

International Horizons Episode 15: The Rise of Hitler in the 1930s: Are There Parallels to Our Time?  
TRANSCRIPT

John Torpey

Hi, my name is John Torpey, and I'm Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute that addresses issues of international significance. Today we explore the rise of Adolf Hitler nearly a century ago with a historian who has written extensively about it in the context of our current pandemic, economic, and racial crises.

We're fortunate to have with us today Benjamin Carter Hett, a professor of history at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center. Professor Hett is the author most recently of *The Nazi Menace: Hitler, Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt, and the Road to War*, which has just appeared from Henry Holt Publishing. Just two years ago, Professor Hett also published *The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic*, also with Henry Holt. The two volumes analyze the circumstances domestically and internationally that accompanied Hitler's rise to power in Germany, and the response of the Allies to his attempt to dominate Europe and the world. Thanks so much for being with us today, Ben Hett.

Benjamin Hett

Thanks, John. It's a real pleasure to be with you.

John Torpey

Great to have you. Thanks for taking the time. So first, it seems to me one of the important points you make in the early pages of *the Nazi Menace* concerns the contingency of history. That is, things don't have to turn out the way they actually do, people can change them. And indeed, it seems to me much of the book is a close examination of the ideas of the four people mentioned in the subtitle, Hitler, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, and how these ideas shaped their actions. This is something that seems to me some have a departure from the kind of history written by academics in recent years. So maybe you can talk a little bit about the argument of the book, and how it differs from other accounts of the run up to World War II?

Benjamin Hett

Well, I think your point is really well taken. I think my approach to writing about these things is probably rooted partly in a kind of basic moral intuition, which is, as you put it, in your question: that people make events, people are capable of changing them. And that means that people are responsible for what flows from the actions that they take. And then there's also, I would guess – if it's not to sort of pompous to put it this way – there's a bit of an intellectual agenda, in the sense that I've always been in some way a bit of a reactionary, I think, in historical methodology. I can remember being a graduate student and being kind of both surprised and while the irritated by some of the interpretations in several periods of history, but famously around Nazi Germany in the Third Reich, which really move the focus away from personal decision-making and personal responsibility and look more at structural factors, and

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forces and so on, not that there isn't a value of doing that. But I do think that events of the last three and a half years particularly have maybe reminded us that who is at the top really matters and individuals and individual decision making really matters. So, you're quite right, I think, to point to that being an important kind of underlying theme of both of these recent books that I've done.

As far as the argument goes, and how it differs from some of what has been written on this, obviously, in these last two books I've taken on subjects, which, to put it mildly, there is no shortage of writing about and there is no shortage of brilliant, groundbreaking work on. So, I think one has to approach them with all due modesty. That said, I do think in both books, what I've at least tried to do is in a way to recombine certain elements, and perhaps change the line of sight a little bit. So that these quite familiar events may in some ways, look a bit different. And in some ways, I've spent the last number of years reading a lot of sort of strange stuff that a lot of people who work on the kinds of things I work on in history don't necessarily spend time reading about. And I think all of that is kind of rattled around in my brain. So I think these books and maybe especially the new one, *The Nazi Menace*, talk about things and have an angle that's not common, even in the vast literature on these subjects.

Let me give you just one example to make this a little bit more concrete. I talk a little bit specifically with respect to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1938-39. His concern about the concept first named in 1937, by the sociologist Lasswell, The Garrison State. And in a way this kind of goes with some of what I have to say about the British military strategist Liddell Hart. The sort of total package here is there was a lot of thinking going on in the late 1930s by academics like Laswell or by strategist like Hart and reaching the politicians to about where exactly the dangers lay for a democracy, if war came again. And one thing that a lot of these thinkers worried about is that under conditions of modern total war, there would be no way that a democracy could fight a total war without becoming basically a totalitarian dictatorship. And Roosevelt saw this challenge quite clearly, I think. Chamberlain saw it, too.

