The Biofictional Critique of the Nazis' Christian Nationalism: Vladimir Bartol's *Alamut*

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Abstract: Biofiction is literature that names its protagonist after a real person, and it has come to prominence as a field of literary studies over the last ten years. This has significant consequences for understanding Vladimir Bartol's *Alamut* (1938), a biographical novel about the leader of the Order of Assassins, Hassan ibn Sabbah. Now that scholars have a more rigorous and precise understanding of the way biofiction functions and signifies, and how it does not function and signify, we can reject some previous interpretations of the work and offer a more reasonable and grounded approach. More specifically, if we understand that biofiction is more focused on the author's present than the past, then we can see how *Alamut* is less an effort to accurately represent the life of Sabbah and his time and more of an effort to fictionalize and metaphorize the life of the notorious leader in order to illuminate the life of Adolf Hitler. This approach has staggering consequences, as it debunks the standard secularization approach to Hitler and the Nazis and demonstrates how it is impossible to understand the Nazis' political agenda without taking into account their profound commitment to Christianity. By reading Bartol's novel alongside other political biofictions from the 1930s, Lackey argues that *Alamut* is one of the best and most insightful works to expose what made Hitler and the Nazis so successful in mobilizing the masses in support of their Christian nationalist agenda.

Keywords: Vladimir Bartol, Order of Assassins, Hassan ibn Sabbah, Islamic Nationalism, Adolf Hitler, Christian Nationalism

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After Hitler came to power on 30 January 1933, there was collective panic among European artists and intellectuals. But what would be the best method for exposing, challenging, and counteracting the Nazis and their death-bringing agenda? That is a question that many German luminaries sought to answer, as Uwe Wittstock has so clearly and convincingly demonstrated in his 2018 (2023 in English) book *February 1933: The Winter of Literature*. But there was much confusion as the intellectuals worked to formulate an effective plan of action. The example of Thomas Mann and his son Klaus is emblematic. In May of 1933, Klaus's friend Annemarie Schwarzenbach "broached the idea of bringing out an anti-Nazi journal."[1] Klaus was enthusiastic about the project, and within four days the two settled on the name of *Die Sammlung* (the collection or the gathering), which would become an international journal with the political goal of opposing fascism. Wittstock calls it "one of the most important publication venues for German exile literature,"[2] but it actually included works from French, British, American, and Russian intellectuals. After the first issue was published, Thomas, at the behest of his German publisher, asked that his name be removed as contributor because he had no desire to antagonize Nazis, which could result in his books being banned in his former homeland. At the time, Thomas had completed the first biographical novel (*The Tales of Jacob*) in his Joseph tetralogy, and in response to the controversy surrounding the release of the first issue of *Die Sammlung*, Thomas told his son that his biographical novel would "be 'a far more stunning victory' over" the Nazis "than 'a whole battery of polemics by émigrés.'"[3] Father and son had radically different views about the best method for challenging the Nazis.

Unnoticed in the scholarship is the fact that a distinct literary form (political biofiction) took decisive shape during this time, and the commonalities in these works' poetics, despite significant differences in languages and cultures, are too striking to simply ignore or dismiss. Biofiction is literature that names its protagonist after an actual person. Given this fact, many wrongly think that the genre is a form of biography, so accurately representing the

1. Quoted in Frederic Spotts, *Cursed Legacy: The Tragic Life of Klaus Mann* (Yale University Press, 2016), 76.
2. Uwe Wittstock, *February 1933: The Winter of Literature*, trans. Daniel Bowles (Polity Press, 2023), 243.
3. Quoted in Spotts, *Cursed Legacy*, 80.

life of the subject is the aesthetic goal. But this is not correct. Biofictionalists fictionalize rather than represent the life of the subject, and they do this so that they can convert their protagonist into a metaphor that signifies more universally. Prominent writers from the 1930s who fictionalized the lives of real people in order to pose a challenge to the Nazi ideology and agenda include Bruno Frank, Lion Feuchtwanger, Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann, Klaus Mann, Bertolt Brecht, and Zora Neale Hurston. But in this essay, I focus on the Slovenian writer, Vladimir Bartol, who authored in 1938 one of the most insightful and enduringly relevant biofictions, *Alamut*, which metaphorizes the life of the famous leader of the Order of Assassins, Hassan ibn Sabbah, to expose the pernicious ways of thinking underwriting Nazi ideology. Focusing on political biofictions from the 1930s has a staggering consequence: it overturns one of the still dominant misconceptions about Hitler and the Nazis, specifically that they were the logical product of secularization. For political biofictionalists of the 1930s, it is impossible to understand the Nazis' agenda without foregrounding their Christian nationalism, and this explains why their works focus so much on religious ways of thinking and behaving.

I.

A brief description of the religio-political context will prove useful. After becoming Chancellor, Hitler was vocal and direct in claiming that the Nazis are a Christian party. As he says in his first wireless message to the German people on 1 February 1933: "The National Government will preserve and defend those basic principles on which our nation has been built up. They regard Christianity as the foundation of our national morality and the family as the basis of our national life."[4] In a 15 February 1933 speech, he claims: "it is Christians and not international atheists who now stand at the head of Germany,"[5] and in that same speech, he vows "to fill our whole culture once more with a Christian spirit."[6] In a 23 March 1933 speech, he declares: "The National Government regards the two Christian Confessions as the weightiest factors for the maintenance of our nationality,"[7] and this is the case because the "Government of the Reich" regards "Christianity as the unshakable foundation of the morals and moral code of the nation."[8] For Hitler, Christianity is the basis and foundation for Nazism. But not just any Christianity. As Hitler says in *Mein Kampf*, he is committed to "true Christianity,"[9] which is much different from the perverted and degraded form of the faith practiced by leaders of the Weimar Republic, as I will clarify shortly.

