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## "I still believe in him": religion, nationalism, and the Nuremberg Party Rally of 1934

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**“I STILL BELIEVE IN HIM”: RELIGION, NATIONALISM,  
AND THE NUREMBERG PARTY RALLY OF 1934**

By

Marilee Akland

Accepted in Partial Completion  
Of the Requirements of the Degree  
Master of Arts

Kathleen L. Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

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Marilee Akland  
May 10, 2012

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AND THE NUREMBERG PARTY RALLY OF 1934**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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## **Abstract**

In some ways it seems that the strong devotion to the figure of Hitler as a political and even cultural messiah on the part of the people written about in Klemperer's work is indicative of the regime's inherent opposition to Christianity. The adoration which many showed for Hitler appears in many ways to act as a substitute for devotion to God. This fails in its explanatory power, however, in that it assumes that Hitler was attempting to take the place of Jesus in the minds of his subjects, and that the loyalty to the state was to replace loyalty to God. Hitler did cultivate a following that at times seemed religious in nature, and mass events such as the Nuremberg Rallies did use rituals that were taken from Christianity or pagan religions. But this "religion" was not all-encompassing. Hitler offered a solution to Germans' earthly concerns while Christianity offered security in the after-life. While some might assume that mass spectacles in 1930s German appropriated religious rituals in such a way as to undermine traditional religious belief itself, I argue that the Party appropriated religious rituals because it would complement the religious sensibility of the spectators, and that this appropriation should not imply a substitution of Nazism for Christianity but rather, a syncretism of religion and national socialism. The two could – and did, in the belief system of Hitler and other Party leaders – coexist. If key Nazi Party leaders considered themselves to be Christian as well as adherents of National Socialism, it is then untenable to claim a fundamental antagonism between the two, at least in the minds of those most intimately involved in setting National Socialist policy. The possibility of devotion to both Christianity and National Socialism is also demonstrated by the German Christian movement. In his early approval of their ideology and his desire to form one Reich Church under the auspices of the German Christian movement, Hitler demonstrated his desire that Christianity and National Socialism work together toward a common goal.

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## Introduction

In *The Language of the Third Reich*, Victor Klemperer, a German Jewish philologist and professor writes of an experience that left a lasting impression on him:

On 13 March 1938 I innocently opened the door leading to the main banking hall of the Staatsbank and started back until I was at least partially hidden by the half open door. The reason being that inside everyone present, both behind and in front of the counters, was standing stiffly erect with outstretched arms listening to a declamatory voice on the radio. The voice announced the law governing the annexation {*Anschluß*} of Austria to Hitler's Germany. I remained half-hidden in order not to have to practise the salute along with everyone else. Right at the front of this gathering of people I caught sight of Fräulein von B. She was in a state of total ecstasy, her eyes sparkled, she was not simply standing to attention like the others, the rigidity of her posture and salute was more of a convulsion, a moment of rapture.<sup>1</sup>

This is only one example that Klemperer gives of people he observed acting towards Hitler in a quasi-religious manner. Even after Hitler's fall, Klemperer talked to an old student whom he quotes as having said: "I accept all that. The others misunderstood him, betrayed him. But I still believe in HIM, I really do."<sup>2</sup> If Klemperer is to be believed, these statements are only a miniscule representation of the sorts of beliefs that many Germans had about Hitler and the Third Reich. Whether Hitler intended to provoke this sort of response or not, many followed him with religious-like devotion.

When speaking of National Socialism, historians often make a clear separation between it and Christianity, often arguing that Nazis and Christians were diametrically opposed – entirely incompatible – and that Hitler employed those aspects and symbols of Christianity that were necessary to entice the masses, but that in the end the two could not exist together. However, as Richard Steigmann-Gall argues, it is entirely possible that the Nazi movement was led by self-described Christians who conceived of Nazism as itself

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1 Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, trans. Martin Brady (New York: Continuum, 2000), 100.

2 Ibid, 111.



Christian, which, though cutting out huge portions of traditional Christian scripture, often the entire Old Testament, could be considered Christian in the sense that they retained a belief in the redemptive work of Christ, even if that Christ was Aryan and an anti-Semite himself.<sup>3</sup>

Any discussion of Christianity in relation to National Socialism must take into account the Nazi state's relationship to the Catholic Church, one that was fraught with much ambiguity. Steigmann-Gall argues that the Nazi party leaned toward Protestantism in its policies and ideology, but Hitler was Catholic as a child.<sup>4</sup> Although early opposition to the Catholic Church was not always unified or organized, it was significant. Part of this undoubtedly had to do with the historical place of Catholicism in Germany; Catholicism, with close ties to Rome, represented a threat to an ethnic German political ideology that Protestantism did not. Furthermore, the Catholic political party in Germany before Hitler's rise to power, the Centre Party, was unambiguously opposed to the advent of National Socialism.<sup>5</sup> These circumstances combined to create an environment in which National Socialism welcomed Protestantism to a degree that it did not welcome Catholicism.

Not all historians agree with this extreme stance. In "Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept," Philippe Burrin argues that National Socialism was a result of the secularization process that had been going on in the western world for several centuries, and that the movement represented an effort towards reenchantment of a rational and individualistic world.<sup>6</sup> For Burrin, Nazism was fundamentally religious in nature, although a

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3 Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

4 Steigmann-Gall, 11.

5 Doris L. Bergan, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 234.

6 Philippe Burrin, "Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept," *History and Memory* 9 (Fall 1997): 341.

crucial part of Burrin's argument is the assumption that Nazism was by definition opposed to a Judeo-Christian worldview. It could be argued, however, as Steigmann-Gall does, that Nazism, though not a political religion, drew on a Judeo-Christian – and more specifically, Protestant – belief system in communicating and instigating its political doctrine.<sup>7</sup> In this way Nazism need not run in opposition to Christianity, but can (at least in theory) run parallel to Christianity, with Nazism looking to a Christian worldview for its ideological success.

In some ways it seems that the strong devotion to the figure of Hitler as a political and even cultural messiah on the part of the people written about in Klemperer's work is indicative of the regime's inherent opposition to Christianity. The adoration which many showed for Hitler appears in many ways to act as a substitute for devotion to God. This fails in its explanatory power, however, in that it assumes that Hitler was attempting to take the place of Jesus in the minds of his subjects, and that the loyalty to the state was to replace loyalty to God. Furthermore, definitions of political religion in relation to the Third Reich argue for the religious function of National Socialism.<sup>8</sup> Hitler did cultivate a following that at times seemed religious in nature, and mass events such as the Nuremberg Rallies did use rituals that were taken from Christianity or pagan religions. But this "religion" was not all-encompassing. Hitler offered a solution to Germans' earthly concerns while Christianity offered security in the after-life. While some might assume that mass spectacles in 1930s German appropriated religious rituals in such a way as to undermine traditional religious belief itself, I argue that the Party appropriated religious rituals because it would complement the religious sensibility of the spectators, and that this appropriation should not imply a

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7 Steigmann-Gall, 59-62.

8 Burrin, 321-349.

substitution of Nazism for Christianity but rather, a syncretism of religion and national socialism. The two could – and did, in the belief system of Hitler and other Party leaders – coexist. If key Nazi Party leaders considered themselves to be Christian as well as adherents of National Socialism, it is then untenable to claim a fundamental antagonism between the two, at least in the minds of those most intimately involved in setting National Socialist policy. The possibility of devotion to both Christianity and National Socialism is also demonstrated by the German Christian movement. In his early approval of their ideology and his desire to form one Reich Church under the auspices of the German Christian movement, Hitler demonstrated his desire that Christianity and National Socialism work together toward a common goal.

Emilie Durkheim offers an important theoretical perspective in considering the role of spectacle in the creation and continued cohesion of National Socialism. He argues for a separation between the sacred and profane, and that even modern societies have sacred objects which they view with reverence.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Durkheim argues for the centrality of ritual to religious belief.<sup>10</sup> That is, religious rites bind people together into a religious group, also allowing escape from the mundane nature of the quotidian. For Durkheim, religion is not about a theological or belief system, but about the rituals that bind people together. In this way, the Nuremberg Rallies were fundamentally religious.

As has already been hinted, there were important ways in which the regime drew on Christian imagery, symbolism, concepts, and ideas in their creation of the Nazi state. This symbolism was not limited to visual representation; written and spoken language also played

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9 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1954), 38-39.

10 Ibid, 101.

a large role in the creation of a quasi-Christian Nazism that could be embraced by a wide variety of Germans. Although this symbolism pervades Nazi events and propaganda, it is especially evident in the case of the Nuremberg Rallies of 1934 and 1935. This huge display of Nazi power and unity and the artistic representations that followed contain several examples of the ways in which the National Socialist Party used Christian symbolism to legitimate their claim to power, such as the swastika and the messianic figure of Hitler himself. In his entry into Nuremberg, Hitler presented himself as a twentieth century messiah, deserving of the world's respect, adoration, and unwavering obedience. This presentation, however, would mean nothing without its acceptance on the part of the Rally's audience – ordinary Germans. In using religious symbolism and ritual to legitimize himself and the Party, Hitler and the architects of the Nuremberg Rallies depended on a similarly religious devotion – not necessarily conscious – on the part of those in attendance.

By the time the Second World War began, the situation of the Church in Nazi Germany had unarguably changed. In *The Third Reich in Power*, Richard J. Evans argues that many leading Nazis, including Hitler, originally had hopes of uniting all churches in one Reich Church. Evans writes that “Hitler and Goebbels’s religious beliefs retained a residual element of Christianity”<sup>11</sup> until the failure of the German Christian Church to unite all German denominations. Up until 1935, then, Hitler embraced at least aspects of Christianity – a Christianity that he believed would be able to not only coexist with but also offer ideological underpinnings for National Socialism. Steigmann-Gall would take this even further, arguing that Evans’ “residual elements” of Christianity lasted throughout the regime, causing, for example, a bias toward Protestantism and a continued reverence toward an

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11 Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power: 1933-1939* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 249.

Aryanized Jesus.<sup>12</sup> In any case, Hitler and other leading Nazis grew increasingly anti-clerical throughout the 1930s, abandoning most of their allegiance to organized Christianity in favor of uncompromising devotion to the Nazi state.

This leads, then, to an interesting question concerning the Nuremberg Rallies of 1934 and 1935. Considering the rapidly shifting policy of the regime toward the Churches and institutional Christianity, what are the differences in implementation, execution, and representation of the two Rallies separated by one religiously and politically tumultuous year? In many ways the Rallies are similar. Both use the nature of a large-scale event like a rally in order to encourage an emotional reaction on the part of participants; both are filled with symbolism (particularly the swastika) reminding Rally-goers of the absolute supremacy of the Nazi state. The 1935 Rally, however, is much more focused on war: religious symbolism functioned mainly in support of war.

Does this represent a shift in Party sentiment or policy? Undoubtedly so. The Nazis' increasingly pronounced hostility toward Christianity as an institution and increasingly open declaration of their ideological leanings was reflected in the way that they chose to portray themselves in the 1935 Rally. While many of the same symbols were mobilized at the later Rally, the swastika and symbols of war were more highly emphasized while overtly Christian symbols lost their centrality. A comparison of the Nuremberg Party Rally of 1934 and that of 1935 thus reveals the extent to which the Nazi regime moved toward a political religion that, while continuing to utilize key Christian concepts, imagery, and ritual, was nevertheless increasingly anti-clerical and anti-establishment.

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12 Steigmann-Gall, 258.

## 1: Hitler and the Church

Because of the ubiquity of religious symbolism at the Nuremberg Rally of 1934, any study of it must explore the underlying relationship of the Nazi regime to the Church. Most historians have assumed that National Socialism and Christianity were entirely at odds. This conclusion is often supported by the use of pagan party leaders and the Hitler's actions against organized Christianity in the mid to late 1930s and during the Second World War. To do this, however, misses the state of the relationship between Hitler and organized Protestantism early in the 1930s, when the regime was new and hostilities had yet to form. Although certain Nazi leaders were always fundamentally opposed to Christianity, others had hope of an alliance between Church and State in which the Church would come under the leadership of the Nazi State. It is only when this did not come to fruition that attitudes and policies began to rapidly shift.

The perception that Nazism and Christianity are mutually exclusive has existed for nearly as long as the regime existed – numerous German pastors, theologians, and historians who were resistant to the regime wrote books in the mid-1930s arguing that Hitler was fundamentally opposed to Christianity. For example, Peter Viereck, publishing a book in 1941 entitled *Metapolitics: From the Romantics to Hitler*, includes a chapter entitled “Nazi Religion Versus Christian Religion.” He introduces the chapter by writing that “the subject of this chapter is urgently pertinent in a day when anti-Christian forces are increasing steadily all over the world. Is Christianity doomed, like so many religions before it, to be replaced by some more modern or adaptable creed?”<sup>13</sup> Although Viereck acknowledges that the Nazis

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13 Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From the Romantics to Hitler* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1941), 281.

“generally sincerely admire – or profess to admire – Christ Himself,”<sup>14</sup> he quickly dismisses this as distorted theology that excludes it from true Christianity.

Of course, works such as this were often written in response to works such as Professor Cajus Fabricus' *Positive Christianity in the Third Reich*, which argued for the essential compatibility of Nazism and Christianity. Furthermore, Fabricus' work went so far as to argue for the Christian *ethic* of National Socialism. Fabricus saw National Socialism as standing for kinship with God and love for one's neighbor, central tenets of Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the works that asserted the *incompatibility* of Hitler and Christianity need to be understood in the context of the works that equally vehemently argued *for* their compatibility. All works on either side of this debate were thus part of a larger discourse which played a role in shaping the relationship of Hitler to Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Also important to this discussion is the role that Hitler played as leader of the Nazi party in shaping both German society and historical events. As Ian Kershaw writes, “the key issue in historical-philosophical terms is the role of the individual in shaping the course of historical development, as against the limitations on the individual's freedom of action imposed by impersonal 'structural determinants.’”<sup>17</sup> In other words, can and should one interpret the Nazi regime as solely the product of Hitler's wishes and directives? Kershaw argues that Hitler cannot be viewed as the sole will behind the regime. Rather, “the conditions in which Hitler's 'will' could be implemented as government 'policy' were only in

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14 Ibid, 282.

