

Substack

Are We the Nazis Now? How do we meet this moment?

**By Joyce Vance
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It's hard to watch. People being treated like they are less than human because of their perceived immigration status. Like a six-year-old girl.



In early October, federal agents with Border Patrol, the FBI, and ATF arrested 37 people in a raid on a Chicago apartment building at 7500 S. South Shore Drive. They banged on residents' doors overnight, according to a report in the Chicago Sun Times, "pulling men, women and children from their apartments, some of them naked, residents and witnesses said." A witness said she saw "agents dragging residents, including kids, out of the building without any clothes on and into U-Haul vans," and that "kids were separated from their mothers." DHS claimed the neighborhood was "a location known to be

frequented by Tren de Aragua members and their associates,” but offered no evidence in support and didn’t confirm that any of those arrested were members of the Venezuelan gang.

Earlier this month, at West Loop Elementary School in Chicago, Illinois, ICE was forced to release two sisters it pulled out of their car at a school pick up, because they have legal status under DACA. But that didn’t stop the masked agents, captured on video by a quick-thinking teacher, from surrounding the car and smashing its windows before dragging the two out. One of the sisters cried out her name and where she lived to bystanders, an apparent effort to prevent being “disappeared” into ICE custody.

It is already horrible enough. But we read *The Diary of Anne Frank* in school. Among the book’s important lessons is that where things start is not where they end up. Bad can become worse in the blink of an eye. The propaganda used to dehumanize people, combined with fear, social pressure, and denial, can have devastating results. People who think it’s too dangerous to speak out may decide to take the path of least resistance and turn a blind eye, hoping it will stop. But a government that is already willing to commit the outrages we are observing is unlikely to do so. Fascism, as it did in Europe during World War II, takes its toll.

Image

To be clear, we are already past the point where it’s only people in the U.S. without legal immigration status who are at risk.

In Portland, Oregon, on October 5, ICE agents threatened to arrest and kill an ambulance driver. The incident is documented by witness reports filed with the ambulance crew’s employer and its union by different individuals, as well as 911 calls, dispatch reports, and emergency communications. The ambulance was called to the ICE office to treat an injured protester, but agents refused to let the ambulance leave once the patient was loaded. When the driver put the vehicle into park, it rocked forward, and an agent responded angrily, saying the ambulance driver tried to hit him. The driver reported that “they were not only accusing me of such a thing, but crowding and cornering me in the seat, pointing and screaming at me, threatening to shoot and arrest me, and not allowing the ambulance to leave the scene. This was no longer a safe scene, and in that moment, I realized that the scene had not actually been safe the entire time that they were blocking us from exiting, and that we were essentially trapped.”

A video filmed in September that recently went viral shows ICE firing on protestors and hitting Presbyterian minister David Black in the head with a pepper ball. The minister, who was injured, is now suing. DHS Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin tweeted that the shooting was justified because “What this clipped video doesn’t show is that these agitators were blocking an ICE vehicle from leaving the federal facility—impeding operations.” Apparently, the new standard operating protocol is that if an ICE agent decides you’re in the way, they can shoot you. “If you are obstructing law enforcement, you can expect to be met with force,” she concluded her tweet, complaining that the minister had “flipped the bird” at Secretary Noem the previous week.

There are now so many of these stories flooding the country, and they come with such rapidity, that it’s impossible to keep up with all of them. In other words, these incidents aren’t the exceptions. They aren’t unusual. And there’s every indication that they are tolerated, even encouraged, by Trump’s machine.

Trump promised he’d deport violent criminals. Instead, ICE is going after legal residents and terrorizing children. The message: if you’re an American citizen, don’t exercise your First Amendment rights unless you want to become a target too.

A PBS Newsletter story titled “Immigration agents become increasingly aggressive in Chicago” reported on actions that include: “Storming an apartment complex by helicopter as families slept. Deploying chemical agents near a public school. Handcuffing a Chicago City Council member at a hospital ... ‘They are the ones that are making it a war zone,’ Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker said Sunday on CNN. ‘They fire tear gas and smoke grenades, and they make it look like it’s a war zone.’”

The Bulwark’s Tim Miller interviewed George Retes, another U.S. citizen. Retes was detained by ICE for three days, two of which he says he spent in solitary confinement. Retes said the conditions he was kept in were dehumanizing. He was given only a hospital dress to wear, the lights remained on 24 hours a day, and he was under constant observation through a glass door.

One of the most chilling comments following that raid on the Chicago apartment building came from a woman named Pertissue Fisher, an American citizen who lives in the building. She said the agents rounded up people, including her, and only asked questions later. “They just treated us like we were nothing,” Fisher said. That’s how federal agents, who took oaths to uphold the law, are behaving under this administration. And no one in

the administration seems in the least bit concerned about it.

