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The Nazi Persecution of Jews and the African-American Freedom Struggle

On the evening of 7 March 1965, millions of Americans settled in their living rooms to watch the ABC Sunday Night Movie, director Stanley Kramer’s star-studded epic Judgment at Nuremberg. At 9:30 p.m. the network interrupted the deliberations of the military tribunal led by Spencer Tracy in the role of chief trial judge to broadcast fifteen minutes of news footage. Earlier that day, 600 civil rights activists had marched to the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. When the demonstrators refused an order to turn around, a band of possemen and state troopers tore into them with tear gas, billy clubs and bullwhips. While white onlookers whooped and cheered from the sidelines, the demonstrators retreated from the bridge, blinded, bruised and bleeding.

These scenes of brutality, soon referred to as ‘Bloody Sunday’, roused the conscience of the nation and accelerated the enactment of a new federal law that enfranchised millions of African Americans long denied the right to vote. For the television audience tuned to ABC that night, the sense of shame and outrage induced by the scenes from Selma was all the more acute because of the unplanned juxtaposition with the movie they had been watching. Judgment at Nuremberg contained actual footage taken by Allied soldiers of Nazi concentration camp victims. The elision of these images with those from Alabama communicated a clear message: Americans may have helped defeat the forces of racial fanaticism overseas but they had still to purge their own nation of the same violent extremism.1

The Sunday Night Movie experience may have served as a Damascene moment for a complacent white audience. African Americans, by contrast, had drawn explicit parallels between Jim Crow and Nazi Germany almost from the moment that Adolf Hitler had assumed the chancellorship of his nation in January 1933. This article assesses the impact of the rise of Nazism and specifically the genocidal persecution of European Jews on the black freedom struggle in the United States. The response of African Americans to the Holocaust was motivated both by a profound sympathy for the plight of another brutally oppressed minority and a self-interested awareness of how the situation in Nazi-occupied Europe could be used to their own political advantage. Recounting this story shows us that while the civil rights movement arose in response to the immediate domestic circumstances in which African Americans found themselves, broader global forces also had a fundamental influence on its focus and direction.

In detailing black reactions to the Holocaust, the article aims to make a number of historiographical contributions. By showing not only the strength of African Americans’ identification with European Jews, but also how this formed part of a broader concept of global solidarity with other oppressed peoples, it complements the burgeoning literature on the black freedom struggle and foreign affairs.² The article also adds further understanding to the more specific scholarship on relations between the black and Jewish peoples of the United

States. Although historians have assessed African American responses to the Holocaust, this research has some limitations. Much of the scholarship focuses narrowly on one individual, the black activist and intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois, who is represented as being slow to appreciate the scale of Jewish suffering and, even when he became more sensitive to the situation, to have been atypical of the African American community. Other studies underestimate the extent to which African Americans were among the earliest international critics of Nazism and how their affinity with European Jews influenced not only how they defined the aims of the Allied fight against Axis forces, but also the post-war settlement. This article therefore demonstrates that the impact of the Holocaust on African American thought and protest came earlier and was more pervasive and enduring than is sometimes understood.

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3 The enormous amount of literature on this topic makes it impossible to list all relevant titles but the best single volume study is Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

4 See, for example, Harold Brackman, “‘A Calamity Almost Beyond Comprehension’: Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust in the Thinking of W. E. B. Du Bois’, American Jewish History, vol.88, no.1, 2000, 53-93. Brackman emphasizes such issues as the endurance of African Americans’ antisemitism and their underestimation of the scale of the Nazis’ genocidal policies.

By the 1930s, the relationship between African Americans and Jews had become increasingly complex. At a political level, the two peoples had found much common cause. The Jewish press reported sympathetically on the oppression of African Americans, which it compared with antisemitic persecution in Europe. Jewish philanthropist Julius Rosenwald promoted educational opportunities otherwise denied black children by donating millions of dollars to funding schools in the rural South. Jews also collaborated with African Americans in campaigning for racial equality as members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), most notably the brothers Joel and Arthur Spingarn, who served respectively as chairman and head of its legal committee. African Americans and Jews became further aligned when they became integral elements of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal coalition. Outside the political realm, however, the situation was less positive. As storeowners and landlords, Jews were often more willing than other white businessmen to trade with African Americans. Black people nonetheless commonly criticized them for allegedly turning this to their advantage by charging extortionate prices and rents.

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Particularly among the more evangelical African Americans of the South, religious stereotypes of Jews as Christ killers also retained a potent hold on the collective imagination.\(^9\)

These complications may account for historian Harvard Sitkoff’s claim that the black press was slow to express sympathy for the plight of Jews in Nazi Germany.\(^10\) By no means were all African Americans convinced that Hitler’s persecution of Jews had any pertinence for their own people. A particularly cynical article in the *New York Age* speculated that white American politicians blew the situation in Germany out of all proportion because it played well with Jewish voters.\(^11\) Other black newspapers acknowledged that the Nazis posed a danger to Jews but still saw the situation as paling in comparison with the daily abuses African Americans suffered. As the *Afro-American and Richmond Planet* argued, ‘Our biggest problem at the moment is to watch the Hitlers right here in our own country.’\(^12\)

This lack of fellow feeling for another persecuted minority owed in part to the personal interactions that some African Americans had with Jews in their own country, experiences that led them to consider Jews less as victims than as perpetrators of discrimination. For some African Americans, Jews were responsible for some of the worst economic exploitation that beset their people, blatantly discriminating against them as


\(^10\) Ibid. Sitkoff contends that African Americans did not develop a sustained interest in Nazi persecution of Jews until 1936.

\(^11\) ‘Rebuking the Nazis’, *New York Age*, 29 July 1933.

