European Journal of International Security (2026), page 1 of 19
doi:10.1017/eis.2025.10039

EJIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pacifist rejoinders to the 'Hitler question'

Alexandre Christoyannopoulos

School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK
Email: a.christoyannopoulos@lboro.ac.uk

(Received 9 October 2025; revised 17 December 2025; accepted 17 December 2025)

Abstract

This article tackles head-on a question that is often thought to defeat pacifism: 'How then would you react against a Nazi invasion?' That multiple wars are still recurrently justified as necessary to confront yet another 'Hitler' makes tackling this question critically relevant far beyond pacifist circles. On the Nazi context specifically: the question comes too late if pitched in 1939; militarism did not deter Hitler; there were actually many examples of nonviolent resistance against Nazis; even Hitler was mindful of public opinion; and the fight 'against Nazis' claimed many non-Nazi German victims too. More generally, and adding theoretical depth: pacifism need not entail a single absolute rejection of violence in all scenarios; nonviolent resistance has been proved to be effective; war-readiness has a corrosive constitutive impact; the Nazi question tends to assume that the application of retaliatory violence is controllable; and to presume that violence is the only option is absolutist and idealistic. Far from delivering a conclusive victory, the Nazi question, carefully considered and discussed, exposes cracks in conventional thinking about violence and war and provides opportunities to unpack and clarify multiple arguments advanced by pacifism.

Keywords: Hitler; just war; pacifism; Second World War; war

Introduction

There comes a point in conversations about pacifism when its detractors often feel they have boxed pacifists into a corner with a killer question: 'How then would you react against a Nazi invasion?' If pacifists concede they would fight, their naïve pacifist credentials crumble in the face of cold but more mature realism. If they insist on not fighting, their position is exposed as immoral, unrealistic, even suicidal. The fact that the Second World War (WWII) is widely remembered as a 'just war' makes it particularly salient and challenging a litmus case for pacifism, but the question is also critical far beyond pacifist circles. Numerous wars since WWII have been – and are being – justified as necessary to confront yet 'another Hitler' (e.g., Milosevic, Hussein, Ghaddafi, Assad, Putin), thus mobilising variants of the Hitler question to shut down criticisms of the path to war. This article confronts this accepted question head-on, building on a growing pacifist scholarship to complicate and contest both its premises and the (both explicit and implicit) arguments it expects victory over.

Although there is burgeoning scholarship starting to give pacifist insights the attention they merit, this remains a relatively recent turn.[1] As recently as 2018, Richard Jackson demonstrated that, despite having much to offer on core politics and international relations (IR) 'subjects such as

[1]Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, 'Pacifism and nonviolence: Discerning the contours of an emerging multidisciplinary research agenda', *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, 1:1 (2023), pp. 1–27; Richard Jackson, 'Introduction: Rethinking the relevance of pacifism for security studies and IR', *Critical Studies on Security*, 6:2 (2018), pp. 155–9; Richard Jackson et al., 'Introduction: The return of pacifism to IR', *Global Society*, 34:1 (2020), pp. 1–3.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The British International Studies Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press or the rights holder(s) must be obtained prior to any commercial use.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

war, violence, security, defence, protection, peacebuilding and the like', pacifism has largely been 'subjugated' in the academy, in the dual sense of being ignored and, if mentioned, 'disqualified' as 'insufficiently elaborated'.[2] From realism and security studies to just war theory in IR, and whenever pacifism is mentioned across political theory and political philosophy, nearly always brought up as the go-to exhibit for scholars to cast it aside is precisely the 'Hitler question'.[3] Similarly in activist circles, such as in the lively discussions on the merits of revolutionary violence on the Left, the Nazis are frequently evoked to demonstrate that in some cases violence is simply necessary.[4] And actually, the Hitler question does sometimes seem to disarm pacifists, leading them to hesitate, dither, or backtrack on their pledge.[5]

A frequent argument in this dismissal of pacifism is that, even *if* nonviolence might be generally preferable and sometimes effective, it is just not effective against a particularly unscrupulous foe.[6] Gandhi's campaign for Indian independence, the argument sometimes goes, was successful because his opponents were the 'civilized'[7] and 'relatively benign'[8] British, who were anyway also weakened by WWII.[9] That Gandhi in fact refused to back the war against the Nazis, and even recommended nonviolent resistance to Jews who were asking him for advice, is seen as evidence that pacifists are 'political fools and moral imbeciles'.[10] It certainly sits uneasily against the dominant consensus, even among most critics of war and advocates of nonviolence, that war was indeed justified against Nazi Germany.[11]

My aim with this article is to complicate this common dismissal of pacifism and demonstrate that pacifism has much to offer when contemplating the use of organised violence, even in a scenario as dramatic as that pitched by the Hitler question. Methodologically, the argument is normative. It proceeds in two sections. The first considers and critically discusses the Nazi context and scenario specifically: the loaded timing of the Hitler question; the extent to which military methods obstructed Hitler; the nonviolent resistance against the Nazis; the role of public opinion; and the victims of anti-Nazi violence. The second adds theoretical depth by turning to and

[2]Jackson, 'Pacifism', p. 166.

[3]For example: Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Harcourt, 1969), p. 53; Duane Cady, *From Warism to Pacifism: A Moral Continuum Paperback* (Temple University Press, 2010), p. 93; Dustin Ells Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism: Violence and the Possibilities of Politics* (Suny, 2009), p. 121; Richard Jackson, 'Pacifism and the ethical imagination in IR', *International Politics*, 56:2 (2017), p. 215; Jackson, 'Pacifism', pp. 166–8; Cheyney Ryan, 'Pacifism(s)', *The Philosophical Forum*, 46:1 (2015), p. 33; Cheyney Ryan, *Pacifism as War Abolitionism* (Routledge, 2024), pp. 25–29; Michael C. Stratford, 'Can nonviolent defence be effective if the opponent is ruthless?: The Nazi case', *Social Alternatives*, 6:2 (1987), pp. 49–57; Ralph Summy, 'Nonviolence and the case of the extremely ruthless opponent', *Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change*, 6:1 (1994), pp. 1–29; Michael Walzer, 'Afterword: Nonviolence and the theory of war', in *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (Basic, 1992), pp. 332–3.

[4]Ward Churchill, *Pacifism as Pathology: Reflections on the Role of Armed Struggle in North America* (AK Press, 2007), pp. 47–54; Derrick Jensen, 'Preface (to the 2007 Edition)', in Ward Churchill, *Pacifism as Pathology: Reflections on the Role of Armed Struggle in North America* (AK Press, 2007), pp. 6–7; Wayne Price, 'Why I Am Not a Pacifist', The Anarchist Library (2017), available at: {https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/wayne-price-why-i-am-not-a-pacifist}, accessed 12 September 2018.

[5]For example: Stanley Hauerwas, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (eds) Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (eds) *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Blackwell, 2004), pp. 136–149; Michael Maier, 'When pacifism is wrong: An interview with Andrew Gilmour', Berghof Foundation (2023), available at: {https://berghof-foundation.org/news/when-pacifism-is-wrong}, accessed 8 March 2024; Martin Wight, 'Christian Pacifism', *Theology*, 33:193 (1936), pp. 12–21.

[6]Stratford, 'Can nonviolent defence be effective if the opponent is ruthless?'; Summy, 'Nonviolence'; Walzer, 'Afterword', pp. 332–3.

[7]Cady, *From Warism to Pacifism*, p. 28.

[8]Summy, 'Nonviolence', p. 5.

[9]Churchill, *Pacifism as Pathology*, p. 54.

[10]Andrew Fiala, *Transformative Pacifism: Critical Theory and Practice* (Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 22; see also Jennifer Kling, 'Humanitarian intervention and the problem of genocide and atrocity', in Andrew Fiala (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Pacifism and Nonviolence* (Routledge, 2018), p. 154.

[11]Robert L. Holmes, *The Ethics of Nonviolence*, ed. Predrag Cicovacki (Bloomsbury, 2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

critically discussing the broader assumptions and implicit claims about war and pacifism that the Hitler question typically comes with: common (mis)understandings of pacifism; whether nonviolent resistance can be effective; the constitutive impact of war; the controllability of violence; and idealised imaginaries of violence.

Articulating these pacifist rejoinders to the Hitler question is important and original for several reasons. Firstly, nowhere in the politics and IR scholarship that touches on this question has it been tackled in such a dedicated and systematic way. Even when the question is given more than a passing mention, the discussion tends to spread over no more than a few paragraphs, and only a handful of the relevant potential arguments are alluded to. This article therefore provides scholars across political and IR theory with a sustained rebuttal to the dominant dismissal of pacifism. Secondly and relatedly, by trawling the literature for fragmentary rejoinders, pulling them together, and enriching them with arguments building on cognate scholarship, this article articulates the most authoritative treatment of the question to date.

Thirdly, the article contributes to complicating simplistic and romanticised memories and rationalisations of both WWII specifically and war more generally, including popular imaginaries of 'just war' and of heroic action in war. Fourthly, it demonstrates to its critics that pacifism actually does have much to offer when thinking about 'war, violence, security, defence, protection, peacebuilding and the like',[12] and that it should therefore be taken seriously as a significant school of thought and praxis in politics and IR, not least when contemplating one of the most serious political decisions that can be taken: whether fellow human beings deserve to be killed. The implications of this are therefore relevant not just for those who study political theory or IR, including war studies, security studies, and just war theory, but also for all political agents considering organised violence or being lobbied to support it.

