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# "Ein Pakt mit dem Teufel": Leni Riefenstahl, Triumph of the Will, and the Nature of Guilt

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# "Ein Pakt mit dem Teufel": Leni Riefenstahl, Triumph of the Will, and the Nature of Guilt

## **Abstract**

Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* is rightly considered a massive technical achievement in the world of cinema and propaganda. However, this achievement was undertaken at the behest of the immoral, murderous regime of Nazi Germany, a regime that Riefenstahl was more than willing to work with and glorify in order to further her career. This thesis will argue that Riefenstahl's onscreen deification of Hitler, visual representation of völkisch ideology, and use of the music of Richard Wagner make her later claims of ignorance as to the film's ultimate meaning impossible to correlate with established facts.

## **Keywords**

Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will*, propaganda, film, Nazism

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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**“Ein Pakt mit dem Teufel”:**

**Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will*, and  
the Nature of Guilt**

By Andrew Burns

HIST-418, Dr. William Bowman, April 19, 2019

**I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the honor code.**

WORD COUNT: 9,171

Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* is rightly considered a massive technical achievement in the world of cinema and propaganda. However, this achievement was undertaken at the behest of the immoral, murderous regime of Nazi Germany, a regime that Riefenstahl was more than willing to work with and glorify in order to further her career. This thesis will argue that Riefenstahl's onscreen deification of Hitler, visual representation of *völkisch* ideology, and use of the music of Richard Wagner make her later claims of ignorance as to the film's ultimate meaning impossible to correlate with established facts.



(Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons and Olympia-Film, G.m.b.H., 1939)

*“I will never make prescribed films. I don’t have the knack for it - I have to have a very personal relationship with my subject matter. Otherwise, I can’t be creative.”*

- Leni Riefenstahl (allegedly to Hitler), *A Memoir*, 1993.

*“In the afternoon visit Leni Riefenstahl, who shows me marvelous scenes from the Party Rally film. Leni knows what she is doing.”*

- Joseph Goebbels, *The Diaries of Joseph Goebbels, Part I*, November 22, 1934.

## HISTORIOGRAPHY AND INTRODUCTION

Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 film *Triumph of the Will* is often considered one of the most effective and influential propaganda films ever made. The skillful shot composition, editing, and choices of musical accompaniment ensure that the viewer is overwhelmed with a sense of spectacle and views the Nazi Party as a mass movement, intent on returning glory and honor to the German nation. However, after World War II, Riefenstahl attempted to remove herself from the narrative of Nazi propaganda production at any cost. Her post-war denials of any affiliations with the Nazi Party or that she denied making *Triumph of the Will* of her own free choice are countered by the fact that she was given virtually unlimited resources by the Nazi Party in order to produce and complete the film. According to the testimony of her production manager Walter Traut "Leni Riefenstahl was not ordered... She *asked* to do this picture."<sup>1</sup> This thesis will demonstrate how through its use of quasi-religious imagery, implicit references to *völkisch* ideology, and its utilization of the music of composer Richard Wagner, Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 propaganda film *Triumph des Willens* explicitly illustrates the Nazis' ideological concepts of militarism and authoritarian fascism, refuting the director's later assertions that she was ignorant of the film's ultimate purpose.

Some of the earliest scholarship surrounding Leni Riefenstahl's merits as a filmmaker was published shortly after the end of World War II. Writing in a 1960 issue of *Film Quarterly*, film historian David Gunston stated that "two conclusions cannot escape anyone seeing *Triumph of the Will*: it could have never been made by anyone not fanatically at one with the events depicted, nor equally could it have been made by anyone not profoundly encompassed by the

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Bach, *Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 123.

medium."<sup>2</sup> As long as Riefenstahl's films have been seriously studied, a debate over her merits as an artist versus her affiliation with the evils of Nazism has raged. The question of Riefenstahl's or guilt by association forms the backbone of any scholarly study of her work. Thus, the prevailing view of Riefenstahl, throughout the decades and after her death, was that while she was an undeniably talented filmmaker, her conscious decision to promote Nazi ideology through the medium of cinema is her greatest misdeed.

Another historian who has deftly tackled Riefenstahl's work is Jürgen Trimborn. In his biography *Leni Riefenstahl: A Life*, Trimborn expertly dismantles Riefenstahl's defense that she was ignorant of the film's purpose as a propaganda spectacle designed to benefit the Nazi Party. Personally ordered by Adolf Hitler to produce an "artistic creation" of the *Reichsparteitag* in Nuremberg,<sup>3</sup> Riefenstahl utilized her considerable filmmaking skills in order to portray the arrival of Hitler in the film's beginning as a scene from a Wagnerian epic. According to Trimborn, Riefenstahl's cross-cutting and use of montages (particularly during Hitler's address to a labor brigade) was intended to convey "Hitler as Germany" and Germany as Hitler, as well as the "virtual cult" of the Führer, elevating Hitler to a deity-like position watching over his faithful followers.<sup>4</sup> According to the film itself, the past "nineteen months [of] Germany's rebirth"<sup>5</sup> were directly caused by the "arrival" of the *Führer*, implied as it is, from a higher plane of existence. Trimborn notes that Riefenstahl's philosophy behind documentary filmmaking "as she understood it, was not a mere recording of external events but a 'bringing to the light' of the

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<sup>2</sup> David Gunston, "Leni Riefenstahl," *Film Quarterly* 14, No.1, (Autumn 1960), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl: A Life* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2007), 106.

<sup>4</sup> Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl* (Faber & Faber, 2007), 107, 116.

<sup>5</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag-Film, 1935), Online, (Universum Film AG, 2005).

ideal, of the true message of the respective event.”<sup>6</sup> With *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl’s true message was to portray Hitler as the only possible “savior” of a Germany devastated by territorial losses, economic ruin, and an erosion of national pride. The 1934 *Reichsparteitag* rally thus functioned only as a staging ground for Riefenstahl to capture on film, and in the required artistic detail, the concept of the *Führerprinzip*, or complete and total allegiance to Adolf Hitler to the point of overriding any pre-existing morality or thought processes. Therefore, Riefenstahl’s post-war claims of innocence do not hold up when presented with the fact that she, through lending her filmmaking services to the regime, enabled the spread of a destructive ideology, that would go on to wage war and genocide across Europe.

Another central element to *Triumph of the Will* (and to all Nazi propaganda) is the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* or a “people’s community.” According to author David Welch, this “people’s community” draws on an “idealized past rather than a present.”<sup>7</sup> In an age of rapid industrialization and urbanization and a perceived loss of traditional values (such as in the Weimar Republic era), the Nazis believed that the “alienated man” would center himself within a “pure” like-minded group.<sup>8</sup> This like-minded group would then forcefully advocate for a return to these traditional values as the highest aspirations of the German people. As Welch defined it, the concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* rests on whom it excludes, as well as the subordination of the individual’s needs to those of the state.<sup>9</sup> This concept is present within many scenes of *Triumph of the Will*, as shown in the mass gatherings of people (with more “Aryan” looking individuals placed towards the front), viewed as a group rather than as individuals, declaring

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<sup>6</sup> Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl* (Faber & Faber, 2007), 117.