\(^12\) *Afro-American and Richmond Planet*, 4 June 1938. See also the assertions made by J. A. Rogers in ‘Hitlerism and Ku Kluxism’, *New York Age*, 4 October 1933.
employers, retailers and landlords. Both the National Urban League and the NAACP commissioned investigations of what African American federal judge Irvin C. Mollison described as the ‘active feeling against Jewish people within our community’. The NAACP’s Walter White concluded that this hostility stemmed from the racially discriminatory practices of Jewish businessmen who ought to know better because of the oppression of their own people. Referring to a heated discussion with a Jewish department store owner in Baltimore who angrily rebuffed his entreaties to serve black customers, White lamented: ‘Some of us are doing everything we can to combat antisemitism among Negroes but we are not going to get any help from some of those in the Jewish group who should be working to stop prejudice among Jews themselves when they are asking others to join in protesting Nazi outrages against Jews.’ White nonetheless issued a press release warning African Americans not to succumb to retaliation against reactionary Jewish merchants for fear that their actions would be exploited by Nazi propagandists. Not all African Americans heeded this advice. The supposedly unscrupulous business practices of Jews led some black political commentators to assert that they had brought the situation in Germany upon

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13 Irvin C. Mollison to Walter White, 17 December 1935, Box 1: C208, Folder 9, NAACP Records. For more information on the Urban League’s study of black antisemitism in Chicago, see: *Chicago Defender*, 25 June 1938; and Earl B. Dickerson to Walter White, 5 July 1938, Box 1: C208, Folder 9, NAACP Records.

14 Walter White to Victor Ridder, 29 November 1938, Box 1: C208, Folder 9, NAACP Records. For a similar assessment of the reasons for the rise in black hostility towards Jews, see ‘Curbing Antisemitism Among Negroes’, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 4 March 1939.

themselves. As the *New York Age* opined of a Manhattan department store that refused to employ African Americans, ‘If the Jewish merchants in Germany treated German workers as Blumstein’s treat the people of Harlem, then Hitler is right.’ This antipathy towards Jewish business proprietors fuelled the rise of fascist-sympathizing black nationalists such as Sufi Abdul Hamid, the so-called ‘Black Hitler’ who coordinated consumer boycotts in Harlem during the 1930s.

Black intellectuals who had long respected German cultural life were also reluctant to accept the realities of life in the Reich. Before the rise of Nazism, African Americans had regarded Germany as a progressive international ally given the sympathy with which many of its authors wrote about racial oppression in the United States. This was especially true of W. E. B. Du Bois, who had studied at the University of Berlin. As Michael Rothberg asserts, ‘Du Bois’s political solidarity with Jewish suffering in the Second World War was not always automatically given’. The black leader remained equivocal about the Nazi regime even after a return visit to Germany in 1936. At no point, he reported, did he experience any racial


animosity, a far cry from his home country.\textsuperscript{20} So concerned were some American anti-Nazi organizations that Du Bois had to reassure them that he did not support Hitler.\textsuperscript{21} Yet Du Bois condemned what he witnessed of Nazi antisemitism as a tragedy without equal in modern times. In reaching further back in history to the African slave trade as a point of comparison, he also reaffirmed a sense of affinity between African Americans and Jews.\textsuperscript{22}

There was also a regional dynamic to black responses to the Holocaust. A poll conducted by the \textit{Pittsburgh Courier} in 1942 revealed that 80.8 per cent of its black readers believed German Jews were more persecuted than African Americans. Most of the minority 12.9 per cent who claimed the opposite was true were from the South, where racial conditions were most oppressive. (The same poll also revealed that many African Americans believed

\textsuperscript{20} Russell Berman, ‘Du Bois and Wagner: Race, Nation, and Culture between the United States and Germany’, \textit{German Quarterly}, vol.70, no.2, 1997, 123-35. Du Bois had declined to join the American Committee for Anti-Nazi Literature due to a possible conflict of interest with his trip, sponsored by the Oberlander Trust of the Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation, an organization that promoted German-American understanding. Statement on the Nazi party, 1937[?]. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

\textsuperscript{21} Telegram from J. A. Somerville to Ellen Irene Diggs, 18 December 1936; Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to American Committee for Anti-Nazi Literature, 5 May 1936. Du Bois Papers.

that the psychological as well as material suffering of German Jews was worse because they had suffered a loss of power and status that black people had never enjoyed.)

Despite the indifference or hostility of some African Americans, there were many who denounced Nazi antisemitism from the outset of Hitler’s ascendency to power. Although more widespread and impassioned than anything that had preceded it, the reaction of these authors and activists was not the first time that African Americans had expressed affinity with another persecuted minority. By demonstrating the global interconnectedness of the struggle against racial and religious intolerance, black people had long hoped to enlist the support of other countries as well as their own federal government in the fight against American racism. In all of these articulations of solidarity with other subjugated peoples, African Americans showed, as they later did in response to the Holocaust, both altruism and self-interest.

The German extermination campaign against the Herero and Nama peoples of West Africa during the early twentieth century, which might have provided historical context for the later actions of the Nazi government, does not seem to have impacted on African Americans’ collective consciousness. Black political commentators nonetheless conveyed a strong sense of kinship with other oppressed racial and ethnic groups, in particular the Jewish victims of state tyranny in Tsarist Russia. ‘What is true of the treatment of the Jews in Russia,’ asserted the Nashville Globe, ‘is hardly less true of the treatment of the Negro race in America’. As they would later do with regards to Nazi discrimination against Jews, African

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24 For further information on the genocide, see Dominik J. Schaller, From Conquest to Genocide: Colonial Rule in German Southwest Africa and German East Africa. New York: Berghahn Books (2008).

Americans also railed against the hypocrisy of white Americans who denounced Russian pogroms while ignoring lynching and race riots within their own borders. ‘We are not asking our neighbours not to sympathize with Russia,’ stated the Atlanta Independent, ‘not to pray for the relief of the oppressed Jews, but to wash their hands clean with duty at home before they go ten thousand miles away to demonstrate their charity’.26 African Americans similarly reproached the white press and politicians for their moral outrage at the Armenian genocide in Turkey. ‘Americans denounce Turkey for the massacre of Armenians,’ observed the Outlook. ‘When, on the other hand, critics of America have charged this Nation with the guilt of lynching, Americans have resented the accusation. It is not pleasant for a free and liberty-loving people to be classed with those whom they have denounced.’27 African Americans made the same criticism of popular support for anti-colonial insurgencies against European imperial rule, especially the Indian nationalist revolt against Britain. As Max Yergen of the National Negro Congress declared, ‘The cup from which the Indian masses have drunk is also pressed to the lips of Negro Americans and its bitter taste lingers.’28

African Americans’ concern about the plight of European Jewry should therefore be seen as the broadening and deepening of a longstanding internationalist outlook. Russian pogroms and Armenian massacres provided a historical precedent for black people’s later interest in and interpretation of the Holocaust. Moreover, the African American response to the Holocaust was but one, albeit the foremost, element of a broader concurrent engagement with global politics. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935 further demonstrated

26 Atlanta Independent, 10 December 1910.

27 ‘Lynching a National Evil’, Outlook, 6 December 1922.