It was not just Hitler's overt religious declarations that must have caught the attention of Europe's intellectuals. Perhaps most concerning was a massive pilgrimage that took place in Trier during the first summer of Hitler's reign. On 20 July 1933, the Catholic Church and the Nazi Party signed the Reichskonkordat, which guaranteed the rights of the Catholic Church in Germany. The Church could have quietly signed this document, thereby downplaying the support of the Nazis that the agreement tacitly communicated. But instead, the Church hailed the alliance by organizing a pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Trier and putting on public display the putative coat of Christ (*der Heilige Rock*), what is referred to in English as the seamless robe. This was supposedly the tunic that Christ wore just before the Crucifixion and for which soldiers threw dice, as recorded in the Gospel of John (19:23-4). So holy is the garment considered, which is housed in the Cathedral of Trier, that the Church rarely allows it to be seen. For instance, before 1933, the last time it had been publicly displayed was in 1891, which was to commemorate the end of Otto von Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* against the Catholic Church.

In short, the year 1933 was considered an occasion for a Catholic political triumph in Germany. As James Carroll claims, "Catholic euphoria was widespread in the summer of the Concordat."[10] At the time, Franz Rudolf Bornewasser was the Bishop of Trier. He supported "the Nazi slate in the March 1933 election," and after Hitler had come to full power, he made the following declaration before a congregation of Catholic youth in the Trier Cathedral: "'with raised heads and firm step we have entered the new Reich and we are prepared to serve it with all the might of our body and soul.'"[11] Bornewasser had the religious and political clout (he was in contact with Hitler, Franz von Papen, Paul von Hindenburg, and Hermann Göring, just to mention a few) to stage a massive event celebrating the alliance between the Catholic Church and the Nazi Party, so he "prepared his clergy to host a pilgrimage to the Holy Coat of Jesus,"[12] and "the occasion for the 1933 celebration," as Carroll notes, "was the

4. Adolf Hitler, *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler: April 1922—August 1939*, trans. Norman H. Baynes. Volume I (Howard Fertig, 1969), 369-70.
5. Adolf Hitler, *My New Order*, ed. Raoul de Roussy de Sales (Reynal and Hitchcock, 1941), 148.
6. Hitler, *The Speeches*, 370.
7. Hitler, *The Speeches*, 371.
8. Hitler, *The Speeches*, 372.
9. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 307.
10. James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 507.
11. Cited in Carroll, *Constantine's Sword*, 504.
12. Skye Doney, "Brown and Black Boundaries: Nazism and German Catholicism in the Summer of 1933," *The Catholic Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (2018): 269.

Reichskonkordat."[13] With regard to the pilgrimage, Bornewasser expresses his objective with precision and clarity in a 23 July 1933 letter to Hitler: "Today in Germany's oldest cathedral in Trier and in the presence of Prussian authorities, state authorities and the Cardinal from Cologne, [we held] the opening of the pilgrimage to the Holy Coat of Christ. On the occasion of this celebration, we assure the Führer, who is to restore the Christian, national, and social basis of the new state, our steadfast cooperation in the construction of the new German Reich."[14] Put simply and directly, one of Germany's most prominent Catholics believes that the Catholic Church and the Nazi Party share the same goal, to make Christianity the basis and foundation of the German Reich. And given that the pilgrimage drew an estimated "2.1 million visitors"[15] over the course of six weeks, the message was politically loud and religiously clear.

In essence, Hitler was a staunch opponent of secularization and a passionate advocate for Christianity. This is not mere speculation, as the German leader unambiguously makes this point when it comes to the educational system in Nazi Germany. After Hitler came to power, two high-ranking Catholics met with the Führer to discuss the role of religion in German education, and the German dictator responded by explicitly rejecting modern secularization. As Hitler says: "Secular schools can never be tolerated because such a school has no religious instruction and a general moral instruction without a religious foundation is built on air; consequently, all character training and religion must be derived from faith."[16] This had direct consequences on education in Germany. Thomas Mann's daughter, Erika, makes this point explicitly in her 1938 book *School for Barbarians*, which documents what students learn in Nazi schools. Mann acknowledges that "officially, the Nazis demand recognition of Jesus,"[17] and she notes that "Religion is still taught in the schools." She also mentions that students are required by Nazi edict to start class by saying "Blessed be Jesus Christ, in all Eternity"[18] and to repeat that claim at the end of class. Those scholars who characterize Hitler and the Nazis as non- or anti-Christian secularists (Eric Vögelin, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Hannah Arendt) do not quote such passages and facts, because they unambiguously contradict their approaches.

II.

