

Atlantis, Racism, and Nazism: A Parable Turned Pseudo-Science

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Abstract

This essay examines the allegory posed by Plato, the story of Atlantis. The story of Atlantis is a cautionary tale warning against government hubris and the dangers of moral decay. Warning became history in the 19th century when figures such as Donnelly proposed the idea of Atlantis being real. Atlantis was distorted further in the 1930s and 40s by Heinrich Himmler in his quest to justify Nazism and the Holocaust. Here I explore the shift from allegory into science and finally into a twisted excuse for the eradication of an entire race of people. I gathered research on the initial myth posed by Plato, then the shift in the narrative during the science heavy 19th century. To bolster my research, I looked into historical figures such as Donnelly, Himmler, and Hitler to get a full picture. I include research from historical texts such as, *Timaeus* and *Critias*, and Donnelly's *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*. Secondary sources include scholarly analysis of the 19th century and Nazi ideology. Such works include those by Kurlander and Goodrick-Clarke. This essay is a synthesis of the above sources and more with the goal of understanding and examining the evolution of the story of Atlantis and its use.

Keywords: Atlantis, Nazi, Plato, Holocaust, pseudoscience.

1. Introduction

Atlantis was a legendary, advanced island kingdom described by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato as a utopian society that ultimately sank into the ocean. While Plato presented it as a historical account, most scholars view Atlantis as a philosophical allegory, myth, or satire, not a factual place. In the nineteenth century, Atlantis was viewed as a pseudo-science and was used to undermine ancient people of color (Blackmore, 2023). During the 1930s-40s, it was used as a pseudo-science to justify the persecution and attempted extermination of the Jewish people (Goodrick-Clarke, 2019). This is how the parable of Atlantis was so violently turned on its head and used for evil, which is exactly what Plato warned against in his original dialogues.

Plato first presents Atlantis in his dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias* to discuss advanced topics such as ideal societies, morality, and the dangers of hubris in a captivating and entertaining way. In these dialogues, he contrasts Atlantis's materialist, corrupt, and hubristic nature with Plato's contemporary depiction of Athens and its virtuous and just upholding of divine law. Plato accomplishes this by having the people of Atlantis lust after power and materialistic wealth, which causes them to lose favor with the gods. Jowett translates Plato's unfinished *Critias* to say, "When the divine aspect of the Atlanteans diminished and was overtaken by human nature, they began to act improperly. Those who could perceive true happiness saw them as debased, while others

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viewed them as glorious even as they were consumed by avarice and unjust power.” On the other hand, the people of Athens uphold the teachings of their gods, eventually allowing them to overcome the seemingly superior Atlantean invasion with divine intervention. This is a satire used to urge the people of Athens to stay on the right path of virtue and to warn them of the dangers of materialistic lust and hubris. Furthermore, in his aforementioned dialogues *Timaeus and Critias*, he describes Atlantis as an advanced city “past the Gates of Heracles” (the Strait of Gibraltar), meaning off the coast of Portugal (Plato, 4th century BCE). He also describes its grandeur as “an island larger than Asia Minor and Libya combined.” These facts emphasize Atlantis’ evident power and how central it was, making Athens’s overcoming of the threat seem more improbable and shows ancient Greeks how virtue is important.

During the nineteenth century, Atlantis became more of a pseudo-science accepted as a true fact. Many “scientists” and scholars believed that Atlanteans were precursors to humans, holding all knowledge. There was one main theory held by these amateurs: Atlanteans fled the sinking continent and settled in a multitude of different ancient civilizations. This explains the ingenuity of these ancient peoples, as they found it impossible to believe they could have achieved it themselves (Donnelly, 1882). One such amateur scientist was Ignatius Loyola Donnelly, a United States congressional representative and writer, now widely known for being a pseudo-scientist (The Nation, 2024). He believed in the aforementioned theory as well as its sinking due to shifting waters, a theory that ignores modern geological understanding, highlighting his lack of knowledge and the ignorance of the time. Many people who believed that ancient people of color were unsophisticated and primitive used Atlantis to explain away the feats of these cultures, specifically the architectural accomplishments (Donnelly, 1882). This shows the evolution of the mythical continent of Atlantis from a cautionary parable to a justification for prejudices against ancient minorities who didn’t fit Europe’s widespread idea of sophistication and skill in the nineteenth century.

