

## Tolkien, Hitler, and Nordic Heroism

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A shadowy, evil overlord hides himself amid an unmapped mountain range. There he wields absolute power over fanatics and slaves, scheming for domination over the free peoples of the world. He sends forth assassins into peaceful lands and cities, spreading terror among civilians.

A capsule history of the past six months? No, that's the plot of the movie I'm going to see tonight—*The Lord of the Rings*. Director Peter Jackson (*Heavenly Creatures*, 1994) could not have known how timely its release would prove—coming as it does as America hunts down a terror network built on a theology of evil, a perversion of Islam which promises eternal sensual reward for the reckless slaughter of civilians. *The Lord of the Rings* speaks to current events. It also touches on the most important themes of Western civilization—freedom, faith, and what it means to be a hero.

### The Birth of Middle Earth

As a teenager, J.R.R. Tolkien neglected his Latin and Greek to study Norse. And Finnish. And Anglo-Saxon. Tolkien thrilled at studying medieval *eddas* and sagas, and mastering dusty grammars to decode half-forgotten tales. At Oxford, he made himself the university's expert in Nordic literature, and won a prestigious chair which he'd hold for the next four decades.

What attracted Tolkien to these tales was their unique, heroic ethos. Written down by recently Christianized barbarians, stories such as *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* intertwined the old, pagan values of individualism, courage and promise-keeping with Biblical themes of self-sacrifice, defense of the helpless, and piety towards the One God. Thus were the warriors of the North civilized, and urged to restrain their swords by the codes of Hebrew prophets and Christian theologians. The grandsons of the Viking raiders began to bind themselves to the Ten Commandments and Augustine's "just war" theory.

Tolkien saw in this literature a great, unsung moment in the birth of the West. Tolkien saw as specifically "Nordic" the individualism and hatred for tyranny that pervades these sagas, which set medieval and modern man apart from the obedient subjects of Rome and Byzantium.

This freeman's spirit survived for centuries in the stubborn cantons of Switzerland, the "free cities" of the Holy Roman Empire, and the gentry of England; the privileges won by Anglo-Saxons from their kings formed the basis of English Common Law, and its great modern descendant—the U.S. Bill of Rights.

The work of Tolkien's close friend C.S. Lewis also refers to "the North" as the source of individualism and resistance to unjust authority; in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, his heroes' battle cry is "for Narnia and the North." In Narnia, as in *The Lord of the Rings*, the heroes were based on medieval, Northern European knights, who fought for free societies based on tradition, custom, and courage—against slave armies recruited from southern climes, who carried scimitars, lived in the desert, and cringed before Oriental despots. (Of course, that brings us back to current events...)

### **The Modern Barbarians**

It is ironic that even as Tolkien wrote to immortalize the great synthesis of Northern heroism with Biblical morality, modern barbarians labored to reverse it. The proto-Nazi "Völkisch" movement, born in the blood and humiliation of Napoleon's conquest of Germany, had for a century agitated against Judaeo-Christian "softness," in favor of pagan ruthlessness. *Völkisch* boosters of Nordic literature ignored its heroic individualism in favor of its residues of pagan tribalism, "deconstructing" the Judaeo-Christian elements as "inauthentic" overlays on the "pure" originals. The artistic pinnacle of this project appeared in Wagner's grand operas, based on "pure" pagan sources. Its political apogee came with the victory of a *Völkisch*-socialist demagogue in Germany.

While Adolf Hitler was careful at first to conceal his neo-pagan agenda, his followers were not: Heinrich Himmler created the SS explicitly as a pagan parody of the Society of Jesus, conducted extensive research attempting to rehabilitate medieval witchcraft, and held torchlit liturgies to Odin and other Norse gods. Hitler's ideologist, Alfred Rosenberg, issued tracts denouncing the Gospels. Josef Goebbels aspired to wipe out "after the last Jew, the last priest." Hitler's ally, General Erich Ludendorff, called for the abolition of Christianity in Germany. By 1936, Hitler was suppressing Catholic trade unions, movements and schools, and forming amongst Protestants a militaristic "German Christian" church that would sanction the regime's savage anti-Semitism. Hitler opined to Albert Speer that he wished Germany had been converted to Islam instead of Christianity, the better to suit it to ruthless warfare.

### **Fighting for the True North**

As a fervent Catholic, a veteran of the Somme, and a genuine scholar of Nordic cultures, Tolkien was not blind to these events. In 1938, Tolkien denounced the Nazis' "wholly pernicious and unscientific race-doctrine." When German publishers Rütten and Loening wished to translate *The Hobbit* from English, they wrote him, inquiring whether his name was of "Aryan" origin. Tolkien's reply dripped scorn:

I regret that I am not clear as to what you intend by *arisch*. I am not of Aryan extraction: that is, Indo-Iranian; as far as I am aware none of my ancestors spoke Hindustani, Persian, Gypsy, or any related dialects. But if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have *no* ancestors of that gifted people.

As he would write his son, Michael, in 1941 (then a cadet training for the British army):

...I have in this War a burning private grudge—which would probably make me a better soldier at 49 than I was at 22: against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler... Ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble, northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light. Nowhere, incidentally, was it nobler than in England, nor ever more early sanctified and Christianized.

We see in Tolkien's life, opinions, and work an enduring rebuff to the totalitarian evils of his century. The moral key to *The Lord of the Rings* is the refusal of ruthlessness and the immutability of the moral law. The Ring is a mighty weapon of war—but profoundly tinged with evil. The Ring may not be used, even against the Dark Lord himself, lest its user be corrupted and become what he hates. Some means are so evil that no end can justify them. Some laws are so sacred that we must willingly die rather than violate them. We may never target the innocent in order to weaken the guilty. These lessons, which Tolkien drew from the Christian, heroic sagas of the North, should linger in our minds and restrain our passions—especially in time of war.

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