28 Max Yergen, ‘Negro Sees? His Future Linked To Independence For 400 Million, Chicago Defender, 26 September 1942.
that the fascist threat was not confined to Jews in Nazi Germany. African American solidarity with the Ethiopian people extended in some instances to their enlisting in the indigenous military resistance to Mussolini’s forces.\textsuperscript{29}

The attention paid by the black press to events in Nazi Germany counters prevailing assumptions that Americans were unaware of the oppression of its Jewish population. Three months after Hitler became chancellor, the \textit{Chicago Defender} attempted to communicate his violent racial fanaticism to readers by comparing him with Simon Legree, the sadistic plantation owner responsible for the death of the eponymous hero of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}.\textsuperscript{30} A year later, Kansas newspaper the \textit{Negro Star} drew the same analogy in a cartoon that depicted Hitler whipping an enslaved African American.\textsuperscript{31} At its annual conference in 1933, the NAACP issued a resolution deploring the antisemitism of the Nazi government and pressing the International Olympics Committee to transfer the 1936 games to another country, a proposal supported by the Associated Negro Press.\textsuperscript{32} African Americans celebrated the eventual triumph of black athlete Jesse Owens, who won four gold medals at the Berlin Olympics, as not only an outstanding sporting achievement but also a


\textsuperscript{30} “‘Simon Legree’ Hitler’, \textit{Chicago Defender}, 8 April 1933.


refutation of the Nazis’ ideology of Aryan racial supremacy. Hitler’s refusal to recognize the success of Owens and other African American competitors received considerable criticism, but President Roosevelt’s failure to invite them on their return home to the White House undermined any moral and political advantage for the United States. When black boxer Joe Louis avenged an earlier defeat with a technical knockout of the German Max Schmeling in front of 70,000 people at Yankee Stadium on 22 June 1938, it again served as a larger symbolic blow against Nazi racial theories.

The African American press emphasized their common cause with Jews in fighting all forms of racial and religious persecution by pointing out that black citizens in Germany were also the victims of Nazism. When the Nazis came to power, there were between 20-25,000 black people in Germany, a number too small for them to be perceived in the same way as Jews as an immediate threat to ‘Aryan supremacy’. Although not the victims of systematic state persecution, black Germans nonetheless suffered serious discrimination.


sterilization programme for mixed race children born to German women and African occupation soldiers in the Rhineland after the First World War was not at that time public knowledge. African American political commentators were nonetheless acutely aware of Nazi attitudes towards peoples stereotyped as non-Aryan and of such policies as the prohibition on interracial sexual relationships, the exclusion of black entertainers including the banning of ‘degenerate’ jazz music, and the enforced registration of people of colour in German occupied territory. NAACP executive secretary Walter White wore as a badge of pride the fact that his anti-Klan novel *The Fire in the Flint* was one of the subversive texts burned by the Nazis. Once the United States had entered the Second World War, the contemptuous ridicule of African American soldiers, including the particularly brutal mistreatment of black POWs, further demonstrated the threat that the Nazis posed to all racial and ethnic minorities. Indeed, several African American commentators claimed that should


37 ‘Negro Wrestler Feels Sting Of Nazis’ Bias’, *New York Age*, 16 March 1935.


the Nazis win the war it would mean the literal re-enslavement of black people. Later reports of the discovery of black bodies among the burned corpses at the Lublin-Majdanek concentration camp further strengthened African Americans’ identification with Jews.

As the United States became more outspoken in its condemnation of Nazi persecution of Jews some African Americans reacted with bitter anger at what they saw as white hypocrisy. How, they argued, could the oppression of a minority in another country provoke outrage while violent discrimination against fellow citizens at home induced only apathy and complicit silence? As the Cleveland Call and Post asserted, ‘America has a lot of housecleaning to do before she can start finding fault with other nations.’ African Americans focused in particular on the issue of mob violence to illustrate white double standards. In February 1934, for example, the black press decried members of the Senate who...


41 Chatwood Hall, ‘Negroes Among Nazi Cremation Victims’, New Journal and Guide, 26 August 1944. Hall speculated that the black victims were either captured French army soldiers or French or German civilians.

piously supported a resolution condemning Nazi antisemitism but also opposed the enactment of a federal anti-lynching law. Black activists continued to push this line of criticism throughout the 1930s. When Utah Senator William H. King gave a radio address in November 1938 calling on the federal government to cut diplomatic ties with Germany over its mistreatment of Jews, Walter White reproached such sanctimony given his failure to protect the United States’ own oppressed minority population by supporting anti-lynching legislation.\(^{43}\) Other organizations, such as the Volunteer Christian Committee to Boycott Nazi Germany, also claimed that the United States would stand more firmly on the moral high ground in its denunciations of Nazism if the federal government enacted an anti-lynching law.\(^{44}\) In an editorial for the *Crisis* published in December 1938, the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins wrote of the resentment and despair induced by white double standards. The African American, he exclaimed, ‘wonders that these people can become so stirred over raiding Storm Troopers in Germany and remain so quiescent over raiding mobs in Dixie.’\(^{45}\)

Black political commentators underlined their criticism of white American hypocrisy by pointing out that the Nazis invoked the discriminatory practices of the southern states to legitimate their own racial and religious policies. In August 1935, the *Negro Star* reported that the newspaper *Der Stürmer*, published by Nazi propagandist Julius Streicher, had excoriated American critics of German antisemitism, accusing them of ‘inconsistency based

\(^{43}\) Walter White to Senator William H. King, 15 November 1938, Box 1: C208, Folder 9, NAACP Records.

\(^{44}\) ‘Anti-Nazi Groups In Coalition To Combat Lynch Bill Enemies’, *New York Age*, 22 July 1939.