15 Professor Cajus D. Fabricus, *Positive Christianity in the Third Reich*, (Dresden, Germany, 1935), 35-71.

16 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Vol. II: *Life-world and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Trans. Thomas McCarthy. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987). Habermas argues that language has a pragmatic function as part of its communicative function. Language can thus shape reality and create meaning. Language produces action.

17 Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 70.

small measure fashioned by Hitler himself.”<sup>18</sup> Although Kershaw argues that Hitler could hardly be seen as a “weak” dictator, he was also not omnipotent.<sup>19</sup> Thus, as writers on both sides of the “religious divide” attempted to categorize Nazism as either compatible with or opposed to Christianity, they shaped the course of history and Hitler's relationship to the Church itself.

German nationalism had always been closely connected to Protestantism. In order to better understand the relationship of German nationalism and religion, one must go back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when the two became explicitly linked. Although this association goes back to the end of the eighteenth century,<sup>20</sup> it found its fullest expression in sermons written for the fiftieth anniversary of Napoleon's defeat.<sup>21</sup> In these sermons, German pastors argued that Germans were a collective unit that related to God in a similar way as the chosen people of the Old Testament.<sup>22</sup> Germany's success was viewed as attributable to God's intervention and defeat in battle could be seen as a sign of God's displeasure or wrath.

Over the course of the next 70 years, this view underwent significant change. As

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18 Ibid, 91.

19 Ibid, 92.

20 Hartmut Lehmann, “The Germans as a Chosen People: Old Testament Themes in German Nationalism,” *German Studies Review* 14 (1991), 263. Lehmann argues that German nationalism was linked to religion as early as the late eighteenth century when Herder “expounded his view, according to which Europe consisted of peoples, or nations, with distinct traits and in various stages of development or maturity.” This was the same time as Germany was experiencing a period of religious revivalism.

21 Ibid, 264-266. The association between nationalism and Protestantism underwent four distinct phases. The first phase, taking place between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the Revolution of 1830, consisted of German Protestants laboring for the building of the kingdom of God. There was not as yet any sense of Germans as a chosen people. The second phase, taking place between 1830 and 1848, saw the Germans as seeing themselves as special in comparison to the French. During the third phase, lasting from 1848 to the early 1860s, German Protestants wondered why God was punishing them and concluded that if they abstained from sin God would bless them. In the final phase, which lasted throughout the 1860s and until 1871, German Protestants viewed themselves as a spiritual unit and compared themselves to the Israelites of the Old Testament.

22 Ibid, 265.



Protestants became concerned with the secularization of society that they saw all around them, some attempted to affect change through involvement in politics. This involved a slowly increasing amount of anti-Semitic rhetoric, as Jews represented a perceived threat to ethnic German superiority.<sup>23</sup> As Social Darwinism and power politics came into the picture at the end of the nineteenth century as part of the increasing secularization of German society, German Protestants responded with a massive campaign to link Protestantism to German Nationalism. This met with mixed success; prior to 1914 German Protestantism appeared to be on the decline.<sup>24</sup> The First World War further solidified Protestant notions of the supernatural forces at work in war: soldiers were God's soldiers, Hindenburg "God's special tool,"<sup>25</sup> and Germany's eventual defeat a result of "the work of sinister forces."<sup>26</sup> Thus Hitler's rise to power was welcomed without reservation by many German Protestants who supported Hitler's nationalism, his dislike of democracy, and even his anti-Semitism. They believed that Germany would finally experience full revival, especially given Hitler's support of Positive Christianity.<sup>27</sup>

German Protestantism was not, however, the only religious movement of the nineteenth century to have ramifications for the National Socialist era. In *The Fascist Revolution*, George Mosse argues that National Socialism had significant occult origins. Members of the nineteenth century occult movement were opposed to what they called the "man machine." They felt that Germany had become artificial and that Germans needed to

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23 Ibid, 266. Lehmann argues that many German Christians hoped that national unification in the early 1870s would result in revival. When this did not happen, some resorted to anti-Semitic preaching.

24 Ibid, 268.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Lehmann, 261-273.

become artists in the sense that they needed to have an artistic rather than mechanical outlook on the world. They were opposed to anything artificial and man-made and believed in a cosmic life force. Mysticism was based on closeness to nature; uncorrupted nature could give a more genuine life to humanity. Cities were seen as opposed to nature.<sup>28</sup> Also important to German occultists were deeds – it was crucial to not only have ideals, but to act on them.<sup>29</sup> Mosse contends that these ideals and beliefs laid the basis for the fascist regimes of the mid twentieth century. Beliefs such as the idealism of deeds and rejection of positivist ideologies would play a large role in the formation and beliefs of National Socialism. As the modern era progressed, Germans felt increasingly alienated from society, culture, and politics. Mysticism and occultism offered a solution to this alienation for an increasingly vocal minority that would eventually manifest itself in the National Socialist Party.<sup>30</sup>

These themes of German exceptionalism, romanticism, and rejection of positivism continued into the twentieth century. Steigmann-Gall describes one significant Protestant ideological position in Germany following the First World War as characterized by “liberation from materialism; Germany as God's chosen nation; domestic betrayal of the nation and God; honor and sacrifice; a new fight for liberation.”<sup>31</sup> This, according to Steigmann-Gall, is part of a dualistic way of thinking in which some Protestant Germans understood the nation to be in battle against evil. As this dualism was also a key feature of Nazism, many Protestants saw Nazism as entirely compatible with their already existing

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28 Ibid, 118-120.

29 Ibid, 128.

30 George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1999), 117.

31 Steigmann-Gall, 17.

beliefs.<sup>32</sup>

In 1933, Germany was, much to the chagrin of the Nazis, divided along denominational lines. The German Evangelical Church, an independent organization which united Lutherans and Calvinists, and the Catholic Church, which owed its allegiance to Rome, made up the main Christian groups in Germany. Nationalists, however, saw Germany as a Protestant state, and Catholics had been persecuted as recently as 1914 when French Catholic priests had been shown murderous hostility by German troops in the First World War. Richard J. Evans argues that “the German Evangelical church seemed to the Nazis to offer an almost ideal vehicle for the religious unification of the German people.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in 1932, the German Christian movement was born as a pressure-group designed to Nazify the national church. This found quick success; by the mid-1930s the Evangelical Church had at least 600,000 members, and won a third of the seats in the Prussian Church elections of November 1932. By April 1933, at a mass meeting in Berlin, they announced their intention to take over the whole Church. They pushed for “a centralized 'Reich Church' under Nazi control,”<sup>34</sup> which they won. The German Christians were firmly in control of German Protestant religious life.

The Nazi push for a centralized Reich Church that would support positive Christianity rather than the doctrine of any one denomination is crucial to understanding the relationship between the Nazi Party as a political entity and Christianity as a religious one. For Hitler and many leading Nazis, ascribing to a pan-German movement which strove for a reunification of Germanic peoples under one government, the key to the successful purification and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Evans, 220.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 223.

reunification of Germany was ascribing to a policy of strict anticonfessionalism. As Steigmann-Gall asserts, Hitler arrived at this conclusion through the combination of his political and ideological beliefs.<sup>35</sup> As a politician, Hitler asserted the importance of the religious neutrality of the state. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler writes:

When Church dignitaries make use of religious institutions or doctrines to injure their nation, we must never follow them on this path and fight with the same methods. For the political leader the religious doctrines and institutions of his people must always remain inviolable; or else he has no right to be in politics, but should become a reformer, if he has what it takes! Especially in Germany any other attitude would lead to a catastrophe.<sup>36</sup>

And yet, despite his upbringing as a Catholic, Hitler showed an unmistakable preference for Protestantism as a truly *German* religion, writing that “Protestantism as such is a better defender of the interests of Germanism, in so far as this is grounded in its genesis and later tradition...”<sup>37</sup> With this bias toward Protestantism, Hitler argued in *Mein Kampf* for a reunification of all German people under the banner of Protestantism in order to better wage war against Germany's true enemy: the Jews.<sup>38</sup> For the Nazis, Protestantism served as an excellent vehicle of German nationalism, as the Protestant Reformation occurred through the work of the German Martin Luther.

Not all German evangelical Christians supported the German Christian movement, though. Opposing pastors formed the Confessing Church in May 1934, opposing the anti-Semitic policies of the German Christian church and calling for a “return to a pure religion based on the Bible.”<sup>39</sup> The Confessing Church never became a main center of opposition to

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<sup>35</sup> Steigmann-Gall, 62.

<sup>36</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), 116.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 561. Hitler writes, “In any case the Jew reached his desired goal: Catholics and Protestants wage a merry war with one another, and the mortal enemy of Aryan humanity and all Christendom laughs up his sleeve.”

<sup>39</sup> Evans, 226.

the Nazis, mainly because the Nazis did not focus their energy fully on religious opposition to the regime. As a result, the German Christians did not entirely succeed in their aim to unify German Protestantism.<sup>40</sup>

This reference to the aims of the German Christian movement itself raises an interesting question about the degree to which the German Christian movement can be viewed as acting on behalf of the Party's wishes. Doris Bergen argues against the notion that the German Christian movement was a product of Nazism. She asserts rather that both German Christianity as a movement and the Nazi party were the natural result of German culture in the post-WWI era. Although the movements shared many ideological similarities, German Christianity should be viewed as separate from the Nazi Party and as acting on its own terms.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, whereas Steigmann-Gall wishes to link the rising and falling fortunes of the German Christian movement at least in part to Hitler and other leading Nazis' shifting ideologies, Bergen wishes to frame the *Kirchenkampf* (the struggle for power between the German Christians and their adversaries, the Confessing Church) as “less an expression of political opposition to Nazism than a competition for control within the Protestant church.”<sup>42</sup> Certainly it is important to remember that the German Christian movement was composed of both Nazi Party members and non-members, and that the Nazi Party itself cannot be considered a monolithic movement with one aim. There were many Nazi paganists who desired to silence the Church, but there were also many Christians who thought the Church could be useful in realizing political aims. As Steigmann-Gall argues, the Party was made up of many who considered themselves Christian (both Protestant and

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40 Ibid, 228.

41 Bergen, 3-4.

42 Ibid, 12.

Catholic), making the line between political and religious ideology hard to define. As a result, there was enough connection and overlap between the membership of the Nazi Party and that of the German Christian movement so as to make possible the assertion that German Christians had a working relationship with the regime that was initially strong and characterized by open dialogue and negotiation.

This relationship began to weaken in the months following the 1934 Rally, however. By the time of the Rally of 1935 things had changed. In *The Third Reich in Power*, Richard Evans argues that a shift occurred between 1934 and 1935 in terms of Nazi policy toward Christian churches in Germany. Originally, Hitler hoped to form one Reich Church with the help of the German Christian movement.<sup>43</sup> With the ultimate failure of the German Christian movement to achieve a synthesis between German Protestantism and Nazi racism, Nazi policy began to shift. Although Hitler still paid lip service to the German Christians, many leading Nazis began considering alternate religious affiliations for the regime.

The Catholic Church too occupied a confused place in the Nazi Regime. Hitler, both admiring and fearing it, did not attack it to a large extent. Some leading Nazis were nominally Catholic, and Hitler himself was raised as a Catholic. As Stiegmamm-Gall has demonstrated, though, Nazism leaned toward Protestantism, seeing Luther as a German hero and favoring Protestantism as the truly German religion.<sup>44</sup> Although the Nazis did attempt to implement anti-Catholic measures, they did so slowly and with a consciousness of the deep-rooted nature of the institution. The political strength of the Catholic Church can largely be attributed to the official voice it found through the Centre Party, a party which was identified,

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<sup>43</sup> Evans, 220.

<sup>44</sup> Stiegmamm-Gall, 11.

along with the Jews themselves, as one of the principal opponents of Nazism.<sup>45</sup> Although anti-Catholic policies did escalate with Hindenburg's death, they did not have the desired effect of “weaning the Catholic community away from its faith.”<sup>46</sup> By 1939, though, the Catholic Church's power and influence had definitely been weakened, and “it began to scale down its criticisms of the regime for fear that even worse might follow.”<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, as David I. Kertzer argues in *The Popes Against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism*, the Catholic Church itself played a key role in the development of anti-Semitic sentiment in Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Themselves uneasy about the transition into modernity, the Vatican upheld anti-Semitic policies toward the Jews in the century prior to the Holocaust.<sup>48</sup> As Peter Godman illustrates in *Hitler and the Vatican: Inside the Secret Archives that Reveal the New Story of the Nazis and the Church*, however, even the Vatican was more fractured than previously assumed. Although some planned to condemn the Nazis, eventually political complications and the reality that the Vatican did not have a single voice resulted in accommodation.<sup>49</sup> Eugenio Pacelli, who was Pope from 1933-1939, is seen as one of the primary parties responsible for this accommodation.<sup>50</sup>

Also important to keep in mind in regard to the ambiguity with which Catholicism was viewed by the Party was the presence within the party leadership of nominal Catholics. Goebbels, for instance, was nominally Catholic, and did not ever officially renounce his

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45 Bergan, 234.

46 Evans, 239.

47 Ibid, 247.

48 David I. Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 11.

49 Peter Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican: Inside the Secret Archives that Reveal the New Story of the Nazis and the Church* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 1-9.

