

Do Nazis Dream of WWII Dystopian Future Pasts?



The tired, simplistic, bargain-basement Cold War narrative of WWII sucks and it's time we got over it. According to my eighth grade history teacher, the USA won WWII by beating the Nazis and the Japs. If we hadn't beaten them, they would've conquered the world. That's how the story goes, and many board games and video games embrace it. It's comforting, comfortable bullshit. That version of history—the \$59.99 version where you get to kill the bad Nazi colonel or fight buddies multiplayer with antique weaponry—ignores basic facts that are widely available outside academia. Chief among those facts is the near-pathetic weakness of Germany and Japan heading into WWII, as well as the wholesale aggrandizement of our intervention and participation in WWII in ways that make us feel good about ourselves but also totally distorts how war looks and how reality worked and works.

Being honest about how WWII went down and what was actually at stake is important because history is important, and shapes how we evaluate our surroundings, our present, our acts and actions. This, as it turns out, is the thematic heart of Phillip K. Dick's science fiction dystopian novel "The Man in the High Castle." Dick, at his best when using strange and challenging scenarios to interrogate the relationship between individual and society, contrives an alternate reality where America loses WWII when the Germans develop and drop A-bombs, forcing us into negotiated surrender, occupation, and servitude. The novel—and the series—is an incredibly subversive take on how history operates, both in the logic of

the story, and in the logic of our own reality.

Amazon (not one to shy away from a sexy narrative featuring Nazis) has taken what was in Dick's hands an interesting meditation on the nature of perception and put together a mostly-faithful rendition that promises to entertain and educate viewers with a cautionary tale about what it feels like to live under a totalitarian dictatorship in America. [I watched the first couple episodes using my Prime membership.](#) And I was mostly impressed.

The series is set in a counterfactual past—it seems to be the 1960s—and begins with a shot of two men in an old-timey movie theater (the younger of which is Joe Blake, who promises to be a major character in the first season) watching a lousy piece of fascist, pro-status-quo propaganda. This is a subtle nod to you, the viewer of the show. Films go on to play a big role in the series, as well as peoples' reactions to film—in fact, the single greatest threat to the “Nazi” led reality is a series of subversive films showing a reality in which the Allies win, and the Nazis and Japanese lose. Both in Dick's novel and the series, this is an honest and accurate idea of how Hitler seems to have viewed narrative—a fact echoed in “Inglorious Basterds,” Tarantino's masterpiece that deals with similar themes. People watching the film of Allied victory in World War II are transported, blissfully and tearfully watching and re-watching footage, in moments that are reminiscent of our own reactions to this type of video on Memorial and Veterans Day, on the History Channel. Where “The Man in The High Castle” takes flight, however, and removes itself from just another nostalgic retread celebrating victory of freedom over tyranny is in its secondary or tertiary level, wherein the critique ends up being not of the Nazis, but of ourselves and our consumption of narrative history.

The series is filled with these double-scenes, moments that have special resonance on multiple levels, which is true to Dick's vision and the intention of his fictionalized world.

Things in dystopian Nazi-America are a bit shoddier than they should be, given the timeframe. There's a great deal of factory labor that's put front and center in the series as part of the economic backdrop to the Nazi-occupied society, and much of the show feels like noir. If the Nazis had won, the show claims implicitly, things would be worse in America than they are today.

But not that much worse. Noah Berlatsky noticed this same phenomenon, watching the show earlier this year. [In a review for the Atlantic](#), he found the show to be subversive in its claim that life would have been crummier, lousier, but not *fundamentally* worse than it has been for our real actual selves. There are no lines for food, no dead people lying in the streets. Gangs of Nazis and Japanese police chase down pro-democracy "resistance" advocates, but the people who keep their heads down and work hard are rewarded. It's not difficult, in other words, to imagine that if there were a group of pro-Nazi, pro-imperial Japanese agents running around today with films showing how in *their* reality Hitler and Hirohito won, our own government would be clamping down on their activities, and would view them as a direct threat. Would our real police be shooting them down on the streets? Well—people who are devout followers of that violent brand of Islam sweeping the Middle East aren't exactly treated with hospitality when the US security apparatus gets their hands on them.

