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The Nazi "Church": Nazism as Ersatzreligion

Abstract

"German Christianity is a distortion. You are either a German or you are Christian."

~ Adolph Hitler

In the last decade, scores of religious scholars have dissected the concept of the Third Reich as a religion. Their theories depict a vast range of extremes from National Socialism portrayed as a secular or political religion to painting the Nazis as anti-Christian pagans. The "Nazi Church" was neither a political religion nor was it simply paganism; instead, National Socialism became its own religion which replaced traditional German Christianity at a time when a nation, ripe for questioning God, was suffering from the aftermath of a disastrous war.

Hitler's Third Reich was as much a religion to the citizens of war-torn Germany as is extremist Islam to lost young men in North Africa. Just as fundamentalist religious leaders bait their chosen followers with a chance for the afterlife, Hitler convinced an entire nation that he would lead the Master Race into the thousand year millennium.

It was exactly what his countrymen needed to hear, but to rule the world, Hitler thought it was necessary to annihilate another culture.

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Master of Arts

by

Carol McKinley Harris

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ABSTRACT

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~ Adolph Hitler

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Introduction:

Nazism as an Ersatzreligion

“What good fortune for governments that people do not think.”

~Adolph Hitler

German religiosity since the upheaval of Martin Luther's 16th century 95 Theses has been remarkably complex. Despite the many layers of German spiritual thought, at its core is a concept sought in all religions: the universal need to find true meaning.

Fortunately for Adolph Hitler, the failed soldier came to power at a time when there was little hope for a German culture demoralized after its defeat in World War I. An opportunist, Hitler offered a cure for his country's theological identity crisis by introducing an *Ersatzreligion*, or surrogate faith, which replaced Christianity at a time when the Germans were ripe for questioning the traditional God. In this thesis I will argue that the Third Reich replaced Christianity with a religion, which centered around creating a supreme race. The Nazis believed that they could mold Germany into a nation made up exclusively of pure Aryan blood, which excluded all Jews, in particular, and other peoples they considered “inferior” races. If Germany had not been destroyed by

World War I, Hitler would never been successful in establishing a hold on the wounded pride of a vulnerable nation. With hopeful hearts, arms and eyes wide open they entered the halls of a new “Nazi church”. This paper will argue that Hitler’s gospel of Nazism was more powerful than any mere political ideology, because it evolved into an *Ersatzreligion*.

This new religion of the Third Reich gave the post-war weary German culture a sense of destiny using the rich folklore of the ancient Norse gods to create a new Christianity based on racism. I will argue that this German Christianity, termed “Positive Christianity” by the National Socialist Party, was more reckless as its own religion than if had been combined with the politics of the Third Reich. Hitler ingeniously peered into a war-wounded German conscience and instinctively knew what it would take to convince a nation that its destiny of world rule depended on keeping the Master Race pure and exterminating what he considered inferior blood which would pollute it. Nazism was not a political or secular religion, but a faith apart from the State. As a surrogate religion, Nazism was more dangerous than if it had been diluted by combining it with nationalism as a sort of political religion.

Historical Background

Almost seventy years after Adolph Hitler killed himself in a Berlin bunker, his rise to power still fascinates historians and basement bloggers. His name is as synonymous with “demon” as Jesus Christ’s is with “prophet.” But during his twelve years of power, astoundingly, he managed to trade places with Christ, convincing mainstream followers and his inner circle (for example, Nazi propagandist Josef Goebbels and S.S. leader Heinrich Himmler) that it was he who was their Messiah. Hitler was their savior who

promised to “renew the myth of the Holy Empire, a Reich (kingdom) which would last a thousand years.” [1](#)

There is solid evidence of Hitler's intent to creating an *Ersatzreligion*, or replacement religion. He stated publicly that Nazism was much more than a secular ideal: "Who comprehends National Socialism merely as a political movement knows almost nothing about it. It is more even than religion: it is the will to a new creation of man." [2](#) Their leader's alternative belief system put a powerful spell over the Germans who were desperate for self-confidence even if it meant wiping out an entire culture. “This *voelkisch* religion,” notes Oxford scholar Milan Babik, “Appealed to the gray masses of everyday Germans conscious of the 'Death of God' and yearning for something else to take the place of His Kingdom as the meaning of existence.” [3](#) The Nazis created their own twisted version of Christianity in a *Heilig* (sacred) Reich, which was separate from the beloved State. To believe otherwise dismisses the serious determination of a movement, which justified murder in the name of God. To make a convincing argument that Nazism stands on its own not as secular/political religion or anti-Christian, but as its own theology of hope and belief, one must first define “religion.” Is it a folktale? Is it an expectation of salvation? What is the importance of the concept of a higher Spirit?

Stanley Stowers provides a scholarly definition of religion explaining,

Religions are often linked and combined practices (for example, doings and sayings) of particular human populations (e.g. imagined as cultures, societies, ethnicities, groups) that involve the imagined participation of gods or other normally non-observable beings in those practices and social formations in that shade into many kinds of anthropomorphous interpretations of the world. [4](#)

Stowers' definition of religion has an extraordinarily crucial component. He describes it as an “imagined participation of gods or normally non-observable beings.” [5](#) Thus, for

Stowers, unless followers believe in gods or supernatural beings, a practice cannot be considered a religion. This definition, Stowers explains, “applies to a huge proportion of cases across time and the globe.” [6](#) Stowers' and Babik's aforementioned explanation (which suggests that the Germans possessed a “will to a new creation of man” [7](#)) are similar in that the two philosophies contend that the Third Reich can be considered as its own religious doctrine, although an unorthodox one with a strong racist intent. The National Socialists did believe in a higher power. Their God was a racist God who denied the Jewish Bible in favor of an Aryan version. These beliefs evolved into common cultural thought, giving the German people the strength they needed to rise from the ashes.

As Germany gathered its strength, religious authorities outside Germany began to recognize (and to an extent were threatened by) Nazism as an *Ersatzreligion*. The Vatican started to worry about the growing dynamism of the Third Reich. Without mentioning Hitler by name, Pope Pius XII warned against the NSDAP's (Nazi Party's) *Ersatzreligion*. He was concerned that the Fuehrer's new brand of Christianity was not Catholic. At the time, no one could put a brand on the Nazi's religiosity. More than half a century later, religious scholars have expanded Pope Pius' argument, suggesting that the Nazis were not Christians at all, but neopagans; but this is a critical error in understanding. The answer is Nazism was not neopagan, not Catholic and not Protestant. The Nazi Church answered to a different god.

It is true that some in the Nazi Party were opposed to traditional monotheism, as there is evidence of paganism and occult ritual among the National Socialists, (Hitler himself, as will be explained later, entertained mystical notions about his power, and

Heinrich Himmler's SS was also known for bizarre ritual) but most Nazis considered themselves Christian and did not participate in the black arts. Again, to dismiss the Third Reich as anything less than a serious theology is to shrug off the horrors the movement committed during the Holocaust, which was rooted in dogma.

Milan Babik disagrees with this premise that Nazism was powerful enough to stand alone as a religion in its own right, opting instead to see Nazism as political, or secular religion. His argument maintains that the NSDAP was a mix of religion and politics. In short, for Babik, the two were dependent upon one another. Argues Babik, "Protestant Nazism does not necessarily undermine Nazism as a secular religion. The two optics are not inconsistent." [8](#) Babik maintains that Nazism was a "fine-tuned secularization" which he breaks down into categories he coins "partial or first-degree secularization, and complete or second-degree secularization." [9](#) On the contrary, in line with the thesis of this paper, Babik's argument qualifying shades of secularization is farfetched. Instead, put simply, the Nazi Church was its own religion separate from the NSDAP. Again, to combine the two dismisses the tragic seriousness of the new version of racist Christianity the Nazis were espousing. Most Germans were happy to trade their new *Ersatzreligion* for a Christianity, which no longer worked for them.