This background information provides a needed context for the political biofictions of the 1930s. In 1934, Frank published *Cervantes*, a novel that metaphorizes the lives of King Philip II and Miguel de Cervantes to expose the psycho-epistemological orientation of everyday people who have become infected by religious nationalism, which normativized the subjugation, violation, and even murder of Muslims and Jews in Catholic nationalist Spain. The biofictional implication: what Philip did in the name of faith during the sixteenth century can illuminate what Hitler was then doing in Nazi Germany. In this same tradition is Heinrich Mann, who authored two splendid biofictions about King Henry IV (*Young Henry of Navarre* and *Henry, King of France*). What these novels so insightfully suggest is that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Wars of Religion in France can be metaphorized to illuminate the Nazis' Christian nationalist project. For instance, in the opening chapter of *Young Henry of Navarre*, Mann foregrounds the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, who are both committed to what they each consider "the right faith," which brings to mind Hitler's commitment to "true Christianity." But what Mann then does is to have his narrator emphasize the causal relationship between political leaders and the people's faith: "The sturdy faith of the peasantry was at least of profit to their leaders."[19] To mobilize the masses to political action, nothing serves the leaders' purpose more than religious faith. Throughout *Young Henry of Navarre* (1935), Mann develops this idea as it builds towards the infamous St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre and its aftermath. Hurston was an American, and yet, in her novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), she metaphorizes the life of Moses to expose how the God-concept can function within the political as an ideal instrument for instituting what she refers to in a letter to a Jewish friend as a "theocratic government."[20] In that letter, she refers to Moses as a "dictator," and then she compares him to Hitler and what is going "on in our Christian lands under the Popes & Preachers."[21] The implication is that the Moses story can be used to illuminate the then-contemporary political situation, specifically the one of Hitler and the Nazis.

How political biofiction uniquely functions is my focus in this essay, and Brecht is extremely insightful on this point. The German author puts the matter succinctly in a 1935 essay about the way political biofiction signifies: "Many things

13. Carroll, *Constantine's Sword*, 502.

14. Quoted in Doney, "Brown and Black Boundaries," 268.

15. Doney, "Brown and Black Boundaries," 270.

16. Quoted in Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Wayne State University Press, 1979), 241.

17. Erika Mann, *School for Barbarians* (Modern Age Books, 1938), 87.

18. Mann, *School for Barbarians*, 86.

19. Heinrich Mann, *Young Henry of Navarre* (The Overlook Press, 2003), 6.

20. Zora Neale Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (Random House, 2003), 529.

21. Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 531.

that cannot be said in Germany about Germany can be said about Austria."[22] This is precisely what Brecht did in his play *Galileo*. To criticize Christian nationalism in Europe, he set the work in seventeenth-century Italy, which enabled him to criticize his time and place while giving him plausible deniability. Albert Einstein's response to an early version of the manuscript illustrates how this works. Brecht sent the 1938 draft to the famous physicist, and in response he said to Brecht: "'You have understood how to create a dramatic framework which is uncommonly captivating and which must especially interest us too on account of the strong links to the problems of the present time.'"[23] Brecht's biofiction about Galileo might seem to be about seventeenth-century Italy, but as Einstein astutely notes, it actually illuminates "the problems of the present time," mainly in Nazi Germany.

There is documentable evidence to support the view that readers understand how biofiction subtly but strategically functions as political critique. In 1946, prominent Nazi leaders were put on trial in Nuremberg for their crimes against humanity, and in his final speech, Sir Hartley Shawcross, the chief prosecutor, quoted Goethe to denounce the perpetrators. For Shawcross, the canonical author brilliantly anticipated the seductive lure of Hitler by warning people about submitting to a "mad scoundrel who appeals to their lowest instincts, who confirms them in their vices and teaches them to conceive nationalism as isolation and brutality."[24] The problem, however, is that Goethe made no such claim. Shawcross unwittingly cited lines from Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar*, a 1939 biofiction about Goethe. When Shawcross read the Goethe passage in an anti-Nazi pamphlet, he assumed that the author of *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* said something strikingly prescient about the present, which is why he quoted the sentence to condemn Nazi perpetrators. Shawcross's response is precisely what authors of biofiction desire. Skillful biofictionalists effectively extract from a biographical subject's story or writings a "truth" that can illuminate realities in multiple times and places. That readers would interpret a biofiction about an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writer as a critique of the contemporary world is clear from Shawcross's decision to cite Mann's novel at the trial to expose and condemn the Nazis' behavior.

III.

This background knowledge about biofiction should provide a framework for understanding Bartol's *Alamut*, a biofiction about the Ismaili leader, Sabbah, who uses religion to mobilize the masses to support his nationalist agenda. Central to biofiction, as Brecht notes, is a cunning method of metaphorical indirection: "Cunning is necessary to the spread of truth."[25] To be effective, writers oftentimes need to use an indirect method to communicate their political critique. For instance, to mobilize the German masses against Jews, prominent Nazi leaders such as Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, and Julius Streicher citied Bible passages condemning the Jews as children of the devil. To counteract the Nazis, intellectuals could not simply say to everyday Germans: "there are errors sprinkled throughout the Bible, so when the Nazis cite the Scriptures in order to justify the claim that Christ refers to Jews as of their father the devil (John 8:48), you do not have to believe them." Everyday people would simply reject what such a person would say. Therefore, what Brecht does in his biodrama is to use the cunning art of metaphorical indirection "to write the truth about evil conditions" so that they "can be identified" and thereby defeated.[26] For instance, in his play, Brecht foregrounds how Galileo's discovery that the earth orbits around the sun contradicts passages from the Bible. Within this framework, when Brecht fictionalizes the life of Galileo to illustrate how science has deconstructed a specific Bible truth such as the sun circling the earth, he is doing more than just undermining a few scripture passages. He is subtly deconstructing the dominant approach to the Bible, which holds that everyday people should look to the Scriptures for reliable truths about human living. According to Brecht's cunning aesthetic, the audience should be able to draw the logical conclusion: Hitler and the Nazis, citing the Bible, say that Jews are the antithesis and even enemy of Christ and all things Christian—here is how they phrase the matter in point 24 of their party program: "'The party as such represents the standpoint of a positive Christianity, without tying itself to a particular confession. It fights the spirit of Jewish materialism within us and without us.'"[27] But since Galileo, using scientific thinking, was able to demonstrate that there are errors in the Bible, everyday people do not need to accept the Nazis' Bible-based claims about Jews, because, having seen how Galileo's scientific method enabled him to debunk some biblical truths, we now know that there are mistakes in the text. Therefore, without saying it directly, Brecht's *Galileo* subverts the approach to the Bible that made the Nazis'

22. Bertolt Brecht, "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties," in *Galileo*, trans. Richard Winston (Grove Press, 1966), 143.