<sup>7</sup> David Welch, “Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People’s Community,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 39, No. 2, Understanding Nazi Germany (Apr., 2004), 217.

<sup>8</sup> Welch, “Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft,” *Journal of Contemporary History* (Apr., 2004), 217.

<sup>9</sup> Welch, “Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft,” *Journal of Contemporary History* (Apr., 2004), 218.

their loyalty to the Nazi state, and in turn, to Hitler himself. The “beginning of German rebirth” as outlined in the film involved a complete transformation of German society into a “people’s community.” The ultimate goal of this transformation was to supercede “prevailing class, religious and sectional loyalties” with “a new heightened nationalism.”<sup>10</sup> Riefenstahl’s methods of presenting Nazi ceremonies with a kind of solemn reverence announces to the viewer that the new German state would be defined by nationalism and undying allegiance to the *Führer* alone. This again, indicates that Riefenstahl’s claims of innocence and ignorance as to what she was producing do not stand up to careful scrutiny, as her finished product is clearly promoting the spectacle of the regime in an attempt to overwhelm the viewer with a “heroic, undemocratic conception of life.”<sup>11</sup>

Another important aspect of *Triumph of the Will* that cannot be ignored is the use of the music of German composer Richard Wagner. Best known for his operas *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Wagner’s legacy remains controversial to this day. While any expert on German Romanticism will cite his clear talent and influence on later composers, his rabid Antisemitism must also not be ignored. Scholar Carolyn S. Ticker, writing in the journal *Musical Offerings*, stated that “Wagner was intent on describing Jews as ‘Other’” and even included antisemitic imagery within his operas, such as the character of the untrustworthy Beckmesser in *Meistersinger*.<sup>12</sup> Even before the rise of Hitler, Wagner’s Antisemitism was well known throughout Germany. When Wagner’s son Siegfried wrote to a prominent German rabbi in 1924, asking for help in funding the *Bayreuth Festspiele*, a festival

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<sup>10</sup> Welch, “Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft,” *Journal of Contemporary History* (Apr., 2004), 217.

<sup>11</sup> Renata Berg-Pan, *Leni Riefenstahl*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 104.

<sup>12</sup> Carolyn S. Ticker, “The Effect of Richard Wagner’s Music and Beliefs on Hitler’s Ideology,” *Musical Offerings* 7, No. 2 (Fall 2016), 57-58.



dedicated to his father's music, the rabbi responded by writing that the entire Wagner household was "a stronghold of this *völkisch* movement" while at the same time wondering "is it any surprise that decent men and women of the Jewish faith... exercise caution regarding things Wagnerian?"<sup>13</sup> Wagner's embrace of German Romantic nationalism and Antisemitism thus served as a clear influence on Hitler's worldview. According to historian Klaus Fischer, Hitler enjoyed immersing himself in Wagner's music from a young age.<sup>14</sup> Ticker, again, writes that "[Hitler's] obsession for Wagner's music is made apparent by his possession of many of the original opera scores."<sup>15</sup> So, it is little wonder that Hitler would desire to see images of a "reborn" Germany and the new *Volksgemeinschaft* accompanied by Wagnerian themes, explicitly tying the rise of the Nazi party to themes of German "purity" and a resurgent nationalism. In the opening scene of *Triumph of the Will*, shots of Hitler's plane descending through the clouds are accompanied by the strains of composer Herbert Windt's original compositions that combine Nazi anthems with quotations from Wagner's Ring cycle and *Die Meistersinger*.<sup>16</sup> Morgan asserts that this musical background provides "historical depth" to the spectacle of Hitler's arrival, tying his new position as the leader of the nation to uniquely Nazi interpretations of German culture. Riefenstahl and Windt's collaboration in matching visuals to sound creates an overwhelming sense of spectacle within the viewer, one that demonstrates and expands on the ideological argument the film portrayed. Using Wagner's music, once again, is meant to explicitly represent the rise of the Nazi Party as another grand historical moment in the scope of German history.

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<sup>13</sup> Ticker, "Richard Wagner's Music and Beliefs," *Musical Offerings* (Fall 2016), 60.

<sup>14</sup> Klaus Fischer, *Nazi Germany: A New History* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 300.

<sup>15</sup> Ticker, "Richard Wagner's Music and Beliefs," *Musical Offerings* (Fall 2016), 61.

<sup>16</sup> Ben Morgan, "Music in Nazi film: How different is *Triumph of the Will*?" *Studies in European Cinema* 3, No. 1 (2006), 43.

Since Riefenstahl lived to the age of 101, she spent over sixty-five years in the aftermath of World War II denying her role in the Nazi propaganda machine. The day of her 100th birthday in 2002, Frankfurt city attorneys announced that Leni Riefenstahl would be prosecuted for the crime of Holocaust denial. The impetus for the announcement concerned statements Riefenstahl made prior “explaining” how Roma and Sinti extras who had been forced to appear in her 1942 film *Tiefland* had all survived the war.<sup>17</sup> Riefenstahl’s denials that she ever set foot in concentration camps ran counter to detailed testimony by the surviving Roma about how Riefenstahl personally selected them and how their movements on set were closely guarded and monitored at all times.<sup>18</sup> In the end, Riefenstahl was found guilty of the lesser charge of “violating the memory of the dead,” but was ultimately not prosecuted due to her advanced age.<sup>19</sup> However, given the evidence presented against her, not just in her biographical material but in her own films, it is virtually impossible for Riefenstahl to have plausibly denied the full scope of the Nazi propaganda machine, the inherent nationalism and authoritarianism, and, later during the war and the production of *Tiefland* the existence of the concentration camps. Within her films, Riefenstahl created a massive spectacle that presented Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party as Germany’s “rebirth.” Although the films she made were shot and edited with clear technical skill, it is important not to forget the role they played in disseminating a monstrous ideology across an entire continent. Riefenstahl’s most readily apparent legacy involves her moral bankruptcy in which she viewed the Nazi Party as a vehicle for the advancement of her own career, and how the nearly sixty years she spent denying and minimizing her role served merely

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Tegel, “Leni Riefenstahl’s Gypsy Question,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 23, No. 1 (2003), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Tegel, “Gypsy Question,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (2003), 7.

<sup>19</sup> Tegel, “Gypsy Question,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (2003), 7.

to refurbish her own public image and avoid responsibility for what she contributed to the spread of Nazi ideology.

Born in Berlin on August 22, 1902, Leni Riefenstahl aspired to be a performer and an artist from an early age. After establishing herself as a critically acclaimed dancer on the German stage, she then moved onto film acting. Riefenstahl's most famous films of her acting career fell within the genre of *Bergfilme* or "mountain films." In these films, Riefenstahl typically played a young, athletic heroine trapped somewhere in the frozen reaches of the Alps or Scandinavia.<sup>20</sup> Given her previous experience as a stage performer and a dancer, Riefenstahl proved to be adept at summiting the imposing mountain crevasses and peaks that made up the background of the on-location shoots. Riefenstahl, in her memoir, took great pains to emphasize the details of the beautiful scenery and the exhausting treks required to make these mountain films. The films, according to Riefenstahl biographer Steven Bach, "glowed with health and appealed to the nationalistic sentiments of German audiences."<sup>21</sup> The relationship between human beings and nature as depicted in these films conformed closely to German Romantic ideals; a solitary hero struggling towards a goal in the midst of stunning natural beauty.<sup>22</sup> It was working on these films that Riefenstahl first honed her skills as a filmmaker and developed her keen eye for striking visuals. With the release of her first film as a director *Das blaue Licht*, Riefenstahl attempted to "construct a beauty and an attraction which which did not exist as such outside the film."<sup>23</sup> This marked the beginning of Riefenstahl's turn from presenting naturalistic and realistic settings on screen to creating artificial ones specifically for the purposes of crafting her own narrative. A

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<sup>20</sup> Glenn B. Infield, *Leni Riefenstahl: The Fallen Film Goddess*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976).