There are plenty of philosophers who agree with Babik. Austrian political theorist Eric Voegelin, who fled from the Third Reich in the 1940's, also believed that Nazism was a combination of politics and religion. "Nazism," Voegelin theorized, "was the community that offered salvation from meaningless existence." [10](#) This thesis contends that Voegelin has Nazism as a political movement confused with Nazism as a religion. It is true that Nazism as a political movement was a stabilizing factor for the Germans, but

it did not represent salvation. Theologian Richard Evans saw reiterates this difference. In his essay, *Nazism, Christianity and Political Religion*, Evans writes that Voegelin saw in the entire practice of nazism a kind of political religion, where banners, rituals, ceremonies, and adoration of the Leader, the cult of sacrifice and much more, inspired the unthinking and fanatical devotion of millions by providing for their deepest emotional needs in an age rendered spiritually prosaic and meaningless by the decline of the Christian churches and the inexorable processes of secularization. ¹¹ Evans' problem with Voegelin's idea is that it insists that Germany was so hypnotized by NSDAP ritual propaganda that it swapped Christianity for a nationalistic religion. Further, to accept Voegelin's theory would be to underestimate the psychology of a nation, which broke from traditional Christianity to form a new religion, which rang true to its ideals of the superior race. Under the philosophy of the Master Race, Christianity was seen as weakness. Under traditional Christianity, Germans would have had to tolerate the races, which they saw as inferior. Christianity begs for acceptance and patience for an Afterlife, which could take many lifetimes! Post World War Germany was a community, which wanted to feel triumph during in one generation. Too many Germans traded their sense morality in return for Hitler's offer of immediate world rule. Again, to ignore this powerful Nazi version of Christianity would be a mistake, as it is the fabric of the mindset of a people hungry for redemption. Many Germans found a messiah in the person of Hitler to lead them into the 1000-year reign and it wasn't Jesus Christ. It was a fake war hero who promised them a quick fix.

Hitler behaved like a typical religious authority or leader. He often ended his fiery speeches with the word "Amen" as if it were a prayer. The League of German Girls even

created a Aryan version of the Lord's Prayer which they chanted at meals:

Fuehrer, my Fuehrer, sent to me from God, protect and maintain me throughout my life. Thou who has saved Germany from deepest need, I thank thee today for my daily bread. Remain at my side and never leave me, Fuehrer, my Fuehrer, my faith, my light. Heil my Fuehrer! [12](#)

Like an Evangelical preacher determined to fill the Sunday collection plate, Hitler learned early on that the notion of redemption and salvation are a hit with a spiritually starved audience. Ever the propagandist, he spoke as if God was in him, often alluding to the Bible in his lengthy diatribes, mixing politics with proselytism. For instance, in Munich in 1923, he told his adoring crowd: “My feeling as a Christian points me to my Lord and savior as a Fighter,” he said, “As a Christian, I have the duty to be a fighter for truth and justice.” [13](#) This version of truth and justice was not the one Jesus Christ preached. The following pages will seek to demonstrate that Hitler used God as a shield for what he was really thinking.

Many religious scholars have blasted Hitler's constant references to Christianity as an attempt to whitewash heinous intentions: “He was mixing brutality with innocence,” writes historian Jean-Michel Angebert, “Giving his mass murder a noble reason.” [14](#) Adolph Hitler used Christianity to lead people away from their morality just as the Pied Piper led the children out of Hamelin with a merry tune. Indeed, Nazi financier and international playboy Kurt Ludecke was skeptical of Hitler until he saw him address a mass demonstration at Munich's Konigsplatz in the early 1920's. In his book, *Hitler 1889-1936 Hubris*, biographer Ian Kershaw quoted Ludecke, who compared the Fuehrer's speech to gospel: “He preached a sacred truth...I experienced an exaltation that could be likened only to religious conversion.” [15](#) Ludecke's divine experience was

shared by thousands of Germans who felt that to be touched by the Fuehrer was to be touched by God.

Historical Origins of the Third Reich

The nationalistic term “Third Reich” promoted in 1923 by German cultural historian Moeller van den Bruck. Though van den Bruck dismissed Hitler and his cronies, the term *Das Dritte Reich* was adopted as a political slogan by the Nazis to represent the revolutionary new order, which was supposed to last one thousand years. Van den Bruck was not the first to espouse this philosophy. He borrowed the ideology from a 12th century mystic Sicilian monk named Joachim de Fiore, whose “interpretation from the Scriptures saw history as an ascent to three stages.” [16](#) The first phase was “The Age of the Father,” which de Fiore saw coinciding with the Old Testament, as one of fear and servitude. This was followed by the New Testament’s “Age of the Son or of the Gospel,” which he believed rendered faith and submission. The third and final age was that of the Spirit, during which the love and knowledge of God would be revealed to man. It was considered the dawn of the new age.

Though de Fiore incorrectly predicted that this new dawn would fall in the year 1260, Van den Bruck took it a step further, molding this new era to apply to his own philosophy for Germany. In his book, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, Norman Cohn explains that Third Reich ideology has deep roots in German mythology, which revolves around an elite Aryan race of supermen and gods who will return to rule the earth. Writes Cohen, “Now a new aristocracy must be restored under a new God- sent savior who is at once a political leader and a new Christ.” [17](#) Adolph Hitler, the nobody from Vienna, became that God-sent savior, riding the wave of power at the perfect moment in history. Without

Germany's humiliating defeat in World War I, the Germans may never have accepted his fanatical style. Though he wrote in *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*) that he was devastated by Germany's loss, he knew that "the poverty, humility, and chaos of a defeated nation offered him his one and only road to political power." [18](#) Without Germany's humiliation and failure, an entire nation may not have been vulnerable to a megalomaniac who wanted to purify his beloved Germany by getting rid of the "other."

In the *Book of Revelation*, the thousand years of Paradise is a reward given to those who have been faithful to Jesus' word. As John of Patmos reveals: 20:4

and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon his forehead or in their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. [19](#)

But Hitler changed John of Patmos' version of the story. For Hitler, it wasn't Jesus' faithful who would be rewarded to exist during the thousand-year reign, but his own people, the pure Aryan race. In November of 1937, Hitler referred to this Golden Age at the highly successful Nuremberg rallies. In front of millions of worshippers, he announced his intention to tear down and rebuild Berlin referring to it as, "a millennial city adequate [in splendour] to a thousand year old people with a thousand year old historical and cultural past, for its never-ending [glorious] future." [20](#) This "never-ending glorious future" seduced a German culture terrified of its own extinction.

Berlin was Adolph Hitler's New Jerusalem. The souls, which were beheaded for the witness of Jesus were actually, in Hitler's mind, witness to him. Hitler did not dismiss John of Patmos' revelations and in fact was passionate about the idea of Armageddon; however, there was one glaring error in St. John's narration. Jesus Christ was too weak to

lead; therefore, Hitler convinced himself that it would be he who brandished the sword astride the glorious white horse, and not Christ. It was the failed student- turned-military hero who would march a post-apocalyptic community of perfect blonde specimens into the Millennium.

There is one important final point to make before moving on. Hitler was under no delusion that he was Christ. In fact he dismissed Christ's role in history just as he did that of the Jewish people. Hitler was adamant about this, explaining that “All comparisons between Jesus and me is impossible, since the Nazarene was a Jew.” [21](#) The future world rulers would be the Third Reich: to Hitler, it was a major component of God’s plan for the Golden Age.