And they were trying in their different ways to not let it happen. And that lies behind a lot of what they were doing strategically. I don't think this point has been appreciated by a lot of historians. For Roosevelt, it has been a little bit more by some historians; for Chamberlain, but not perhaps in so many words. Also, I think there's a kind of evaluation that's worth pondering behind it. I mean, the fact that this was a real danger, I think, was real. And the fact that it was something that a politician needed to think about, a leader needed to think about and worried about that mobilizing for a total war might mean a degree of political control, a degree of censorship, a degree of regimentation that citizens of a democracy would find unacceptable. It certainly might involve a degree of casualties, which would no longer be acceptable in the wake of the first World War. These people were trying to figure out a way to mitigate these dangers, I think is an important theme and what I'm trying to do, especially in the second book.

John Torpey

Hmm, so does that sort of help absolve Chamberlain of the perennial charge of appeasement?

Benjamin Hett

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Yeah, I think it does, or I think at least it mitigates it. I mean, I think he's a much more complex figure, in a way, than both critics and supporters of him have presented him. I mean, certainly the kind of old Churchillian stereotype of a foolish, weak cowardly figure could not be more wrong. I mean, Chamberlain was none of those. He was brave, very smart, very capable, very arrogant, rather dictatorial in his own way. So that sort of umbrella toting weakling idea is completely wrong. The people who have tried to rehabilitate him the most actually tend to be British Euroskeptic conservatives, and they have a particular agenda and how they're trying to rehabilitate, in which I personally am not too fond of either. So in a way, I may be among the first historians to try to rehabilitate Chamberlain but from a more liberal stance. He's a highly flawed and in many ways, unattractive figure, there was a core of what he was trying to do, which is I think really hard not to sympathize with, that he was trying to avoid a war. And if war came in a kind of Liddell Hart way to try and fight it in the most casualty minimizing way.

John Torpey

I wanted to go back and try to look at some of the ways in which we got to the later war. So, I see these two books as kind of a diptych. I don't know if you see them that way, but they seem to me to be very much kind of two parts of the same story.

Benjamin Hett

Do you see them that way?

John Torpey

Yeah. And *The Death of Democracy* describes, among other things, a scenario in which the conservatives in the Weimar Republic abetted and accommodated Hitler's rise in thinking that they could bend him, this upstart Austrian colonel, to their own purposes? But of course, things turned out very differently. Maybe you could describe this scenario and what happened and what went wrong?

Benjamin Hett

Sure. Well, there's obviously there's been a lot of talk in recent years of possible comparisons between Trump and Hitler, which I think mostly don't work on the level of the individual persons because they're so so different, Trump and him. But I do think comparisons between our situation in the United States now and Germany in the late 20s and early 30s do have some bite at a deeper structural level. And your question points to one of the key places where the comparison does have some bite in the sense that, amidst economic dislocation, you have a conservative elite, consisting largely of business leaders and senior military officers, who increasingly feel that the democratic structure they're operating in doesn't work for them. It doesn't work for their interests. Starting in the late 1920s, they start thinking very hard about how they can roll it back. And quite systematically, basically, they, they start using their influence with the upper reaches of the German government. To get Chancellors appointed who will carry out a

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right-wing agenda, try and minimize the role of Parliament, try and roll back the power of organized labor, and try and roll back the social reforms of the Weimar Republic, and build up the strength of the Armed Forces, and start to reassert Germany's foreign policy presents again, the problem that they have that these conservatives have elites have. And here again, I think this tracks on our situation. The problem they have is that their agenda doesn't have much popular support. They can't win elections on the kinds of things they're trying to do. So, what they need is a kind of troops, they need electoral troops, they need a political party that can win elections, but which will also then help them carry out their agenda. And, for this purpose, Hitler is not perfect, he and his party are not perfect, but they're highly desirable in some ways, because Hitler and the Nazis clearly are anti-communist, anti-socialist, nationalist pro-military. They worry the conservative elites with their demagoguery and with their possible reckless irresponsibility, but basically business leaders and military officers swallow hard and decide. Hitler and the Nazis are crude. They might be a little reckless, but god bless them, they're nationalists, they're militarist. They're anti-socialist. So of course, the elites underestimate Hitler very much. And they tend to see him as just this clown with no education who never made it past Private First Class in the war, etc., etc. So, they think he's a useful tool. And they think his movement will be the troops that they need: the mass base for the kinds of right-wing moves that they want to make. So, it's a kind of deal with the devil that they make, underestimating and feeling to see where this is going to go. But that deal is kind of at the heart of what happens in German politics in 1933.

