

# Lessons from the Holocaust

*Should we be comparing Trump's America to Hitler's Germany?*

BY EMILY GREEN  
STAFF WRITER

President Donald Trump exhibits the characteristics of a demagogue. His attacks on the media, fear mongering, overt lying and the way he plays on people's prejudices and emotions all fit the mold. As such, more than a few memes and articles circulating on the internet compare him to one of the most recognizable demagogues in recent history: Adolf Hitler.

But to compare Trump to the leader of a political party that murdered 11 million people is an oversimplification, and could be considered gauche. A better comparison might be between the rise of the Nazi war machine and the rise of the "alt-right" white nationalist movement.

But is this a comparison that should even be made?

Or is it more dangerous *not* to make the connection?

Street Roots visited the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education, which is preparing for its grand reopening this June at a new location in downtown Portland, to pose these questions to Holocaust history experts.

April Slabosheski, a Holocaust educator, said while there are risks in making analogies, there are important uses for Holocaust history in the United States at this moment.

"I think it's OK for those two things to be very true," she said.

Historically, authoritarian regimes thrive alongside economic depression. The Great Depression of 1929 hit Germany particularly hard. One might argue the U.S. today is not so different, as large swaths of rural America still haven't recovered from the 2008 recession. This is also where Trump found his voter base.

Slabosheski said that when people ask her if there are similarities between post-recession U.S. and post-depression Germany, the first thing she does is explain what Germany actually looked like in the years leading up to Hitler's reign.

Germany had recently lost World War I, with more than 2 million Germans losing their lives along with it. The peace treaty Germany signed at the end of the war assigned the country billions of dollars of war debt. Germans weren't just economically depressed; they were starving – and there was great instability of governance, with regular assassinations of prominent political leaders, Slabosheski said.

The United States' government is more established than Germany's government was in 1933, making it less vulnerable.

"We have low unemployment, the dollar is as strong as ever, people have health insurance – all sorts of things you could look at as positive," said Judith Margles, the center's director. "They lost World War I, and they were suffering because of that loss."

Slabosheski agreed.

"The situation in Germany was unimaginably awful," she said. "It was emotional and economic and physical."



PHOTO BY ARKADY BROWN

At the Oregon Holocaust Memorial in Portland, bronzed items such as this child's shoe represent belongings left behind by Jewish people who were persecuted.

## Does this mean Trump's America bears no resemblance to Hitler's Germany?

It's "a risky comparison at best," Slabosheski said. However, "this trend, if you will, of economic struggles and authoritarianism, populism, xenophobia – those are so intimately connected."

One striking difference, she noted, is that today's far-right and xenophobic movements are not isolated to the United States; "it's happening everywhere."

Slabosheski offers a workshop on anti-Semitic legislation, and it begins with the question of how Hitler rose to power in the first place. The Nazi party had already been actively recruiting for 10 years prior to Hitler's appointment to the Cabinet of a popularly elected German president, Paul von Hindenburg, in 1932.

"There was enough representation in the German parliament by the Nazi party at the time that the Nazi party was able to pass laws that put Hitler and the party, essentially, in complete control of government decisions," Slabosheski said.

"These early laws, they really played on a sense of panic and so-called threats to the safety of the country and the people of Germany to be able to pass whatever laws were necessary, even if they were not constitutional," she said, "which saying out loud makes me feel kind of sick right now."

The first law was the Reichstag Fire Decree, passed after an anarchist set a government parliament building on fire.

The decree stated that "as a defensive

measure against Communist acts of violence that endanger the state," it was suspending seven articles of the German Constitution.

Slabosheski said that while the arsonist was not a communist, the Nazi party claimed that he was and used the fire as a reason to pass the decree.

If this sounds familiar, it should. On Jan. 30, the White House used the terrorist attack on Muslims in Quebec to justify Trump's controversial security measures after false reports from Fox News indicated that a Moroccan immigrant was suspected of the attack. It was later revealed the suspected attacker was a French Canadian who was anti-immigrant.

The Reichstag Fire Decree, Slabosheski said, "took a lot of rights away from people, and the really critical ones were due process of police investigations and being able to have a fair trial."

The decree also limited people's ability to assemble freely. The same objective is currently being pursued by Republican lawmakers in at least eight states, The Intercept reported in January.

Because the decree took away due process, the Nazi party was able to arrest and detain most of the communist and socialist representatives in parliament. This allowed them to pass the Enabling Act.

"It was called the Enabling Act because it enabled Hitler to have all the power," Slabosheski said. "It transferred all the power of the presidency and parliamentary

## If you go

### Speakers and tours

The Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education has moved to 724 NW Davis St. It's closed until its grand reopening in June, however the public can request group tours of the Holocaust Memorial in Washington Park or invite Holocaust survivors, educators or docents, who all have a personal connection to the Holocaust, to give a lesson or presentation on Holocaust history. For more information or to request a tour or speaker, visit [ojmche.org](http://ojmche.org).

Speakers reflect a range of experiences; some were hidden children, some were refugees, and some survived concentration camps.

There is no fee for memorial tours, However a donation of \$25, to cover administrative costs, is recommended.

### Workshop

In March, the center will host a free public workshop on the gradual implementation of anti-Semitic legislation. The date and time have not yet been determined. Check the center's website, [ojmche.org](http://ojmche.org), for updated information.

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