There are many similarities between the Third Reich’s twelve-year rise to power and the blossoming of a growing religion. Historian William Shirer wrote that “the Nazi regime intended eventually to destroy Christianity in Germany, if it could, and substitute the old Paganism of the early tribal Germanic gods and the new Paganism of the Nazi extremists.” [22](#) In fact, early Nazi religious philosophy, coined “Positive Christianity” was spelled out in Article 24 of its 25-point Party Platform, which guaranteed freedom of religion as long as it did not “jeopardize the state's existence or conflict with the manners and moral sentiments of the Germanic race.” [23](#) In other words, the Germans were welcome to worship freely as long as they knew that the nation-state came first. In addition, Article 24 exemplifies “common good” over “individual good” reinforcing the unity, which the Third Reich desperately needed from the Germans in order to convince them to buy into the Nazi ideology.

Finally, and not surprisingly, the Nazis' Positive Christianity had no room for

Judaism, imploring anyone within the party to fight “against the Jewish materialist spirit within and without...” [24](#) In 1920's Germany, the Third Reich appealed to a humiliated and war-torn society by forming a shiny, new national conscience of regained birthright. The Germans bought into this self-centered mindset because Positive Christianity was packaged as a superior national religion. It suggested the rebirth of the ancient Teutonic tribes. If God believed that the Germans were an exceptional race and that the Jews planned to cheat them out of their destiny, (by hijacking the economy,) then how could exterminating their culture be wrong? It was the survival of the fittest. Within the next decade, the Nazi Party would expand on this premise, this time using strong-arm tactics to put a fog over the idea of one all-knowing God.

In 1936, the Nazis pushed Positive Christianity to amazing levels of hubris, forming the National Reich Church. Now there was a Thirty Point program to follow, which took precedence over the Ten Commandments. To belong to the new power structure, one must accept a new morality, which turned Christianity upside down. For example, point number nineteen on the list of thirty gives clear instructions that the Christian Bible is to be forgotten: “On the altars there must be nothing but *Mein Kampf* (to the German nation and therefore to God the most sacred book) and to the left of the altar a sword.” [25](#) Hitler's autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, replaced the Bible as the holy book of Germany. *Mein Kampf* was standard reading material: a National Socialism for Dummies.

There were other outrageous orders including replacing the Christian cross on churches, cathedrals and chapels with the swastika. Statues and pictures of saints were banned. Another demand stipulated that mothers and fathers take an oath promising that their children were of Aryan descent. Nazi party leaders gave sermons instead of Priests.

Hector Avalos described this surrogate national religion as “a synthesis of Christian anti-Judaism, Israelite ethnocentrism and anti- Christian paganism and pseudoscientific thinking.” [26](#) The Nazi Church contorted Darwin's theory of natural selection into its own version: Jews and minorities, whom Hitler described as “parasites,” were naturally going to have to be eliminated if the Aryans were to survive.

There are other chilling examples of how National Socialism, the faith of race and blood, borrowed from religious ritual to gain acceptance for a very un-Christian plan. For instance, Hitler and his cronies knew that what the Germans needed psychologically after the war was to feel whole again. To do this, the National Socialists practiced ceremonies, which would instill unity, which in turn would breed a feeling of patriotic strength. For instance, when Hitler addressed his Labor Servicemen at the 1934 Nuremberg rallies they wielded their shovels like guns, chanting in unison, “We work in the swamps. We work in the sand.” [27](#) These were Hitler’s words echoed like a Sunday morning liturgy. Hitler’s labor force was his sheep, and just like Jesus, he handpicked a circle of disciples to carry his gospel to the world. As a defected Nazi named Gregor Strasser told author Trevor Ravenscroft, “Listen to Hitler, and one suddenly has a vision of one who can lead mankind to glory. A gentleman with a comic mustache turns into an Archangel.” [28](#) Hitler’s plan used symbolism of hatred disguised as hope to convince a disillusioned country that he was their messiah.

To many of his followers in post-World War I Germany, Hitler represented a savior. In the Nazis’ *Ersatzreligion*, he was the *Ersatzmessias*, the replacement for Christ whom he considered weak and insignificant. To his colleagues, he dismissed Jesus Christ as merely “a Jewish carpenter from Nazareth” and a “self-appointed Rabbi whose teachings

of meekness and love ended in the surrender of the will to survive.” [29](#) As Adolph Hitler forged his own horrible history, he became more convinced that traditional Christianity and its theology of forgiveness and humility was passive, sapping it of any strength it might have had. He believed that Christ’s death on the cross was not a sacrifice, rather, he gave up, simply lacking the will to live; thus, Jesus was a weakling. Hitler's *ersatzreligion* was the religion of the pure race, the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*, or “world view.” Still, Hitler wisely wore the mask of Christianity to fool the Germans, who were two thirds Protestant and a third Catholic, and to keep Rome from toppling his building blocks of his plan for National Socialism. "Hitler knew, through the constant invocation of the “the Lord God” (German: *Herrgott*) or of providence (German: *Vorsehung*), to make the impression of a godly way of thought." [30](#) Christians were wimps, but the disdain he held for Christians paled when compared with his hatred of the Jews.

In his formative years as a young man in Vienna, Hitler was a voracious reader and the strange mix of views, which were swirling around Germany in the century before he came to power determined the man he would become. When he was sentenced to Landsberg prison in 1924 for leading the “*Bier Hall Putsch*,” (a failed effort to overthrow the German government,) he used his nine months in captivity productively, forming many of his barbaric and twisted philosophies while he was behind bars. Biographer Ian Kershaw noted that Hitler chose his reading carefully, opting for books which would build upon his theories of Aryan superiority: “Hitler's reading and reflection were anything but academic...He read not for knowledge or enlightenment, but for confirmation of his own preconceptions.” [31](#) To add weight to that statement, he later told

a colleague that through his selective studying in prison, “I realized the own correctness of my views.” Historian William Shirer wrote that these views were not correct at all, calling them “irresponsible, megalomaniacal ideas.” Hitler's “opponents inside and outside Germany,” Shirer said, “Were too busy or too stupid to take much notice of it until it was too late.” [32](#) Further, it was at Landsberg that Hitler created *Mein Kampf*.

Historical Influences

According to several of Hitler's biographers, there were three major German thinkers who were a major influence on him: 19th century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, the magnificent composer Richard Wagner, and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. All three denied the duality of good and evil and rejected the idea of a Supreme Being. In his book, *The Spear of Destiny*, Trevor Ravenscroft wrote of Hitler's fascination with this trio, “For three long years, Adolph Hitler found himself inextricably bound in a web spun by the thinking of these three men of incontestable genius whose work prepared the soil for the emergence of National Socialism.” [33](#) From Schopenhauer, Wagner and Nietzsche, Hitler framed his core philosophies: the glories of war, the belief in the Aryans as a master race, the weakness of Christianity, and the rejection of democracy.

There was a major ideological difference between the three, however, in that though Schopenhauer and Wagner had a monstrous contempt for Jewish people, Nietzsche hated anti-Semitism and rallied against it. In fact, Nietzsche may have been horrified to know that after his death some his ideas had become a template for Nazi thought. This was not his intention, but that of his sister, a devout National Socialist, who created the myth after Nietzsche died that he was a dedicated Aryan Nationalist. At that point, he obviously had no say in his legacy. It wasn't until just recently that these lies

were discovered and the stain on Nietzsche's reputation was removed.

Unlike Nietzsche, Arnold Schopenhauer would have been proud to be associated with the Nazi movement. Ravenscroft noted that Schopenhauer's famous essay, which magnified the importance of the will of man was one of Hitler's favorites, and in fact, was “seldom out of reach and remaining with him until his suicide in the Berlin Bunker in 1945.” [34](#) Further, in noting Hitler's psychological make-up, biographer Allan Bullock stated of Hitler that “every phrase and gesture in his speeches reflected the same purpose--one of force and will. No word was more frequently on Hitler’s lips.”

Dissatisfied will, for Schopenhauer, is what gives human beings motivation.

It follows that Schopenhauer was preoccupied with the overcoming of willfulness and defined it thus in his famous essay, *On the Freedom of the Will*: “A man can do what he wants, but not want what he wants.” [35](#) In other words, man has no free will and must succumb to destiny. This philosophy spoke to Hitler because he believed that it was his destiny to rule the world.