23. Quoted in Stephen Parker, *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life* (Bloomsbury, 2019), 392.

24. Quoted in Ronald Hayman, *Thomas Mann: A Biography* (Scribner, 1995), 531.

25. Brecht, "Writing the Truth," 149.

26. Brecht, "Writing the Truth," 140.

27. Quoted in Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14.

anti-Semitic Christian nationalism possible.

Bartol does something strikingly similar. Many everyday European Christians from the Nazi period were reluctant and even unwilling to criticize Christianity, but they were ready and willing to criticize and fault Islam. Therefore, through a cunning act of metaphorical indirection, Bartol fictionalizes the life of the eleventh-century religio-political leader in a way that should enable everyday readers to see striking similarities between Sabbah's version of Islam and Hitler's version of Christianity, thus leading them to be more willing to criticize and even reject the Nazis' Christian nationalism. Illustrating exactly how that functions will be my focus for the rest of this essay.

Bartol's Sabbah, like Hitler, has an uncanny ability to motivate and inspire people to follow him, and this is the case because he has been an attentive student of "'of man's secret drives.'"[28] As he tells his most trusted leaders, what enables him to succeed is his "'knowledge of the human soul, but also'" his "'knowledge of how the human body functions.'"[29] Specifically, as "the commander of thousands of believers," Sabbah formulates a "plan built on thorough knowledge of nature and human weakness."[30] Having "'experimented with all kinds of human behaviors,'" he claims that "'the entire human organism, spiritual and physical, lies before'" him "'like an open book.'"[31] Based on his careful analysis of the human, Bartol's Sabbah realizes that religion, more than anything else, is the best and most effective instrument for persuading people to execute his nationalistic will. As he says to his advisers, he understands "'what a tremendous force faith is, and how easy it is to awaken.'"[32] This is especially the case when it comes to establishing the political goal of establishing a legitimate and true Islamic nation. *Alamut* is set primarily in 1092 Persia, when the Seljuks have control over Iran. The nationalist objective of Bartol's Sabbah is to liberate the Persian Shiites from the tyranny of Turkish Sunnis. At first, he tries to achieve his goal through standard forms of political statesmanship, but that does not work. His central epiphany is that religion, more than anything else, is the best instrument for achieving his nationalist goal. As he says to one of his trusted advisers: "'Until now I've trusted to my statesmanship. But now I'm going to see what *faith* can accomplish.'"[33] Shortly after making this claim, he punctuates his point by saying: "'I'm going to show the world what kind of miracles *faith* can work.'"[34] It is through faith that Sabbah will indoctrinate his fighters with a self-sacrificing ideology that will make them comfortable killing others, no matter how dastardly or costly the deed.

This idea, that faith is central for the creation of fighters who would sacrifice their lives and kill without questioning, is one of the primary reasons why Hitler insisted that the Christian faith be taught in the schools. As Hitler says to Catholic Bishops about his political agenda with regard to religious instruction: "We have need of soldiers, believing soldiers. Believing soldiers are the most valuable ones. They give their all. Therefore we will maintain the confessional schools in order to train believing people through the schools, but this depends upon having truly believing teachers, not by chance Marxists who do not stand fully by their religious faith, as teachers."[35] Only true-believing Christians can be trustworthy soldiers, because non-religious ideas are "built on air." To put this idea in the words of Bartol's Sabbah: "'Everyone must simultaneously be a solider and a believer.'"[36] Christianity as the foundation for the Holy Reich and Islam as the foundation for the Islamic state are, therefore, absolute musts for the formation of a sacred nation that could crush its immoral enemies.

Important here is to note what constitutes enemies, as this has caused much confusion. The simplistic, pop-culture logic goes something like this: Hitler and the Nazis persecuted some Christians. Therefore, Hitler and the Nazis were not Christian. But Bartol provides a compelling way to understand what really was happening in Nazi Germany. Bartol's Sabbah and his followers are Shiite Muslims, whereas the Seljuks are Sunni Muslims, and as such, they are enemies of the true faith. As Sabbah says to one of his most exceptional disciples: "'Whoever is a traitor to the true faith and becomes its enemy is related to Iblis [an evil spirit that tempted the first humans]. Because the true faith is Allah's faith. And only one faith is true.'"[37] While the eleventh-century Muslims have enemies, such as Christians and Jews, it is also the case that Ismaili Muslims consider the Seljuks, Sunni Muslims, mortal enemies as well, and this is the case because the Seljuks lack an understanding of the "true faith," and that lack of understanding is leading to a corruption and degradation of the faith itself. Here is how one of the trusted ministers of Bartol's Sabbah puts the matter: "'under the Seljuk sultans the faith is degenerating.'"[38]

28. Vladimir Bartol, *Alamut*, trans. Michael Biggins (North Atlantic Books, 2011), 120.
29. Bartol, *Alamut*, 225.
30. Bartol, *Alamut*, 145.
31. Bartol, *Alamut*, 225.
32. Bartol, *Alamut*, 200.
33. Bartol, *Alamut*, 105.
34. Bartol, *Alamut*, 109.
35. Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler*, 241.
36. Bartol, *Alamut*, 158.
37. Bartol, *Alamut*, 280.
38. Bartol, *Alamut*, 94.

