

# **“The Lord of the Rings” and the World Wars: The Applicability of Allegory**

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## **Abstract**

"Lord of the Rings" trilogy, written by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien between 1937 and 1949 is an epic novel, set in the fictional Middle Earth, in which a brotherhood of humans, elves and dwarves battles against a mighty force of evil, Sauron and his minions to protect the free world from destruction and slavery. Although the author denies that the novel is an allegory of war, many people believe that he was influenced greatly by the First and Second World Wars. My research question was "How did the Two World Wars Influence John Ronald Reuel Tolkien During the Creation of " the Lord of the Rings" Trilogy ?" . I will analyze the similarities between the events in the novel and the events during the two world wars and strive to point out how Tolkien was influenced by these. The most important allegory is the battle between the ultimate evil of Sauron (ie. Nazism and Fascism) and the free peoples of Middle Earth. Although evil is far more powerful and aggressive in the beginning, the determination and valor of a coalition of unlikely allies wins in the end. Several other points exist in the novel that are directly related to the events during the world wars. Nazi Germany, defeated and repressed after the First World War, rises again as an over-industrialized, hostile country, trying to spread its influence around the world. This is similar to Sauron and the forces of evil, defeated in the Second Age by the coalition of elves and humans, rises yet again to threaten Middle Earth and enslave its people. SS soldiers, performing unspeakable deeds during the Holocaust remind us of mindless orcs who carry out the orders of their masters without thinking. The uneasy alliance formed by the democratic capitalist countries with the communist Russians during the Second World War is like the alliance of elves and dwarves; although they are not fond of each other, they unite against a common enemy. Geographical similarities; the role of the Nazgul and V2

rockets; the similarity of Sauron's army with the German war machine; Saruman's resemblance to Mussolini; the likeness of Dead Marshes to the battlefields of Somme are other minor but important points.

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**Research Question: How did the Two World Wars Influence John  
Ronald Reuel Tolkien During the Creation of " the Lord of the Rings"  
Trilogy ?**

## **Introduction**

"The Lord of the Rings" trilogy is an epic novel about the battle between an ultimate evil power and an alliance of seemingly weak peoples of middle earth. The alliance brings together humans, hobbits, elves, dwarves and even ghosts to end the brutal repression of evil symbolized by Sauron and to save the free world from slavery. The novel was written in stages between 1937 and 1949, much of it during the Second World War. Although the author John Ronald Reuel Tolkien denies the idea that the trilogy is an allegory of the war, many similarities and influences can be spotted throughout the whole novel.

In the foreword Tolkien writes;

*"As for any inner meaning or message, it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical or topical.....Its sources are things long before in mind or in some cases already written, and little or nothing in it was modified by the war that began in 1939 or its sequels."* <sup>(1)</sup>

However, although he denies any allegory, he also leaves the reader free for "applicability" with the words in the foreword;

*"I think many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purported domination of the author"* <sup>(2)</sup>

Therefore, as a reader I will take the freedom to express my views on the similarities and influences of the events of the First and Second World Wars on the events that take place in the novel. The most important point is that both in our world and in Middle-Earth there is a great war that brings mass destruction and involves many nations and races. The rise of evil affects everyone and even though some are far

away from the battlefields, they cannot stay indifferent to it, since it will eventually harm them too.

## **1. The Changing World**

In the years that the trilogy was written in, Tolkien was born into a changing world. 'Old world' culture and lifestyle was changing at a tremendous pace. One by one the traditions and the peaceful urban territories of England were leaving their spot to the newfound industry. The old aristocratic families and habits were slowly fading, and with it the whole world order was altering. This change is similar to the dwindling power of the elves in the novel. The immortal elves, noble and wise race of Middle Earth, were powerful and had a great influence in the world in the past. However, during the tumultuous events in the novel, we see that their power gradually fades as humans take their place. The elves slowly leave Middle-Earth and sail to Valinor, an island where mortals are not allowed, to isolate themselves against the rise of evil. <sup>(3)</sup>

The trilogy starts in Shire, a remote, peaceful village where the hobbits live. Shire is a replica of a typical English village, Hobbits are simple farmers, they lead uncomplicated lives, yet their lives will be changed drastically by the rise of evil from the east. This is very similar to pre-war British countryside, with an idyllic life soon to be shattered by war coming from the east.

