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“In the Spirit of a Millennial Inheritance:” The Nazi Ambition to Regenerate German Civilization through the Visual Arts

Marco J. Lloyd
Gettysburg College

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Keywords

Nazism, Nazi art, National Socialist art, cultural policy, Nazi culture

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Nazism

Professor Bowman

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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.

"When we to-day summon German art to new, great tasks, we would conceive of these tasks not merely as the fulfilment of the wishes and hopes of the present, but in the spirit of a millennial inheritance"- Adolf Hitler.[1]

Introduction

After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, the Third Reich attempted to shape and control many aspects of German society in a process known as *Gleichschaltung* or "coordination." German culture was no exception. The Nazis exerted influence in the negative sense, repressing, confiscating, and demonizing art that they considered "degenerate" or contrary to Nazi ideological ideals of Germanness. On the other hand, the Nazis also patronized and elevated art that upheld their ideals. While not always applied consistently, this policy was born out of the National Socialist ideology. It reflected both its disdain for the perceived degeneration of German society and its desire to give purpose and meaning to an envisioned Aryan utopia. They intended purification and promotion of the visual arts to lay the cultural foundation for this new civilization. Therefore, this paper seeks to explain Nazi cultural policy as a product of Nazi ideology and contribute to the historiographical debate surrounding the role of modernism and ideology in Nazi art.

Historiography

Prevailing perceptions of Nazi cultural policy as totalitarian and repressive emerged almost immediately. On May 10th, 1933, just a few months after the Nazi seizure of power, students in several German universities burned thousands of books considered subversive and un-German, prompting worldwide outrage, with counter-demonstrations in American cities. In the following years, many prominent German artists, authors, and intellectuals fled Nazi rule,

[1] Adolf Hitler, "Address on Art and Politics on September 11, 1935," in *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler*, ed. Norman Hepburn Baynes, vol. 2 (New York: Gordon Press, 1981), 584.

bringing their critiques of Nazi cultural totalitarianism and strongly denouncing Nazi policies. Similarly, the "Degenerate Art Exhibition" of 1937 sparked international outrage.[2] These events helped foster a perception of Nazi cultural policy as regressive and totalitarian, which solidified during the Cold War as many lumped the cultural approaches of Nazi Germany with their perception of the Soviet Union, which used terror to dominate the cultural sphere to stifle all independent artistic expression except that which could be effective as propaganda.[3] Therefore, historical works of this period focused primarily on uplifting the artists who were victims of Nazi policy or condemning the backward and repressive nature of that policy.[4] In the post-war period, most understood Nazi culture as "essentially Teutonic pastoralism, Speer-esque monumentalism and/or 'blood and soil' reaction."[5] In fact, the Nazi approach to cultural policy was regarded as regressive and philistine to the point where the term "nazi culture" was often considered a "scandalous oxymoron."[6]

Most modern historians eschew these generalizations and assumptions, but the historiographical focus on Nazi art as totalitarian and reactionary remains a prevailing theme. In *Culture in Nazi Germany*, Michael H. Kater describes the coordination of culture as totalitarian and completely anti-modern. While there was some initial tolerance, the Nazis desired to create their own aesthetic culture, so by 1937 at least, they eliminated modernism because of its associations with Weimar Germany and groups the Nazis considered un-German. Additionally, Kater and others, such as Ehrhard Bahr, built on advancements in Holocaust historiography to

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[2] Glenn R. Cuomo, *National Socialist Cultural Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 1.
[3] Paul Betts, "The New Fascination with Fascism: The Case of Nazi Modernism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 4 (2002): 545–47.
[4] For an example of this latter perspective, see George L. Mosse, "Introduction," in *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural, and Social Life in the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966).
[5] Betts, "New Fascination with Fascism," 553.
[6] Betts, "New Fascination with Fascism," 548.