50 Ibid, 71.

religion. As a member of Hitler's inner circle, though, Goebbels was careful to remain "above confessions." In March of 1925 he wrote in his diary:

Catholicism and Protestantism...Catholicism is music (feeling), Protestantism poetry (reason and personal responsibility). It is no coincidence that Beethoven and Mozart are Catholics, Goethe and Schiller Protestants...Every great German is Catholic in his feelings, Protestant in his actions. Protestantism is defined: Luther! Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me, amen!<sup>51</sup>

Steigmann-Gall argues that the statement that Germans are Protestant in their actions, when compared to the idea of Nazis as men of action, implies that "Nazis themselves, as 'men of action,' were similarly Protestant in sensibility."<sup>52</sup> Later, as Steigmann-Gall points out, Goebbels became much more anti-Protestant. However, he continued to profess an anti-confessional Christianity, writing in 1928 that "We have brought back the image of Christ."<sup>53</sup> Support for Protestantism and opposition to Catholicism was never as straightforward as it might appear. The consistent thread running through leading Nazis' (at least those who considered themselves Christian) writings is that of anti-confessionalism and positive Christianity.

Most historians writing on the Christian Church and Nazism see the Nazi party as exploiting Christianity for its own ends. The generally accepted argument on the issue of the level of opposition between Christianity and Nazism can be summed up by Doris Bergen, who argues that National Socialism was entirely antithetical to Christianity. Although she recognizes that many Christians in Germany did not see the situation as such, she argues that Nazi leaders did.<sup>54</sup> In the case of the Confessing Church, opposition to Hitler resulted in its eventual suppression. In the case of the Catholic Church, friction existed due to its ultimate

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51 Steigmann-Gall, 53-54.

52 Ibid, 54.

53 Ibid.

54 Bergen, 1.



loyalty to Rome.<sup>55</sup> Overall, though, the relationship was more ambivalent. Although there was some attempt to protest, by 1939 fear left the Catholic Church largely silent in terms of opposition to Nazism.<sup>56</sup> Although this statement implies a fundamental incompatibility between the Nazis and Catholicism, it nevertheless establishes a basic cooperation between the Catholic Church and the Nazi regime by the late 1930s.

The eventual policy of accommodation on the part of the Catholic Church is in many ways similar to the initial attempt on the part of the German Christian movement to gain approval by the National Socialist Party, and raises the question of the degree to which Catholics eventually came to see their faith as intrinsically connected to their political involvement. As the regime neared the brink of the another world war, it is certainly possible that the increased emphasis on anti-Semitism, a value historically held by the Catholic Church, appealed to the Church's perceived calling. In an environment increasingly characterized by fear and violence, to fight the perceived enemy became top priority, even for the Catholic Church, which was originally opposed to the regime on political terms.

Many Party members were themselves adherents of positive Christianity. Steigmann-Gall identifies two main religious currents in the Nazi movement – namely, positive Christianity and paganism. He argues that positive Christianity asserted the essential compatibility of Nazism and Christianity. Positive Christianity even went so far as to assert that Nazism was in key respects derived from Christianity.<sup>57</sup> D. Cajus Fabricius, writing *Positive Christianity in the Third Reich* in the mid-1930s as a defense of positive Christianity against those who attempted to appropriate National Socialism for paganism, argues that

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<sup>55</sup> Evans, 234.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>57</sup> Steigmann-Gall, 261.

National Socialism and Christianity share three basic traits: kinship with God, love for one's neighbor, and an emphasis on redemption.<sup>58</sup> Of course, Fabricus' assertions mean nothing if not collaborated by the Nazi Party. While official National Socialist rhetoric would shy away from direct association with any religious creed, the Christianity of many leading Nazis created a Party that, while strictly speaking considered themselves a political movement only, was in fact influenced by Christianity (particularly Protestantism) in important ways.

Even paganism, according to Steigmann-Gall, leaned toward Protestantism. Paganism was based in large part on “philosophies of a much more recent past” than pre-Christian Germany.<sup>59</sup> Steigmann-Gall argues that pagans “appropriated Protestantism as a barometer of Germanism.”<sup>60</sup> Although they dispensed with many Jewish elements of Christianity, rather than dismissing Jesus, Nazis labored to reconceptualize him as an Aryan. In his discussion of the occult roots of National Socialism, Mosse provides an example of this. He writes of Hermann Lietz, founder of nineteenth century boarding schools, that “this religious world Lietz saw in terms of a Christianity which, as for the others, was divorced from Christ as a historical personage...Christ must be rescued from St Paul and emerge again as a hero image.”<sup>61</sup> Even the occult movement was in many ways Christian, admiring Christ, but seeing him as obscured by Paul's description of him.

Even though they rejected much Christian dogma, Nazis used Christian heroes of earlier eras as the basis of their ideology. For example, Luther's 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, held in 1933, were huge events conducted by both Protestant Churches and the

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58 Fabricus, 35-71.

59 Ibid, 263.

60 Ibid, 262.

61 Mosse, 133.

Nazi Party. Gauleiter Erich Koch spoke at a celebration taking place in Königsberg, making a clear connection between Hitler and Luther. According to Koch, both Hitler and Luther were well-loved German heroes, both fought for their beliefs, and both had the same spirit.<sup>62</sup> This calls for a fundamental reordering of previously unquestioned assumptions, arguing that the Nazi movement did much more than simply exploit Christianity. In fact, leading Nazis looked to Christian heroes such as Luther as German heroes and role models.

Even for historians such as Nicholas Goodrich-Clarke, who argues that the paganist roots of Nazism can be found in the nineteenth century, the *völkish* movement is described in strikingly Christian terms:

Semi-religious beliefs in a race of Aryan god-men, the needful extermination of inferiors, and a wonderful millennial future of German world-domination obsessed Hitler, Himmler, and many other high-ranking Nazi leaders. When the endless columns of steel-helmeted legionaries marched beneath the swastika at the massive martial displays of the 1930s, Germany was effectively saluting the founder-emperor of a new One Thousand Year Reich. But all this optimism, exuberance, and expectation was matched by a hellish vision. The shining new order was sustained by the wretched slave-cities where the Jewish demons were immolated as a burnt sacrifice or holocaust. The Nazi crusade was indeed essentially religious in its adoption of apocalyptic beliefs and fantasies including a New Jerusalem...and the destruction of the Satanic hosts in a lake of fire.<sup>63</sup>

It is as if Goodrich-Clark stops just short of stating the obvious – he uses almost entirely exclusively Christian language in his description of Nazism as “religious,” but is unable to move past the traditional model of the relationship between Nazism and Christianity in which the two are fundamentally opposed. The strikingly Christian nature of the imagery employed by the Nazis seems to suggest a relationship between Nazi and Christian ideologies that is

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<sup>62</sup> Steigmann-Gall, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas Goodrich-Clark, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology; The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany, 1890-1935* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 203-204.

more than just coincidental. To claim Nazism to be fundamentally opposed to Christianity seems to be in this case entirely untenable.

Often Alfred Rosenberg is held up as an example of the ideological and religious leanings of the regime. This is largely because of his position as the most prominent paganist in the party. Rosenberg aspired to greatness, and often his aspirations are taken as representative of historical reality. This is simply not the case. Although he published many works, including *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, which many hold to be a guide to Nazi thinking, these works were never official. In addition, Hitler himself expressed many reservations in terms of the usefulness of the book as a potential guide to Nazi ideology.<sup>64</sup>

Rather than being wholeheartedly supportive of paganism, as many wrongly assume, Hitler was open to the idea of supporting religion. In his memoir *Inside the Third Reich*, Albert Speer, a leading Nazi architect, quotes Hitler as having said, “The church is certainly necessary for the people. It is a strong and conservative element...Through me the Evangelical [Protestant] Church could become the established church, as in England.”<sup>65</sup>

Further, Speer claims that

Even after 1942 Hitler went on maintaining that he regarded the church as indispensable in political life. He would be happy, he said in one of those teatime talks at Obersalzberg, if someday a prominent churchman turned up who was suited to lead one of the churches—or if possible both the Catholic and Protestant churches reunited...he sharply condemned the campaign against the church, calling it a crime against the future of the nation. For it was impossible, he said, to replace the church by any “party ideology.” Undoubtedly, he continued, the church would learn to adapt to the political goals of National Socialism in the long run, as it had always adapted in the course of history.<sup>66</sup>

Although these sorts of statements were often made in public, they are no less significant

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<sup>64</sup> Steigmann-Gall, 91-93.

<sup>65</sup> Albert Speer, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: Galahad Books, 1970), 95.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

than if Hitler had written them in *Mein Kampf*. Hitler may not have himself claimed to be a Christian, and certainly he did not require adherence to Christianity on the part of German citizens. Rather, he required absolute adherence to himself and his regime. In order to legitimate this claim to power, however, Hitler used the Church, recognizing it as an integral part of German culture. He recognized that his ability to bring together the public and private aspects of life in Nazi Germany would ensure his legitimacy as leader, and thus nurtured and utilized the faith of ordinary Germans. On a fundamental level, then, Hitler and Christianity went hand in hand.

This sort of conclusion is supported by the argument of Robert P. Ericksen, who, in his work on the relationship of the German churches and the Nazi regime, argues that the stories of a few heroic individuals such as Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who were vocally opposed to national socialism) have tended to muddy historians' perceptions of the *Kirchenkampf* (church struggle) that occurred in the 1930s. Although many assume *Kirchenkampf* to refer to resistance to the regime, Ericksen points out that it actually refers to conflict within the church over internal church matters.<sup>67</sup> As part of a larger argument about the complicity of German churches and universities in the Holocaust, Ericksen asserts that both Protestants and Catholics largely welcomed the Nazi regime. Although Catholics opposed certain tenets of the new regime's policies, in large part their response to the events of 1933 was the same as that of Protestantism.<sup>68</sup>

If it is true that National Socialism's relationship to the Church was more complicated than simply one of repression and persecution, could it also be possible that the regime

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67 Robert P. Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 49-50.

68 Ibid, 60.

operated under a Christian—or more specifically, Protestant—ideology? There seems to be some evidence that this was indeed the case. For example, in *The Nazi Primer*, which served as the official primer for the Hitler Youth, Fritz Brennecke writes that “Even today the racial ideas of National Socialism have implacable opponents. Free Masons, Marxists, and the Christian Church join hands in brotherly accord on this point.” Although this seems shockingly clear in its implications, Brennecke goes on to say that “The Christians, above all the Roman Church, reject the race idea with the citation 'before God all men are equal.'”<sup>69</sup> Although he uses the phrase “the Christians,” Brennecke's criticism seems directed almost exclusively at Catholicism, which finds its authority in Rome. Protestantism, on the other hand, finds its roots in Germany, and thus is spared the scathing condemnation reserved for the Roman Church.

Of course, National Socialism distanced itself from being considered religious in any sense. As Waldemar Gurian argues in *Hitler and the Christians*, “since it [Christianity] threatens to split the Germans into various denominations, it must be thrust into the background by great national, unifying, experiences.” Gurian goes on to assert that Hitler thus attempted to “whistle off those of his followers who favour over-drastring measures and want to emulate the escapades of a Dinter or a General Lundendorff.”<sup>70</sup> Gurian takes this to mean that Hitler was simply allowing Christianity to exist for the time being out of the knowledge that an outright attack would create insurmountable resistance to the regime. Gurian argues that for Hitler the Christian

whose obedience to God brings him into conflict with on or other of the demands of the

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69 Fritz Brennecke, *The Nazi Primer: Official Handbook for Schooling the Hitler Youth*, Trans. Harwood L. Childs (New York & London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1938), 9.

70 Gurian, Waldemar, *Hitler and the Christians*, trans. E. F. Peeler (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1936), 47.

National Socialist world theory is nothing less than a hypocritical perverter of true, inward Christianity, which in its own real interest must be protected against this perverter. There are no such persons now as martyrs for the faith; there are only currency smugglers, political priests, and squabbling pastors.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, according to Gurian's interpretation of National Socialist ideology, Christianity, like all religions, was to be considered simply a system of morals based entirely on the improvement of society – a means to an end. National Socialism, in contrast, was something that went beyond this world – something living and eternal – an end in itself.<sup>72</sup>

Of course, a significant element of Nazi leadership was opposed to Christianity from the outset. This is nowhere better reflected than in the anti-Christian sentiments reflected in Hitler Youth liturgy, which, though arguably be influenced by Christian ritual and liturgy, was also infused with a undeniable hostility to a faith that would demand loyalty above and beyond the loyalty required by Hitler's state. At the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, the Hitler Youth sang the following song:

We are the jolly Hitler Youth,  
We don't need any Christian truth  
For our Leader Adolf Hitler, our Leader  
Always is our interceder.

Whatever the Papist Priests may try,  
We're Hitler's children until we die;  
We follow not Christ but Horst Wessel.  
Away with the incense and holy water vessel!

As sons of our forebears from times gone by  
We march as we sing with banners held high.  
I'm not a Christian, nor a Catholic,  
I go with the SA through thin and thick.<sup>73</sup>

At times it seems as if fundamental aspects of Christian ritual and belief were being attacked.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>73</sup> Evans, 250-51.

As yet another example, German youth in Cologne were instructed to sing the following song before meals:

Führer, my Führer, bequeathed to me by the Lord,  
Protect and preserve me as long as I live!  
Thou hast rescued Germany from deepest distress,  
I thank thee today for my daily bread.  
Abideth thou long with me, forsaketh me not,  
Führer, my Führer, my faith and my light!  
*Heil, mein Führer!*<sup>74</sup>

A similar invocation followed after meals, being similarly written as a prayer to Hitler.

If these songs and prayers dedicated to Hitler took the place of their Christian counterparts, how are we to understand them? Nazism took care to make its worldview expressible in a religious manner. Nazism strove to replace Christianity, but, significantly, they also used the traditional forms of Christianity in doing so, even employing Christian imagery to make their point.<sup>75</sup> It is also possible that rather than striving to immediately replace Christianity, Nazism attempted to co-opt key aspects of Christianity to further their power, not wishing to destroy operating Christian belief that did not result in resistance to the regime.