We aren't even better off in the ways Trump promised. Deporting school kids doesn't make us safer. Americans don't want the jobs that aren't being done in immigrants' absence. The Labor Department warned in "an obscure document filed with the Federal Register last week that the near total cessation of the inflow of illegal aliens" is threatening "the stability of domestic food production and prices for U.S. consumers." But beyond the absence of benefits from this administration's mass deportations, it's the absence of humanity we see around us that threatens us the most. People who aren't criminals are thrown to the ground. People are treated with a lack of respect for their basic human dignity. Many of them are hard-working folks who want to be able to love this country and give back because of the opportunity it gives them and their families. Instead, a president who is the son of immigrants and has been married twice to immigrants has become the face of nationalism, using hate and horror to expand his control over people, both American citizens and immigrants, on American soil. Are we the Nazis now?

What's certain is this: No matter where Donald Trump wants to take this country, you and I are not going along for the ride. On Friday, House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the No Kings rally on Saturday was a "hate-America" rally. He said the people attending would be "the pro-Hamas wing" and "the antifa people." He's wrong. We are, in the best tradition of America's Greatest Generation, truly anti-fascist. And in 2025, anti-fascism begins at home, because we love this country and we believe in democracy. We're ready.

Joyce Alene Vance served as the United States attorney for the Northern District of Alabama from 2009 to 2017.

The Scientist

The Legacy of the Nazi Lagers

By Primo Levi

March 7, 1988

On April 11, 1987, the Italian chemist and author Primo Levi was found dead in his apartment building in Turin. Reportedly depressed over worldwide violence, his deteriorating health, and a case of writer's block, he apparently threw himself down the stairwell of his building. A survivor of Auschwitz, Levi had written a series of works, including The Periodic Table (Schochen Books, 1984), that intermingled stories of his captivity with metaphysical reflections.

The experiences that we survivors of the Nazi Lagers carry within us are extraneous to the new Western generation and become ever more extraneous as the years pass. For the young people of the 1950s and 1960s these were events connected with their fathers: they were spoken about in the family; memories of them still preserved the freshness of things seen. For the young people of the 1980s, they are matters associated with their grandfathers: distant, blurred, "historical." These young people are besieged by today's problems, different, urgent: the nuclear threat, unemployment, the depletion of resources, the demographic explosion, frenetically innovative technologies to which they must adjust. The world's configuration is profoundly changed; Europe is no longer the center of the planet. The colonial empires have yielded to the pressure of the peoples of Asia and Africa thirsting for independence, having been dissolved not without tragedies and struggles between the new nations. Germany, split in two for an indefinite future, has become "respectable," and in fact holds the destiny of Europe in its hands. The United States-Soviet Union diarchy, born out of World War II, persists; but the ideologies on which the governments of the two sole victors of the last conflict are based have lost much of their credibility and splendor. A skeptical generation stands at the threshold of adulthood, bereft not of ideals but of certainties, indeed distrustful of the grand revealed truth: disposed instead to accept the small truths, changeable from month to month on the convulsed wave of cultural fashions, whether guided or wild.

For us to speak with the young becomes ever more difficult. We see it as a duty and, at the same time, as a risk: the risk of appearing anachronistic, of not being listened to. We must be listened to: above and beyond our personal experiences, we have

collectively witnessed a fundamental, unexpected event, fundamental precisely because unexpected, not foreseen by anyone. It took place in the teeth of all forecasts, it happened in Europe; incredibly, it happened that an entire civilized people, just issued from the fervid cultural flowering of Weimar, followed a buffoon whose figure today inspires laughter, and yet Adolf Hitler was obeyed and his praises were sung right up to the catastrophe. It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say.

It can happen, and it can happen everywhere. I do not intend to nor can I say that it will happen; it is not very probable that all the factors that unleashed the Nazi madness will again occur simultaneously, but precursory signs loom before us. Violence, “useful” or “useless,” is there before our eyes: it snakes either through sporadic and private episodes, or government lawlessness, both in what we call the first and second worlds, that is to say, the parliamentary democracies and countries in the Communist bloc. In the Third World it is endemic or epidemic. It only awaits its new buffoon (there is no dearth of candidates) to organize it, legalize it, declare it necessary and mandatory, and so contaminate the world. Few countries can be considered immune to a future tide of violence generated by intolerance, lust for power, economic difficulties, religious or political fanaticism, and racist attritions. It is therefore necessary to sharpen our senses, distrust the prophets, the enchanters, those who speak and write “beautiful words” unsupported by intelligent reasons.