## **2. Repression Followed by the Rise of Evil**

After the First World War, Germany was defeated by the group of England, France, Russia and the other allied forces with the help of the United States of America. After the victory of the Allied Forces they made Germany sign the Treaty of Versailles, which was harsh and limiting Germany in many aspects and in a way it was suspending

the country, like a chained dog full of rage and ready to attack. <sup>(4)</sup> In addition to territorial concessions, Germany was forced to pay the equivalent of 442 billion US dollars, which was finally completed in 2010.<sup>(5)</sup> The treaty had so extreme limitations that made Germany explode later on which caused the Second World War, but it never completely destroyed the country. Similarly, Sauron and his evil minions were defeated in the Second Age by the Coalition that was formed between Elves and Men in the War of the Last Alliance. <sup>(6)</sup> Sauron and the ring had no more power anymore but they were never completely destroyed, just like post-war Germany. After that in time both Germany and Mordor recovered, at a really quick pace and soon they had the power to strike again, leading the whole world to chaos.

### **3. Mordor, the Over-Industrialized Evil Power and Nazi Germany**

One of the similarities between World War Two and the events that are going on in the Third Age of Middle-Earth is the presence of an ultimate evil power. At the time of the war it is possible to observe an over-industrialized Germany, which relates to the situation in Isengard and Mordor where there is no respect for the nature and its beauties, which can be seen in the example of the trees being cut down to provide fuel for the forges. Isengard, once a beautiful valley was Saruman's head-quarters against Rohan. He cut down its trees, dug deep pits and used these to breed the Uruk-hai and Orcs. Gandalf describes Isengard as :

*" I looked on it and saw that, whereas it had once been green and fair, it was now filled with pits and gorges..... Over all his works a dark smoke hung.." <sup>(7)</sup>*

After the industrial revolution in Germany, the country started to produce steel war machines and the war industry came into prominence, which lead to the harming of

nature. Thousands of war prisoners and deported Jews were forced into labor to produce war machines and to build defenses against an eventual allied invasion. This example, and the fact that Nazi SS soldiers followed orders without even questioning them in situations like the Holocaust, which in fact made them a mindless rabble of orcs, symbolizes the stereotypical evil in history. The systems in these kinds of powers are based on strict orders and cold-bloodedness which causes the people to lose their judgment skills and their common sense and even their conscience.

#### **4. "Blitzkreig" and the Armies of Sauron**

During the Second World War, the French thought they could stop the advance of German Armies with the outdated Maginot Line, which was easily overrun by the motorized force concentration of tanks, infantry, artillery and air power. This battle tactic, where a superior concentration of mechanized force was constantly in motion was described as "Blitzkreig" or lightning war. <sup>(8)</sup> This concentration of brute force, superior war machines and speed is typical of Sauron's armies and their fighting strategies. The forces of evil overwhelm their foes with hundred thousands of Orcs, tireless Uruk-hai (cross-breeded humans and orcs) that are constantly in motion, wargs (wild wolves), attack towers, battering rams, Mumakil (battle elephants), flying Nazgul(see later) while the Free Peoples of Middle Earth have nothing but their simple weapons and horses.

#### **5. Alliance of Weaker Nations and the Help of the "Cavalry"**

In the novel, the Free Peoples of Middle-Earth are relatively weak compared to the power of Mordor and Isengard. In order to defeat this coalition, the Free People need to form an alliance in order to obtain the power to stand against evil. In this



alliance, even the smallest of powers are needed. Hobbits are one of these. Even though they aren't capable of a lot and even though they are small in size they play a tremendously noteworthy part in the novel. Similarly in WWII, even the relatively small nations like Serbs and Greeks played a role in the course of history, delaying and resisting the German Armies and making the allied victory possible.

Due to this general lack of power and strong unity, the Free Peoples of Middle-Earth always need assistance in their conflicts. This assistance is sometimes in the form of a last minute reinforcement. This particular condition can be noted in the examples of; the Battle of Helms Deep and the Siege of Minas Tirith where respectively, Erkenbrand and King Elessar ride to the aid of the defenders. It can be said that who saved Europe from the Nazi-German dominance was the United States of America, which in this case symbolizes the desperately needed reinforcement.

World War II started in September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939 when Germany and Slovakia attacked Poland. <sup>(9)</sup> Europe was quickly overrun by the Germans and Britain was spared because of its geographical advantage. The island acted as an impenetrable fortress similar to Helms Deep until reinforcements arrived. Helms Deep, in the novel, is the fortified sanctuary with impenetrable walls that people of Rohan had retreated during times of war. The armies of Saruman laid a siege at Helms Deep with superior forces. All seemed lost when at the last moment, help arrived in form of Riders of Rohan, led by Erkenbrand and Gandalf. The evil army could only be defeated with the help of the riders. Although the Americans helped the allies with materials and arms, they did not enter the military conflict until late 1941. However their involvement was pivotal in overturning the Nazi invasion and winning the war. As seen from the view of popular

culture in the United States, the cavalry was there at the most desperate moment to save Europe.