Gilmer W. Blackburn's argument in "The Portrayal of Christianity in the History Textbooks of Nazi Germany" reflects the possibility that Christianity was acceptable as long as it did not threaten German concepts of their own racial supremacy. Although he argues that the ultimate aim of the Nazi regime was "the utter annihilation of the Christian faith,"<sup>76</sup> he also points out that Nazi textbooks taught young children that "God . . . helps his people'

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74 George L. Mosse, *Nazi Culture* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1966), 241.

75 Ibid, 235.

76 Gilmer W. Blackburn, "The Portrayal of Christianity in the History Textbooks of Nazi Germany," in *Church History* 49:4 (December 1980), 433.



but only 'when they are brave and resourceful.'"<sup>77</sup> While some textbooks followed this vein of thought, others were more obviously against the spirit of Christianity. For example, *So Ward Das Reich* argued that Christianity was the single largest threat to the Germanic spirit.<sup>78</sup>

Clearly politics and the *Volk* came first for the Nazi regime. This does leave room, however, for the transformation of Christianity, in the form of the German Christian Church, into an institution that upheld and reflected the seemingly opposing ideology of the Nazi regime. This possibility is nowhere better reflected than in an excerpt from the *Kirchliches Jahrbuch für die evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* concerning principles that the German Evangelical Church was adopting in order to better adhere to the Nazi regime:

The Evangelical Church has learned from Martin Luther to distinguish sharply between the realms of reason and faith, politics and religion, state and Church. The National Socialist world view is the Volkish-political doctrine which determines and forms the German man. And as such it is also binding upon German Christians. The Evangelical Church honors a divinely established order in the state and demands from its members a total service in this order.<sup>79</sup>

This unequivocally establishes the relationship, at least on an official level, of the German Christian Church to the Nazi state. It seems as if in this area Hitler was successful in his aim to appropriate a surprisingly willing Christianity for his own ends. The German Christian movement was more than willing to accommodate Hitler and National Socialism. For a time, it seemed as if Hitler was willing to accommodate them.

A traditional reading of the symbolism present at the Nuremberg Rally of 1934 would assume any religious symbolism to be either exploitative or coincidence. This paper will argue quite the opposite – that in considering the complexity of Nazi leaders' relationship to

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 436.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 438.

<sup>79</sup> Mosse, *Nazi Culture*, 243.

religion, and even Christianity, one must assume that for many of the individuals involved in the planning and presentation of the Rallies, religion was more than something to be exploited in the souls of the attendees. Rather, these Nazis' religious convictions were inextricably tied to their political convictions, and many Nazi leaders saw no reason to make religion and politics mutually exclusive. Rather, there was a basic syncretism of religion and politics and the level of the Nazi leadership.

Any consideration of religion's place at the Nuremberg Rallies must not only consider Hitler and leading Nazis; also important are the masses that took part in the Rallies. The next chapter will consider these people – what their relationship was to Hitler, to the party, and to religion. It will consider theories of fascism in order to place the Nuremberg Rallies in their larger historical context. More importantly, it will look at the experience of the Rallies for those attending. The Nuremberg Party Rallies were a place of high emotion, it is true, but the willing and enthusiastic participation of the onlookers hints at a deeper acquiescence with the regime than one may initially assume. Taking the Nuremberg Rallies seriously as indicative of the mood of the country in the early to mid-1930s means a possible reconsideration of the theory that the regime maintained power through coercion. The Rallies offer a quite different picture of the mood of the populace just after the birth of the Third Reich, one in which Rally goers were willing participants in what they saw as a revolution.

## 2: Hitler and the Masses

Although Hitler and other party leaders undoubtedly played an important role in shaping the movement, it is also important to keep in mind the way that their ideas and mandates were received by ordinary Germans. To label Nazism as Christian is one thing, but if the people did not sense or relate to this religiosity, it loses much of its meaning. Those Christians who attended the Nuremberg Party Rallies would have needed to experience their Christian beliefs as entirely compatible with their political beliefs in order for any ideological intentions of Hitler or Nazi leaders to have a real effect. This is particularly the case when considering the Nuremberg Rallies, which undoubtedly found much of their emotional power through the participation of the masses.

First though, one must consider the nature of fascism itself. Was Hitler simply a strong personality to whom people in an economic crisis gravitated in sheer desperation? Or was Hitler simply a product of his time, a gauge of the national temperature? This question has existed since Hitler first came to power. First writing in 1933, Wilhelm Reich was one of the first to address this issue. In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, he argues that one cannot assume Hitler's ideas to have been simply transmitted to mindless followers. Rather, Hitler was able to come to power because of a convergence of belief between him and the people who held many of the same opinions. More specifically, Reich writes that “*only when the structure of the führer's personality is in harmony with the structures of broad groups can a “führer” make history.*”<sup>80</sup> Fascism itself, according to Reich, is “only the organized political expression of the structure of the average man's character, a structure that is confined neither

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80 Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), 35.

to certain races or nations nor to certain parties, but is general and international.”<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, Reich argues that fascism is “*borne and championed by masses of people*.”<sup>82</sup>

Reich also seeks to explain throughout his book why the working-class chose Nazism instead of a Marxist revolution. Reich argues that to understand political repression, one must understand sexual repression. Sexual repression, Reich argues, is inherently present in an authoritarian society.<sup>83</sup> As a Freudian analyst, Reich argues that just as a child represses his/her sexuality out of fear of punishment, so adults obey the state out of fear of punishment. Keeping food or water from someone will cause her to rebel. But the suppression of sexual desires results in a reactionary mentality with no rebellion. Not only do people fear punishment for political rebellion just as they do for sexual rebellion, Reich goes so far as to argue that sexual repression in German society created a nation of people, who, because of their sexual repression, were overly docile and exceedingly prone to reactionary politics. Reich argues that a child has a natural sexuality from early childhood. Parents have moral reason to inhibit this sexuality from developing further, and this results in the inhibition of the child's genital sexuality as well. The child becomes docile and obeys out of fear. After this, all important decisions, even those that are life and death, are accompanied by fear. Just as sex is a forbidden thought, any sort of thought accompanied by fear becomes forbidden as well.<sup>84</sup> Into this environment stepped National Socialism, offering not only a revolution but a return to a mythical, agrarian past. This was something to which already repressed people could more easily adhere, an alternative that appealed to their fear of disobedience and the

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81 Ibid, xiii.

82 Ibid, xiv.

83 Ibid, 29.

84 Ibid, 30.

consequences that disobedience brings.

Even if some should have disagreed in principle with National Socialism on the basis of its inability to provide for material needs, as Reich argues is the case with Germany's lower middle class, the lower middle class' unique position in German society in the early 1930s resulted in their support of the regime. Although Reich points out several reasons for this, important to this discussion is his argument that the lower middle class felt a sense of identification with the state as an authority figure and as an entity that bestowed them with authority.<sup>85</sup> As Reich writes,

The economic position of the average official is worse than that of the average skilled industrial worker; this poorer position is partially compensated by the meager prospect of a career, and in the case of the government official by a lifelong pension. Thus dependent upon governmental authority, a competitive bearing toward one's colleagues prevails in this class, which counteracts the development of solidarity. The social consciousness of the official is not characterized by the fate he shares with his coworkers, but by his attitude to the government and to the 'nation.' This consists of a complete *identification with the state power*; in the case of the company employee, it consists of an identification with the company. He is just as submissive as the industrial worker. Why is it that he does not develop a feeling of solidarity as the industrial worker does? This is due to his intermediate position between authority and the body of manual laborers. While subordinate to the top, he is to those below him a representative of this authority...<sup>86</sup>

Thus, as Reich points out, the middle class man does not act in his actual best interests as a result of the authoritarian mindset with which he was raised.

In addition to arguing that middle class men felt a sense of identification with the state, Reich also points out that the lower middle class had a unique position in the capitalist production process of the early 1930s. As industrialization continued, small business owners found themselves increasingly marginalized. Whereas German nationals in 1932 warned that the lower middle class would have to choose between middle and working class, the National

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 44-46; 48-62.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 46-47.

Socialist party did not create such a gap, thus appealing to this sector of German society.

Although Reich's attempt to stay away from assuming that Germans were simply befogged by Hitler is valuable, his argument's dependence on Freud and preoccupation with sexual repression makes this attempt problematic. Colin Wilson argues in *The Quest for Wilhelm Reich* that there is actually no evidence whatsoever that repressed sexuality formed the basis for fascism.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, Wilson writes that “the overall impression of *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* is of a man determined to oversimplify for his own purposes. Reich is basically an anarchist who hates all authority, and believes that sexual freedom is the answer to all mankind's problems.”<sup>88</sup> Many of Reich's ideas were, as Wilson points out, clearly misguided and motivated by desperation and paranoia. His ideas about the convergence of the ideas of the *Führer* and ordinary Germans are valuable, though, and must not be discarded along with his more dubious theories.

Perhaps a fuller answer to the question of the degree of the masses' acceptance of Hitler lies outside of psychology. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno approach the subject of Hitler and National Socialism through the question of the impact of “enlightenment” on the twentieth century masses. According to their theory, enlightenment, although taking the place of myth and religion, is in the final analysis itself only a myth. They argue that science, as a system of signs, is fundamentally flawed. Because it is made up of signs which are removed from nature, it is in the final analysis only aestheticism.<sup>89</sup>

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87 Colin Wilson, *The Quest for Wilhelm Reich* (New York: Anchor Press, 1981), 142.

88 Ibid, 143.

89 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 13.

Furthermore, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Enlightenment thought rejects individuality and creates the herd. Rather than individuals making autonomous and individually meaningful decisions, “the liberated finally themselves become the 'herd.’”<sup>90</sup> According to Horkheimer and Adorno, this is because the enlightenment creates systems, like the signs mentioned above. Anything not reducible to these systems is simply non-existent. Under this system of thought, all people are equal, and this equality erases individuality and difference.<sup>91</sup> Relevant to our discussion, they argue that has much to do with National Socialism – in particular the Hitler Youth. They write:

Each human being has been endowed with a self of his or her own, different from all others, so that it could all the more surely be made the same. But because that self never quite fitted the mold, enlightenment throughout the liberalistic period has always sympathized with social coercion. The unity of the manipulated collective consists in the negation of each individual and in the scorn poured on the type of society which could make people into individuals. The horde, a term which doubtless is to be found in the Hitler Youth organization, is not a relapse into the old barbarism but the triumph of repressive *égalité*, the degeneration of the equality of rights into the wrong inflicted by equals.<sup>92</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno further argue that fascism is but the result of the “trajectory of European civilization.”<sup>93</sup> Although Nazism may appear to be a regression to a lesser state of civilization, this is not the case. Rather, what some would see as a “mob mentality” simply reflects the end result of Enlightenment. Enlightenment's “freedom” produces the herd.

This is not all. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the Enlightenment has created a machine. This machine (namely capitalism and industrialization), although destructive to the masses, must be operated by them in order to continue running. They continue running the machine because they have been taught to believe in the objective reality of the laws that

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90 Ibid, 9.

91 Ibid, 7-9.

92 Ibid, 9.

93 Ibid.

have produced capitalism. Unfortunately, the reality is that just as the enlightenment replaced myth with science, science once again becomes myth, in the form of the “‘intuitions’ of the *Führer*.”<sup>94</sup> And there is nothing to be done: “The powerlessness of the workers is not merely a ruse of the rulers but the logical consequence of industrial society, into which the efforts to escape it have finally transformed the ancient concept of fate.”<sup>95</sup>

Not all scholars see fascism as the inevitable progression of Enlightenment, however. In *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, Jonathan Israel argues that there were two competing strands of Enlightenment: radical democratic and moderate monarchical.<sup>96</sup> According to Israel, one of the principle problems with the moderate strand is that there was no room for criticism of existing political or societal structures.<sup>97</sup> So while its proponents believed in progress, progress itself was limited by their very belief in it. Radical Enlightenment is characterized by egalitarianism, democracy, and is responsible for much of the social reform in the modern Western world.<sup>98</sup> National Socialism was neither of these, but rather followed in the tradition of many radical Counter-Enlightenment movements throughout the centuries before. Counter-Enlightenment insists “on the primacy of faith and tradition, not reason, as the chief guides in human existence,” and is the result of the ultimate failure of the Moderate Enlightenment to offer an alternative to the Radical Enlightenment.<sup>99</sup>

For the purposes of this discussion, it is not important to arrive at a conclusion as to

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94 Ibid, 30.

95 Ibid, 29.

96 Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 12.

97 Ibid, 14.

98 Ibid, vii-viii.

99 Ibid, 34-35; 122-123.



whether or not National Socialism was the natural result of the Enlightenment. More pressing is the “herd” that Enlightenment thought created, a herd that at least partially believed the propaganda and pseudo-science. This “herd” surely recognized the political-religious aspects of mass events such as the Nuremberg Party Rallies, but within the context of the elaborate pseudo-scientific ideology presented to the public through every medium available to the regime, a Germany already familiar with the thought processes of the Enlightenment would have been easy prey.

Is there a way to define fascism itself keeping in mind the above theoretical perspectives? Robert O. Paxton, in arguing for a definition of fascism that encompasses the variety of movements in the twentieth-century western world, approaches the question of fascism in a more straightforward manner, attempting to come to a working definition of twentieth-century fascism. He concludes that fascism is

a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.<sup>100</sup>

This definition claims to represent a compromise between two extremes – one extreme that defines fascism in purely Marxist terms (with ideology or the leader's personality taking little or no part), and the other extreme which dominates popular perceptions of fascism (with Hitler creating a police state where people were simply cowed into submission).<sup>101</sup> In defining fascism as “a form of political behavior,” Paxton attempts to avoid concentrating on

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100 Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 218.

