Chapter 26 of Harper Lee’s 1960 classic *To Kill a Mockingbird* offers an unexpected discussion of Hitler’s actions in Nazi Germany. The subject arises during a student presentation on “current events” at Scout’s school. Her classmate Cecil Jacobs observes, “old Adolf Hitler has been after the Jews and he’s puttin’ ’em in prisons and he’s taking away all their property and he won’t let any of ’em out of the country and he’s washin’ all the feeble-minded and – ” (Lee 281). Following a query from his teacher, Miss Gates, Jacobs continues:

Well anyway, Hitler's started a program to round up all the half-Jews too and he wants to register ’em in case they might wanta cause him any trouble and I think this is a bad thing and that's my current event. (Lee 281)

Miss Gates then explains:

“That’s the difference between America and Germany. We are a democracy and Germany is a dictatorship. Dictator-ship,” she said. “Over here we don’t believe in persecuting anybody. Persecution comes from people who are prejudiced. Pre-ju-dice,” she enunciated carefully. “There are no better people in the world than the Jews, and why Hitler doesn’t think so is a mystery to me.” (Lee 282)

In a novel in which an innocent black man is framed for the alleged rape of a white woman, an injustice to which the white townspeople are indifferent at best, the irony of Miss Gates’s discourse on democracy is clear. Lest it is not, Scout emphasizes it just two pages later when she recounts Miss Gates’s observation on leaving the Courthouse following the trial of Tom Robinson:

Miss Gates was – she was goin’ down the steps in front of us, you musta not seen her – she was talking with Miss Stephanie Crawford. I heard her say it’s time somebody taught ’em a lesson, they were gettin’ way above themselves, an’ the next thing they think they can do is marry us. (Lee 284)

As ever, Scout brings her concerns to her father who tells her that it is not okay to hate Hitler because: “It’s not okay to hate anybody” (Lee 283).

Critics of this Nazi-themed chapter have suggested that Lee’s discussion is deliberately anachronistic, evidence of the way in which she seeks to shape the text and the reader to her own moral and political ends. The suggestion is made by two very different writers. At one end of the spectrum, the English and Africana Studies professor Eric J. Sundquist argues that Cecil Jacobs’ classroom account of events in Germany is “in keeping with Harper Lee’s strategy of projecting the novel’s action into a dim past, illuminating the postwar events even as they are conveniently screened by the strategy of retrospect.” Indeed, he continues, the “student’s uncomprehending reference to Hitler ‘washing’ the feebleminded is deliberately anachronistic in the sense that the genocide to which it led would have been clearly comprehensible to Lee’s readers in 1960 but not to her juvenile characters in 1935” (Sundquist 188). At the other end of the spectrum, Jared Taylor, a self-described “racial realist” whom the Southern Poverty Law Center describes as a “white nationalist,” offers a similar critique for quite different reasons. ¹ Noting that Scout’s teacher, Miss Gates, condemns Hitler’s treatment of the Jews, Taylor declares:

This would have been a real achievement for a schoolteacher during the depression. At that time, most Americans were more interested in how Hitler was putting Germany back to work than what he thought
about the Jews, but Miss Lee was writing after the war, so could have her character give the Nazis a good thumping. (Taylor)

When Cecil Jacobs expresses his puzzlement at the persecution of the Jews, he offers, as a possible explanation, “they’re supposed to change money or something” (Lee 282). It is the only hint that the contemporary understanding of Hitler in this period was – for these characters at least – anything less than critical. Nevertheless, the arguments of both Sundquist and Taylor would seem to draw support from the work of Deborah Lipstadt on American newspapers and the Holocaust. Lipstadt notes that as late as 1938, a poll suggested that 60% of Americans blamed the Jews in whole, or in part, for their own persecution, a persecution provoked by their supposedly insular ethnic outlook, and/or their political and/or business activities (Lipstadt 42–43) 47. There was, to be sure, an awareness that something was happening to the Jews in Germany – evidenced by the debate over America’s participation in the 1936 Berlin Olympics – but there was a widespread view that the information that Americans were receiving was unreliable, with Lipstadt identifying what she calls a “deep-seated American skepticism” about these reports (Lipstadt 16). Moreover, antisemitism was not seen as central to the Nazi ideology and the violence against Jews was often considered a part of a broader violence against opposition groups including, but not limited to, communists and socialists (Lipstadt 15). Hitler was, furthermore, frequently seen as being not personally implicated in such activities: as late as 1938, the Atlanta Constitution suggested that the he could not have known about Kristallnacht (Lipstadt 47–49).2

On this account, Chapter 26 serves to underline the dominant understanding of the text as one in which a man so good that he could not bring himself to hate Hitler, was able to rise above the hypocrisy of his fellow white citizens, and defend an oppressed minority against their prejudice. Lee, it is argued, misrepresents history to heighten the heroism of her character. Nevertheless, there is evidence to indicate that Lee’s depiction of the townspeople’s understanding of Hitler’s actions was far more historically accurate than has been suggested.

In his study of Alabama’s Jews, the Holocaust, and the Second World War, Dan Puckett notes that the state’s white, black, Christian, and gentile populations received their news in much the same way as did the rest of the country, through newspapers which, lacking dedicated foreign correspondents, relied on the Associated Press and United Press reports, as well as on influential national papers such as the New York Times for their material. He further notes, however, that the state’s journalists and editors were not content to let these stories run without commentary.

