

**Godwin's Law and the Covid-19 Pandemic:**  
**An Exercise in Critical Thinking**

**Grade 10:** CHC2D – Canadian History Since World War I

*Units:*

- E. Canada, 1982 to the Present
  - *Focus: Continuity and Change*

**Grade 11:** CHT3O - World History since 1900

*Units :*

- E. A Globalizing World: Issues and Interactions since 1991
  - *Focus: Identity, Citizenship, and Heritage*

**DESCRIPTION:** The evocation of the memory and images of World War II is frequent and on the rise in online spaces and political discourse. The comparing of opponents to Hitler and the Nazis, and oneself to victims of the Holocaust, is now common. This has been especially the case in regards to the controversy surrounding responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic, particularly vaccine mandates. This lesson can serve to facilitate greater awareness of current events, as an introduction to issues of personal freedom and civic responsibility, and as an exercise in critical thinking and media literacy. The visual examples used here were gathered by research assistants for the “Populist Publics: Memory, Populism, and Misinformation in the Canadian Social Mediascape” project at Carleton University, and are meant to give a sense of the online content with which a student might come into contact.

**TIME:** One 60–90 minute class period for the students to read the articles and fill in the worksheet. Another class period could be used for discussions based upon the worksheet.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Inspire civic awareness about the nature of political discourse
- Encourage critical thinking about ideologically motivated evocations of history
- Situate media literacy within a matrix of current events and historical knowledge

**MATERIALS:**

- Worksheet
- Referenced newspaper articles

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**Introduction**

First appearing in the very early days of the internet, **Godwin's Law** is the observation that **the longer an online discussion goes on, the more**

**probable a comparison involving the Nazis or Hitler becomes.** For example, an online discussion about gun control may reference Hitler banning personal weapons, a discussion about abortion

may reference the Nazi death camps, and a discussion about censorship may reference Nazi book burnings.

A variation on Godwin's Law is the **Hitler Ate Sugar** logical fallacy, a sub-type of the Association Fallacy, in which it is assumed that **anything that a bad person did or liked is itself bad, and anyone who does or likes the same thing is bad by association**. For example, a discussion about atheism might culminate in the assertion that Hitler was an atheist and, therefore, being an atheist is bad.

The original idea behind Godwin's Law was that the first person in an argument to break it and play the "Hitler card" thereby lost the argument, the assumption being that if you have to resort to comparing your adversary to a genocidal dictator, that means that you must have run out of legitimate arguments to use.

***However, do you think that this is actually true?***



**Question #1:** Is it really *never* valid to compare anyone to Hitler, or anything to the Nazis?

Why or why not?

If you think that it *is* a valid comparison to make in some situations, what are those situations?

### **The Pandemic I**

Since the Covid-19 Pandemic began in December of 2019, there has been a lot of controversy about how best to respond to it. Tensions have run particularly high around the issue of whether or not vaccines should be mandatory. Among opponents of vaccine mandates (making vaccines mandatory), comparing advocates for vaccine mandates to Hitler and the Nazis has become common.

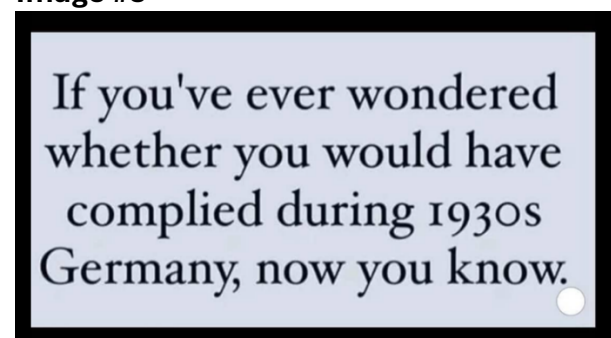
*The following are images taken from social media. Try to identify what two things are being compared, and the argument or point that each of the images is trying to make.*

**Image #1**



**Image #2**

**Image #3**



Comparison:

Argument:

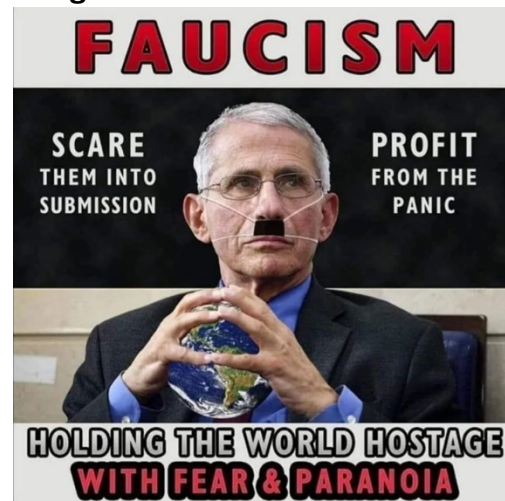
If you're vaccinated but you're complaining about the unvaccinated then what you're really saying is that you don't think the vaccines work.