101 Ibid, 8.

either the leader or the nation removed from one another.<sup>102</sup> To this end, he points out a boundary in definition between authoritarianism and fascism. Whereas authoritarians strive to keep the public passive and uninvolved, fascism seeks to engage and excite the public.<sup>103</sup> This understanding of fascism works well when considering the role of spectacles such as the Nuremberg Rallies in the maintenance of public support of the regime. Paxton considers both Hitler and the masses to have played an important role in the rise of fascism. This definition of fascism goes a long way toward creating a framework through which one can understand the Nuremberg Rallies.

Paxton also places the rise of fascism within a particular historical context – that of post- Great War Europe. Gone were ideas of the progress of humanity, in its place crept despair. Europe was politically and economically strained.<sup>104</sup> Fascism began in Italy in March of 1919 with a group of about one hundred people committed to fighting socialism with a particular brand of nationalism: National Socialism. National Socialism was born in Italy; Germany followed close behind.<sup>105</sup>

The distinction between the Party and Hitler himself also needs to be considered. For example, Ian Kershaw argues that support for Hitler himself was probably much higher than was support for the ideology of the National Socialism.<sup>106</sup> This raises some difficult questions, however, as it openly contradicts the argument furthered by Wilhelm Reich. Was ideological consensus necessary, after all? Kershaw argues that it was not – that the Party

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102 Ibid, 9.

103 Ibid, 216-217.

104 Ibid, 28.

105 Ibid, 5-6.

106 Ian Kershaw, “The Hitler Myth,” in *The Nazi Revolution*, ed. Allan Mitchell (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 88.

retained the illusion of ideological support through furthering the “Hitler Myth.” According to this theory, Hitler carefully cultivated his public image so as to appeal to a wide variety of people and ideological stances. He intentionally separated himself from politics in order to keep necessary distance from unpopular policies.<sup>107</sup>

Other historians see support for Hitler not limited to Hitler himself. Thomas Childers argues that support for National Socialism was not limited to just one class, but was very broadly spread across the lower and middle classes.<sup>108</sup> This diverse support was not always very deep, making it tenuous at best and the party highly unstable. However, anti-modern, anti-Semitic ideology is what caused the party's rise in the polls in the first place.<sup>109</sup> According to Childers, this is where Hitler stepped in; at the moment when the movement was in the most danger of losing their momentum entirely, Hitler was appointed chancellor, not by his lower and middle class supporters, but by upper-class elites.<sup>110</sup>

In his biography of Hitler, Joachim C. Fest argues against the notion that Hitler's rise to power was a historical accident, citing the mass enthusiasm that greeted Hitler's appointment as chancellor.<sup>111</sup> Unlike Childers, though, Fest refutes the idea that Germans welcomed Hitler because they were anti-Semitic. In explaining the appeal of Nazism, Fest points to a “directionless craving for morality.”<sup>112</sup> National Socialism preached values such as obedience, bravery, and loyalty, thus filling this void. This desire for moral direction could certainly be argued to complement the Party's efforts to create mass-events such as the

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107 Ibid, 91.

108 Thomas Childers, “The Party's Electoral Appeal,” in *The Nazi Revolution*, ed. Allan Mitchell (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 37.

109 Ibid, 40.

110 Ibid, 42.

111 Joachim Fest, “Enthusiasm and Confusion,” in *The Nazi Revolution*, ed. Allan Mitchell (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 50.

112 Ibid, 51.

Nuremberg Rallies that were ritualistic in nature.

Although it is certainly important to consider the role of ordinary Germans in the rise to power of the Nazi party, it is equally crucial to consider the process of Nazification. That is, what level of resistance to the regime could be found among the working poor, for instance? Is it really as Wilhelm Reich argued in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* wherein no one resisted because they all agreed? Even if Hitler's rise to power was eagerly welcomed by a large amount of Germans, did this change in the years following?

The trend has been to downplay support of the regime, arguing that the majority of people were frightened into submission or entirely apathetic. This is reflected, for example, in the work of Timothy W. Mason, who, in his study of the German labor movement of the early to mid-1930s, concludes that by the time that the reality of Nazi labor policy became clear, it was too late to resist.<sup>113</sup> Jill Stephenson writes about the reactions of women to the regime, limiting her discussion primarily to women who resisted, fled, or became apathetic.<sup>114</sup> An exception to this is found in the work of Claudia Koonz, who, in her study of Nazi mothers, concludes that the role of mother was crucial in allowing the regime to maintain a veneer of respectability. Because women were traditionally relegated to the spheres of home and church rather than politics, Koonz argues that Nazi women were able to ignore political realities in favor of viewing Hitler as their messiah.<sup>115</sup> Even this, however, assumes a level of psychosis on the part of anyone insane enough to agree with Hitler's

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113 Timothy W. Mason, "Workers in the German Labor Front," in *The Nazi Revolution*, ed. Allan Mitchell (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 157-163.

114 Jill Stephenson, "The Wary Response of Women," in *The Nazi Revolution*, ed. Allan Mitchell (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 173-181.

115 Claudia Koonz, "Mothers in the Fatherland," in *The Nazi Revolution*, ed. Allan Mitchell (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 182-189.

policies.

Wolfgang Benz goes in a slightly different direction in his consideration of the manner in which National Socialism achieved the consent of its subjects. According to Benz, Nazi ideology was meager at best. In spite of this, Benz argues that the Party enjoyed the positive commitment of the majority of the population. Furthermore, this positive commitment was not achieved through violence, as many assume, but through the constant invocation of the *Volk* as a type of mystical unity.<sup>116</sup>

According to Benz, the process of attaining and retaining the public's support contained five elements. First, propaganda served as an instrument through which to create an authoritarian democracy in which the will of the party matched that of the people. Second, the Nazis orchestrated public life in such a way as to mesmerize participants. Events on both a small and large scale took place throughout the year – the Nuremberg Party Rallies are only one example. Third, the Nazi party attempted to create a National Socialist aesthetic, mostly through large-scale, brutalized neo-classicist architecture. The goal was an “architecture of subjection” that would act as instruments of political pressure by communicating the power of the regime.<sup>117</sup> Fourth, Benz argues that Nazism made an effort to offer itself as a substitute for religion. He points to the particularly religious aspects of the cult of the dead and honoring of heroes. Finally, the religious aspects of Nazism were not solely based on ritualistic acts, but the Führer myth itself was a way of giving Germans an

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<sup>116</sup> Wolfgang Benz, “The Ritual and Stage Management of National Socialism: Techniques of Domination and the Public Sphere,” in *The Attractions of Fascism: Social Psychology and the Aesthetics of the 'Triumph of the Right'*, ed. John Milfull (New York: Berg Publishers Limited, 1990), 273.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 282.

object of religious devotion in the person of Hitler himself.<sup>118</sup>

Although Benz's analysis gets back to questions of the religious orientation of Nazism discussed in the previous chapter, it is also important to consider Benz's assertion that the devotion of the majority of German citizens was achieved without the use of violence. For Benz, events such as the Nuremberg Rallies were the points at which the Party was able to implement the five elements enumerated above. Propaganda and mass events rather than violence offer the best way to understand early approval of Hitler and the regime. For those who approved, it was not about rational consideration of policies and their moral ramifications. Benz argues that the Party's goal and purpose was as follows:

The rule of National Socialism was founded on the ecstasy of the ruled. The conquest, exercise and consolidation of power involved, to an extent unrealized by any other regime, the devising of institutions and mechanisms whose purpose was to transport the populace into a form of permanent intoxication and to generate and maintain a climate of mass hysteria – a climate in which a constant, unreflected acclamation of the regime thrived.<sup>119</sup>

This was achieved through the regular implementation of events such as the Nuremberg Party Rallies, although this particular event was certainly only one of many. Was it possible that events such as the Nuremberg Rallies were able to have such a large effect on the minds and emotions of ordinary Germans? Memoirs of attendees at the Rallies provide some idea of the degree to which these events were successful in their planners' goal of “permanent intoxication.”

William Shirer, an American war correspondent who in his diary detailed his experience of the Nuremberg Rally, provides some insight into the interconnectedness of ritual and experience on the part of both German spectators and participants in the rally. In

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118 Ibid, 274-88.

119 Ibid, 273.

writing about the presentation of Hitler's Labour Service Corps on September 6, Shirer writes that “there was a ritual even for the Labour Service boys. They formed an immense *Sprechchor*—a chanting chorus—and with one voice intoned such words as these: 'We want one Leader! Nothing for us! Everything for Germany! *Heil Hitler!*'”<sup>120</sup> Shirer writes that the spectators responded to the Corps' goose-step by going “mad with joy,” noting “what an inner chord it strikes in the strange soul of the German people.”<sup>121</sup> Of primary interest here is Shirer's use of words such as “ritual,” “chanting chorus,” and “soul;” all of which carry religious connotations. Not only was the event planned as a ritual, but the people responded with religious abandon to this demonstration of Nazi power.

In his diary, Shirer notes the intensity of public devotion to Hitler at the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, writing:

About ten o'clock tonight I got caught in a mob of ten thousand hysterics who jammed the moat in front of Hitler's hotel, shouting: 'We want our Führer.' I was a little shocked at the faces, especially those of the women, when Hitler finally appeared on the balcony for a moment. They reminded me of the crazed expressions I saw once in the back country of Louisiana on the faces of some Holy Rollers who were about to hit the trail. They looked up at him as if he were a Messiah, their faces transformed into something positively inhuman. If he had remained in sight for more than a few moments, I think many of the women would have swooned from excitement.<sup>122</sup>

As is shown in this excerpt, Shirer reiterates again and again the religious quality of ordinary Germans' devotion to Hitler. They are described as “hysterics,” “crazed,” and “transformed” in Hitler's presence. These people were clearly deeply affected by the overpowering experience of the Rally. These excerpts support Benz's claim that hysteria played a role in the public's support of Hitler as leader, as well as providing an example of a mass event that

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120 William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent, 1934-1941* (New York: Popular Library Eagle Books, 1941), 19.

121 Ibid.

122 Shirer, 17.

had far-reaching implications for the widespread acceptance of and support for the regime.

In his diary, Victor Klemperer writes of crowds of people listening to Hitler speak at other events and Hitler's ability to create a “frenzy:”

In the selection from his diary, *Vom Kaiserhof zur Reichskanzlei*... Goebbels reports on 10 February 1932 on a speech given by the Führer in the Sportpalast: "Towards the end he built up to a wonderful, incredible rhetorical pathos and closed with the word Amen!, it sounded so natural that everybody was deeply shaken and moved by it . . . the masses in the Sportpalast were soon caught up in a frenzy . . .' This Amen demonstrates clearly that the general thrust of this rhetoric was religious and pastoral...<sup>123</sup>

This is important for at least two reasons. First, it illustrates the ability of Hitler to influence people on a religious level. Secondly, the people clearly reacted in the way that Hitler wanted them to. Hitler did not only desire to cause a frenzy; he achieved it. It can be safely assumed that the same sort of thing occurred at the Nuremberg Rally of 1934. This carefully crafted and presented spectacle had just the effect that Hitler wished it to – the people were caught up in a frenzy of devotion to their country's leader.

Of course, the Nuremberg Rally was but one week out of the year, and although other mass events provided opportunities to get caught up in political fervor, the reality of day-to-day life should not be neglected. This is illustrated in Erik Larson's *In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*. At times, the pomp and pageantry were overt, unmistakable, and even all-encompassing, but much of the time American ambassador William E. Dodd and his family were able to almost forget that the Nazis were in power. Daily life remained mundane and charming; politics were not ubiquitous.<sup>124</sup> The particular function of the Rallies, then, was to provide attendees with an out of the ordinary

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<sup>123</sup> Klemperer, 104-105.

<sup>124</sup> Erik Larson, *In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin* (New York: Random House, 2011).



reminder of the presence of National Socialism and the importance of adherence to its ideological imperatives.

Furthermore, people certainly had practical reasons for their acquiescence to the regime. The 1920s and early 1930s had been economically difficult for Germans, with poverty and unemployment running rampant. As part of his attempt to win over the masses, then, Hitler needed to implement a variety of welfare programs. In “‘The Struggle Against Hunger and Cold’: Winter Relief in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939,” Thomas E. de Witt argues that popular acceptance of National Socialism had a great deal to do with their economic policies.<sup>125</sup> De Witt focuses in particular on the winter relief program implemented in the winter of 1933. This program encouraged individuals to “voluntarily” donate to a fund to aid the poor. The government expended few resources, simply relying on propaganda to encourage individuals toward generosity. According to de Witt, the success of the program acted as a barometer of the degree to which the German people had accepted Nazi ideology.<sup>126</sup> Not all Nazi propaganda centered around spectacle and emotion-driven mass events.

Part of Hitler's success undoubtedly lay where the bleak day-to-day reality of life met the mass enthusiasm of his somewhat unexpected rise to power. This is supported by the recollections of Ursula Meyer-Semlies, who, in an interview with oral historian Alison Owings, recited a portion of a poem that was popular in the years before Hitler's rise to power: “O God, send us a Führer who will change our misfortune, by God's word.”<sup>127</sup>

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125 Thomas E. de Witt, “‘The Struggle Against Hunger and Cold’: Winter Relief in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939,” in *Canadian Journal of History* 12:3 (Feb 1978), 361-381.

126 Ibid, 378.

127 Alison Owings, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers

According to Meyer-Semlies, political and economic chaos combined with a fear of communism made reception of Hitler enthusiastic.<sup>128</sup>

One fascinating aspect of Urula Semlies' recollections is her ambivalence toward the relationship of her religious beliefs to her political beliefs. Looking back on the 1930s, Semlies seems to recall that many no longer believed in “this Christian fuss.” In spite of pressure to the contrary, Semlies claims to have retained her Christian beliefs, saying “I sent a short prayer to heaven and said, 'Well, for me, Christmas is still always a Christian Christmas.’”<sup>129</sup> When she told the SS with whom she was conversing that she was politically-speaking National Socialist and religiously-speaking Christian, she recalls that the SS responded by saying “That *is* precisely the wrong way around. The Führer wants the whole human being, and if there is still *any* region in your heart that does not belong to the Führer, then you are not a convinced National Socialist and then the Führer cannot influence you.”<sup>130</sup>

Perhaps most fascinating about the above account is how Semlies ends her recounting of the conversation. The SS got off the train saying that they would ask her again in ten years and then it would be clear who was right regarding this clearly divisive issue. She then tells of the difficulty she had in deciding whether or not to join the Nazi party, which she eventually ended up doing. It is clear that, for Semlies, she concluded that her political and religious beliefs did not need to be mutually exclusive, even in the face of some who thought

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University Press, 1994), 56.