Hitler had a strikingly similar view of and approach to Christianity. For the Nazi dictator, National Socialism is premised on not just Christianity but also "true Christianity," which means that the Nazis have no choice but to wage a holy war against those who would corrupt the faith. This is a point that Hitler made with precision in a 15 February 1933 speech. After telling his listeners that "it is Christians and not international atheists who now stand at the head of Germany," he differentiates the Nazi version of Christianity from the so-called Christianity of leaders from the Weimar Republic:

> "I do not merely *talk* of Christianity, no, I also profess that I will never ally myself with the parties which destroy Christianity. If many wish today to take threatened Christianity under their protection, where, I would ask, was Christianity for them in these fourteen years when they went arm in arm with atheism? No, never and at no time was greater internal damage done to Christianity than in these fourteen years when a party, theoretically Christian, sat with those who denied God in one and the same government."[39]

For Hitler, Weimar Republic leaders worked and cooperated with Marxists and Jews, thus leading them to formulate laws and policies that were by nature non- and even anti-Christian. To re-establish "true Christianity," therefore, a war against the false Christians who have corrupted the true faith is necessary.

Given Bartol's construction of Sabbah, the implication is that religious faith is a political leader's most effective instrument for achieving a nationalist objective. This, however, does not necessarily mean that Bartol considers either Sabbah or Hitler sincere believers. In fact, based on Bartol's representation of Sabbah, the suggestion is that Hitler was actually a nihilist who merely used the Christian faith to mobilize the masses in support of his nationalist agenda. Multiple times in the novel Sabbah explicitly says that he does not actually believe in Allah and that religious belief is ultimately incoherent. For instance, having studied extensively the epistemological justification for religious faith, Sabbah concludes that, for serious thinking intellectuals, all religions are ultimately fairy tales. As he says to Miriam, a woman he forces to participate in his grand religious deception: "'The doctrine of Ali and Mahdi,'" which is the foundation for the Ismaili version of faith, "'is just bait for the masses of believers.'" But for enlightened intellectuals, "'the Koran is the product of a muddled brain'" and the "'Prophet'" is a "'man with a muddled brain.'" Within this framework, Islam is "'just a fairy tale dreamt up for the common masses.'"[40] This is something that applies to all faiths. As Sabbah goes on to claim: "'just as much as the Shiites defended their claims, the Sunnis defended theirs. What's more, Christians of all sects, Jews, Brahmins, Buddhists, fire worshippers and pagans were just as passionate about their teachings.'"[41] Ultimately, all religions hold that theirs is the one and only true faith, but this is proven to be incoherent, because the faiths contradict each other. Therefore, there is no compelling truth in any religion.

And yet, Sabbah, like Hitler, consistently declares himself a passionate believer in public. But why? The answer: faith is the best instrument for establishing a nation—that is the central claim at the core of *Alamut*, and if we see Sabbah as a cunning metaphor of Hitler, then Bartol's suggestion is that the German dictator, as a nihilist, merely used the Christian faith to set into motion his nationalist agenda. Let me specify precisely how Bartol's text neatly maps onto Hitler's writings and agenda.

Early in his career, Hitler realized the power of faith to motivate people in service of his nationalist agenda, as can be seen in a 12 April 1922 speech he delivered in Munich. At the time, Count von Lerchenfeld-Köfering was a conservative prime minister of Bavaria, and he was a staunch opponent of Hitler and the Nazis. As a tolerant Christian, Lerchenfeld went before the German Landtag to make the case for opposing anti-Semitism. As Hitler says in his 1922 speech: Lerchenfeld "said in the last session of the Landtag that his feeling 'as a man and a Christian' prevented him from being an anti-Semite." Hitler was incensed by this remark, so he countered by defining his version of faith: "my feeling as a Christian points me to my Lord and Saviour as a fighter. It points me to the man who once in loneliness, surrounded only by a few followers, recognized these Jews for what they were and summoned me to the fight against them and who, God's truth! was greatest not as sufferer but fighter."[42] While Lerchenfeld's version of Christianity holds that he must respect those who do not share his belief, Hitler's version holds that he must fight against those who are enemies of his faith.

