

From Troy to Total War: Pro-Greek, Anti-Trojan Interpretations of the Iliad

The legacy of the Iliad is long lasting, influencing not only literary tradition, but also political ideology. While the epic itself presents a varied tapestry of heroism and rather favourable depictions of both the Achaeans and the Trojans, later interpretations reveal contemporary biases. On some occasions, these interpretations could be read as natural consequence of national pride. On others, however, they resemble a malevolent and intentional twisting of the epic.

This essay will first examine the anti-Trojan sentiments of the scholia: the notes written in the margins of a text by ancient commentators.¹ The exegetical bT scholia to the Iliad are designated as such because they are found in the descendants of lost manuscript b (sixth century AD) and in manuscript T (eleventh century AD) and they focus on finer points of literary criticism.² Much of the material is Alexandrian from the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, largely attributable to Didymus, but the commentators are mostly anonymous.³ Not only do these commentators wear their own biases proudly, but they also impose them upon the poet. Across the Homeric exegetical scholia, a certain conviction is salient: ‘ἀεὶ γὰρ φιλέλλην ὁ ποιητής’ (‘for the poet is always a friend of the Greeks’). Such philhellenism translates into a distaste for those who threaten the beloved Greeks—the Trojans. The first part of this essay will consider the techniques that the scholia use to justify these sentiments.

Almost two millennia later, during a speech at the Cultural Conference at the 1933 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, Hitler opted to claim a (false) ancestral connection to classical civilisation. Henceforth, German National Socialism embarked on the task of recasting the Greeks as ‘Nordic’ forebears.⁴ This theory was distilled into diverse areas of public life, from propaganda and popular literature to school curricula.⁵ Alfred Rosenberg, an influential Nazi intellectual, ideologue, and propagandist for racial theory, is largely responsible for this.⁶ His book *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, published in 1930, had sold more than one million

¹ Eleanor Dickey, *Ancient Greek Scholarship: A Guide to Finding, Reading, and Understanding Scholia, Commentaries, Lexica, and Grammatical Treatises, from Their Beginnings to the Byzantine Period* (Oxford University Press 2007) p. 11

² Ibid., p. 19

³ Ibid., p. 20

⁴ Sam Thompson, *Classical Reception in German Exile Literature, 1933-48* (2022) Abstract

⁵ Ibid., Abstract

⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘Alfred Rosenberg: Biography’ (Holocaust Encyclopaedia) <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/alfred-rosenberg-biography>> accessed 7 July 2025.

copies by 1944.⁷ It is rife with classical references, arguing that Homeric heroes, such as ‘blue-eyed Menelaus’, were ‘Nordically conditioned’. To Rosenberg, this meant that they were racially predisposed—due to their Nordic blood—to think, feel, and act according to what he considered the free and heroic Nordic worldview, rather than that of ‘degenerate’ races.⁸ This essay will perform a close analysis of the Homeric reception of Rosenberg’s text and compare its pro-Greek, anti-Trojan interpretations of the Iliad with those of ancient commentators in the scholia.

Anti-Trojan Sentiment in the Exegetical Scholia to the Iliad

Though Homer never uses the word βάρβαροι to describe the Trojans,⁹ the scholia employ it unreservedly as a technique to distance them from the Achaeans. By the time of their writing, the word was undoubtedly pejorative, as it had been since the time of the Persian Wars.¹⁰ Interestingly, the characteristics that the scholia believe make the Trojans βάρβαροι are often characteristics that the Achaeans, too, possess. In Book 24, for example, Priam has entered the Greek camp at night to supplicate Achilles and bring the ransom for the corpse of Hector. To a modern audience, this scene is deeply sympathetic. Priam has risked death to retrieve the body of his son; has shown humility by supplicating Achilles even though he is a king; and his plea is framed in shared human suffering, since he asks Achilles to ‘remember [his] own father’.¹¹ The two are united in grief and they weep together.¹² Yet when Achilles grants Peleus a truce for a mourning period, the scholion remarks ‘φιλοπενθές γὰρ τὸ βάρβαρον.’ (‘For the barbarian likes to mourn.’),¹³ with a tone that seems snide and dismissive. We might

⁷ ‘The Myth of the 20th Century’ (*Blackwell’s* 8 July 2020) <<https://blackwells.co.uk/bookshop/product/The-Myth-of-the-20th-Century-by-Rosenberg-Alfred/9781916028500?srsId=AfmBOopU552efZGqsehZwTjpocArxueRDxF2tut4XlWi2hS-jPVuDOI5>> accessed 15 July 2025.