It may be surprising to note that Schopenhauer considered himself a Buddhist. It is no accident that the Buddhists use the word Aryan but with a completely different meaning than the one the Nazis embraced. To the Buddhists, the word Aryan means “aristocrat;” thus, in the Buddhist sense, an Aryan refers not to a superior human being, but to a class of intellect whose temperament has respect for other people. Hitler borrowed these spiritual ideas from Schopenhauer and added the glorification of race, which is found in Wagner's philosophy.

One can hear echoes of this mixture of theories in a Hitler speech during the epic documentary, *Triumph of the Will*, when he tells a worshipful crowd, “It is our will that

this state and this Reich shall endure through the coming millennia.” [36](#) Hitler’s reference to the millennium holds sacred tones, implying that the Reich, or Kingdom, was destined to rule for the next thousand years. Historian Martin Kitchen is not surprised by this religious reference, explaining that “The millennium represents the idea that this was the apotheosis of German history -- in their blasphemous terms, that the kingdom had come at last.” [37](#) Did Adolph Hitler believe that he was a Christ figure who would lead the Germans into a glorious age? One of his closest colleagues, Joseph Goebbels had the same question when he asked, “Is this man Christ, or is he just John the Baptist?” [38](#) In the end, Hitler was, of course, a mortal. His dreams of world rule died with him.

Hitler also admired the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and often posed for portraits near his statues. William Shirer wrote of Nietzsche's impact on Nazi philosophy in his book *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* when he said, “No one who lived in the Third Reich could have failed to be impressed by Nietzsche's influence on it.” [39](#) The Nazis borrowed much of Nietzsche’s religious logic, and “rejected (the Old Testament and the Epistles of Saint Paul) as meaningless values inspired by Judeocracy.” [40](#) In his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche shared his skepticism of both religions, describing Christianity as “the art of sacred lying” and Judaism as a “secular, archserious technique (sic)...The Christian is merely a Jew of more liberal persuasion.” [41](#) To Nietzsche and to Hitler, religion was a farce. It was from Nietzsche that Hitler discovered the prophecy of the supermen, a superior human race which was destined to rule the world. Nietzsche wanted to return to the days of the ancestral giants through the creation of the superman. His notion that “this man and the elite around him will become the 'lords of the earth' ...must have struck a responsive chord in Hitler's littered mind.” [42](#) Hitler looked to the

philosophy of Nietzsche as inspiration as he formed a plan to lift Germany from the ashes of World War I. Like Nietzsche, Hitler aimed to “reverse the process of degradation of Germanic mankind,” [43](#) aiming to revive the Teutonic race from slumber. It was a fairytale the Germans embraced, but to rule the world, Hitler thought it was necessary to get rid of cultures, which he felt were inferior.

As mentioned previously, this was not the legacy Nietzsche would have wanted to endure from his writings. Hitler grossly misused Nietzsche after Nietzsche's sister, who was a dedicated Nazi, manipulated his theories after his mental breakdown in 1889. Recent research into Nietzsche's history reveals the myth created by Elisabeth Foerster-Nietzsche. In Christian Niemeyer's book, *Nietzsche Encyclopedia*, he speaks of forgeries and betrayal: "Foerster-Nietzsche did everything she could do, such as telling stories about Nietzsche, writing false letters in the name of her brother, and so on to make it seem that Nietzsche had been a right-wing thinker like herself." [44](#) Niemeyer painstakingly researched letters written by Friedrich Nietzsche and found that only 60 of the 505 were original and the rest were either incorrect or made-up. The Nazis were happy to advance the fake endorsement, going so far as to build a museum in the philosopher's honor in Weimar “even though it is unlikely Hitler ever read much, if any, of Nietzsche's work.” [45](#) Nietzsche was not a Fascist, and detested nationalism, but the Third Reich used his popularity among the Germans to build credibility for their anti-Semitic ideals.

Another important influence was the composer Richard Wagner. Hitler once said that to know National Socialist Germany, one must know Richard Wagner. If Hitler was the drummer of the National Socialist Movement, Wagner played the melody. As a young

man in Vienna, Hitler often spent his time and precious money going to Wagner's operas, some of which he saw ten and twenty times. "When I hear Wagner," Hitler remembered later, "it seems to me that I hear rhythms of a bygone world." Wagner's operas were irresistible to the poverty-stricken future-Fuehrer. The composer's musical lore of ancient Germanic mythology, of "gods and heroes, and titanic struggle and redemption, of victory and death" [46](#) was a musical stimulation which "made the German throngs feel like a religious community." [47](#) Wagner wanted the German people to realize their destiny as the superior race and he did it by weaving tales of their mythic greatness through his music.

Ravenscroft wrote that the Wagnerian opera was a "projected call for an awakening of the German 'Volk,' which later became the very essence of the Nazi propaganda upon which Adolph Hitler romped to Power." [48](#) To Hitler, the masses of the people who made up the "*Volk*" were initiated into a kind of mystical tribe. Membership eliminated all individuality, and would take on a life of its own with the help of the Nazi propaganda machine. The slogan "Ein volk, ein Reich, ein Fuehrer" (one people, one nation, one leader) appeared on paintings and posters, in radio broadcasts and in speeches. Author Jean-Michel Angebert emphasized the importance of the Volk in Nazi theosophy as the religion, which replaced Christianity. In his book, *The Occult and the Third Reich*, Angebert notes, "This enables us to understand better the hold of the Fuehrer on his people... Indeed the bond between Hitler and the German masses was constituted by this mystico-biological mediator which is the Volk." [49](#) Wagner's emphasis on the Volk in his operas only strengthened that bond. It was a phenomenon, which a young Nietzsche, recognized and maintained. In fact, though their relationship eventually broke down, the

philosopher dedicated his first book to Wagner. In the forward of *The Birth of Tragedy From the Spirit of Music*, Nietzsche penned that Wagner united “patriotic emotion ...with aesthetic enjoyment.” [50](#) The “contempt for nationalism” [51](#) which Meyer says came later on in Nietzsche's career was obviously not an idea he had early on. Nevertheless, it was Wagner who hypnotized a nation with his incredible talent; but, Wagner had a major flaw. Though he was one of Germany's most brilliant composers, Wagner was tainted by his intense hatred of the Jews.

Like Hitler, Wagner was convinced that the Jewish people were out to take everyone's money and eventually control the world. Wagner and Nietzsche believed in the master race, but the two of them did not agree on everything. Unlike Nietzsche, Wagner did not bash Christianity. Rather, like the Nazis, he rewrote it, replacing the biblical narrative of rich Jewish history with everything Aryan. Once again, we see the danger in the power of the new so-called Positive Christianity. Whereas Nietzsche believed that “the Christian God was an idiot,” [52](#) Wagner was convinced that Jesus was not only a prophet, he was an Aryan. His music reinforced the idea, as every time the Germans heard it they swelled with Nordic pride.

In his memoir, *Hitler Speaks*, Hermann Rauschning points out that Wagner was a major spoke in the wheel of the Nazi propaganda machine: “He was not just thinking about Wagner's musical genius but about the entire Wagnerian view of Germanic Culture, which was a revolutionary doctrine right down to the smallest detail.” [53](#) Hitler's stormtroopers marched through the streets to the thunderous tunes of Wagnerian opera. It was also forced on the poor souls dying in the Nazi concentration camps. German conductor Wilhelm Furtwaengler remembers that “the notorious Dr. Mengele reportedly

conducted his heinous medical experiments with recordings of Wagner playing continuously in counterpoint to the screaming of his human guinea pigs.” [54](#) If Hitler was a deranged German Messiah, Richard Wagner composed the hymnal. Again, the Third Reich became a surrogate to Christianity as its own religion. It had a savior, an unquestioning following, and it built a Volk-centered unity with Wagner’s nationalistic music playing in the background.