What makes Hitler's version of Christianity so worrisome is his contention that allowing an enemy of Christianity like the Jews to flourish would result in the fall of Germany. To make this case, he cites the Christian Testament, referring to "the passage which tells us how the Lord at last rose in His might and seized the scourge to drive out of the Temple the brood of vipers and adders." Hitler marvels at Jesus's behavior: "How terrific was His fight for the world against the Jewish poison." The implication is that, had Jesus not taken aggressive action against the Jews,

39. Hitler, *The Speeches*, 148-9.
40. Bartol, *Alamut*, 123.
41. Bartol, *Alamut*, 125.
42. Hitler, *The Speeches*, 26.

the whole world would have been poisoned by them. Given his close reading of the Christian Testament and his understanding of Christ and his mission, Hitler draws a larger conclusion about the body politic:

> "As a Christian I have no duty to allow myself to be cheated, but I have the duty to be a fighter for truth and justice. And as a man I have the duty to see to it that human society does not suffer the same catastrophic collapse as did the civilization of the ancient world some two thousand years ago—a civilization which was driven to its ruin through this same Jewish people."[43]

By their very nature, Jews destroy civilization, as can be seen from what happened 2000 years ago, so if Christians do not take preemptive action against Jews now, the situation for Germany and even the world will become dire—that is Hitler's Christian nationalist logic. And Hitler is doing all this because he is "a fighter for truth and justice." Moreover, it is not Hitler who has necessitated this treatment of the Jews. Christ set all this into motion two millennia ago when he recognized the Jews for what they are, destroyers of civilization. As Hitler says: "after two thousands years, with deepest emotion I recognize more profoundly than ever before the fact that it was for this that He had to shed His blood upon the Cross."[44]

That is stunningly similar to Sabbah's view and approach in *Alamut*—it's difficult not to draw the conclusion that Bartol based some of Sabbah's monologues on Hitler's speeches, as both leaders share the goal of using religion to inspire everyday people to contribute to their nationalist agenda. In *Alamut*, Sabbah has the idea of secretly building a garden paradise mirrored on the one found in the Koran so that he can send select fedayeen there to trick them into believing in and fanatically desiring the afterlife, thus making them willing to die for the Islamic state. To intensify the emotional response, Sabbah gives them a drug (hashish), which is sometimes referred to as poison. The suggestion is that religion is the opium of the people. While there were rumors that the actual Sabbah did such a thing, Bartol's characterization underscores the metaphorical function of the Ismaili leader's behavior. Put more directly, he fictionalizes the life of Sabbah to illuminate the way Hitler strategically uses faith in order to produce fanatical supporters who would enable him to build his Holy Reich. The metaphorical logic: if we understand how Bartol's Sabbah uses Islam to achieve his nationalist agenda, then we will be able to understand how Hitler uses Christianity to achieve his nationalist agenda.

The two leaders had a vision of building a religious-based nation, and they realized that it could only come to fruition with the support of fanatical believers. Therefore, they devised strategies to inculcate fanatical belief within their followers. As Sabbah says to a crowd of his supporters: "'We have educated and trained a phalanx of believers, the likes of which no other ruler has known. Their fanaticism is legendary. Their determination is unequalled. Their devotion is unprecedented.'"[45] For Sabbah, fanaticism is a virtue. Hitler makes this same point in *Mein Kampf*. When discussing the rise of Christianity in antiquity, he says: "The greatness of Christianity did not lie in attempted negotiations for compromise with any similar philosophical opinions in the ancient world, but in its inexorable fanaticism in preaching and fighting for its own doctrine."[46] Fanatical belief is the best instrument in the hands of a political leader.

How that fanatical vision manifests itself is best seen through the followers' willingness to kill their enemies. After Sabbah talks to three followers who went to his artificial paradise, he tells them that he hopes that their "'faith will remain firm and unshaken'" and that "'it will be the kind of faith about which it has been said that it can move mountains.'"[47] Having had a small taste of paradise, his disciples respond exactly as Sabbah hopes and predicts. One believer says, since Sabbah has been given the keys to paradise, this proves the truth of his version of the faith: "'that's the best proof that only Ismailism is the true faith. Only a criminal dog would still doubt in Sayyiduna's mission after miracles like that.'"[48] Since this is demonstrably the case, killing in the name of the faith is the only logical response. As another fedayeen responds: "'From now on I give no leeway to infidels. I'll hack in two anybody who refuses to recognize Sayyiduna as a great prophet.'"[49] So intense are these fedayeens' beliefs that many other soldiers become similarly impassioned, which leads one commander to become "disturbed by the wild fanaticism that he observed among his men." He, therefore, draws the following conclusion: "He could just feel that his old, experienced soldiers were turning into herds of wild fanatics who no longer looked to him as their most immediate commander, but were instead falling more and more under the invisible influence of the leader of the faith."[50]

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43. Hitler, *The Speeches*, 26.
44. Hitler, *The Speeches*, 26.
45. Bartol, *Alamut*, 373.
46. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 351.
47. Bartol, *Alamut*, 251.
48. Bartol, *Alamut*, 261-2.
49. Bartol, *Alamut*, 262.
50. Bartol, *Alamut*, 262.

This is precisely what Sabbah wants, for as he says to Miriam: "'We all depend for our salvation on my machine functioning properly. I just hope it also succeeds in destroying our bitterest sworn enemy.'"[51] His particular version of Islam is the machine that churns out fanatical disciples who are ready and willing to kill enemies of the nation and faith. And it has worked exactly as planned, just as Hitler's 1922 speech had a similar effect in Germany by the year 1938, when Bartol's novel was published.

To establish this link between Sabbah and Hitler or between Islam and Christianity, Bartol has Sabbah call the reader's attention to the structural similarities between the faiths. In a conversation with one of his advisers, Sabbah says that he has modelled his institution on the Catholic Church, because, as he notes, the "'institution of Rome has been standing for a thousand years!'"[52] He says that the "Church in Rome [is] an even better system"[53] than Islam when it comes to installing leaders of the faith—it is worth noting that Hitler was a life-long Catholic and that the Catholic Church never ex-communicated him. Bartol is clearly going out of his way to indicate that there are striking similarities between Islam and Christianity when it comes to the role of deadly violence in the establishment of a nation.