John Torpey

So you've raised the issue of the possible parallels between Hitler and Trump. And one might explore a bit further. The use, for example, in the contemporary context of the term fascism, by people even on the right, Stephen Calabresi, and an op-ed in *the New York Times* the other day, saw some of Trump's moves in terms of introducing federal troops into Portland and other places as sort of fascistic. I mean, is it useful to talk about? It seems to me you don't use the term fascism very much, if I recall correctly. That's right. You tend to you talk about narcissism, but not about fascism. And so, I wonder whether you could say a little bit about how you see the usefulness of a term like that today as opposed to in its original context.

Benjamin Hett

Yeah. It's interesting you asked, because I think my thinking on this subject has probably changed in about the last two months in response to some of what we've been seeing. Generally speaking, I have always been one of those people who's a little skeptical about the usefulness of the term fascism for a generic kind of political content. So yeah, I have I have tended to stay away from using it.

That said, I am afraid that in the last few months we're starting to see conduct from Trump, which whatever you want to call it is alarmingly authoritarian, even more contemptuous of the Constitution and the rule of law than he has been up till now. Alarmingly undemocratic is sending federal officers into Portland to pull people off the streets without charge, musing about delaying the election, which as you've noted, has provoked even staunch conservatives into calling Trump fascist. Call it what you will,

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authoritarian, perhaps fascist, if you want. It's highly undesirable, I think that we can say and it is reminiscent of European fascist or authoritarian movements in the 20s and 30s.

John Torpey

Interesting. So, you're concerned in *the Nazi Menace* book to address the difficult problem of how a democracy should confront an authoritarian regime that is a security threat. And this is, of course, a very real problem. But Roosevelt and Churchill saw the threat relatively early and moved to address it. Could you say a little bit about why they saw this menace coming and what they thought they had to do with it? I'm particularly intrigued by the emphasis that Churchill laid on the Christian heritage of Europe and the characterization of Hitler as the as the Antichrist.

Benjamin Hett

Yeah, well, you know, I think it's interesting and it's a point I try to stress in the book that we need to remember that, for these people in the 1930s, these problems in many ways were very new. And they're kind of flying blind; they have to meet new problems with new solutions. New in the sense that the scale of European mass politics had changed beyond recognition in the wake of World War I. And you've got very new kinds of regimes that again, whatever you want to call it, the regime that Hitler's leading in Germany, or the regime that Mussolini was leading in Italy or the regime of Stalin's in the Soviet Union. These are entirely new kind of facts on the ground in European politics in the sheer scale of their mobilization, and brutality, and potential aggressiveness in danger.

And at the same time, politicians in places like Britain or America are dealing with much expanded voting publics with of course, women getting the right to vote and in Britain after World War I, even for men the right to vote dramatically expanded, and in the wake of World War I and then all of the reasons against the casualties of that war. Politicians don't really know where they are, and they have to figure out where they are in terms of how much can you mobilize, you know, these new democratic and rather pacifist electorates to meet something that's increasingly clearly a threat as Hitler's Germany increasingly clearly wasn't in the 30s. And another thing I try to spell out in the book is that precisely because this is new, and people like Churchill and Roosevelt are working this out as they go, they work it out, really in response to what's happening in Germany and elsewhere. And for that matter, Hitler frames a lot of what he's doing in response to the democracy.