128 Ibid.

129 Ibid, 59.

130 Ibid.

otherwise. After all, as she recalls, “And much that Hitler did we found good.”<sup>131</sup>

This theme of conflict between those who found Nazism to be entirely antithetical to Christianity and someone like Semlies, who considered herself both a Christian and a Nazi, continues throughout her account. On the one hand, this seems to read as Semlies' acknowledgment that – in retrospect, at least – she was wrong. It is important to take into consideration, however, the fact that this interview took place nearly half a century after the events she is recalling. This half century had been one in which resistance to the regime was praised, and Christians consciously separated themselves from the horrors of the Holocaust. Semlies' account thus takes an apologetic tone, as if to say, “I was both a Christian and a National Socialist, which I see now was a grave error on my part.” We should, therefore, not read this as an absolute statement of the mutual exclusivity of the two.

In many ways, the attempt to indoctrinate the populace in national socialism was constant, although this indoctrination did not always happen by way of spectacle. As Klemperer writes,

From 1933 to 1945, right up until the catastrophe in Berlin, this elevation of the Führer to the status of a god, this alignment of his person and his actions with the Saviour and the Bible, took place day by day and always 'went like clockwork' and it was impossible to contradict it in any way.<sup>132</sup>

According to Klemperer, this constant elevation of Hitler took place largely through the use of language. When Hitler was mentioned in writing, religious epithets accompanied his description.<sup>133</sup> With Germans being constantly reminded of the god-like status of their country's leader, it is probable that attendance of a mass event such as the Nuremberg Rally

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131 Ibid.

132 Klemperer, 105-106.

133 Ibid, 107.

of 1934 simply confirmed the things they already read, heard, and saw every day by simple matter of living in Germany. Although the Nuremberg Rallies may have served as an emotional high point for Rally goers, the ideology that accompanied it was nothing new to the vast majority.

This frenzy of devotion is noted in other studies of mass events during the Nazi era. In Karen Fiss' study of France's reception of German culture in the 1930s and Germany's attempts at cultural seduction of France, she notes the “visual power of Nazi spectacle.”<sup>134</sup> For Fiss, though, Nazi political pageantry represents more than just an emotional collective experience. She argues that events such as the Nuremberg Rallies appeal to the audience because “they offer the image of a reconstructed organic totality as a kind of antidote to the fragmented experience of modern life.”<sup>135</sup> Of course, the pageantry does not offer any real solution; it is merely an illusion. In addition, Walter Benjamin argued in 1936 that fascism, through art forms such as cinema or a rally, “short-circuits the potential for societal change by offering the masses self-expression in place of real political action...[defined as] the aestheticization of politics.”<sup>136</sup> The Nuremberg Rallies, then, were so effective in part because they served as an intensely emotional experience that allowed for expression without action.

It seems that ordinary Germans attending the Rally were not the only ones emotionally influenced by the Rally's events. In *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, William Shirer shares one possible account of Hitler's experience of the 1934 Rally: “It is

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134 Karen Fiss, *Grand Illusion: The Third Reich, the Paris Exposition, and the Cultural Seduction of France* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009), 165.

135 Ibid, 166.

136 Ibid, 167. This quotation is not Benjamin's, but a paraphrase by Fiss of his argument.

wonderful!’ [Hitler] exulted at Nuremberg to the foreign correspondents at the end of the exhausting week of parades, speeches, pagan pageantry and the most frenzied adulation for a public figure this writer had ever seen.”<sup>137</sup> Although Shirer falls into the same patterns as so many others, distancing Hitler’s “pageantry” from Christianity by identifying it as pagan, what is important is that Hitler seems to have reacted emotionally in much the same way as other attendees. It seems that the Rallies took on a life of their own; although it is tempting to ascribe agency for the outcome of the Rallies, the ritual, the euphoria, and the nationalist and religious character of these Party events were beyond the ability of any one person or committee to orchestrate.

Shirer also gives an account of the 1938 Nuremberg Rally, the last of these events before the outbreak of war halted them entirely, from Hitler’s perspective. This particular rally took place right before Hitler was scheduled to give an announcement on the fate of Czechoslovakia. As Europe waited to find out what Hitler had decided, the Rally went on as normal, with Hitler reserving the announcement of his decision for the last day.<sup>138</sup> Hitler’s involvement in the Rally seemed to have an influence on his decision, though, at least according to some leading generals of the army. Shirer writes that:

On September 8 General Heinrich von Stuepnagel saw Jodl and the latter noted in his diary the General’s pessimism regarding the military position in the west. It was becoming clear to both of them that Hitler, his spirits whipped up by the fanaticism of the Nuremberg Party Rally, which had just opened, was going ahead with the invasion of Czechoslovakia whether France intervened or not. ‘I must admit,’ wrote the usually optimistic Jodl, ‘that I am worried too.’<sup>139</sup>

It seems that the Nuremberg Party Rallies served to enhance what many saw as Hitler’s

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137 William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 230.

138 Ibid, 382-383.

139 Ibid, 378.

fanaticism.

First-hand accounts of mass-events in Nazi Germany seem to overwhelmingly support the notion of a religious-like fervor that created a mass consensus to National Socialism. It is certainly possible that this was the case; the emotional impact of the Nuremberg Rallies for the majority of the attenders cannot easily be denied. This needs to be more closely examined, though. Did people respond with religious-like devotion because they were simply overwhelmed by the huge scale and emotional quality of the event? Alternatively, did they come to the Rallies already convinced? What purpose did these events really serve – did they serve primarily as avenues of conversion to a creed or did they simply affirm preexisting beliefs? As a work of art, the Rallies served as a mode of expression for people facing a modern, scientific world stripped of enchantment. As a political event, the Rallies offered a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves, a reminder that each individual attending was not alone. At the Nuremberg Rallies, National Socialism presented itself as the obvious solution to the economic, political and even religious concerns of the majority of ordinary Germans. National Socialism itself did not pretend to offer salvation in the afterlife; for this it turned to Christianity.

This alliance of religion and politics took a clear form at the 1934 Nuremberg Party Rally. Taking place at a time when the relationship between the Church and the State was still being sharply contested, the ubiquity of religious symbolism should not be surprising. Although some of its use was for the clear purpose of setting Hitler and the Nazi Party up as worthy of political allegiance, the use of Christian symbolism also implies a level of comfort with Christianity that is not consistent with a concerted attempt to destroy its presence within

the new Nazi state. The next chapter will examine the role that Christian symbols played at the Nuremberg Rally of 1934 as a way of more clearly understanding the relationship of National Socialism to Christianity.

### **3: Symbolism, Ritual, and Representation at the 1934 Nuremberg Party Rally**

The Nuremberg Rallies were full of symbolism and ritual that gave them their distinctively religious atmosphere. This took many forms, from the ubiquitous presence of the swastika to ceremonies to honor fallen soldiers from the Great War. These rituals and symbols served two purposes. First, they catered to an audience accustomed to the rituals and symbolism of Christianity. Second, the co-opting of religious symbolism and ritual infused the Rallies with a sense of optimism and hope that encouraged a quasi-religious response on the part of Rally-goers. Without a religious aspect, the Nuremberg Rallies would have simply been a collection of political speeches persuasive only to the degree that they made rational sense. Many of the same symbolic and ritualistic forms were used in both the 1934 and 1935 Rallies. The emphasis shifted, however, and it is in this shift that we can detect larger developments in the regime itself both as the reality of life in the Third Reich became apparent to German citizens and as the priorities of the regime shifted in preparation for war.

A significant part of National Socialism's appropriation of Christianity was its use of the swastika as a national symbol. The presence of the swastika itself as the German national symbol during the Third Reich is a prime example of the ways in which Nazi symbolism was informed by religious themes and beliefs. The swastika is an ancient religious symbol found in many places throughout the world. Early versions have been found dating from as early as 2000 B.C., and the Hissarlik—another early version of the swastika—was a part of Aegean culture until around 1100 B.C., whence it then moved toward Europe through Greece and later Italy. The Germans began using it as an ornament and decoration for plaques at the end



of the Bronze Age. It was eventually adopted by Christians by the mid-sixth century A.D.<sup>140</sup>

Although the origins of the swastika are not precisely known, Hitler used the swastika in large part because of its supposed Aryan roots, saying “We believe that someday Heaven will unite all Germans in one Reich, not under the Soviet star or the Jewish Star of David, but under the Swastika...”<sup>141</sup> The swastika was in fact not used only by Aryans, having been retained in a non-Aryan form by the Freemasons. Although the Nazis abhorred Freemasonry, there were aspects of it that appealed to them – particularly the fact that one needed to have certain knowledge and experience to gain entry to graduated levels of Freemasonry. This was strikingly similar to German occultists, who had similar entry restrictions based on race.<sup>142</sup>

In 1874, archeologist Dr. Heinrich Schliemann, while discovering the remains of ancient Troy, discovered evidence of the swastika's use in the region in ancient times. This discovery, thought to prove the Aryan origins of the swastika, was used to transform the swastika into a symbol of Aryan ascendancy. As ideas of racialism and eugenics gained hold, the swastika, a prominent ancient icon, came to embody these ideas. Many thus believed the swastika to be associated with anti-Semitism.<sup>143</sup>

Hitler clearly saw the swastika as emblematic of the Nazi mission. In *Mein Kampf*, he wrote:

As National Socialists, we see our program in our flag. In *red* we see the social idea of the movement, in *white* the nationalistic idea, in the *swastika* the mission of the struggle for the victory of the Aryan man, and, by the same token, the victory of the idea of creative work, which as such always has been and always will be anti-

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140 Steven Heller, *The Swastika: Symbol Beyond Redemption?* (New York: Allworth Press, 2000), 33-37.

141 Ibid, 40.

142 Ibid, 49.

143 Ibid, 43.

Semitic.<sup>144</sup>

For Hitler, the swastika was more than just decoration for the Nazi flag; it encompassed “the mission” that the Nazis believed themselves to have. Heller supports this idea, writing “By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, German racist mystics and occultists adopted the swastika as their sacred icon of racial purity and invented a heritage and lore to support it.”<sup>145</sup> According to this view, Nazis appropriated the swastika for use as a national symbol with deep religious significance attached.

One should not necessarily assume the occult aspects of the swastika's origins to signify a rejection of Christianity. A key facet of German Christian ideology was the idea that the Germans were a sort of chosen people, chosen by God for the destruction of the Jews. The swastika, then, fit nicely into this worldview; as a symbol with what was thought to be Aryan roots, the swastika became a symbol equal to the Christian cross, but not intended as a replacement.

In noting the religious aspects of the swastika, one should not neglect the more practical and economic aspects of its appeal. According to Wilhelm Reich, the swastika held a special appeal for the working class. Reich quotes the lyrics to a song centered around the swastika:

We are the army of the swastika  
Raise the red banners high,  
For the German worker  
The way to freedom we shall pave.<sup>146</sup>

As noted earlier, Reich believed fascism to be a convergence of belief between Hitler and the

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144 Hitler, 496-497.

145 Heller, 38.

146 Reich, 99.

masses who followed him. This is just one more example of the ways in which this manifested itself; in this case, the swastika acted as piece of propaganda employed by the Nazis to remind the German working class of just how similar their goals were to those of the Party.<sup>147</sup>

The swastika was not the only Nazi symbol which came to have religious significance. Linguist Victor Klemperer, writing about the SS symbol rather than the swastika, supports this notion. He writes:

Within the LTI itself, the special jagged form of the letters SS represents for me the link between the visual language of the poster and language in the narrower sense. There is also another link of this kind: a similarly jagged torch, either erect or turned towards the ground – the rune of blossoming and wilting. As a symbol of passing away it was only used as a replacement for the Christian cross on death announcements, whilst in its other form, pointing upwards, it not only served as a replacement for the star on birth announcements, but also appeared on stamps used by chemists and bakers. One would assume of course that these two runes would become as established as the SS symbol, given that they too were encouraged on account of their physicality and Germanness. This was not the case however...<sup>148</sup>

After discussing further the occasional use of the SS symbol instead of the star and cross on death announcements, Klemperer continues:

As a jagged character the rune of life was related to the SS symbol, and as an ideological symbol also related to the spokes of the wheel of the sun, the swastika. And thus, as a result of all this, it was the most obvious thing on earth that the cross and star would be entirely displaced by the runes of life.<sup>149</sup>

In these excerpts from *The Language of the Third Reich*, Klemperer, in making a larger argument about the link between visual language and written and spoken language, clearly equates the SS symbol with a sort of religious symbolism. The fact that at times the SS

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147 Reich also argues that the swastika was originally a sexual symbol, linking this to the sexual preoccupation of the Nazi regime. This portion of his argument concerning the swastika is heavily connected to his larger claims about sexuality and fascism, and is not supported by other evidence.

148 Klemperer, 64.

149 Ibid, 65.

symbol took the place of the cross or star points to the religious function of the symbol. Although this did not happen as often as Klemperer would have expected, his connection of these two things is significant nonetheless. Klemperer's inability to make a case for the replacement of the cross by the SS symbol does not negate the fact that he believes an attempt was made toward this. Alternatively, it is possible that the cross and SS symbol served much the same purpose in the minds of those writing death announcements.