\(^{45}\) Roy Wilkins, ‘Negroes, Nazis and Jews’, *The Crisis*, vol.45, no.12, December 1938, 393.
on the treatment accorded Negroes in the States’. Nazi newspapers particularly emphasized
the persistence of southern lynch law, including the mob murders of two black Floridians:
Claude Neal in Marianna on 18 October 1934, and Rubin Stacy in Fort Lauderdale on 19 July
1935. In a public address delivered in New York’s Carnegie Hall, Walter White warned that
the fascist press used the persistence of lynch law in the United States ‘as reason for laughing
at American protests’ at the oppression of German Jews. That laughter included a darkly
satirical cartoon published in 1943 in Lustige Blätter (‘Funny Pages’). The popular humour
magazine mocked the American war effort in a cartoon featuring a monument with the carved
title ‘General Lynch’ on which a US soldier hangs an African American.

More than this though, some African Americans suggested that there was a
fundamental ideological affinity between Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow South. American
influence on Nazi racial theories even led the New York Age to offer the fanciful suggestion
that, ‘It might be that the present Chancellor, Hitler, served an apprenticeship at some time in
Atlanta, under the tutelage of [Klan Imperial Wizard] William J. Simmons, as a subordinate
Kleagle or something of the sort.’ Although flippant in tone, the comment was

46 Negro Star, 30 August 1935.
47 ‘Stop Lynching Negroes Is Nazi Retort To American Critics’, Pittsburgh Courier, 10
48 Walter White, telegram to speakers at Carnegie Hall meeting on Nazism called by Mayor
Fiorello La Guardia, 8 December 1938, Box II: C208, Folder 10, NAACP Records.
50 ‘Rebuking the Nazis’, New York Age, 29 July 1933. Poet Langston Hughes later wrote the
similarly facetious but serious verse: ‘You tell me that hitler/Is a mighty bad man./I guess he
representative of a consistent line of argument by African Americans. According to Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, for instance, the Nazis were avid enthusiasts of the southern racial system because it adhered to their own ‘idea of government by a “master race” without interference from any democratic process.’

Such claims were closer to the mark than many Americans could countenance. As legal scholar James Q. Whitman has convincingly demonstrated, the Nazi government drew considerable inspiration from American race laws. The leading German academics Heinrich Krieger and Herbert Kier gathered much of the information about US race and immigration legislation that informed Nazi policies. American anti-miscegenation statutes in particular provided models for the second Nuremberg Law, the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour, which prohibited Jews from marrying or engaging in sexual relations with persons of ‘German or related blood’.

African Americans also warned against the naysayers satirized by novelist Sinclair Lewis whose reaction to the rise of European fascism was, in the words of his 1935 novel, that *It Can’t Happen Here*. The rise of far-right organizations such as the German American Bund and the Silver Legion of America demonstrated that racial and religious minorities in the United States were no less vulnerable to persecution than were Jewish victims of Nazism. The connection between domestic and foreign politics appeared all the more acute following...

\[\text{REFERENCES}\]

\[\text{51 Roy Wilkins, ‘Nazis and Negroses’, } The Crisis, \text{ vol.48, no.5, May 1941, 151.}\]

the discovery that the Nazi consul in San Francisco, Baron Manfred von Killinger, had attempted to use money from the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda to purchase ownership of the Ku Klux Klan. African American anxiety about the threat posed by American imitators of Nazism led the NAACP to collaborate with federal authorities during the war in securing information on these home-grown fascist groups so as to secure their prosecution and disbandment.

The willingness of white Americans to take up arms against fascism without waging a similar offensive against racial discrimination within their own country caused indifference and even hostility on the part of some black people towards the Second World War. African Americans, they concluded, had no role to play in a war between competing white imperialist powers. But many civil rights activists recognized that by contributing to the war effort black people could use the fight against fascism to promote toleration and inclusion of minorities at home as well as abroad. Their support for the liberation of Jews from Nazi persecution therefore owed both to a humanitarian empathy with the plight of another oppressed minority and a politically strategic manoeuvre to capitalize on the situation to their


54 Walter White to US Attorney General A. G. Biddle, 21 April 1942, Box II: A14, Folder 1, NAACP Records.

55 James W. Ford, ‘Some Problems of the Negro People in the National Front to Destroy Hitler and Hitlerism’, The Communist, October 1941, 888-896 (888).
own advantage. Regardless of their motivations, African Americans promoted an inclusive and idealist message at a time when resurgent antisemitism in the United States dissuaded President Roosevelt from championing the emancipation of European Jews as a central aim of the Allied war effort.

Black writers and artists mobilized support for European Jews in ways that often drew analogies with the suffering of their own people. Blues musicians denounced Nazi antisemitism in songs such as the Soul Stirrers’ ‘Pearl Harbor’ and Leadbelly’s ‘Mr Hitler’, which proclaimed that the Führer ‘started out in 1932/When he started out, he took the homes from the Jews’. Most explicitly, classical composer William Grant Still’s ‘Wailing Woman’ articulated the affinity between African Americans and Jews in a lyric written by his wife and artistic collaborator Verna Arvey: ‘He said they shunned him because his skin was black,/Underneath I felt akin because my nose was hooked, my folk despised.’ Altruism and self-interest were intertwined in many of these artistic works as is evident from John Woodrow Wilson’s 1943 painting, ‘Deliver Us from Evil’, a striking tableau that merged images of Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow South.56

Throughout the war, black activists drew comparisons between Nazism and Jim Crow to warn that the United States was undermining the democratic ideals for which it was supposedly fighting. This disparity between rhetoric and reality gave rise to the ‘Double V’ campaign, which promoted the fight for freedom at home as well as overseas.57


Discrimination in the US military, the separation of Red Cross blood banks, exclusion from war industries, and domestic race riots were all likened to Nazi antisemitism. In its pamphlet *The War’s Greatest Scandal*, the March on Washington Movement proclaimed of segregation in the US military, “‘White supremacy,’ which is simply Hitler’s “Nordic Supremacy” in Cracker Lingo, has become the official policy of the American armed forces.”58 The NAACP attempted to turn wartime patriotism to its political advantage, depicting southern segregationists who conspired to restrict black political rights as adhering to the same anti-egalitarianism as America’s fascist foes. In 1942, for instance, it produced a report titled ‘American Fascism in the Congress of the United States’, which documented white southern politicians’ successful filibustering against federal anti-poll tax legislation. The opposition of politicians such as Senators Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi and Richard Russell of Georgia to black enfranchisement was un-American because it undermined the democratic principles for which the country was fighting.59 The *Crisis* also likened the racially discriminatory tactics of Memphis Police Commissioner Joseph Boyle and the law enforcement officers under his command to Himmler and the Gestapo.60 The relentlessness with which African Americans drew these parallels had some influence on wider public opinion. As the war progressed progressive mainstream publications such as *PM* and the *New Republic* also started to stress


the analogy between US white supremacy and the Nazi racial state, especially after the Detroit disorder.⁶¹