<sup>21</sup> Bach, *Leni*, 35.

<sup>22</sup> Bach, *Leni*, 36.

<sup>23</sup> Rainer Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl: The Seduction of Genius* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 36.

few years later, German audiences saw this artifice in the context of the Nazi *Reichsparteitag* rally, and Riefenstahl's carefully constructed narrative that presented Hitler, not just as an example of German Romantic greatness, but as the reborn Nazi state's ultimate "savior."

### **THE DEIFICATION OF HITLER**

In terms of Riefenstahl's first encounter with Adolf Hitler, there is numerous evidence to directly counter her claim that her receptiveness of Hitler's ideas was apolitical in nature. Riefenstahl's own memoirs detailed how she decided to attend a Nazi rally at the Berlin Sportpalast "on the spur of the moment."<sup>24</sup> Riefenstahl recounted the rally in starkly emotional terms, conveniently omitting many of the details in favor of describing Hitler's effect on her as a profound experience and repeatedly emphasized that it was the first political rally she ever attended.<sup>25</sup> Secondary accounts of Riefenstahl's first experiences with Hitler shed more light on how they first came into contact and established a working relationship. Riefenstahl wrote a telegram to Hitler at the so-called Brown House in Munich, the headquarters of the Nazi Party. In it, she conveyed that she was impressed by Hitler's speaking ability and wished to meet him as soon as possible. Hitler responded almost immediately, declaring himself a fan of Riefenstahl's films. Hitler and Riefenstahl met for the first time on May 22, 1932 in a private meeting in Wilhelmshaven on the North Sea.<sup>26</sup> It was here, Riefenstahl later recounted, that Hitler told her "if we come to power, you must make my films."<sup>27</sup> In the immediate aftermath of her first encounter with Hitler, Riefenstahl instantly became a devoted follower of his cult of personality, obsessively reading his tome *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), a book that historian

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<sup>24</sup> Leni Riefenstahl, *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 101.

<sup>25</sup> Riefenstahl, *A Memoir*, 101.

<sup>26</sup> Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 60.

Steven Bach has called “unambiguously political,” and rife with “manic egocentricity and an utter lack of humanity.”<sup>28</sup> Author Francine Prose, writing in the *Yale Review*, explained that what ultimately motivated Riefenstahl was “neither fascist ideology nor German nationalism, but an almost demonic personal and professional ambition.”<sup>29</sup> Riefenstahl, constantly in search of new methods to demonstrate her filmmaking talents and gain professional recognition, was willing to attach herself to a racist, nationalistic movement that was quickly gaining power in order to do so. What Riefenstahl wanted was “the funding, access, and equipment to create a cinematic extravaganza,” which she could not have accomplished without voicing a devotion to the spectacles and rhetoric of Nazism.<sup>30</sup> One telling example of Riefenstahl’s adaptation of Hitler’s ideas to her own worldview came when *Das blaue Licht* was released in cinemas in 1932. Although part of the then-commercially successful *Bergfilm* (mountain film) genre, it received generally less-than-stellar reviews in some publications of the German press. Author and historian Jürgen Trimborn wrote that Riefenstahl “perceived every negative review as a personal attack,” which her colleague Harry Sokal stated in an interview that she blamed “Jewish critics... who didn’t understand her methods” and were intent on “ruining her career.” Sokal (who was himself Jewish) went on to state that Riefenstahl remarked on more than one occasion that “Herr Hitler, were he allowed to come to power, would no longer allow something like that.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, when *Das blaue Licht* was re-released in 1938 (with the names of Jewish technicians and producers conveniently removed), it was enthusiastically hailed as a “masterpiece” by the Nazi-controlled press.<sup>32</sup> Despite her later protests of a youthful innocence or naïvete over the

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<sup>28</sup> Bach, *Leni*, 86.

<sup>29</sup> Francine Prose, “Leni Riefenstahl,” *Yale Review*, 106, No. 4 (October 2018), 40.

<sup>30</sup> Prose, “Leni Riefenstahl,” 40.

<sup>31</sup> Jürgen Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl: A Life* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2007), 55.

<sup>32</sup> Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl* (Faber & Faber, 2007), 56.

particulars of political discourse, there can be no question that, upon encountering Hitler's ideas and personality, Riefenstahl dedicated herself fervently to the advancement of the Nazi cause in Germany. After filming the now nearly-forgotten *Sieg des Glaubens* (Victory of Faith) in 1933, a propaganda film devoting almost equal time to Hitler and his soon-to-be executed lieutenant Ernst Röhm, head of the *Sturmabteilung*, Riefenstahl was given the opportunity to direct *Triumph of the Will* with massively increased funding and the full cooperation of the state propaganda apparatus at her side. With these increased resources, she elected to show her audiences how Adolf Hitler, in her words, "infected" her with an "apocalyptic vision" of German rebirth and power.<sup>33</sup>

In her new film, Riefenstahl was determined to capture the vision of Hitler as what historian Klaus Fischer described as "government along the lines of an ecclesiastical order... [with Hitler as] as an infallible pope."<sup>34</sup> Simply put, Adolf Hitler was regarded as the supreme authority in the new Nazi Germany, and no decision or edict he made could be questioned or disobeyed. This *Führerprinzip* (leadership principle) not only ensured that Hitler's power went unchecked during his twelve-year reign, but also that the German military and civilians were presented with an ideology of unquestioning loyalty to their leader. In her autobiography, Riefenstahl attempted to make a "crucial distinction" between Hitler's politics of racism and antisemitism and his personality, instead writing that it was his "socialist" plans for reducing unemployment that initially drew her to him. She then dismissed his racism as what she thought, at the time, was mere "campaign rhetoric."<sup>35</sup> However, Fischer contended that the fact that Hitler's personality could be separated from his odious politics at all was absurd, writing that

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<sup>33</sup> Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 57.

<sup>34</sup> Fischer, *Nazi Germany*, 296.

<sup>35</sup> Leni Riefenstahl, *A Memoir*, 101.

“The origin of Adolf Hitler’s anti-Semitism... was the result of his exposure to noxious anti-Semitic literature during his Vienna period reinforced by the traumatic effects associated with the German defeat in World War I.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, Adolf Hitler’s personality was inherently antisemitic and obsessed with a perceived “Jewish threat” against the “rightful” Aryan master race. His central policies of creating *Lebensraum* (living space) for ethnic Germans and waging war against Eastern Europeans and Russians whom, as Slavic peoples he deemed “inferior,” were a direct outgrowth of his twisted, prejudiced personality.