The eagle was also a major part of Rally symbolism – almost any poster made for the Nuremberg Rallies prominently featured it. The use of the eagle as symbol went beyond the Nuremberg Rally, though. In fact, the spread-eagle motif in German history goes all the way back to the first Empire of Charlemagne, and served in pre-Nazi times as a symbol of strength and unity hearkening all the way back to the Roman Empire. Nazis co-opted this symbol along with the swastika, displaying the eagle on national flags and all over at the Nuremberg Rally of 1934.<sup>150</sup> The eagle, with its wings outstretched, became a symbol of strength and power to be used by the Nazis to create an atmosphere of almost religious excitement.

At times the alignment of Christianity and Nazi symbolism was more direct. The German Christian movement, being the officially recognized Protestant church of Germany during the Third Reich, seemed fully to embrace Nazism. The German Christian flag itself made explicit connections between the Third Reich and Christianity through the use of symbols. The flag, pictured below, consisted of a large Christian cross with a swastika at the center of the cross. The flag's background was red, giving the flag a strikingly similar

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150 Joanne Mundorf and Guo-Ming Chen, "Transculturation of Visual Signs: A Case Analysis of the Swastika," *Intercultural Communication Studies* XV (February 2006): 37.

aesthetic to that of the Nazi flag.<sup>151</sup> This mixing of Christian and national symbolism on the part of the German Christian movement is a clear example of the swastika's use alongside religious symbols, and speaks to the co-existence of political and religious imagery.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, the German Christian flag flies in this image alongside both a flag with a cross and the Nazi flag itself, which only enhances the mixture of national and religious symbolism. This seems excellent evidence of the syncretism of political religion and Christianity.



Regardless of any debate over the purpose of symbolism at the rallies, it was ubiquitous, and had a huge effect on Rally-goers. In his diary, William Shirer, the American journalist who spent much time in Germany during the Nazi regime and kept a diary of many of the things he experienced, supports this interpretation of the rally. He writes: “Tens of thousands of Swastika flags blot out the Gothic beauties of the place, the façades of the old houses, the gabled roofs. The streets, hardly wider than alleys, are a sea of brown and black

151 “Datei:Bundesarchiv Bild 102-15234, Berlin, Luthertag.jpg,” Wikipedia: die freie Enzyklopädie, accessed March 19, 2012, [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Bundesarchiv\\_Bild\\_102-15234,\\_Berlin,\\_Luthertag.jpg](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Bundesarchiv_Bild_102-15234,_Berlin,_Luthertag.jpg).

152 Bergen, 46.

uniforms.”<sup>153</sup> This was one of the first things that Shirer noted; when attending the rally, one could not help but notice the omnipresence of the swastika.

The use of flags themselves, regardless of the specific form they took, also was used in a symbolic manner. As Hilmar Hoffman argues, although flags no longer had a utilitarian function (identification of troops in battle, for example), they still stood as “a symbol of life in the midst of the general threat of death.”<sup>154</sup> The flag, therefore, served a very important symbolic function at the Nuremberg Rallies, invoking nationalistic victory and ultimately the importance of absolute loyalty to the state.<sup>155</sup>

On August 20, 1934, just weeks before the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, the Nazis passed a law that made the flag pledge not only an oath of loyalty to the German nation, but also to Hitler himself. It read as follows: “I swear before God this sacred oath, that I will yield unconditional obedience to the Führer of the German Reich and people, Adolf Hitler, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and, as a brave soldier, will be ready at any time to lay down my life for this oath.”<sup>156</sup> In including the national flag and its symbol, the swastika throughout the Rally grounds, the Rally planners were sending a very significant message: fealty to Hitler and his party was inextricably tied to one’s status as a loyal German.

The symbolism employed at the rallies was not only visual; Christian millennialism also played a significant role. Hitler's Germany was (and is) known as the Third Reich,

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153 Shirer, 16.

154 Hilmar Hoffmann, *The Triumph of Propaganda: Film and National Socialism, 1933-1945*, John A. Broadwin and V. R. Berghahn, trans. (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996), 3. Hilmar further argues that the flag only moved from “rallying point to revolutionary symbol” as a result of secularization. He writes that “abstract internalized values now gave meaning to life, providing a substitute for religious transcendence.” (3-4) My paper argues that flags, as integral parts of the rituals that gave the Rally its religious atmosphere, were not a substitute for religious transcendence but rather religious-like symbols themselves.

155 Ibid, 4, 11-14.

156 Ibid, 12.

which was said to be the “Thousand-Year Reich” during which peace and prosperity would reign. It is significant that Hitler first used this phrase at the Nuremberg Rally of 1934. As Hamilton T. Burden points out, Hitler hailed the coming of a new era of “greater national unity and strength” that made the loss of freedom suffered by Germans a small price to pay. Burden argues that this was the context in which Hitler first coined the phrase “Thousand-Year Reich,” saying: “The nervous nineteenth century has reached its end. There will not be another revolution in Germany in the next 1,000 years.”<sup>157</sup> The number “1,000” itself has religious significance: Christians believe that after defeating the anti-Christ, Christ himself will reign on earth (either literally or figuratively) for 1,000 years. Hitler thus invokes a number with positive religious meanings. Although the figurative anti-Christ, the Jews, had not yet been entirely defeated, this was only a matter of time; thus, Hitler welcomed a millennium of peace and prosperity where good would prevail.

Hitler's reference to unity may very well have had religious significance as well. As noted earlier, the Nazis made early and repeated attempts to unite the Protestant Church under one organization – the German Christian Church. On September 5, in Nuremberg, Shirer writes that Hitler “also referred to the fight now going on against his attempt to Nazify the Protestant church. ‘I am striving to unify it. I am convinced that Luther would have done the same and would have thought of unified Germany first and last.’”<sup>158</sup> Here Hitler appeals to the Christianity of his listeners in a manner that reflected his own agenda – a unified, state controlled religion.

The Nuremberg Party Rallies undoubtedly played a significant and immediate

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<sup>157</sup> Hamilton T. Burden, *The Nuremberg Party Rallies: 1923-1939* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1967), 81.

<sup>158</sup> Shirer, 19.

propagandistic purpose. It is hardly questionable that to attend a rally would have been an incredible and emotionally affecting experience. This was in large part because of the architecture of the Rally. In the early twentieth century, German architecture saw a shift toward architecture for a mass audience, architecture that was used to court the middle and lower class. Gathering places that promoted unity and community were no longer simple, but rather infused with spectacle. According to Kathleen James-Chakraborty in *German Architecture for a Mass Audience*, there were three main assumptions of the time in regard to the power of architecture over an audience seen as entirely passive. First, centralized space possessed the unique power to bring people together. Second, harmony of the past could be recreated through art, not necessarily through politics. Third, allusions were to be replaced by spectacle, which would be much easier to understand for the working class.<sup>159</sup> These assumptions were reflected in architectural planning of the Rallies. Chakraborty points to the use of light as one example: light played an important role in transforming the Rallies into a spectacle that would impress a mass audience.<sup>160</sup>

The 1930s were an age of rapidly expanding technological capabilities, and the radio and movies were increasingly important to the successful control of public opinion. In the case of the Nuremberg Rallies, film played a hugely influential role in shaping public perception of the events. On September 4, 1934, the first day of that year's Nuremberg Rally, Hitler made a dramatic entrance by plane into Nuremberg, Germany, being greeted by an immense crowd of adoring Germans. This day was captured for posterity (and undoubtedly propaganda) by Leni Riefenstahl in unprecedented artistic style, being made into a film

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159 Kathleen James-Chakraborty, *German Architecture for a Mass Audience* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

160 Ibid, 89.



entitled *Triumph des Willens*, or *Triumph of the Will*. This film offers both casual viewers as well as historians an intimate glimpse into the official mood of the week's festivities, allowing viewers, if not to experience the rally's reality, to at least grasp its intended purpose as propaganda.

One thing that stands out as one watches the film is the obvious presence of symbolism. This takes several forms. According to Richard Barsam, the use of symbols such as the swastika, the eagle, and the “Horst Wessel” song encourages an emotional involvement on the part of all involved.<sup>161</sup> The eagle and the swastika are seen throughout the film, serving as a visual reminder to the viewer of the central themes of the Nuremberg Rally. Barsam argues that the eagle was associated with Hitler throughout the film. In any case the eagle served to reinforce the very German quality of the event.

When watching *The Triumph of the Will*, one cannot miss the swastika. It appears in countless frames, constantly reminding the viewer of the rally's purpose. The camera pans over cheering, ecstatic crowds with the Nazi flag fluttering conspicuously in the background, never far from view. The people themselves wave flags bearing the swastika. The use of the swastika as symbolism, when combined with the euphoric mood of the film, gives *The Triumph of the Will* a distinctly emotional, and even religious atmosphere, if only in the sense of the state and its leader as commanding a worship akin to the honor one would give God. Hilmar Hoffman argues as much in his analysis of the role of flags in Riefenstahl's film, writing that:

Riefenstahl used the flag as an emotional and sentimental prop with which to orchestrate a dizzying symphony of flags which disseminated the Nazi world-view in

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<sup>161</sup> Richard Barsam, *Film Guide to Triumph of the Will* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), 32.

staged aesthetic events that indicated the “correct” way to regard art. In films such as *Sieg des Glaubens* (Victory of Faith, 1933) and *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will, 1934), she transformed the flag into a fetish...<sup>162</sup>

The swastika, then, most specifically in its use as a flag, contributed directly to the religious atmosphere of the rally.

The third scene of the movie begins with “a mood of peace and tranquility.”<sup>163</sup> As scenes from the town drift by, “the hymn, “Awake! The dawn of day draws near” from Act 3 of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*” plays softly but triumphantly in the background. This only adds to the religious quality of Riefenstahl's presentation of the rally. Church bells sound as the song draws to a close.<sup>164</sup>

In his analysis of the rally, Barsam explicitly identifies strong religious undertones. Indeed, when analyzing *The Triumph of the Will*, one cannot miss the clear parallels between Hitler's entrance into Nuremberg and Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. Hitler's “triumphal entry” into Nuremberg in many ways exceeds that of Jesus. Hitler descends from the sky in a plane (appropriately adorned in swastikas), and rides a motor car through the streets, mirroring Jesus' procession through the streets of Jerusalem on a donkey. Hitler, mirroring Jesus' reception with palm branches, is adored by the crowd who prepares his way with raised hands and loud cheering. According to Barsam, “One remarkable close-up reinforces the messianic presence of the *Führer* by capturing the sun as it is refracted in the upraised palm of his hand.”<sup>165</sup> In this sense, Hitler himself becomes a symbol – arguably, the most powerful symbol of all, at least in the context of the film. The replacement of the Nazi

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162 Hoffman, 18.

163 Barsam, 34.

164 Leni Riefenstahl, “Triumph of the Will,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBfYncHshJc>, Accessed May 7, 2011.

165 Barsam. 32-33.

swastika with the Christian cross only adds to the sense of national-religious triumph.

Hitler also sets himself up as a Christ-figure in his warm reception of a young girl whose mother holds her up so she can offer him flowers. Making a special effort to greet her, he even pauses the parade by stopping his car. Throughout the film, Hitler is shown interacting with children in various ways; one boy is shown “whose face is full of wonder and awe at the sight of Hitler's magnificent automobile.”<sup>166</sup> This warm and friendly portrayal of Hitler is arguably a direct reflection of Mark 10:13-16 (NIV), in which children are brought to Jesus to receive his blessing. Jesus goes so far as to chastise his disciples for discouraging these children from approaching him. This popular image of Christ is one that Hitler emulates in his entry into Nuremberg. He presents himself as someone who can relate to and is adored by children. The children's apparent trust in him only adds to the overall sense that one can and should trust this beloved leader who promises to return Germany to her previous greatness.

In a scene portraying a rally of the Hitler Youth groups, Hitler addresses the young people. This speech contains many aspects of Nazi ideology. First, nation is given priority over anything else. He repeatedly refers to the youth as “German” and refers to Germany's glorious and unified future. Second, the Nazi concept of the *Volk* comes through when he says “And I know it cannot be otherwise because you are flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood, and your young minds are filled with the same spirit that dominates us.”<sup>167</sup> During his time in power, Hitler carefully cultivated the concept of the *Volk*, a community based on “the notion of blood, or race...” that “...posited an organic relationship that went beyond the idea

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166 Ibid, 38.

167 Ibid, 48.

of citizenship, maintaining the racial ties of one individual to another and one generation to the other.”<sup>168</sup> Thirdly, in this speech to the Hitler Youth, Hitler appeals to the concept of the *Volk* in religious terms. Fourthly, he says “You cannot be but united with us,” arguably invoking a statement by Jesus, who said “He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.” (Matthew 12:30, KJV) In addressing the Hitler Youth in such a manner, Hitler makes a clear effort to educate the next generation of Germans in the ways and ideology of the Nazi Party.

Riefenstahl's use of Hitler as a religious figure and symbol is also powerfully illustrated in a later scene, which is an outdoor memorial service and military review. This scene, which according to Barsam is intended to be a demonstration of the Nazis' strength and vitality, begins by remembering Germany's dead. Barsam writes that “Here, the *Führer*, the 'lord of creation,' is bringing Germany back to life, and here, at his hand, is the largest display of that life—almost one million men marching as if they were one single force.”<sup>169</sup> Barsam hints that both the event itself and Riefenstahl's representation of it have a similar mood: “Here the solemnity and simplicity of the ceremony are matched by the dignity and restraint of the photography and editing.”<sup>170</sup>

Others have offered differing but not contradicting analysis of the film. In “*Triumph of the Will: Notes on Documentary and Spectacle*,” Steve Neale argues for the centrality of spectacle in Hitler's entrance to the rally by plane. He writes: “All these forms of codification are designed to *exhibit* the image for the gaze of the spectator and for the scopic

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168 Eds. Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz, *Inside Hitler's Germany: A Documentary History of Life in the Third Reich* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1992), 188.