African American sympathies for the plight of European Jews intensified during the spring and summer of 1945 when the black press published eyewitness accounts from soldiers who had helped to liberate the concentration camps. The sheer horror of what the troops observed momentarily silenced any comparison with southern racism. Instead, the testimonies of men such as black GI John Stribling, a soldier in the Sixth Armored Division that entered Buchenwald in April 1945, suggested an unparalleled level of human suffering.⁶² In the words of black journalist Gordon B. Hancock, the Holocaust was ‘The Super-Shame of All History’.⁶³

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The Allies might have won the war against the Axis powers by the summer of 1945, but the fight against what African Americans described as domestic fascism continued. It was bitterly ironic that within only a few years of the war ending, German newspapers should criticize the persistence of racial violence and discrimination in the United States as evidence

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of the country’s failure to live up to the ideals for which it had fought and defeated the Nazis. In an astonishing twist, the German press started to offer moral instruction to the United States on the need to improve minority rights. Moreover, the source on which the defeated enemy drew much of its criticism of American racism was paradoxically the testimony of African American GIs engaged in the military occupation of Germany. This condemnation of the United States demonstrated a resurgence of liberal and progressive thought in Germany rather than schadenfreude on the part of embittered former Nazis. The lessons of the war appeared to have been learned faster by a Germany determined to dissociate itself from the recent past than by a United States that had fought against it in the name of democracy. ‘There is a fundamental contradiction,’ asserted Die Welt, ‘between the democratic belief based on the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights which every school child learns by heart and the fact that the rights and liberties, of which America is proud and which it demands for people behind the Iron Curtain, are refused to every tenth American citizen.’

In a separate editorial, the newspaper scolded the United States for heeding the clamour for independence from peoples living under European colonial rule while remaining deaf to the cries of its own oppressed black population. Without any apparent trace of irony, the

64 ‘The Negro Question in the U.S.’, Welt Der Arbeit [according to German grammar “der” should not be capitalized – but it might be different in this case. Just thought I’d mention it], 7 April 1950. This and the German newspaper sources cited in the following footnote are extracted from American Jewish Committee, Paris Office, 7 August 1951, ‘German Reaction to Discrimination in America, Supplementary Report No.4’, American Jewish Committee Archives, http://ajcarchives.org/ajcarchive/DigitalArchive.aspx (accessed 8 November 2017).
Stuttgarter Zeitung even went so far as to decry southern segregationists for employing ‘fascist methods to oppress racial and other groups in favor of the ruling elite’.65

Black activists framed racial discrimination at home as a betrayal of the democratic ideals for which the nation had fought, accusing white supremacists of treasonously subverting Allied victory by perpetuating the ideas and practices of the United States’ wartime enemies. Hence the Afro-American branded southern senators who filibustered against the establishment of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, the body established during the war to combat workplace discrimination, as mounting a ‘Memorial to Hitler’. Southern Democrats, the newspaper thundered, were intent on perpetuating the racist doctrine ‘for which millions gave their lives to eradicate from the face of the earth’.66 The African American press similarly responded to post-war racial violence that targeted returning black servicemen. Under the headline ‘Hitlerism is not Dead’, the Chicago Defender graphically recounted the race riot that erupted in Columbia, Tennessee in February 1946, comparing the mob that ransacked black homes and beat their terrified inhabitants to the SS.67 ‘What are we going to do,’ asked black author Langston Hughes in an article titled ‘Nazi and Dixie Nordics’, ‘with folks who wish to continue to deny Negroes the ballot—as the Germans denied it to the Jews in Europe? Who wish to continue to segregate Negroes as the Nazis ghettoized Jews in Poland?’ For African Americans, the war would not be over until the United States had defeated the fascists within its own midst.68

65 Die Welt, 7 June 1950, 21 June 1950; Stuttgarter Zeitung, 6 August 1949.

66 ‘Memorial to Hitler’, Afro-American, 7 July 1945.


68 Langston Hughes, ‘Nazi and Dixie Nordics’, Chicago Defender, 10 March 1945.
The fate of the defeated European fascists also remained a concern for many African Americans. Black attitudes towards the prosecution of Nazi officials who had perpetrated the slaughter of European Jews were informed by a profound sense of moral outrage rooted in their affinity with the victims. The black press believed that Allied forces should be unsparing in their punishment of Nazi war criminals and condemned any temporizing on the matter by military or civilian authorities. A tale about the actor, singer and activist Paul Robeson encapsulated the mood of African Americans. In the story, Robeson strikes up a conversation with a young American officer who he asks how he can tolerate the failure to punish many former Nazi leaders. To this the officer not only replies that the Allies must observe due process of law, but also that he would be sick to the stomach should he have to carry out a death sentence on a convicted war criminal. ‘Well, I’ll tell you what to do,’ replies an unsmiling Robeson. ‘Just line them up against that wall, give me a machine gun, and stand right behind me. I want you to watch my hands shake and tears stream down my cheeks. I want you to see me vomit while I pull the trigger!’ Whether the tale is apocryphal is less important than the message it conveyed. There must be no compromise in prosecuting the Nazis whose fanatical racism fuelled the slaughter of European Jews. African American activists and editorialists were no less strident in their support of Allied Denazification policies, demanding the nationalization of private firms in Germany that had profited from the war.  

The black press offered zealous support for the prosecution team at the Nuremberg trials that commenced in November 1945. African American newspapers forcefully condemned those who complained that the death sentences handed down against a dozen of the defendants constituted a gratuitous act of ‘victors’ justice’. ‘If they could only speak,’ asserted black journalist Lucius Harper, what would the 6,000,000 Jews…say about the objections of these “dry-eyed American weepers”? In fact, the Nuremberg tribunal was too impartial.’