understand parallels between the Nazi purification of culture and the annihilation of the Jews and other non-German people.[7] In addition to the removal of modern art from public display, historians like Stephanie Barron look at the Nazi concept and display of "degenerate art" as a tool to denounce ideological opponents and legitimize themselves as protectors of German culture and civilization. Historians such as Barron, Fritz Stern, and Shearer West place these actions in the context of the conservative reaction towards modern art, showing that the Nazis inherited this view of modern art from a long German tradition of *Kulturpessimismus* (cultural pessimism), which understood changes in art as being reflective of changes in society in general, leading to the idea of art being emblematic of a civilizational decline.[8]

Opposing this view, other historians have questioned the assertion that Nazi culture was completely anti-modern, pointing out the evidence of modern technology and style in Nazi culture and propaganda, through the effective use of film, radio, advertising, and other forms of 'low culture.' One could expect modernism in modern media, but traditionally historians have considered painting and architecture in Nazi Germany as "the supreme exemplars of 'blood and soil' ideology."[9] More recently, the relationship between modernism, Nazi ideology, and the high arts has been the subject of much historiographical debate. Because of a significant focus on painting and architecture in Nazi rhetoric, and their contested role in the historiography, this paper will primarily focus on these art forms.

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[7] Michael H. Kater, *Culture in Nazi Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), xiv-xvi. See also Ehrhard Bahr, "Nazi Cultural Politics: Intentionalism vs. Functionalism," in *National Socialist Cultural Policy*, by Glenn R. Cuomo (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).
[8] Stephanie Barron et al., *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991) 11-13; Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair; A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961); Shearer West, *The Visual Arts in Germany, 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).
[9] Betts, "New Fascination with Fascism," 549.

Many historians have come to view modernism in Nazi art as a form of continuity with the Weimar period. Barbara Miller Lane argues that the Nazis did not have a distinct architectural style, and the period was typified by continuity rather than change.[10] Iain Boyd Whyte examines how many students of Bauhaus Modernism shifted their allegiance to Nazi Germany and the Nazi use and misuse of that style.[11] Prevailing modernist elements were also present in Nazi painting and sculpture, raising questions about the Nazi relationship to modernism when considering the vicious denunciation of modern art by prominent Nazi leaders.[12]

One common explanation for the continuing presence of modern art is that the Nazi coordination of cultural policy was not nearly as complete or as pervasive as previously thought. The political structure of Nazi Germany was characterized by individuals and institutions with overlapping jurisdictions, all competing for power under Hitler's sweeping leadership.[13] Jonathan Petropoulos uses this polycratic framework to argue that the promotion and repression of art were often marked by inconsistencies and contradictions because it was dictated by the ambitions of different prominent Nazi leaders.[14] Joan L. Clinefelter takes a similar approach. Her

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[10] Barbara Miller Lane, *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 8-10.
[11] Iain Boyd Whyte, "National Socialism and Modernism: Architecture," in *Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators 1930-45*, ed. Dawn Ades (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1995): 264-69.
[12] Cuomo, *National Socialist Cultural Policy*, 1-3.
[13] Klaus Fischer, *Nazi Germany: A New History* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1998), 294-299.
[14] Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Petropoulos briefly discusses cultural repression and promotion, but his primary focus is the Nazi confiscation of art. While this is an important component of the relationship between the Third Reich and visual art, this paper will not extensively discuss confiscation because different factors, such as personal ambition and competition, drove that process.

analysis of the German Art Society argues that policy was inconsistent and dictated from below as much as from above. She suggests that 'Nazi art' is determined less by specific themes or styles than by context, interpretation, and rhetoric. Overlapping institutions and competing personalities made Nazi cultural policy inconsistent and sometimes surprisingly permissive of art that might officially be considered "degenerate."[15]

While competing institutions within the Third Reich can explain some diversity in art, Hitler was ultimately in control of Nazi cultural policy.[16] Therefore, the polycratic explanation does not explain the full plurality of styles, many of which enjoyed official patronage. Therefore, it is essential to understand Hitler's cultural ideology within the context of the Nazi condemnation of modernism.[17] Some historians effectively identify the presence of both elements. Peter Paret effectively explains Nazi anti-Modernism; they viewed modern art as a foreign influence corrupting the purity of German culture. By analyzing the influence of Impressionism on the work of Hans Schweitzer, a prominent Nazi propagandist, he argues that