From the time of his youth, Adolph Hitler followed traditional German and Norse mythology, and specifically identified with the pagan god, Odin, (or in German, “*Wotan*”) who was the father of Thor. Wotan had mystical powers, which gave him an edge in battle. Hitler believed that he and Wotan had that supernatural edge in common.

Wotan was one of the most popular, and chief, of the Viking gods. In Norse legend, when Wotan stabbed himself with a magical spear, he gained infinite knowledge and hung from a huge tree for nine days. After that, Wotan gained even more supernatural strength. He then became the father to a race of heroes who were not unlike Hitler's Master Race. The first known indication that Hitler identified with the pagan god Wotan came early in his life as a soldier. In 1915, upon surviving debilitating blindness after what he claimed to be a mustard gas attack during World War One, the future-Fuehrer wrote a poem using Wotan’s trial in the sacred tree for inspiration:

I often go on bitter nights
To Wotan's oak in the quiet glade
With dark powers to weave a union -
The runic letter the moon makes with its magic spell
And all who are full of impudence
during the day
Are made small by the magic formula! Adolph Hitler, 1915 [55](#)

Author John Toland mused of the strange poem: “Perhaps it was the season of perception. That fall on a night made gray-white with hoarfrost he may have felt the

sense of his destiny.” [56](#) The words of poem appear to indicate that Hitler felt inadequate, but that he would get revenge on the people who made him feel that way with help from the spirit of Wotan. More proof of Hitler's insecurities were discovered decades later in an unbelievable twist to this story of gods and heroes.

Like the false legend concocted by Nietzsche’s own daughter, recent letters indicate that Hitler's war stories were also a lie. In previously unpublished letters written in 1943 between two neurologists who had access to Hitler's medical files, they found that his so-called injuries were not from a mustard gas attack, but that “his temporary loss of sight was actually caused by a mental disorder known as ‘hysterical blindness’.” [57](#) In fact, Hitler's fellow soldiers reported that he never faced the front lines, and “in reality he was little more than a ‘teaboy’ who worked as a messenger running errands.” [58](#) Did inadequacy lead Hitler to redefine himself after the war? It is possible that the young private's connection with Wotan was another dot in Hitler's paint-by- number self-portrait. Astonishingly, a famous painting of Wotan would advance the Fuehrer's delusions of grandeur.

There is strong evidence that Hitler may have created his own image from a famous painting of Wotan created by the German artist, Franz von Stuck. Called *Die Wilde Jagd*, or *The Wild Hunt*, it depicts the mythological war hero surrounded by dark grey thunderclouds on horseback with wolves running at his side. The depiction of Wotan in *The Wild Hunt* looks astonishingly like Hitler, with a jetblack hair and the trademark mustache. But the mirror image was painted in 1889, the year Hitler was born. Was this an accident, destiny, or did a young Hitler see this painting as a young man and apply the features of Wotan to himself in order fabricate his own mythology?

The famous German psychotherapist, Carl Jung, was accurate when he wrote of Hitler's duplicitousness: Hitler seemed like the 'double' of a real person, as if Hitler the man might be hiding inside like an appendix, and deliberately so concealed in order not to disturb the mechanism... You know you could never talk to this man; because there is nobody there... It is not an individual; it is an entire nation. [59](#) For Jung, Hitler was an empty shell who filled in his own blank history with mythical German legend. Before he convinced the Germans of this outlandish fantasy, he had to believe it himself. It was a magnificent transformation: once homeless and then a war coward, Adolph Hitler spun his image into that of a savior.

There is another correlation connecting Hitler's identification with Wotan with his own so-called destiny, and again, we turn to the music of Wagner. The self-described "most German man" in the history of the nineteenth century" [60](#) wrote a famous four-part opera about Hitler's hero Wotan and the Norse mythologies called *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The major work is the tale of a ring, which grants to the wearer the ability to rule the world. To this day, Germans travel for hundreds of miles to see it, as its nationalistic theme is ingrained in their social psychology.

Hitler loved Wagner's operas from the time he was a young man trying to make it as an artist in Vienna. He often said that his late teens, from the age of 16-19, were his happiest years when he had no job, but had "the freedom to brood, to dream,...and spend his evenings curled up with a book or standing in the rear of the opera house in Linz or Vienna listening enraptured to the mystic, pagan works of Richard Wagner." [61](#) His childhood friend, August Kubizek described Hitler's mindset every time he listened to Wagner's music: "He was in a state of intoxicating ecstasy. Willingly, he allowed himself

to be taken away into a legendary world more real to him than the world he saw around him every day.” [62](#) Another of Wagner's operas, was to be a cornerstone of Hitler's grandiose delusions. *Rienzi's* story may sound familiar. It is a five part opera of an Italian leader named Cola di Rienze, who restores power to the people by outwitting the nobility in medieval Rome. Hitler took the lore very seriously and may have felt its message was a bolt of lightning meant for him.

It was during his days as a young man in Vienna with his childhood friend Kubizek that Hitler first sat in the audience enraptured by the opera, *Rienze*. After the performance Kubizek remembers that the two of them walked to a hill overlooking the Danube. Here, in the darkness, Hitler started to speak in a strange tone. Kubizek said later that Hitler mimicked the voice of Wagner's *Rienze* “speaking as though to the masses before him...to liberate the people from bondage and to reveal to them the joys of freedom.” [63](#) Nearly twenty years later Hitler confided to his architect, Albert Speer, that, for him, *Rienze* marked the beginning of a huge movement. Speer wrote that it was “the divine music of Rienze that inspired him with the conviction that he would succeed in uniting the German nation behind him and in making the Third Reich great.” [64](#)

Hitler believed that it was his destiny to free his people from oppression and lead them into the millennium. Richard Wagner had the same thoughts while in exile from his beloved Deutschland. Just as Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* in prison, Wagner also wrote of his philosophies on life while banished from Germany for his socialistic activism and much of it was anti-Semitic. “In the last analysis,” Wagner theorized, “The Jews always find themselves facing the need to wage war.” [65](#) Wagner's family eventually gave many of their ancestor's writings to Hitler, which he kept locked in a safe in his bunker.

Joachim Kohler outlined the effects of this diabolically cataclysmic Hitler/Wagner partnership in his book *Wagner's Hitler* as “a utopia that embraced both the magic of Wagner's music dramas and the philosophy behind his revolutionary writings.” [66](#) Though Wagner died when Hitler was just six years old his spirit was kept alive as the Fuehrer's musical muse and theological sidekick. With the help of Wagner's soul-stirring melodies, “...the Germans,” Kohler says, “Surrendered to a religion they did not know, adopting ritualistic practices they did not understand and blissfully dying for a corpus of religious rites into which they had never been initiated.” [67](#) It seems logical that the three “W’s,” Wotan, Wagner and war, were interconnected in Hitler’s mind. It is possible that Hitler, who often confused fiction with reality, convinced himself that these connections combined to propel him to greatness.

The Elements of Hitler’s Religion

Hitler did not have magical powers, but he was a charismatic religious presence who studied voice and movement, perfecting his magnetic style. German playwright Carl Zuckmayer compared Hitler’s appearance to a whirling dervish,

He knew how to fire up the people, not with arguments,...but with the fanaticism of his whole manner, screaming and yelling, and above all by his deafening repetition, and a certain contagious rhythm. This he has learned to do and it has a fearfully exciting and barbaric effect. [68](#)

Historian Raymond Sickingen adds that “One of the best ways to gain insight into Hitler and to interpret his actions both before and during the war is to understand that he thought and acted in a magical way.” [69](#) Hitler’s belief in providence took command over reality. As a result, he made numerous crucial decisions based not on military genius, but on natural phenomena, which he determined were prophetic signs.

