



Not for the faint of heart, or short of funds.

COLLECTING'S THIRD RAIL

Nazi Pieces of Work

Memorabilia linked to the Third Reich is a favorite collectible of the super-rich. What are they thinking?



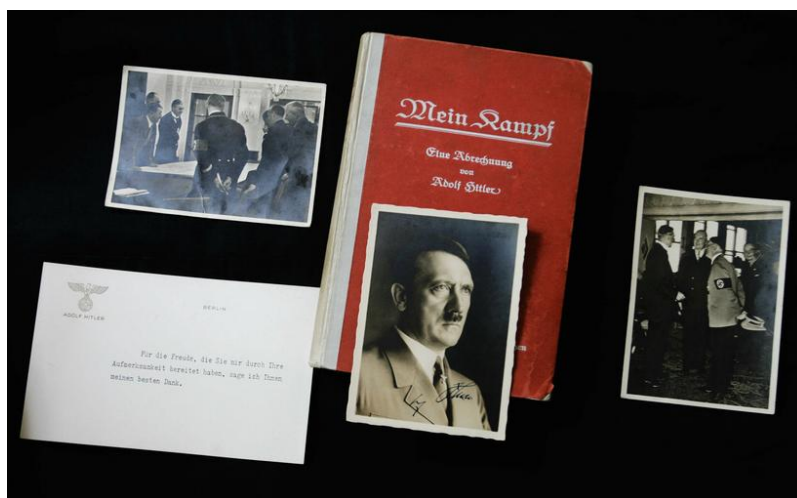
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APRIL 15, 2023

READING TIME: 5 MINUTES

If a movie wishes to establish quickly that a character is an utter creep, it gives him a collection of Nazi memorabilia. Nothing makes an audience recoil more swiftly than a roomful of swastikas and busts of Adolf Hitler. It was this feeling of revulsion that was precisely the reaction to last week's revelation that Harlan Crow—the billionaire benefactor of Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas—has a serious penchant for collecting Third Reich trinketry.

According to reports in *Washingtonian* and *The New York Times*, the property mogul's mansion in Texas is filled with items such as a signed copy of *Mein Kampf*, paintings by Hitler, a bust of Hermann Göring, blocks of postage stamps featuring the Führer, not to mention silverware and even dainty linen napkins adorned with Nazi eagles and swastikas.



Signed copies of Adolf Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* regularly sell for tens of thousands of dollars.

It might come as a surprise, but collecting this stuff is an expensive business and is well out of the reach of your average skinhead. Signed copies of *Mein Kampf* can cost tens of thousands of dollars, but this is mere entry-level. Back in 2019, a cap supposedly owned by Hitler sold for nearly \$450,000.

Such a price is typical. A top hat once worn by Hitler went for \$53,000, while one of his brown shirts, complete with his Wound Badge medal—earned for being wounded in the First World War—an Iron Cross, and a gold Nazi Party tiepin, went for a staggering \$670,000. If you had \$270,000 in 2019, that would have secured you Hitler's

Blood Order medal, which commemorated the Nazi's 1923 attempted coup. And more recently, a watch supposedly belonging to the dictator sold for \$1.1 million. When you compare these prices to some of the more recent sales of the Victoria Cross—Britain's highest military award—for \$37,000, \$220,000, and \$200,000, it's obvious that Third Reich knickknacks can be big business indeed.

So who is buying this stuff?

Few collectors wish to be identified, but with these price tags the answer is simple: it's the super-rich. Some of those who are known are utterly predictable. They include the shock rocker Marilyn Manson, who, according to a breach-of-contract complaint issued some years back, had amassed a collection of Nazi artifacts including "SS typewriters, swastika wall tiles ... and Nazi government coat hangers owned by Adolf Hitler." Then there was the late rock singer Lemmy Kilmister, of Motörhead, whose study was a shrine to Nazi memorabilia, and who had the views to match. ("If you were 20 in 1933 you would go for it like a knife!" the British rocker once said. "Because he [Hitler] kept all his promises. He said he'd kill the Jews. He killed the Jews.")



A bust of Hitler, presumably kept for "historical purposes."