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[15] Joan L. Clinefelter, *Artists for the Reich: Culture and Race from Weimar to Nazi Germany* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2005), 1-5. See also, Alan E. Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics in Nazi Germany: The Reich Chambers of Music, Theater, and the Visual Arts* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Steinweis focuses on the Reich Chamber of Culture, suggesting a historiographical overemphasis on repression and an underappreciation of the degree to which artists cooperated with the Reich and its neo-corporatist promotion of art. Cuomo, *National Socialist Cultural Policy*, contains essays that outline several different cultural approaches, especially regarding different artistic mediums.

[16] Petropoulos, *Art as Politics*, 35.

[17] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968); Lutz P. Koepnick, "Fascist Aesthetics Revisited," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 1 (1999): 51–73. Both Benjamin and Koepnick take a Marxist view of modernism in Nazi art through their understanding of fascism as late-stage capitalism, where even aesthetics become a marketable political commodity. Their interpretation can be more philosophical than historical, but they successfully identify how central aesthetics were to fascism.

Nazi propaganda incorporated elements of modern art.[18] Some historians do not attempt to explain this apparent inconsistency, dismissing it as "contradictions" from a "Janus-faced cultural policy."[19]

On the other hand, in *Nostalgia for the Future: Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts of Nazi Germany*, Gregory Maertz proposes intentional reasons behind the presence of modern elements. Maertz examines previously unstudied works in German collections and publications to provide more evidence for the continuation of modern art and styles under Nazi rule and even under Nazi patronage. He partially attributes this to the polycratic inconsistencies of Nazi rule and the presence of "degenerate" modernists as patrons and official artists.[20] He also explains modernism in Nazi aesthetics as looking forwards to a eugenic Nordic utopia. This Nazi futurism contributed to modernist themes and stylistic elements in many Nazi artworks.[21]

Understanding Nazi cultural policy's intent to lay the foundation for a thousand-year Reich is a key component of this paper. The Nazi relationship with art was not just a propaganda effort but an essential expression of Nazi ideology. As such, one must understand German fascism and its relationship with modernity and culture. The Nazi movement was, in many ways, a conservative reaction to the events and instability of the Weimar Republic, but it also embodied more significant insecurities about modern society and changes in German culture. In art, as in politics, the Nazis presented a vision for national regeneration that was both a reaction against the Weimar Republic and a vision for a greater future society. They did not so much try to turn

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[18] Peter Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism: 1840-1945* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
[19] Cuomo, *National Socialist Cultural Policy*, 2.
[20] Gregory Maertz, *Nostalgia for the Future: Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts of Nazi Germany* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2019), 15-16.
[21] Maertz, *Nostalgia for the Future*, 54-57.

back the clock to an idealized pre-modern past but instead looked to create a future imbued with spirit and free from the corrosive elements of Marxism, capitalism, liberalism, Judaism, and other elements not seen as properly German. This was more important than adhering to a stylistic orthodoxy. Given the association between culture and civilization, Nazi policy towards the visual arts can therefore be understood as not only an example of this ideology but an essential component of it.

Changes in German art and society ~1870-1933

Throughout the nineteenth century, German society and culture underwent monumental changes. In a few generations, many Germans went from members of a hierarchical feudal society to citizens of an increasingly modern and industrial one. By 1871, the patchwork of independent princedoms of the former Holy Roman Empire united into a modern nation-state, with more pronounced ideas of German nationalism and distinctness. Industrialization happened later and more quickly in Germany than in other European nations, creating a culture shock as ways of work, life, and society changed rapidly.[22] The resulting dehumanization of technology, secularization, and the erosion of traditions led to questions of meaning and identity in the modern world.[23]

Within this context of uncertainty, German art underwent drastic changes as well. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, most professional art had been regulated in a formal academic setting. However, in the 1890s, various groups of dissatisfied artists and art critics broke away from this more regulated structure. These Secession movements, while still elitist, gave artists more control over the sale and display of their art, providing greater freedom for

[22] Mary Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 112-138.
[23] Fischer, *Nazi Germany*, 5-13.