⁸ Alfred Rosenberg, ‘The Myth of the 20th Century (Mythus Des XX. Jahrhunderts) an Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of Our Age, English Edition’ (1980) <<https://www.nommeraadio.ee/meedia/pdf/RRS/Alfred%20Rosenberg%20-%20The%20Myth%20of%20the%2020th%20Century.pdf>> accessed 7 July 2025.

⁹ Thuc., 1.3.3

¹⁰ Jona Lendering, ‘Barbarians - Livius’ (www.livius.org 15 July 2020) <<https://www.livius.org/articles/concept/barbarians/>> accessed 15 July 2025.

¹¹ Homer, *The Iliad* (Emily Wilson tr, W W Norton & Company 2023).

¹² Homer, *Iliad*, 24.505-511

¹³ I cite Iliadic scholia using their numeration in Erbse’s edition (1969-88), in the format Σ Il. (line number): this scholion is Σ Il. 24.664.

question why the scholion associates the quality solely with the non-Greek, when in fact earlier books of the Iliad give the impression that the Trojans and Achaeans are equally ‘φιλοπενθεῖς’. Achilles’ grief for Patroclus, for example, has an animalistic quality: ‘he scooped up fistfuls of soot and dust and poured it on his head’, ‘he tore his hair’,¹⁴ and he is ‘just like a thick-maned lion’.¹⁵ The differential treatment of Priam and Achilles suggests that this comment is more reflective of contemporary religious practices than it is reflective of the content of the Iliad. Their bias, therefore, is not only philhellenic, but also affected by the cultures and traditions of late antiquity that differ from the time of the Iliad’s composition.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the scholia tend to quote lines and phrases out of context, which strengthens the impression that the commentators are intent on finding grounds for Trojan criticism. Hector is a frequent target. For instance, he is vilified on account of his speech in Book 8, which a modern reader might consider unifying and galvanising, since he encourages his men to exploit their favourable position.¹⁶ However, when Hector hopes that the Greeks will ‘jump desperately on board their ships’, the scholion quotes and comments ‘ἵνα τις στυγέησι καὶ ἄλλος • ἀλαζονείαν ἔχει ὁ λόγος βαρβαρικῇν.’ (*‘So that even another might shudder [to bring war to the Trojans]: the speech contains barbarian boastfulness’*),¹⁷ perhaps in an attempt to associate the trait deemed negative by this scholiast with a non-Greek, despite ‘ἀλαζονεία’ (‘boastfulness’) being a quality shared by many Greek heroes. Alternatively, this is proof of disparate standards being applied to the different groups, revealing the scholiast’s belief that the Trojans are inferior, therefore that their achievements do not warrant pride. One might identify disparate standards once more in Hector’s speech, as the scholion quotes out of context: ‘αἶ γὰρ ἐγὼν [...] εἶην ἀθάνατος: βαρβαρικὸν τὸ εὐχεσθαι τὰ ἀδύνατα.’ (*‘If only I were immortal: [it is] barbarian to pray for impossible things.’*)¹⁸ The scholion takes advantage of the ambiguous Greek of Hector’s wish, quoting only a small part of his plea for Trojan success. In comparison, Nestor’s speech of the previous book in which he prays to be young again provokes no such criticism from the scholiasts, who instead praise it for its effective rhetoric: Nestor’s speech is ‘ἐντεχνον’ (‘masterful’).¹⁹ As before with the ‘φιλοπενθεῖς’ βάρβαροι, this comparison suggests the scholiast’s disapproval of contemporary non-Greeks’ nonconformity to Greek religion and

¹⁴ Homer, Iliad, 18.23-27

¹⁵ Ibid., 18.318

¹⁶ Homer, Iliad 8.496-553

¹⁷ Σ. Il. 8.515b

¹⁸ Σ. Il. 8.539-9b

¹⁹ Σ. Il. 7.125

their differing practices. In other words, Hector only receives such a reprimand because of his state as βάρβαρος. Once more, the ancient interpretation of the Iliad reveals more about the time period of the commentators than about the Homeric age.