Comparison:



Argument:

Image #6



Comparison:

Argument:

Image #4



Comparison:

Argument:

Comparison:

Image #5

Argument:

**Argument:**

**Comparison:**

**Question #2:** Do you think that any of the above memes are making a valid comparison? Why or why not?

Do you think that any of the above memes are making a valid argument? Why or why not?

### **The Pandemic II**

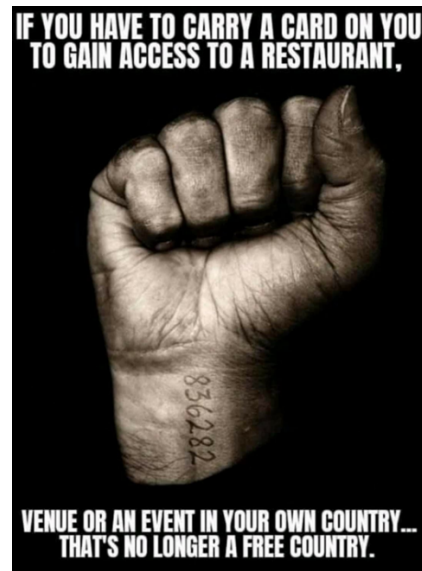
In addition to comparing their opponents to Hitler and the Nazis, people who oppose vaccine mandates have also evoked the memory and imagery of the Holocaust.

***The following are more images from social media. Once again, try to identify what two things are being compared, and the argument or point that each of the images is trying to make.***

**Image #1**



**Image #2**



**Image #3**



**Comparison:**

**Argument:**

**Comparison:**

**Argument:**

**Comparison:**

**Argument:**

**Question #3:** As before, do you think that any of the above memes are making a valid comparison? A valid argument? Why?

On the other hand, do you think that any of the above memes are making an invalid comparison? Do you find any of them offensive? Why?

### **The Media**

***Please read the three (3) newspaper articles included below and answer the following questions.***

1. What historical comparisons (asserting a similarity between the past and the present) are being made in **article #1**? Do you think that they are valid? Why or why not?
2. **Article #2** quotes a number of people who objected to, and were upset by, the fact that vaccine mandate protestors were evoking the memory and imagery of the Holocaust, such as the Star of David and Anne Frank. What reasons did they give for objecting and being upset? Do you think that they have a point, or do you think that they are overreacting? Why?
3. **Article #3** is written by Mike Godwin himself. Does he think that it is *always* invalid to compare someone to Hitler? Why does he think that? Do you think that he is being nuanced, or hypocritical?

### **Article #1**

## **Fox News Host Tucker Carlson Compares Vaccine Mandates to ‘Nazi Experiments’**

**Influential host calls measures imposed by Biden administration ‘unethical’ and ‘immoral’**





Martin Pengelly  
From The Guardian  
Sat 22 Jan 2022

The Fox News host Tucker Carlson has compared coronavirus vaccine mandates imposed by Joe Biden's government to medical experiments conducted by Nazi Germany and imperial Japan.

"I thought that we had a kind of consensus," Carlson said on Friday.

"I mean, after watching what the imperial Japanese army and the Nazis did in their medical experiments, I thought that American physicians agreed that compulsory medical care was unethical, it was immoral and it could never be imposed on anyone. When did we forget that?"

Carlson's guest, the virologist and anti-vaxxer Robert Malone, said: "Apparently about a year ago, I think yesterday" – a reference to Biden's inauguration on 20 January 2021 – "was when we must have forgotten that, although Mr. Biden prior to his election made clear statements that he wasn't going to force vaccination."

On 4 December 2020, after his election victory, Biden told reporters: "No, I don't think [vaccines] should be mandatory. I wouldn't demand to be mandatory, but I would do everything in my power."



Carlson is vastly influential, commanding huge audiences in primetime. He has promoted resistance to vaccine mandates and conspiracy theories about the effects of the shots. It is not known if he is vaccinated but Fox News has strict rules for its staff.

Carlson's exchange with Malone came on the day a judge in Texas blocked the Biden administration's vaccine mandate for federal employees.

The White House said 98% of such employees had been vaccinated or were seeking a religious or medical exemption and added that it was confident it had the legal authority to impose the mandate in question.

Earlier this month, the supreme court blocked a mandate for large businesses but allowed a requirement for healthcare facilities. A mandate for federal contractors was blocked by a judge in December.

More than 864,000 people have died of Covid-19 in the US. Federal authorities say 75.4% of eligible Americans have had at least one vaccine dose, 63.3% are considered fully vaccinated with two doses, and 39.5% have had a booster shot.