experimentation.[24] Secession movements in different cities differed in style and ideas, but they were generally more favorable to inspiration from the modern French Impressionists. The lower barrier for exhibiting art also led to greater experimentation and stylistic changes, allowing for the development of the style of Expressionism.[25] Whereas Impressionism was primarily a French movement, Expressionism originated in Germany. It played on idealist tendencies, intending to express the spiritual and emotional through abstraction.[26] While Expressionism grew in popularity, it remained largely underground for the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The First World War marked sharp changes in both the political and cultural order. The conservative government of Imperial Germany had restricted many of the more leftist and radical elements of German society. On the other hand, the new Weimar government was far more tolerant and even encouraged modern art. While political changes made modern art more acceptable, social changes really pushed artistic trends. The horrors of the First World War and the following turmoil largely ended the idealism associated with the lingering German Romanticism.[27] The chaotic years of 1918 to 1924 were characterized by an explosion in the popularity of Expressionism and the irrational and eclectic Dada style. From 1924 to 1929, Weimar Germany enjoyed a period of relative stability and the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) style, which reacted against the abstractions and utopianism of Expressionism with an emphasis on the physical and a gritty, and sometimes cynical, realism. This typology, while helpful, understates the incredible diversity and creativity in styles that colored Weimar culture.[28] Despite the turmoil of modern Germany, or more likely partially because of it, Germany between

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[24] Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism,* 63-68.
[25] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany,* 18-26.
[26] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany,* 84.
[27] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany,* 3.
[28] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany,* 159-62.

1918 and 1933 was a time of remarkable artistic experimentation and creativity. However, changes as impactful and profound as the evolution of German culture often have strong opposition.

Cultural pessimism and the conservative reaction to modern art

The Weimar Republic and many aspects of its culture would fall to Hitler and his Nazi party in 1933. In his rise to power, Hitler successfully mobilized fears of the perceived decline in culture and civilization, but he was far from the first opponent of modern art. Discontent with modernity was a long-time staple of German thought, laying the foundation for Hitler's cultural philosophy. In 1890, philosopher and art historian Julius Langbehn released *Rembrandt als Erzieher (Rembrandt the Educator)* to critical claim and over 150,000 copies sold by 1945.[29] He captured feelings of confusion and despair at rapid modernization and changing ways of life. Coopting Rembrandt as an authentic Germanic hero, he called for society to turn away from rationalism and commerce and back to art and primitive life. Decades before the NSDAP, he directly connected art to the German *Volk* and blamed the rootless Jew for its degeneration and the promotion of soulless modernity.[30] Two years after *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, author and physician Max Nordau popularized the notion of an *Entartung* (degeneration) of art. He used medical language to diagnose modern art and culture as deviant or sick. He also connected "degenerate art" to mental and physical disabilities.[31]

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[29] Stern, *Politics of Cultural Despair,* 155.
[30] Stern, *Politics of Cultural Despair,* 97-142.
[31] Olaf Peters and Steven Lindberg, "Fear and Propaganda: National Socialism and the Concept of 'Degenerate Art,'" *Social Research* 83, no. 1 (2016): 42-46. Nordau did not associate art with race, himself being Jewish, but others readily applied degeneracy to individuals who failed to meet an imagined German racial ideal.

Even in the late eighteenth century, the intellectual phenomenon of cultural pessimism was well formed. However, the humiliation and defeat of the First World War and rapid change in politics and institutions made Germans even more acutely aware of perceived civilizational decline. First published in 1918, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* struck a chord with many Germans. He conceived of a "life-course" for civilizations.[32] Like past great civilizations, Spengler argued that the West had passed its stages of growth and was already displaying symptoms of irreversible decline. This cycle of civilization is more than power or influence; he conceived of a metaphysical life for a society. Therefore, his discussion of Western art is central to his analysis. The West reached its maturity with the Baroque Period (1500-1800.) Once a society stagnates culturally, its artists can no longer create great innovation but rather seek soulless fashion and trends.[33] In this way, Expressionism and other modern art forms were not just symptomatic of civilizational decline but *were* civilizational decline.