African American perceptions of the post-war prosecution of Nazi officials were also filtered through the interpretive lens of their own people’s historical misfortunes and future hopes. Black political commentators claimed that their own people’s history provided an important lesson to Allied authorities wrestling with the prosecution of Nazi leaders and the post-war reformation of Germany. Eight decades earlier, the end of the American Civil War had raised the hopes of African Americans that they would not only be liberated from slavery, but also granted sufficient land to establish themselves as independent farmers. However, the post-war Reconstruction of the South had failed to fulfil the aspirations of newly emancipated African Americans to attain equality with their former masters. According to journalist John Robert Badger, ‘if the forces which prosecuted the Civil War to success had completed their task and crushed the former slaveholders, even stripping them of their plantations and distributing these to the former slaves, our own history would have been vastly different’. The continued suffering of African Americans that followed from the failure to enforce radical change on the former Confederacy, opined Badger, could ‘contribute a

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70 For a visual expression of black support for the Allied prosecution of Nazi war criminals, see ‘The Ghosts of Nuremberg – Don’t Let Them Ride Again!’, editorial cartoon, New York Age, 2 November 1946.
special answer’ to how to deal with the defeated Nazis. By not destroying the power of the white planter class, the federal government had forced African Americans to succumb to a renewed status of economic dependence as sharecroppers, allowed them to lose their newfound right to the vote, and exposed them to the murderous violence of the lynch mob.\textsuperscript{71}

The bitter post-war experience of African Americans was therefore a warning from history that the Allies should be unsparing in the prosecution of Nazi war criminals and the restoration of the rights and property of the Jews who survived their reign of terror. As Lucius Harper asserted, ‘Had America in 1865 followed the advice of Thaddeus Stevens, that noble congressman from Pennsylvania, tried, convicted and sentenced these traitors to the gallows as was accomplished at Nuremberg, this nation today would dwell in better brotherhood, in better democratic principles.’ The Allies must achieve for European Jews what the US government had failed to do for African Americans, to ensure that a future generation ‘will no longer have to bow in reverence or get its lessons in brotherhood and democracy from a bunch of perverts, fiends and murderers’.\textsuperscript{72}

African American press coverage of the Nuremberg trials also stressed the analogy between Nazism and American racism in the hope of encouraging the federal government to pursue the prosecution of lynch mobs. Defence lawyers underlined comparisons between the two regimes by pointing out, much to the embarrassment of the prosecution, that the Nazis had found inspiration for their racial theories in the writings of American eugenicists and


\textsuperscript{72} Lucius C. Harper, ‘Dustin’ Off the News: We Should Have Had a Nuernberg [sic] after the Civil War’, \textit{Chicago Defender}, 9 November 1946.
African Americans seized on the discomfort this created to push for similar prosecution of southern lynchers. In an open letter to Attorney General Tom Clark, black veteran John Gilman declared that he had fought to liberate Europe from Nazi tyranny only to return home to a country that allowed the racist murderers within its own midst to act with impunity. ‘I’m writing to let you know,’ the former machine gunner announced, ‘that the same crimes that Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, Ley, Hess and all the other Nazi criminals have enacted are now going on right before your eyes.’ Gilman continued by cataloguing numerous recent murders that had gone unpunished by the authorities, concluding that: ‘Even the Nazi murderers of Dachau, Belsen, Buchenwald, and all the other torture camps have been granted a fair trial. Was it because these men were colored, that they were mercilessly lynched?’

Black journalists likewise appropriated the concept of collective guilt established at the war trials to argue that just as all Germans bore responsibility for the Nazi regime, so too every white American should answer for the crimes committed by southern lynch mobs. They condemned Allied prosecutors’ restricted definition of ‘crimes against humanity’ as applying only to acts committed in wartime as a cynical ploy to avoid similar prosecution for the racial violence that white Americans had systematically waged against black citizens. A more

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inclusive interpretation of crimes against humanity and collective guilty was therefore essential to ensure justice for all victims of racial violence. Journalist Gordon B. Hancock was among those who condemned the victorious Allied forces for their failure to acknowledge that they had crimes of their own for which to atone. ‘Our nation breeds lynchers and pretends to dislike their lynching;’ he observed of this double standard, ‘the world breeds Nazis and hangs them high on a scaffold at Neuremburg [sic]’.76

Black sympathy for the plight of post-war refugees also made them strong proponents of Jewish resettlement in Palestine. Black press coverage of Palestine in the years immediately following the war assessed the situation almost exclusively from the perspective of Jewish refugees; political solidarity with Palestinians emerged only during the Black Power era.77 The reluctance of the new Labour government in Britain to heed to American pressure by resettling tens of thousands of Jewish refugees in Palestine elicited furious criticism from the black press. The outspoken resistance of Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin drew the fire of African American editorial writers. Once more comparing the predicament of the Jewish people to the oppression of its own people, the Chicago Defender concluded that, ‘While homeless Jews have been placed into barbed wire concentration camps in Cyprus and British courts hand out death sentences to Jewish rebels, Negroes are being lynched and shot down like dogs in the South.’ The actions of the British undermined the ideals for which the

77 For examples of this asymmetric coverage, see ‘Palestine—Pattern of British Oppression’, Chicago Defender, 31 August 1946; ‘Dr. Ralph Bunche’, Chicago Defender, 9 October 1948.
Allies had fought the war, the paper concluded, and African Americans would resist this ‘Hitlerism’ in support of the Jewish people’s legitimate aspirations for a national homeland.78

The Holocaust also influenced the enthusiastic support of African Americans for the newly established United Nations Commission on Human Rights. A May 1945 editorial in the Atlanta Daily World ardently endorsed an appeal by the American Jewish Committee to President Truman to support the establishment of a permanent commission with responsibility for the protection and promotion of religious liberty and racial equality, specifically the restitution of all property seized, damaged or destroyed by the Nazis.79 The fate of European Jewry further induced black civil rights groups, most notably the NAACP, to lobby for the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1948. In a newspaper column indignantly denouncing opponents of the Convention, Walter White declared that: ‘The cries of anguish from Dachau and Buchenwald which should still haunt the conscience of mankind would be presumed to be enough to cause the delegates to the General Assembly of the United Nations now meeting here to pass swiftly a resolution to make genocide forever impossible.’80

