

# Give the Nazis What They Want

If you called Donald Trump a Nazi, he'd probably take offense, [even though his nationalism is socialistic](#). If you called Bernie Sanders a Nazi, you'd be dismissed out of hand, though [his socialism is avowedly nationalistic](#). But did you know that Adolf Hitler himself took offense when the word was applied to him and his political party?

"He would have considered himself a National Socialist," writes word nerd [Mark Forsyth](#) in [The Etymologicon](#).

Sure, but as Steve Horwitz reminds us in "[Why the Candidates Keep Giving Us Reasons to Use the 'F' Word](#)" ([Freeman, winter 2015](#)), "Nazi is short for National Socialist German Workers Party [*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*]." So why would even Hitler be offended by the epithet?

Because "Nazi is, and always has been, an insult," according to Forsyth.

Hitler's "opponents realised that you could shorten *Nationalsozialistische* to *Nazi*. Why would they do this? Because Nazi was already an (utterly unrelated) term of abuse. It had been for years."

*The standard butt of German jokes at the beginning of the twentieth century were stupid Bavarian peasants. And just as Irish jokes always involve a man called Paddy, so Bavarian jokes always involved a peasant called Nazi. That's because Nazi was a shortening of the very common Bavarian name Ignatius. This meant that Hitler's opponents had an open goal. He had a party filled with Bavarian hicks and the name of that party could be shortened to the standard joke name for hicks.*

Something similar has been happening in the Middle East, with

opponents of the self-described Islamic State deciding that the group should be called instead *Daesh*.

Sarah Skwire explains:

*ISIS does not want to be called Daesh. The group considers the acronym insulting and dismissive. An increasing number of its opponents do not want it to be called the "Islamic State." They fear that this shorthand reifies the terrorist group's claims to be a legitimate government. (["The Islamic State by Any Other Name,"](#) December 8, 2015)*

Totalitarians and terrorists shouldn't get to bully us into using the terminology they prefer, especially when their preferred terms smuggle semantic baggage past our defenses, but neither should we reflexively refuse to apply accurately descriptive names just because it's what the bad guys say they want.

Whether you consider "Islamic State" to be an appropriate moniker hinges on how you feel about both the nature of Islam and [the nature of the state](#).

But how appropriate was Hitler's preferred appellation? No one denies that *nationalism* was central to his ideology, but whether or not he deserved to call himself a *socialist* depends on how you feel about individual liberty, private property, central planning, and state ownership of industry. It also depends on how much you want the word *socialism* to carry a connotation of internationalism and social liberalism.

Horwitz writes, "The Nazis were undoubtedly socialist ... as even a quick glance at their [1920 platform](#) will tell you." And those of us who associate private property with public welfare will tend to agree. But ours was not the dominant perspective in the countries that received National Socialism's exiles.

As Forsyth tells it,

*Refugees started turning up elsewhere complaining about the Nazis, and non-Germans of course assumed that this was the official name of the party.... To this day, most of us happily go about believing that the Nazis called themselves Nazis, when, in fact, they would probably have beaten you up for saying the word.*

I suspect, however, that the confusion Forsyth describes was less innocent than his story implies. Those who fled east to get out of Germany would have found themselves under the authority of self-described socialists of the Soviet variety. Those who fled west landed among social democrats who, whether or not they were comfortable with the term “democratic socialism,” certainly didn’t want to give weight to the growing association between *socialism* and *totalitarianism*.

In the United States, the S-word was never as popular with the general public as it was in Europe, but many in the American intelligentsia did and still do seek to defang socialism in the popular imagination. The more we use the old Bavarian insult as if it were the National Socialists’ name for themselves, the more we cooperate with that agenda.

But you don’t have to oppose socialism to call the German fascists by their party’s proper name. You need only prefer historical accuracy and semantic precision to linguistic confusion – or [politically motivated obfuscation](#).

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