Carlson's comparison of mandates to tortures inflicted by totalitarian regimes came not long after a Fox News contributor, Lara Logan, compared Biden's chief medical adviser, Anthony Fauci, to the Nazi doctor Josef Mengele.

Fox News has distanced itself from Logan. She has reportedly lost her agent.

On Friday, Malone referred to the process by which Nazi leaders were brought to account, saying: "Thank you for bringing up the Nuremberg trials, Tucker. They are crucial biomedical ethics matter. And this is frankly illegal and I'm so glad that the courts are making it clear.

"It's unfortunate that so many federal workers and so many members of our military had been forced to take these products while they're still experimental, against their will."

Fox News did not immediately return a request for comment.

## **Article #2**

# Disgust Growing Over Vaccine Protesters' Holocaust Comparisons

Demonstrators seen wearing yellow stars, holding pictures of Anne Frank

Alistair Steele · CBC News · Posted: Sep 15, 2021



At the National Holocaust Monument in Ottawa on Tuesday, they gathered to remember the Babi Yar massacre.

Over two days in late September 1941, nearly 34,000 Jewish men, women and children were herded through the streets of Kyiv in Nazi-occupied Ukraine, stripped of their clothing and forced into a narrow ravine where they were mown down with machine guns. Dead and wounded alike were then buried where they lay.

At the solemn ceremony, which happened the same day provincial officials unveiled details of Ontario's vaccine passport system, there was little sympathy for those who have been protesting against such passports and vaccine mandates — some comparing themselves to victims of Nazi brutality.

"It's a total desecration of the memory of ... those that were killed during the Holocaust," said prominent Ottawa lawyer Lawrence Greenspon, who co-chaired Tuesday's commemoration. "It's incredibly insulting."

The comparisons are "vile," agreed Andrea Freedman, CEO of the Jewish Federation of Ottawa.

"They're dangerous, and they're a gross and wilful distortion of history," she told CBC News.

"It's offensive. It's offensive to the survivors, and it's offensive to the memory of the six million people who were systematically murdered."

It's difficult to say whether the sentiment is widespread among the protesters, or representative of an extreme fringe. Protesters wearing yellow stars like those Jews were forced to wear in Nazi-occupied Europe have been seen at demonstrations across Canada.

At a demonstration in Calgary last week, one protester held a picture of Anne Frank, the teenage diarist who died in a Nazi concentration camp.

One internet meme making the rounds shows two forearms, one wearing a proof-of-vaccination bracelet at a baseball game, the other bearing a six-digit tattoo from a concentration camp.

"Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it," the caption reads.

But CBC News spotted no sign of demonstrators comparing their cause to the plight of Jews during the Second World War when about 50 gathered on Monday near the Civic campus of The Ottawa Hospital.

Freedman rejects any such comparisons as not only wrong-headed, but potentially dangerous.

"There can be absolutely no comparison between torture and persecution, to getting a vaccine or wearing a mask, and quite frankly making such comparisons just trivializes the horrors of the [Holocaust]," she said.

For Freedman, that distortion is linked both to a general and growing ignorance about the Holocaust.

"It's a lack of knowledge, it's a lack of education and it's a wilful ignorance of understanding the complexities of history," she said.

That's particularly true when it comes to hospital protesters comparing themselves to Frank, who's believed to have died of typhus.

"The irony of this is that Anne Frank perished from a treatable disease," Freedman said.

Increasingly, politicians are speaking out against such comparisons, too.

Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson called them "unbelievable and appalling."

"Please think about the millions of Jews and others murdered and tortured and stop using this analogy," he wrote on Twitter last week.

"I really wish there was a way that we could stop it from happening, but I don't think that the criminal law is at current equipped to be able to do that," said Greenspon.

At the commemoration on Tuesday, several speakers alluded to a key lesson of the Holocaust: that such evil is only made possible when others look away. For that reason, Freedman says everyone has a duty to denounce such comparisons.

"We can't stay silent," she said. "That is one of the lessons of the Holocaust, is you can't stay silent."

Article #3

## **Sure, Call Trump a Nazi. Just Make Sure You Know What You're Talking About.**

The inventor of "Godwin's Law" about Hitler comparisons on the Internet says they're not always inappropriate.

By Mike Godwin

The Washington Post

December 14, 2015

First, let me get this Donald Trump issue out of the way: If you're thoughtful about it and show some real awareness of history, go ahead and refer to Hitler or Nazis when you talk about Trump. Or any other politician.

My Facebook timeline and Twitter feed have been blowing up lately. And whenever that happens, it's almost always because someone's making comparisons to Hitler or Nazis or the Holocaust somewhere. Sure enough, as Trump pontificates about immigrants or ethnic or religious minorities, with scarcely less subtlety than certain early 20th-century political aspirants in Europe did, people on the Internet feel compelled to ask me what I think about it.

