moving forward

with Nazism and creating a new cohesive identity as a newly democratic nation much more

difficult. The social relevance and simplistic nature of comic books allows the reader to create their own fictious world based on the real-world problems they experience.

Figure 11: Defining Comics. From: *Understanding Comics*, p. 9.

In combination with their contemporary and historical significance, comic books also fuse the sophisticated elements of literature and art in a single medium. They synthesize the visual stimulation and imaginative expression of art with the critical thinking and social commentary of literature to create an entirely new form of pop culture worthy of scholarly inquiry and debate. Scott McCloud states the importance of the juxtaposition of images in a deliberate sequence in his seminal work *Understanding Comics*, in order to elicit the reader's critical thought process while reading (see **Figure 11**). Comic books create an interactive and complex world of imagined realities based on the reader's sense of identity, purpose, and their struggles in society.
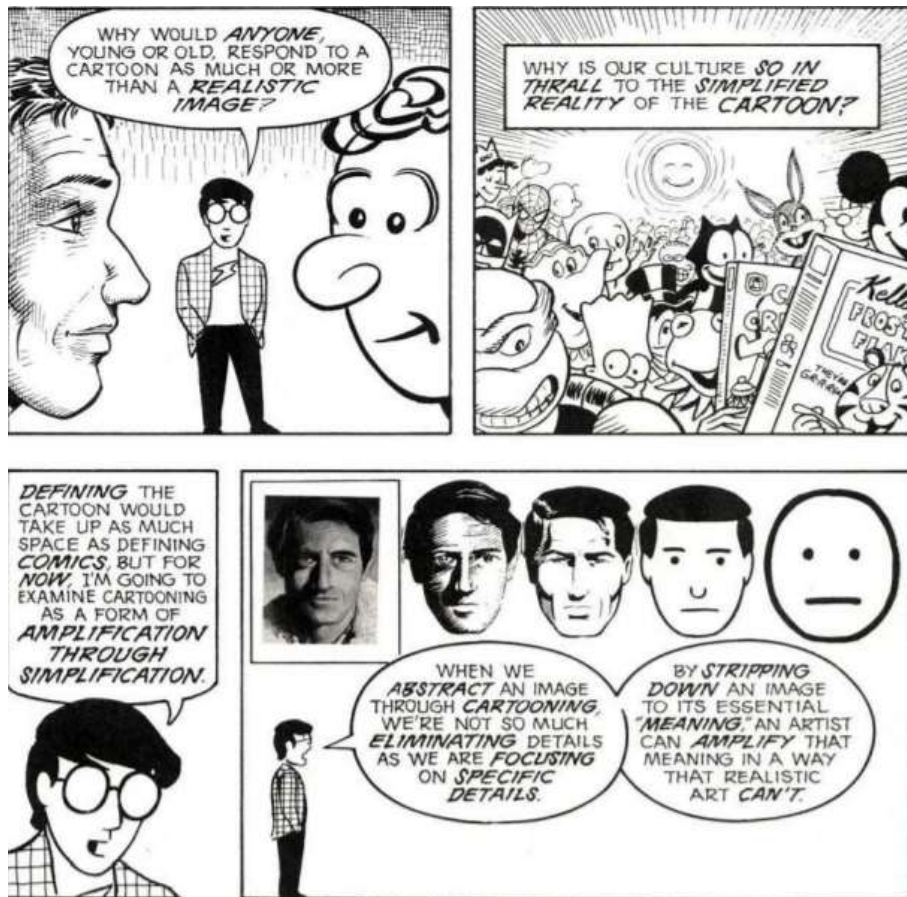
Figure 12: The Importance of Simplification in Comics. From: *Understanding Comics*, p. 30.

The direct and simplistic structure of storytelling within comic books allows them to function as an excellent tool for teaching young readers the foundations of critical thinking and reading, and as a fluid medium for social, political, economic, historical, and cultural critique through its simplicity, convenience, and accessibility. Scott McCloud calls this process "amplification through simplification" (McCloud 30). Even when dealing with colorful superheroes and boisterous supervillains fighting in imaginary worlds, there are still elements of contemporary society and genuine history embedded into their storylines and backstories. By fusing reality with fantasy, it allows the reader to create their own world within the confines of the story they are reading and observing (see **Figure 12**). With the addition of e-readers for smartphones, tablets, and computers in the digital age, comic books and graphic novels keep transcending the conventional bounds of traditional art and literature with the potential to reach a vast audience. Comic books allow for the reader to build a world

based on their own interests, experiences, and conflicts that transcends the limitations,

resources, and expectations of the real world.

However, it is not merely within the action-packed and spectacularly drawn pages of

mainstream superhero comics where the tyranny of Nazi fascism is reimaged in order to

showcase atrocities in a different manner. Art Spiegelman began illustrating and writing the

iconic graphic novel *Maus* in 1986 during the meteoric rise of the graphic novel in the 1980s.

In this award-winning and critically acclaimed graphic novel, the gruesome horrors of the

Holocaust and horrific atrocities of the Nazis are counterbalanced with innocuous and almost

childlike drawings of cats and mice in order to make a compelling and understandable

retelling of history without relying on the overused and predictable story of heroic military

conquest while glorifying the immense violence it caused.
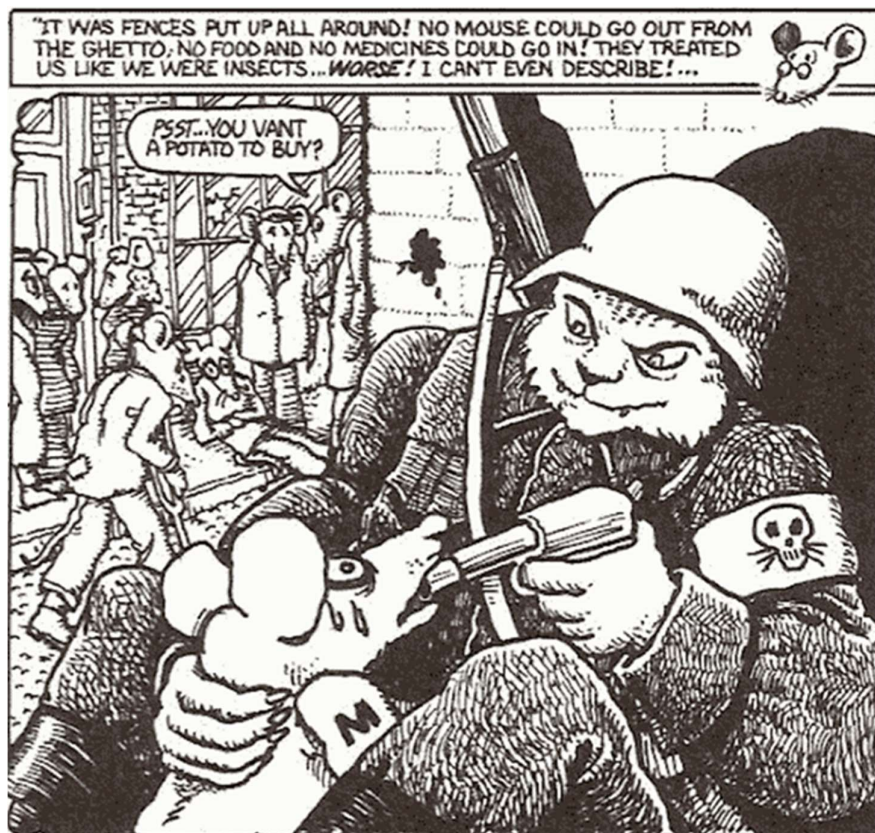
Figure 13: Original Concept Art for *Maus* (1972). From: *MetaMaus*, p. 105.

Under the thinnest of veils, *Maus* reimagines the horrific persecution of the Jewish

people by the Nazis that plagued many countries during the 1930s and 1940s, using the most

well-known power structure found in nature, the cat and the mouse (see **Figure 13**). The use

of incredibly simplistic black and white illustrations in combination with the uniform text

font in this graphic novel allow for the reader to focus on the historically accurate plot and

profound symbolic messages within the story without being preoccupied by the complicated

text bubbles and color schemes or the page-consuming and over-stylized fight scenes of

mainstream superhero comics. Art Spiegelman and his work *Maus* emerged and thrived in a

rare position within the realm of comic books, because he intentionally utilized both

mainstream and underground practices as well as in his creation, publication, and distribution

methods (Hutton 31-32).

Figure 14: Art Spiegelman's Struggle to Write. From: *Maus*, p. 201.

Maus also exists in an equally unique status within the world of academia, because it

surpassed the preconceived limitations of graphic novels and comic books as a medium for

critical thinking and artistic symbolism. Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for this work and challenged bookstores to classify *Maus* as legitimate literature and high art (Hutton 34-36). *Maus* also challenged scholars and literary critics to begin to accept graphic novels and comic books as part of the academic literary canon. Additionally, the adamant refusal of Spiegelman to adapt his work into a film reflects his desire to cement *Maus* as form of serious literary and artistic critique (see **Figure 14**), rather than it becoming another stereotypical relic of American popular culture about Nazism (Baetens 39). Art Spiegelman paved the path for contemporary and future authors in the graphic novel and comic book industry to be taken seriously as legitimate authors and artists in academic and professional circles.

Spiegelman also provides a critically necessary antithesis to the superhero comic books when examining and envisioning Nazi history by focusing on power structures and personal emotions through ordinary images and text. His work does not rely on fantastical and stereotypical Nazi imagery of maniacal world conquerors enhanced with the supernatural or the eventual heroic triumph over their enemy that is commonly found in superhero comic books. *Maus* illuminates the horrors of the Holocaust without fetishizing World War II or the political, social, and military conquests of Nazism, while still championing the resilience of the Jewish people through the struggle of the minorities of the Holocaust, rather than the stereotypical military conquest of the German soldiers, their officers, and Adolf Hitler.

Academic Narratives and Scholarly Responses about Comic Books

Despite scholarship on comic books existing since the 1950s, with Sol Davidson receiving a Ph. D for his 1000-page dissertation on comic books in 1959, academic work about comic books was not common until the 1970s (Mambrol 4). However, by the early 21st century, research and scholarship surrounding comic books extensively increased, including having their own section in many university libraries, including Michigan State University

and Bowling Green State University, as well as the University of Florida developing graduate and doctoral tracks in Comic Studies for their students (Mambrol 15-16). Within the past 70 years, realms of higher education and academia have finally begun to acknowledge comic books as legitimate forms of art, literature, and academic storytelling.

Figure 15: The Multimodality of Comics. From: *Understanding Comics,* p. 48.

From employing simple dialogue and onomatopoeia (Biff! and Wham!) to expressing conflict and action and using captivating illustrations to aid in visualizing major events, the comic book is an exceptional vehicle for storytelling and eliciting critical thinking. Through the masterful fusion of written narratives and visual storytelling, comic books transcend the bounds and capabilities of traditional literature and art (see **Figure 15**). Although comic books are usually considered to be designed for children and inexperienced readers, they seamlessly blend sophisticated qualities of literature and art. Nevertheless, this medium was long overlooked by scholars, but within the past few decades, comic books have emerged as valid forms of art and literature that increasingly form the subject of academic studies (Stein, et al. 502-503). In conjunction with the dawn of superhero movies (based directly on comic book characters and storylines) as successful Hollywood blockbusters making billions of dollars, superhero comic books have emerged as mainstream popular culture and have also begun to be accepted as legitimate art and literature in the realms of academia and higher

learning. Some scholars, such as Rocco Versaci, even go as far as stating that comic books

provide a unique bridge between pictures and words for inexperienced and developing

readers as well as a visual understanding of the process of storytelling and critical reading

(Versaci 62-64). Comic books combine the artistic appeal of art and the social critique of

literature in a simple manner that has the capacity to reach the youngest and oldest of viewers

through an understandable and organized storytelling.
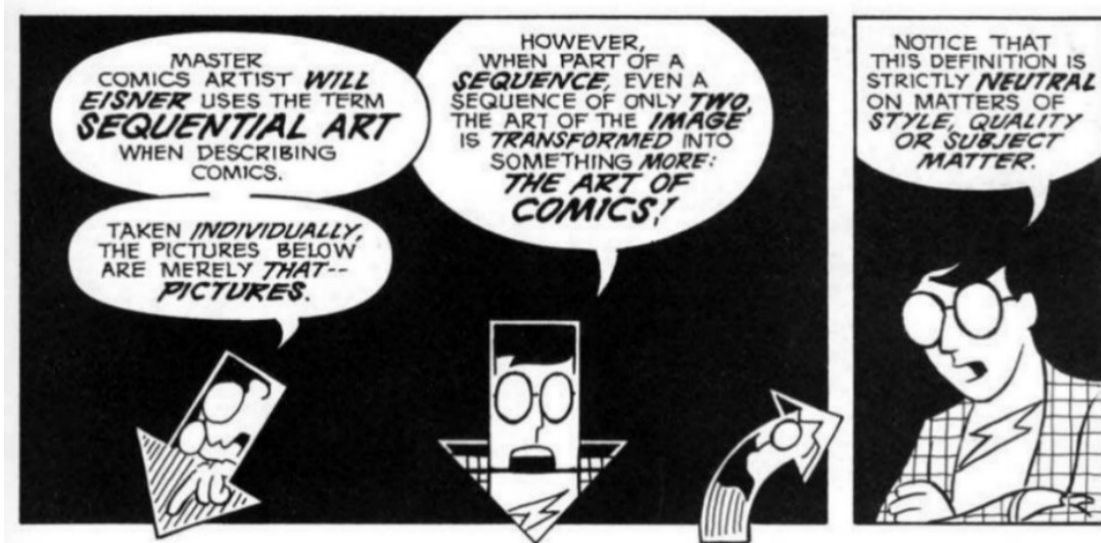
Figure 16: The Sequential Nature of Comics. From: *Understanding Comics,* p. 5.

Storytelling itself has been sequential since the first humans began telling stories,

remembering them, and then telling them to others. The cycle simply repeats itself until it

becomes an oral tradition, tall-tale, fairy tale, mythos, religion, etc. The advent of printing

allowed the dissemination of thought to spread like wildfire. Iconic comic artist Will Eisner

states that comics are merely the next generation of sequential storytelling (see **Figure 16**).

The serialized and collaborative nature of comic books also affords the chance to showcase

diversity and intersectionality because multiple artists and authors are often employed for a

single storyline or series (Stein, et al. 507, Cook 272 -274). Artists Andrea Sorrentino from

Italy, Daniel Acuña from Spain, Francis Yu from the Philippines, Steve McNiven from

Canada, Rod Reis from Brazil, and Joshua Cassara from the United States of *Secret Empire*

from Marvel and Bruno Redondo from Spain, Eddy Barrows, Jack Herbert, Adriano Lucas,

and Eber Ferreira from Brazil of *Freedom Fighters* from DC with both of their authors (Nick Spencer and Robert Venditti) are from the United States. This intersectionality and diversity of comic books can be further multiplied by companies like Marvel and DC because of their immense marketability and widespread influence on the global scale, especially due to their recent success in Hollywood and international box offices. As a result, Marvel and DC have recently developed more relevant, relatable, and socially conscious publications, like *Secret Empire* in 2017 and *Freedom Fighters* in 2019.

Superhero comic books also provide an excellent source for visualizing real-life conflict, personal drama, and heroic resolutions under the guise of superhuman abilities, magical artifacts, and advanced technology. Marvel Comics has introduced a number of superheroes and supervillains that represent existing social and political crises. The conflict between Captain America and the Red Skull is an allegory for World War II, and the X-Men are a clever way of addressing race, gender, and national identity issues (Peterson and Gerstein 896). Even Spiderman could be viewed as a supernatural metaphor for puberty and crime within the inner city. Like other forms of art and literature, the content and style of comic books directly echo the society and culture of the time with an immediacy that cannot be equaled in film due to their fast-paced and serialized publication methods (Baetens 40-41).

For example, a study by Bill Peterson and Emily Gerstein examines the role of authoritarianism in comics and how comic books from 1978-1992 are written differently based on perceived levels of public threat and danger. The study shows how comic books emphasize the negative effects of drugs and alcohol and show less corruption within the governmental organizations during times of perceived public threat, while during times of low public danger, comic books are willing to show more shocking behavior from heroes and government officials (Peterson and Gerstein 900-901). The trend of authoritarian themes identified by Peterson and Gerstein can be employed to assess how Captain America and the

United States government were portrayed as purely heroic against the absolute evil of Adolf

Hitler and the Third Reich. Although this was not a far cry from reality because the United

States played a critical role in the defeat of Nazism, it is not hard to imagine how the

iconography of villainy from Nazi fascism could attach itself to the identity of Germany and

German people, especially from a transnational perspective.

Comic books have been slowly trickling into academia as legitimate and effective

tools for teaching critical thinking, pedagogy, linguistics, visual design, and the writing

process. They have shown to be much more than a simplistic and crude medium for children

and the uneducated, as they have shown to be a complex and ever-evolving multimodal

medium and a uniquely powerful vehicle of narrative capabilities (Kukkonen 49). A study in

2015 from Hobart and William Smith Colleges analyzes 42 comic books created by a wide

array of students from the university, in which 60 percent identified as female and 40 percent

as students of color. The study suggests comic books function as a pedagogical tool in three

distinct ways: they offer a larger range of design elements than other textual works, visualize

power relations and metacognitive processes, and provide new and understandable strategies

for multimodal writing and design practices (Dickenson and Werner 51-54). Although this is

a limited study of amateur comic books written by students of the liberal arts, it still provides

an excellent example of how comic books can function as educational devices and higher-

level literature and art, especially for those alienated and disenfranchised by mainstream

society and popular culture.

Despite the fact that comic books were born in the era of pulp fiction, which fetishized

violence, racial stereotypes, and Nazism as a whole, much of mainstream comic books have

continuously evolved with American society and mainstream popular culture. Marvel and DC

Comics may still rely on Nazi-themed imagery for evil, but they have begun to detail their

iconic villainy from a more relatable perspective of the modern and digital age and through

an increasingly accurate historical, social, and economic lens. If this trend continues, the personal sociological commentary and authentic historical insight of works like *Maus* could be fused with the international popularity and widespread influence of contemporary works like *Secret Empire* from Marvel Comics and *Freedom Fighters* from DC Comics, producing comic books that educate a wide-reaching and worldwide audience, while still providing captivating and profitable entertainment.

Chapter 4: Primary Source Analysis: DC Comics

History of Superman and Nazism

As Nazi Germany and the Third Reich began to terrorize their neighboring countries within Europe in the 1930s, the United States felt as if their safety and freedom were at stake during this time of economic precarity and uncertainty. As a result, the German people themselves became synonymous with Nazism, serving as the prototype for evil and villainy, especially in the world of American popular culture. Along with the supernatural, impossible, and surreal dominating the world of superhero comics, the imagery of the Third Reich and the ideology of Nazism has served as a hauntingly real paradigm for genuine evilness and villainy, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. Additionally, the subsequent defeat of Germany at the hands of the United States and their Allies made Nazi imagery a recognizable symbol for an enemy of America. Since then, popular culture has relied on the association of world domination and genocide with Nazi imagery to create instantly recognizable villains.