And fifthly, it actually addresses pacifists too, especially those who have been prone to concede substantial ground to their critics when challenged with the Hitler question, sometimes precisely partly due to a lack of strong enough rejoinders readily available to complicate the discussion. Like many other political currents, pacifism has much to offer that is rich and relevant to difficult yet pressing political questions. By pushing back against a common formula to dismiss it, this article invites many of those who have hitherto dismissed it, both in the scholarship and beyond, to instead engage with it more earnestly.

In closing this introduction, two related points are worth noting. Firstly, even if the Hitler question does feature in debates about the place of violence in revolutionary resistance, my focus in this article is primarily on inter-state war, not revolutionary violence. Secondly, there are variations of the Hitler question that are sometimes mentioned alongside it but that fall outside the scope of this article. Some refer to other wars (usually in addition to WWII), but most are variants of the 'individual attacker analogy': 'how would you react if someone was about to kill you', or 'to commit violence against a loved one', or 'against a vulnerable neighbour?' The line of argument with such questions then typically proceeds to extrapolate the anticipated *individual* reaction to an *individual* attacker onto *state*-on-*state* relations. In other words, unlike the Hitler question, for the individual attacker analogy to apply to international relations requires anthropomorphising states. This move is problematic and oversimplistic in various ways, but a discussion of this falls outside the scope of this article and can be found elsewhere.[13] It is also more a tactical question than about wider organisation and strategy.[14] Therefore, while the Hitler question and the individual attacker analogy are sometimes raised together and conjure partly similar challenges, the focus of this article is

[12]Jackson, 'Pacifism', p. 166.

[13]Lee-Ann Chae, 'Pacific resistance: A moral alternative to defensive war', *Social Theory and Practice*, 44:1 (2018), pp. 1–20; Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, 'An anarcho-pacifist reading of international relations: A normative critique of international politics from the confluence of pacifism and anarchism', *International Studies Quarterly*, 66:4 (2022) available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac070}; Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, 'Questioning the warist orthodoxy: Pacifist critical reflections on Russia's invasion of Ukraine', *International Affairs*, 101:1 (2025), pp. 253–272; Jackson, 'Pacifism'; Majken Jul Sørensen, *Pacifism Today: A Dialogue about Alternatives to War in Ukraine* (Irene, 2024).

[14]Summy, 'Nonviolence', pp. 3–4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on the former, and by extension on similar state-on-state circumstances. Some of the arguments below arguably apply as rejoinders to the individual attacker analogy, but the primary focus here is the Hitler question.

Resisting the Nazis

A first set of pacifist rejoinders pertains to the specific historical context mobilised by the Hitler question.

Setting the question

Firstly, posing the question when Poland has already been invaded, after the annexation of the Sudetenland and once Hitler's eyes are on France and Britain, does instil a sense of dramatic emergency. However, like asking the gladiator how they propose to act when the starved lions enter the ring and have just killed a couple of their fellows, the question comes rather late if pitched in 1939 or later.

The broader historical context cannot be ignored: the recent First World War (WWI), the harshness of the Versailles Treaty for Germany, the post-1929 economic crisis and ensuing tide of nationalist protectionism, as well as the wider but ongoing and hungry expansionist imperialism of Europe's Great Powers.[15] The Hitler question is set in an already tense and militarised scenario. This delivers a sense of urgency and crisis, but the extent to which militarism and organised violence *produce* crises like 1939 in the first place should not be overlooked.[16] The question confronting Paris and London by then is serious indeed, but the French and British governments were already implicated in multiple ways in the escalating tensions upstream.

A more wholistic pacifist approach might have led to different circumstances by 1939 to begin with. This points to the wider set of priorities that pacifists tend to advance around 'positive peace', treating all parties with dignity, and working together to sink the foundations of a stable and just peace.[17] Concretely, the traumas of WWI might have been addressed more collectively and with a less vindictive victors' treaty; the economic crisis might have been used less to whip up international tensions and more to develop greater international solidarities; and the violent engines of imperialism might have been reigned in. One could furthermore ask how Hitler might have been resisted differently and more effectively *before* 1939, including both up to 1933 and thereafter.

Pitching the question in what had become the context in 1939, however, helps stage WWII as an unavoidable 'tragedy',[18] obscuring the foreseeable adverse effects of antecedent policies (Versailles, militarism, imperialism), presenting Allied leaders as lacking agency and options to respond any differently, and thus excusing the surrender to the war.

War to stop Hitler

Secondly, if organised violence proved part of the solution to ultimately defeating the Nazis, the threat of it did not prevent Hitler's rise to power in the first place, nor did it protect Jews from

[15]Bart de Ligt, *The Conquest of Violence: An Essay on War and Revolution* (Pluto, 1989), p. 243; A. J. Muste, *What Would Pacifists Have Done About Hitler? A Discussion of War, Dictators and Pacifism* (Kessinger, 1949), p. 2; Ryan, *Pacifism as War Abolitionism*.

[16]Helen Dexter, 'Pacifism and the problem of protecting others', *International Politics*, 56:2 (2019), pp. 243–258; Jackson, 'Pacifism and the ethical imagination in IR'.

[17]Cady, *From Warism to Pacifism*, pp. 79–92; Andrew Fiala, 'Toward an ontology of pacifism: Three ontological intuitions of the pacifist tradition', *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence* (2025), pp. 1–28; Richard Jackson, 'Post-liberal peacebuilding and the pacifist state', *Peacebuilding*, 6:1 (2018), pp. 1–16; Stellan Vinthagen, 'Praxis of emerging liberations: A transdisciplinary knowledge-making of how to liberate within-against-and-beyond systems of violence', *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, 1:1 (2023), pp. 114–129.

[18]Benoît Pelopidas and Neil C. Renic, 'The tragedy trap: On the tragicized politics of nuclear weapons and armed drones and the making of unaccountability', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 38:2 (2024), pp. 209–231.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

genocide.[19] Military force also failed to prevent Hitler from taking almost all of Europe and North Africa for the first few years of the war, which could have become a more permanent outcome had the Nazis mastered the atomic bomb first.[20] Either way, violence and military strategy did eventually bring Hitler down, but only *after* a colossally devastating global war *and* the Holocaust. 'It is also worth remembering', Brian Martin notes, that the industrial-scale 'extermination of the Jews and other stigmatised groups did not begin until after the war began', the war having provided 'a brutalising environment' as well as 'a cover' to implement the 'Final Solution'.[21]

Furthermore, the dominant memory of war against the Nazis has generated plenty of moral posturing that deserves questioning. The USA, UK, and USSR did not deploy their military might to slow down the genocide by, for instance, striking the rail network, as they could have done, in light of their growing awareness of it.[22] Indeed, it was not to stop the genocide that the Allies did intervene, even if effectively putting an end to it has helped remember WWII as a just war. For that matter, the states that defeated the Nazis have turned a blind eye to plenty of other genocides, such as of Armenians in 1919, by Stalin in the 1930s, or in Cambodia in the 1970s, without launching military interventions.[23]

Moreover, the war that defeated Hitler was 'not against the ruthless system of fascism per se', but 'against German military and political expansion'.[24] Plenty of other fascist and sub-fascist regimes have been left unthreatened or even propped up by those who defeated Hitler.[25] Also notable is that 'the Allies systematically returned Nazis and ruling class collaborators to positions of power in post-war Western Germany'.[26] Some pacifists furthermore observe that although war did defeat Hitler on the battlefield, (neo)fascism is back now.[27] Besides, among the biggest supporters of fascism today, and indeed during WWII in both Germany and occupied territories, are those 'who [laud] military methods'.[28] That is of course not to say that all advocates of military action are fascists, but that what Cady calls 'warism'[29] is not particularly primed to prevent the emergence of fascism. Rather, warism and fascism tend to thrive alongside each other.

Inspired by Peck, Lindqvist, and others, Naomi Klein argues that although the Nazis are remembered as exceptionally evil, their regime was in several ways only a continuation of European practices in the colonies, just on a new scale, more industrialised, and unleashed onto fellow Europeans. Defeating Hitler was righteous indeed, but what should not be ignored (however convenient) is the extent to which he was inspired, in the methods of repression and in his militarism, by American, British, and other European colonial projects. Hence the lack of surprise at the Holocaust by those familiar with colonialism, such as Du Bois and Césaire. The rise of Hitler happened in a broader militaristic and violent colonial context in which the Allies were actively complicit.[30]

Again, therefore, one might ponder what could have been, had a different approach been adopted in the inter-war years to resist the rise of fascism. Allied militarism did not prevent it.

[19]Robert L. Holmes, *Pacifism: A Philosophy of Nonviolence* (Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 312; Jackson, 'Pacifism and the ethical imagination in IR', p. 217; Jackson, 'Pacifism', p. 169; Kling, 'Humanitarian intervention and the problem of genocide and atrocity', p. 162.