IV.

The deep-level and structural similarities between Sabbah's Islamic nationalism and Hitler's Christian nationalism are too numerous to be mere coincidence—other connections include a passage describing Sabbah's writings about his own life that sound like an Islamic version of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (77), strategic descriptions of Sabbah and his followers that call to mind Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (1935), and the prophetic suggestion that Hitler would annex territory (Sudetenland and Austria, 374). That Bartol would draw parallels between the two leaders makes total sense. Hitler, like Sabbah, had a spellbinding power over a huge segment of the population, and even though Bartol published his work in 1938, he could already see what the Nazis' Christian-nationalist agenda was leading to and how incredibly dangerous it was. But how could an informed and responsible intellectual like Bartol effectively warn everyday Europeans about the likely outcome of Hitler's Christian nationalist political experiment? The answer: through the cunning art of metaphorical indirection, Bartol could fictionalize the story of a taken-from-life figure to give readers a logical and realistic template of what was coming, thus providing everyday people with the necessary knowledge and the intellectual resources to expose, challenge, and counteract the deceptions and manipulations that make an oppressive political agenda possible.

This objective explains why Bartol included the character of Avani Ibn Tahir, one of Sabbah's most gifted disciples. After tricking Tahir into believing that he was in paradise, Sabbah orders the young disciple to assassinate Nizam el-Mulk, a well-respected vizier and Sabbah's enemy. Tahir succeeds by poisoning el-Mulk, but just before he dies, the lauded leader explains to the young assassin how Sabbah tricked him by converting King Daylam's famous gardens into a seeming paradise. Tahir, having finally been divested of his illusion, draws the following conclusion about Sabbah: "How could he have ever guessed that a religious leader, whose devoted followers all thought he served justice and truth, could be such a vile fraud! Such a cold-blooded, calculating cheat!"[54] If we read *Alamut* through the lens of Brecht's cunning art of metaphorical indirection, then this passage would apply as much to Hitler as it does to Sabbah. Just as Sabbah uses the Islamic faith to inspire everyday people to believe that fighting against Sunnis is an act of "justice and truth," so too did Hitler use the Christian faith to inspire everyday people to believe that fighting Jews is an act of "truth and justice." To repeat a quotation from Hitler: "As a Christian I have no duty to allow myself to be cheated, but I have the duty to be a fighter for truth and justice." Bartol strategically uses Tahir to encourage readers to see through Hitler—the German dictator is not an inspired Christian who has privileged or reliable knowledge about the faith. Rather, he is a vile fraud and a cold-blooded cheat, who has used extremely sophisticated tactics and ploys to persuade everyday people to believe in his anti-Semitic Christian nationalism.

My interpretation of Sabbah stands in stark contrast to many Bartol scholars, who have a tendency to see Sabbah as a Nietzschean-inspired figure. Simona Škrabec thinks that Bartol uses Sabbah to illustrate how life is "'will for power,'" a Nietzschean philosophy that gives people "a license to dispense with all compassion";[55] Mirt Komel claims that Bartol's Sabbah embodies a form of Nietzschean nihilism, which justifies a "Machiavellian 'use of people as means to an end'";[56] and Michael Biggins argues that "Hasan embodies" Nietzsche's "lessons to perfection."[57] Putting aside for the

51. Bartol, *Alamut*, 321.

52. Bartol, *Alamut*, 167.

53. Bartol, *Alamut*, 223.

54. Bartol, *Alamut*, 329.

55. Simona Škrabec, "The Price of Leaving the Anonymity of a 'Small Literature'. Vladimir Bartol, *Alamut*, 1938." *Interliteraria* 10 (2005): 347.

56. Mirt Komel, "Re-orientalizing the Assassins in Western historical-fiction literature: Orientalism and self-Orientalism in Bartol's *Alamut*, Tarr's *Alamut*, Boschert's *Assassins of Alamut* and Oden's *Lion of Cairo*," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 5 (2014), 536.

57. Michael Biggins, "Against Ideologies: Vladimir Bartol and *Alamut*," in Bartol's *Alamut*, 388.

moment that Nietzsche has a much more nuanced approach to the will to power than Škrabec suggests, that Nietzsche unambiguously condemns nihilism, and that Nietzsche would absolutely condemn Sabbah for exactly the same reasons that he condemned Richard Wagner, I want to conclude by offering an alternative way of reading the text.[58]

In the novel, the character who draws surprisingly similar conclusions to Sabbah about knowledge, specifically in relation to religion, is Omar Khayyam, putative author of *The Rubaiyat*. This is important because he functions as Sabbah's foil. Both Sabbah and Khayyam realize that "'Ultimate knowledge is impossible'"; that the masses are "'afraid of uncertainty, which is why they prefer a lie that promises something tangible to even the most exalted truth if it doesn't give them anything to hold on to'"; and that the religions of "'Christ and Mohammed'" are "'fairy tales'"[59]—many of these ideas can be found in the Edward Fitzgerald translation of *The Rubaiyat*. While Sabbah and Khayyam "had come to surprisingly similar conclusions," Bartol emphasizes that they did so "each in his own way."[60] This is seen most clearly when Sabbah comes to realize with horror what he has done. After Miriam discovers the extent to which Sabbah manipulated his followers and how he used her to achieve his end, she kills herself, and this devastates the Ismaili leader, who then wonders how Khayyam would have responded to his actions: "He perceived Miriam's suicide as the loss of the last person to whom he could reveal his true self. If only he had Omar Khayyam with him now! What would he have made of his actions? He wouldn't have approved of them, for sure, but he would have understood them."[61] The realization that there is no divine being or absolute truth does not necessarily lead to an everything-is-permitted philosophy, such as Sabbah's. Another approach is possible, and Khayyam represents that alternative.