Why? Simple: Because 25 years ago, when the Internet was still a pup, I came up with Godwin's Law. In its original form, Godwin's Law goes like this: "As an online discussion continues, the probability of a reference or comparison to Hitler or Nazis approaches 1."

Invoking Hitler or Nazis (or World War II or the Holocaust) is common in public life these days, both in the United States and around the world, and it has been for quite a while. Back in 1990, I set out — half-seriously and half-whimsically — to do something about it.

Through most of the 1980s, I'd been a hobbyist using computer "bulletin-board systems" that connected small local communities by telephone lines. I couldn't help but notice how often comparisons to Hitler or Nazis came up in heated exchanges, usually as a kind of rhetorical hammer to express rage or contempt for one's opponent. Once I was back in school to study law, I leveraged my student status to get a free Internet-based computer account. With access to the global Internet came still more hyperbolic Hitler and Nazi comparisons.

Despite the Internet's distractions, I did actually manage to study law. And I was drawn to a particular kind of legal problem: What happens when a nation, although acting consistently with its own laws, behaves so monstrously that other nations, and eventually history itself, are compelled to condemn it? I steeped myself in the history of the Nazi movement and in accounts of the Holocaust, including Primo Levi's harrowing "Survival in Auschwitz." I was increasingly troubled by the disconnect between what I was reading about the Third Reich and the way people used that era against debating opponents online.

Could I help close the gap between the glibness and the graphic accounts? I was no historian or eyewitness; I probably knew less about Hitler and Nazi Germany than the average viewer of the History Channel. But I knew enough about science to recast my distaste for these trivializing comparisons as if it were a law of nature. I framed Godwin's Law as a pseudo-mathematical probability statement, almost like a law of physics. I wanted to hint that most people who brought Nazis into a debate about, say, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's views on gun control weren't being thoughtful and independent. Instead, they were acting just as predictably, and unconsciously, as a log rolling down a hill.

After some early energetic seeding on my part, "Godwin's Law" took off in the early days of large-scale public access to the Internet. Users would see a poorly reasoned, hyperbolic invocation of Nazis or the Holocaust and call the arguer to account, claiming the shallow argument had proved (or, sometimes, had "violated") Godwin's Law. Soon after, Godwin's Law propagated into the mainstream media as well. Democrats and Republicans alike invoke it from time to time — so do other political parties in the United States and around the world. Sometimes it's invoked by a Democratic blogger; sometimes it's cited by a Republican. The law notably surfaced recently in Canadian politics, too.

So has Godwin's Law actually reduced spurious Hitler or Nazi or Holocaust comparisons? Obviously not — just sample your own media sources, and you'll find that Hitler comparisons are alive and well. (My personal favorite this year: the Mets fan who likened Yankees fans to former Nazi Party members.) But I do think the meme gives Internet users a clear opportunity to think critically about shallow references to the

Nazis or the Holocaust. And it exposes glib Nazi comparisons or Holocaust references to the harsh light of interrogation.

The idea seems to travel well, adapting itself to new languages and cultures. In French, for example, users sometimes say a debate has reached “the Godwin point” when discussion has degenerated into Nazi comparisons, and one author, François De Smet, subtitled his 2014 book “Reductio ad Hitlerum” (a philosophical essay) as “une théorie du point Godwin.”

To be clear: I don’t personally believe all rational discourse has ended when Nazis or the Holocaust are invoked. But I’m pleased that people still use Godwin’s Law to force one another to argue more thoughtfully. The best way to prevent future holocausts, I believe, is not to forbear from Holocaust comparisons; instead, it’s to make sure that those comparisons are meaningful and substantive. This is something a pleasantly surprising percentage of commentators in this political season have managed to do (like this piece on Trump by New America and CNN analyst Peter Bergen). And I’m pleased in any season to see more people revisiting the history books.

It’s still true, of course, that the worst thing you can say about your opponents, in our culture, is that they’re like Hitler or the Nazis. But I’m hopeful that we can prod our glib online rhetorical culture into a more thoughtful, historically reflective space. In 2015, the Internet gives more and more individuals both the information and the skepticism to question what politicians and others say in their Hitler-centered hyperboles. Just as importantly, the Internet gives us the tools to share our criticisms — including the appropriately appalled reaction to Trump’s statements — with one another more widely.

The one thing we shouldn’t be skeptical of is our right — our obligation, even — as ordinary individuals to use the Internet and the other tools of the digital age to challenge our would-be leaders and check the facts.

And by all means be skeptical of Godwin’s Law, too. But you don’t need me to tell you that.