Suburbia in Nazi-America is inhabited by Nazi party members and functionaries, but apart from kids having to wear silly school uniforms, things are about the same. Kitschy television shows the type of which people consumed in the 1950s and 1960s are on the air, but with a Nazi twist. There seems to be a functioning interstate system (Eisenhower is, after all, said to have been inspired by Hitler's autobahn, so this is not totally surprising).

In the Midwest, the truck Joe Blake is driving blows a tire,

and he gets help from a Nazi policeman who offers him help and part of a sandwich. During the exchange, Blake spots a tattoo on the policeman's arm, and the policeman self-identifies as a veteran of the war against Nazi Germany—then claims not to even remember what they'd been fighting for. White flakes are falling from the sky, and Blake asks the trooper what they are. The policeman cheerfully volunteers that "Tuesdays they burn cripples, the terminally ill... [they're a] drag on the state." In this series (and in the book), people in the south and Midwest have adapted easily and enthusiastically to Nazi rule.

The resistance, on the other hand, is made up of (frankly) irritating ideologues who rant about "freedom," which, presumably, is the kind of thing Moderate Syrians wanted in 2011, or the kind the West enjoys today—contextual freedom. "The Man in the High Castle" deserves huge credit for showing the resistance critically, and giving them real weight, real complexity, rather than simply having them be the sympathetic heroes to whom everyone is accustomed. Even though many of the resistance freedom fighters don't know what freedom actually is, it doesn't stop them from expressing willingness to die for the idea—to "do the right thing," as Joe Blake says. Thus the show subtly but undeniably reinforces the notion that perhaps the world we see today—the real world—is not as we imagine. This is not what our noble ancestors fought for.

Interesting side-note—in Europe, when you talk with people it seems like everyone's family was in the resistance in WWII. I've always found that fascinating, like, if everyone's grandparents were all in the resistance, how did the Germans conquer so much territory? But I digress.

So far, the series has decided to portray the Nazis and Japanese as brutal if thuggish occupiers, with an incredibly sophisticated and all-encompassing intelligence-security apparatus. The Nazis are recognizably Nazis—tite uniforms, imposing architecture, annoying habits, and superior military-

aviation technology. The Japanese, on the other hand, turn out to be eastern spiritualists who do martial arts on the side and are in the logic of the show (and the book) presented as morally superior to the Germans. Gone are the massacres they carried out against whites, Chinese, and “inferior” people in the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere—in this show, they are unwilling puppets of the Germans, occupiers almost in name only.

Which is where the show’s deviation from the book and challenge to History as we know it begins to get really interesting—in the logic of the show, Hitler is the one who insisted on détente with the Japanese at the end of World War II, and who insisted on peace. Hitler, in other words, is the peace-bringer. In the world of the show, Goebbles and Himmler are jockeying to replace Hitler as the Fuhrer, and that’s seen as a bad thing.

Another decision that’s sure to bring the show in for criticism is its handling of Jewish characters. One of the main characters in the book (and thus far in the show) is a Jewish worker with artistic aspirations named Frank Fink. To begin with, he produces “degenerate” art, which is an odd confirmation of Nazi propaganda (he appears in the logic of the show’s world to be guilty of the thing that Nazis expect him to be guilty of). Then, he’s captured and presented with what appears to him to be a dilemma—save his girlfriend, or save his family.

And this is where things get really strange, in the show. The audience, at a certain point, understands that it doesn’t matter what Fink chooses—his girlfriend is already being tracked by the Nazis. A member of the resistance, Randall, warns Fink that if he gives her up, he’ll sacrifice his soul, a point that is reinforced to the audience because viewers know that whether Fink gives her up or not is completely irrelevant to her fate. The Japanese don’t know this either, though, so they threaten to kill Fink and his sister and her

family, for being Jewish. The Japanese claim not to be racists like the Nazis (as already described) in the sense that presumably their racism is directed toward other Asians, and not based on religious discrimination, so it doesn't matter to them whether they kill Frank or not. But they do end up killing the family—Fink's sister, his niece, and nephew, with an improved form of Zyklon-B gas. It's an accident, bad timing. The Japanese apologize, which is a neat bit of Holocaust-logic—this is how occupied people are treated, and especially Jewish citizens, as essentially expendable.