In the 1930s, two Jewish high school students from Cleveland, Ohio created a superhero as a therapeutic reaction to the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany and growing antisemitism in America (Schwartz 2). Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman, whose original moniker was the "Champion of the Oppressed," as a direct critique of the racist and supremacist ideals of Nazi fascism. Rather than being an embodiment of the United States military, Superman is a super-powered guardian of the ordinary people, the subjugated and downtrodden, sworn to protect freedom and peace. Superman's original mission was to give the Jewish and other oppressed people a symbol of hope by defeating those responsible for their oppression, especially the rampaging atrocities committed by the Third Reich across Europe. The Jewish authors were able to combat the harmful and racist propaganda of the Nazi Party through Superman and created a form of anti-propaganda for Americans to look towards during those uncertain times (Rabkin 4-5).
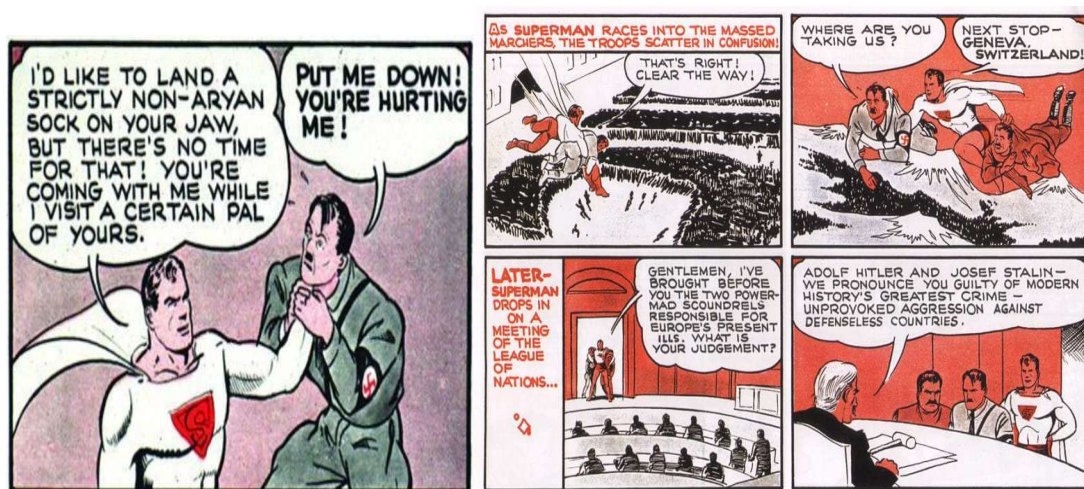
Figure 17: Superman Arresting Hitler and Stalin. From: *Look Magazine*.

In the comic strip section of the February issue of popular magazine *Look* 1940,

Superman apprehends Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, then delivers them to the United

Nations, who declare them, "guilty of modern history's greatest crime; unprovoked

aggression against defenseless countries" (see **Figure 17**). This is significant because

Superman also manhandles Hitler more than a year before the soon-to-be cover of the

Captain America Comics #1, which predates America entering World War II by almost two

years. Superman refuses to punch Adolf Hitler because he has more pressing matters at hand:

trying to preemptively end World War II and bring the leaders of fascism to international

justice. Additionally, Superman declares not only Adolf Hitler as an enemy of freedom, but

also Josef Stalin and the U.S.S.R. This is clearly a response to the signing of the Molotov-

Ribbentrop Pact in August of 1939, a non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet

Union (Kershaw 341). At the dawn of his creation, Superman represents the power of politics

and the common people to create a peaceful resolution as he hands the malevolent dictators

over to the United Nations, rather than simply taking the matter into his own hands and

continuing the chain of violence and military conquest. In his original conception, Superman

embodied the strength of those who believed in the power of a democratic and free society

against those who wanted to threaten peace and justice for their own personal gain.

Figure 18: Superman Manhandling Hitler and Tojo. From: cover of *Superman* #17.

Superman bullying Adolf Hitler in *Look Magazine*, almost two years before the height

of World War II, showcases that even the fantastical and fictitious world of comic books

could not escape the pervasive horrors of the Nazi Party and Third Reich. Whether readers

were at the newsstands for politics, current events, or even for entertainment in the comic

book section, they would constantly see the evils of Nazism. The terrors posed by the Nazis

permeating the largely fictious world of comic books extended this connection of all German

people with an imagery of evil and villainy to young and impressionable readers, whom news

and politics generally did not reach or interest. Several covers of early issues of *Superman*

show him fighting leaders of the axis nations, including issue 17 from May of 1942, which

depicts Superman easily subduing Adolf Hitler as well as a racially stereotyped Hideki

Tojo—a horrendous image that demonstrates the pervasive anti-Asian racism of the United

States even as it advocates for the crushing of Nazism (see **Figure 18**). However, Superman

would not actually fight Nazis within the storylines of his comics during the height of Nazism

in the 1930s and 1940s.

Ultimately, it would be decades before DC Comics would actually depict Superman

dealing with the horrors and atrocities of Nazism within the DC Universe. In 1977, they

finally reprised his feud with the Nazis from the 1940 comic strip of *Look* magazine within

his own comic book. In addition, in issue 54 of *Comic Superman* in 1987, Superman is sent

back and forth through time where he aids a group of Auschwitz survivors during the early

stages of World War II (see **Figure 19**). In this narrative, he ends up foiling an atomic bomb

test being conducted by Adolf Hitler (Ip 4). However, the most significant and realistic

interaction between Superman and the horrors of Nazism was in 1998 within issues 80 to 82

of *Superman: The Man of Steel*.

Figure 19: Superman Aiding Holocaust Victims. From: *Superman #54.*

In this storyline, Clark Kent gets an inside report about the appalling activities of the Nazis in

Poland. In response to this, he flies to Poland and disguises himself as a Jew, hoping to get

captured by the Nazis. He experiences firsthand the heinous atrocities endured by the Jewish

people during the Holocaust. Instead of simply using his strength and defeating them himself

in an amazing superhero fight, he steals supplies from the Third Reich and gives them to

members of the Jewish resistance force (Ip 6). Superman uses his powers to empower those

who do not have the ability to fight for themselves and finally lives up to his original title as

"Champion of the Oppressed" coined by his creators almost 50 years ago.

Throughout the long-established and internationally famous Superman franchise, the association between Germany and the absolute wickedness of the Nazis remains a consistent theme in comic books. Even before his inclusion in DC Comics and prior to becoming the most popular name in superhero comics, Superman's creation was inextricably connected to Nazism, a link that continues into the 21st century. His continuous connection to Nazism remains a paramount example of how comics still has a fascination with the Nazi past and impedes the already difficult process of establishing a new Germany transnational identity for the modern age. It seems that the DC Comics franchise intentionally avoided conflicts involving Adolf Hitler, the Nazi Party, and the Holocaust in their storylines while the Third Reich was ruling Germany with an iron fist and even during the turmoil of World War II. Nevertheless, they eventually published an intense storyline involving an alternate timeline where Nazi Germany rules modern-day America after winning World War II.

Figure 20: Original Comic Book Covers. From: *Freedom Fighters* issues #1 and #9.

The Freedom Fighters is a group of superheroes from the DC Universe X/10, a universe where Germany wins World War II because of successful nuclear weapons experiments conducted by Adolf Hitler as well as a successful Japanese invasion of

California, in which they must fight against the tyranny of modern-day Nazi fascism in the United States. The first issue of *Freedom Fighters* was ironically released in July of 1976, the bicentennial of the United States gaining independence (see **Figure 20**). This superhero team is led by the iconic Uncle Sam (who literally derives his power from the patriotic spirit of the American people). The stories involving the Freedom Fighters were mostly crossovers with more famous and prominent DC heroes. However, the Freedom Fighters storyline would be reimagined during the relaunch of the entire line of DC Comics with the publication of 52 new comic series, all beginning at #1, called *The New 52*, in September of 2011. DC Comics discontinued certain series and (re)introduced other series into the new expanded universe, *Freedom Fighters* belonging to the latter with their 12-issue series beginning in 2019.

Content Analysis: *Freedom Fighters* (2019)

As with many other relaunches during *The New 52*, the premise of Universe X/10 remains the same with the Nazis winning World War II and taking over the world. However, the reboot includes a cataclysmic variation to the origin story of the very superhero designed to defeat Nazi fascism to make the story even more tragic and hopeless. In this universe, instead of landing in a small town in the middle of Kansas, Superman lands in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia in 1938. Superman is subsequently indoctrinated into the Nazi Party and becomes the Overman, an obvious reference to the concept of the "Übermensch" coined by German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and a literal translation into the English language. The idea of the "Übermensch" is that the true potential of humankind is restrained by social and cultural constructs such as morality and empathy, a concept that was later endorsed by the Nazi Party because it dovetailed with their supremacist ideals. Adolf Hitler manipulated the concept of the "Übermensch" into a form of social and political propaganda by fitting it into his own obsessions of eugenics, antisemitism, and myths of the Aryan race. The Nazi Party adopted this concept to justify their heinous atrocities in the name of progress as a

society, while trying to mask true intentions of power, control, and conquest through

genocide.

The concept of an alternate timeline where Germany wins World War II and conquers

the world is not an entirely original concept for storytelling. However, *Freedom Fighters*

(specifically the *New 52* reboot) includes several significant references to German history and

Nazi ideology that often are ignored in the portrayals of Nazism in popular culture. The

representation of Overman as a subjugated bionic clone as the paradigm for the ideal soldier

is critical in understanding the true intention of the Nazi Party (see **Figure 21**).

Figure 21: Overman Being Brainwashed by the Nazi Party. From: *Freedom Fighters* (2019).

Steven Aschheim wrote in *Nietzsche, Anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust* (1997) that

the wording and ideas posited by Nietzsche could have acted as a triggering mechanism for a

vulnerable German population, and that it was Nietzsche's language that flared the

imagination of the Nazi party by making all actions, regardless of their level of brutality,

conceivable: Nietzsche's "vocabulary and sensibility constitutes an important (if not the only)

long-term enabling precondition of such radical elements in Nazism" (Aschheim 16). The

condemnation of the "weak/impure/sick" people as the ones responsible for holding back and even tainting the "pure/beautiful/whole" people in the works of Nietzsche (*The Will to Power* and *Genealogy of Morals)* was cited ad nauseum in the works of Adolf Hitler such as *Mein Kampf* (Kalish 27). Hitler distorted the ideals of Nietzsche to promote the strength, solidarity, and purity of the Aryan Race, while misdirecting all of the societal, economic, and political unrest towards the "impure" minorities and "invading" foreigners responsible for their failures and shortcomings. Hitler and the Nazi Party valued absolute obedience and subjugation above all else, especially from his own followers.

Figure 22: Cloned Plasstic Men. From: *Freedom Fighters* (2019).

In combination with Hitler's obsession with industrial production, esoteric sciences, and the supernatural, the imagery of an army of racist cloned Plasstic men (see **Figure 22**) and a Nazi-controlled robotic Overman enforcing Nazi ideology and propaganda paint a horrifyingly accurate superpowered metaphor for the obsession of the Nazi Party for utter

dominance of their enemies and absolute subjugation from their followers. In the comic book, Overman eventually learns of the insidious behavior and gruesome activities of the Nazi Party and abandons their cause. However, Adolf Hitler and his scientists manage to reverse engineer the alien DNA of Overman along with the capsule he arrived to Earth in and are able to create a horrifying arsenal of destruction and conquest.

These weapons include super-advanced technology and vehicles as well as an army of cloned Plasstic men and a bionic Overman that strictly obey the commands of the Nazi Party. This allows Germany to win World War II and conquer the United States and the entire world. Within these comics, Superman is transformed from a heroic and good-natured man from rural America into a sadistic and malevolent soldier of Germany, still equating Americans with heroism and Germans with villainy more than 70 years after the end of World War II. The *New 52* reboot of the DC universe allowed for the creators and writers of the comic books to explore new origins and storylines of the entire DC universe, in an attempt to make the characters more modern and relatable. *Freedom Fighters* is no exception, since both the heroes and the villains in the comics are more vulnerable and damaged. In 2019, *Freedom Fighters* reignite their heroic fight against their modern-day Nazi enemies. From the beginning, we see the heroes struggle mightily against their Nazi oppressors while Uncle Sam, their heroic leader, is nowhere to be found and presumed dead (together with the spirit of American revolution). At the same time, we also witness the horrors of a Nazi-ruled America from the perspective of the Nazi tormentors themselves. Notably, before any epic fights or spectacular battles take place, we must experience the societal turmoil that accompanies a Nazi-controlled regime as well as the emotional manipulation and power structures within Nazi society. The clones of Plasstic men and the bionic Overman perfectly encapsulate the ultimate goals of the Third Reich through the lens of an alternative superhero

society set in modern times, where the clutches of Nazism have turned the United States into the Fourth Reich of Nazi fascism.

Freedom Fighters #1 (2019) highlights this preoccupation for obedience and control from their followers how this would look in the modern day within the first few pages, when we see Nazis attack and arrest their own citizens at the first signs of upheaval or resistance (see **Figure 23**), as if they were the enemies of the state. The author of *Freedom Fighters*, Robert Vendetti, immediately showcases how the Nazi Party largely functioned through the abuse of power and the exploitation of fear against their own people.

Figure 23: Citizens Being Arrested by the Cultural Polizei. From: *Freedom Fighters* #1.

From the very beginning of *Freedom Fighters*, we observe the paranoia, fear, lies and manipulation of a society controlled by the Nazi Party extended into the 21st century, allowing the reader to experience the horrors of Nazism within the context of the modern day. Combining the realistic horrors of the Nazis with the recognizable amenities of modern culture encourages the reader to consider how many of the social, political, and economic turmoil of the past few years reflects the history of the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany.

Within a flashback in *Freedom Fighters* #3, we discover an elderly and sickly Adolf Hitler clinging to life and obsessively trying to find and eradicate Uncle Sam, an act that he believes would snuff out the last remaining hope against the Nazi-resistance. His son, Adolf

Hitler II, believes the top priority should be eliminating the resistance forces themselves.

After an intense argument, Adolf Hitler dies, and his son assumes the role of Führer and

begins his own rampage against any form of resistance against Nazism.

Figure 24: Führer Adolf Hitler II in a "Nazified" White House. From: *Freedom Fighters* #3.

We then flash-forward to see that the efforts of Adolf Hitler II have come to fruition, as much

of the resistance, including the Freedom Fighters, has been scattered and defeated. However,

the Freedom Fighters are able to hack into the Nazi computer network and send out a single

message of hope and resistance: the image of the American Flag. However, when the readers

see the horrific imagery of a Nazi-controlled White House (see **Figure 24**), they are forced to

think of how the American Flag itself has been altered by several far-right extremists, such as

the Thin Blue Line and modifications in favor of Donald Trump, in order to masquerade their racist and fascist ideology as patriotism and nationalism, just as the Nazis did with the Flag of Germany and the Swastika in the 1930s. The modernized "Nazification" of classic American iconography, such as the White House, entices the reader to consider the current state of political turmoil and social unrest within the United States and the rise of far-right extremism.

Figure 25: Adolf Hitler's Malicious Grandson Introduced. From: *Freedom Fighters* #3.

Still within the same issue, Adolf Hitler II, in an effort to combat this message of inspiration, enlists the help of his son, Adolf Hitler III (see **Figure 25**), who continues the genetic trend of increasing malevolence by generation through his demented lust and sickening joy he gains from torturing his captors. Through this singular scene, *Freedom Fighters* highlights one of the most fetishized themes of Nazi villainy found in popular

culture. The fetishization of torturing prisoners for the purposes of espionage or scientific research at the hands of Nazi doctors, scientists, and officers was very popular in the 1970s with movies like *Shock Waves* in 1977 and *The Boys from Brazil* in 1978 showcasing super soldiers and clones of Adolf Hitler (Magilow 13). The son and grandson of Hitler in *Freedom Fighters* seems to equal or exceed their predecessor in sheer malevolence and depravity. In combination, with the clear lack of any motherly figure and their supernatural level of scientific ingenuity, it is easy for the readers to assume they are clones to ensure the reign of Adolf Hitler extends past a single generation or lifetime. Although this rigid hierarchy of power based on nepotism is clearly meant to highlight the inherent lust for power of Adolf Hitler and his obsession for maintaining that power as a super villain, it also serves as an overstated display of the actual power structure that existed within the Nazi Party, as nepotism and genetics played perfectly into the ideology and propaganda of Nazism. Also, the concept of each Adolf Hitler being more insidious than the last not only serves to connect the horrors of the Nazi Party with the bloodline of Adolf Hitler, but it also suggests to readers that their innate evilness is within the blood of the German people as a whole. This seemingly common trope about Nazism and evil could easily be misinterpreted as meaning that Germans themselves are inclined to violence and authoritarianism, instead of just Hitler.

The Nazi Party followed an incredibly strict hierarchy of power to ensure the commands of the superiors were always followed and never questioned. They also rewarded absolute obedience with political, social, and economic incentives, such as houses, jobs, and social privileges. *Freedom Fighters* highlights how the pervasiveness and effectiveness of the power structures at the core of Nazi fascism allowed them to quickly gain widespread support throughout a struggling nation through the revelation that the father of Phantom Lady, a member of the Freedom Fighters, was critical in the rise of the Nazi Party in the United States

(see **Figure 26**). This scene fuses classic superhero irony with the hauntingly real instances of

German children having to confront their parents about their Nazi past.

Figure 26: Phantom Lady's Nazi Past. From: *Freedom Fighters #3*.

This notion even became the subject of an entire literary movement in postwar Germany

focused on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which translates "to coming to terms with the past".

However, Vicki Lawrence describes the monumentally difficult task of these texts through an

emotive description that vivifies the struggle of Phantom Lady in *Freedom Fighters* (and

countless other Germans) in the beginning of her book:

> This is the generation that has enjoyed… the grace of being born too late to be
> held responsible for the horror of the Nazi years. And yet they are not free of
> that time. It is always with them. Though not personally responsible, they are
> tied by love and respect to the people who were, and by upbringing, blood,
> and nationality to a history they cannot escape. (Lawrence 100)

This topic of struggling to come to terms with the Nazi past has prevented Germany from forming a new transnational identity beyond the stereotypes of Nazi villainy, which *Freedom Fighters* brings to life through one of their own members. It is noteworthy that a conventional superhero comic is able to insert a critical, but an often-overlooked way Nazism is still impacting German society long after their defeat in World War II. If more mainstream popular culture, especially comic books, can continue to include profound and meaningful rhetoric relating Nazism to more modern issues in society, they could eventually become legitimate art and literature that offer impactful social and political critiques.