So it's almost a kind of dialogue that's going on over the years about what democracy means, about what totalitarianism or authoritarianism mean, and how they're going to interact. On the point of defining tomorrow in terms of Christianity, both Roosevelt and Churchill do this. Roosevelt probably does it more from the heart than Churchill does and articulates it more fully. I have to give props here to my graduate student who recently graduated Ky Woltering (who you will know, John, from things we've done together) and Ky's very interesting dissertation. He coined the term Christian totalitarian dichotomy. He's talking really about American Cold War policies to West Germany into East Germany and the Soviet Union. But it's sort of building on what Ky has done. I find that that idea is very much articulated by Roosevelt and Churchill. And I think it's, as I said, for Roosevelt, it comes to some extent

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from the heart; he seems to have been very genuinely a Christian and motivated by religious feelings quite so much. But both of them recognize that it's a useful way to frame the issue for electorates that are going to be, by and large, affiliated with a Christian denomination in one way or another.

And so, you see in Roosevelt's State of the Union speech in 1939, where he reels this idea out quite clearly. He's very definitely framing the international problem as one of Christian democracies facing totalitarian regimes, the essence of which is their anti-Christian orientation. And that framing that he has really keeps up through the war. Churchill does the same thing in some of his famous speeches in 1940. The task that Britain has in resisting Nazi Germany is very much as you indicated, framed in terms of defending Christian civilization against an anti-Christian menace. Churchill's Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax who, also like Roosevelt, was a more deeply believing Christian than Churchill probably was. He also picks this up and frames Britain's war against Germany very much in Christian versus anti-Christian terms. So I think this was, in large part, a sort of way to sell the war to electorates which these politicians weren't quite sure how far they could bring people along with them to bear the sacrifices that a major war effort would involve, and then, to some extent, especially with someone like Roosevelt and Halifax, probably reflected how they really thought about world affairs.

John Torpey

So, some of the comments that you've made remind me that, in addition to the fact that you're a historian, you're also a lawyer, I hope it's okay that I mentioned that. But the problem of addressing an anti-democratic menace is complicated when it comes from within a at least a putatively democratic country itself and has many sympathizers in that country. So, the question is: how does one address that problem, but for all the worries that Trump will refuse to leave office after the election, which many people including the presumptive Democratic nominee, Joe Biden, have discussed? You know, Bret Stephens, columnist at *the New York Times* recently said that he thought Trump was actually too cowardly to stage a coup. But I mean, the broader question is: how do you kind of enforce constitutional norms and laws with somebody who seems to get away with simply ignoring them and violating them and threatening to sue and that serves his purposes. I mean, it's a very difficult question. An institutional problem, it seems to me.

Benjamin Hett

It is a profoundly difficult problem and one, sort of by definition, for which there's no clear legal remedy. And, as you indicated, the problem comes in at least two subsets. So there's the problem of, from the standpoint of a democratic leader, what you do if the totalitarian menace you're facing abroad has a substantial body of sympathizers at home who are part of your electorate. That's one kind of problem. All the democracies had it in the 30s and 40s. You know, the United States, of course, with groups like the German American Bund, which was a very pro-Nazi, mostly German emigre, organization, or sort of even weirder outfits like the Silver Shirts. In Britain, it tended to be oddly a more elite affair. There were a lot of German sympathizers in the higher reaches of the British social structure. And there was a small, not very effective British fascist party as well, of course: Oswald Mosley in the British Union of Fascists. So, the problem that poses – and again, you see it most clearly with Roosevelt, when you have that kind

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of weight of people sympathizing with the putative enemy – how you move your country in a democratic way towards resisting the forum threatened. You know, I think the presence of groups like the Bund was one of those factors that contributed to Roosevelt's, you can characterize this different ways, extreme caution, perhaps pragmatic caution, perhaps more. Too much hesitation in taking steps towards meeting the threat that Nazi Germany constituted, because he knew that groups like the Bund were only the sort of tip of the spear of a big body of opinion in the United States, which was certainly isolationist and sometimes isolationist because of even more troubling attitudes like anti-Semitism or sympathy to authoritarianism. In a way, the problem is worse and it's even harder to solve when the leader himself or herself – in those days, of course only himself – is also in some ways complicit with the foreign threat. And you know, Trump has been raising this problem in different ways for years.