[20]Holmes, *The Ethics of Nonviolence*, p. 165.

[21]Brian Martin, 'The Nazis and nonviolence', *Social Alternatives*, 6:3 (1987), p. 48; see also Jacques Sémelin, *Purifier et détruire: Usages politiques des massacres et génocides* (Seuil, 2005).

[22]Jacques Semelin, *Sans armes face à Hitler 1939–1945: la résistance civile en Europe* (Les Arènes, 2013), pp. 360–1.

[23]Martin, 'The Nazis and nonviolence'.

[24]Martin, 'The Nazis and nonviolence', p. 47.

[25]Martin, 'The Nazis and nonviolence', p. 47.

[26]Brian Martin, 'The Nazis and nonviolence (III)', *Social Alternatives* 9:1 (1990), p. 55.

[27]Holmes, *The Ethics of Nonviolence*, p. 167.

[28]Martin, 'The Nazis and nonviolence', p. 49.

[29]Cady, *From Warism to Pacifism*.

[30]Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (Penguin, 2023), pp. 267–77; also Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Cornell University Press, 2011); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Verso, 2018).

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nonviolence, widely coordinated as a method of resistance (including within Germany) and in the full sense of also working towards positive peace and common emancipation, might have charted a path different to the one that brought the Nazis to power, and Europe to war.[31]

Non-violent resistance against the Nazis

Thirdly, it is in fact misleading to remember the successful defeat of the Nazis as down only to military force, because there were in fact plenty of examples of nonviolent resistance to the Nazis whose role should not be underplayed. Perhaps the most exhaustive study of these, by Jacques Semelin,[32] recounts the wide repertoire of methods of civil resistance that were used through the war.[33]

Across the territories occupied by the Nazis or governed by their sympathisers, numerous Nazi policies and initiatives were thwarted by public institutions and state administrators from low-ranking civil servants to magistrates and royalty; by dissenting churches and clergy; by industrial strikes, sabotage, and go-slows; and by particular sectors such as doctors (the Netherlands), miners (Belgium, France), school teachers (and parents – Norway), or the entire education sector (Poland). Popular initiatives from the ground up also established solidarity networks that protected Jews and helped them escape (Bulgaria, Denmark, France). National commemorations became vectors of public defiance. Clandestine newspapers were organised and circulated. Plenty of nonviolent resistance happened and contributed to ultimately defeating the Nazis and resisting the Holocaust. Even within Germany, wives and relatives of Jewish men managed to get them liberated (the Rosenstrasse protest), and churches successfully stopped the systematic extermination of the 'mentally ill'.

Most of these actions, however, were improvised, and rarely reached a large scale. Despite that, they met some successes. Where they failed, such failures might have resulted from 'deficiencies in the way the campaigns were waged', not the 'intrinsic nature of nonviolent resistance' necessarily,[34] nor the ruthlessness of the Nazis in repressing resistance.[35] And just because the Nazis did implement many brutal policies does not mean the cause was an antecedent failure to resist violently.[36] Moreover, just as effective military responses require coordinated training and investment, so too do nonviolent strategies.[37] 'Skilful use of physical violence' might be more effective than 'poorly executed' nonviolence, but the converse is also true (and discussed further below): well-planned nonviolence, including with sufficient training, can be more effective than poorly executed violence.[38] Better coordinated nonviolent resistance on an even larger scale might have had an even bigger impact.

Nonviolent methods work differently than violent ones. Instead of physically overpowering or killing opponents, they address them as human beings, looking to sap their will to exact violence by eroding their rationalisations for the violence they help inflict. Meeting German soldiers nonviolently could have affected conflict dynamics. They would no longer feel physically threatened. Some might have still killed with zeal regardless, but to assume all occupying soldiers would continue killing unarmed resisters would be to assume 'that most German soldiers had a special penchant

[31] Holmes, *The Ethics of Nonviolence*, p. 165; Richard Jackson, 'Pacifism in international relations', in Oliver P. Richmond and Gëzim Visoka (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Peacebuilding, Statebuilding, and Peace Formation* (Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 112.

[32] Semelin, *Sans armes face à Hitler*.

[33] Shorter and more selective accounts can also be found in Kling, 'Humanitarian intervention and the problem of genocide and atrocity', pp. 161–3; Sørensen, *Pacifism Today*, pp. 12–30; Summy, 'Nonviolence', pp. 19–26.

[34] Summy, 'Nonviolence', p. 5.

[35] Summy, 'Nonviolence', pp. 19, 22.

[36] Summy, 'Nonviolence', p. 5.

[37] Holmes, *The Ethics of Nonviolence*, pp. 165–6.

[38] Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism*, p. 128.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for inhumanity'.[39] Either way, how nonviolent resistance works *when* it does is unpacked and discussed further below. Here, what should be noted is firstly that there *were* plenty of examples of nonviolent resistance against the Nazis, but secondly that they were largely piecemeal, reactive, and neither planned nor coordinated and funded anywhere near as much as violent resistance was.

Besides, Hitler was expecting violent military encounters and was prepared for them. Resisting differently could have outmanoeuvred him. There are indeed reports that Nazi generals preferred violent resistance and were relieved whenever any nonviolent resistance, which they were frustrated by, turned violent: they now knew what to do.[40] The war machine – the training, the propaganda, the military strategy, etc. – prepared them for it. Therefore, those who engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience were often ruthlessly repressed, but so were those resisting violently. Violence was how the Nazis confronted most resistance. The question is whether violence was the only or the most effective method to respond to theirs.

As for nonviolent resistance to the Holocaust specifically, the obvious challenge here is that the policy was expressly to eradicate Jews. Resisting a genocide through nonviolent sacrifices can come across as insane complicity in mass suicide. But the responsibility for potential nonviolent resistance should not be assumed to fall on Jewish shoulders alone. Plenty of non-Jews could, and did, join in on efforts to resist, disrupt, and denounce the genocide. It is nonetheless worth noting that the policy 'was carefully designed to thwart resistance of all kinds'.[41] One cynical ingredient was to let at least some Jews hold hopes of survival, allowing some to remain in denial to some degree and until it was too late.[42] Another was to ensure that every cog of the Holocaust machinery was 'isolated from full responsibility'.[43] The Nazi regime also made efforts to seclude the mass killing from the wider population.[44]

Public opinion

Fourthly, therefore, even in the context of Nazi Germany, public opinion played a non-negligible role. The Nazis were mindful of it,[45] not least since they had never secured an electoral majority in the first place.[46] Hitler was well aware of the dependency of dictators on some degree of popular support.[47] The Nazis knew also that executing a policy as large-scale as the extermination of millions of Jews made them dependent on third party cooperation, including from non-Nazi elites, administrators, and a substantial proportion of the wider population.[48] This seems to have restrained them to some degree until the start of the war, which, when it came, generated dynamics that provided a markedly more genocide-enabling context.[49]

There are several examples in the 1930s when antisemitic Nazi policies were backtracked when they alienated the public for varying reasons, just like the systematic extermination of the 'mentally ill' had to stop in the face of growing public outrage.[50] Kristallnacht, the very public orgy of violence

[39]Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism*, p. 131.

[40]B. H. Liddell Hart, 'Lessons from resistance movements – guerilla and non-violent', in Adam Roberts (ed.), *Civilian Resistance as a National Defence: Non-Violent Action against Aggression* (Pelican, 1969), pp. 239–40; Kurt Schock, 'Nonviolent action and its misconceptions: Insights for social scientists', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 36:4 (2003), p. 708; Semelin, *Sans armes face à Hitler*, pp. 261–2; Summy, 'Nonviolence', p. 20.

[41]Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism*, p. 132.

[42]Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin, 1977); Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism*, p. 132; Semelin, *Sans armes face à Hitler*, pp. 286–92.

[43]Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism*, p. 133; see also Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, *Tolstoy's Political Thought: Christian Anarcho-Pacifist Iconoclasm Then and Now* (Routledge, 2020) on how state violence is organised to shirk responsibility.

[44]Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism*, pp. 134–5.

[45]Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism*, p. 134; Semelin, *Sans armes face à Hitler*, pp. 275–338.

[46]Johann Chapoutot, *Les irresponsables: Qui a porté Hitler au pouvoir?* (Gallimard, 2025).

[47]Summy, 'Nonviolence', pp. 28–9.

[48]Summy, 'Nonviolence', pp. 20–4.

[49]Sémelin, *Purifier et détruire*.

[50]Summy, 'Nonviolence', pp. 21–2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ignited by the Nazis against Jews for one terrifying night, did not happen until 1938, and Hitler quickly realised that such public violence had to be a 'final fling'.[51] Thereafter, Jewish policy was executed mainly through organs of state, and German people were exposed to as little as possible of the Holocaust – as if proceeding more visibly might risk hindering it.

Independently of the Nazis' cold-blooded planning, however, a significant factor in explaining the Holocaust is also the ubiquity of the Jews' marginalisation *across Europe* at the time. Antisemitism has a long history and was particularly widespread in the leadup to WWII. Jews were thus marginalised in the sense both that they were discriminated against and often reviled, and that (partly as a result) their collective life was often relatively detached from that of other demographic groups. This made it easier to look away or be unaware of or indifferent to their plight. Where Jews were less marginalised (Denmark, Bulgaria, Rosenstrasse), more survived.[52] Where the Nazis depended on the collaboration of people who felt genuinely concerned for Jews, nonviolent resistance was more effective.[53]

In short, public opinion played a substantial role even in the Nazi context. Among the reasons this is worth noting is that public opinion is theorised as important in campaigns of nonviolent civil resistance, as discussed further below.