The former Red Sox pitcher turned far-right commentator, Curt Schilling, has a disturbingly large collection of Nazi uniforms he has displayed on Facebook. But perhaps the most fervent collector of Nazi memorabilia in the world is the British construction heir and multi-millionaire Kevin Wheatcroft, whose collection even

includes Hitler's bed. His collection is estimated to be worth more than \$100 million, and it is rumored that he was the buyer of a pair of Eva Braun's underpants that was recently auctioned in Britain for \$4,600.

The big question is this: Why do people such as Crow, Schilling, and Wheatcroft buy Nazi memorabilia, especially as they all deny being Nazi sympathizers?

"I try not to answer when people accuse me of being a Nazi," Wheatcroft has said. "I tend to turn my back and leave them looking silly... I think Hitler and Göring were such fascinating characters in so many ways. Hitler's eye for quality was just extraordinary. More than that, though, I want to preserve things. I want to show the next generation how it actually was."



A swastika-adorned medal from the 1936 Olympic Games, in Berlin, could be yours for just a few thousand dollars.

As the Wheatcroft Collection is not yet open to the public, it is hard to see how the next generation will learn from it. But even if it were to be made available, what possible historical value could be gleaned from looking at Hitler's bed? Similarly, Crow's collection, which is also private. What is it that he learns about the Third Reich by gently dabbing his mouth with the corner of one of his cherished Nazi napkins?

A pair of Eva Braun's underpants was recently auctioned in Britain for \$4,600.

Like many historians of the Nazi period, I suspect that the vague “historical purposes” reasoning that many of these collectors allude to in order to justify their collections is just a smoke screen to obscure an unhealthy fascination with the Third Reich.

You might reasonably argue that there is no such thing as a healthy fascination with Nazism, but, as the careers of far more august historians than myself—such as Michael Burleigh, Christopher Browning, and Ian Kershaw—prove, you can have an interest and even a fascination with the Third Reich and yet still not be a nutjob. There is clearly a difference between writing and reading books like Burleigh's and buying Eva Braun's underpants.



Birds of a feather: Lemmy Kilmister; Kevin Wheatcroft; Curt Schilling; Marilyn Manson; Harlan Crow.

What's also strange is that collectors of Nazi memorabilia generally come from the right of the political spectrum. You rarely see well-known liberals brandishing similar collections, which they might be supposed to do if owning such items served “historical purposes.” It's true that Brad Pitt spent \$385,000 on a rare Nazi sidecar motorcycle in 2020, but this seems less because it was Nazi-made than because it was a motorcycle, of which Pitt is a known collector.

In a way, items of Third Reich memorabilia, and especially those that are associated with Hitler or any other senior Nazi, have become like medieval relics. Own a lock of

Christ's hair, and you feel closer to him, and feel his power. Wear Hitler's wristwatch (or Eva Braun's knickers) and, doubtless for those who venerate the Führer, the thrill is much the same.

There is surely something sordid and distasteful about such collections, and nothing exemplifies this more than the auctioning of a whip in a Maryland auction house just last year that was supposedly used in a concentration camp. I once had an argument with a memorabilia dealer that such items—associated as they are with genocide—should have no commercial value and should be donated to museums. He told me that I had a “problem with the Jews.” It seemed that the problem was more his than mine.

There is one wealthy individual, however, who has bought Nazi memorabilia for commendable reasons, and that is the Swiss millionaire Abdallah Chatila, who spent nearly \$700,000 on Third Reich items—including that top hat—at an auction in 2019, and then promptly turned them all over to an Israeli fundraising body to decide their fate.



Hitler's monogrammed hat sold for more than \$50,000.

“It is extremely important to me that items from this painful historical era do not land in the wrong hands,” he said at the time.

Unfortunately, most of the men—and it is always men—who collect Nazi memorabilia do not behave in the same way. They may not feel that their hands are the wrong ones, they may suggest they are just historical collectors, but for most of us the idea of

owning a Nazi napkin provokes a feeling of revulsion. There are things that money can't buy, and then there are things that money shouldn't buy. Crow and others should learn the difference.

Guy Walters is a journalist and the author of several books, including [Hunting Evil](#) and [Berlin Games](#). He can currently be seen on [How to Become a Tyrant](#), on Netflix

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