One of the things that I found fascinating and working on this book was that Neville Chamberlain posed this problem for his government as well. There are only very recently declassified British intelligence documents, which tell the story of basically Chamberlain's office opening up a back channel in late 1938 to make deals with Nazi Germany, without involving the Foreign Office and doing it kind of on the sly. And interestingly, this also oddly parallels our situation. The British domestic intelligence service MI5 discovered what Chamberlain was up to, and were very worried by it and they supplied the foreign office with information on what Chamberlain was doing and the head of the Foreign Office, the Permanent Under-Secretary Alexander Cadogan, then had to figure out: what do I do with this information? Do I go to Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, and what will Halifax do? How will Chamberlain react if this all becomes public?

In a way, it's an analogy to the kind of scenario that you referred to in your question: what do we do if Trump doesn't leave office? What do we do? What do you do? If you're in the British government, the Prime Minister is secretly dealing with the Nazis and you confront him with this information, how is he going to react? And what do you do about that? There's there are a lot of bad scenarios that can result out of that for which there isn't a clear legal remedy or pathway. And a lot of the possible remedies or pathways could potentially lead to political chaos or violence. So, you know, I think it's fascinating that the problem has come up in these ways, in other contexts; what wisdom history can offer us in terms of a solution, that's a lot more problematic and a lot less clear.

John Torpey

So it is, so it is. So, another matter upon which you know, history might provide some enlightenment for us is the issue that you address in the books about the use of the media, disinformation, propaganda, etc. Of course, Hitler is famous for having been a master manipulator of the media of giving these speeches that whips people into a frenzy and those kinds of things. I wonder what you would say about that and the state of communications and their role in Hitler's rise in the 30s. But also how would you compare to today's situation? And Trump's often noted mastery, if that's the right word, of the media.

Benjamin Hett

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Yeah, among the things that really fascinated me and surprised me when I was working on actually both of these books – but maybe, especially with *the Nazi menace* – is the extent to which the kinds of problems like that, that we're very familiar with in our situation, today how much they're actually prefigured by the 20s and 30s with exactly the same kinds of concerns and a lot of the same kinds of discourse. And again, all of it around what were then new forms of media. A lot of the discourse in the 20s and 30s was around what does radio mean for politics, what this film mean for politics, these new media forms, which in their time are versions of what we have today with the internet and social media. And the other thing that I think surprised and fascinated me was how historians of Germany are certainly very familiar with Hitler's sort of celebration of their rationality and his open contempt for truth and his advocacy of the usefulness of lies in political campaigning. What's surprised me was just how much was common around the industrialized Westernized world in the in the 30s.

So you see in the United States at the time that Hitler and his propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels are really developing a propaganda, which is sort of blatantly dishonest and wallows in a rationality and sort of celebrates the fact that there's no real, verifiable factual reality. You see exactly the same things happening in the United States, generally not called propaganda but generally called by the more mild term public relations or political consulting, and some of the pioneers of public relations and political consulting for United States political campaigns. And this is a new industry in the 20s and 30s. They're saying exactly the same things that Hitler is saying in *Mein Kampf* in his kind of practice of propaganda. They're saying there are alternative facts, as later people would put it, there is no factual reality. You know, Joseph Goebbels said at one point, objectivity doesn't exist. Professors think it does, but professors don't make history. American public relations consultants say the same things. There are no facts, there's just kind of prejudices. So what you do with this in politics is you just go with gut instincts. And again, the Americans and the Germans kind of say the same things. Go for the gut, you know, animate people with basic emotions. They'll vote for you. If you can kind of line yourself up with their basic emotions, facts don't matter. People aren't very smart. Don't tire them out with data on economic or political problems, go for the gut. And this is something that you know, the husband and wife team, Whitaker and Baxter, discovered, and it's exactly the same discovery that Joseph Goebbels, made as to how you can run a campaign, how you can garner mass public support for a candidate utterly irrespective of whatever particular policies that candidate might actually stand for.

John Torpey

Interesting. I guess I want to move to another topic. And I'm just thinking about one of the early questions I asked, which was the issue about how the conservative elites thought they could bend Hitler to their purposes. And of course, it turned out very differently. But in some sense of a number of those people were complicit in helping him to power. Of course, he originally came to power legally, and then transformed his government into a criminal regime. But I'm thinking about the article that Anne Applebaum, the historian journalist, recently wrote about Republicans in the United States and the extent to which they would also share or be at some point held accountable for assisting the regime, if that's the right word, into power that we now have. So I wonder if the people from the 20s and 30s who assisted Hitler's rise today pay the price in the court of historical opinion.