One story clearly indicates that Germany's future was at the mercy of his delusions. After seeing a brilliant display of the Northern Lights at Eagle's Nest in Berchtesgaden, Hitler was entranced by a glowing red hue which glanced off of the faces of his generals in the room: "He indicated to an aide that the omen clearly meant that without force, Germany would not make it this time. Within a few short days, the invasion of Poland occurred and World War II had begun." [70](#) This is, once again, evidence that Adolph Hitler believed that he was destined to be the savior of the Aryan Race.

During Hitler's rise, Germany was struggling economically. Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw described the mood then, saying, "Anger, especially in the working class, was rising by Autumn 1935 as a result of food shortages, rising food prices. and renewed growth in unemployment." [71](#) People were desperate for a leader and the conditions were ripe for that person to lift the nation from the rubble to rebirth. In his book on eschatology, Jerry Walls notes that these conditions are also perfect for people looking to the end times as a way out of their misery, *The Book of Revelation* is a favorite text that "speaks with immediate power and clarity to conditions of oppression, persecution, political injustice, and the like." [72](#) Hitler believed he had been chosen to save his beloved Germany from poverty.

Just as Wagner and Wotan had a special significance in Hitler's life, so did the myth of a magical spear. In the next segment, I will outline the importance of Wotan's spear and that of a different but similar weapon: Die *Heilige Lanze* (Holy Lance.) The Nazi leader was obsessed with it. The *Heilige Lanze*, aka the Spear of Longinus, aka The Spear of Destiny, has an important role in the Bible. According to the Gospel of John, the lance belonged to a blind Roman centurion, Longinus, who is said to have pierced the side of

Jesus Christ after he was dead on the Cross. When Christ was pierced by the spear, blood and water flowed from the wound and into Longinus. A lance, which had been part of the royal treasures of the Holy Roman emperor since Charlemagne in the early ninth century, was alleged to be the same as the spear of Longinus, was the one Hitler wanted. He believed it would give him powers to take the Third Reich and the Aryan race, sans the Jews who threatened to pollute its bloodline, into the Millennium. Thus, if Hitler could claim the lance for himself, he would establish himself as the ultimate authority for the Nazi *Ersatzreligion* that would replace Christianity.

Trevor Ravenscroft's book, *The Spear of Destiny*, describes an interesting account about the first time Hitler laid eyes on the Biblical artifact. Ravenscroft's work is controversial because he used conversations Hitler had with a man he met in Vienna named Dr. Walter Stein. Sickinger criticizes the validity of the stories because Ravenscroft "made no formal notes of these talks." [73](#) Indeed, Stein told Ravenscroft his "numerous conversations with Hitler" [74](#) from memory, which the author later copied from scribbly sentences. Stein had much to say about Hitler's obsession with the so-called Sword of Destiny.

Hitler was a young man visiting Austria's Imperial Museum at the Hofburg when he first encountered the *Heilige Lanze*. As Stein told Ravensburg "When we first stood side by side in front of the Spear of Destiny it appeared to me that Hitler was in so deep a condition of trance that he was suffering almost... a total lack of self-consciousness." [75](#)

Hitler later said,

I stood there quietly gazing upon it for several minutes quite oblivious to the scene around me. It seemed to carry some hidden inner meaning which evaded me, a meaning which I felt I inwardly knew yet could not bring to

consciousness...I felt as though I myself had held it before in some earlier century of history. That I myself had once claimed it as my talisman of power and held the destiny of the world in my hands... [76](#)

Ravensburg wrote that the sword “was to become the central pivot in the life of Adolf Hitler and the very source of his ambitions to conquer the world.” [77](#) The *Heilige Lanze* played right into Hitler’s fantasies of war and fate.

Hitler never forgot about the *Heilige Lanze*. In 1938, during the Anschluss when Austria was annexed into Germany, he had his men take the lance from the Hofburg Museum and bring it to Nuremberg, which was the spiritual capital of the Nazis at the time. Hitler’s *Heilige Lanze* was in his Berlin bunker on April 30th, 1945, the day he committed suicide.

No one really knows for sure what happened to the talisman, but one of the most credible accounts contends that General George S. Patton knew about it, and had one of his men retrieve it from Hitler’s stash hours after he killed himself. According to historic documents, there are several places where the Sword of Destiny could be today. There is a sword in the Hofburg Museum in Vienna where a 20- something Adolph Hitler first became obsessed with it. That lance was returned to the museum after the war was over and Hitler was dead. But some researchers believe that this is a phony look-alike.

One of the most outlandish stories is told by Tulane professor Howard A. Buechner, who claims to have gotten a message from a German U-boat submariner confessing that he had hidden the lance in Antarctica after Hitler's death in 1945 only to reclaim it in a later expedition there led by a man whom Buechner gave the pseudonym of “Maximilian Hartmann.” Jerry E. Smith and George Piccard tell Buechner's story in their book, *Secrets of the Holy Lance: The Spear of Destiny in History and Legend*. The so-called

Hartmann kept a log, and wrote, upon finding the lance at the end of a frozen cavernous tunnel, “We carefully open the case. It is there! the Holy Lance! the lance that pierced the side of our lord Jesus Christ!” [78](#) According to Buechner, a neo-Nazi group called the “Knights of the Holy Lance” now guarded the spear in a secret location in Germany, kept as a secret weapon waiting for the next German Messiah.

An investigation into Adolph Hitler’s grand sense of providence, however, would not be complete without mention of the world’s most recognized Nazi symbol: the swastika. Though Hitler himself designed the Nazi flag as red with a black swastika in the center of a white circle, he was not its creator. The mystic symbol actually originated five thousand years earlier, in India. It is a mark of “good fortune” for the Hindus; but by the early twentieth century, the swastika was being used by the *volkisch* movements as the emblem of Aryan pride. Its original intentions don’t matter, for today it brings a chill to those who see it as a reminder of an evil regime.

One intriguing account suggests that the swastika may have represented the apocalypse for the Nazi movement. In Rhineland Germany, there were clandestine meetings at a castle called “Wewelsburg” which was located in the heart of the pagan empire of the Saxons. The meetings involved an elite group of Heinrich Himmler’s SS known as “The Black Sun.”

As Hitler’s *Reichsfuehrer*, Himmler was the second most powerful Nazi, and also one of the most ruthless. Known as the architect of the Final Solution, he was convinced that the glorious days of the ancient Germans, which started with the superior Nordic gods, were destined to return. In the words of Himmler biographer Christopher Hale, “He had lost his religious faith. He now spoke of Christianity as merely another manifestation

of Jewish superstition. Germany must rediscover the old pagan gods and rites that the Church had forced underground” [79](#) and redeploy them in the service of the new *Ersatzreligion*. Himmler closed many of the meetings at Wewelsburg, although there are records of solstice holidays and pagan marriages being held there. “Brides were forbidden to wear veils and instead wore sprigs of the trees which grew in the forest. Himmler felt these ceremonies gave them strength.” [80](#) Many of the interviews about this mysterious society have been erased from the Internet.

Still, the evidence is clear. Wewelsburg Castle stands today, and many of The Black Sun’s relics are on display inside its stone rooms. In Wewelsburg’s “Hall of SS Generals” is a mosaic of a sun wheel, which resembles a twirling swastika. Himmler, who paid 250 million *Reichsmarks* to lease his “Camelot” (also known as the SS Vatican) for 100 years, wanted Wewelsburg to be his Reich SS Leadership School. He envisioned the Nazi fortress would be the center of the rebirth of the Knights of the Roundtable and dreamed that as a headquarters, it would someday lead the Third Reich into the Millennium. In fact, according to a recent interview with the vice-director of the castle, Himmler named many of Wewelsburg’s rooms after Roundtable legends, including one called *Gral* (Grail) and another dubbed *Konig Artus* (King Arthur.) [81](#) Himmler’s own personal space in Wewelsburg was dedicated to the man from whom he thought he was reincarnated: King Heinrich I, founder of the first German Reich.

