

One of the reasons I love Morrison comics is because I get to say sentences like this: At the heart of stories about Superman as Nazi or Communist is the question of nature versus nurture, which secretly is a question of whether moral absolutism exists. Is Superman good because that is who he is or because that is the way the Kents raised him to be? And if Superman was raised to believe such things as genocide are the correct course of action, would he ever recognize them as wrong? And if he doesn't, are right and wrong thus social creations, not inherent values? Luckily, we don't have to go there. The very first page depicts Hitler sweating in agony on a toilet, screaming his outrage at a poor soldier who dares disturb his bowel movements. This may just be the humiliation before the glory that soon follows, but it also reduces Hitler to a mere man, suffering the most common ill. It's a necessary reminder as we later see his empire and the views it espouses that they all spring from someone just as vulnerable to violent diarrhea as anybody else. Hitler achieves his utopian aims, not because he was a god who divined the true path forward, but because he had a god to enforce his wrongheaded goals. The fact that Nazi-Superman, a.k.a. Overman, a.k.a. Karl, has so much angst on his conscience tells us that no amount of conditioning can change what is truly moral, only disguise it. Karl's raised from infancy as vanguard of Hitler's forces, yet he's clearly stricken by the "purges," the "mountain of dead" generated during his unexplained three-year absence. The paradise he now lives in doesn't assuage his regret because it only benefits the Aryan race at the cost of the "under people". These include "Jews, Jehovah's [W]itnesses, Romani, negroes...[the] usual suspects," but also a broader group of "the poor and the lost...[t]he crazy, the different, the strange." In that sense, Karl is a living hypocrisy, since he is stranger and more different than anybody. So the staggering guilt he feels may not just be from the appalling death count,* but perhaps also from the connection he feels to the dead, people killed just because they didn't fit in, a fate he escaped only because of the "strategic miracle" he represented to the people who found him. Karl seems to possess two of Superman's enduring traits: empathy for all people, not just the best and brightest, and a desire to fit in, both of which are defeated by a society that promotes the superiority of some over others. This is the society Karl's complicit in creating. The only quality this world appreciates is his strength. Both his grief and his conscience are derided by his consorts as weakness, and Lena (interestingly, an analogue for Lana rather than Lois) goes further by calling out his "immortal alien" heritage. Maybe he could have lived with his burdens if he felt a stronger bond with the people around him, but viewed by everyone as a leader—Hitler's successor—and losing Overgirl, someone created expressly for his companionship, can only heighten his sense of isolation. If he indeed conspired to bring about the "end of the bloated, self-satisfied Thousand-Year Empire," as the issue strongly suggests he did, it's as much an act of emotional suicide as of redemption. It's also a big mistake. Working with Uncle Sam and the Freedom Fighters, a team composed of persecuted individuals, might have been a good idea, but terrorizing an innocent populace for past crimes they may have had no part in has no productive value whatsoever. Little wonder that Uncle Sam comes across as malevolent rather than heroic; he demands justice, but sending the New Reichsmen's HQ crashing into Metropolis is purely vengeance. The defeat of the USA reduced Sam from proud figurehead to cornered rebel, bringing back the desperation for survival from the country's colonial roots. Who knows but that America's forefathers, faced with an even more powerful oppressor than the British monarchy, might have resorted to the same extreme tactics, the same deals with devils. We can't discuss an issue of The Multiversity without talking about comics, and Morrison uses them in interesting ways here. In this case, it's not the cursed Ultra Comics that precipitates the ruin of Karl's world; it's the classic Superman comics that inspire

Hitler to turn Karl into his own unbeatable man of tomorrow. Unsurprisingly, comics are also purged in the wake of Nazi victory, as Karl would only suffer greater internal conflict if he saw the glories and values of his fictional counterparts. This issue is a good exemplar of Lee's art, exposing the things he excels at and those in which he only gets by. Some may criticize his superhero designs as too busy and overdone, but both the New Reichsmen and Freedom Fighters look powerful and larger than life here. If anyone can make Nazi heroes and American terrorists attractive, it's Lee. His storytelling is plain, straight, emotionally on the nose, but it's more than capable of delivering the least concept-heavy issue of the series thus far. Some Musings:* Approximately eleven million people perished in the real Holocaust. Imagine how high the counter goes up when applied to the whole world over ninety years.- "For in one hour so great riches is come to nought." For those wanting to save some Wiki time, this is a quote from the Bible's book of Revelations, referring to the ultimate downfall of Babylon, whose unjustly earned magnificence and riches leads to only greater vengeance.- Karl is watching Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle and, fittingly, the scene in which Hagen betrays and kills Siegfried for the ring that Hagen's father forged (and Siegfried's grandfather, Wotan, stole). However, the ring is made from gold stolen by Hagen's father himself. The ring thus belongs to no one, and in the struggle to possess it, everything is destroyed. You might say Karl is the ring; his power enables those who hold him to rule the world. Originally meant to be adopted by America, but taken in by Germany, Karl's sympathy with Uncle Sam may be analogized to Hagen's attempt to recover the ring. But, as Jürgen narrates later, this only leads to the end of the entire empire, with no suggestion of anything greater in its wake. Fascinating stuff. The post The Multiversity: Mastermen #1 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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