Non-Nazi Germans

Before turning to a wider set of pacifist rejoinders, a fifth and final observation needs to be made about the specific historical framing of the Hitler question. Put simply, pitting the fight as 'against the Nazis' obscures the many non-Nazi Germans who were victims of Nazism, too – both direct victims, and victims of the war that consumed them. Hitler and his fellow Nazis might have been responsible and thus deserving of retaliatory violence, but what of, say, the German conscript, or indeed of the dissident in Dresden?[54] 'Fighting the Nazis' turned to fighting 'the Germans', 'busting dams and drowning large numbers', and carpet-bombing urban populations.[55] Conscripts and civilians thus found themselves lumped in with 'the Nazis' and targeted accordingly.

War does that. It dehumanises. It thrives on, and then reproduces, binary identities that get cemented in blood and trauma. Yet there are humans on all sides, which nonviolence is better equipped to treat with dignity. 'Most of the German soldiers in WWII', Holmes observes, 'probably were no worse as persons than their American, British, and Russian counterparts'.[56] The Allies portrayed 'an entire population as evil' because of the actions of a substantial (and powerful) minority.[57] It is a form of 'collective punishment'.[58] Pacifists have long decried dynamics like these, and how they are galvanised by war.

Resisting war

Beyond those focused specifically on the historical context of the Hitler question, a second set of pacifist rejoinders complicates the discussion by disputing some of the assumptions with which the question tends to be asked, and adding theoretical depth to the above context-specific rejoinders.

Many pacifisms

Firstly, the Hitler question often comes with an assumption that pacifism stands for an absolute rejection of violence in all scenarios. It does not take much research into the pacifist tradition to

[51] Summy, 'Nonviolence', p. 21; also Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism*, p. 134.
[52] Semelin, *Sans armes face à Hitler*.
[53] Semelin, *Sans armes face à Hitler*; Summy, 'Nonviolence', p. 25.
[54] Soran Reader, 'Cosmopolitan pacifism', *Journal of Global Ethics*, 3:1 (2007), pp. 87–103.
[55] Uloth, in Vernon Richards (ed.), *Violence and Anarchism: A Polemic* (Freedom, 1993), p. 47.
[56] Holmes, *The Ethics of Nonviolence*, p. 158.
[57] Barry Gan, *Violence and Nonviolence: An Introduction* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), p. 29.
[58] Gan, *Violence and Nonviolence*, p. 30.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

realise this is a misunderstanding, and that this characterisation applies to some pacifists only. Like any other ideological tradition, pacifism comes in many varieties. Nuclear pacifists, for example, agree that war against the Nazis was justified, but oppose war in the nuclear age because of the unfathomably catastrophic yet predictable consequences of nuclear war (which, as Pelopidas shows, was averted on several occasions during the Cold War more out of sheer luck rather than careful strategic oversight).[59] Along these lines, Holmes insists that there is 'no inconsistency in holding' that WWII might have been just but that other wars have not met the threshold since.[60] Ryan furthermore notes that out of thousands of wars that can be considered, there is consensus only on WWII as being a truly just war – and even this consideration does not include the millions of Bangladeshis that died from Churchill's famine, or Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the failure to prevent the Holocaust.[61]

Either way, some pacifists oppose organised violence because they see war as immoral, others on more pragmatic grounds because they consider it ultimately ineffective or strategically counterproductive. Contingent pacifists are close to the just war tradition but reckon that hardly any war has truly met all the necessary criteria articulated by that tradition. Environmental pacifists frame their concerns about war especially on its ecological consequences. More broadly, pacifists also articulate concerns about the wider war system, the military–industrial complex, arms races, and the dynamics of militarism (including the constitutive element of war discussed below). There are, in short, many pacifisms, and pacifism amounts to much more than just stubborn principled objection to this and every possible war.[62]

Pacifism is also sometimes confused with, sometimes deliberately pictured and dismissed as, passivity or even cowardice. Critics sometimes denounce pacifism as simply letting war happen, ignoring the sober reality of the challenge posed. A classic WWII equivalent of this move is the retrospective ridiculing of British 'appeasement' policy – again, setting the question rather late and leaving the historical context unquestioned and oversimplified. It anyway does not take much digging into pacifism to realise that caricaturing it as passivity or cowardice is inaccurate.[63] Pacifists are very much concerned about organised violence, committed to understanding its drivers, and working to reduce it. They are just not convinced that the best way to do so is by confronting it with more violence. Nor do they necessarily lack courage in confronting it. Numerous pacifists have put their bodies on the line, facing persecution and even death. But 'believing something is worth dying for' is not the same as 'believing something is worth killing for',[64] and there are some forms of resistance that brave pacifists would rather die than commit.

Nor is advocating for nonviolence the same as defaulting to 'conventional politics', even if the latter 'is *usually* nonviolent in this limited sense'. Nonviolence 'typically lies outside […] regularised patterns of political behaviour'. It is often 'novel' in some way, sometimes illegal, usually 'carries with it an element of risk', and it is 'often exercised' precisely 'where the standard response might widely be expected to be the use or threat of physical force'.[65] Pacifism does not necessarily stand for some deluded insistence to keep using established democratic institutions and practices of diplomacy. Rather, it usually involves a search for creative, perhaps unconventional, often disruptive responses to the sedimented paths that so often lead to war.

[59] Benoît Pelopidas, 'The unbearable lightness of luck: Three sources of overconfidence in the manageability of nuclear crises', *European Journal of International Security*, 2:2 (2017), pp. 240–262.

[60] Holmes, *The Ethics of Nonviolence*, p. 164.

[61] Ryna, *Pacifism as War Abolitionism*, pp. 25–6.

[62] Iain Atack, *Nonviolence in Political Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Cady, *From Warism to Pacifism*, pp. 63–78; Duane Cady, 'A time – and a project – for pacifism and nonviolence studies', *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, 1:1 (2023), pp. 41–51; Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Nonviolent Struggle: Theories, Strategies, and Dynamics* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Ryan, 'Pacifism(s)'; Ryan, *Pacifism as War Abolitionism*.

[63] Duane Cady, 'Pacifism Is Not Passivism', *Philosophy Now* (2014), available at: {https://philosophynow.org/issues/105/Pacifism_Is_Not_Passivism}, accessed 5 March 2024; Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism*, p. 122.

[64] Cady, *From Warism to Pacifism*, p. 102.

[65] Summy, 'Nonviolence', p. 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Pacifism therefore has much more to offer than the stubborn and moralising refusal to respond to violence that the Hitler question tends to assume. The problem of collective violence is one that pacifists approach with eyes wide open, but also with a willingness to review typical responses to it, to question dominant assumptions about it, and to consider seemingly counter-intuitive yet potentially effective and innovative methods to reduce it.

Effectiveness of non-violent resistance

Secondly, it is indeed worth reflecting on how nonviolence operates, and whether and how it can be effective especially against particularly ruthless foes. Discussions about the relative effectiveness of violence and nonviolence can be frustrating. Martin, for instance, complained in 1987 that 'the use of different criteria to judge nonviolence and violence is a regular feature of debates on these issues', and that 'a single failure' is often 'used to reject nonviolence', but 'repeated failures' of violence, of which there are many, 'are never enough to reject' it.[66] To be fair, sometimes it is advocates of nonviolence who are accused of bias with their own choices of case studies.[67] More generally, historical examples can always be found when one's preferred method worked, and when the alternative one failed.

Since Martin expressed these frustrations, however, a growing volume of scholarship has been rigorously examining this question. Perhaps the most groundbreaking contribution was the publication of Chenoweth and Stephan's *Why Civil Resistance Works*.[68] Surveying 323 cases of violent and nonviolent resistance across the world from 1900 to 2006, they found that, although (importantly) neither method *guarantees* success, nonviolent resistance was successful two times more frequently than violent resistance, *including* when the opponent is a ruthless autocratic regime. Moreover, when it does succeed, nonviolent resistance tends to beget societies more respectful of democratic values and human rights than when violence succeeds. And while nonviolence does not guarantee that no violence or death will be suffered by the resistance, there is evidence to show that nonviolence reduces the number of civilian casualties.[69]

Chenoweth and Stephan's work has attracted some criticisms and generated considerable scholarship building on it and its associated dataset. On the whole, the empirical finding that nonviolence *is* effective, and apparently substantially *more* than violence, appears to hold.[70] There is ongoing debate on whether nonviolent resistance campaigns are more or less effective when accompanied by a more 'radical' or violent 'flank', but, taken as a whole, the scholarship on this remains

[66]Martin, 'The Nazis and nonviolence', p. 48.