Himmler, who would later defect when times got tough for the Nazis as the Allied Forces were closing in, founded a think tank which met at Wewelsburg called *die Ahnenerbe*. This was a team of archeologists and anthropologists who “conducted research there to try to back up Nazi theories on the supremacy of the Aryan race and on

the supposed Nordic heritage of the German nation.” [82](#) To Himmler, “the *Ahnenerbe* was a dream come true. As he had always believed, he who interprets the past shapes the future.” [83](#) There is more evidence that under worldly connections lie between the cryptic concept of The Black Sun and the Nazi’s 1000-year plan for the Master Race.

In the Bible, the image of a black sun has important significance in Revelation 6.

This revelation chronicles a three day eclipse which is a prelude to the end of the world:

Revelation :

6: 12: When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13: and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; 14: the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place....

6:17 For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand? [84](#)

Did Himmler, like Hitler, believe that the *Book of Revelation* with its promise of a Golden Age was intended, not for Jesus and his followers, but for the Nazis? This chilling comment by Himmler himself echoes the tale of the Bible’s three-day eclipse: “The next ten years will see a war of annihilation conducted by the sub-human enemies of the entire world against Germany, the kernel of the Teutonic race and guardian of the culture of the human race.” [85](#) Himmler envisioned an imminent Apocalypse from which Germany would emerge victorious.

Today, the castle has been converted into a museum in Germany’s effort to dispel myths of underground pagan influence on the Nazis. Historian Moritz Pfeiffer in an interview with *Spiegel Online International*, did his best to sugarcoat the castle’s eclectic history: “Wewelsburg is nothing more than a historical construction site. It has become a focal point for all manner of myths, but there is no evidence whatsoever to back them

up.” [86](#) Today, Wewelsburg Castle is a destination point for Neo-Nazis who are enthralled with its colored past. There are surveillance cameras in place throughout the grounds to catch anyone in the act of resurrecting the unwanted ghosts of Hitler’s Germany.

Himmler’s dip into the mystic is an indication that among Hitler’s closest confidantes, there was belief in a supernatural destiny for the Third Reich. But many current scholars do not believe that Hitler subscribed to paganism and instead worshipped his own brand of racist Christianity: The Nazi Church was much more powerful to the German people than the whimsical mysticism of Himmler. The NSDAP and its Positive Christianity was very real and very dangerous.

The Religious Leaders of the Third Reich

How did Adolph Hitler and his hand picked Yes-men use propaganda to convince the Germans that it was necessary to destroy the “other” in order to save themselves? The NDSP marketed the philosophies of the Nazi Church brilliantly using the newest technology of the era. To put this in perspective, if the Third Reich were on the rise today, Hitler would surely be a master of the tweet. The National Socialists would update their status hourly on a Facebook page. One might even download Hitler’s speeches from iTunes and the Nazi’s would have a smartphone application with maps to the next rally.

In the early 1920’s, before advanced social media, Hitler was keenly aware of power of public relations. His exaggerated mannerisms were no accident. In fact, he studied how to mesmerize an audience with his approach. He had a speech coach and his personal photographer took pictures of him using various striking facial expressions and dramatic poses. Once the photo shoot was complete, the two men would study these portraits to

determine which ones worked and which ones did not. Historian Ian Kershaw wrote that, for Hitler, “...propaganda was the key to the nationalization of the masses, without which there could be no national salvation.” [87](#) When you are finished reading, my hope is that you will have some understanding of why an entire nation would lose its humanity by participating in one of the most horrific periods of modern history.

Joseph Goebbels’ diary, which was found by Allied Intelligence after his suicide, is a remarkable record of Hitler’s Rise and Fall. When Goebbels and Hitler first spoke in 1926, the journal entry to mark the occasion reads like a blooming romance, “ I love him... I can accept this firebrand as my leader. I bow to his superiority, I acknowledge his political genius!" [88](#) Goebbels was enthralled with Hitler’s fanatical style, writing further in his diary about the leader’s “...wonderful harmony of gesture, facial expression and spoken word. The born motivator! With him, we can conquer the world.” [89](#) Seven years later Goebbels’ prediction would begin to take shape.

In January of 1933, when Hitler was elected Germany’s Chancellor, he appointed Goebbels as his Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Goebbels’ job? To shape public opinion. Having already been an important contributor to the National Socialist movement before the election, Goebbels was primed to promote a calculated national ideology and Hitler was happy to have him do it. Explains Kershaw, “It is Joseph Goebbels’s historical significance to have been the originator of the myth.” [90](#) With the help of his loyal apostle and image-maker, Goebbels, Hitler was an answer to his peoples’ prayers. He was a surrogate Christ to replace the one who had let them down during the war.

Goebbels was an ingenious communicator. He was born with a club foot which gave

him a limp and a chip on his shoulder. His biographers claim that he wondered why God had made him a cripple and as a result questioned religion. He found the spirituality he was looking for, though, in the Positive Christianity of National Socialism. This couldn't be more clear than in his diary entry on October 16th, 1928: "One day soon NS will be the religion of all Germans. My party is my church. And I believe I serve the Lord if I do his will and liberate my oppressed people from the fetters of slavery. That is my gospel."

[91](#) By 1931, Goebbels had earned Hitler's trust and from then on became one of his most influential disciples.

Under Goebbels' influence, the Third Reich controlled the German media. As of July 17th, 2013, Washington D.C.'s Holocaust Museum website wrote of the infamous Nazi book burnings. Just months after Hitler came to power as Chancellor, a group of students announced "The Action Against the Un-German Spirit," taking it upon themselves to burn books, which were "Un- German." These book burnings were well-publicized, and they happened in 34 university towns. One flyer, emblazoned with an angry red swastika followed by five instruction points read like this:

Invitees must arrive at the designated area at precisely 11 p.m. At 11 p.m. the torchlight procession of the entire Munich Students Association will be arriving. 1. The united bands will play parade music 2. The festivities will begin at 11 with the song "Brothers, Forward!" 3. Speech by the leader of the German Students Association Kurt Ellersiek 4. Burning of the nation-corrupting books and journals 5. Group sing-along of ... songs. [92](#)

In a speech to a group of young students at a separate Berlin book burning in May of 1933, Goebbels proclaimed,

You are doing the right thing at this midnight hour—to consign to the flames the unclean spirit of the past. This is a great, powerful, and symbolic act. . . . Out of these ashes the phoenix of a new age will arise. . . . Oh Century! Oh Science! It is a joy to be alive! [93](#)

Charred among the cinders were works by authors whose writings threatened the social order, for example, Karl Marx, August Bebel and Jewish libertarian Ludwig Van Mises. Books by American authors Ernest Hemingway, Jack London and Helen Keller were also torched. In all, students burned around 25,000 books.

Under Goebbels' lead, the national newspapers were under complete editorial control. The Nazi newspaper, *Der Sturmer*, (*The Attacker*) was written in tabloid style and Hitler reportedly read it every day. Radio, which Goebbels considered "the eighth great power," was also a Nazi mouthpiece. In fact, he oversaw a government program, which gave cheap radios to the public for free. It was a brilliant move, which brought the party's voice into everyone's living room. Called *Volksempfänger*, or "people's receiver" these radios had limited range so that the Germans couldn't listen to anything being broadcast out of enemy territory. In an outright act of censorship, Goebbels made listening to non-German radio against the law, punishable by death.

In a further move to control communications, in just a dozen years, between 1933 and 1945, there were nearly 1100 feature films produced in Germany designed to encourage mass unity. This move to create a false legend to the cinema has been described as "the totalitarian state's concerted attempt to create a culture industry in the service of mass deception." [94](#) Despite its Nazi message, one of the best-known propaganda films ever produced is Leni Reichenstall's aforementioned documentary, *Triumph of the Will*. It is nearly two hours of black and white footage portraying the tremendously successful 1934 Nuremberg rallies. Its symbolism is designed to stamp the brand of the glorious Third Reich into the minds of the German people . Religious images

of gothic spires, wispy clouds and ringing church bells are scattered throughout. Foreign correspondent William Shirer noted in his diary the sacred feel of the film when he wrote “This morning's opening meeting... was more than a gorgeous show, it also had something of the mysticism and religious fervor of an Easter or Christmas Mass in a great Gothic cathedral.” [95](#) *Triumph of the Will* was a triumph of Nazi propaganda.