The introduction of *Triumph of the Will* begins with on-screen text explaining that “Sixteen years after the start of German suffering” and “nineteen months after the start of German rebirth,” Adolf Hitler flew to Nuremberg to “review the columns of his faithful followers.”<sup>37</sup> This text then fades directly into the now-infamous images of clouds in the sky above Nuremberg, with Hitler’s airplane descending from them to the airfield. Right from the beginning, Riefenstahl’s technique aims to explicitly portray Hitler as descended from the heavens to aid the German people in their “rebirth.” In her memoir, Riefenstahl recounted the creation of the opening sequence and Hitler’s reaction to it. Recalling that she planned out the sequence in her head before production began, she was disappointed that Hitler instead wanted her to pan over a line of important *Wehrmacht* officers and use that footage as the opening of the film, in order to placate the egos of important military officers who would later help him in consolidating his power. Riefenstahl, growing extremely upset, insisted that she could not do it, maintaining that such a sequence would ruin the “artistic integrity” of *Triumph of the Will*.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Fischer, *Nazi Germany* (Continuum, 1995), 89.

<sup>37</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019, <https://archive.org>.

<sup>38</sup> Riefenstahl, *A Memoir* (St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 181.

However, in positioning herself against Hitler regarding an artistic choice for the film and portraying herself as an innocent, nearly apolitical victim of party machinations, Riefenstahl omits the fact that all of the film's artistic choices are carefully designed to glorify Hitler. According to Bach, the imagery of the opening sequence is "lyrical, expansive, [and] unmistakably messianic."<sup>39</sup> Although *Triumph of the Will* is typically regarded as a documentary film because it captures a real event without actors, the manner in which it is composed nearly erases any connection the film has with the "real world." In fact, the *Reichsparteitag* rally that Riefenstahl filmed was specifically staged for the purposes of capturing it on film. In this manner, the film "conflates the imaginary with modern reality," in transferring elements of a fantastical savior narrative onto real life.<sup>40</sup> Author Rainer Rother, writing in *Leni Riefenstahl: The Seduction of Genius*, explained that the film "makes no attempt to declare its authenticity," and that the opening sequence suggests its own interpretation through a narrative form rather than a documentary one.<sup>41</sup> The obvious narrative presented by the film is the deification of Hitler himself and a clear visual representation of the *Führerprinzip*.

Alan Sennett, writing in *The Journal of Cinema and Media*, employed film historian Richard Taylor's strict definition of propaganda as "the transmission of ideas and/or values from one person, or group of persons, to another."<sup>42</sup> Sennett modified this definition by writing that propaganda, thus, must be "both intentional and useful."<sup>43</sup> (*Triumph of the Will* falls under Taylor's definition of propaganda as it is transmitted Nazi ideology, particularly with regards to

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<sup>39</sup> Bach, *Leni*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 136.

<sup>40</sup> Linda Schulte-Sasse, "Leni Riefenstahl's Feature Films and the Question of a Fascist Aesthetic," *Cultural Critique*, No. 18 (Spring 1991), 142.

<sup>41</sup> Rainer Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl: The Seduction of Genius* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 64-65.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Taylor, quoted in Alan Sennett, "Film Propaganda: *Triumph of the Will* as a Case Study," *The Journal of Cinema and Media*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Spring 2014), 47.

<sup>43</sup> Sennett, "Film Propaganda," *The Journal of Cinema and Media* (Spring 2014), 47.



Hitler's role in the party and in German society, to the German masses.) The film was meticulously planned out. Every shot was intentional; it was a film designed to overwhelm its audience with spectacle (particularly the spectacle of Hitler), and argued that only the leadership of Hitler and the National Socialist movement could restore Germany to its former prestige.

The production was a massive undertaking. Under her command, Leni Riefenstahl had a crew of around 170 individuals. These included cameramen, assistants, truck drivers, and even pilots for airplanes and airships that were used to capture certain shots.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the film can fully be considered propaganda because the intentionality with which it was filmed was dedicated to transmitting ideas via spectacle. This spectacle was designed to inform the viewer about the "glories" of Nazism, and establish Hitler as the new, unquestioned leader of Nazi Germany.

One particularly notable sequence of *Triumph of the Will* that combines spectacle, the deification of Hitler and the transmission of Nazi ideas comes about one third of the way through the film. In it, Hitler addresses a group of *Deutsche Arbeitsfront* (German Labor Front) workers, standing in great blocks, each one "armed" with a shovel.<sup>45</sup> The great mass of workers announce to Hitler that they are "ready to carry Germany into a new era."<sup>46</sup> One member of the Labor Front asks his fellow workers "Comrade, where are you from?" One by one, a series of workers give answers from all over the German-speaking territories, from Bavaria to Friesland to Breslau, in a repetitive sequence meant to demonstrate the unity of the German people in service to Hitler. Once this sequence has ended, the mass of workers shouts the common Nazi refrain "*Ein Volk, ein Führer, ein Reich! Deutschland!*" with Riefenstahl's camera panning to, respectively, a close-up of Hitler's face, the Nazi *Adler* (eagle), and a swastika banner,

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<sup>44</sup> Sennett, "Film Propaganda," *The Journal of Cinema and Media* (Spring 2014), 49.

<sup>45</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

establishing the figure of Adolf Hitler as one with the new German state, and the state as one with the *Führer*.<sup>47</sup> From this point on in German society, the wishes and needs of the individual were always supposed to be subservient to those of the state, comprised of one common Aryan *Volk*. This is reflected in the next chant of the Labor Front who state their various undertakings, such as “reclaiming the North Sea” or creating “new fields for farmers,” all in the service of, as the workers chant together, “Deutschland!” as the screen immediately cuts to another close up of Hitler. Therefore, the spectacle of the *Arbeitsfront* men, the centralization of Hitler and his association with the existence of the German nation, and the emphasis placed on the workers (viewed as “soldiers”) giving their labor in service to the state, serves as a perfect example of Riefenstahl’s intentions during the filmmaking process.

Another sequence of the film that demonstrates the centrality of Hitler in Nazi ideology is the infamous rally and parade on the final day to honor the Nazi dead. This sequence was filmed from many different angles and heights in order to capture its sheer size. At the rally, Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Chief of the SS and Viktor Lutze, Chief of the SA, walk between two massive columns of Nazi *Sturmabteilung* men (Stormtroopers). Riefenstahl’s cinematography centers the focus of every shot around Hitler as he pays respects to Nazi “comrades” killed by left-wing militants during the Weimar era, he approaches the podium to make a speech denouncing the former leader of the SA (Ernst Röhm, killed during the Night of the Long Knives).<sup>48</sup> Riefenstahl’s cameras pan around Hitler and utilize both medium and close-up shots during his lengthy address in contrast to the static shots of thousands upon thousands of Stormtroopers standing motionless in front of him. The way the camera interacted with both

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<sup>47</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

Hitler and the rally participants was intended to convey the will of the individual German submitted to the will of the *Führer*; the *Führer* was the only actively independent member of the new German society, and all others within the *Volk* were meant to be submissive. Later in this same sequence, the *Blutfahne* (the “blood banner” that was supposedly carried by Hitler’s Stormtroopers during the failed Beer Hall Putsch) was solemnly paraded through the rally grounds, and new swastika banners were touched to it in a perverted sort of consecration ritual.<sup>49</sup> Schulte-Sasse contended that this represented what she termed the “kitsch of death,” a concept favored by the Nazis that would enable enormous masses of people to march willingly to their deaths.<sup>50</sup> Rituals surrounding Nazism and Nazi ideology glorified death in service to the German *Reich* and by extension, the *Führer*. In Nazi Germany, the new fascist hero was required, if necessary, to sacrifice himself for the glory of the *Reich*. *Triumph of the Will* portrayed these sacrifices as the highest duty of a member of the *Volk* to the state, a process that fully succeeded in killing off the individual and replacing him or her with a glorified symbol of the strength solely devoted to the *Reich* and Adolf Hitler.