Through the addition of a heroic protagonist with direct ties to the Nazis' ascent to power, the readers get a chance to understand the plight of those who may have struggled with similar actual circumstances from their own past. For example, someone from Germany reading *Freedom Fighters* could identify their past and family with the struggles of the heroine, instead of only seeing their culture through the villains with their spouting of German buzzwords related to stereotypical Nazi imagery. Scott McCloud states that self-identification by readers occurs often in comic books because their simplistic and generic drawings allow readers to easily insert themselves in the stories (McCloud 36). Although Phantom Lady actually fights directly against Nazism in the comic, *Freedom Fighters* showcases how anyone can combat modern-day fascism, "thorough, unrelenting and unflinching confrontation of one's past guilt as a person (or a country)," (Wolff 13). Even if the reader does not have a past directly involving Nazism, most Americans can recognize the rise of fascist rhetoric in their mainstream politics or at least recall the recent violence occurring in the Ukraine at the hands of the fascist regime of Russia and Vladimir Putin.

Figure 27: A Nazi Rally at Mountreichswehr. From: *Freedom Fighters* #4.

Within the first few pages of *Freedom Fighters* #4, the Freedom Fighters successfully detonate explosives inside Mount Reichsmehr (formally Mount Rushmore) (see **Figure 27**) during a Nazi celebration event, six seconds of which was nationally televised before the broadcast was terminated. This scene showcases not only the profound influence of Nazism on this alternative American history, but also their stereotypical desire for absolute control over media and entertainment. Interestingly, the Nazi Party was more concerned with the public witnessing the attack in the media more than the physical damage of the attack. As we witness in following pages, Adolf Hitler II and his son argue over the implications of this disaster. Adolf Hitler III speculates about the reason for the Freedom Fighters not assassinating his father, the all-powerful Führer, furthering the already rampant paranoia and fear within the Nazi Party and the Führer himself (see **Figure 28**). The readers once again see how paranoia, fearmongering, and a lust for absolute control not only gave power to Nazism, but how they also plagued the Nazi Party itself because of their cultlike power structure.

Figure 28: Paranoia and Power Struggle within the Nazi Party. From: *Freedom Fighters* #4.

The lineage of Adolf Hitler as the genetic embodiment of deceit and mistrust is also

emblematic of the Nazi Party. Through this seemingly stereotypical portrayal of the sheer

wickedness of the continued progeny of Adolf Hitler, *Freedom Fighter* highlights a

significant but lesser-known aspect of how the power structure of the Nazi Party relied on

exploiting the insecurities, anxieties, and sheer desperation of their own people to amass and

maintain unthinkable power and influence. Systemic distrust is a hallmark of far-right

political parties built on these principles, which can be found lurking in the background of the

Republican Party in America and the AfD in Germany.

The continued Nazification of iconic American monuments allows the readers of

Freedom Fighters to visualize the propaganda utilized by the Nazis to enforce their ideology

through the distortion of American patriotism. The final pages of *Freedom Fighters* #4 depict

Adolf Hitler gleefully torturing a captured member of the Freedom Fighters, the Human

Bomb, for information on his comrades. The readers also witness Uncle Sam successfully

stopping a Nazi officer from harassing a citizen while gaining immense strength from

inspiring hope in the onlookers. The author and artists of *Freedom Fighters* juxtapose the

stereotypical acts of terror utilized by Nazis in popular culture with iconic images of American patriotism, in order to entice the current reader to compare the recent political and social turmoil in the United States to the events that led to the rise of Nazi fascism in Germany in the 1930s for alarming similarities.

Figure 29: Uncle Sam Recalls the Past Failures of America. From: *Freedom Fighters* #5.

Freedom Fighters #5 continues the plot and theme of the previous issue, as Uncle Sam continues to gain more power through defeating more Nazi opposition while inspiring not only the subjugated citizens, but even the Freedom Fighters themselves. For the first time in the story, the Freedom Fighters seem to be gaining the upper hand against their Nazi oppressors. Yet, while Uncle Sam is gaining strength by rousing his fellow Americans, he cannot help but think of the failures of his own country. He recounts the horrors of slavery, the massacre of the Native Americans, and the struggle of women's suffrage (see **Figure 29**). These failures of the United States are eerily similar to those of Nazi fascism, which endorsed the subjugation of minorities through the ideology of white men in power. Uncle Sam recites

how this struggle for freedom is ongoing and permanent, as long as the desire for oppression

and conquest of others exists within those in power. He states that the might of Overman is

immense, as was the military might of the Third Reich, but that: "We underestimated their

greatest weapon. Fear" (*Freedom Fighters* #5). The author of *Freedom Fighters* is referring

to the principle that what drove the success of the Nazi Party was their ability to intimidate,

blackmail, and brainwash their followers, rather than their stereotypical political organization

or military prowess, which is a fact often ignored in popular culture.

Figure 30: Cyborg Overman Enters the Battlefield. From: *Freedom Fighters* #5.

Unfortunately, as Uncle Sam and his fellow Freedom Fighters are relishing their

mounting momentum of freedom and victory, the Nazis unleash the most devastating weapon

in their arsenal, Overman (see **Figure 30**). Uncle Sam remarks that Overman may have

superhuman strength, stamina, durability, speed and other amazing abilities, but his supreme

power is his ability to instill fear and hopelessness in the efforts of anyone trying to oppose

the will of the Nazi Empire. Although they had no superhuman alien to enforce their will, the

Third Reich and Adolf Hitler amassed many sympathizers with the additional threat of

imprisonment, torture, and death for those who rejected their ideals. Like the bionic nature of

Overman, the Nazi Party also used extreme methods such as hypnosis, forced reeducation,

and other means to mold their followers into vehicles for the Nazi movement (Patel and

Reichardt 8-9). Whether it is from the pages of a superhero comic book or a history textbook, instilling fear and hopelessness in both their followers and their enemies was a weapon as strong as any military force when it came to promoting the propaganda of Nazi fascism, hence the creation of an entire administration dedicated to the dissemination of propaganda and suppression of opposing thoughts in media.

Figure 31: The Nazis Conducting Secret Genetic Experiments. From: *Freedom Fighters* #5.

Freedom Fighters #5 and #6 rely heavily on the epic fight between the Freedom Fighters and Overman, revealing the origins of Overman, including psychological conditioning, social isolation, and complete reprogramming, even mentioning correcting his "cognitive contamination" of being left-handed. As we learn the tragic origins of Overman and his eventual abandonment of the Nazi Empire, the Freedom Fighters learn that they are fighting a bionic clone of Overman. Both of these crucial characteristics of Overman are a supernatural representation of the social and psychological manipulations historically used by the Nazi Party and Third Reich. Social and psychological reprogramming was achieved by a strict control of media, entertainment, social, and scientific establishments in addition to the systemic use of propaganda and reeducation programs throughout Germany (Patel and

Reichardt 13-14). The author also directly cites government cover-ups of failures and horrible

genetic experimentation within a singular scene (see **Figure 31**). The experienced reader

cannot help but notice how some of the computer screens of failed biological experiments are

segmented like comic book panels to fragment the bodies and draw the readers' attention to

the horrors of Nazism (McCloud 67). Bionic Overman embodies the ultimate paradigm for

Nazi soldiers and followers, a powerful but more importantly obedient weapon at the

complete disposal of Hitler and the Third Reich. The concept of cybernetic Nazis is a

seamless blend of history and futurism involving the terror and malevolence of the Nazi Party

in the modern era.

Although the bionic conversion of a superhero or supervillain is a common trope in

comic book mythology, the seemingly standard superhero comic book material, *Freedom*

Fighters simultaneously highlights the subversive, manipulative, and horrible practices and

experiments of the Nazi Party, who were more obsessed with the complete subjugation of

their own people rather than utter military, economic, or political efficiency and superiority.

The author and artists compel the current readers of this story to view the foundations of

Nazism from a modern perspective, in order to consider how current similar circumstances

exist today in America.

In the wake of the epic fight between Overman and Uncle Sam, the Freedom Fighters

retreat into the mountains and seek shelter with an old ally as they plan their next step. Within

the first few pages of *Freedom Fighters #7,* we see our Nazi enemies pursuing them with two

stereotypical tropes of Nazi interrogation. Adolf Hitler III continues to torture the Human

Bomb for information on the Freedom Fighters with stereotypical insidious delight. At the

same time, a party of Plasstic Men arrive to the house of the man harboring the Freedom

Fighters to enact some classic door-to-door intimidation (see **Figure 32**), the fetishization of

interrogation by Nazi officers has been stereotyped in popular culture since the 1970s (Fuchs

282). The author and artists of *Freedom Fighters* continue to expertly blend stereotypical

Nazi themes with hints of modernity.

Figure 32: Stereotypical Nazi Interrogation Methods. From: *Freedom Fighters #7.*

As another fight ensues between the Plasstic Men and the Freedom Fighters, the

Plasstic Men display two more concepts of subterfuge commonly employed by the Nazi Party

in popular culture. The Plasstic Men expound on how they are the true heroes of the Nazi

Empire, and they will be more feared than the progeny of Hitler. After the fight, the Plasstic

Men report that although they failed to capture the Freedom Fighters, a secret agent of the

Nazi Party has been inserted into their group (see **Figure 33**), another classic trope of Nazi

fiction. Secretly vying for greater power, respect, or fear within the Nazi Party and inserting

Nazis into various organizations to eliminate competition are common motifs of Nazism in

both popular culture as well as documented history. Using sabotage, against both their

enemies and allies, is another hallmark of fascist groups built on a system of lies,

manipulation, intimidation, and fear, once again linking the Nazi Party to more modern-day

examples such as far-right political parties using conspiracy theories to create mistrust

towards the government and media.
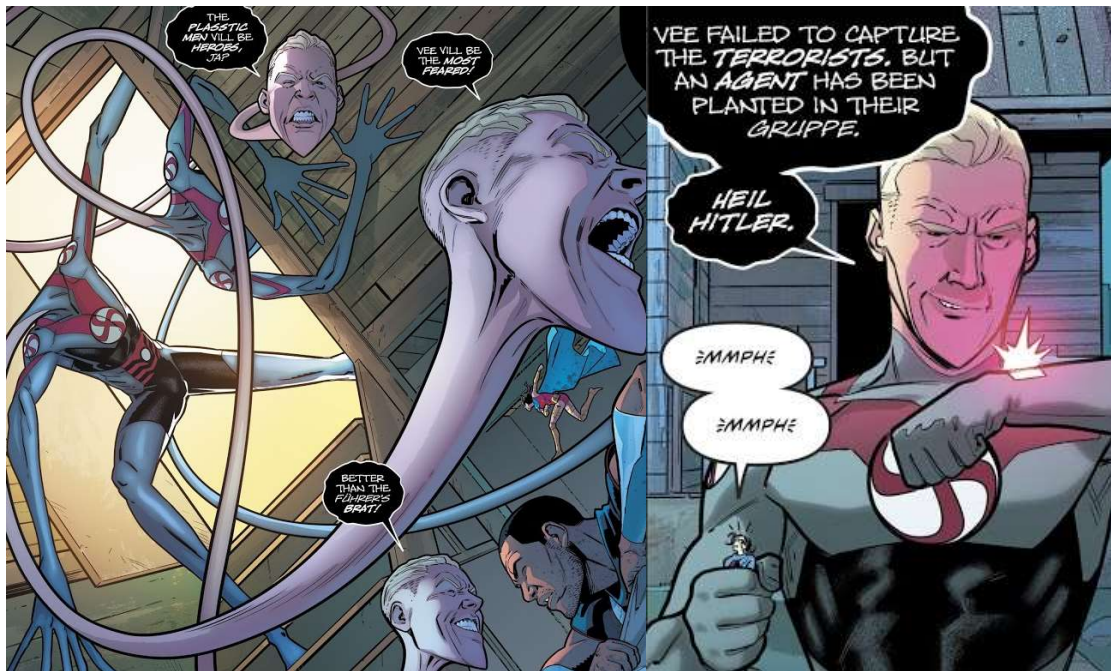
Figure 33: Plasstic Men Spout More Nazi Stereotypes. From: *Freedom Fighters* #7.

Freedom Fighters #8 delves into the backstory of Marcus Robbins, aka Black Condor, the de facto leader of the Freedom Fighters when Uncle Sam is unavailable. This issue of the series highlights the premise of human beings with supernatural abilities as the primary target of Nazi persecution and experimentation (see **Figure 34**), as they are the biggest threat to Nazi supremacy and dominance, as were Jewish and other minorities historically targeted by the Nazi Party for the same reasons. As soon as he is born and named by his parents, he is taken away by Nazi officers, as was the case in countless concentration camps during the Third Reich and World War II. Marcus plans to enlist the aid of his parents and their friends in a large factory complex in Detroit, where many are kept as prisoners and factory workers. After a short tussle with some Nazi officers and some Plasstic Men, Marcus leads a successful revolt. Detroit being an iconic city for Black culture, the issue also calls out the racist ideology of Nazism, with the Plasstic Men literally calling themselves the "Master Race" and refer to the factory workers as slaves.

Figure 34: The Tragic Backstory of Black Condor. From: *Freedom Fighters* #8.

Although the primary victims of the Nazi Party and Third Reich were Jews, they

obviously had equally racist and hateful ideology towards African Americans, African

Europeans, and any other minorities that were not Aryan or German. In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf

Hitler states, "the Jews had brought the N[------] into the Rhineland with the clear aim of

ruining the hated white race by the necessarily-resulting bastardization." (*United States*

Holocaust Memorial Museum 4). The Nazi Party even created a hateful term for Afro-

Germans during their reign of terror in the 1930s, *Rhinelandbastard*. Professor Reiner

Pommerin published a book on the atrocities involving multiracial Germans during the Third

Reich titled, "Sterilisierung der Rheinlandbastarde. Das Schicksal einer farbigen deutschen

Minderheit 1918 - 1937" (Sterilization of the Rhineland Bastards: the fate of a colored

German minority). In this book, he documents the horrors of mass forced sterilizations of

Black youth in Germany (Chiponda 7). Having the Plasstic Men blatantly call African

Americans slaves makes the reader instantly recall the historic travesties of American slavery

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and the atrocities of the sterilization of youth deemed impure by the erroneous and horrific

concepts behind Nazism. Current readers will also consider the systemic racial inequality and

prolific social injustices minorities still face in current societies all across the world.

Figure 35: The Nazis uttering More Racist Propaganda. From: *Freedom Fighters #9*.

Freedom Fighters #9 continues the storylines of Black Condor's revolution in Detroit

and Adolf Hitler III torturing the Human Bomb for information about the Freedom Fighters.

Throughout these two struggles, the stereotypical methods of torture and subjugation by the

Nazis reinforce their significance to the identity of Nazi villainy. The Human Bomb directly

proclaims how the bloodline of Adolf Hitler has an obvious penchant for torture and sadism.

Although this could merely be an attempt to fluster his torturer, it could also be a direct

commentary on the idea of evil being in the genetics of Adolf Hitler and perhaps German

people as a whole. We also witness the continued oppression from the Nazi guards within the

factory complex in Detroit, as they remark how the destiny of slaves is to serve as master (see

Figure 35). Despite the fact that this dynamic of guards oppressing their prisoners is a

common theme in popular culture, the tragedies and revulsions of the concentration camps

remain in the forefront of our minds in these types of situations. In response to the

66

overwhelming presence of Nazi officers during the revolt, Black Condor makes a desperate attempt to even the playing field. Rather than have scientists analyze the stolen Plasstic Men cloning formula, Black Condor injects it into his own body and is easily able to overwhelm the guards. This is another superhero twist on a common trope in popular culture, when the hero inserts themselves into enemy lines in hope of gaining some sort of advantage (*Inglorious Basterds* by Quentin Tarentino instantly comes to mind). Although he is not a spy within the Nazi organization, Black Condor compromises not only his ideology, but also his own health and genetic code, in hopes of having a fighting chance against the Nazis. *Freedom Fighters* continues to display many of the complex themes associated with Nazism through seemingly ordinary superhero material.

In *Freedom Fighters* #10, we experience the escalating fear and paranoia of the Nazi Empire, as the Freedom Fighters successfully storm their secret base. The son and grandson of Adolf Hitler have a heated exchange about the best way to deal with the problem at hand. Adolf Hitler II is hesitant to act without a fully repaired Overman, as he fears the belief in the Nazi Empire will weaken if the public realizes Overman is a robot under their control.

Figure 36: Paranoia and Fear within the Nazi Party. From: *Freedom Fighters* #10.

Adolf Hitler III despises how the weakness and fears of his father are compromising the entire Nazi empire, which results in him savagely slitting the throat of his own father in front of his officers (see **Figure 36**): notice again how the computer monitors act like comic book panels to separate the images but draw attention to the juxtaposition of recent events

(McCloud 67). In the midst of a crushing defeat, the progeny of Adolf Hitler exhibit two examples of the power structures that existed within the actual Nazi Party during the Third Reich: absolute control of information from the public and internal power struggles. Documented history shows us how one of the first actions of the Nazi Party was to gain control of all scientific, social, and economic institutions within Germany, to ensure they had absolute control over the dissemination of information to the public. Additionally, the power structure of the Nazi Party allowed, and almost encouraged, members and officers to gain authority through fear and placing the Nazi Party above all others, even their own family.

Freedom Fighters #11 continues the themes of the crumbling power of the Nazi Empire and the culminating power of the Freedom Fighters through one final battle between Overman and Uncle Sam. The two super-powered combatants exchange the foundations of their ideology. Overman professes the superiority of the Nazi race, power, and technology, while Uncle Sam declares the power of freedom, equality and the power of the people. Overman promises to rid the earth of any mention of the opposition and rewrite history of the Nazi Empire and Uncle Sam ironically questions why the supposed superior Nazi Party would even need a bionic Overman as an enforcer. This directly reflects the ambition of the Nazi Party to establish itself as the sole proprietor of power, control, information, and safety, by eliminating any form of opposition, whether it was entire public institutions or individual dissidents. Uncle Sam also directly criticizes this trait of Nazism mired in contradictions, the idea of superiority of the Aryan race. Although Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party professed the genetic superiority of the German people, the Nazi Empire acquired power and control through the devotion to the capabilities of their technology, machinery, and weaponry.

In the final issue of the series, *Freedom Fighters* #12 emphasizes the absolute depravity and desperation of the Nazi Empire in the grips of certain defeat. Adolf Hitler III, the sole ruler of the empire, decides to detonate his bunker with nuclear bombs to destroy the

Freedom Fighters, alongside countless innocent citizens and his own followers. Adolf Hitler III professes how removing hope from the public is worth any price of destruction and how the Nazi Empire will grow stronger after such a mighty struggle against the last hope of freedom (see **Figure 37**).

Figure 37: The Nazi Party is Defeated, but the Threat Remains. From: *Freedom Fighters* #12.