[67]Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, 'Mapping the landscape between pacifism and anarchism: Accusations, rejoinders, and mutual resonances', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 27:1 (2024), pp. 407–429; Churchill, *Pacifism as Pathology*; Peter Gelderloos, *The Failure of Nonviolence* (Active Distribution, 2013); Peter Gelderloos, *How Nonviolence Protects the State* (Detritus, 2018); Stratford, 'Can nonviolent defence be effective?'

[68]Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stepham, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

[69]Nina Perkowski and Erica Chenoweth, 'Nonviolent Resistance and Prevention of Mass Killings During Popular Uprisings', International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (2018), available at: {https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/nonviolent-resistance-and-prevention-of-mass-killings-perkoski-chenoweth-2018-icnc.pdf}, accessed 8 October 2025; Jonathan Pinckney, *Making or Breaking Nonviolent Discipline in Civil Resistance Movements* (International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2016).

[70]Erica Chenoweth, 'The role of violence in nonviolent resistance', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 26:1 (2023), pp. 55–77; Erica Chenoweth and Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, 'Understanding nonviolent resistance: An introduction', *Journal of Peace Research*, 50:3 (2013), pp. 271–276; Erica Chenoweth and Kurt Schock, 'Do contemporaneous armed challenges affect the outcomes of mass nonviolent campaigns?', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 20:4 (2015), pp. 427–451; Erica Chenoweth, Jonathan Pinckney, and Orion Lewis, 'Days of rage: Introducing the NAVCO 3.0 dataset', *Journal of Peace Research*, 55:4 (2018), pp. 524–534; Dustin Ells Howes, 'The failure of pacifism and the success of nonviolence', *Perspectives on Politics*, 11:2 (2013), pp. 427–446; Nepstad, *Nonviolent Struggle*; Stephen Zunes, 'The power and value of strategic nonviolent action', *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, 1:1 (2023), pp. 130–139.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inconclusive.[71] There is also considerable and ongoing debate over the potentially noteworthy effectiveness of methods that are somewhere near the middle of the spectrum (often referred to as 'unarmed collective violence'), such as property destruction and street rioting.[72] But this debate, too, is overall inconclusive to date, and anyway the kind of 'violence' that this amounts to falls a long way short of intentional killing, let alone on an industrial scale as in war.

Either way, this expanding research on civil resistance tends to focus on *domestic* opposition, not inter-state war, which is what the Hitler question evokes. Emerging during the Cold War, however, has also been literature making a case for the latter. Often termed 'civilian-based defence' (otherwise 'social' or 'nonviolent' defence), its proponents have called for governments to invest, *en masse*, in training entire populations in the methods of nonviolent dissent to prepare to resist, and possibly deter, international aggression and invasion.[73] Without committing to such training (which would anyway, but notably, cost a fraction of typical defence spending), it might be unreasonable to expect nonviolent resistance to an invading army to be more effective than untrained, unequipped civilians taking up arms, let alone a fully-equipped standing army.[74] Just as organised violence requires mass training, so does nonviolent defence.[75]

No country yet has faced potential invasion fully prepared to resist it primarily, or even solely, with nonviolent defence. Among the examples that come closest and are often mentioned in the literature is Czechoslovakia in August 1968, which nearly succeeded but ultimately did *not*, and which happened without upstream mass training and preparation. Also mentioned in the literature is Lithuania as the Soviet regime was collapsing: Moscow did try to send troops, Lithuanians resisted nonviolently (again, largely improvised), and in this case, ultimately the foreign troops retreated. More broadly, most of the autocratic communist regimes that collapsed in 1989 – regimes that were installed following Soviet military occupations during WWII – did so in the face of relatively improvised, large-scale, mostly nonviolent civil resistance. Nonviolence has also been deployed since, sometimes successfully, to resist repeated attempts by the Kremlin to capture, not by invasion but by multiple other means short of kinetic warfare, the political leadership of former Soviet satellite states, with mixed results. And actually, there were dozens of examples of nonviolent resistance to Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but – importantly – these happened only *alongside* a full-scale military response, and the latter quickly absorbed all the attention, efforts, and investments.[76]

[71]Alexei Anisin, 'Debunking the myths behind nonviolent civil resistance', *Critical Sociology*, 46:78 (2020), pp. 1121–1139; Chenoweth, 'The role of violence'; Elizabeth Tompkins, 'A quantitative reevaluation of radical flank effects within nonviolent campaigns', in Patrick G. Coy (ed), *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2015), pp. 103–135.

[72]Anisin, 'Debunking the myths'; Chenoweth, 'The role of violence'; Mohammad Ali Kadivar and Neil Ketchley, 'Sticks, stones, and Molotov cocktails: Unarmed collective violence and democratization', *Socius*, 4 (2018), pp. 1–16; Brian Martin et al., 'On Andreas Malm's How to Blow Up a Pipeline', *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, 2:2 (2024), pp. 257–291.

[73]Robert J Burrowes, *The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach* (SUNY Press, 1996); Christoyannopoulos, 'Questioning the warist orthodoxy'; Jørgen Johansen and Brian Martin, *Social Defence* (Irene, 2019); Brian Martin, 'Social defence: A revolutionary agenda', in Richard Jackson et al. (eds), *Revolutionary Nonviolence: Concepts, Cases and Controversies* (Zed, 2020), pp. 94–106; Grazina Miniotaite, 'Lithuania: From non-violent liberation towards non-violent defence?', *Peace Research*, 28:4 (1996), pp. 19–36; Jack D. Salmon, 'Can non-violence be combined with military means for national defense?', *Journal of Peace Research*, 25:1 (1988), pp. 69–80; Gene Sharp, *Civilian-Based Defense: A Post-Military Weapons System* (Princeton University Press, 1990); François Vaillant, 'La défense civile non-violente', *Alternatives non-violentes*, 213 (2024), p. 1.

[74]Holmes, *The Ethics of Nonviolence*, p. 147; Brian Martin, 'How nonviolence is misrepresented', *Gandhi Marg*, 30:2 (2008), p. 240.

[75]Nepstad, *Nonviolent Struggle*; Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Horizons, 2005); Sørensen, *Pacifism Today*; Stellan Vinthagen, *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works* (Zed, 2015).

[76]Felip Daza, *Ukrainian Nonviolent Civil Resistance in the Face of War: Analysis of Trends, Impacts and Challenges of Nonviolent Action in Ukraine between February and June 2022*, ICIP & Novact (Barcelona, 2022); Marta Kepe and Alyssa Demus, *Resisting Russia: Insights into Ukraine's Civilian-Based Actions During the First Four Months of the War in 2022* (RAND Corporation, 2023), available at: {https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2034-1.html}, accessed 20 December 2023.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While there is thus no clean empirical example of nonviolent defence alone against an invading army, what these cases do illustrate is how civilian-based defence would be an extension of domestic civil disobedience. At the same time, two overlapping but somewhat distinct phases would need to be projected to resist potential invasion nonviolently: resisting the actual invasion, and then, should that fail, resisting the occupation. Indeed, should coordinated and large-scale nonviolent resistance not stop an invasion, it can still make an occupied population ungovernable[77] – and the threat of that could have a deterrent effect in the first place.[78]

How would it work? After all, nonviolent methods do at first appear counter-intuitive, which is one reason why its critics have accused it of being foolish, even suicidal. How then has nonviolence been effective when it has, and how would it work against an invading army? Although historical examples of the latter are limited, there are plenty of examples of nonviolent resistance against occupations and generally unwanted and unscrupulous regimes, including against the Nazis, that have been reflected upon by the scholarship. In turn, these examples can help understand how nonviolent defence could play out against not just the second but also the first phase of an invasion, even if for the moment this can only consist of (at best) informed projections and counter-factual speculation.[79]

It is worth recalling first that the repertoire of nonviolent methods is actually very broad. Gene Sharp famously listed 198 methods ranging from symbolic protests (speeches, petitions, posters, leaflets, marches, picketing, teach-ins) to non-cooperation (consumer boycotts, refusals to pay, industrial or general strikes, boycotting elections, slow compliance) to more confrontational intervention (civil disobedience, hunger strikes, sit-ins, nonviolent occupations).[80] Others have been tried since Sharp produced his classification,[81] and the internet has opened even more possibilities.[82] This broad variety means that the methods chosen to resist can be adapted to circumstances for greater effectiveness: pressure can be escalated; less risky methods can be preferred when more appropriate; new tactics can be creatively devised in different contexts. One of the reasons systematic training enhances the effectiveness of nonviolence is that it exposes those being trained to plenty of historical examples, successful and not, for inspiration and reflection.

As for why such tactics can be effective, nonviolence theory since Gene Sharp has stressed that every ruler needs consent or compliance from a sizeable or critical section of its population. To that extent, power is granted not *by*, but *to* the ruler. By the same token, that consent or compliance can also be withdrawn, and that is what nonviolent resistance can target. Ruling regimes depend on some degree of popular support and on various agents to administer their policies.[83]

From the Nuremberg trials, Holmes for instance notes, 'we should know that the key to understanding the horrors nations perpetrate isn't the evil of the occasional Hitlers of this world', but 'rather the dedication of functionaries who serve them, and of the millions of ordinary persons like ourselves whose cooperation is essential to the success of their enterprise'.[84] Nonviolence speaks directly to such people, bidding them to withdraw their consent and agency. In turn, every time a cog of the machinery of oppression or occupation stops turning, it further illustrates the dependence of the ruler(s) on these cogs.