### **TRIUMPH OF THE WILL AND THE APPEARANCE OF VOLKISCH IDEOLOGY**

Another notable aspect of *Triumph of the Will* is the way in which it portrays the idea of *völkisch* thought. *Völkisch* is a German word that translates literally to “folkish” or (within the context of Nazism) “racial.” While Riefenstahl was never an official member of the Nazi party, her obsessive readings of *Mein Kampf* familiarized her with the precepts of *völkisch* ideology. According to author Bernard Mees, *völkisch* ideology can be traced back to Johann Gottfried von Herder, a late eighteenth-century German Lutheran pastor.<sup>51</sup> Herder “was the first influential

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<sup>49</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Schulte-Sasse, “Fascist Aesthetic,” 142.

<sup>51</sup> Bernard Mees, *The Science of the Swastika* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 16.

figure to speak of an essential Germanness that he wished to see cultivated rather than suppressed.”<sup>52</sup> This manner of thinking spread until German Unification of 1871, which saw the *Volksgeist* (German national spirit) transformed into a political entity. Almost immediately, *völkisch* thinkers viewed the new German state as incomplete because it excluded Austria, which was the seat of power of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Across the border, Austrian *völkisch* ideologues clamored for the creation of a *Großdeutschland* (Greater Germany) that would unite all of the German-speaking territories, a philosophy known as Pan-Germanism.<sup>53</sup>

Pan-Germanism became popular after the breakup of the German Confederation in 1866, which had included Austria.<sup>54</sup> Adolf Hitler, an Austrian by birth and an avowed Pan-German from an early age, infused the word *völkisch* with particular antisemitic overtones in *Mein Kampf*, pairing typical nationalist precepts with the racist hate-mongering of antisemitic movements and thinkers active in cities such as Vienna and Munich.<sup>55</sup> Georg von Schönerer was one of these influential hate-mongers. Schönerer’s combined Pan-Germanism and Antisemitism formed the basis of his worldview, which he saw as a perpetual struggle between the Protestant, German *Volk*, and a liberal “anti-Germanness” propagated by the Jewish cultural elite.<sup>56</sup> Schönerer’s influence on Hitler was apparent in his descriptions of Jews as an “anti-*Volk*,” the opposite of the noble Germanic “master race” and as an existential threat meant to be eradicated.<sup>57</sup>

German literature and cinema, even during the relatively liberal and open years of the Weimar Republic, traded in antisemitic imagery, representing mythical creatures such as

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<sup>52</sup> Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 17-18.

<sup>54</sup> Office of the Historian, “Unification of German States,” U.S. Department of State, Online, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/countries/issues/german-unification>

<sup>55</sup> Fischer, *Nazi Germany*, 89.

<sup>56</sup> Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Mees, *The Science of the Swastika*, 19.

vampires and ghouls as implicitly coded as Jewish. A resurgence of Antisemitism in Germany, fueled by the releases of novels as *The Sin Against the Blood* and *Vampire*, viewed the new “wandering Jews” who came to Germany and Austria via countries like Galicia and Poland as interlopers at best and “poisoners” and “parasites” at worst.<sup>58</sup> This atmosphere of Antisemitism that was implicitly deemed “acceptable” in German society at the time, allowed far-right parties that blamed Jews for economic troubles and social decline to flourish and rapidly gain support. A society-wide undercurrent of Antisemitism allowed the Nazis to become as prominent as they were while ordinary Protestant Germans, such as Riefenstahl saw the rising party’s success as a conduit for their own personal and professional achievements.

Although *Triumph of the Will* contained no direct mentions of Jews, it served as the first time that Nazi ideology was screened before a mass audience (*Sieg des Glaubens* was quietly removed from distribution after the assassination of Ernst Röhm).<sup>59</sup> One of the most prominent demonstrations of *völkisch* ideology within the film is displayed at the Hitler Youth ceremony, two thirds of the way into the film. In a fiery speech, Hitler tells the assembled crowd that the young men of Germany represent the future of the German *Reich*, and that they must be prepared to serve the German nation whenever called upon to do so.<sup>60</sup> This returns to the theme of Hitler’s speech to the *Arbeitsfront*, what scholar Leila J. Rupp referred to by considering the definition of the common Nazi slogan *Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz*: the common good before before the individual good.<sup>61</sup> As stated previously, the goal of Nazi fascism was the complete subservience

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<sup>58</sup> Marie Mulvey-Roberts, *Dangerous Bodies* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2016), 130.

<sup>59</sup> Judith Thurman, “Where There’s A Will,” *The New Yorker*, March 19th, 2007. Accessed March 8th, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/03/19/where-theres-a-will>

<sup>60</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 15.

of the individual's will to the will of the Nazi state as embodied in its leader Adolf Hitler.

*Völkisch* ideology was a key component of Nazism in that it aimed to present the German people (specifically the “Aryan” Germans) as a united front, prepared to submit completely to the wishes of the *Führer*.

Earlier in the film, images of members of the Hitler Youth, the *Arbeitsfront*, and other groups within the Nazi party are presented in a montage of morning activities that suggests strength, vigor, and personal satisfaction amongst the party members.<sup>62</sup> The sequence begins with a long shot of the hundreds of identical tents on the campgrounds outside the rally area. Next, a static shot appears of blonde Hitler Youth boys playing the drums, suggests a military atmosphere and conforms to the Nazi aesthetic that places emphasis and value on military might. To the sound of the incessant, martial beat on the drums, the boys and young men of the Hitler Youth are then shown preparing for the day ahead. The music soon shifts to an upbeat, jaunty tune composed by Herbert Windt as the young men wash, shave, and dress together in preparation for a day of activities. A communal meal and various pursuits such as exercise and gymnastics conclude the sequence.<sup>63</sup> The Nazi emphasis on the concepts of strength and unity form the basis of this scene, while at the same time it suggests a filmed version of the *Volksgemeinschaft* or “people’s community,” in which a united people work together in the service of the Nazi state. The sequence succeeding the Hitler Youth in *Triumph of the Will* is an overview of a parade demonstrating folk costumes and traditions from all over Germany. Riefenstahl also demonstrates traditional male and female roles, marking the strict gender hierarchy of Nazi society, one in which a woman was much more the exception rather than the

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<sup>62</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

rule. Richard Taylor viewed this parade sequence as representative of the official party line that “the Nazi era is an era of plenty, and of plenty for all, a real people’s community.”<sup>64</sup> Hitler appears in this sequence, enthusiastically greeting the crowds and accepting gifts of flowers as a measure of gratitude from the German *Volk*. The people’s community shown here showcases the glory of the new German state. Riefenstahl shows the viewer that a *Volksgemeinschaft* had truly been achieved through the leadership of the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler. Therefore, her claims of ignorance or naivete do not hold up when presented with these sequences from the film, in which a clear worldview is presented and themes of Nazi ideology are repeatedly referenced and shown on screen.