However, the newly freed Human Bomb manages to detonate the entire mountain before the nuclear bombs explode with help from the Phantom Lady, which prevents nuclear annihilation and saves countless lives. Within the final pages of *Freedom Fighters*, the final hallmark of Nazi stereotypes in popular culture is revealed and defeated, the threat of nuclear war at the hand of the Nazis (Ward 102). While much of the content in the final issue of *Freedom Fighters* is simple and conventional comic book material, it still manages to highlight how the Nazi Party under any Adolf Hitler yearned for control through removing any hope or power that existed outside the realms of Nazism. Nazi Germany ensured absolute control and domination of the people by eliminating all other sources of inspiration, belief, and empowerment, just as Nazi America did in the comic.

Current American readers will be forced to consider the existing social inequality and political turmoil after seeing a modern-day version of Nazi fascism rule a fictional United States. Despite the villains using stereotypical German accents with Nazi-themed buzzwords,

Freedom Fighters does have a superhero confront her Nazi past, in the solemn and profound spirt of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, thus allowing German readers to find relatability and possible self-identification through a protagonist, instead of just seeing their culture portrayed as villains. However, the characters and storylines will have to continue to be more socially relevant and culturally sensitive if DC comics wish to begin to disassociate German identity from Nazi imagery.

Multimodal Depictions of Nazis in the DC Extended Universe

Although the Freedom Fighters, Universe X, and their unique storyline was confined to the print form of comic books for nearly 50 years (1976-2020), their unique influence on and profound significance to the entire DC Universe extended into a multimodal franchise by the 21st century. The Freedom Fighters also appear in the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) through a crossover event involving the four television shows on the CW Television Network: *The Flash, Arrow, Supergirl, and DC's Legends of Tomorrow*. These four shows involve how the multiverse functions within the universe of DC characters, and one of the most significant events is the crossover event involving Universe 10. The first thing we witness from the assumed horrors of Universe 10 (Germany winning World War II and taking over the earth) is their version of the classic Justice League, which is stereotypically named the "New Reichsmen" (see **Figure 38**).

Figure 38: Nazi Supervillains from Universe 10. From: the CW Network Television Shows *Arrow* (2012-2020) and the *Flash* (2014-).

The New Reichsmen includes a fascist version of Supergirl aptly donning the name of
Overgirl. The New Reichsmen are the champions of Germanica, the name of the United
States controlled by the Nazi Party. Germanica is another classic callback to another
horrifically iconic concept of Nazism, Germania, what Adolf Hitler envisioned to be the
capital of the 1000-year empire of the Third Reich and planned to be located in Berlin. There
are still existing structures from unfinished designs from the Nazi era, such as
Großbelastungskörper (the large load body) which is so large that it cannot be destroyed
without damaging the nearby cityscape (Diaz 1). The viewers are once again subjected to the
synthesis of classic Nazi iconography and imagery with a recognizable and relatable modern-
day America on primetime cable network television.

Throughout the four-part crossover event, which spans all of the CW shows: *Supergirl*
(2015-2021)*, Flash* (2014-)*, Arrow* (2012-2020)*,* and *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-)*,*
we are introduced to an onslaught of stereotypical themes and motifs associated with Nazism
infused into current-day America, such as the cruelty of Nazi officers and the horrors of
concentration camps. Throughout the crossover event we are only introduced to one member
of the actual Freedom Fighters, Raymond Terrill aka The Ray. However, the Freedom
Fighters appear in their own animated web series on the online streaming platform "CW
Seed" dedicated to continuing the horrors and triumphs of Universe 10. Although *Freedom*
Fighters is a relatively unknown story arc within the vast DC Universe, it has situated itself
as a monumental turning point for comic book storylines to involve the struggles and
tragedies of history and real life. By not only being reborn within comic books through the
New 52 reboot of storylines, but also ascending into the world of popular cable television and
online streaming platforms and becoming a multimedia sensation, *Freedom Fighters* and the
DCEU emphasize the importance of learning how important history can impact modern
society through the fictional world of superheroes and supervillains. This fusion of America

and Nazism is significant because it attempts to alter the transnational identity of two countries simultaneously: the United States and Germany. Through entrenching American cityscapes, superheroes, government, and iconography with Nazi imagery and themes, the CW Network and Universe 10 showcase how the economic, social, and political structures of America could easily succumb to the allure and power of fascism. Additionally, even though many pseudo-German buzzwords, like Reichsman, make their way into the CW Network shows, the commonalities between Germany and this modern depiction of Nazism are minimal compared to their comic book equivalent, *Freedom Fighters*. The evolution of having more sophisticated and relatable depictions of Nazi ideology and imagery through modern-day America showcases how popular culture can begin to separate fascist ideology from solely belonging to the Nazis, when the current audience is painfully aware of similar circumstances existing and occurring recently in many parts of the world, especially in the United States.

Chapter 5: Primary Source Analysis: Marvel Comics

History of Captain America and Nazism

One American-made comic book superhero has carried the mantle of the fight against Nazism for more than 80 years: the aptly named Captain America. Comic books during the early 1930s largely focused on pulp sci-fi horrors and noir-spy thrillers, including Timely Comics (the creator of Captain America). Towards the end of the 1930s, the concern about Nazi Germany becoming a worldwide threat was growing quickly in America, while comic books were evolving into a popular form of news and entertainment because of their affordability during this time of economic uncertainty (Donnelly 6). These precarious conditions allowed Captain America to bridge the gap between the supernatural fantasy of comic books and the frightening realness of the escalating aggression from the Third Reich in Europe. Although the publication date is March 1941, the first issue of *Captain America Comics* was published on December 20, 1940 (Licari and Rizzo 13) (see **Figure 39**), almost an entire year before the United States officially entered World War II.

Figure 39: Captain America Punching Adolf Hitler. From: *Captain America Comics* # 1.

Timely Comics, which was largely known for pulp-fiction at the time but would become Marvel Comics by the 1960s, was the first to portray Hitler and the Third Reich as actual villains and enemies in their comics in the early 1940s (Licari and Rizzo 10). Although there are *Superman* comics from the 1940s that show him manhandling Hitler and other tyrannical dictators on their covers, in the actual story of these comics Superman never combats Hitler, Nazi soldiers, or any real enemies of the United States military during this time. Captain America stands alone as a fictional icon representing the might and courage of the United States military, akin to a modern-day superpowered Uncle Sam.
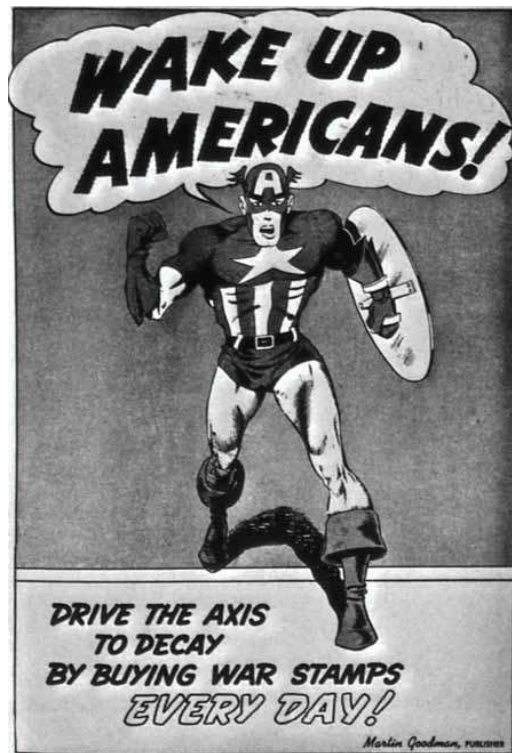
Figure 40: Captain America Tells Readers to Purchase War Bonds. From: *USA Comics* #7.

While the threat of Nazi Germany becoming the actual enemy of the United States loomed large, Captain America was already showcasing the heroism of America and asking his readers to do the same through contributing to the war effort. In fact, the early issues of *Captain America Comics* also functioned as a source of revenue for the military through advertisements to purchase war bonds sponsored by the United States Military and Captain American himself (see **Figure 40**). Matthew Perfetti from Ryerston University studied the

multitude of American propaganda during World War II and cites how Captain America

continuously encouraged his readers to contribute to the warfront in his comics: "'Selling war

bonds actually, they used the characters for that purpose, that I [definitely] knew they did

that, and apparently it was successful because they did quite a bit of that… they did a lot of

work for the government.' (Carmine Infantino, 2:58 – 3:20)" (Perfetti 4). In the United States,

war bonds and stamps played a crucial role in bolstering not only the economy and military

during World War II, but also the sense of national hope and patriotism for the Americans at

home. *Captain America Comics* and war stamps allowed concerned citizens to feel as if they

were directly contributing to the war against the terrors of Nazism. In its early stages the

Captain America Comics verged on American propaganda, highlighting the profound impact

that a fictional character had on American culture, media, and military.

Figure 41: Adolf Hitler and the Red Skull. From: *Captain America Comics* #1.

A superhero cannot truly exist without a supervillain to fight and subsequently defeat.

Marvel Comics introduced a truly fear-inspiring villain that embodied the might and terror of

the Third Reich: The Red Skull. The Red Skull brought to life the malevolence of Nazism

within the pages of the *Captain America Comics*. His origin serves as a villainous foil to the

story of Steve Rogers and Captain America, instead of being championed by the government

that created him, he was indoctrinated by the Nazi Party and became the personal assassin for Hitler. The life of Johann Schmidt mirrored the tragic story of so many Germans growing up in the Weimar Republic, as he was the orphaned son of an abusive father emotionally and physically crippled from World War I. Consequently, his only chance to rise to prominence from an ordinary bellhop was to join the Nazi Party, reflecting how so many Germans were desperate for not only work and survival, but also a stronger sense of national and personal purpose, power, and identity that was lost to them after World War I (Esposito 1).

Although the Red Skull never receives any form of the Super-Soldier Serum, he is subjected to endless brainwashing and physical conditioning from Adolf Hitler himself (see **Figure 41**). He sports a green jumpsuit with a large Swastika and a red mask that makes him look like a demon or devil. Although we never see his actual face, he perfectly embodies the supernatural terror and villainous identity of the unknown Nazi soldier, who threatens the freedom and democracy of the American government and way of life.

Figure 42: Red Skull Using Hypnotism. From: *Captain America Comics* #1.

His fear-inspiring imagery and uncanny capabilities escalated the malevolence and horror of Nazism to literally superhuman levels, by giving him the ability to hypnotize and scare people to death, in the early issues of *Captain America Comics* (see **Figure 42**). In the very

first issue, the Red Skull is shown terrorizing and killing American military officers through seemingly supernatural means, with Captain America the next name on his list (see **Figure 43**). The Red Skull represented how the American public viewed the unknown and potential horrors of Nazi Germany, becoming a hideous and sinister supernatural enemy to foil the heroism and patriotism of Captain America in his comics.

Figure 43: Red Skull and the Enemies of America. From: *Captain America Comics* #1.

However, in the *Captain America Comics*, the Red Skull was the only figure to pose actual danger to the safety of the American public, the military of the United States, and Captain America. In an obvious metaphor to condemn Nazi Germany and bolster American pride, the hideous appearance and malicious nature of the Red Skull, and the Nazi Party, is perfectly juxtaposed with the classic handsomeness and patriotic heroism of Steve Rogers, and the America government. *Captain America Comics* functioned as propaganda by emphasizing the overall superiority of the United States and their people over Germany and their people, to assure the readers at home that the United States and its Allies will easily defeat the real-life threat of Hitler, the Third Reich, and the Axis Powers.

Although *Captain America Comics* relied on the infamous imagery of Adolf Hitler

and the demonic visualization of the Red Skull to establish the menace and evilness of the

Nazi Party and the Third Reich, they also displayed a plethora of stereotypical Nazi soldiers

for Captain America and even his young sidekick Bucky to pummel into submission and

defeat. James Barnes, aka Bucky, played a critical role in the comics despite not having any

superpowers. First, precisely because he was just an ordinary human soldier, with the rank of

a mere private, he allowed the American readers to insert themselves, or a loved one actually

in the military, into the story and experience defeating Nazis in a fictious world. Additionally,

they purposely embellished the superiority of the American soldiers compared to their

German counterparts to bolster American patriotism through showing their success on the

battlefield. The advantages of having ordinary Nazi soldiers act as cannon fodder in the

struggle between Adolf Hitler, the Red Skull, and Captain America were also two-fold.

Figure 44: Captain America versus the Cowardly Nazis. From: *Captain America Comics* #2.

First, they provided a chance for more fighting and action sequences of Captain

America and the United States military dominating their Nazi adversaries. Second, they also

provided the American public with a fictive image of the actual adversaries their military

would be fighting (see **Figure 44**). Clearly, the average United States soldier was not going

to confront the Red Skull or even Adolf Hitler on the battlefield during the war. Rather, they

would be fighting the soldiers representing Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. Thus, *Captain*

America Comics created a necessary synthesis of fiction and non-fiction for domestic

American citizens to understand and experience the warfront without having to constantly hear about the sobering realities of real-life injuries, atrocities, and casualties. Even at the dawn of the comic book age, Captain America typifies the unique capability of the comic book: to fuse current events with fictional characters to provide an equilibrium of information and entertainment for their readers.

Therefore, the contents of many comic books during this time, including Captain America, relied heavily on many of the tropes within pulp-fiction including hyperbolic violence and racial stereotypes of the enemies of America, in order to clearly establish them as the villains in their comics, especially during World War II (see **Figure 45**).

Figure 45: Captain America against Racially Stereotyped German Soldiers. From: *Captain America* #19.

Timely Comics, the publishers of *Captain America Comics*, was no exception to this trend. The strong depictions of pulp-fiction stereotypes and having Captain America directly asking citizens to donate to the war effort during a time of immense uncertainty and anxiety for the American people resulted in a *Captain America Comics* essentially functioning as American propaganda. The comics not only shamelessly promoted American ideals while asking for contributions to the military, but they also depicted foreign leaders through crude racist

stereotypes, including the representation of Tojo and Stalin in Superman comics, as the enemies of the American government and therefore its citizens as well.

The German soldiers are more crudely illustrated with exaggerated mouth, noses, and eyebrows when compared to Captain America, Bucky, and the American soldiers. Also, they are portrayed as weak, cowardly, and function as ineffectual minions, whose only purpose is to be defeated by Captain America and the American military. The second issue of *Captain America Comics* even goes as far as portraying the leaders of the Nazi Party as pathetically cowering in fear in the presence of Captain America and the sheer strength of the United States for the first time (Donnelly 26). Timely Comics purposely displayed the two most maniacal leaders of the Third Reich as comically miniscule and inept in comparison to the might of Captain America and Bucky (see **Figure 46**), while Germany was quickly spreading terror throughout Europe before the United States entered the war, in order to minimize the real-life threat and terror posed by the Nazis to global peace and American freedom.

Figure 46: Adolf Hitler and Hermann Goering versus Captain America and Bucky. From: *Captain America Comics* #2.

Although Adolf Hitler and the German military were enemies of Captain America, comic book writer Joe Simon purposely portrayed Hitler and his Nazi followers in a comical fashion to diminish his malevolence for comic book readers, "with his comical moustache, the ridiculous cowlick, his swaggering, [and his] goose-stepping minions" (Donnelly 12). The

other main writer for the comic, Jack Kirby, also stated how their portrayal of Hitler was largely satirical and offended American Nazi sympathizers and the Bund Association: "[He ended up being] a clown. Evidently, this infuriated a lot of Nazi sympathizers" (Donnelly 16). The owner of Timely Comics, Martin Goodman, and many of his employees were Jewish and they received hate mail and death threats from some of their fellow Americans for their defiance of the Neutrality Acts of the 1930s.
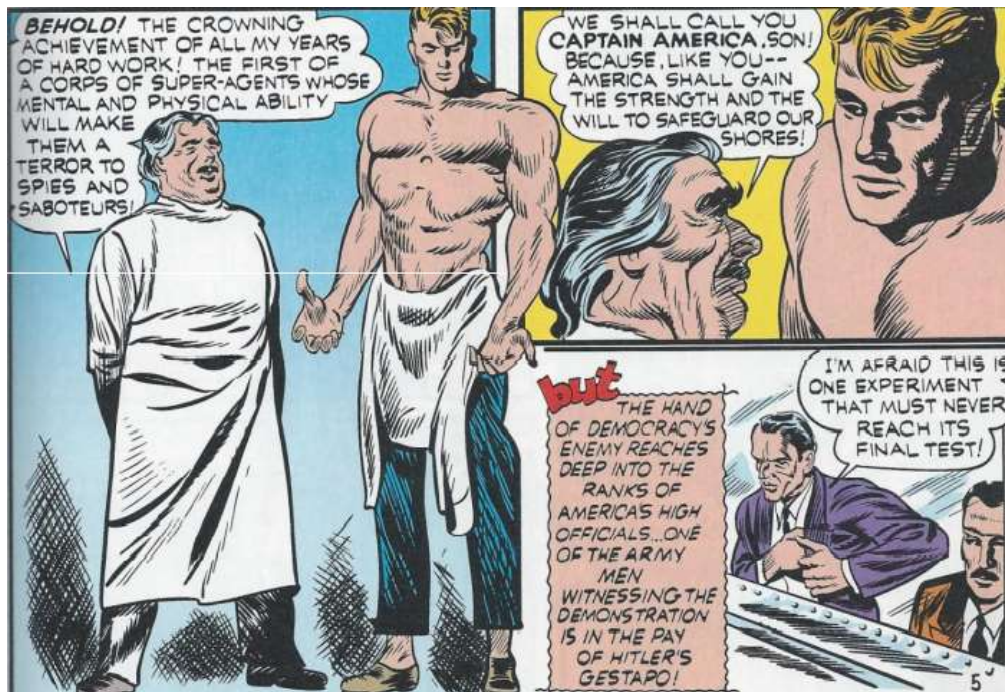
Figure 47: The Origins of Steve Rogers. From: *Captain America Comics* # 1.

Ironically or intentionally, the pulp-fiction nature of the American comic book industry and the origin story of Captain America utilize many aspects of stereotypical Nazi ideology. Thus, *Captain America Comics* functioned as American propaganda and perhaps introduced the allure of Nazi stereotypes in American popular culture in the 1940s. In the first issues of *Captain America Comics* the greatest threat of the Nazi enemies was not their military might, as Captain America, Bucky, and the United States military regularly defeat the German military and Adolf Hitler within the comic books. Instead, the most menacing and prevalent threat at the disposal of the Nazis was infiltrating and sabotaging American institutions like the government and military. In the very first issue, the Jewish scientist and

inventor of the Super-Soldier Serum, Professor Reinstein, remarks on his fears of the Nazis

discovering the formula immediately after their successful attempt with Steve Rogers (see

Figure 47) (Unca 2). Additionally, on the cover of the first issue Hitler clearly has plans of

sabotage for the United States (see **Figure 48**) (Miller 4). From the beginning of the series,

Timely Comics and their authors utilize their pulp-fiction roots through the terror of Nazi

sabotage in America by showing an exploding munitions factory and plans of sabotage on the

cover of the very first issue.

Figure 48: A Closer Look at the Cover. From: *Captain America Comics* # 1.

