

# 'Nazi' references: BBC sportscaster's tweet revives debate

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March 15, 2023

AP

NEW YORK (AP) — The references seem endless, and they can come from anywhere. In recent days, Pope Francis compared Nicaragua's repression of Catholics to Adolf Hitler's rule in Germany. In Britain, a BBC sportscaster likened the nation's asylum policy to 1930s Germany, resulting in his brief suspension and a national uproar.

For Holocaust and anti-Nazi scholars and organizations, the two sentiments were understandable — but concerning. Invoking Hitler and Nazi Germany, they warn, often serves to revive a familiar and unwelcome line of argument.



“We have to be aware of, and confront, contemporary instances of discrimination, hate speech and human rights abuses across the world,” says Rafal Pankowski, a Polish sociologist who heads the anti-Nazi NEVER AGAIN Association. But he added: “Of course, the historical analogies must not be overused and devalued. The label ‘Nazi’ should not be trivialized and reduced to a term of abuse against anybody we don’t like.”

Last week, Pope Francis was quoted as criticizing the government in Nicaragua, where religious leaders have been arrested or fled, for acting as “if it were a communist dictatorship in 1917 or a Hitlerian one in 1935.” Nicaragua responded by proposing to suspend Vatican ties.

Around the same time, the BBC's Gary Lineker tweeted that a new asylum policy announced by Britain's Conservative government was “immeasurably cruel” and included language “not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s.”

The bill, intended to stop tens of thousands of migrants a year from reaching the country in small boats across the English Channel, would bar asylum claims by anyone who reaches the United Kingdom by unauthorized means and compel the government to detain and deport them “to their home country or a safe third country.”

At first, the broadcaster suspended Lineker, its highest paid TV commentator. But it reversed itself on Monday and praised Lineker as a “valued part of the BBC.”

## ALTERNATIVE WORDING

Peter Fritzsche, author of “An Iron Wind: Europe Under Hitler,” among other books, calls Lineker’s comments poorly expressed and misguided, given that “Nazi Germany had no immigration policy.” Rather than comparisons to the Nazis, Fritzsche believes Lineker would have been better off describing the policy with the words “racist” or “inhumane.”

“Great Britain, in its rhetoric about immigrants and its policies regarding asylum-seekers ... generates quite rightly enormous outrage, because we believe Great Britain is in the family of democratic humane nations,” says Fritzsche, a history professor at the University of Illinois. “The sportscaster’s sentence is inaccurate. The spirit is laudable.”

Sometimes, scholars and activists say, events do call for Nazi comparisons, whether it’s the white supremacist march in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 or the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw, Poland, organized by extreme-right groups. But Nazi references have also been used to criticize fiscal policy (anti-tax activist Grover Nordquist once invoked the Holocaust when criticizing estate taxes) or insult rival heads of state (Saudi Arabia and Iran recently re-established diplomatic ties, six years after Prince Mohammed bin Salman referred to Iran’s Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the “new Hitler”).

On the internet, Nazis have been mentioned so often, and for so long, that in 1990 author-attorney Mike Godwin formulated “Godwin’s Law” for them: “As an online discussion continues, the probability of a reference or comparison to Hitler or Nazis approaches 1.” They come up so often that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., has crafted a standard response, which it cited when contacted this week by The Associated Press.

“Nazism represented a singular evil that resulted in the murder of 6 million Jews and the persecution and deaths of millions of others for racial and political reasons,” the statement reads.

“Comparing contemporary situations to Nazism is not only offensive to its victims, but it is also inaccurate and misrepresents both Holocaust history and the present,” the statement says. “The Holocaust should be remembered, studied, and understood so that we can learn its lessons; it should not be exploited for opportunistic purposes.”

## A RANGE OF REFERENCES

Nazi references can be outlandish (actress Megan Fox once compared “Transformers” director Michael Bay to Hitler); self-evident (Kanye West, who years ago complained of being looked at like “he was Hitler,” declared in 2022 that there were “good things about Hitler”); and strategic (Russian President Vladimir Putin listed “denazification” of Ukraine as one of the main goals of his “special military operation,” falsely alleging that there are Nazis in Ukraine’s leadership).

The Putin accusation isn’t new. It has been part of the Kremlin’s propaganda effort for years, used to justify a Moscow-backed insurgency in Ukraine’s east and bash Kyiv’s pro-Western government, which took over after a popular uprising ousted a pro-Russian president in 2014.

Analysts say the narrative appears to play well in Russia, where the Soviet army's defense against Nazi Germany forces in World War II is still a fundamental part of the national identity. Officials and state media routinely use the term "Nazi" to describe the Ukrainian government and its army.

Moscow's rhetoric has prompted some international backlash. Asked in an interview with an Italian news channel about Russian claims that it invaded Ukraine to "denazify" the country, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Ukraine could still have Nazi elements even if some figures, including the country's president, were Jewish.

"So when they say, 'How can Nazification exist if we're Jewish?' In my opinion, Hitler also had Jewish origins, so it doesn't mean absolutely anything. For some time we have heard from the Jewish people that the biggest antisemites were Jewish," Lavrov said, speaking to the station in Russian, dubbed over by an Italian translation.

Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid called Lavrov's statement "unforgivable and scandalous and a horrible historical error," adding that "the government of Russia needs to apologize."

In Israel, the Holocaust is seen as unique, and comparisons to the Nazis or Nazi Germany in the modern context are typically dismissed as cheapening the victims' memory. But comparisons do happen. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has likened Iran to Nazi Germany, and ultra-Orthodox protesters call the police in Israel "Nazis" when they arrest people.

Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, says Lineker's comparison is flawed. The Conservatives' proposal, he says, is more like the British policy toward Holocaust survivors who tried to enter British Mandate-era Palestine after 1945 on boats such as the Exodus — and were turned back.

The larger issue, Zuroff says, is that people like Lineker cite the Holocaust to draw attention to their own issues. Perhaps, Zuroff says, the BBC figure "should be punished by being put in a library and forced to read 10 accurate history books."

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AP journalists Vanessa Gera, Daria Litvinova and Laurie Kellman contributed to this report.

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