One of the most damning sequences in the entire film directly follows the parade sequence. From the parade of German folk customs, the scene fades directly into an austere meeting hall where hundreds of uniformed brownshirts and Nazi Party officials are seated before a massive banner reading “*Alles für Deutschland!*” (Everything for Germany).<sup>65</sup> Rudolf Hess, Deputy *Führer* and Hitler’s trusted subordinate opens the proceedings by paying tribute to Paul von Hindenburg, the late *Reichspräsident* who had died just a few months before production of the film began.<sup>66</sup> After Hess’ introduction, a sequence of Nazi leaders is presented before the viewer, each accompanied by identifying text and a short clip from their speech at the rally. Among the most infamous of these was Julius Streicher, editor in chief of *Der Stürmer* (The Attacker). *Der Stürmer* was an antisemitic newspaper which attacked the Jewish population of Germany on a daily basis.<sup>67</sup> In his speech, Streicher announces that “A people which does not

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), 180.

<sup>65</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

<sup>66</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Bach, *Leni*, 79.

hold with the purity of its race will perish!”<sup>68</sup> This would be the most explicit reference to “racial threat” within the film itself, but certainly not one that Riefenstahl could have missed in the long and involved process of editing. Dr. Joseph Goebbels is another prominent speaker who appears at the rally. In his official capacity as the *Reichsminister* of the Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment, Goebbels speaks metaphorically of a “great flame” within the German people, and how power “based on arms” is no substitute for power based on “winning the hearts of the people.”<sup>69</sup> Goebbels, more than any figure within the Nazi regime, was responsible for disseminating the *völkisch* ideal through a massive campaign of propaganda praising the accomplishments of Aryans and demonizing and dehumanizing Jews. Riefenstahl’s film, despite not containing any explicit endorsements of *völkisch* ideology, reveals implicitly the racial and nationalistic components of Nazism in the speeches of Party leadership, as well as the shots of ideal Aryan men and boys parading and engaging in ceremonies honoring Adolf Hitler.

### **NAZISM, HITLER, AND THE WAGNERIAN “FASCIST HERO”**

One of the most identifiable facets of Nazi aesthetics is their appropriation of the music of German Romantic composer Richard Wagner. Wagner’s operas, often described as “emotional” and “symbolic,” were steeped in motifs of powerful medieval heroes and utilized symbols of German nationalism.<sup>70</sup> Despite Wagner’s massive influence on classical and romantic music for the past 150 years, his pervasive Antisemitism cannot be ignored. Wagner published a pamphlet titled *Das Judentum in der Musik* (Judaism in Music) in 1850, in which he denounced Jews as inherently “foreign” and untrustworthy.<sup>71</sup> Wagner also questioned the Jew’s ability to

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<sup>68</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

<sup>69</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag Film, 1935), accessed March 23rd, 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Deryck V. Cole, “Richard Wagner,” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed March 24th, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Wagner-German-composer>

<sup>71</sup> Ticker, “Richard Wagner’s Music and Beliefs,” *Musical Offerings* (Fall 2016), 56.



make music, remarking on what he viewed as the “unpleasantness” of their speech.<sup>72</sup> Wagner’s Antisemitism also came from the mythical notion of a specifically German *Volksgeist* or national spirit. This national spirit was, for Wagner, the driving force behind all great German art that had been produced over the centuries, and as such, was completely inaccessible to anyone of Jewish heritage. In Wagner’s mind the “Jews did not belong to European culture by virtue of their Otherness. They were consigned to a negative status in Wagner’s mind as a people without an aesthetic authenticity.”<sup>73</sup>

Ticker further excavated the relationship between Wagner and Antisemitism by examining the ties between Antisemitic thought and German nationalism. One of the defining characteristics of nationalists is that they cannot accept racial, religious or ethnic diversity within their communities. In the view of German nationalists, only those who conformed to the physical ideal of a “German” man or woman would be allowed to enjoy the full rights of citizenship. Even Wagner’s operas clearly delineate between who is “German” and who is “Jewish,” as seen in the antisemitic character of Beckmesser in *Meistersinger*. As Israeli composer Tzvi Avni explained, “You cannot ignore that he was... an anti-Semite. For Hitler and his friends, he really symbolized the *ideal* of anti-Judaism.”<sup>74</sup> The antisemitic propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*, produced by the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda in 1940, even contains a quote from Wagner about the “shape-shifting” nature of Jews as one of the reasons for “the downfall of society.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ticker, “Richard Wagner’s Music and Beliefs,” *Musical Offerings* (Fall 2016), 57.

<sup>73</sup> James Loeffler, “Richard Wagner’s ‘Jewish Music’: Antisemitism and Aesthetics in Modern Culture,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 15, No. 2 (Winter 2009), 7.

<sup>74</sup> *Wagner’s Jews*, directed by Hilan Warshaw (Overtone Films, Westdeutscher Rundfunk, 2013), accessed March 25th, 2019, [www.alexanderstreet.com](http://www.alexanderstreet.com). (Emphasis added).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

Wagner's connection to Antisemitism and German nationalism was apparent before Hitler rose to power. The composer was co-opted after his death by German nationalists during the First World War as a potent symbol of Germanic *Kultur* (culture) under assault by the French concept of *civilisation*. Pan-German societies held Wagner's work in high regard, and considered his works "testaments to German cultural superiority."<sup>76</sup> Nationalists also considered Jews incapable of creating superior art, and therefore, could never be considered part of the German *Volk*.<sup>77</sup> These messages permeated throughout texts on German nationalism and Antisemitism, and their connections with Wagner's music and writings undoubtedly influenced the young Adolf Hitler.<sup>78</sup>

Hitler's fascination with Wagner went back to his childhood. He recalled in *Mein Kampf* how the composer influenced his "revolutionary politics."<sup>79</sup> The Nazis viewed Wagnerian protagonists as symbols of a masculine, superhuman Nordic-German nationalism. Hitler even viewed his own life story and struggle to lead the German *Volk* as part of what scholar James Sturz termed "the fascist hero."<sup>80</sup> According to Sturz, the fascist hero is "above all, powerful, beautiful, and masculine."<sup>81</sup> Within the context of Nazism, the fascist hero incorporated aspects of Greek mythology, German nationalism, and Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* (super human). Sturz also wrote that the fascist hero is "young" and "courageous" and therefore, not a pacifist.<sup>82</sup> The Nazis considered Wagner's Siegfried, the protagonist of his epic *Ring Cycle*, to be

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<sup>76</sup> David Ian Hall, "Wagner, Hitler, and Germany's Rebirth After the First World War," *War and History*, 24, No. 2 (2017), 159.