Despite his monolithic association with Nazism, the Red Skull has remained the main

antagonist of Captain America. By the 1950s, the terror of the Nazis had almost completely

disappeared, but a new threat posed by the spread of communism was beginning to rise as the

new enemy of freedom, democracy, and the United States. Thus, Steve Rogers became the

"Commie Smasher" and began to fight various Russian, Chinese, and Korean communists

(see **Figure 49**). However, there would be one figure who would perfectly encapsulate the

"Red Menace" and "Red Scare" that the American government painted as the enemy of the

state and quickly spread throughout America. The Red Skull was easy to mold into the

prototype of socialist ideology and imagery because of his association with the color red and

his rivalry with Captain America.

As the "Commie Smasher" during the 1950s, Steve Rogers was portrayed differently

than the Captain America who fought against the Nazi Party. He began to fight ordinary

criminals to find possible connections to infiltration and sabotage from the numerous

international threats posed by communist party.
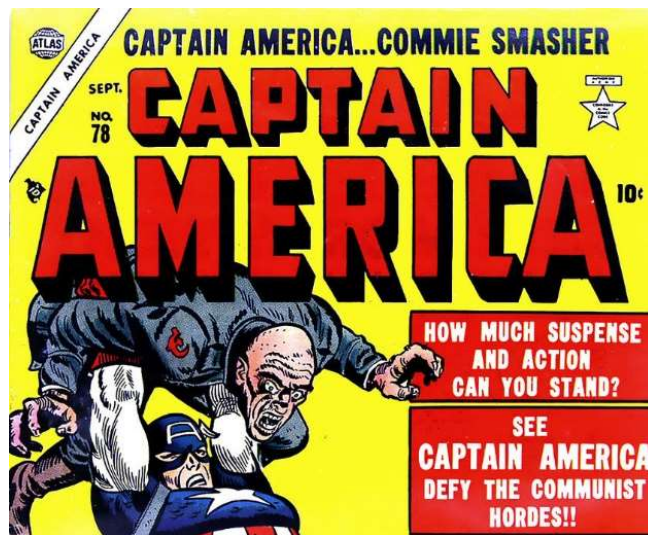
Figure 49: Captain America the Commie Smasher. From: *Captain America Comics* # 78.

Thus, this "new" Captain America was not nearly as popular as his 1940s counterpart, so the

"Commie Smasher" run of *Captain America* only lasted four issues: *Captain America 75-78*

(Parrott 10). However, by the 1960s and 1970s, the bizarre events of the 1950s Captain

America would be spectacularly explained through what would become a common practice in

the comic book world, the retcon, which stands for retroactive continuity (Salao 2). In order

to continue the original idea of Captain America being frozen in time towards the end of

World War II and his immensely popular unfreezing in the 1960s, writer Steve Englehart

reveals what "really" happened with Captain America during the 1950s. In issues 153-156 of

Captain America, it is revealed that the Captain America and Bucky of the 1950s were

imposters named William Burnside and Jack Monroe. They took up these patriotic mantles to

fight crime and communism. They even encounter the Red Skull, who also turns out to be imposter Albert Malik, not Johann Schmidt the ex-Nazi attacking the United Nations (Licari 32-34). The classic paranoia of Nazi subversion was easily replaced with generic Soviet stereotypes, propaganda, and themes connected with communism instead of fascism, despite many of the themes in popular culture remaining the same for both.

The questionable actions of this new duo were attributed to their radical politicization during the "Red Scare" of the 1950s and from them receiving an incomplete version of the Super-Soldier Serum discovered after the fall of the Nazi Empire. This stroke of comic book genius had two major effects: it allowed Captain America to return as the paragon of ideal American heroism and exploited the communist-laden fears of spies, sabotage, and the infiltration of the American military, government, and society. Although it was mainly the United States against the Soviet Union in conflict to represent the struggle between democracy and communism, Germany experienced its own microcosm of this battle because it was divided by Soviet and Allied forces (composed of Great Britain, France, and the United States) with a wall dividing the capital Berlin which stood in the heart of the eastern Soviet-occupied side from 1961 until 1990. Unlike any other nation in the world, Germany experienced a division among their own people, sometimes among families, between the competing ideologies vying for ultimate power and control of the entire world between those who shared a singular history, language, and culture.

By the 1970s, Marvel Comics had established themes of heroes with tragic backstories to make them more human and relatable to the readers. With his reemergence from being frozen in ice, Captain America had to deal with existing in a world completely unfamiliar to him (Licari and Rizzo 70-71). The fall of the Berlin Wall signified the end of the international threat of communism and the Soviet Union. It would not be until a travesty unseen in the United States since the attack on Pearl Harbor, where he would once again deal

directly with the current affairs of America within the main storyline of his comic book: the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001.

Figure 50: Captain America, PTSD, and the War in the Middle East. From: *Captain America* vol. 4 #1.

Although *Captain America Comics* #1 predated the attack on Pearl Harbor by almost an entire year, the two events were inextricably connected to the United States entering the war against both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. For the first time since his supernatural transformation into Captain America during the 1940s, Steve Rogers deploys himself into an active warzone following 9/11 and expects to solve the international conflicts of America once again (Licari and Rizzo 140). As is the tragic motif surrounding Captain America, he finds that even warfare has changed since his last deployment and finds himself lost in a place once so familiar. Within pages of his entry into the Middle East warzone, he remembers

his time during World War II in a PTSD-fueled flashback (see **Figure 50**). Captain America

and his constant struggle with his past emphasizes how the horror and atrocities of Nazi

Germany has never truly escaped the minds of Americans over 50 years later.

During the early 2000s, Captain America found himself pitted against many of his

most trusted allies and friends. *Civil War* pitted him against one of his closest friends, Tony

Stark, aka Iron Man, when the government initiated the Superhero Registration Act. Despite

Captain America representing the power and might of the American government, he is an

even greater symbol of freedom and peace. He equates the registration act to how the Nazis

registered and tagged Jewish people and other minorities during the Third Reich (Licari and

Rizzo 142-143). Contemporary authors and critics also link it to the then recent and still

controversial Patriot Act (a direct response to 9/11) because it limited the rights and civil

liberties of certain individuals (those they deemed as potentially dangerous to society) but not

others (This 231-232). Even his closest and presumably deceased friend for over 60 years,

James Buchanon "Bucky" Barnes, reemerges as the Winter Soldier, a Soviet assassin. The

Winter Soldier becomes a heroic figure once he foils a political assassination plan hatched by

a new villainess, Sinthea Schmidt, aka Sin, the daughter of the Red Skull, who takes over the

role of her father as head of Hydra (see **Figure 51**).

Figure 51: Sinthea Schmidt, the Daughter of the Red Skull. From: *Comicvine.com.*

Scarred and disfigured to look like her father, Sin becomes the main antagonist of the next Marvel storyline, *Fear Itself* from 2011. Sin acquires the occult power of the Norse Goddess Skadi, which gives her supernatural strength, durability, speed, and energy projection. Sin unleashes the forces of fear, which are Nazi war machines enhanced by the evil magic from the Norse God of Fear. The Marvel Universe merges Norse mythology and Nazi imagery in the pages of *Fear Itself*, which still remain connected to one another since the Thule Society and the occult interests of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party (Manea 98).

Modern neo-Nazism constantly misuses imagery and iconography from Norse mythology to promote rightwing extremism through traditional Nazi propaganda in the United States and several parts of Europe including Germany and Scandinavia (Manea 269). Despite the Nazi Party being soundly defeated in WWII, their racist ideology and penchant for fascism has resurfaced through many far-right political parties including recently in the United States with the rhetoric from Donald Trump as well as in Germany with the rise of AfD. Likewise, over the past decade Marvel has begun utilizing Nazi imagery and iconography once again for their main supervillains into their major storylines through the infamous Hydra organization becoming a contemporary allusion for rising influence of the neo-Nazi organizations all over the world (see **Figure 52**).

Figure 52: Nazi War Machines in Washington D.C. From: *Fear Itself* (2011).

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Johann Schmidt, aka the Red Skull, developed the Hydra terrorist organization in conjunction with Imperial Japan, in hopes of helping the Axis powers win World War II. He also used this organization to merge the occult Thule Society of Germany with the Hand, a supernatural group of assassins from Japan, in hopes it could help him sustain power through the defeat of World War II. From their inception in the 1960s, Hydra consistently battles Captain America and his allies, while committing war crimes and assassinations throughout the globe. By the 2000s, Hydra had cemented itself as the primary villainous organization in the Marvel Universe, while still utilizing Nazi-themed imagery and rhetoric. Marvel Comics even invented a new phrase for the organization that directly references the infamous Nazi salute: "Hail Hydra!" At the behest of the Red Skull, Hydra scientist Doctor Faustus manages to hypnotize Sharon Carter to kill Steve Rogers by shooting him. However, it is revealed that the gun used to kill Captain America was enchanted to place him in a state of hypnosis where he would be under complete control of Hydra and the Red Skull. Since their introduction, Hydra has used hypnotism to showcase their terror and spread their influence, just as the Nazi Party yearned for complete control over their subjects (Poley 97). Afterwards, Steve Rogers reveals himself as not merely a spy for the insidious organization, but as their new and undisputed leader determined to eradicate every superhero that opposes them. Thus, Marvel Comics shows even Steve Rogers can succumb to the allures of fascism and evil.

Content Analysis: *Secret Empire* (2017)

By April of 2017, the stage was set for the most shocking revelation in decades for Marvel Comics: Steve Rogers, America's and Marvel's greatest hero for over 70 years, has become the leader of the very organization he was created to defeat: Hydra. This turning point in the Marvel Universe was unlike any other to date. This person was not a mere clone, robot replicate, or alien shapeshifter (figures that are quite common in Marvel Comics), rather it was the actual Steve Rogers. In addition, he was not simply under the spell of some sorcerer

or simply brainwashed by Hydra, it appears to be the genuine Captain America. In the

prequel issue, *Secret Empire* #0, he displays this fact by lifting Thor's hammer, Mjolnir, with

ease, maintaining that he is still "worthy" of wielding the weapon of the Gods. In the Marvel

Universe, this is even more bizarre, because Thor himself had recently lost the ability to lift

the hammer and was deemed "unworthy" for the first time in decades.

In the same issue, one of the first images we see of Hydra Leader Supreme Steve

Rogers is with an enormous tattoo of the Hydra symbol emblazoned on his chest. His blond

hair and tattoo of a fascist organization force the readers to recall images of modern-day hate

groups like the Aryan Brotherhood or Ku Klux Klan (see **Figure 53**).

Figure 53: Steve Rogers with a Hydra Tattoo. From: *Secret Empire* #0.

The author of *Secret Empire,* Nick Spencer, immediately reminds the reader that threats of

extreme racism and fascism exist and thrive in certain parts of the United States through the

juxtaposition of Captain America and neo-Nazi imagery. Although the ultimate leader of an

organization being the secret leader of the opposing organization is a common theme in

popular culture, the transformation of Steve Rogers is emblematic of the existing struggle in

the United States between a weakening democracy and the allure of fascist power. It is not accidental that the publication of *Secret Empire* coincides with a seismic shift in the political landscape that accompanied the 2016 Presidential Election in the United States by less than one year. Marvel Comics once again uses the actions and struggles of Steve Rogers to represent the international and domestic conflicts of America.

Captain America has been combating Nazis since before the United States entered World War II. Since then, Marvel Comics has relied heavily on Nazi imagery when depicting villainy and evilness, especially when dealing with the Hydra organization. Therefore, in order to remain relevant and relatable to the modern reader, the artists of *Secret Empire* utilize the rhetoric and imagery of more modern groups who support racism and fascism to evoke real emotion from the open wounds that still infect the lives of countless Americans. If Steve Rogers, an international symbol of American patriotism, heroism, and integrity as well as Marvel's exemplar for the supernatural capability of an ordinary citizen, can succumb to the allure of fascism by betraying freedom, equity, and empathy, it signifies how it could happen in the United States or any other democratic and peaceful nation.

In *Secret Empire* #1, the readers witness the Hydra organization from an entirely new perspective while experiencing a classic motif of comic books, depicting the propaganda and horrors of the Nazi Party through the lens of the supernatural. However, these stereotypical atrocities are portrayed through the lens of modern-day America, while being sanctioned by the ultimate symbols of freedom in the Marvel universe: Captain America and the American government. Seeing Inhumans, people with supernatural abilities and DNA, being systematically targeted, arrested, and experimented on simply for being different immediately brings to mind the Holocaust. This is immediately coupled with seeing the youth of America being indoctrinated into believing the stereotypical lies and propaganda of Hydra in the next few panels (see **Figure 54**).
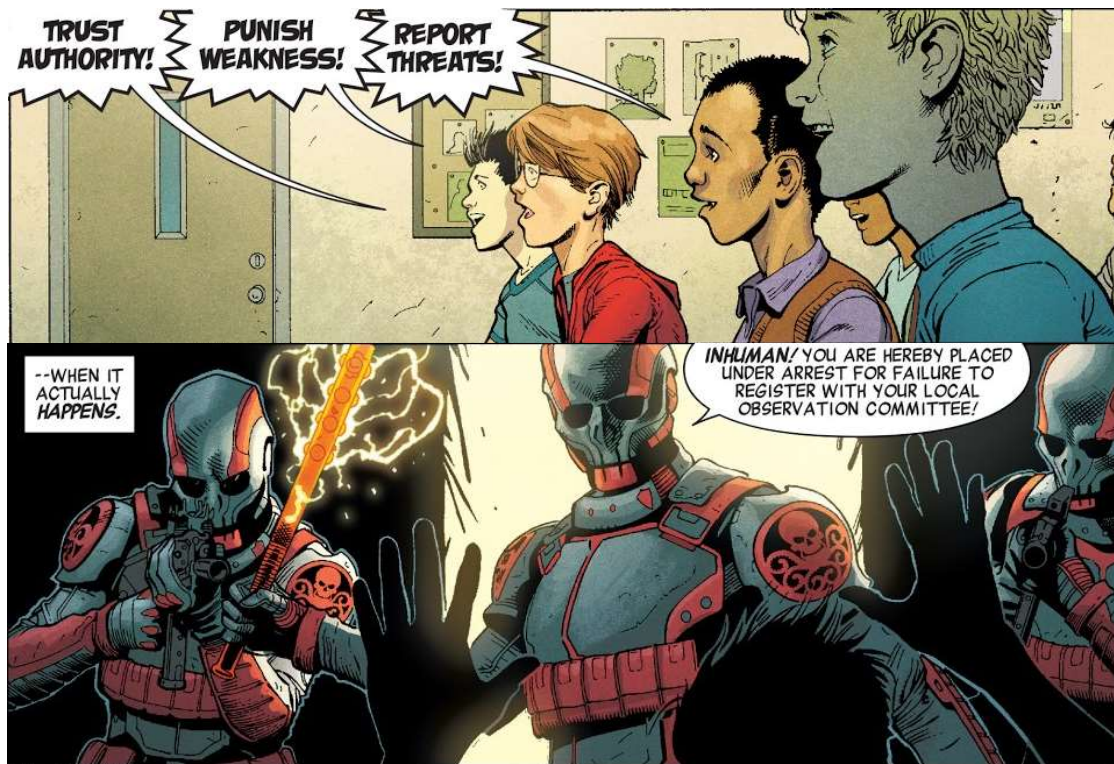
Figure 54: Hydra Indoctrinating Youth and Detaining Inhumans. From: *Secret Empire* #1.

This imagery prompts the reader to recall the atrocities and fascism of Nazi Germany and once again compare it to similar situations and happenings in the modern-day United States. Within the first issues of *Secret Empire*, the reader is continuously confronted with the infamous tattoos of neo-Nazi organizations inscribed on Steve Rogers as he kneels to his Hydra masters, the stereotypical Nazi propaganda being echoed by the youth of America in school masked as education, and the government-approved genocide of those deemed as dangerous and enemies of the state. The authors and artists of *Secret Empire* waste no time to display how Hydra utilizes the hateful and dangerous rhetoric of Nazism, just like many modern neo-Nazi organizations, by slightly altering their belief system to exploit the current social, political, and economic problems, in order to effectively manipulate the public.

Figure 55: "The Great Illusion." From: *Secret Empire* #1.

Although *Secret Empire* predates the Presidential Elections of 2020 by more than 3 years, "The Great Illusion" sounds remarkably similar to "The Big Lie" that the supporters of Donald Trump remark on when they deny the confirmed results of the election. The proponents of "The Big Lie" included many members of the media, government, and Trump himself. This event resulted in riots and attacks on the United States Capitol Building on January 6, 2020, causing several deaths, including those of rioters and police officers. Rioters even threatened certain members of the government during the riot, including Mike Pence, the Vice President (Farivar 9). The hateful and dangerous rhetoric and imagery surrounding "The Big Lie" would not escape anyone reading *Secret Empire* and hearing of a grade-school teacher talking about "The Great Illusion" to her students (see **Figure 55**). Some readers could even imagine the disturbing idea of their own children learning about "The Big Lie" in school, a concept that may not be a superhero-level fantasy. Along with the rise of fascist

rhetoric on the national level in the United States, this depiction of America as a totalitarian nation spreading propaganda through the public school system is hauntingly realistic, even when witnessed through the lens of the supernatural in comic books.

Secret Empire and even Captain America do not predate another grand conspiracy propagated by a large portion of an entire country. During the German Revolution of 1918-1919, the anti-Semitic theory referred to as *Die Dolchstoßlegende* (Stab-in-the-Back Myth) was spread by the many members of the diminishing aristocratic German society, who argued that the Jews were solely responsible for the loss of WWI because of the political and social dissent they created domestically during the war. This caused widespread mistrust towards government leaders and resulted in referring to them as criminals (*Novemberverbrecher)* for signing the Armistice on November 11th, 1918 (Kershaw 118-119). *The New York Times* even linked "The Big Lie" to *Die Dolchstoßlegende* in order to highlight how radical rightwing fascism and national conspiracy theories have been intertwined for over 100 years and remain so to this day (Stephens 8). The Weimar Republic and the era of the Donald Trump administration continue to have alarmingly consistent similarities regarding propaganda, conspiracy theories, and fascism that readers today cannot ignore while reading *Secret Empire* and considering current social, political, and economic turmoil.

The Nazi Party and Third Reich constantly sought to acquire power through both conventional and unconventional means. The more traditional means included a vast increase in military-industrial production, a shift to a fascist government, and the suppression of minorities. Adolf Hitler also had a profound interest in acquiring immense power through the esoteric means of the supernatural and occult. Popular culture has documented and dramatized this rather bizarre interest in the world of the paranormal in film and television, usually through the search for powerful mystical artifacts. The search of the Holy Grail and Ark of the Covenant by the Nazis and Adolf Hitler in the *Indiana Jones* franchise are well-

known examples in American film history. Marvel Comics utilized this theme through the constant search for the infinitely powerful Cosmic Cube by the Red Skull since the introduction of his character in the 1940s, an item which continues to be a primary objective for the Hydra organization to this day.