Instead, they interpreted these events for their readers through editorials and commentary. In doing so, the press in Alabama – Birmingham, Montgomery, and Mobile particularly – covered the persecution of the Jews extensively and exhibited greater sympathy for the plight of European Jews than did the national press. (Puckett 77)

Indeed, he notes that, with the exception of the Atlanta Constitution, Lipstadt pays little attention to Southern newspapers. Puckett attributes the greater sensitivity of the Southern press to a multiplicity of local factors, including, but not limited to Alabama Jews’ “civic and economic connections … throughout the state,” which “secured the support of local, state, and national leaders who frequently spoke out in favor of Jewish causes” (Puckett 28).3 As the Nazis’ persecution of the Jews increased, so did the criticism of their actions in the Alabama press: Puckett identifies what he calls “an intensely negative view of the Nazis” which was “magnified by the increasingly harsh anti-Semitic persecutions of the 1930s” (Puckett 79).

Lee’s depiction of the townspeople’s attitude toward Hitler and the rise of the Nazis appears, then, to be a highly plausible one given the opinions expressed in their sources of information. Indeed, Atticus is said to read The Mobile Press, The Mobile Register, The Birmingham News, and The Montgomery Advertiser. The very newspapers that promulgated a more sympathetic view of Jewish suffering were, then, clearly in circulation in Maycomb (Lee 138, 154, 195, 322). As such, it is Sundquist and Taylor who would appear to be in error. Indeed, Sundquist’s claim that by having Cecil Jacobs declare that Hitler is “washin’ all the feeble-minded,” Lee is engaging in a deliberate
anachronism to parallel the plight of the Jews with that of 1950s African Americans, would itself appear to be a mistake. Sundquist seems to be suggesting that Lee is appealing over the heads of her characters to her readers by alluding to the showers of Auschwitz. There is, nevertheless, a much more plausible and straightforward reading of this passage. Lee suggests Jacobs’ capacity for imprecision when he declares that “Hitler has been prosecution’ the [Jews]” which Miss Gates immediately corrects to “Persecuting,” a correction he seems unwilling to take (Lee 281). Thus, his claim about “washing the feeble minded” is, perhaps, best seen not as an allusion to incipient genocide, as Sundquist suggests, but rather as a product of Cecil Jacobs’ misunderstanding of what the Nuremberg Laws meant by the term “sterilization.”

What, then, is the significance of Lee’s seemingly accurate depiction of the understanding of Hitler and the Nazis in small town Alabama in the 1930s?

The only time I ever saw Atticus scowl was when Elmer Davis would give us the latest on Hitler. Atticus would snap off the radio and say, “Hmp!” I asked him once why he was impatient with Hitler and Atticus said, “Because he’s a maniac.” (Lee 282–283)

In this historical context, Scout’s choice of adjective “impatient” is somewhat surprising, as indeed is Atticus’ choice of noun. Impatience would seem to be a remarkably mild response to the systematic persecution of an oppressed minority, a persecution about which Atticus was clearly well informed; likewise, “maniac” might be thought to imply an extremism or excessive zeal rather than outright condemnation of such behavior. Thus, it might be necessary to rethink the implications of Atticus’ refusal to hate Hitler. While this could be seen as an expression of the depth of his Christian love for others, his inability to make an exception in the case of Hitler could possibly be seen as evidence of a certain sympathy with at least some of the German’s views, if not necessarily his methods. Atticus, after all, was a member of an Alabama legislature whose eugenic policies were predicated upon similar reasoning to the Nazi’s Nuremberg Laws (Stow). For Atticus, it might be argued, it is not the racial/ethnic/religious divide that Hitler is enacting in German that is problematic, but rather the way in which he is going about it. What makes Atticus impatient with Hitler is the maniacal zeal with which he is implementing his racial/ethnic segregation. Atticus would appear to have the same concern about Maycomb. Shortly before the trial of Tom Robinson, he tells his brother Jack:

I hope and pray I can get Jem and Scout through it without bitterness, and most of all, without catching Maycomb’s usual disease. Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don’t pretend to understand. (Lee 100–1)

As with his understanding of Hitler, it is not the prejudice that concerns him, but the self-defeating madness – “the usual disease” – it engenders in his fellow white citizens. Atticus Finch, it might be argued, prefers his discrimination to be rational, orderly, and methodical; anything less tries his patience.

Notes

1. In their own self-understanding, a “racial realist” is somebody who recognizes the existence of biologically determined races existing in a hierarchy. The Southern Poverty Law Center offers a more accurate depiction. “Jared Taylor projects himself as a courtly presenter of ideas that most would describe as crudely white supremacist – a kind of modern-day version of the refined but racist colonialist of old.” https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/jared-taylor. Accessed 12/6/2016.
2. What was true of the secular press was also true of the Christian newspapers (Ross).
3. As early as March 1933, for example, Governor Benjamin M. Miller sent a letter to the national conference on Racial Persecution in Germany, condemning the Nazis’ actions against the Jews; likewise, the Mobile City commission, lobbied by the city’s Jewish population, unanimously passed a resolution expressing regret for the examples of intolerance displayed by Nazi Germany.
4. The real anachronism here concerns Elmer Davis – one of the great CBS radio newsmen – to whom Atticus was said to be listening. Davis did not begin his radio career in earnest until 1939, less than two weeks before Germany invaded Poland, and some four years after the period in which Atticus is depicted turning off his
broadcasts (Fang 175–197). Prior to 1939, moreover, Davis was known as a print journalist, not a broadcaster; indeed, in the period in which Atticus is said to be listening to him, he was most likely on, or about to embark on, a tour of Europe for Harper’s magazine (Fang 180).

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Works cited