As for wider popular opinion, as mentioned above, even Hitler was mindful of his dependency on some degree of popular support. Even in a ruthless regime, that support can be withdrawn, and that withdrawal expressed. Indeed, those who have lived through totalitarian regimes, including

[77]Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism*, 130.

[78]Theodore Olson, 'Social defence and deterrence: Their interrelationship', *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, 16:1 (1985), pp. 33–40.

[79]For example: Christoyannopoulos, 'Questioning the warist orthodoxy'; Sørensen, *Pacifism Today*.

[80]Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Porter Sargent, 1973).

[81]GNAD, 'Global Nonviolent Action Database' (Swarthmore College, 2023), available at: {https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/browse-methods}, accessed 19 December 2023.

[82]'Civil Resistance 2.0: 198 Nonviolent Methods Upgraded' (2012), available at: {https://commonslibrary.org/198-nonviolent-methods-upgraded/}, accessed 19 September 2022.

[83]Atack, *Nonviolence in Political Theory*; Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*; Summy, 'Nonviolence'.

[84]Holmes, *The Ethics of Nonviolence*, p. 148.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nazi occupations, have noted how empowering it was for them to liberate themselves from the oppressive regime mindset they had internalised, to live the truth and no longer in fear, and to express this even through symbolic action.[85] An oppressive regime becomes vulnerable to collapse when people lose fear.

Nonviolence does not seek to overpower with military force. It addresses opponents as human beings, without threatening their physical integrity, but nonetheless insistently resisting the violence and repression those opponents are playing a part in. To the extent that nonviolence expects violence from the oppressor, it uses it for 'moral' or 'political jiujitsu' (or 'backfire effect'), turning it against the oppressor by making a spectacle of the further injustice thereby inflicted.[86]

Confronting a violent opponent nonviolently is always risky (hence courageous). Remaining nonviolent in the face of violence requires substantial self-control (another reason why training is important), not least since there is (just like violence) no guarantee it will work. But when it works, it does so in part because it troubles the oppressors and those on whose support they depend – if not the Hitler at the top, at least perhaps the conscript instructed to continue to repress violently despite the strict nonviolence of the resistance, as well as the wider population observing the spectacle. As such, precisely what is counter-intuitive about nonviolent resistance is partly why it can be effective. When dehumanised opponents address agents of oppression with human dignity, without physically threatening those deployed to repress them (often violently), without seeking to physically overpower them, yet insisting nonetheless with their resistance despite the violence, this disturbs the reasoning with which those agents of oppression hitherto justified their role.

Violent dissenters are easy to dehumanise. It is much harder when opponents remain nonviolent. Whereas violent resistance pulls the pillars of a regime more firmly together and provides it with evidence with which to scare the broader public, nonviolent resistance pulls these pillars apart, sowing doubt among those on whom the regime is dependent, and eroding its arguments that the resistance is a threat to their life.[87]

This is also partly why Gandhi's campaign against British colonial rule succeeded. In fact, from the Amritsar massacre to the Bengali famine, the colonial regime was not particularly clement.[88] But the nonviolent resistance orchestrated by Gandhi steadily eroded British support for colonial rule. It exposed its violence and illegitimacy. Gandhi's political jiujitsu pulled apart the pillars of colonial rule.

In any case, and in short, no method is ever guaranteed to succeed or fail, but the empirical evidence is increasingly demonstrating that nonviolent resistance *can* be effective, including against unscrupulous foes. Therefore, enough accumulating research suggests that it is not a foregone conclusion that a coordinated campaign of nonviolent resistance by entire populations trained in nonviolent defence and resistance would have failed against Hitler. Plenty of spontaneous nonviolent resistance played a role already, as discussed above, so what if entire populations had been fully trained upstream? Even if such an observation can only be counter-factual speculation, such speculation does help critically re-examine 'claims of past impossibility'[89] such as that WWII was the only way in which Hitler could have been stopped.

[85]Semelin, *Sans armes face à Hitler*; Summy, 'Nonviolence'.

[86]Richard B. Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence*, abridged ed. (James Clarke & Co, 1960); Brian Martin, 'How nonviolence works', *Borderlands E – Journal: New Spaces in the Humanities*, 4:3 (2005), pp. 1–8; Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*; Sørensen, *Pacifism Today*.

[87]Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*; Martin, 'The Nazis and nonviolence (III)'; Martin, 'How nonviolence is misrepresented'; Nepstad, *Nonviolent Struggle*; Schock, 'Nonviolent action and its misconceptions'.

[88]Cady, *From Warism to Pacifism*, pp. 96–9.

[89]Benoît Pelopidas and Sanne Cornelia J. Verschuren, 'Writing IR after COVID-19: Reassessing political possibilities, good faith, and policy-relevant scholarship on climate change mitigation and nuclear disarmament', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3:1 (2023), p. 8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

War's constitutiveness

Thirdly, often (at best) overlooked (and at worst consciously embraced) by advocates of military methods is the constitutive impact of organised violence.[90] War transforms its agents in the process. It gives renewed vitality and ultimately further embeds what some have called the 'military–industrial complex' or the 'war system'.[91] It entrenches a militarised political economy and a warist political culture that in turn make war more tempting as a policy option (because prepared and able) and more likely (because it threatens others who will be tempted to join in risky arms races).[92] War also tends to generate pressures towards stricter hierarchies.[93] Then there is the social and psychological effect of training masses of (primarily) men to kill.[94] Wars brutalise and traumatise the many people they absorb, leaving many of them prone to default to violent responses and mindsets not just during wars, but also long after they have ended. Focusing only on the act of war occludes all these ways in which war-building corrodes and transforms the societies investing in it.

Ahead of WWII, pacifist Bart de Ligt was worried that the prospect of war with Germany was already causing 'a kind of Prussification of the universe' and the degradation of 'civilizing values' such as 'liberty', 'toleration', and 'the respect for human dignity'.[95] At the end of the war, Muste deplored how 'the Western world' was 'sick' with an 'illness' that is 'mental and spiritual', a combination of expansionism, militarism, and civilising hubris.[96] The war certainly did entrench a 'permanent war economy' with high military spending and, now, the new looming threat of nuclear war.[97] WWII transformed the countries it consumed into terrifying war machines.

Moreover, the industrial base needed to wage war, even if partly justified so that 'we' can better fight 'them', will rarely find itself bound by any such loyalties. Industrial heavyweights based in Allied countries, for example, did not appear particularly phased by geopolitical allegiances. American corporations were for instance happy to trade with the Nazis and profit from German industry and militarism deep into the war.[98] Defence industries justified as essential to repel enemies have a long history of openness to trading with whoever is interested in their products, whatever their human rights record or whichever side of any geopolitical fence they sit on. Therefore, not only is warism corrosive and constitutive for the societies investing in it, it also does not stop at national boundaries or allegiances, but will spread contagiously.

The sums expended globally on the defence industry are colossal.[99] Spending even just a fraction of these on nonviolent defence methods instead would have a very different constitutive impact on

[90] Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, 'On politics and violence: Arendt Contra Fanon', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 7:1 (2008), pp. 90–108; Kimberly Hutchings, 'Pacifism is dirty: Towards an ethico-political defence', *Critical Studies on Security* 6:2 (2018), pp. 176–192; Jackson, 'Pacifism and the ethical imagination in IR'; Cheyney Ryan, 'Pacifism, just war, and self-defense', *Philosophia*, 41:4 (2013), pp. 977–1005; Ryan, 'Pacifism(s)'; Ryan, *Pacifism as War Abolitionism*.

[91] Andrew Alexandra, 'Political pacifism', *Social Theory and Practice*, 29:4 (2003), pp. 589-606; Christopher J. Coyne, *In Search of Monsters to Destroy: The Folly of American Empire and the Paths to Peace* (Independent Institute, 2022); Andrew Fiala, 'Just war ethics and the slippery slope of militarism', *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 19:2 (2012), pp. 92–102.

[92] Ned Dobos, *Ethics, Security, and The War-Machine: The True Cost of the Military* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Fiala, 'Just war ethics and the slippery slope of militarism'.

[93] Christoyannopoulos, 'An anarcho-pacifist reading of international relations'; Charles Tilly, 'War making and state making as organized crime', in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (eds), *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 169–186.

[94] Dobos, *Ethics, Security, and The War-Machine*; David A. Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, rev. ed. (Back Bay Books, 2009).

[95] de Ligt, *The Conquest of Violence*, p. 244.

[96] Muste, *What Would Pacifists Have Done About Hitler?*, pp. 5ff.

[97] Martin, 'The Nazis and nonviolence', p. 48.

[98] Jacques Pauwels, 'Profits *über Alles!*: American corporations and Hitler', *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 51 (2003), available at: {https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt51re01}, accessed 25 April 2025.