By the *Secret Empire* #2, Steve Rogers as Hydra Leader Supreme continues the quest of searching for the Cosmic Cube. The readers also learn about a highly powerful supernatural being called Kobik, who was created by S.H.I.E.L.D (the heroic intelligence agency that acts as a foil to Hydra), from scientific experiments on the fragments of the Cosmic Cube. The Red Skull captures Kobik and manipulates her naivety and eagerness to become human by inculcating her into Hydra through propaganda and lies, which also led to Steve Rogers joining Hydra.

Figure 56: Collage of Hydra Mind Control through Propaganda. From: *Secret Empire* #2.

Furthermore, we once again see the modernization of stereotypical Nazis themes, such as brainwashing and propaganda. The Red Skull indoctrinates an incredibly young and suggestible Kobik through the lies and propaganda "that Hydra was the best thing since *Frozen*" (see **Figure 56**).This unique collage of a lifetime of moments in a singular scene

highlights the immense power and influence of propaganda and mental conditioning through the breaking of traditional page layout.

Alex Abad-Santos, senior correspondent for *Vox.com*, wrote about how the breaking of conventional panel structure indicates a breaking of the established supernatural and magical limits of a superhero comic book: "If panels and gutters represent time and structure, then the absence of panels means something is broken or something is so powerful that rules don't apply to it" (Abad-Santos 24). Within two pages, the authors and artist use the transcendental power of a lifetime of Hydra brainwashing and mind control to show their overwhelming desire of absolute control over people, their lives and even their thoughts. By blending themes of Nazism and modern popular culture in such a captivating scene breaking traditional comic book motifs, the author entices the readers to consider once again the current political and social turmoil in the United States while reading a superhero comic book, while the reader pauses and fully absorbs this complex and mesmerizing scene.

There are two scenes peppered into *Secret Empire* #2 and #3 that reimagine several prolific and profound Nazi stereotypes within the Hydra organization found in both history and popular culture. The first is a youth science fair hosted by Hydra, where a child invents a portable Inhuman detector and receives approval from Hydra Leader Supreme Steve Rogers himself. This is clearly a superhero metaphor of how the Nazis attempted to use the occult and pseudoscience such as phrenology to detect the supposed genetic defects of minorities.
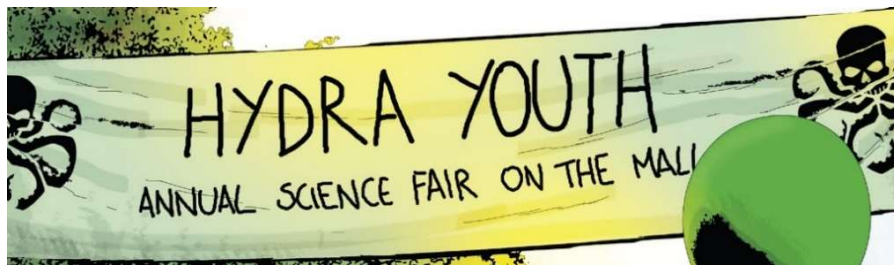
Figure 57: Hydra Youth Science Fair. From: *Secret Empire* #2.

At this point, any veil separating Hydra and the Nazi Party regarding systematic youth indoctrination is completely torn with the banner depicting "Hydra Youth" (see **Figure 57**) in

the next few panels, because it is essentially an Americanized version of *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler

Youth), a Nazi youth organization. Finally, the second scene is when Hydra reveals they have

infiltrated the group of heroes with a spy set for sabotage. This is another classic Nazi-themed

trope commonly found in popular culture, including *Freedom Fighters* from DC Comics.

This theme showcases how the widespread fear, paranoia, and mistrust within these fascist

organizations extends to everyone because it is embedded into the core of their beliefs,

personality, and identity through propaganda, lies, and indoctrination.

In *Captain America* #25, a continuation of the *Secret Empire* storyline, Steve Rogers,

donning his Hydra uniform, gives a speech in front of an enormous Hydra symbol (clearly

reminiscent of the speeches of Adolf Hitler) where he demands what he feels was wrongfully

stolen from him. He concludes his tyrannical speech with the following words: "Until what is

rightfully ours is **returned**. Until what was taken from us is **restored**" (see **Figure 58**). This

rhetoric is a reference to the desire of the Third Reich to regain the German lands lost as a

result of World War I, namely the country of Austria. In March of 1938, before the Munich

Agreement, Germany had begun a small-scale war in Austria with the help of the Nazi Party

of Austria. Hitler called it an annexation under the guise of reunification of Germany

(*Anschluss*). To avoid global military conflict, the leaders of Europe, namely Neville

Chamberlain and Great Britain, allowed this to happen but publicly objected to the actions of

Germany (Kershaw 242). Steve Rogers, like Hitler, utilized the fear of global warfare as a

means to acquire power without the use of significant military force. However, both would

subsequently use military force when diplomatic measures no longer proved effective.

Figure 58: Hydra Leader Supreme Steve Rogers Mimicking the Rhetoric of Adolf Hitler during a Speech. From: *Captain America* #25.

As the main story continues with the search for Cosmic Cube fragments by each side, we see them contact iconic fictional sovereign nations for their fragments in an attempt to advert international warfare with clear allusions to events during World War II in *Secret Empire* #5. We first see Wakanda, a sovereign African nation with advanced technology, deny aid to both Hydra and the band of resistance heroes, essentially playing the role of Switzerland, as they wish to remain neutral and avoid unnecessary combat during this global conflict. We then see the underwater world of Atlantis, who also wish to avoid the conflict with Hydra. However, they essentially play the role of England and France, as they give into the demands of Steve Rogers and Hydra for fear of military conflict and bloodshed. This is clearly reminiscent and critical of the Munich Agreement in September of 1938*,* an act of international appeasement, where the nations of Europe reluctantly ceded Czechoslovakia to Germany in hopes of avoiding global military conflict (Kershaw 330-334).

However, Namor, King of Atlantis, instantly remarks on how acts of appeasement would not work against a man like Steve Rogers, obviously comparing his ambition, power, and treachery directly to Hitler, the iconic villain for such traits (see **Figure 59**). By the late 1930s, the leaders of Europe quickly learned that the relinquishing of Czechoslovakia and

Austria only gave Hitler the confidence to escalate his plans of global conquest and warfare. The indirect reference to *Anschluss* is followed by a direct reference to appeasement in consecutive issues of the *Secret Empire* storyline, making it virtually impossible to not consider the threat and spread of Nazi fascism while reading this story.

Figure 59: Namor Discussing the Ineffectiveness of Appeasement. From: *Secret Empire* #5.

In *Secret Empire* #7 following his victory, Hydra Leader Supreme Steve Rogers announces increased restrictions on media and communication for his citizens under the guise of national security (see **Figure 60**), which is a hallmark of many fascist regimes throughout history, such as the Nazi Party in the late stages of the Weimar Republic and the early stages of the Third Reich. Current readers can think about recent unsuccessful attempts by Donald Trump and the Republican Party to stifle and condemn certain news and media outlets for being biased against their rhetoric. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to both Hydra and our band of heroes, Natasha Romanov, aka Black Widow, and the Young Avengers hatch their plan to assassinate Steve Rogers in an attempt to end his recent reign of terror. However, the tides turn, and Steve Rogers kills Natasha with a single strike of his triangular-shaped shield, while he is paradoxically donning his original Captain America uniform. With the failure of the seemingly last group of resistance fighters, Hydra makes aggressive moves on their remaining enemies. As a result, Atlantis quickly learns how appeasement does not satiate the appetites of Hydra, just as it did not stop the maniacal conquest of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich throughout Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.

Figure 60: Hydra Increases Restrictions and Bans on Media. From: *Secret Empire* #7.

In *Secret Empire* #2, we recall how Hydra, with Steve Rogers at the helm, holds

command of the government and military. Additionally, now he also has complete control

over the media and what information they will disseminate to the public. Adolf Hitler and the

Nazi Party also sought complete control over all media outlets in Germany, condemning

traditional forms of literature and art if they had little control over the authors, while

championing newly emerging technological media of radio and film that they were able to

monopolize through technology. Through the unfettered control of media, in combination

with government-controlled propaganda, the Nazi Party strove for absolute control over the

information and entertainment their citizens would be able to access. This would not only

give them full control over the thoughts and actions of their citizens, but it would also silence

any dissenting voices opposed to Nazism. For fascist organizations like Hydra in Marvel

Comics, the Nazi Party of the Third Reich and even some parts of the Republican Party in

modern-day America, control of media and information is just as important as political

influence and military might.

Those reading the story today will also think how the United States recently experienced a modern-age version of this when Donald Trump sought to attack and discredit traditional media outlets, such as *ABC*, *CNN*, *MSNBC*, and even *BBC* for being "liberal" and "biased" against him, while championing the social media outlet *Twitter* for allowing him to spew his hateful rhetoric under the guise of free speech (Ryan 13). Trump would eventually be permanently banned from *Twitter* for his dangerous and hateful posts, while still being the president of the United States. As with the Nazi Party and Trump, Hydra wants to control every aspect of life in order to manipulate the citizens into thinking they are maintaining order and safety, rather than oppression and domination. The words of Hydra Leader Supreme Steve Rogers sound like something out of a speech from Hitler: "It is only through **strength** that war is averted. It is only through **order** that violence is quelled" (*Secret Empire* #2). The words may sound heroic, but when they are viewed through the historic and social lens of Nazism and the topical lens of Trump and the AfD gaining popularity and influence, the words bear a more sinister and dangerous tone.

However, in the last pages of *Secret Empire* #7 and *Captain America* #25, the readers are given two classic comic book storyline tropes during the fight against Hydra and Steve Rogers. Sam Wilson aka Falcon, with his iconic circular shield of red, white and, blue, reprises his role of Captain America, and it is revealed that Namor, King of Atlantis, rescued and allied himself with the presumably deceased Bucky Barnes, aka the Winter Soldier. Ironically, Steve Rogers has been using an altered version of his original triangular-shaped shield, the very one he used to originally defeat Hydra and the Nazi Party in the 1940s (see **Figure 61**). In those same issues, experienced comic book readers will notice the classic juxtaposition of Sam Wilson embodying the modern Captain America with the modern shield, while Steve Rogers and his old shield now representing the ideology of the fascist organization he was created to destroy. With the iconic juxtaposition of the former and

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current Captain Americas making their first real appearance in combat, the current readers see two contrasting images of America: a new symbol of hope and freedom, Sam Wilson, and the old symbol of hope preaching protection and safety through order and control, Steve Rogers. Current readers may compare this to the struggle in current American politics between the young and upstart politicians interested in change and the old and experienced politicians entrenched in their own sense of influence through power and control.
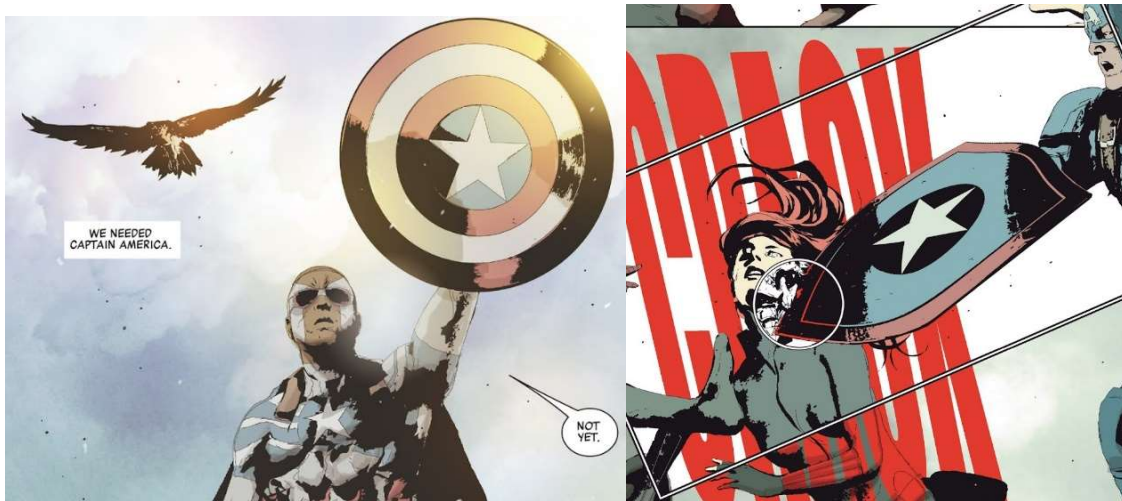
Figure 61: Captain America versus Hydra Leader Supreme. From: *Captain America* #25 and *Secret Empire* #7.

The readers also witness the tragic murder of a beloved Avenger, Black Widow, with the added bonus of detailed "emanata" (Salgood 2), an X-ray image within the panel to highlight the detail of her neck breaking expertly stylized in front of iconic comic book onomatopoeia of "CRACK" to entice readers to focus on this gut-wrenching and series-defining moment. This scene stands out not only because of the tragic irony of a death at the hands of a former friend and ally, but the distinct cross-hatching gutters on this page lead the readers eyes to focus solely on this singular panel. This astonishingly heartbreaking scene is underscored by the unique page layout that, "influence[s] the way images interact by controlling their number, shapes, sizes, and arrangement on the page, giving more meaning to the images than they would have if viewed individually" (Gavaler 2). In these two issues, the author and artists unleash an onslaught of classic superhero plot twists to emphasize the

overwhelming sense of despair, while the readers feel the same emotions simultaneously enhanced through the synthesis of several iconic comic book motifs. Meanwhile, the current readers must also consider resurgent fascist ideology through seeing Steve Rogers in his traditional Captain America attire slay his dear friend and then continue to spout stereotypical propaganda about the safety and efficiency of a tyrannical empire. Naturally, seeing Captain America spout fascist ideology as the leader of Hydra once again instantly connects current events to the atrocities of the Nazi Empire and Adolf Hitler.

Figure 62: Steve Rogers versus Hydra One Last Time. From: *Secret Empire* #10.

In the final issue of the series, *Secret Empire* #10, Hydra Leader Supreme Steve Rogers is donning an Iron Man-like suit powered by the incomplete Cosmic Cube. He quickly overpowers the heroes with his new godlike powers and begins literally reshaping the entire planet in the image of Hydra. In addition, Sam Wilson, aka Captain America, gives Steve the final Cosmic Cube fragment. However, Scott Lang, aka Ant-Man, used his shrinking powers to transport himself and Bucky Barnes into the fragment in a final attempt to fix the situation. Inside the fragment, Bucky finds the actual Steve Rogers and Kobik, who

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have been trapped in the cosmic cube since the beginning of the series and rescues them.

Once they are out of the fragment and in the real world, Kobik reverts the world back to

normal and the two Steve Rogers begin to fight one another. As the battle culminates, the real

Steve Rogers manages to wrestle Thor's hammer from the clutches of the Hydra Leader

Supreme and defeats him (see **Figure 62**), ending the horrible reign of terror caused by Hydra

and restoring freedom, peace, and order to the entire world.

As he ends the battle against Hydra once and for all, the real Steve Rogers speaks of

the manner in which Hydra rose to power: "They had come to power on the back of a lie. A

lie some of them believed… That others let them believe. The had made us feel small, weak,

fearful. They had reveled in their strength, their power over us. But like he has promised … It

was time to see the truth. They had **never** been worthy." (*Secret Empire* #10) Even in the

world of the supernatural and impossible the author of *Secret Empire* consistently states that

the strongest weapon of Hydra, and any other fascist and tyrannical empire, is fear. Even

against the unreal power of the Cosmic Cube and the literal godlike powers of Hercules and

Thor, fear is the strongest weapon that exists. The words of the "real" Steve Rogers ring

hauntingly true for any fascist regime, but with Captain America uttering these words the

readers will instantly think of the hate-speech and fear-laden propaganda of the Nazi Party.

Current readers will even consider the similarities existing in modern far-right extremism and

their use of lies, and conspiracy theories to spread their ideology and gain support through

fear. The influence of fear, lies, propaganda, paranoia, and power was able to corrupt the

mind, body, and spirit of the likes of Steve Rogers, aka Captain America, albeit aided by the

supernatural powers of the Cosmic Cube. Marvel Comics shows, through a franchise-

changing story, how the most heroic of people in the most patriotic of places can succumb to

the allure and power of fascism, even in the modern age. Thus, the story forces the readers

one final time to recall the recent and ongoing struggle of freedom, peace, and democracy

against fear-laden propaganda and hate-driven ideology of fascist far-right extremism in many parts of the world, including the United States and Germany.

Comic books have certainly changed in the 80 years since the debut of Captain America on the precipice of the most important event in modern history; however, *Secret Empire* shows that certain core themes have remained unchanged. Nevertheless, Steve Rogers, a mere mortal human enchanted with a supernatural formula granting him only mild superpowers, manages to conquer most of the world including the United States, defeat and subjugate literal gods, aliens, wizards, and countless superheroes and supervillains, and even an evil version of himself. Despite comic books being mistakenly thought to mostly deal with the inane, ridiculous, silly, and impossible, like other forms of art and literature, comic books reflect the social and political problems of the time as well as recall history. *Secret Empire* shows the profound and terrifying power a single human being can cause over the course of history for the entire world, as Adolf Hitler had done less than a century ago. If authors and artists of Marvel Comics continue to produce more historically accurate and socially relevant content within their major storylines, mainstream superhero comics could be considered as legitimate art and academic literature, like *Maus*. In combination with their widespread influence and immense marketability, Marvel Comics could use there globally recognized and multimodal platform to become a bastion of social and political critique as well as a powerful vehicle for social change and cultural expression on an international scale.

Multimodal Depictions of Nazis and neo-Nazis in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

In the past decade, Marvel has transcended their role as mainstream popular comics and has become not only a quintessential part of the Hollywood movie scene as well as an iconic part American mainstream society and culture. Marvel Comics finally succeeded at something that every comic book franchise has yearned for almost a hundred years, to become accepted as a pillar in the Hollywood industry by winning awards and being

immensely profitable. Captain America foreshadowed the multimedia modality of the comic

books and superheroes in 1944 when he entered the world of movies and television (Licari

and Rizzo 20), which was subsequently dominated by DC Comics and the heroes of

Superman and Batman for decades. However, all of those pales in comparison to the

phenomena the world is currently witnessing. In the past decade, any person with a

television, the internet, or an interest in movies is now aware of the Marvel Cinematic

Universe, its characters and the imagery surrounding them.