<sup>77</sup> Hall, "Wagner, Hitler, and Germany's Rebirth," 162.

<sup>78</sup> Ticker, "Richard Wagner's Music and Beliefs," *Musical Offerings* (Fall 2016), 64.

<sup>79</sup> Ticker, "Richard Wagner's Music and Beliefs," *Musical Offerings* (Fall 2016), 61.

<sup>80</sup> James Sturz, "The Case of Siegfried," *Judaism*, 38, No. 3 (Summer 1989), 346.

<sup>81</sup> Sturz, "Siegfried," 347.

<sup>82</sup> Sturz, "Siegfried," 347.

the prototypical fascist hero, leading a united *Volk* to a higher plane of existence through sheer force, spectacle, and passion for the ideology of fascism. Therefore, it would make perfect sense that a propaganda film extolling the “virtues” of Nazism would utilize Wagner’s music, both in terms of aesthetics and reinforcing the connection between Hitler and founding myths of the German people and nation.

In addition to the use of Wagner’s music in *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl structures the film like one of the composer’s epic operas, broken into multiple acts, each revolving around the triumph of a perfect Germanic hero. If Act I introduces the perfect fascist hero as Hitler, arriving literally from the clouds to the people of Nuremberg, and Act II establishes his uniformity with the German nation and mass declarations of loyalty from the German people, then Act III provides the climax of the narrative, with Hitler announcing an unending glorious German Reich, with himself as its eternal leader and guide (literally, the *Führer*), prepared to deliver greatness to the German *Volk*, if they pledge their loyalty and service to the state and by extension, to Hitler himself. The Wagnerian nature of Nazism is therefore laid bare for the viewer to see. The spectacle is designed at first to overwhelm the viewer, but through the combination of Hitler’s speeches and Riefenstahl’s cinematography, reenacts a grim, operatic performance of racist ideology and militaristic fascism. It is here where questions of Leni Riefenstahl’s guilt start to gather serious weight.

### **THE QUESTION OF LENI RIEFENSTAHL’S GUILT**

After Hitler’s suicide and the German surrender on May 8, 1945, Leni Riefenstahl fled Berlin to Kitzbühel in Austria where forces of the Seventh American Army captured her and placed her under arrest. In custody, the German Intelligence Section interrogated her about her

knowledge of Hitler's plans for mass genocide and total war conducted across the European continent. In her interrogation, on May 30, 1945, Riefenstahl was introduced as a "film star and producer" as well as "Hitler's alleged mistress."<sup>83</sup> Due to her status and her closeness with both Hitler and Goebbels, rumors and speculation emerged that Riefenstahl was romantically involved with either one or both of them; rumors that she was eager to refute before the official denazification process began.<sup>84</sup> Riefenstahl stated in her interrogation that she "never had any sexual relations with either Hitler or Goebbels. She [said] further that she had a reputation as a movie artist before the world had ever heard the names Hitler and Goebbels."<sup>85</sup> This began Riefenstahl's lifelong attempt at rehabilitation of her image, arguing that she was a neutral and apolitical filmmaker, dedicated to her art over any political ideology or movement. One particularly surprising part of her interrogation is that Riefenstahl even insists she would have refrained from making *Triumph of the Will* if she knew "how much aggravation [she] would have" in producing it.<sup>86</sup> In her interrogation, Riefenstahl continued to parrot her oft-repeated tales of party machinations interfering with her art, and that Goebbels and his underlings from the Ministry of Propaganda attempted to impede production of *Triumph of the Will*, constantly frustrating Riefenstahl, the consummate non-ideological filmmaker and artist.<sup>87</sup> In 1993, speaking to documentary filmmaker Ray Müller, Riefenstahl repeated her trademark lines that she "didn't know who Hitler was" before the Sportpalast Rally, and that she "didn't like his

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<sup>83</sup> National Archives Collection of World War II War Crimes and Records, 1939-1945, "Riefenstahl, Leni," Online, accessed March 29th, 2019, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/57342880>

<sup>84</sup> Bach, *Leni*, 224.

<sup>85</sup> National Archives Collection, "Riefenstahl, Leni."

<sup>86</sup> National Archives Collection, "Riefenstahl, Leni."

<sup>87</sup> National Archives Collection, "Riefenstahl, Leni."

racial theories.”<sup>88</sup> Riefenstahl also denied that she had even a close working, professional relationship with Hitler or Goebbels, despite Müller reading Riefenstahl numerous excerpts of Goebbels’ diaries detailing plays, films, and other events he attended with her, Magda his wife, and other high-ranking Nazi officials. Goebbels in his diaries refers to Riefenstahl as “clever... a courageous woman” who is “capable of a great deal.”<sup>89</sup> These excerpts, along with numerous official and unofficial photographs, countered Riefenstahl’s claims that she rarely encountered either Hitler or Goebbels during her filmmaking career in the Third Reich. In response to these excerpts, Riefenstahl nearly left Müller’s interview, muttering that Goebbels’ was “the master of the lie” and that not even his mundane personal accounts could not be trusted as methods of disproving her story.<sup>90</sup> However, historians agree that his private diaries are “too voluminous” to have been edited regularly as a matter of political convenience. The diaries also have the advantage of having been written much more closely in time to the actual events occurring than Riefenstahl’s memoirs were.<sup>91</sup> Ultimately, the American interrogators in Bavaria refrained from labeling Riefenstahl as either a fervent Nazi or a cynical opportunist, instead commenting on what they perceived to be her “lack of moral poise.”<sup>92</sup> The army officers then wrote what Bach considered Riefenstahl’s epitaph: “If her statements are sincere, she has never grasped, and still does not grasp, the fact that she, by dedicating her life to art, has given expression to a gruesome regime and contributed to its glorification.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> “The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl,” directed by Ray Müller (Arte, Four Channel Films, ZDF, 1993), Online, accessed March 29th, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wA7lv\\_iMRrw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wA7lv_iMRrw)

<sup>89</sup> Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 86.

<sup>90</sup> “The Wonderful Horrible Life,” dir. Ray Müller (Arte, Four Channel Films, ZDF, 1993), Online.

<sup>91</sup> David Culbert, “The New Goebbels Diary Entries (2006) and Leni Riefenstahl,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 27, No. 4 (October 2007), 552.

<sup>92</sup> Bach, *Leni*, 224.

<sup>93</sup> Bach, *Leni*, 225-226.

As Prose wrote in the *Yale Review*, Riefenstahl “seems to believe that the entire difference between art and propaganda is voice-over narration. A narrator is propaganda. No narrator is art.”<sup>94</sup> Riefenstahl believed that propaganda could only be qualified as such if a voice-over was present to explain the ideological significance of each sequence or shot. Riefenstahl considered her films as existing within both the realms of art and documentary. However, given the highly staged nature of Hitler’s arrival, the rally sequences, and the parades through the streets of Nuremberg, any reading of the film would have to account for Riefenstahl’s (and Hitler’s), in Schulte-Sasse’s words, “conflating [of] the imaginary with modern reality.” Thus, Hitler’s presence on screen, depicted as the “savior” of the new Nazi German state, must be rendered as “imaginary” rather than a document of objective reality. Riefenstahl, in her methods of portraying Hitler as the Wagnerian “perfect fascist hero” of the *Reichsparteitag*, in fact implicates herself in the creation of the myth of the fascist hero. Walter Benjamin, in his work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, explained that because the “actor” (in Riefenstahl’s case, Hitler) is presented through the medium of film, edited and presented through angles unique to the movements of a camera, audience identification instead lies with the camera, rather than the subject of the film.<sup>95</sup> Riefenstahl serves as the point of audience identification for anyone who was not present at the Nuremberg Rally, presenting the audience with what she desired them to see, and in those decisions, became a central figure in how the narrative of the Nazi Party was controlled and disseminated. In other words, Riefenstahl’s control over the narrative of Adolf Hitler as a savior of Nazi Germany greatly assisted the Nazi propaganda machine as a whole, enabling the use of film to further

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<sup>94</sup> Prose, “Leni Riefenstahl,” 42.