The pro-Greek, anti-Trojan bias of the scholia also manifests itself as selectiveness of evidence, rather than consideration of the epic as a whole. Σ. Il. 16.101-11 explains that ‘καλῶς δὲ ἐκλογῇ τῶν ὀνομάτων χρῆται • φυγὴν γὰρ οὐκ ὠνόμασεν, ἀλλ’ ὅτι μένειν οὐκ ἠδύνατο’ (‘He [sc. Homer] chooses his words well. The word ‘flight’ is not used, but he says that he [sc. Ajax] could not withstand.’) This praise suggests that Homer carefully avoids associating weakness with ‘Greek-ness’. However, since Homer uses φυγή and its cognates frequently to describe Greek flight,²⁰ the scholion demonstrates a narrow focus on individual lines at the expense of broader context. In doing so, the scholiast demonstrates their anxiety to prove that Homer is philhellene. Thus, what started as national pride culminates in an intense need to defend Greek superiority. In other words, the scholiast’s bias has transformed their interpretations of the Iliad into manipulations of the text to suit their belief system.

Nazi Ideological Reception of Homer

As observed by Ziva Kunda in *The Case for Motivated Reasoning*, individuals tend to unconsciously adapt their processing of information to make interpretations that align with a goal, typically to reinforce identity, to maintain existing beliefs, or to avoid cognitive dissonance.²¹ As a result, the ideologues of German National Socialism saw themselves reflected in the heroes of the Iliad and agreed, as put forward in Rosenberg’s *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, that ‘the ancient Mycenaean culture of the Achaeans was predominantly Nordic in character’. Throughout the book, race is a recurring theme and a principal reason for Rosenberg’s admiration for ‘the dream of Nordic man made manifest in Hellas’.²² He argues that, since Homer’s epic is a manifestation of Nordic racial spirit, the heroic values present in the Iliad must work to reflect Nordic characteristics. Not only this, but bias is

²⁰ See, for example, Il. 2.159, 8.137, 8.511, 9.27, 11.311, 12.123, 15.63

²¹ Ziva Kunda, ‘The Case for Motivated Reasoning’ (1990) 108 Psychological Bulletin 480., p. 482-483

²² Alfred Rosenberg, ‘The Myth of the 20th Century (Mythus Des XX. Jahrhunderts) an Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of Our Age, English Edition’ (1980) <<https://www.nommeraadio.ee/meedia/pdf/RRS/Alfred%20Rosenberg%20-%20The%20Myth%20of%20the%2020th%20Century.pdf>> accessed 7 July 2025.

assigned, as with the scholia, to the composer of the epic, who too must have been ‘Nordically conditioned’.²³ This racial angle, reminiscent of the scholia’s efforts to separate Greeks and βάρβαροι, also implies that Homer favours the Greeks and dislikes the Trojans. With the blood myth of Rosenberg as backdrop to his ideological considerations,²⁴ Nazi Party member Erhart Kästner started writing his travelogue ‘*Griechenland*’ in 1942 to give German soldiers in Greece ‘an introduction to the monuments and beauties of the country.’²⁵ He too connects the Nordic race with the warriors of the Iliad by aligning the soldiers with ‘blond Achaeans...the young Antenor, the massive Ajax, the lithe Diomedes’ and arguing that no race would have more right to compare themselves to Homeric heroes than the Germans.²⁶ Significantly, this idea of the soldiers’ ‘right’ conveys a sense of ownership, which shows the extent that the Iliad has been reformulated as a celebration of Nordic achievement.

In *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, Rosenberg adds to this that ‘it is the *moderation* of a superior race which resounds from every page of the Iliad’. Here, Rosenberg seems to apply the later Greek ideal of μηδὲν ἄγαν (‘nothing in excess’) to demonstrate Greek ‘superiority’, although the Achaean heroes do not always exemplify moderation, instead tending towards extremes both in battle and in their personal relationships, as shown previously by Achilles’ grief for Patroclus. The sense of generalisation is furthered by the phrase ‘resounds from every page of the Iliad’, which suggests an intent equal to that of the scholia to morally elevate the Achaeans above the Trojans.

However, the scholia and Rosenberg disagree with regards to the function of a minor character in the Iliad named Thersites, who speaks out against Agamemnon in Iliad 2.212-275. The Iliad describes how Thersites ‘knew how to blather on for hours with pointless and irrelevant complaints against the rulers’.²⁷ He was ‘the ugliest man who marched on Troy...one of his legs weak, the other twisted’.²⁸ The scholia interpret the character as comic relief: Homer ‘δείκνυσιν αὐτὸν καὶ γελοῖον παρὰ πᾶσιν ὑπὲρ πάντα’ (‘shows him ridiculous

²³ Alfred Rosenberg, ‘The Myth of the 20th Century (Mythus Des XX. Jahrhunderts) an Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of Our Age, English Edition’ (1980) <<https://www.nommeraadio.ee/meedia/pdf/RRS/Alfred%20Rosenberg%20-%20The%20Myth%20of%20the%2020th%20Century.pdf>> accessed 7 July 2025.