Rank	Peak	Title	Worldwide gross	Year	Reference(s)
1	1	Avatar	$2,847,246,203	2009	[# 1][# 2]
2	1	Avengers: Endgame	$2,797,501,328	2019	[# 3][# 4]
3	1	Titanic	$2,187,425,379	1997	[# 5][# 6]
4	3	Star Wars: The Force Awakens	$2,068,223,624	2015	[# 7][# 8]
5	4	Avengers: Infinity War	$2,048,359,754	2018	[# 9][# 10]
6	6	Spider-Man: No Way Home †	$1,834,136,947	2021	[# 11]
7	3	Jurassic World	$1,671,713,208	2015	[# 12][# 13]
8	7	The Lion King	$1,656,943,394	2019	[# 14][# 4]
9	3	The Avengers	$1,518,812,988	2012	[# 15][# 16]
10	4	Furious 7	$1,516,045,911	2015	[# 17][# 18]
11	10	Frozen II	$1,450,026,933	2019	[# 19][# 20]
12	5	Avengers: Age of Ultron	$1,402,809,540	2015	[# 21][# 18]
13	9	Black Panther	$1,347,280,838	2018	[# 22][# 23]

Highest-grossing films[13]

Figure 63: Highest Grossing Films Worldwide†: still Grossing Money. From: IMDB.com.

It is a fact that Marvel has recently dominated the Hollywood and box-office market

through their extended universe of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). The MCU has

become unrivaled in popularity and marketability in the United States, but the extent of their

influence is global by having 6 of the 13 worldwide highest grossing movies of all time, with

Avengers: Endgame being in second place with approximately $2.8 billion earned through

global box offices in 2019 (see **Figure 63**) (*IMDB.com*). Through blockbuster Hollywood

movies funded by Disney in tandem with the newly emerging streaming television shows on

Disney+, the Marvel universe entered the lives of more people than any comic book franchise

could have ever imagined. Thus, the storylines of Marvel Comics now have the possibility of

entering into an entirely new stage of popular culture, which adds to the significance and influence of the iconography, storylines, stereotypes, and history they chose to modernize, parody, critique, and bring to life in their work.

The Marvel movies do not shy away from the similarities between the Nazi Party and the Hydra Organization. In one of the first films of the MCU franchise, Johann Schmidt and the Nazi Party are the main antagonists of the first Captain America movie, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), and feels like a modern-day pulp-fiction classic or another Indiana Jones movie because it is saturated with Nazi imagery and iconography (see **Figure 64**).

Figure 64: Johann Schmidt and the Red Skull. From: *Captain America: The First Avenger.*

However, we do get a glimpse of stereotypical Aryan propaganda and racism through a modern-day Hydra scientist Helmut Zemo in a crucial scene of *Captain America: Civil War*, when he looks into the eyes of Captain America and says: "There's a bit of green in the blue of your eyes, how nice to find a flaw." Through a singular scene featuring a stereotypical and maniacal scientist, the MCU completely tears any veils between Nazism and the Hydra organization by him directly citing classic Aryan propaganda that having blue eyes and blond hair is indicative of genetic superiority. Finally, Marvel directly connects the hate-mongering and fascist rhetoric of Hydra to stereotypical Nazi propaganda and racism. Modern audiences will also compare Hydra to existing neo-Nazi organizations through the continuous blend of modern-day themes and contexts of their film.

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For over a decade, Hydra continues to play the role of stereotypical maniacal villains in the MCU storylines through all of the Captain America movies: *The First Avenger* (2011), *The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Civil War* (2016), and in the recent Disney+ show *Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021). Their constant recurrence in a successful and lucrative franchise showcases the widespread allure and fascination with imagery and rhetoric surrounding fascist organizations that bear resemblance to the Nazi Party. Remarkably, there is even a callback to the *Secret Empire* storyline itself in the very last film of the 23-movie franchise, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) (see **Figure 65**).

Figure 65: "Hail Hydra" Being Uttered by Steve Rogers. From: *Avengers: Endgame.*

In the movie, the heroes must travel through time to undo the death, mayhem, and overwhelming despair created by the universally loathed supervillain Thanos. While in the past, 2012 to be specific, Captain America gains possession of one of the six Infinity Gems by uttering the horrid words "Hail Hydra" to an American government official, who he now knows to be affiliated with the malevolent organization. Although this is simply a reference to *Secret Empire* storyline for the hardcore fans who have read or know about that storyline, it still is amazing that Steve Rogers would even consider uttering the salute of his most-hated organization that is the modern-day equivalent of the Nazi Party. Also, the fact that the Hydra Organization has made its way into so many modes of mainstream popular culture is

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profoundly significant because it forces the current viewers to continuously consider the atrocities committed by other fascist organizations besides Hydra and the Nazi Party, especially the still-existing and strengthening far-right fascist movements recently arising in the politics of America, Germany, and other countries worldwide. However, in order to truly move past the stereotypical association between German people and Nazism, Marvel must continue the trend of *Secret Empire* and offer more relatable, relevant, and accurate depictions of fascism and far-right extremism that still exist today in more of the content of their multimodal franchise. It is critical for Marvel to no longer sensationalize the malevolence of Nazism and other recent far-right political parties solely for the purpose of having an iconic and devastating supervillain. Rather they should showcase the lesser-known and more realistic aspects of these organizations, in an attempt to illuminate their danger and educate their audience, while still entertaining them. This is especially important in recent times, when the ideology and rhetoric of neo-Nazism has entered into mainstream society and national politics all across the world.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Further Implications

The rise of Nazism in Germany and the emergence of the comic book industry in the United States coincided, and both developments can be understood in the context of the global social, political, and economic uncertainty of the 1930s following the Global Stock Market Crash of 1929. Germany was still reeling and lamenting the anger, humiliation, and desperation following its defeat in World War I, and its subsequent failure to establish a successful social democracy during the Weimar Republic allowed for Nazism to ascend to power so quickly. The unbridled and unmatched terror of the Third Reich led pulp-fiction writers to insert Nazi imagery and ideology into the portrayal of their villains. Pulp-fiction was a backbone of Atlas Comics in the 1930s and 1940s (the name of the publishing company now known as Marvel) (Licari and Rizzo 8), thus their depiction of the enemies of America involved accentuated graphic racist stereotypes and comical ineptitude as villains, to identify them as evil but mitigate the actual threat they posed to American citizens and soldiers (see **Figure 66**). However, this also caused much of early Marvel superhero comics to function as American propaganda and ironically utilize many stereotypical Nazi themes,

Figure 66: Captain America Fighting Racially Stereotyped Japanese Soldiers. From: The cover of *All Winners Comics* #12 in 1941.

Joe Simon, the first editor of Timely Comics (which eventually became Marvel Comics) personally stated how the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler were more terrifying than any fantasy he could imagine as a Jewish man, which directly led to his creation (alongside artist Jack Kirby, also of Jewish heritage) of Captain America. Simon recalled the significance of this monumental decision to make Adolf Hitler the villain of their comic: "There never had been a truly believable villain in comics. But Adolf was live, hated by more than half of the world… All that was left to do was to devise a long underwear hero to stand up to him" (Donnelly 12). In the United States, the newspaper became an affordable and accessible source of news about the struggling economy and the European warfront, and the comic strip acted as a form of entertainment to temporarily distract the reader from the harrowing anxiety of reality. The popularity of pulp-fiction and the comic strip continued to rise in the late 1930s, until finally they both synthesized into a singular medium that would change the world of popular culture: the comic book.

As the World War II came to an end and the leaders of the Nazi Party either died, surrendered, fled, or were awaiting trial, the palpable threat of Nazi invasion and conquest dwindled in the news and media. However, popular culture continued to use Nazi imagery and rhetoric in representations of villains, relying on iconic stereotypes of a globally recognizable and universally loathed enemy for a large part of the world. Indiana Jones, James Bond, and countless World War II films such as *Schindler's List* (1993)*, Saving Private Ryan* (1998)*, and Inglorious Basterds* (2008) come to the mind of any American or international fan as examples of Hollywood cinema, where Nazis (fictionalized or not) are the prototypical enemy for the audience to hate and the hero to defeat. Over the years, the horrors of Nazism have been pigeonholed into two themes in mainstream popular culture—world domination and racist genocide—to maximize their malevolence and identify them as the paradigm of absolute evil in modern history. American popular culture has stereotyped,

fetishized, and even monetized Nazi imagery and ideology in order to have a singular iconic, foreign, and universally despised villain for the audience to simultaneously be afraid of and yearn to defeat in their work, especially in the United States.

Although world domination and genocide were the two main objectives of the Nazi Party, there exist a myriad of other less sensational parts of Nazism ignored in mainstream popular culture. For example, the Nazi Party was a paranoid, manipulative, and fanatical cultlike organization that preyed on the fear, anger, and desperation of a people without a sense of identity or purpose. Popular culture purposely overlooks these facets of the Nazi Party because it would subtract from the allure of their stereotypical role as the modern paragon of global conquest and racial genocide. Popular culture has historically portrayed Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich as unstoppable political and militaristic juggernauts, while often disregarding their bizarre social hierarchy, the esoteric use of pseudoscience and the occult, and their economic failures. Through representing Nazis as the ultimate villain and absolute embodiment of evil, popular culture and basic history ignore core characteristics of Nazism that led to their ascension in power (such as fearmongering, propaganda, and lies) as well as other reasons that ultimately led to their demise (such as their overconfidence in their inflexible power structure).

Ultimately, the escalating influence of popular culture on the political, social, and economic structures in the modern age caused the stereotypical imagery and ideology of the Nazi Party to become synonymous with the identity of German people and Germany as a nation for a large part of the world, especially within the United States. This dangerous trend of portraying Germans in popular culture as Nazi villains has continued for 80 years, even in the face of other developments, including postwar democratization in the West, state socialism in the East, and the transition to a unified democracy after 1990. However, the centuries-long struggle with the allure of fascism in Germany has recently been exacerbated

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by the steady rise of far-right ideology, particularly the AfD, finding influence and support in recent local and national elections in Germany (Schultheis 4-9). It is also noteworthy that both *Freedom Fighters* from DC Comics in 2019 and *Secret Empire* from Marvel Comics in 2017 coincide with the rise of Donald Trump and far-right rhetoric and ideology within the Republican Party in the United States around the same time.

Both publications depict pervasive and oppressive fascist organizations veiled as political parties ruling America. It is astounding that the two major competing comic book monoliths both created a literary and artistic foreshadowing of their collective anxieties about the existing struggles for freedom, peace, and democracy in the United States. Finally, Germany and America are not the only countries dealing with far-right fascist ideology gaining influence in national politics and recent elections; others include Italy, Brazil, India, Hungary, and Australia (Burdeau 2-7, Boadle 2-4, Chattopadhyay 1-3, Krekó et al. 1-3, McSwiney 1-6). Although the United States is the primary market and targeted audience for the storylines and characters of Marvel and DC, their recent global success in the movie theatres and from streaming services indicate that they can reach an international audience. Therefore, future productions and publications may include more diverse characters and locations, so readers from other nations can easily insert themselves, their family, and identity into the storylines. Whether it is the Freedom Fighters against the Fourth Reich of the Nazi Empire and the offspring of Adolf Hitler or the heroes of the Marvel battling against Hydra and their former ally Steve Rogers, people from many different countries are able to commiserate and comprehend the threat of a fascist regime rising to power in a democratic country.

Although there are remarkable similarities between storylines of *Freedom Fighters* and *Secret Empire*, the ways in which they depict modern-day fascism existing in America are quite different. By not directly fighting Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in the 1940s or

having a fictional villainous organization that embodies their sinister ideology, DC Comics never dealt with the atrocities of Nazism in their fictional universe. Thus, during the bicentennial of American Independence in 1976, they created an entire alternate universe where the Third Reich wins World War II and eventually conquers the entire world. During this national wave of patriotism and American pride of the bicentennial, DC Comics decided to finally confront the ultimate historical enemy of democracy, freedom, and peace as they rule the United States. For the very first time in DC Comics, readers witness immense Nazi imagery and rhetoric in the context of the modern day, where the *New-52* continuity reboot rewrote the history of Universe X and explained how Nazism ascended to be the ultimate power in the entire world through Superman landing in Nazi-occupied territory and becoming indoctrinated into the Nazi Party.

Beginning in 2017, *Freedom Fighters: A Rise of a Nation* became the first DC Comics publication to depict stereotypical Nazi imagery and rhetoric in a profound and relevant manner for modern-day readers. In this 12-issue series, the authors and artists provide a plethora of stereotypical Nazi iconography and ideology through an elderly Adolf Hitler as well as his more malevolent son and grandson. Without a single mention of any type of a mother figure in their lives, *Freedom Fighters* utilizes other stereotypical themes of eugenics, human experimentation, and efforts to clone the perfect Aryan. *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture* (2012) has an entire chapter on the rhetoric and historicism of cloning as means of bringing the threat of Nazism into the modern age and how it has become a stereotype in popular culture: "the clone narratives also feature aging male Nazis wishing to bring about a Fourth Reich through some alternative form of reproduction" (Bridges 78). Adolf Hitler II and III are mirror images of the original with even more diabolical ideals and sinister ambitions, and they even depict a seamless transition of power after the death of the elderly Adolf Hitler. This stereotype suggests that even defeating

and killing the Nazis and their leaders was not enough to stop their unstoppable lust for world

domination. *The Boys from Brazil* from 1978 is a film about clones of Adolf Hitler that

employs a well-known cast and an award-winning director but is still a clear example of the

exploitation of Nazis as the prototypical villain in the 1970s (Bridges 82). *Freedom Fighters*

continues these themes of Nazi exploitation through the lens of the uncanny, supernatural,

and classic American iconography fused with stereotypical Nazi imagery and rhetoric

through a more modern and relatable lens for current readers. Although genetic cloning of

Adolf Hitler or any Nazis is now clearly a fictional plot device, the infamous imagery of

Josef Mengele's genetic experiments allowed Nazi cloning to remain a remote possibility in

the minds of many long after the fall of the Nazi empire, especially in the 1970s:

> The notion of plausibility and whiffs of 'historical reality' fuel
> an audience's ability to suspend disbelief where depictions of Nazi
> scientific exploits are concerned. In the case of science fiction, as an
> expressly speculative genre, historicity becomes even more flexible,
> albeit in a different way, because it deals inherently with alternative
> timelines and 'what if?' scenarios. (Bridges 78)

Freedom Fighters continues this historically stereotypical theme through showing the

malicious and sinister progeny of Adolf Hitler (with no mention of any mother figure) ruling

the modern-day United States in an alternate but realistic superhero universe.

Additionally, the readers also see the Nazification of classic American monuments,

such as Mount Rushmore, renamed Mount Reichswehr depicting the three intergenerational

Adolf Hitlers, and the White House, which is redesigned with Nazi iconography and has a

new address of 1600 Berlinerstrasse. As the authors and artists of *Freedom Fighters* present

the readers with classic Nazi rhetoric while bombarding them with eerie depictions of

modern-day America through a lens of stereotypical Nazi imagery, the readers consider the

fascist rhetoric and racist ideology of Donald Trump and the Republican Party in America.

However, *Freedom Fighters* also has more sophisticated and thoughtful portrayals of Nazism

that often go ignored or overlooked in much of mainstream popular culture. Paranoia,

sabotage, propaganda, fear-mongering, and overt distortion of facts are pervasive aspects of Nazism that they used to obtain power and influence over their own people, but as a result, the pervasiveness of these themes also plagued the inner-workings of the Third Reich. The power struggle and insidious mistrust between the son and grandson of Adolf Hitler explicitly showcases how these systemic qualities infiltrated the Nazi Party because of the entire organization was built upon a cultlike power structure and an ideology based on fear.

The cybernetic clone of Overman perfectly synthesizes the aspects of systemic indoctrination and genetic experimentation within the Third Reich through the Nazification of the most iconic, heroic, and patriotic figure in DC Comics: Superman. After learning about the horrors and atrocities of the Nazi Party, Overman flees Earth in search of his true identity and purpose. The Nazi Party then employs a unique combination of these two hallmarks of Nazism to develop the ultimate enforcer of their twisted ideology. They use genetic engineering to replicate his Kryptonian D.N.A and use advanced robotics to replicate his unparalleled strength and durability, while also employing advanced brainwashing techniques to ensure his absolute allegiance to Nazism and the Fourth Reich. *Freedom Fighters* showcases how the Nazi Party used subversive methods and immoral techniques to ascend to and maintain power and influence through the synthesis of the scientific and the supernatural Nazification of the most globally recognized superhero in the world. Despite using many stereotypical aspects of classic Nazification and Nazi exploitation such as cloning and eugenics to create the ultimate stereotypical Nazi supervillain like other popular culture (Bridges 87), *Freedom Fighters* also proffers sophisticated and profound depictions of the lesser known, not less sensational characteristics of the Nazi Party through the lens of a modern-day America. Current readers must witness an onslaught of modern-day propaganda, hate-crimes, and fearmongering in the context of a relatable and recognizable America that will make them consider recent and hauntingly similar economic, social, and political turmoil

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existing today. On the other hand, Captain America has been fighting Nazis and confronting

Nazism in his comic books since the early 1940s, before Marvel Comics even existed. In *All

Winner* Comics, alongside two of his fellow Timely Comics (which would later become

Marvel Comics) superheroes, the Human Torch (a sentient android), and Namor the

Submariner (the King of Atlantis), formed the first superhero squad: the Invaders in the 1941

(see **Figure 67**). In the comics, the Invaders formed at the behest of Winston Churchill to

combat the Axis powers and give aid to the Allied forces (Penagos 2).

Figure 67: The Invaders Fighting Racially Stereotyped Germans. From: The cover of *All
Winner Comics* #11.

Through directly referencing one of the most famous leaders of the free world as

responsible for forming the first team of superheroes in their comics, they immediately cite

the palpable threat to freedom and peace the Axis powers posed to America and the rest of

the world. The Human Torch and Namor had fantastic superpowers and ended up rescuing or

destroying entire fleets of soldiers with little effort. However, Captain America remained the

only superhero that actually participated in realistic military combat with the Nazis and Adolf

Hitler. Although the Nazi fighting origins of Namor and the Human Torch would be largely

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forgotten after the 1940s, Steve Rogers would not need any added superpowers to remain as the ultimate superhero of America, which cites the importance of his identity as the enemy of Nazism and how defeating the Nazis in World War II played a critical role in the establishment and continued success of Marvel Comics.

Furthermore, Marvel Comics also invented two iconic figures that embody the racist rhetoric and fascist ideology of the Nazi Party as well as anchor the genuine terror of Nazism to the Marvel universe: Johann Schmidt, aka The Red Skull, and the Hydra Organization. The Hydra organization, whose roots coincided with and mirrored the aspirations of the Nazi Party, continues to play a large role in the Marvel franchise, in both print and digital media, and has evolved to reflect the organizations and ideologies threatening American freedom and worldwide peace. After World War II, Hydra and the Red Skull represented the threat of the communist party and socialism threatening freedom and democracy for decades. As shown in the *Secret Empire* storyline, the Hydra Organization now resembles the rhetoric of neo-Nazi organizations that have rose to prominence in many countries throughout the world.