[99] Miriam Barnum et al., 'Measuring arms: Introducing the global military spending dataset', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 69:2–3 (2025), pp. 540–567; Coyne, *In Search of Monsters to Destroy*; Fiala, 'Just war ethics and the slippery slope of militarism'; Andrew Fiala, *Against Religion, Wars, and States: The Case for Enlightenment Atheism, Just War Pacifism, and Liberal-Democratic Anarchism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the societies concerned. As Martin puts it, instead of only asking which of violent or nonviolent methods can be effective against a ruthless opponent, a 'better question' might be: 'What "defence system" – violent or nonviolent – stimulates the creation of ruthless regimes?'[100] When deciding what defence method to invest in, therefore, the constitutive impact of that decision ought to be borne in mind, too.

Controllability of violence

Fourthly and relatedly, those addressing pacifists with the Hitler question tend to assume that the application of retaliatory violence can be controlled, perhaps like a well-managed 'police raid'.[101] Military planning, including nuclear strategy, similarly rests on the assumption that military operations can be commanded and controlled.[102] But as Ryan argues, war 'is less like a police action than an urban riot', absorbing its actors in its momentum.[103] Sheer luck, rather than genuine 'command' or 'control', has played a determining role in more military outcomes than might be comfortable to recall.[104] In any case, how effective the application of organised violence proves to be depends less on the capacity to inflict it than on how those to whom it is applied respond. They might respond with compliance, or resistance.[105] Their response cannot be stage-managed or planned. Indeed, in reality, violence often triggers counter-violence, generating a cycle of violence that is prone to spin out of control.[106]

Pacifists also often return to arguments about the continuity of means and ends.[107] For many pacifists, it is foolhardy to accept unquestioningly that (to put it simply) 'good ends justify bad means'. Rather, when violent means are adopted for a laudable end, means often come to dominate and take a life of their own. If a just peace really is the aim, then just and peaceful means – nonviolent means – might be more appropriate than organised violence to reach it.

Moreover, war has multiple impacts beyond whether it leads to the achievement of its original strategic aims. Civilians die. Entire populations are dehumanised (as with the non-Nazi Germans above). Cities are destroyed. Deep traumas are generated that victims and perpetrators will carry for the rest of their lives. It is expensive, thus coming at a substantial opportunity cost.[108] The focus on the battlefield often comes to the detriment of other challenges, such as socio-economic priorities, for example. Often overlooked and underestimated too are the widespread, multifaceted, and profound damages caused by late modern warfare on our planet and the life it sustains.[109] All that is a lot of 'collateral' damage for a method ostensibly deployed for much more limited aims.

It is tempting to imagine that organised violence can remain limited and contained, that like a tool it can be applied to a discreet task and then stopped. The frequent reality, as indeed proved

[100] Martin, 'The Nazis and nonviolence', p. 49.

[101] Ryan, 'Pacifism, just war, and self-defense', p. 983.

[102] Zia Mian and Benoît Pelopidas, 'Producing collapse: Nuclear weapons as preparation to end civilization', in Miguel Centeno et al. (eds). *How Worlds Collapse: What History, Systems, and Complexity Can Teach Us about Our Modern World and Fragile Future* (Routledge, 2023), pp. 315–332.

[103] Ryan, 'Pacifism, just war, and self-defense', p. 983; also Dexter, 'Pacifism and the problem of protecting others'.

[104] Patricia Lewis et al., *Too Close for Comfort: Cases of Near Nuclear Use and Options for Policy*, Chatham House (London, April 2014).

[105] Richard Jackson, 'A defence of revolutionary nonviolence', in Richard Jackson et al. (eds), *Revolutionary Nonviolence: Concepts, Cases and Controversies* (Zed, 2020); M. S. Wallace, *Security without Weapons: Rethinking Violence, Nonviolent Action, and Civilian Protection* (Routledge, 2017); M. S. Wallace, 'Wrestling with another human being: The merits of a messy, power-laden pacifism', *Global Society* 34:1 (January 2020), pp. 52–67.

[106] Christoyannopoulos, 'An anarcho-pacifist reading of international relations'.

[107] Cady, *From Warism to Pacifism*; Jackson, 'Pacifism in international relations'; Majken Jul Sørensen and Brian Martin, 'Beyond nonviolent regime change: Anarchist insights', *Peace & Change*, 49:2 (2024), pp. 124–139.

[108] James Pattison, 'Opportunity costs pacifism', *Law and Philosophy* 39:5 (2020), pp. 545–576; Luke Glanville and James Pattison, 'Ukraine and the opportunity costs of military aid', *International Affairs*, 100:4 (2024), pp. 1571–1590.

[109] Kjølv Egeland, 'Climate security reversed: The implications of alternative security policies for global warming', *Environmental Politics*, 32:5 (2023), pp. 883–902; Mark Griffiths and Henry Redwood, 'Late modern war and the geos', *International Political Sociology*, 18:2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to be the case with WWII, is that its application tends to ripple out and bleed enduringly onto multiple other dynamics, and before long generates a widening cluster of challenges that can no longer be managed from a military command centre.

Romantic views of violence

Fifthly and finally, it is worth asking who tends to invoke the Hitler objection in the first place. Just war theory, for example, does like to mobilise WWII as a favourite example to justify the virtue of violence in certain geopolitical contexts, pitching just war thinking as a more realistic and pragmatic position between pacifist utopianism and dog-eat-dog realism.[110] But the analysis of the realities of geopolitics that it articulates tends to be located in a particular context and for particular audiences – namely the USA, the UK, and the wider West. The Hitler example, in other words, is a go-to case study in a literature produced by scholars primarily socialised in the north Atlantic alliance that emerged on the winning side of WWII. Similarly to the 'trolley problem' and the 'ticking bomb problem',[111] the Hitler question produces a scenario with which those who can otherwise portray their intentions as peace-preferring can go on to argue that nonetheless, unfortunately, sometimes, cold realism must take precedence and violence is simply the only option. It just happens that the Hitler example does in reality get mobilised rather frequently alongside such seemingly theoretical arguments about rare and extreme cases to justify recurring and ongoing Western military adventures, and that it helps present such ventures as reluctant but necessary interventions. War propaganda can be counted on to soon enough explicitly compare the enemy leader as 'another Hitler'.[112] Put differently, the Hitler question *often* helps present and remember *Western* wars past *and* present as just – whether in Kosovo,[113] Iraq,[114] Afghanistan,[115] Syria,[116] or Ukraine.[117]

Reproduced in the process are rather partial memories of WWII. The war is remembered through the war rooms, the strategies, the men who operated the war machine, and the heroic soldiers on the battlefield. Often overlooked is how that violence and its aftermath are remembered by other constituencies – the traumatised or mutilated conscripts on all sides, their families and

[110]Cady, *From Warism to Pacifism*; Dexter, 'Pacifism and the problem of protecting others'; Ryan, 'Pacifism, just war, and self-defense'; Ryan, *Pacifism as War Abolitionism*.

[111]Andrew Fiala, 'Pacifism and the trolley problem', *The Acorn*, 15:1 (2014), pp. 33–41; Charles K. Fink, 'Nonviolence and Tolstoy's hard question', *The Acorn*, 17:2 (2017), pp. 101–117; Mathias Thaler, *Naming Violence: A Critical Theory of Genocide, Torture, and Terrorism* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

[112]Anne Morelli, *Principes élémentaires de propagande de guerre: Utilisables en cas de guerre froide, chaude ou tiède* (Aden, 2010).

[113]Roland Paris, 'Kosovo and the metaphor war', *Political Science Quarterly*, 117:3 (2002), pp. 423–450.

[114]Channel 4 News, 'Iraq Inquiry: Blair Talks Nazis, 9/11 and Iran', YouTube (2011), available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXhsodO7n5g}, accessed 21 January 2025; Jim Naureckas and Sam Husseini, 'Creating the new Hitler: The Gulf war', in Jim Naureckas and Janine Jackson (eds) in *The Fair Reader: An Extra! Review of Press and Politics in the' 90s* (Routledge, 1996).

[115]Lee-Ann Chae, 'Talking to children about war', *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence* 1:1 (2023), pp. 52–64; Martin Parsons, 'Withdrawing from Afghanistan Would Be Like Appeasing Hitler', *Conservative Home* (2009), available at: {https://conservativehome.blogs.com/centreright/2009/11/withdrawing-from-afghanistan-would-be-like-appeasing-hitler.html}, accessed 8 June 2025.

[116]Robert Satloff, 'Syria and the Holocaust: Putting "never again" to the test', *Washington Post*, (2016), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/syria-and-the-holocaust-putting-never-again-to-the-test/2016/05/03/3e52496c-0e55-11e6-8ab8-9ad050f76d7d_story.html}, accessed 8 June 2025; Nicholas Watt, 'Hilary Benn makes emotional plea for Britain to bomb Isis "fascists" in Syria', *Guardian* (2015), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/02/william-hague-breaks-with-cameron-over-use-of-ground-forces-in-syria}, accessed 8 June 2025.