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Benjamin Hett

In the court of historical opinion, they generally have paid the price. In their own lives, most of them not so much. But certainly, no historian nowadays has anything much nice to say about the most important and powerful people who enabled Hitler's ascent to the chancellorship. Most notably, the President and former Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, or the man who had briefly been Chancellor in 1932, and then became Hitler's vice chair, Franz von Papen. Those two in particular, are seen as the most critical enablers and they are scorned in history for that.

Actually, I pointed out in my *Death of Democracy* book that it's sort of ironic that Hindenburg, when he was president of Germany from 1925 to 1934, his overriding concern at all times was his own reputation and preserving his kind of heroic stature as a great leader in sort of stabilizing force and defender of Germany. And it was for that reason that he agreed to put Hitler into the Chancellorship because he thought Hitler would bring political stability in right-wing terms, which would end the threat of civil war, and would thus preserve Hindenburg's reputation as this great defender of Germany. And ironically, you know, of all the things Hindenburg did in his life, nothing has more permanently torched his reputation than the fact that it ultimately it was he who opened the door to Hitler to become Chancellor. And the same is true of most of the others.

In a way, the more interesting cases are the people who facilitated Hitler's rise to power, and then turned against him. Some of them army officers, some of them senior civil servants. Some of those people's story I tell, actually, both in *the Death of Democracy* and in *the Nazi Menace*, it's interesting that, as things developed especially after 1938, it was senior army officers who were always at the heart of the only resistance movement that actually had much chance of getting Hitler out of power and who tried on a number of occasions to kill him and to launch a coup d'état. They were, perhaps surprisingly, for people who are such competent military commanders, they were utterly incompetent plotters of coups with results that are familiar to us from movies like "Valkyrie". But in some ways their, I hesitate slightly to say this, heart was in the right place, at least in the sense that most of them were motivated by repugnance for most of what Hitler stood for, and in many ways the heart of their resistance was basically moral.

John Torpey

I mean, it's interesting in the sense that we've recently seen a number of high ranking military figures in the United States break the professional code of silence that they normally observe, in order to make statements that articulate their views about the current leadership in the White House. And I mean, it helps here that the military is I think, the most important major social political institution in the country.

But I guess I wonder whether or not are we better now at kind of because of the Nazi experience and other experiences from the early 20th century? Are we better now at identifying bad guys when they come along and doing things? Or have we - is human frailty still kind of the dominant reality and things happen that people in retrospect wish hadn't happened and hadn't they hadn't been involved in?

Benjamin Hett

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You know, I think it depends who you mean by we.

If all of us have learned those lessons, and we're better, then there would be precisely zero chance of Donald Trump being reelected in my view, in light of his, to any rational person I think, gross assault on the rule of law and the Constitution in a myriad of ways, to his pretty clear and repeated acts of treason. None of this would gather any electoral support at all. I mean, there's about roughly 45% of the American voting public, which evidently has not learned these lessons. But many other people have, and I actually entertain the hope that some of them are senior army officers.

So if it really comes to it after November, Trump loses in the office, I have been somewhat encouraged by some of these recent examples of senior officers speaking out against what he's been doing, to think that the ultimate arbiter of force will be when it comes to it, deployed on the side of the rule of law and the Constitution and not on the side of a would be perpetrator of a coup. I'm inclined to agree that also, if it came to it, Trump is probably too cowardly for a coup d'etat. I could be wrong about that, but I hope I'm not.

John Torpey

Well, I hope you're not either. Thank you very much for this conversation.

That's it for today's episode of International Horizons. I want to thank Professor Benjamin Carter Hett of Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center for taking the time to discuss his recent books on *the Rise of the Nazi Menace* and *the Death of Democracy in Germany* that preceded it. I also want to thank Hristo Voynov, for his technical assistance. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us again for the next episode of International Horizons. Bye bye.