In return, Frank's character swears vengeance in the police station. "If you need Jews, you know where to find me," he says, enraged and embittered at the Japanese decision to kill his family (as they promised to do if he did not give over the useless information, which he refuses to do). The Japanese police chief looks him in the eye and says "I know." Because it's a totalitarian society! OF COURSE they know that he's Jewish, and where to find him. The governments know almost everything about almost everyone in their societies—much like the totalitarian governments imagined in 1984. It's also worth pointing out that the entire city where this takes place is under imminent threat of being destroyed by a hydrogen bomb wielded by the Nazis.

The decision to use a Jewish character to unpack complicated philosophical questions of causality and moral agency is dangerous and potentially offensive—maybe even certainly offensive. Because to do so puts the viewer in the role of Holocaust victim—and the dystopian future imagined by Dick (and revisited by this series) means, if there are still Jewish people alive in America or anywhere, that the Holocaust is ongoing. It also makes the subtle point that we like or should like Frank Fink, which implies that we ourselves are in a sort of cultural Holocaust, an annihilation of identity, which is an interesting thought experiment but one that doesn't seem like it's welcome yet in popular culture.

Another way in which the series may provoke controversy is that the basic premise—that America could have lost World War II under any circumstances—plays on bad history. Our narrative of the war overplays German and Japanese strengths while underplaying the Allies' economic and military might. Here's the truth: Germany and Japan were doomed to lose World War II in almost EVERY reality. Their military accomplishments despite that fundamental weakness were extraordinary, but testify more to the astonishing incompetence of American, French, British, Chinese and Russian political leadership and bad generalship early on than to any advantage enjoyed by the Nazis or Japanese. In *The Man in the High Castle*, the Germans have developed the Atomic bomb before America—we now know that, despite provocative History Channel specials to the contrary, the Germans were nowhere near the bomb, although one of their scientists (Werner Heisenberg) got about one third as far as the entire Manhattan project with a hundredth of their budget before crapping out due to bad math. On top of this, the fact that WWII happened at all is due largely to greedy and grabbing western politicians who fucked over Germany at the end of World War I, hamstrung earnest diplomatic efforts at rapprochement during the depression, and manifested an almost-willful desire to misunderstand Hitler's intentions in the mid- and late- 1930s. Knowledge of Nazi strengths versus Soviet and Allied strengths leads one inexorably to the conclusion that our dimension must be the only one in which the Nazis weren't crushed before 1943—it's a minor miracle they lasted until 1945.

An accurate characterization of Germany and Japan in WWII is not that they almost won—it's that they almost lost, over and over again, until finally they didn't not lose. That's the true history of World War II. We fucked around and fucked things up until we decided, kind of, to sort things out, then lazily and shittly continued fucking off and underestimating the Nazis and Japanese until we eventually didn't lose, as we were always going to.

Sorry mom's dad and dad's dad. It's the truth.

The real genius of Dick's novel, and of this series, is that there was and is a fascist threat in America, and it's going on every day. Where a physical dictatorship of Hitler and Mussolini (and, later, Stalin) was defeated, the result of that defeat was not freedom, actually. What we got is the corporate dictatorship we enjoy today, the anti-intellectual monopoly that began with LBJ and Nixon and the squares of Philip K. Dick's day. These happy Eichmann-types have been replaced by well-meaning, bright-eyed Hillary Clinton supporters, Jeb Bush (wait does anyone support Bush?) workers, and the hordes shouting Donald Trump or Ben Carson's name. They're people developing apps or leveraging synergies in New York City or Palo Alto, California in order to make a couple bucks peddling the escapist farce that a human life should be so easy and predictable that one must never encounter anything unpleasant or inconvenient. They're the social, corporate, cultural and technological fascists who will doom and damn our country more certainly than David Semel will direct himself into a box of unmet expectations from which he cannot escape by the beginning of Season Three.

End the series by (no later than) Season Two, David Semel. Don't you screw us again.

After indulging in a fantasy where one gets to rebel vicariously against Nazis in an alternate universe, viewers may consider a more modest rebellion of not supporting the shittiest cast of Democratic and Republican candidates since Rutherford B. Hayes. Otherwise, the future dystopia imagined in this series has already come to pass.