²⁴ E Glesener and Matthias Buschmeier, Chapter 3. Military Occupation as Tourism? Griechenland. Ein Buch Aus Dem Kriege (1942) and Ölberge, Weinberge (1953) by Erhart Kästner (Leuven University Press 2016) <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/258/oa_edited_volume/chapter/4050927#en_6> accessed 17 July 2025.

²⁵ Hiller von Gaertringen and Julia Freifau, “‘Meine Liebe Zu Griechenland Stammt Aus Dem Krieg’: Studien Zum Literarischen Werk Erhart Kästners.” [1994] Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz., p. 96

²⁶ Erhart Kästner, ‘Griechenland: Ein Buch Aus Dem Kriege. Zeichnungen: Helmut Kaulbach’ (1943).

²⁷ Homer, Iliad, 2.212-214

²⁸ Homer, Iliad, 2.216-217

before everyone else’).²⁹ The polyptoton of ‘πας’ emphasises how ‘γελοῖον’ (‘ridiculous’) Thersites is, hence how unthreatening he appears. Another commentator supports this, explaining ‘καὶ νῦν οὖν τὸν Θερσίτην ὁ ποιητὴς παρέλαβε πρὸς τὸ διαλῦσαι τὸ στῦγνόν τῆς ἐκκλησίας’ (‘And so now the poet uses Thersites to lighten the grimness of the assembly’).³⁰ Rosenberg, however, seems to consider that Thersites *adds* a layer of grimness to the affairs, asserting that ‘clearly Thersites is the embodiment of the hither Asiatic spies in the Greek army. These traitors were the forerunners of our Berlin and Frankfurt pacifists’, an interpretation that betrays a distinctive nationalist propaganda tactic—equating dissent and pacifism with treason.³¹ Since Rosenberg idealised Homer’s Greeks to such an extent and associated them so closely with contemporary Germans, it is unsurprising that, to him, an unsympathetic Greek must have been a spy, an intruder, a threat. His certainty of Greek moral superiority leads him to distort Homer’s text, as nowhere is Thersites described as Asiatic or a traitor. It is also unsurprising that Thersites appeals to Rosenberg as an example, because Thersites’ dissent is quickly punished by Odysseus who ‘thrashes him with his staff’.³² The Nazis did not tolerate nonconformity and punished dissent even more severely: concentration camps held almost 25,000 political prisoners on the eve of World War II.³³ Rosenberg goes on to claim incorrectly that ‘Homer described the brothers of Thersites, the Phoenicians, as: Swindlers, bringing with them countless trinkets in a dark ship’, introducing a racial angle as well as political. The brothers of Thersites do not appear in the Iliad. It is true that Homer refers to the Phoenicians as traders ‘bringing countless trinkets’ at Odyssey 15.415, as is typical of later classical Greek views of foreign merchants,³⁴ but it does not carry the racial-hatred tone found here. In arguably his most shocking act of imposing contemporary biases onto the ancient poet, Rosenberg concludes that, by his inclusion of Thersites, Homer ‘created racial spiritual art...He guided the brush of painters and gave a racial form to the alien antihero.’ Thus, he reframes the epic poetry as racial propaganda glorifying the Nordic race and encoding racial Otherness onto non-Greeks. Here, Rosenberg has moved beyond

²⁹ Σ. II. 2.231b

³⁰ Σ. II. 2.212A

³¹ Dana-Maria Farcaș, ‘The Women’s Peace Crusade: Feminist Pacifism as Political Resistance (1848-1939)’ (University of Bucharest, Faculty of Political Science April 2025) <<http://ijasos.ocerintjournals.org/en/download/article-file/4626393>> accessed 18 July 2025.

³² Homer, Iliad, 2.265

³³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘Political Prisoners’ (*United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* 2019) <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/political-prisoners>> accessed 18 July 2025.

³⁴ See, for example, Herodotus, The Histories, 1.1.1-2

manipulating and distorting the content of the Iliad to suit his own purposes and has begun to treat Homer as a proto-racist authority.