One significant justification of prejudices against a minority comes from a man named Heinrich Himmler. Himmler used the idea of an ancient Atlantean race to help fuel his and many others’ hatred and prejudice against the Jewish people of the 1930s. Himmler is the man widely accepted as the architect of the Holocaust, who used outlandish claims to justify his persecution, forced sterilization, and extermination of the “lesser” Himmler was second only to Adolf Hitler and was the leader of the SS and Gestapo in Nazi Germany. Himmler was obsessed with the people of Atlantis and used Nazi resources to find traces of them, namely in Tibet (BBC 2021). He used this idea of the Atlanteans moving to create what is commonly referred to as the Aryan Race, a superior race of people categorized as tall, athletic, fair-skinned, blonde with blue eyes, and possessing elongated skulls (Seidel, 2018). Hitler details the racial hierarchy in his manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, this book shows what his goals for Nazi Germany were along with many of his own beliefs. Hitler goes on to say the Nordics perfectly fit his idea of an ideal person, furthering the pedestal he sat his people on. He even goes as far to say Jews are the parasites of society (Hitler, 1925). This description of the ideal Aryan is the opposite of how Jewish and Romanian people stereo-typically looked and were viewed at the time. Himmler used this idea of the master race to justify his rationalization of white supremacy, and antisemitism as well as the persecution of Jewish people. The concept of the *herrenvolk* stems from the nineteenth-century pseudo-science of Atlantis. Himmler claimed that prior to the flood and destruction of Atlantis, the Atlanteans fled to Tibet (BBC, 2021). Himmler believed he would find the origins of his master race in the remote largely untouched Himalayas. He and many other Nazi leaders believed if you measured someone’s head size you could determine what race they were. In short, relevant racist beliefs of the time lead to Himmler’s, and Hitler’s belief that they needed to enact the final solution and commit mass genocide against who they believed were less than.

This previously mentioned “scientific expedition” to Tibet along with Alfred Rosenberg’s book *The Myth of The Twentieth Century* were all key factors in bolstering the

credibility of the mythical Atlantean, Aryan, or Nordic people (they're all synonyms and commonly used interchangeably). Rosenberg was a Nazi theorist who was accused and was put to death for war crimes he committed, at the Nuremberg Trials. He also held many important positions in the Nazi government and wrote a book entitled, *The Myth of The Twentieth Century*. In this book Rosenberg details "the myth of the blood" which in summary is saying the "Aryan" race is the precursor to all culture. Rosenberg also claims that all of history is the battle between the superior Aryan race and lesser races. In summary he is saying that the ancestors of Nazi Germany were in a constant battle with other minor races, and the case of the Holocaust would be no different in his eyes. This branches into his idea of "alien blood" and how the Aryan or Atlantean blood was being tainted along with German culture by Jews. He and other Nazi theorists used pseudo-scientific, vague concepts of race to demonize Jews and other groups they deemed undesirable. Using this twisted pseudoscience induced view on race he believed that the blood of the Germans were being tainted, and the only way to "clean" Germany was by enacting the final solution and restore their racial integrity by removing the Jewish population from Europe (Rosenberg, 1930). He founded the Institute for the Investigation of the Jewish Question and declared in 1939 that the "Jewish question" would only be solved when all Jews had left Germany. Rosenberg's book being deemed as credible and used as propaganda pushed out by the Third Reich validated many prior antisemitic and white supremacist beliefs. This book was a best seller within the Third Reich along with Hitler's previously mentioned manifesto, *Mein Kampf*.

In short, the parable of Atlantis was first posed by Plato to warn against the dangers that come with lusting after power and material possessions, emphasizing how virtue is the only thing that can combat this hubris. Had people like Himmler and Hitler listened to Plato and not to pseudo-scientists of the 19th century, they would have been forewarned of the danger of their actions before it happened. Plato's parable and the events that occurred during the World Wars (one and two) are almost one and the same. An advanced group of people, the Germans and Atlanteans, fall victim to their own hubris, causing them to fall from grace and be halted by morally upright, "less" powerful people, the Allies and the people of Athens, who receive help from a powerful group that changes the tide of conflict: the American people and the gods. Moreover, the pseudo-science of Atlantis in the nineteenth century has influenced history by overshadowing logical findings of the time and by providing other explanations to justify the genius of ancient peoples. It has legitimized acts of violence through racism in events such as the Holocaust and persecution of other "inferior" groups. This is important to learn about, especially in the current political climate of our world that grows more tense every day. Coupling this with the media we consume, the ideology of people around the world can easily be swayed. If the people in power could see that they could easily fall into the cyclical pattern of what happened in the parable of Atlantis and the World Wars, they will hopefully think twice about what they decide to do, because it will affect the world.

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