## **6. Uneasy Alliances**

The abovementioned reinforcements are not always hundred percent defending the same cause. This leads to uneasy alliances. For instance, the assistance from the dead that King Elessar had summoned is not completely reliable. The Dunlendings once allies of Sauron, change sides and swear allegiance to Isildur of Gondor. However, they are cursed by Isildur when they refuse to go to war with the Last Alliance of Elves and Men against Sauron. Their ghosts remain doomed forever in the White Mountains until Aragon summons their help during the siege of Gondor. The ghosts arrive at the last moment on the southern shores of Gondor and help defeat the Corsairs of Umbar, providing the men of Gondor help during the battle of Minas Tirith.

Another example would be the elegant and sophisticated elves not completely being happy to be fighting alongside the brute and arrogant dwarves. Dwarves are not too willing either, but the greater cause, to protect their lands and to cleanse evil from Middle-Earth, brings them under one banner. Haldir the elf reacts to the presence of a dwarf in the fellowship with the words:

*".. A dwarf! That is not well. We have not had dealings with the dwarves since the Dark Days. They are not permitted in our land. I cannot allow him to pass."* <sup>(10)</sup>

In correlation to this, during WWII a similar alliance was formed between the communist dictatorship of the Soviet Union and the bastions of democracies of the free world, Britain and the United States of America, with their capitalist order. These two

opposite poles had to form an alliance to stand against the might of Nazi-ruled Germany. It is ironic to note that, the same Soviets that had massacred the Polish prisoners of war in the forest of Katyn in 1940,<sup>(11)</sup> would be called in to help overthrow the invading Nazi's later in the war. As expected, once the greater evil was defeated, the alliance fell apart as Europe was divided and the Cold War began.

## **7. The Nazgul and V2 Rockets**

Apart from these, similarities exist in minor themes or symbols. For example the almost invincible Nazgul and their flying fellbeasts, which are also referred to as 'Sauron's most terrible servants' can be related to the death raining V-2 Rockets (Vergeltungswaffe 2, ie. retaliation weapon) that the Nazi-Germans used during World War Two. The V- 1 and V-2 rockets were liquid fuel rockets developed by Wernher von Braun and Walter Dornberger and produced by Nazi Germany to attack distant sites. They were used mostly to attack London and Antwerp, killing almost 2500 people <sup>(12)</sup>. The first man-made object to reach outer space, these weapons were almost invincible, appeared unexpectedly out of the sky and wrought terror in the hearts of civilians with their dreadful noise and capacity for mass destruction. As told by David Golfman in South Londoner's Stories on the Flying bombs and Rockets

*"...Once heard, the V1 jet propulsion system roar would forever be recognised for what it was, and still, 60 years on, when television documentaries or such like replay the past, the hair on the back of my neck reacts, and memories, good and bad, return."* <sup>(13)</sup>

The Nazgul (Dark Riders or Black Riders) were indestructible killers that fell unexpectedly out of the sky, with terrifying noise. The terror they caused was probably more effective than their actual damage, similar to the rockets. Sauron's most trusted

servants, the Nazgul, were originally the old kings of men, then Sauron, with his extraordinary ability to corrupt and persuade, gave them the nine rings of power and one by one their souls were captured by the darkness. With their steeds, fellbeasts, they reach their target which was set by their master Sauron swiftly. They are like propelled V2 rockets this way, since their targets are pre-determined and they are controlled by the higher authorities and one final similarity is the fact that they both get their job done once they are sent on duty. Their role in the Siege of Gondor is described as:

*"The Nazgûl came again . . . and as their Dark Lord now grew and put forth his strength, so their voices which uttered only his will and malice , were filled with evil and horror. Ever they circled above the City, like vultures that expect their fill of doomed men's flesh. Out of sight and shoot they flew, and yet were ever present, and their deadly voices rent the air. More unbearable they became, not less at each new cry. At length even the stout-hearted would fling themselves on the ground as the hidden menace passed over them.." (14)*

## **8. Dead Marshes and The Battlefields of Somme**

Tolkien was sent to France in 1916 and fought in the battle of Somme during the First World War. <sup>(15)</sup> The battle of Somme involved the British and French Armies against the Germans and their Allies. Over a million soldiers from both sides died because of war or disease, including some of Tolkien's best friends. Sixty thousand British soldiers died in the first day of the offensive. Thousands of lives were lost for a few meters of territory. Although Tolkien denies any allegory, the descriptions:

*"... dead grasses and rotting reeds loomed up in the mists like ragged shadows..."*

*"Candles of corpses.. some like dimly shining smoke, here and there twisted like ghostly sheets.."*

*"There are dead things, dead faces in the water... They lie in all the pools, pale faces deep deep under the dark water. I saw them: grim faces and evil and noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, and weeds in their silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead." (16)*

... speak for themselves as he describes the horrors of trench warfare.