169 Barsam, *Filmguide*, 53.

170 Ibid, 54.

drive that sustains it, designed, precisely, to 'catch' (to lure) the eye.”<sup>171</sup> As the film begins to show the crowds awaiting Hitler's arrival in Nuremberg, Neale argues that the other central aspect of the film, looking, enters the equation. As the film switches between scenes of the plane and Hitler and the adoring masses, Riefenstahl establishes Hitler as the object of looking, the ultimate spectacle.<sup>172</sup> She repeatedly affirms Hitler as spectacle throughout the film. Further, Neale argues that “looking, therefore...is not only the foundation of spectacle in its relations with the spectating subject, it is also the means by which the film coheres as a film – linking the images together and to a large extent specifying their meaning.”<sup>173</sup> In blurring the line between the film and the event itself in terms of the spectacle of each, Riefenstahl makes a bold attempt to represent the Rallies as closely to reality as possible, or at least to establish Hitler as a spectacular figure worthy of one's political loyalty.

One must exercise caution in any account of the Nuremberg Rally of 1934. It is entirely possible that many of the religious themes that Riefenstahl exploits were not intentional on the part of the event's planners. It is, however, significant that Riefenstahl was asked by Hitler himself to make this film.<sup>174</sup> He approved of and encouraged the making of the film, thus giving it a certain legitimacy as a representation of the symbolism of the Rally. Furthermore, as Hilmar Hoffman argues in his analysis of Riefenstahl, Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* succeeded in defining the “fascist film aesthetic.” Her films aimed to “exert emotional influence” which, coincidentally, was arguably also Hitler's main political

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171 Steve Neale, “*Triumph of the Will: Notes on Documentary and Spectacle*,” downloaded from <http://screen.oxfordjournals.org/> at Western Washington University on December 9, 2011, 67.

172 Ibid, 69-70.

173 Ibid, 76.

174 Barsam, 14.

strategy.<sup>175</sup> Riefenstahl's film did not create a fictional reality through film, but rather,

*Triumph des Willens*, according to Hoffmann, encapsulated

an extra-aesthetic reality with aesthetic means in such a way that the people who lived in this reality recognized themselves in it—as parts of a crowd. Reality was thus not utilized aesthetically in order to pretend what it was. After all, Riefenstahl was herself piously fixated on this actually existing National Socialist reality.<sup>176</sup>

It is also important to note that other firsthand accounts of the Rally ostensibly written at the time (before being exposed to Riefenstahl's portrayal of the film) contain this acknowledgment of religious themes. In his diary written during the rally, Shirer writes,

Borrowing a chapter from the Roman church, he is restoring pageantry and colour and mysticism to the drab lives of twentieth-century Germans. This morning's opening meeting in the Luitpold Hall on the outskirts of Nuremberg was more than a gorgeous show; it also had something of the mysticism and religious fervour of an Easter or Christmas Mass in a great Gothic cathedral. The hall was a sea of brightly coloured flags. Even Hitler's arrival was made dramatic. The band stopped playing. There was a hush over the thirty thousand people packed in the hall. Then the band struck up the *Badenweiler March*...Hitler appeared in the back of the auditorium, and...he strode slowly down the long centre aisle while thirty thousand hands were raised in salute.<sup>177</sup>

This description bears striking similarities to Hitler's triumphal entry portrayed in *Triumph of the Will*, leading one to conclude that someone observing the Rally would be hard pressed to not note the religious aspects of the event.

Furthermore, Riefenstahl's film was sought out, approved, and championed by the Nazi Party. The Rallies themselves were conceived as a cinematic experience, both for those present and for those who would one day watch the film.<sup>178</sup> According to Karen Fiss in *Grand Illusion*, “the visual power of Nazi spectacle relied on its fusion of a modern aesthetic

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175 Ibid, 149-150.

176 Ibid, 150-151.

177 Shirer, 18.

178 Fiss, 176.

with the scopic inscription of a unifying and totalizing will.”<sup>179</sup> The Rally was a place, unlike the chaos of day to day life in a modern age, where life seemed organic, simple, and unified.<sup>180</sup> This was evident not only for attenders of the event, but, thanks to Riefenstahl's film-making, to movie-goers as well. In allying herself to the ideological beliefs of the regime, Riefenstahl made possible the aesthetic pleasure for the masses.

Even if the film could be considered different in its impact due to editing and physical and emotional distance from the grandness of the event, the cameras could not miss the ubiquity of political symbols. This is particularly true in the case of the use of the swastika. Albert Speer, as self-described “chief decorator” of the Nuremberg Rallies, wrote a memoir about his experiences as Hitler's leading architect. He details his experiences and strategy in decorating for the Nuremberg Rallies. Of his use of the Nazi flag and swastika, he writes:

At that time I dearly loved flags and used them wherever I could. They were a way of introducing a play of color into somber architecture...Of course it was not altogether consonant with the flag's dignity to use it mostly for decorative effect, for accenting the pleasing harmonies of certain façades or covering ugly nineteenth-century buildings from eaves to sidewalks. Quite often I added gold ribbons to the flag to intensify the effect of the red. But it was always scenic drama I was after. I arranged for veritable orgies of flags in the narrow streets of Goslar and Nuremberg, with banners stretched from house to house, so that the sky was almost blotted out.<sup>181</sup>

Speer, in writing his memoir, often expresses self-disgust at having so willingly followed Hitler. This is evident in this excerpt with his use of the phrase “at that time.” Even with Speer's apologetic tone, his use of “somber” or “the flag's dignity” make clear the role that he intended the flag to play in the event. Furthermore, his desire to create “veritable orgies of flags” that would almost blot out the sky indicates his desire to create an experience of civic

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179 Ibid, 165.

180 Ibid, 166.

181 Albert Speer, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: Galahad Books, 1970), 59.

religiosity. In Hitler's triumphant entry into Nuremberg, flags rather than palm branches would line his path.

As noted in a previous chapter, by 1935, Hitler's relationship to the German Christian movement had changed significantly, and the regime was becoming ever so slightly more hostile to organized Christianity. The shifting priorities of the regime are no more evident than in the focus of the 1935 Nuremberg Rally when compared to that of 1934. In 1934, the Rally's concerns revolved around the birth of the Thousand-Year Reich and an argument for the end of the revolution in favor of cultural peace and prosperity. Hitler was firmly in power; the revolution had ended, ushering in the beginning of 1,000 glorious years for Germany. Significantly, Hitler also called for state control of the church under the pretext of its unification. Racism was not absent by any means; Hitler attacked Jewish intellectualism, arguing for the need for purification of German art after its infiltration by Jews. A speech by Dr. Gerhard Wagner on the second day reflected Nazi ideas of social Darwinism and survival of the fittest. Concepts of peace, courage, and the ultimate God-given mission of the German people were continually invoked by Hitler and other leading representatives of the Party.<sup>182</sup>

In spite of this, the 1935 Rally at Nuremberg was in many ways even more extreme in tone. Anti-Semitic speeches were a part of this Rally as well, but this year the regime took concrete steps in their war against the Jewish threat. The Nuremberg Laws were unveiled at the 1935 Nuremberg Rally, giving the event a particularly anti-Semitic tone. This war against Judaism and Communism were not only backed by laws; the military took center stage at this rally in a way that they had not in 1934. While the 1934 Rally had a day devoted to the military, its focus in many ways seemed to be on uniting Germany under Hitler and the

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182 Burden, 76-91.



relatively new Third Reich. The 1935 Rally, however, juxtaposed continued insistence that Germany only wanted peace and prosperity with the centrality of her armed forces. For example, a military parade on Monday, September 16 included 100,000 men and 100 war planes and heavy bombers. Furthermore, in his closing speech Hitler emphasized the importance of both a unified party and a modern army in creating a strong Germany.<sup>183</sup>

This emphasis on the military and war is also evident in Leni Riefenstahl's film of the 1935 Rally. Whereas *Triumph des Willens* concentrates on symbolism, crowds of adoring Germans, and images of a peaceful Nuremberg, Riefenstahl's *Tag der Freiheit* is infused throughout with a strong military theme. Although, like in her earlier film, the swastika is prominent throughout, the swastika serves decidedly different purposes in the 1935 Rally. Whereas the swastika of the 1934 Rally invoked ideological unity and pointed to the ritualistic aspects of the Rally, the swastika of the 1935 Rally invoked war.<sup>184</sup>

By late summer of 1935, when the Nuremberg Party Rally took place, Hitler's concerns had shifted from consolidation of the regime to rearmament for war. In addition, with a Reich Church no longer an option, any religious symbolism employed at the rally tended to be almost entirely devoid of any real Christian content. Although the influence of Christian ritual was clear, and Christian concepts appeared from time to time, Christianity no longer needed to play such a central role. Hitler had established himself as the unequivocal leader of the German nation, and concentrated on calling his people to war against their enemies.

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183 Ibid, 100-112.

184 Leni Riefenstahl, "Tag der Freiheit," [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D\\_IWoMH17EY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_IWoMH17EY), accessed 3/21/12.

## Conclusion

The Nuremberg Rallies were in many ways primarily designed as displays of state and military might, and any discussion of the religious context of the Rallies cannot be divorced from the overwhelming presence of the police state. In September 1934, the presence of the SA and SS must have been particularly noteworthy, bringing to mind the events of the previous months. In July of the previous year, Hitler had decided to halt the revolution in order to stabilize the regime. As a result, the SA became increasingly marginalized within the government, even though its numbers dwarfed those of the army. With the SA increasingly discontented, brawls with no overtly political motive became common. Ernst Röhm, the leader of the SA, began to form a following within the SA, preaching a second revolution. This proposed revolution would have the SA to replace the army, a proposition which naturally was not well received by the army. With popular enthusiasm for the regime waning, the threat of revolution was even stronger. The SA were out of control; Röhm needed to be overthrown. On June 30, 1934, in what would become known as “The Night of Long Knives,” SA leaders, conservative leaders, army officers, and Hitler's personal rivals were purged. The majority of Germans admired Hitler for his decisive action, and the army was relieved to have the SA repressed.<sup>185</sup>

SA violence survived beyond its legitimate institutional threat, as exemplified during the Nuremberg Rally of 1934, when a fight broke out in the brownshirts' camp. Although in this instance this violence was certainly not approved, the main issue for Nazis was not repressing the violence itself, but rather repressing opposition to the regime.<sup>186</sup> To this end,

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185 Evans, 20-40.

186 Ibid, 40-41

Hitler made an impassioned speech to both the SA and SS at the Rally on September 9, distancing himself from the violence of the Night of Long Knives and urging both SA and SS members to pledge their allegiance to the regime above all else.<sup>187</sup> In concluding the speech, Hitler stated, “Only a madman or a deliberate liar could say that I or anyone would have ever intended to lay to rest what we ourselves have built up over many years. No, my comrades, we stand firmly for our Germany, and we must stand together for this Germany.”<sup>188</sup> This is a repetition of a theme that flows throughout the speech – Hitler is careful to downplay divisions between the SA and SS, arguing that both are serving a stronger, more united Germany. This was not simply a motivational speech; the purges had made clear the absolute requirement of following Hitler without reservation or complaint.

Even this demand for absolute adherence to the regime was not divorced from ritual, however. According to Julius Streicher in *Reichstagung in Nürnberg*, a detailed account published by the Party of the Rally's speeches and events, Hitler's speech was followed by the consecration of the SA and SS standards by contact with the *Blutfahne*, or the Blood Flag.<sup>189</sup> The Blood Flag was revered as the flag carried during the failed Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 and thus carried special ritualistic significance.<sup>190</sup>

Every aspect of the Nuremberg Rallies was infused with ritual – even a speech devoid of any explicitly religious content, such as Hitler's address to the SS and SA, was followed by a ceremony with ritualistic qualities. Just as the Blood Flag was revered for its central role in the violent Beer Hall Putsch, so too did the SA and SS flags symbolize the importance

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187 Julius Streicher, *Reichstagung in Nürnberg 1934* (Berlin: C.A. Weller, 1934), 362-364.

188 Ibid, 364.

189 Ibid, 364.

190 David Littlejohn, *The SA 1921-1945: Hitler's Stormtroopers* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1990), 19.

of violent action in the creation of a Reich that would last for one thousand years. It would be a mistake to view the consecration of the SS and SA flags as a ritual that was Christian; this was a military ceremony designed to encourage loyalty to the state. But this ritual was only one of many, and, taken as a whole, it becomes clear that the planners of the Rally were acting with Christian ritual in mind. Their Christian culture, Protestant or Catholic, informed their decisions when it came to implementing the Rally's rituals. Many of the people who attended the Rallies or watched *Triumph of the Will* also approached their reception of and participation in the spectacle of the Rally from a framework of Christian belief and practice. Christianity and Nazism were not antithetical, although it is clear that certain aspects of Christianity would have to be suppressed as Germany moved ever nearer to war and the Final Solution.

It was not long after Hitler came to power than a proliferation of literature appeared that attempted to categorize the Nazi movement and Hitler himself as either Christian or non-Christian. Some claimed Hitler for their versions of Christianity, while others vehemently denied his association with orthodox belief. After the fall of the Third Reich in 1945, as Christianity began to associate itself almost exclusively with resistance leaders such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Niemoller, National Socialism and Christianity were almost universally seen as mutually exclusive. This legacy exists yet today in the forms that accounts of the relationship between Nazism and Christianity take, and betrays a fundamental presupposition that has a large effect on the specific story historians tell: Hitler cannot be a Christian, because Christians would not commit the unspeakable atrocities that he did. And yet, a close look at the Nuremberg Rallies of 1934 shows the clear symbolic

links between Christianity and the state. Intentions aside, it is clear that practicing Christians attending the Rally would have found much with which to identify. This Christianity was anti-Semitic, it was unorthodox, and it had disastrous effects for its enemies. Christianity was not the only force driving Hitler in the direction of the Final Solution, but it did undoubtedly shape his decisions.

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