The Pegida, *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamicization of the Occident) from Germany fabricates a war against immigrants and minorities just as the Nazi Party did over 70 years ago (B. Lee 9). Others include: the Golden Dawn movement in Greece, the Azoz Battalion currently fighting against the Russian military in the Ukraine, the Grey Wolves from Turkey, the anti-Muslim Jobbik Party in Hungary, and even the Hindu nationalist Bharatyia Janata Party of India, all of which have spread racist and fascist ideologies under the guise of nationalism with some even adopting swastika-like symbols or logos (J. Lee 119-120). In 2012, the global threat of neo-Nazism loomed so great that the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 67/154, 'Glorification of Nazism: Inadmissibility of Certain Practices that Contribute to Fueling Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related

Intolerance' which focuses on the glorification of Nazism by the numerous international neo-Nazi organizations across the world (J. Lee 121). Within the Marvel universe, Hydra expertly reflects and critiques the racist ideology and hateful imagery of neo-Nazi organizations because they are both modernized caricatures of the Nazi Party (see **Figure 68**). Hydra and other neo-Nazi organization use the recognizable iconography of Nazism and modernized fascist ideology veiled as conservative nationalism.

Figure 68: The Hydra and Pegida Logos share the Same Color Scheme as the Swastika. From: The Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats.

Obviously, the United States has its own longstanding problem with neo-Nazi organizations, especially among the southern states. The Ku Klux Klan is one of the oldest and most well-known organizations for spreading racist propaganda and committing hate-crimes since the end of the Civil War in 1865 (Bond 4). After the outlawing of slavery and losing the Civil War, many of the southern states shared similar social, political, and economic precarity with Weimar Germany following WWI, and the KKK organization later adopted much of the ideology and rhetoric of the Nazi Party. They promoted their history and baseless genetic superiority to the point of racist and hateful propaganda to an incredibly vulnerable and uncertain postwar country, just as the Nazi Party did to ascend to power and begin their tyrannical reign of global conquest and systematic genocide. Countless hate groups and other neo-Nazi organizations have arisen in the 150 years since the end of the Civil War within the United States.

As recently as the riots on the national Capitol on January 6, 2021, about alleged election fraud surrounding the 2020 United States Presidential Election, we have seen the influence of neo-Nazi organizations in America, especially because of the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories on the Internet. Donald Trump fueled widespread mistrust toward the mainstream media and opposing political parties to ascend to power in the United States through hate-speech and fearmongering, just as Adolf Hitler did toward the end of the Weimar Republic. Donald Trump's victory in 2016 was fueled by overwhelming support from neo-Nazi groups and even former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke (J. Lee 19 and 105).

In *Secret Empire*, Marvel Comics skillfully weaves iconic neo-Nazism imagery and ideology into the identity and aspirations of Hydra through an intriguing new perspective, as we see the inner workings of the insidious organization through the tyrannical leadership of Steve Rogers, now Hydra Leader Supreme. For example, they utilize the iconic use of tattoos of swastikas and other symbols of hate by the Aryan Brotherhood, a criminal offshoot of the Ku Klux Klan, by presenting Steve Rogers with an enormous Hydra tattoo on his chest in the first few pages of *Secret Empire* #0. In addition, with this publication coinciding with the rise of Donald Trump in the Republican Party and mainstream national politics, the author and artists artfully synthesize stereotypical Nazi imagery and ideology with the contemporary propaganda and conspiracy theories of Donald Trump. *Secret Empire* #1 mentions the unlawful arrests and experimentations of those with superpowers is a clear metaphor for the Holocaust, and current readers cannot help but directly connect "The Great Illusion" to "The Big Lie" purported by Donald Trump and his followers following the results of the 2020 election. The author and artists of *Secret Empire* continue to fuse themes of stereotypical Nazism and relevant neo-Nazism into their story of a fascist organization ruling modern-day

America by channeling the fear-inducing and hateful misinformation and manipulation of the truth.

Additionally, issues of *Secret Empire* #2 and #7 both emphasize the overwhelming importance of complete control over the media and news outlets in the United States (see two figures from another section). In the Marvel universe of the supernatural, godlike, otherworldly powers, the power of unfettered control of the dissemination of information in a society manages to rival the power of any superhero. This seemingly classic maneuver by the villain in popular culture actually speaks volumes about how Donald Trump aimed to silence and discredit established "liberal" media outlets in favor of the lack of censorship of his hate-ridden rhetoric on Twitter and other social media platforms, just as the Nazi Party used the advent of radio and television to hasten the spread of Nazism as well as the suppression of opposing critics. Also, just as Hitler did in the 1930s, Trump utilized hate-filled rhetoric to appear to side with and represent the powerless and dispossessed by asserting himself as anti-establishment and against much of mainstream media and the upper-class, despite being an influential member of the elite class and a current part of national politics during 2016 Presidential elections (J. Lee 113). *Secret Empire* and Marvel Comics emphasize that the matchless power from the control over media outlets, national narratives, and pandering to the middle class, are just as crucial to world domination as controlling the government or military, even in a fictional universe of unbelievable and unearthly supernatural abilities, causing readers to recognize that dissemination of information functions as its own real-world superpower.

By explicitly fighting against Adolf Hitler, the Nazi Party, and the tyranny they represented, even before the United States officially entered into military conflict against them, Marvel Comics was able to adapt the Hydra organization to reflect the current threat to American peace, freedom and democracy. Similarly, *Secret Empire* in 2017 is able to vivify

the escalating threat of neo-Nazism through Hydra and the supernatural conflict in the context of a relatable and contemporary America. By recreating universally identifiable traits and imagery of neo-Nazi organizations worldwide through a fictional organization of villains, like Hydra, Marvel forces the readers to consider the recent increasing influence of neo-Nazi organizations in mainstream politics and social media. On the other hand, DC Comics never genuinely dealt with the atrocities of the Nazi Party in a relevant matter with recognizable superheroes. Therefore, the reboot of *Freedom Fighters* in 2017 has the task of directly dealing with Nazism in a way that current readers can empathize with and relate to their own lives 80 years after their defeat. As a result, *Freedom Fighters: Rise of a Nation* relies heavily on stereotypical Nazi iconography and rhetoric through classic Nazi exploitation and Nazification of contemporary America, in order to recreate the escalating threat of the rise of far-right ideology and neo-Nazism into mainstream politics across the globe. Despite the great strides made by the recent publications from Marvel and DC in depicting the horrors of Nazism in a modern, relatable, and poignant manner, they still sensationalize, fictionalize, dramatize, and stereotype the Nazis as the prototypical villain. This in turn still fetishizes and even glamorizes their malevolence, violence, and racism through the classic superhero conflict and fight scenes in their works.

There is a singular work within the medium of comics that depicts the horrors of the Holocaust and atrocities of Nazism that does not focus on military conflict, epic battles, or an onslaught of stereotypical Nazi imagery and rhetoric spewed from the mouth of some generic and thinly veiled supervillain: *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. On the contrary, Art Spiegelman simply invokes the most common power dynamic in the animal kingdom to represent tyrannical power and predatory nature of the Third Reich the struggle of the Jewish people and other minorities to simply survive: the cat and mouse. In conjunction with the generic cat and mouse metaphor, Spiegelman also employs a simple comic strip like layout in black and

white with cartoonish but realistic drawings. This makes the metaphor for the Holocaust understandable and authentic without relying on the fantasy violence, fighting, and war to sensationalize or glamorize the struggle.

One of the two main characters is Vladek, who largely represents the struggle of Art Spiegelman's own father. However, Art purposely intended for him to not be another stereotypical heroic figure who becomes stronger through his fight against evil, as he did not want to stereotype victims of the Holocaust through one single character (*MetaMaus* 33) (see **Figure 69**). Spiegelman wanted to show the victims of the Holocaust as they truly were, regular people rendered as powerless against their ruthless Nazi oppressors, just as a mouse is hopeless in defeating a cat. *Maus* shows that for the victims of the Holocaust, their battle did not end with the defeat of Nazism. Thus, Spiegelman did not want to produce another story where the victim turns into a hero and defeats his oppressors, he wanted to show how his struggled continued not only his entire life, but also influenced the life of his son a generation later.
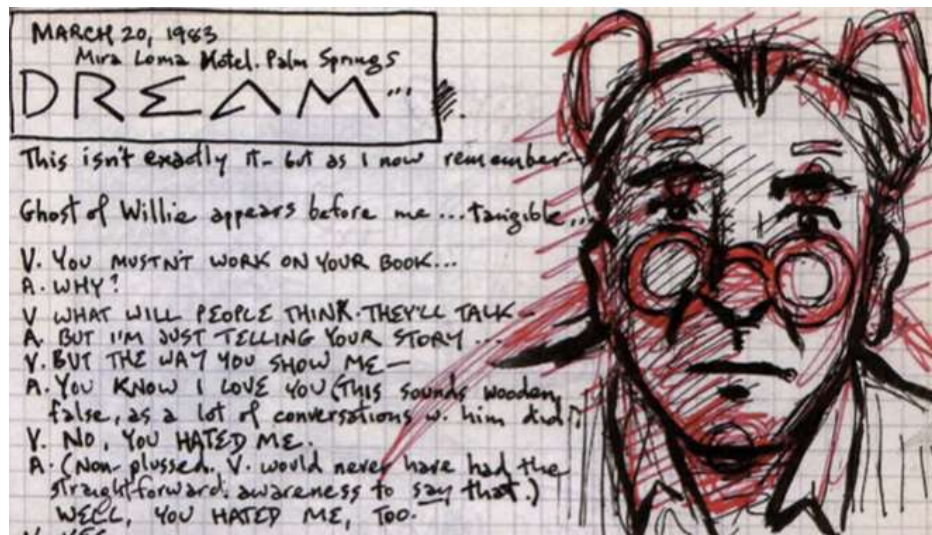

Figure 69: The Two Aspects of Vladek. From: *MetaMaus,* p. 33.

Art Spiegelman decided to write about the Holocaust from a different perspective by not sensationalizing violence or the struggle of the victims through a stereotypical story of triumph against impossible odds. The way he wrote *Maus* was in a similar style of the works

known as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung.* As both works focused on the greater struggle of moving forward and creating a sense of identity beyond the horrors and atrocities of Nazism without whitewashing or ignoring history. He researched the popular genre of Nazi exploitation in the reemergence of pulp-fiction in the 1970s to know what to avoid in his work (*MetaMaus* 46-49). He also did research in Germany and Poland about the Holocaust, including interviewing survivors and examining existing documents from the era. In fact, much of the inspiration for his drawings came from visits to concentration camps and the discovery of drawings from victims and survivors of the Holocaust (*MetaMaus* 49-63) (see **Figure 70**). Art Spiegelman went out of his way to research and develop *Maus* unlike any other comic book or graphic novel about Nazism and the Holocaust.

Figure 70: Drawings from Holocaust Victims/Survivors. From: *MetaMaus*, p. 52.

He was rewarded for this effort with countless rejections from publishers deeming his work to be too "off-putting" or claiming that "nothing new comes from the charged personal material in comic strip form" (*MetaMaus* 77). However, his work was published in 1982 by Pantheon Books and went on to gain immediate worldwide recognition for being such an exemplary piece of art and literature. Art Spiegelman gained further respect by winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1982 and for his refusal to make his work into a movie (thus avoiding becoming another part of Nazi-related popular culture that glorifies and fetishizes Nazism without really teaching about the real-world repercussions of their atrocities). *Maus* masterfully avoids the pitfalls of traditional superhero comics by not focusing on the terror and malevolence of the Nazis as the ultimate supervillain, but rather the real-life struggle of the victims and their families.

Maus also portrays the Nazis in a manner that is not as harmful to the transnational identity of Germans by not having them be generic German soldiers spouting German buzzwords and propaganda in a stereotypical accent, and instead depicting them as predatory cats. Art Spiegelman deliberately chose this animal metaphor to critique the Nazi rhetoric of Jewish people being rats needing to be exterminated and to visualize the class and racial oppression of the Nazis (*MetaMaus* 114-118). However, he chose to anthropomorphize the characters and show them in equal size to "minimize the disparity, so that the cats and mice became, more or less, overt masks… To equalize them in scale didn't mean to give them equal power" (*MetaMaus* 118). His main goal when choosing this cat-and-mouse metaphor was to encapsulate the terror and danger felt by the Jewish people during the Holocaust through a recognizable power structure, but also to maintain the human element and realness of their struggle by not getting completely lost in the animal metaphor.

Furthermore, the other main character of *Maus* is Spiegelman himself and is portrayed as a man wearing the mask of a mouse struggling to write the comic, indicating his struggle

with being able to genuinely identify and sympathize with the main subject of his work, the victims of the Holocaust and his father in particular (see **Figure 71**). By including his own struggle of writing about something he has not personally experienced, he places himself as only being able to experience the horrors of Nazism secondhand, just as any current reader of his comic. By having himself be only depiction of an actual human in the story, Spiegelman encourages the reader to imitate him and try to place themselves as the mice in the story to attempt to authentically experience their plight.

Figure 71: Art Spiegelman Portraying the Struggle of the Writing Process. From: *MetaMaus,* p. 148.

Spiegelman poured his sense of self-identity directly into his work in order to generate a remarkable and realistic piece of historical fiction. He wanted the reader to attempt to do the same to understand this work as more than just a fictional comic book. However,

Spiegelman also chose the medium of the comic strip intentionally because of its ability to juxtapose the past and present, the real and the surreal, the understandable and incomprehensible, in a way that film could not replicate (*MetaMaus* 165). He also states, "comics are an essentialized form of diagramming a narrative movement through time. For me, it's an art of compression that breaks narrative events down to their most necessary moments" (*MetaMaus* 168). Spiegelman specifically chose the medium of the comic book because it has the unique ability to highlight specific ideas and themes through still images. *Maus* singlehandedly redefined the social, historical, and academic capability of comic books, while showcasing the potential for others to make groundbreaking and influential work using the medium. Although comic books are often considered unsophisticated, childish, and basic popular culture focusing on mindless action-packed fighting scenes of stereotypical heroes and villains relying on the supernatural, fantastic, and unrealistic to entertain their target audience, *Maus* has stoically displayed how comic books can be profound, insightful, and influential.

Internationally influential franchises like Marvel and DC will hopefully continue to produce works that depict realistic and sophisticated allusions and metaphors for modern-day examples of fascism and tyranny. Due to their recent internationally economic success, they have also begun employing more diverse teams of authors, artists, and supervisors, Marvel and DC have begun to produce more inclusive, equitable, and socially conscious content in their works such as *Secret Empire* and *Freedom Fighters* among others. Also, if they can emulate the realistic and authentic narrative of *Maus* by focusing on the real-life social, political, and economic struggles of their victims, rather than the predictable battles of superheroes and governments against supervillains and other governments, they could transcend the realms of superhero popular culture by also becoming legitimate academic art and literature, in addition to profitable popular culture. Finally, if the widespread influence

and immense marketability of Marvel and DC are combined with the socially relevant and historically accurate content of works like *Maus*, comic books can become even more powerful vehicles for social expression and cultural re-identification on an international scale.

With recent widespread political division and social unrest escalating across the world in the past few years. Consequently, authoritarian and fascist rhetoric has also become a part of mainstream society and organizations representing those ideals have even entered into recent political elections in many countries, including Germany and the United States. It is critically important that popular culture teach us about the horror and atrocities of Nazism without fetishizing or sensationalizing their malevolence and stereotyping all German people with Nazi imagery and ideology in their work. It is also equally important for citizens to recognize the danger and racism behind their thinly veiled ideology of nationalism.
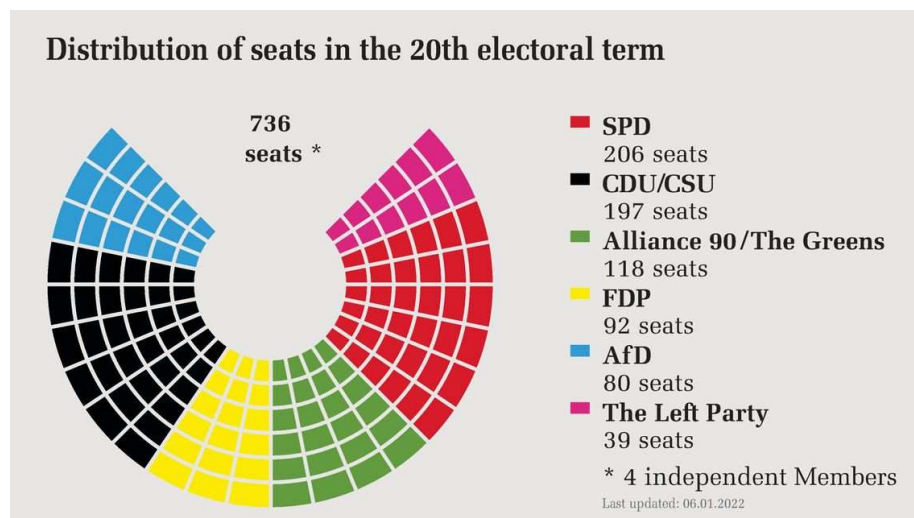

Distribution of seats in the 20th electoral term

736 seats *

SPD
206 seats
CDU/CSU
197 seats
Alliance 90/The Greens
118 seats
FDP
92 seats
AfD
80 seats
The Left Party
39 seats
* 4 independent Members
Last updated: 06.01.2022

Figure 72: German Parliamentary Government as of June 2022. From: *Deutscher Bundestag.*

Although Germany still struggles with far-right political parties, like the AfD, praising or minimizing the political influence of Nazism in modern-day Germany, Germany has the second largest parliamentary government in the world with 736 seats (see **Figure 72**), helps lead the world in environmental regulations and green-friendly policies (*SGI* 1-7), and supports a strong portion of the international European economy for the past 30 years (Swash 6-9). Marvel and DC have the capacity to acknowledge other places where far-right

extremism is threatening national freedom, peace, and equity through their new role as influential and international popular culture. In addition, the recent military aggression of Russia reflecting the desires to reclaim lands they once claimed by the Soviet Union, the Ukraine, brings to mind the German *Anschluss* (the desires of Adolf Hitler to have the lands they once owned returned to them) which began the international rampage of the Nazi Party (O'Day 1-3).

Recently in the United States, the conflation of the ideology emerging within the Republican Party and the rhetoric of Nazism has caused many southern states to ban the teaching of Nazi Germany in public schools (Giroux 5-9). In fact, McMinn County Public Schools in Tennessee banned *Maus* in January 2022 for profanity and nudity, although the text only has a few panels containing these elements. This is clearly the most recent example of the southern states wishing to ban anything to do with the sociopolitical analysis of fascism, Nazism, and even critical race theory. Republican State Senator Scott Baldwin claimed that schools "need to be impartial" when discussing fascism and Nazism in school (Schnell 2). On the other side of the world, the unprovoked aggression of the fascist oligarchy of Russia on a neighboring sovereign nation of Ukraine should alarm the entire world, as it resembles the beginnings of the most devastating war in modern history, World War II. Given the global scope of their influence, Marvel and DC can hopefully find more educated and international authors and artists that can follow the model of Art Spiegelman and utilize their own academic research, personal experiences, and family history to bring current struggles from around the world to life in creative, thoughtful, and provocative ways—just as *Maus* did over 30 years ago—through their international and multimodal channels of communication and influence.

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