[117]Lindsey German, 'Vladimir Putin is the latest "new Hitler" that the US and its war-making allies keep finding round the world', Stop the War Coalition (2014), available at: {https://www.stopwar.org.uk/article/ukraine-the-anti-war-movement-and-why-the-main-enemy-is-at-home/}, accessed 8 June 2025; Philip Rucker, 'Hillary Clinton's Putin–Hitler comments draw rebukes as she wades into Ukraine conflict', *Washington Post* (2014), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/hillary-clintons-putin-hitler-comments-draw-rebukes-as-she-wades-into-ukraine-conflict/2014/03/05/31a748d8-a486-11e3-84d4-e59b1709222c_story.html}, accessed 8 June 2025.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

relatives, those who starved away from the front, the conscientious objectors, the colonised populations swept into this White European civil war. Overlooked too are some of the wider repercussions of WWII that affect international politics and cause industrial-scale suffering and insecurity to this day, such as the turbocharged entrenchment of multiple military–industrial complexes, the nuclear arms race, and the fertilisation of militant settler colonial Zionism. Also cast aside are potential introspections that might expose wider responsibilities and complicities in for example racism, antisemitism, colonialism, and militarism. The Hollywoodesque lesson widely drawn from WWII is that, when a specific cabal of people who embody some kind of ultimate evil (e.g., Hitler, the Nazis) becomes too threatening, the forces of good need to be prepared and ready to fight and kill. WWII thus gets remembered as a hypermasculine struggle where good men fought valiantly for a few dramatic years to protect their motherland, their families, and their values. The Hitler question emerges from and reproduces such romanticised, partial, patriarchal, and militaristic memories and imaginaries.[118]

The other main but different setting where the Hitler question is mobilised against pacifism is among dissidents debating the relative merits of violence and nonviolence.[119] Although the focus of such discussions is not on inter-state war as such but on tactics for domestic dissent, the Nazi case, in those contexts, usually sits alongside examples of unsuccessful nonviolent dissent as a seemingly particularly telling illustration of pacifist folly. The relative merits of violence and nonviolence in domestic resistance are discussed above already and indeed elsewhere,[120] and questions of revolutionary violence are not the primary focus of this article, but worth noting here is that advocates of both violent dissent and just war share these questionable assumptions that violence is effective and can be controlled, as well as similarly romanticised memories of historical examples of violent victories.

What is also common among many advocates of violence is a claim that violence, if only in the cases they put forward, is or was simply 'the only option'. Such a conclusion, however, seems no less absolutist than the alleged pacifist refusal to countenance it. As discussed above, the research into the theory and practice of nonviolence suggests other options are often available. Also questionable, however, is the assumption that violence is actually an option that, even if only as a last resort, is effective. This overlooks a messy empirical record. Violence, in reality, often fails.[121] For one, if in war one party can win and the other lose, then loss is a potential outcome half the time.[122] Few wars in the past century actually ended in a decisive military victory.[123] What all wars do guarantee to leave behind, however, is a trail of damage – to bodies, nature, societies, and infrastructure. To approach violence as a viable option is therefore to indulge in romanticised assumptions about it. In o ther words, it would seem that what the 'empirical evidence demonstrates' is that it is 'the practitioners of violence', not the pacifists, who are 'more often the tragic idealists'.[124]

In any case, nonviolence also leaves more room for humility and error. Analyses can be mistaken, targets chosen erroneously, causes misjudged. But *violent* mistakes cannot be undone, nor

[118]Victoria M. Basham, 'Gender, race, militarism and remembrance: The everyday geopolitics of the poppy', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23:6 (June 2016), pp. 883–896; Victoria M. Basham, 'Liberal militarism as insecurity, desire and ambivalence: Gender, race and the everyday geopolitics of war', *Security Dialogue*, 49:1–2 (2018), pp. 32–43; Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, 'A pacifist critique of the red poppy: Reflections on British war commemorations' increasingly hegemonic militarism', *Critical Military Studies* 9:3 (2023), pp. 324–345.

[119]Churchill, *Pacifism as Pathology*, pp. 47–54; Gelderloos, *The Failure of Nonviolence*, pp. 198–206; Jensen, 'Preface', pp. 6–7; Price, 'Why I am not a pacifist'.

[120]Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*; Chenoweth, 'The role of violence'; Christoyannopoulos, 'Mapping the landscape between pacifism and anarchism'; Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, *Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019); Richard Jackson et al. (eds), *Revolutionary Nonviolence: Concepts, Cases and Controversies* (Zed, 2020).

[121]Jackson, 'Pacifism and the ethical imagination in IR', p. 219; Jackson, 'Pacifism', p. 169.

[122]Martin, 'The Nazis and nonviolence', p. 48.

[123]Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton University Press, 2004); Howes, 'The failure of pacifism and the success of nonviolence'; Jackson, 'Pacifism and the ethical imagination in IR'.

[124]Howes, 'The failure of pacifism and the success of nonviolence', p. 438.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

victims unkilled. Mistakes in nonviolent campaigns leave no similar damage. They can more easily be remedied. Inflicting violence, by contrast, requires not just faith in the effectiveness of violence, but also often a hubristic conviction in one's righteousness. Both romanticised ingredients in turn get cemented and reproduced in future commemorations of said violence.

Conclusion

From political to IR theory, both in the scholarship and among political agents across the political spectrum, the Hitler question is a classic tool mobilised to dismiss criticisms of war and argue *for* it, presenting advocates of war as the reasonable moderates between two immoral extremes: cruel dog-eat-dog brutality on the one hand, naïve and suicidal pacifism on the other. Far from delivering a conclusive victory, however, when considered more carefully and critically discussed, the Hitler question exposes cracks in conventional thinking about violence and war, providing opportunities to clarify and develop important and diverse arguments advanced by pacifism.

On resisting the Nazis specifically: the question comes late if asked only in 1939; Allied militarism did not prevent the rise of Hitler, nor did the Allies intervene primarily to stop the Holocaust or the ideology of fascism; there are many examples of nonviolent resistance that did contribute to resisting the Nazis; the impact of Nazi violence on public opinion was something even Hitler was mindful of; and anyway anti-Nazi violence claimed many victims beyond the Nazis. As for resisting common assumptions about war more generally: pacifism has much more to offer than just a single absolute rejection of all wars; the evidence of the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance suggests it might be worth considering even in defence against invasion; war has a corrosive constitutive impact on the societies that embark on it; violence often spins out of control; and it might be advocates of violence, rather than pacifists, who are guilty of romantic idealism.

Pacifism, it turns out, is not only not as easily dismissed as commonly assumed, but helps articulate perceptive and serious arguments about the theory and the reality of organised political violence. These arguments do not close the debate, but rather demonstrate why it should be (re)opened. By weakening the go-to rationale mobilised by those who teach, study, and practice politics and IR, this article serves as an invitation to engage further and more earnestly with what pacifism can offer to thinking about organised violence – which, as a growing literature has been showing and as indicated by some of the arguments in this article, includes a wide range of perceptive and critical arguments grounded in empirical, theoretical, and normative analysis.[125] To treat the Hitler question as a reason to ignore pacifist voices is to risk overlooking the critical relevance of such arguments for established IR fields such as war studies, security studies, and just war theory.

Gone is the degree of stability and predictability in international politics that Cold War bipolarity and the brief unipolarity that followed provided. Military spending is on the rise. Foes are aplenty. It is only ever just a matter of time before some adversaries are denounced as particularly ruthless and the drums of war are beaten more loudly. Tempting though it will doubtless again be in such contexts for advocates of organised violence to mobilise the Hitler question to mute pacifist critique and present their case as more reasonable, thus paving the way for more death and destruction, this article demonstrates that doing so should no longer be expected to automatically deliver a checkmate. From proposing alternative methods of resistance to warning about the constitutive nature of war and calling for positive peace, from questioning illusions of control and assumptions about efficacy to nuancing caricatures of enemy populations, pacifism has much to offer to enrich and complicate debates as serious as those concerned with the justification of violence.

Pacifism needs to be taken seriously by both scholars and the wider public because it helps articulate rich and nuanced critical reflections on weighty political matters and opens a horizon more peaceful, respectful, and hopeful than one overcast by the dark clouds of war. When tensions and militarism are on the rise or whenever a new Hitler is said to have appeared is not the time

[125]Christoyannopoulos, 'Pacifism and nonviolence'; Jackson, 'Pacifism'; Jackson, 'Pacifism in international relations'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to dismiss pacifism, but precisely when its contributions should be taken particularly seriously. Unscrupulous foes do need to be resisted, but that resistance need not threaten another world war.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to all those who commented on earlier drafts of my argument at the 2025 Britain and Ireland Association for Political Thought conference (especially Elizabeth Frazer, Kimberly Hutchings, and Mihaela Mihai), the 2025 Pacifism and Nonviolence Workshop organised by Loughborough University's Institute of Advanced Studies (especially Cécile Dubernet and Noga Glucksam), the November 2025 Centre of Security Studies seminar at Loughborough University, and in separate correspondence (especially Benoît Pelopidas and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe) for their precious feedback and encouragement. I am also very grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers whose suggestions also enhanced the paper.

Alexandre Christoyannopoulos is Reader in Politics and International Relations at Loughborough University. He is the author of *Tolstoy's Political Thought* (2020) and *Christian Anarchism* (2010), as well as a range of journal articles and book chapters on pacifism, anarcho-pacifism, Leo Tolstoy, and religious anarchism. He is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cite this article: Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, 'Pacifist rejoinders to the 'Hitler question'', *European Journal of International Security* (2026), pp. 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10039