Self-interest as well as sympathy for the plight of another persecuted minority motivated black civil rights organizations’ alliance with Jewish defence groups in promoting international governance of human rights. African Americans believed that the United States


would not in the interest of consolidating its credentials as leader of the free world be able to support the genocide convention without extending its protections to the oppressed black population within its own borders. As deliberations between UN delegates continued, black union activist Willard Townsend called on his government to include white southerners’ systematic subjugation of African Americans within the definition of genocide. ‘Will the Ku Klux Klan or any other hate-frenzied mob be guilty of genocide?’ he demanded to know. ‘Will the Rankins, Talmadges and other white supremacists, with their genocidal ravings be permitted to continue?’ Black commentators particularly pressed for lynching to be included within the terms of what constituted genocide.81

This effort to use the global response to the Holocaust as a means of securing external interventionist action against racial violence in the United States culminated in ‘We Charge Genocide’, a petition presented to the UN by the Civil Rights Congress in December 1951. Cataloguing many of the racist offences committed against African Americans, the petition cited as a precedent the statement of Robert H. Jackson, the US Chief Prosecutor at Nuremberg, that while the domestic affairs of nations were usually their own concern, ‘the German mistreatment of Germans is now known to pass in magnitude and savagery any limits of what is tolerable by modern civilization’. According to the petition, ‘Every word he voiced against the monstrous Nazi beast applies with equal weight, we believe, to those who are guilty of the crimes herein set forth.’82


There was nonetheless an unwillingness even among African Americans to equate racial violence in their own country with the genocidal persecution of European Jews. The onset of the Cold War made it increasingly difficult for African Americans to criticize the deficiencies of US democracy without being accused of disloyalty. Given its communist affiliations, the Civil Rights Congress came under particular fire. Other black organizations deliberately distanced themselves from the UN petition. The NAACP, for instance, wrote to reassure the US State Department that it did not consider the actions of southern lynch mobs to constitute genocide. Ultimately, the efforts of black activists amounted to little since the US government failed to ratify the Genocide Convention, a position it did not amend until 1986.  

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The Holocaust had a profound impact on advocates as well as opponents of racial segregation. Most white southerners initially saw no contradiction between their revulsion at Nazism and their own support for segregation. Richmond Times-Dispatch editor Virginius Dabney actually claimed that the South was more racially progressive than the Allied nations fighting for democracy against fascism. White southerners, he asserted, had a paternalistic attitude towards African Americans that promoted racial harmony within the region. The occasional lynching could not compare with the large numbers of black Senegalese troops that the Allied forces had willingly sacrificed as cannon fodder during the First World War. 

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84 Cited in Wilkins, ‘Nazi and Negroes’, 151.
and again as a human shield to protect retreating British and French soldiers during the evacuation at Dunkirk in 1940. Even when white southerners bore personal witness to the horrors of the Holocaust it seldom appears to have induced any critical reflection on racial practices closer to home. South Carolina politician Strom Thurmond stated that he would never forget what he had seen as a soldier involved in the liberation of Buchenwald but none of what he witnessed led him to reconsider his implacable opposition to black civil rights.  

The more politically astute segregationists nonetheless eventually realized that they must do more to distance Jim Crow from comparisons with Nazism. Public awareness that Nazi racial policies had resulted in the systematic extermination of millions of people forced these ideologues on the defensive, leading them to disavow overt white supremacist rhetoric and instead emphasize legalistic justifications for Jim Crow. Some actually attempted to invert the Nazi association by claiming that the federal government acted like a fascist power in forcefully imposing integration on the South. Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, for instance, declared that ‘the concentration camps may as well be prepared now, because there will not be enough jails to hold the people of the South’ opposed to school integration.  

Such rhetoric only served to alienate the conservative white northerners on whom segregationists depended to build a national rather than sectional political force capable of restraining federal power. Segregationists’ determination to emphasize that their support of Jim Crow was consistent with American values also led them to crack down on political organizations whose ideology and tactics bore any taint of fascism. This included the infiltration and arrest


of groups such as the Columbians and the Ku Klux Klan.\textsuperscript{87} The Citizens’ Council, the preeminent segregationist organization founded in 1954, publicly stated its determination ‘not to be taken by lunatics of the far right, either by fascists and fanatics who always try to horn in on States’ Rights Southerners’.\textsuperscript{88} These internal ruptures weakened massive resistance by cutting off the leadership from a substantial element of its potential power base.\textsuperscript{89}

International critics of the United States also used the Nazi analogy to condemn the continued oppression of African Americans. Chinese and Soviet propagandists, whose countries were in direct competition with the United States for the support of non-aligned nations in Africa and Asia, frequently attempted to discredit their Cold War adversary by comparing the Jim Crow South with Nazi Germany. Similar parallels appeared in international press coverage of the civil rights struggle, from Finnish newspaper \textit{Päivän Sanomat}’s reporting on the integration of the University of Mississippi to Radio Baghdad’s commentary on the murder of NAACP activist Medgar Evers.\textsuperscript{90}


\textsuperscript{88} \textit{The Citizens’ Council}, November 1955, 4.


Significantly, the United States’ allies as well as its enemies used the Nazi comparison. British political commentators continually criticized American race relations on not only moral but also strategic grounds, accusing the United States government of alienating non-aligned nations in the developing world and thereby ceding the geopolitical balance of power to the Soviet Union. Editorialists gave added moral force to their criticisms of American racism by evoking the wartime experiences of readers, equating the contemporary struggle against segregation with the military conflict against European fascism. One of the most poignant illustrations of this was the editorial work of cartoonist Victor Weisz, who filtered his interpretation of the civil rights struggle in the United States through his personal experience as a German-born Jew who fled Nazism during the 1930s. In a cartoon published the Evening Standard, Weisz substituted a burning cross with a swastika to comment on the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and specifically their murder of white civil rights activist Viola Liuzzo.91

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African Americans continued to manipulate historical memory of the Holocaust to their political advantage during the post-war era. Segregationists characterized the black freedom struggle as being communist inspired and therefore ‘un-American’. African Americans inverted this accusation by representing themselves as embodying the ideals of American democracy and their white supremacist opponents as betraying the noble aims for which the United States had fought the Second World War. While black demonstrators peacefully protested for the constitutional rights that were the birth right of every American citizen, white southern reactionaries used Gestapo-like tactics to maintain a social and

political system akin to the Nazi racial state. African American newspapers also relentlessly described race-baiting white southern politicians as Dixie Führers. The main target for this line of attack was Alabama governor George Wallace, notorious for the rallying cry ‘segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever’ whose three successive bids for the US presidency were based on crude populist appeals to angry and resentful white working-class voters. Black newspaper editorials often represented Wallace as a wannabe Adolf Hitler.