It has obscenely been said that there is a need for conflict: that mankind cannot do without it. It has also been said that the local conflicts, violence in the streets, factories, and stadiums, are an equivalent of generalized war and preserve us from it, as *petit mal*, the epileptic equivalent, preserves from *grand mal*. It has been observed that never before in Europe did forty years go by without a war such a long European peace is supposedly an historical anomaly.

These are captious and suspect arguments. Satan is not necessary there is no need for wars or violence, under any circumstances. There are no problems that cannot be solved around a table, provided there is good will and reciprocal trust—or even reciprocal fear, as the present interminable stalled situation seems to demonstrate, a situation in which the greatest powers confront each other with cordial or threatening faces but have no restraint when it comes to unleashing (or allowing the unleashing) of bloody wars among those “protected” by them, supplying

sophisticated weapons, spies, mercenaries, and military advisers instead of arbiters of peace.

Nor is the theory of preventive violence acceptable: from violence only violence is born, following a pendular action that, as time goes by, rather than dying down, becomes more frenzied. In actuality, many signs lead us to think of a genealogy of today's violence that branches out precisely from the violence that was dominant in Hitler's Germany. Certainly it was not absent before, in the remote and recent past: nevertheless, even in the midst of the insensate slaughter of World War I there survived the traits of a reciprocal respect between the antagonists, a vestige of humanity toward prisoners and unarmed citizens, a tendential respect for treaties: a believer might say "a certain fear of God." The adversary was neither a demon nor a worm. After the Nazi *Gott mit uns*, everything changed. Goering's terrorist bombings were answered by the "carpet" bombings of the Allies. The destruction of a people and a civilization was proven to be possible and desirable both in itself and as an instrument of rule. Hitler learned the massive exploitation of slave labor in the schools of Stalin, but in the Soviet Union it was brought back again, multiplied, at the end of the war. The exodus of minds from Germany and Italy, together with the fear of being surpassed by Nazi scientists, gave birth to nuclear bombs. Desperate, the Jewish survivors in flight from Europe after the great shipwreck have created in the bosom of the Arab world an island of Western civilization, a portentous palingenesis of Judaism, and the pretext for renewed hatred. After the defeat, the silent Nazi diaspora has taught the art of persecution and torture to the military and political men of a dozen countries, on the shores of the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Pacific. Many new tyrants have kept in their drawer Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* with a few changes perhaps, and the substitution of a few names, it can still come in handy.

The Hitlerian example demonstrated to what an extent a war fought in the industrial era can be devastating even without having recourse to nuclear weapons. During the last 20 years the ill-fated Vietnamese enterprise, the Falkland conflict, the Iran-Iraq war, and the events in Cambodia and Afghanistan confirm it. Yet, it has also demonstrated—(not in the rigorous sense of mathematicians, unfortunately) that, at least sometimes, at least in part, historical crimes are punished. The powerful of the Third Reich ended on the gallows or in suicide; the German people suffered a Biblical "massacre" of the first horn that decimated a generation and a partition of their country that put an end to century-old German pride. It is not absurd to assume that, had Nazism not shown itself so very ruthless from the start, the alliance among

its adversaries would not have been formed, or would have broken up before the end of the conflict, shattered. The world war willed by the Nazis and Japanese was a suicidal war: all wars should be feared as such.

More often and more insistently as that time recedes, we are asked by the young who our “torturers” were, of what cloth they were made. The term torturers alludes to our exguardians, the SS, and is in my opinion inappropriate: it brings to mind twisted individuals, ill-born, sadists, afflicted by an original flaw. Instead, they were made of the same cloth as we, they were average human beings, averagely intelligent, averagely wicked: save the exceptions, they were not monsters, they had our faces, but they had been reared badly. They were, for the greater part, diligent followers and functionaries, some fanatically convinced of the Nazi doctrine, many indifferent, or fearful of punishment, or desirous of a good career, or too obedient. All of them had been subjected to the terrifying miseducation provided for and imposed by the schools created in accordance with the wishes of Hitler and his collaborators, and then completed by the SS “drill.” Many had joined this militia because of the prestige it conferred, because of its omnipotence, or even just to escape family problems. Some, very few in truth, had changes of heart, requested transfers to the front lines, gave cautious help to prisoners or chose suicide. Let it be clear that to a greater or lesser degree all were responsible, but it must be just as clear that behind their responsibility stands that great majority of Germans who accepted in the beginning, out of mental laziness, myopic calculation, stupidity, and national pride the “beautiful words” of Corporal Hitler, followed him as long as luck and the lack of scruples favored him, were swept away by his ruin, afflicted by deaths, misery, and remorse, and rehabilitated a few years later as the result of an unprincipled political game.

Primo Levi was a Jewish Italian chemist, partisan, Holocaust survivor and writer.