Put simply and directly, Bartol does not metaphorize the life of his protagonist to endorse the behavior of Sabbah or Hitler, but to expose and critique the ways of thinking informing and underwriting their religious nationalism.[62] It is for this reason that it makes no sense to criticize Bartol for misrepresenting Sabbah and his time. Bartol, to be sure, wanted to accurately represent the ways of thinking that enabled Sabbah to persuade everyday Muslims to become fanatical believers who would suffer, die, and kill for their country and belief, but his real focus was the rise of fascism in the 1930s, as Komel,[63] Škrabec,[64] Biggins,[65] and Mak Juvan[66] note, so he invented characters and scenes and altered what he considered non-relevant facts to foreground his cunning metaphor of Hitler and the Nazis. Hitler's monstrous project had a logic, and it was founded on a religious way of thinking about the nation. Bartol fictionalized the life of Sabbah to make that way of religious thinking clear and accessible to everyday readers. If you want to understand why the Nazis were so incredibly successful with so many good, everyday Christians, Bartol's novel offers readers some compelling insight.

The commonalities in the political biofictions of the 1930s—with their focus on religion as the animating force underwriting the Nazis' oppressive political agenda—indicate that a wide range of creative writers were coming to the same conclusion, that biofiction is one of the best ways to expose and critique the ways of thinking that made the Holy Reich a reality. What makes *Alamut* particularly challenging to locate within this literary tradition is that Bartol's metaphor is more conceptually distant from Nazi reality than Frank's *Cervantes* (King Philip's sixteenth-century Spain), Heinrich Mann's Henry novels (Henry IV's sixteenth-century France), and Brecht's *Galileo* (Galileo's seventeenth-century Italy), which metaphorize lives that are deeply rooted within a Christian context. By portraying the life of a Muslim leader, many naïve readers could wrongly assume that *Alamut*'s primary target in 1938 was Islamic nationalism. But if we interpret *Alamut* through the lens of Brecht's cunning model of metaphorical indirection and we take note of Bartol's obsession with and concerns about the role of religion within the context of European fascism, then it would make sense to see the work as a subtle but incisive critique of the

58. For the best and most extensive analysis of Nietzsche's potential effect on Bartol, see Matic Kocijančič's "'Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted': Dostoevskii, Nietzsche and the Most Famous Quote in Slovene Literature," *The Slavonic and East European review*, 100, no. 4 (2022). It is worth noting that Kocijančič quotes a passage from Bartol, who claims that Nietzsche "has nothing to do in the novel" (Kocijančič 647).

59. Bartol, *Alamut*, 127.

60. Bartol, *Alamut*, 126.

61. Bartol, *Alamut*, 328.

62. Bartol is unambiguous in claiming that he does not support Sabbah's worldview and that his view is much more closely aligned to Khayyam's. In his memoirs, he argues that people who were once raised as believers will frequently become nihilists who support the view that, because nothing is true, everything is permitted. But for those who have been raised in a non-believing community, that "logic" does not apply, and Bartol is clear that he belongs in the second camp: "Those for whom ethical principles are a human and social postulate and not some commandment imposed 'from above' will be immune to this supreme Ismaili principle. I think it will be clear that the author of these memoirs counts himself among the latter and always has" (Qtd. in Kocijančič 651).

63. Komel, "Re-orientalizing the Assassins," 534.

64. Škrabec, "The Price of Leaving," 346.

65. Biggins, "Against Ideologies," 383.

66. Marko Juvan, *Worlding a Peripheral Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1.

Nazis' Christian nationalism, which bears an eerie resemblance to Sabbah's religious-nationalist agenda.

And yet, that is not the end of Bartol's metaphorical story. If we understand the way the biofictional symbol functions, then what Bartol accomplishes through *Alamut* is so much bigger and more wide-ranging than a critique of his own time and place. The metaphor that Bartol constructs through his fictionalization of Sabbah's life can be used to illuminate the 1979 Islamic Revolution (it is worth noting that Amin Maalouf's 1988 biographical novel *Samarcande* fictionalizes the life of Sabbah in the same way as Bartol in order to expose the dangers of religious fundamentalism) or the ways of thinking informing the 9/11 terrorist attack in the United States.[67] But the text's metaphor could also be used to illuminate the rising Christian nationalisms today in Brazil, Italy, Poland, Hungary, and the United States. In short, the text's symbology can have a wide-ranging application, which explains why the work reads as if it were "conceived to become an international bestseller,"[68] to quote Juvan. The enduring power and applicability of its metaphor, the depth of the text's insight about the dangers of religious ways of thinking within the context of the political, and the more humane and socially just alternative to Sabbah as seen in and through the character of Khayyam explain why *Alamut* should be considered one of the best and most effective political biofictions ever to have been written and why it should be canonized as a biofictional classic.

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67. It is worth noting that Bartol's novel has gained a major global audience in part because of the way *Alamut* can be used to illuminate the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism from the late seventies until the present, as Tomo Virk argues in *Trojka s Filozofske: spisi o Vebru, Bartolu in Jugu*. I have taken this idea from Kocijančič's "'Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted,'" 625-6.

68. Juvan, *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*, 1.