Heavy symbolism runs throughout the documentary: swastika- adorned flags appear everywhere as a reminder: on banners lining the streets, adorned on the tips of poles and as armbands; the Nazi party's black eagles are also prevalent as is footage of young Germans in service to their country as they shave, eat and play games in their tent camps. One is not surprised to see lines of people with no expression giving the Nazi salute, as the air drowns with the mantra Heil Hitler. Shirer compared their expressions to those he had seen at holy-roller revivals in Louisiana. From *Triumph of the Will*, the impression is that worshippers came to the Nazi spiritual capitol of Nuremberg to get an adoring look at Hitler, from blonde haired children to a cat, which stops what it is doing to watch his parade pass by.

One of the most soul-stirring talismans to appear in the documentary is the *Blutfahne* (Blood Flag.) Just as the blood of Christ symbolizing everlasting life inspires deep emotions in Christians, Hitler also used blood to bring the Germans to their knees in prayer. The *Blutfahne* was a sacred object to the Third Reich: the actual flag, which flew in the aforementioned Beer Hall Putsche in Munich in 1923 covered in the blood of those who died there. Even though the Putsche failed, the event embodied the beginning of the Nazi movement. It was the uprising, which broke the ice. Like the American flag, which flew over Fort Sumter battered but still there, the *Blutfahne* represented the birth of the

Nazi nation: a nationalistic artifact, which took on religious overtones. Its critical place in Third Reich lore was not lost on Leni Reichenstahl as she used footage of the *Blutfahne* over and over in *Triumph of the Will*: in black and white newsreel, Hitler kisses it, he touches banners with it (anointing the old with the new,) never allowing the bloodied *Blutfahne* to touch the ground.

For Hitler and his cronies, this behavior instilled collective unity, which led to a feeling that they were all in this together and thus was a “basis for loyalty or obedience.”

[96](#) The National Socialist movement got stronger by eliminating its competition.

Germany needed an enemy to bring people together for a common cause. At a rally in February of 1933, just as Hitler was settling in as Chancellor, his Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels appeared slobbering with power at the podium when he brazenly spoke of Germany’s Jewish population: “One day the Jews will have their brazen, lying mouths stuffed once and for all.” [97](#) The responsive cheers were deafening, and the message was clear: the Jews must be silenced.

The Legacy of Nazism

National Socialism gained power by excluding people whom the party considered inferior, for example, the Jews, Gypsies, different religious minorities, and any political opponent of the Third Reich, who numbered many by the start of World War One. These “others” were outsiders whom the Nazis considered a threat. To be secure in its place, the dominating group simply took it upon itself to get rid of that threat. Hitler used themes of Christianity to justify this twisted reasoning. The leader of the Third Reich cherry-picked from religious prophecy to suit his diabolical fancies. He twisted the Christ story into his own version, assessing that Christ was an Aryan who shed his blood not for mankind, but

only for the Germans. Even Hitler's last words left behind in his *Final Political Testament*, reminded his cronies still in power to continue “merciless opposition to the universal poisoner of all people's, international Jewry.” [98](#) But in post WWI Germany, there was no poison more toxic than Hitler himself.

In his book, *Faith in Nation*, Anthony Marx theorizes that the object of nationalism is “only too sharply defined, as the love of certain categories of people, and the detestation of others.” [99](#) To strengthen his point, Marx uses various examples throughout history of exclusionary nationalism: first, the bloody annihilation of the Protestant Huguenots by the seventeenth century French monarchy; and, secondly, the rebellion against the Catholics in England by the Protestant monarchy. Marx then bemoans the fact that, though we have seen nations like England and France gain strength through violent exclusion of the other, lessons were not learned. Hundreds of years after the blood shed during Europe’s religious wars, hardly anyone in Nazi Germany acted against the massacre of the Jews, which was happening before their very noses. Writes Marx, “These and so many other groups have been sacrificed on the altar of collective solidarity, with their victimization central to the process of forging cohesion.” [100](#)

There is ample evidence to prove that Hitler, who claimed to have escaped death in World War I and spent time in a German prison, believed that his life had been spared for a reason: to be Germany’s savior. In a speech to his generals on November 23, 1939, he assured them “The fate of the Reich is dependent entirely on me.” In another speech given on February 15, 1942, he said, ““I have created a world power out of the German Reich. I am boundlessly proud that I was blessed by Providence with the permission to lead this battle.” When he was at the top of his game, Hitler was a legend in his own

mind.

In the summer of 1944, the legend went from promise to disaster. As enemy troops converged on the Reich, Goebbels desperately implored, "'Now is the time to turn away from your false gods and to render homage to him (Hitler)," and then as if the Fuehrer was going to magically survive imminent defeat, "We do not need to know what the Fuehrer is going to do -- we believe in him." [101](#)

In Hitler and through Hitler, in the face of unraveling defeat, many of the National Socialist leaders held on, convinced that they could still miraculously win the war. After all, they firmly believed that it was their destiny to rule the world for the next thousand years. In truth, though, the man in which they poured their faith, the so-called German Messiah who promised eternal life, had led them to ruin.

Estimates are that only a few thousand members of the original Nazi party are still alive, many of them in their 90's, but a new generation of Aryans is on the increase. There are far-right parties in Austria, in the U.S., in Great Britain and in Switzerland; but the resurgence is miniscule compared to Hitler's world-conquering force. Still, nearly seventy years after Germany's humiliating defeat by the Allies, the country is once again emerging as a European power not in terms of its military strength, but in terms of its economy. Some say this is the Fourth Reich, but it's not the one Hitler envisioned for Germany.

Conclusion

The Nazi "Church" was neither political nor secular, nor was it anti-Christian. It was a frighteningly authentic and powerful new form of religion, using the language of Christianity, but adding its own virulent racist belief systems and synthesizing them with

the folklore of ancient German paganism that Wagner himself, for example, had dramatized in his opera in order to create a new cult of Wotan and other gods for the German people.

Hitler was the seductive savior figure for this *Ersatzreligion*, who would resurrect Germany to its rightful place as a world power. He promised salvation and eternal life. It was a message that the Germans, who felt that their prayers had gone unanswered after the devastation and poverty following World War I, were ready to accept. It was enough for most of Germanic society to ignore the atrocities against the Jews.

In post-World War I Germany, Wotan, Wagner, *Mein Kampf*, magic spears, swastikas, and blood flags quickly replaced the traditional rituals of Christianity in the minds of its people. With Hitler as their surrogate Messiah, the ideology of the Third Reich evolved into a national theology. The gospel of this new “Nazi Church” demonized the Jews and other minorities in the name of a God, which guaranteed kingdom come of the Third Reich.

Hitler may have believed in his own delusions of Providence, but in the end, he was just a man. Stepping into the spotlight as an understudy, he stole a faith his countrymen had reserved for God. Once in the starring role as the leader of the Nazi Church, he knew his lines and wove the plot for his *Ersatzreligion*, but he had no control over the ending.

At the final curtain, Hitler’s magic spell was extinguished by his own human hand. As the world collapsed around him, he swallowed a cyanide pill and then shot himself with a pistol on April 30, 1945. Hitler imagined that he would lead the Third Reich to rule the earth for one thousand years. Nazi Germany would come up short by a long shot: it only ruled for twelve.

Notes

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³ Milan Babik, *Nazism as a Secular Religion. History and Theory* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University, 2006), 379.

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