Tolkien treasured his friends, and was sent to war with three of his closest friends; Rob Gilson, Geoffrey Bache-Smith and Christopher Wiseman. The first two died during the battle; one from enemy bullets and the other from gangrene from a minor wound in the trenches. <sup>(17)</sup> Their loss had a profound effect on him. This may have reflected on his storyline, in the breaking of the fellowship and particularly on the death of Boromir in Amon Hen while trying to defend the hobbits. This occurs during fighting near Parth Galen, where Boromir is mortally wounded by orc archers while defending Merry and Pippin, and although he dies, he dies for a glorious cause.

Another character in the novel is Samwise Gamgee, Frodo's gardener/helper who accompanies him in his journey to Mount Doom, and saves his life countless times. Some researchers believe that Samwise Gamgee is Frodo's "batman" a term used in the British Army for orderlies who cook, carry the luggage and take care of their officers. <sup>(18)</sup> Tolkien confirms this later in a letter stating:

*"My Sam Gamgee is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognized as so far superior to myself" (19)*

## **9. Genetic Experiments and The Creation Of Superior Orcs**

Paul Kocher has pointed out another similarity between Nazis and Saruman. <sup>(20)</sup> Hitler was obsessed with creation of a superior Aryan race and encouraged a multitude of genetic experiments, mostly on concentration camp inmates. Similarly, in the novel Saruman conducts genetic experiments to create "... Orcs of the White hand, larger, better fighters", however unlike the Nazis he succeeds in producing a modified species.

### **10. Geographical Similarities**

The geographical similarity of the map of Middle Earth and Europe has been pointed out by Frank Masel. <sup>(21)</sup> Masel likens the map of Middle Earth to Europe without Italy. Mordor is approximately where Germany is in modern times. Gondor, the land of the white city and kings, located west of Mordor, is France. Shire, which is far from the conflict is in the northwest, symbolizes England. The blond and good looking elves are from the far north, in this case Scandinavian states. Although these similarities are probably unintentional, they probably represent the subconscious preconceptions of the author and signify yet another influence of the geographical situation in the Second World War.

### **11. Likeness of Mussolini to Saruman**

The Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was an important ally of Nazi Germany, and fought together with Hitler to further his despotic ambitions. Italy entered the war on July 10th, 1940 alongside Nazi Germany. With the help of Nazi Germany, Italy annexed parts of France, Sudan, Kenya, Somalia and Egypt for a short time. The relatively weak Mussolini was manipulated by the stronger Hitler to spread war in Europe, North Africa and Balkans. However, Mussolini's glory was short lived, after a series of defeats by the allied forces, he was dismissed by King Vittorio Emanuel in 25 July 1943. He was reinstated by the Germans and ruled for two more years as a puppet to his German

masters. His death was in the hands of one of his countrymen, Walter Audisio a partisan commander.<sup>(22)</sup> In the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Saruman, at first well intentioned, succumbs to the authority and power of Sauron and uses his powers to wage war on men of Rohan. Saruman is the leader of the Istari, wizards sent by elves to Middle-earth in human form. He is sent to fight the great evil Sauron, but instead is corrupted by the power and becomes a puppet of the stronger Sauron. He proceeds to destroy nature and trees in his headquarters in Orthanc, Isengard. He creates an army of orcs and wolves and wages war on Rohan. However, his glory is short lived as his army is defeated by the riders of Rohan, and Isengard is destroyed by the Ents led by two friends of Frodo, Merry and Pippin. His death is by the hands of one his henchmen Grima Wormtongue.

## **12. Conclusion**

The Lord of the Rings Trilogy is a great saga, focusing on the fight of good against evil, carried out by a small group of enormously outnumbered but determined and noble men, which bring together different nations and races in an eventually victorious battle. Although the author John Ronald Reuel Tolkien is against the idea that he has been influenced by the two great world wars, we can observe many events in the novel that bear the marks of the wars. Apart from the main theme of alliance of free men against a ruthless corrupt power, many minor influences can also be observed. These range from the more obvious geographical similarities to the likeness of Nazgul, to the V-2 rockets and the puppet Saruman to Mussolini. The trench warfare experiences of the author during the Battle of Somme find their expression in the Dead Marshes and the character of Samwise Gamgee. The two World Wars were such horrible and traumatic events that no man could stay uninfluenced. I have correlated these with

several events and characters in the novel and conclude that Tolkien was significantly influenced by the two world wars, either consciously or subconsciously during the creation of the saga of the Lord of the Rings.



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