Similarly to the scholia, therefore, Rosenberg villainises the Trojans: 'The waters of Asia Minor...were hostile to the Nordic ethos of the Greeks, and sought to pervert, falsify, and destroy its vital character.' As with the case of Thersites, Rosenberg seems to find the 'βάρβαρος' highly threatening. In turn, ironically, this suggests that the 'vital character' of the 'Nordic ethos' is fragile, since it is susceptible to this violent tricolon of verbs, even if merely mixing with 'the waters of Asia Minor'. Moreover, although it is the Greek heroes who bring an army to Troy in the Iliad, they seem to remain the innocent victim as Rosenberg observes 'the Greek become a participant in racial spiritual decay, wearing himself out in the struggle against what is alien'. From this, we might infer that, during World War II, the Germans, too, remained the victim in Rosenberg's eyes.

The vilification of non-Greeks might even be seen as practice for the vilification of non-Germans in Nazi propaganda. Most concerning of all is the justification of war crimes that has the potential to stem from Rosenberg's text. This is illustrated when he highlights that 'the concept of sin was alien to the heroes of Homer...An oppressive sense of sin is a sure symptom of racial bastardy.' This statement recalls the disparate standards applied by the scholia to the Achaeans and Trojans, but, in the context of the National Socialist setting, it is even more dangerous. It implies that the 'racially pure' Germans should not feel guilt for their actions, that they should act without impunity. Arguably, it gives them permission to commit the violent acts present in Homeric warfare without repercussions. Moreover, it suggests that they do not need salvation, while the 'racially impure' do. Kästner goes a step further in his '*Griechenland*' by stating that the battles of the German soldiers were 'much more heroic, much bolder...more bitter' than those of Homer, thus suggesting that modern warfare should engender more brutality than the battle of Troy. His glorification of German soldiers reads: 'this crowd of conquerors *cavorted* along the foreign sea, and it seemed as if an *immortal race* that had been thought lost had *naturally* returned and taken possession of this shore...and the mountain of the gods had never looked down on anyone but them.'³⁵ The verb 'cavort' connotes playfulness and mischief, once again stripping the soldiers of sin or guilt. Furthermore, the wording 'immortal race' bestows godlike status on them which colours the 'conquerors' with a clear sense of superiority; the idea that their return is 'natural'

³⁵ Erhart Kästner, 'Griechenland: Ein Buch Aus Dem Kriege. Zeichnungen: Helmut Kaulbach' (1943).

hints towards the Homeric idea of fate and inevitability, as if these soldiers have a divine right to the land which they seize. It is precisely the aestheticization of the occupying forces, via Homeric imagery, that serves to celebrate the racist historical narrative.³⁶ Stemming from the ‘racial spiritual decay’ of the Achaeans’ interactions with the Trojans in the Iliad,³⁷ antiquity served as a warning for German National Socialism: Greece and Rome fell because they did not protect the purity of their blood against mixing and infiltration.³⁸ Ultimately, this is how the Nazi mind renders horrifying war crimes acceptable.

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To conclude, this exploration of pro-Greek, anti-Trojan interpretations of the Iliad serves as a reminder of the importance of being intentional about how we receive literature. The ancient commentators and the Nazi ideologue Rosenberg, despite existing millennia apart, followed similarly treacherous paths: they receive Homer through a lens of philhellenism; this gives rise to anti-Trojan sentiment; this emerges as a manipulation or misrepresentation of the text to justify the position. The two diverge when Rosenberg’s nationalist ideology becomes obsessive, evidenced by their different interpretations of Thersites. As seen in Kästner’s ‘*Griechenland*’, his idealisation of mythical Achaean heroes culminated in a harmful real-life application of ideology: a glorification and victimisation of aggressors.

Fundamentally, although it is humanly impossible to eliminate bias, we determine the power of texts’ influence, and we control how they influence us. It is imperative, therefore, that we think critically about texts themselves and their interpretations by others.

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³⁶ E Glesener and Matthias Buschmeier, *Chapter 3. Military Occupation as Tourism? Griechenland. Ein Buch Aus Dem Kriege (1942) and Ölberge, Weinberge (1953) by Erhart Kästner* (Leuven University Press 2016) <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/258/oa_edited_volume/chapter/4050927#en_6> accessed 17 July 2025.

³⁷ Alfred Rosenberg, ‘The Myth of the 20th Century (Mythus Des XX. Jahrhunderts) an Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of Our Age, English Edition’ (1980)

³⁸ Johann Chapoutot and Richard R Nybakken, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe’s Classical Past*(Oakland, CA, California Publishing Online 2016) <<https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520275720.001.0001>> accessed 25 June 2025.

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