<sup>95</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,”

spread their destructive ideology more efficiently than before. Therefore, Riefenstahl's claims that she moved through the inner circles of Nazi hierarchy as an apolitical artist do not hold up under scrutiny.

From the late 1970s there has been a loosely organized movement to, if not completely rehabilitate Riefenstahl, provide her with a platform to tell "her side of the story." Until her death, Riefenstahl continued to make public appearances at film festivals. The somewhat morbid context for this late-in-life "Riefenstahl Renaissance" came primarily from her status as the last living tether to the Nazi era, an associate and a witness to one of the most evil regimes in modern history. The "great image maker of the Nazis" and "woman of evil" had been transformed into a "feminist pioneer."<sup>96</sup> Questions of Riefenstahl's role within the inner workings of the Nazi Party began to be replaced by commentaries on her talents as a filmmaker, praising her technical work on *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*, while adding in the fact that these films were approved and financed by the Nazi Party almost as a secondary matter. According to Trimborn, "curiosity and interest replaced indignation and anger."<sup>97</sup> However, Riefenstahl could not fully escape accusations beyond her official status as a *Mitläufer* (fellow traveler) with the deadly machinery of the Nazi Party. In August of 2002, shortly after her 100th birthday, the Frankfurt Prosecutor's Office announced a preliminary investigation into allegations that Riefenstahl had denied the Holocaust, a crime under German federal law. Specifically, the accusations stated that during the making of her narrative film *Tiefland* in 1944, Riefenstahl had denied that Roma and Sinti concentration camp inmates used as extras in the film had been transported to their deaths at Auschwitz immediately after filming of their scenes was complete. The Prosecutor's Office

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<sup>96</sup> Catherine Soussloff and Bill Nichols, "Leni Riefenstahl: The Power of Image," *Discourse*, 18, No. 3 (Spring 1996), 21.

<sup>97</sup> Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 283.

focused on comments Riefenstahl had made at a book fair in Frankfurt in October of 2000 in which she stated that the “biggest lie” promulgated against her was that she was “in the concentration camps” and personally selecting “Gypsy” inmates for use in her films. Riefenstahl had also stated previously that she was assured that “all of the Gypsy extras” survived the war period, and that she was fortunate to have “bumped into” a few of the extras over the years.<sup>98</sup> Riefenstahl denied these particular allegations for decades. The first allegations of wrongdoing were published in 1949, during the period leading up to Riefenstahl’s denazification trial. The illustrated magazine *Revue* published accounts that claimed that Riefenstahl had personally ventured to the concentration camps and selected the Sinti and Roma extras herself for use as “film slaves.”<sup>99</sup> Although she eventually won a libel lawsuit against *Revue* Riefenstahl continued to battle the allegations that she personally selected the extras from Maxglan concentration camp for the *Tiefland* production. According to Bach’s account Maxglan was “a transit or collection camp for German Gypsies destined for cattle cars to the east.”<sup>100</sup> Thus, it functioned as a holding center for Sinti and Roma inmates destined for Auschwitz and other death camps. If Riefenstahl had been present at Maxglan to select extras for *Tiefland*, then she could not have been ignorant of the camp’s ultimate purpose. Consensus around Riefenstahl, particularly regarding her complete control of film productions and obsessive attention to detail, supports the hypothesis that she would not have delegated the work of selecting extras to anyone else on her crew. The Sinti and Roma extras on set endured conditions that were authoritarian and below the standards of human decency. The extras were housed in barns and stables and were not paid directly, but into a “general fund” designed to offset the costs of operating the Maxglan concentration camp.

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<sup>98</sup> Tegel, “Gypsy Question,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, (2003), 4.

<sup>99</sup> Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 190.

<sup>100</sup> Bach, *Leni*, 205.



<sup>101</sup> Riefenstahl's clear moral bankruptcy regarding the treatment of the Sinti and Roma extras in *Tiefland* reveals a woman whose ambitious commitment to her work overshadowed any ethical or moral quandaries she encountered. The extras she employed, in her mind, only existed to aid in the completion of *Tiefland*, and Riefenstahl's denials of the eventual fates of most of them functioned as a strategy to free herself of the "Nazi film director" label. In the particular case involving the Sinti and Roma extras, Riefenstahl was only found guilty of the lesser charge of "desecrating the memory of the dead." and forced to issue a retraction of her earlier contentions that she had been ignorant about the circumstances of where the extras came from.<sup>102</sup> Although she was ultimately found not guilty of denying the Holocaust, Riefenstahl's reputation suffered in the international media in the year before her death at age 101.

Since Riefenstahl was never convicted of any crime relating to the Nazi regime immediately after the war, Bach recounts that she always posed "a single defiant question in lieu of an answer 'Of what am I guilty?'"<sup>103</sup> Leni Riefenstahl did not personally kill anyone during the Nazi regime, nor did she aid in the planning or construction of the concentration camp system or the murderous policies of the SS, the SA, or the *Sicherheitsdienst*. Nevertheless, Riefenstahl's contributions to the furtherance of the Nazi ideal, through her methods of filmmaking and her onscreen presentation of militarism and reverence towards Hitler, contributed immensely to the propaganda war that the Nazi Party was waging for possession of the hearts and minds of the German people. When asked by director Ray Müller whether she thought she had made a "pact with the devil," Riefenstahl attempted to deflect from substantively answering the question, stating that "now we know" that Hitler was a kind of "devil" or

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<sup>101</sup> Bach, *Leni*, 203.

<sup>102</sup> Tegel, "Gypsy Question," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, (2003), 8.

<sup>103</sup> Bach, *Leni*, 5.

“schizophrenic,” claiming that this information relating to Hitler’s twisted personality was not common knowledge at the time.<sup>104</sup> However, numerous contemporary newspaper accounts of Nazi crimes had already been published, and the Nazis’ reputation for brutality was well apparent in Germany by the early 1930s. Leni Riefenstahl’s reasons for agreeing to make films for Hitler were her own desire for professional advancement in the new German government and a sense of excitement and curiosity about the Nazi political program. Her most famous film, *Triumph of the Will*, is a reflection of her sincere admiration for Adolf Hitler and a vital document that explains how the Nazis were able to syndicate their horrific message to millions over such a short period of time.

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<sup>104</sup> “The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl,” dir. Ray Müller (Arte, Four Channel Films, ZDF, 1993), Online.

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