The rise of Black Power contributed to a reinterpretation of the relationship between the Holocaust and the African American freedom struggle. Black militants for a time continued to invoke the Holocaust as a historical precedent for, and parallel to, contemporary white supremacy. Malcolm X used the occasion of a visit to Smethwick, a town in the British West Midlands where a political candidate had recently won election by manipulating racial prejudice, to compare the situation of black Britons not only to African Americans but also the Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe. ‘I wouldn’t wait for them to set up gas ovens,’ he declared in a call to arms against the local forces of bigotry.

The increasing radicalization of black nationalists nonetheless led to their abandoning the analogy that civil rights activists had drawn for three decades between American racism and the Holocaust. A resurgence of black antisemitism during the late 1960s undermined alliance and affinity between African Americans and Jews. Black Power’s conception of African Americans as an internally colonized people led to a greater global solidarity with other oppressed peoples struggling for the right to self-governance, including the Palestine Liberation Organization. The state of Israel, whose creation African Americans had enthusiastically supported in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, came to be seen as an instrument of oppression rather than of liberation. This perception of Israel as a western imperial outpost intensified following the Arab-Israeli War of June 1967. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) responded by accusing Israel of pursuing a policy of ethnic cleansing.95 When Black Power proponents drew comparisons between the contemporary condition of African Americans and the experience of European Jews in wartime Europe, the purpose was to demonstrate the differences rather than similarities. While African Americans actively resisted white oppression, Jews had allegedly been passive or even complicit in response to Nazi persecution. ‘Check out the difference between us and the Jews when the Nazis started to commit genocide against them,’ SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael asserted with reference to the Jewish councils through which the Nazis administered the ghettos. Carmichael’s words revealed the influence of Hannah Arendt’s 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which controversially claimed that Jewish leaders had not only complied but actively collaborated with the Nazis in the genocide of their own people. ‘They got the Jews to cooperate with them,’ continued the African

American militant, ‘and the Jews were the ones carrying out the orders so the Nazis could say it’s not us’.96

Black radicals also used the example of the Holocaust to legitimate their rejection of the integrationist ideals of the civil rights movement. The fate of German Jews was, they claimed, a cautionary tale from history. Although Jews had assimilated to the point ‘that they were more German than the Germans’, this had not protected them from the genocidal policies of the Third Reich.97 Germany had not wanted to absorb Jews into the lifeblood of the nation, asserted African American writer William Melvin Kelley, they had wanted to eliminate them altogether. The loss not only of Jews’ ethnic and religious identity, but also of their very lives, was a warning of the false ideals of integration.98

Later controversy over the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which opened its doors in April 1993, further complicated African American opinions about the Nazis’ genocide of European Jewry. Black critics accused the federal government of hypocrisy for publicly memorializing the Holocaust but failing to construct a similar memorial to the historical suffering of African Americans. This, they alleged, encouraged the American


people to see racial and religious persecution as a phenomenon that occurred in other parts of the world without acknowledging or atoning for their own complicity. Black criticism contributed to the eventual opening of the National Museum of African American History in September 2016.99

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In 1952, W. E. B. Du Bois reflected on a post-war visit to Poland in the essay ‘The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto’. That trip completed an intellectual rite of passage. At the outset of Hitler’s rise to power, Du Bois had perceived little connection between Nazi persecution of Jews, the scale of which he was reluctant to recognize, and the oppression of African Americans. What he witnessed in Warsaw nonetheless enhanced what during the late 1930s and early 1940s had been his increasing understanding of the moral and political ties that bound African Americans not only with Jews but all other victims of racial and religious intolerance. As he wrote, American racism ‘was no longer in my mind a separate and unique thing as I had so long conceived it’. Seeing with his own eyes the crimes committed by the Nazis ‘helped me to emerge from a certain social provincialism into a broader conception of

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what the fight against race segregation, religious discrimination and the oppression by wealth had to become if civilization was going to triumph’.\(^{100}\)

To that end, Du Bois had already in 1947 produced ‘An Appeal to the World’, a petition by the NAACP to the UN for the redress of human rights violations committed by the United States against African Americans.\(^{101}\) In applying the concept of universal human rights to the African American freedom struggle, Du Bois embraced the idea that the rest of the world had a legitimate reason for intervening in what was once the exclusive jurisdiction of national governments. Washington intractably resisted this effort to connect the new human rights discourse shaped in reaction to the Holocaust with what it considered a domestic matter. Yet that does not diminish the impact that the Holocaust had in galvanizing a heightened global consciousness on the part of black activists such as Du Bois. Despite the recent revisionist claim by Samuel Moyn in The Last Utopia, his iconoclastic study of the history of human rights, the Holocaust did matter in the development of a more internationalist approach to individual and collective privileges and protections.\(^{102}\)


The parallels black people drew between Nazism and American white supremacy were never precise. Although white authorities often colluded in acts of racial intimidation and murder, the extermination of African Americans was not a systematically coordinated governmental policy. Yet African Americans’ invocation of the Holocaust was intended metaphorically as well as literally. In demonstrating the relational connection between Jim Crow and Nazi antisemitism, black authors and activists encouraged the American people to contextualize and thereby more clearly comprehend the realities of racial oppression in their own country. Whether African Americans represented their own situation as better, similar or worse than that of European Jews, their repeated use of the Holocaust as a contemporary or historical reference point also emphasized its exceptional significance. This is no less true of latter day descriptions of the historical suffering of African Americans as a ‘Black Holocaust’. In dedicating her novel *Beloved* to the ‘Sixty million and more’ who died during the Atlantic slave trade, Toni Morrison may have insinuated that black victimization was tenfold that of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. By making that comparison, however, she paradoxically accentuated the uniqueness of the Holocaust by showing how it is the phenomenon by which all other acts of persecution are measured. For African Americans in the decades before, during and immediately after the Second World War, establishing if not the equivalence then at least the similarity between their own condition and that of

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103 See, for example, S. E. Anderson, *Black Holocaust for Beginners* (Danbury, Connecticut: For Beginners LLC, 1995).

European Jewry provided a powerful rhetorical tool for mobilizing moral and political support in the struggle against white racism.