

# Fantasies of Occupation: 'Occupied' and 'the Man in the High Castle'

Written by Robert A. Saunders

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/03/07/fantasies-of-occupation-occupation-and-the-man-in-the-high-castle/>

ROBERT A. SAUNDERS, MAR 7 2016

Last year saw the premiere of two television series about the politics of occupation. A Norwegian production *Okkupert* ('Occupied'), which premiered on TV 2 in Norway and is currently available on the Netflix platform, and *The Man in the High Castle*, Amazon's first foray into television programming. The first, based on an original idea by internationally renowned detective writer Jo Nesbø, is set in the near future. The United States, having attained energy independence and learned the lessons of failed interventionism in the war-torn Middle East, has unilaterally withdrawn from NATO just as a newly elected Green Party government in Norway decides to abandon all oil and natural gas extraction in favour of an untested renewable energy project based on thorium. The result: a European Union-sanctioned Russian 'velvet glove' invasion of the Scandinavian country to restart petroleum production. The second is set in 1963, and is an adaptation of Philip K. Dick's alternative history (published the same year) wherein Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan divide up a defeated America, leaving only a narrow neutral zone in the Rockies. Both series have received critical acclaim while also generating controversy. The latter's visually evocative advertising campaign on New York City subway cars resulted in a quick denunciation by the Anti-Defamation League who found the ads offensive, while Vyacheslav Pavlovsky, the Russian ambassador in Norway, condemned *Occupied* as an example of the 'worst traditions of the Cold War', aimed at frightening 'Norwegian viewers with a non-existent threat from the east'.

To those of us who spend our days (and nights) plumbing the depths of the popular culture-world politics continuum, it comes as no surprise that *Occupied* appeared when it did. Clearly Nesbø's 'original idea' was a response to Russia's similar (real-world) operation in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and is somewhat plausible given that Norway provides more than 10% of the EU's oil and a third of its natural gas (more than Russia). The parallels between Norway and Ukraine are numerous: both countries are non-EU members that possess a border with Russia, as well as share(d) governance over a piece of territory, namely Svalbard and Sevastopol, and both countries' national identities are rather fragile and new entities (Ukraine is obsessed with differentiating itself from Russia, Norway from Sweden). Remove NATO from Norway or add it to Ukraine and the parallels deepen further. Moving beyond the explicit dynamics of the plot, there is a deeper fear addressed in the series, that of immigration abetted by EU policies (or lack thereof). While the Africans and Muslims portrayed in the series are marked as integrated and loyal citizens, there is a rabid anti-immigration theme that presents in *Occupied* with the Russians who have 'snuck' across the border becoming the object of vicious hatred.

Having just returned from Oslo, I can state that the question of immigrants and 'national values' were swirling all around me wherever I was in the city, despite a seemingly successful policy of integration when compared to that of UK, France, Germany, or many other European countries. In defence of the show's producers, *Occupied* is really about the pressures placed on a society in an untenable situation, and that is where the series succeeds where many other geopolitical dramas have fallen short of the mark. Still, in these situations, we are able to tease out palpable fears a given society has about themselves and their place in the world. Thus, *Occupied* represents a raw and honest vision of the here and now for a Norway that is outside the EU, but ultimately governed by its actions and inaction.

Popular culture as a mechanism for representing contemporary realities is, unfortunately, totally absent in *The Man in*

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*High Castle*. In addition to being bogged down by a distended and uninteresting 'love story', the series continues to beat the dead horse of anti-Nazism that has so well-served cinema (and its televisual complement) for nearly seven decades, spanning *The Great Dictator* (1940) to the recent Oscar winner *Son of Saul* (2015). As a dedicated fan of Dick's oeuvre and *The Man in the High Castle* in particular (which I read at the age 18), I have long anticipated the adaptation of this important work. Yet, when it arrived, that enthusiasm turned to ashes in my mouth, given its appearance in a year when a leading Republican candidate for the U.S. Presidential nomination, retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson, stated that the U.S. is living in 'a Gestapo age' and that the country today is 'very much like Nazi Germany'. These preposterous claims followed a venomous debate over healthcare reform with Obamacare being regularly labelled by the far right as a latter-day Aktion T4 program for America's old and sick. Extending the Nazi analogies, many on the American left increasingly see the presumptive Republican nominee, Donald J. Trump, as a Hitler-in-waiting for the country (or at least the harbinger of American authoritarianism), particularly given his plans to ban Muslim immigration, advocating of killing terrorists' families, xenophobic attacks on major trading partners, and a (temporary) failure to reject the endorsement of former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke. Sadly, I have come to the conclusion that Amazon green-lighted the project to tap into the simmering angst and anti-government sentiment that pervades Obama's America on both sides of the political divide.

*The Man in the High Castle* is the perfect 'distraction' for a country riven by increasingly bitter culture wars, a debilitating struggle between neo- and post-racism, and a complete breakdown in civil discourse. Viewers can sit back in the comfort of their living rooms and wish for a 'better time' when a genocidal external enemy brought the country together, rather than dealing with the very real divisions that exist today in dealing with immigration, reproductive rights, healthcare, and foreign policy.

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## About the author:

**Dr. Robert A. Saunders** is a Professor in the Department of History, Politics and Geography at Farmingdale State College-SUNY. He is the author of four books, including *Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm* (Routledge, 2017). His research explores the changing nature of national, religious, and political identity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.