As the Weimar Republic continued, voices of cultural concern only became louder. In 1928's *Art and Race,* Paul Schultze-Naumburg argued that "every artistic judgment is at least in part bound to race."[34] Therefore, the "atrophy of the feeling for physical beauty in art" is proof of "racial decline."[35] Later, he explicitly blamed the Jews for modernist architecture, arguing that the style, just like the Jew, was internationalist and rootless, bearing no connection to the German people or culture.[36] Other conservatives, such as Arthur Moeller van fer Bruck, Ernst

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[32] Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, vol. 1 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 3.
[33] Spengler, *Decline of the West*, 291-295.
[34] Paul Schultze-Naumburg, "Art and Race," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 496.
[35] Schultze-Naumburg, "Art and Race," 489.
[36] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany*, 185.

Jünger, and Edgar Jung, joined Spengler and Schultze-Naumburg in the chorus denouncing the soulless materialism of modern life and democracy. Between the proponents and opponents of modern culture, the visual arts became a political battleground.[37]

The conservative reaction against modernism in art was not merely born from aesthetic antipathy. According to historian Peter Paret, modern art became a target because "it was easier to fight innovations in literature or painting than oppose such forces as urbanization or internationalization of financial institutions. Not only did modernism in the arts raise anxieties for its own sake, but it also became the target for frustrations with very different roots."[38] While many disliked modern art for its stylistic qualities, many directly connected art to the society which created it. Therefore, to many, modern art embodied the liberalism, socialism, materialism, immorality, and national humiliation that they despised about modern Weimar society.

Despite the despair over civilization's decline, many during this period hoped for a conservative revolution that would return Germany to its glory days. These ideas were foundational for the Nazi Party, which shared the same cultural philosophy and proposed a vision for cultural regeneration through the state. On February 24th, 1920, Hitler presented twenty-five points as the platform of his new party. Among them, the Nazis demanded "legal prosecution of all tendencies in art and literature of a kind likely to disintegrate our life as a nation, and the suppression of institutions which militate against the requirements mentioned

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[37] Fischer, *Nazi Germany*, 186-87; Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism,* 196-198. Criticism of artists sometimes came from both sides. Communists denounced Max Liebermann, President of the Prussian Academy of the Arts, for not being more politically vocal and for a portrait of a Prussian field marshal. At the same time, the right criticized his work as un-German and him for being a Jew in such a high position in the German art world.

[38] Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism*, 63.

above.[39] From the beginning, the Nazis viewed art as dangerous to society, something they inherited from the aforementioned traditions. Additionally, they called for repression as necessary to protect the community.

After the failure of the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, Hitler further expanded on his cultural vision in *Mein Kampf*, giving a further explanation as to why repression of corruptive tendencies was essential.[40] Concurring with the cultural pessimists, he describes the "cultural level" as "one of the most obvious manifestations of decay in the old Reich."[41] Later, he explicitly blames the Jew, who "contaminates art, literature, the theater, makes a mockery of natural feeling, overthrows all concepts of beauty and sublimity, of the noble and good, and instead drags men down into the sphere of his own base nature."[42] Despite still being a small minority, Jews were overrepresented in the arts making up 4.5% of painters in Prussia, when compared to being 0.9% of the total population, giving ammunition to antisemitic claims of Jewish domination and corruption of the cultural sphere.[43] Due to this corruption, he describes modern culture as "morbid excrescences," "parasitic growths," and a "disease," using medical language similar to Nordau.[44] He once again argues for government intervention against this degeneration "For it is the business of the state, in other words, of its leaders, to prevent a people from being driven into the arms of spiritual madness."[45]

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[39] German Workers' Party (DAP), "The Twenty-Five Points," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 126.
[40] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 255-263.
[41] Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 257.
[42] Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 326.
[43] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics*, 104.
[44] Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 258-59.
[45] Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 258-59.

Understanding Hitler's political thought in the intellectual landscape of cultural pessimism demonstrates that Hitler conceived of art as not only vital, in and of itself, but also for its direct connection to the strength of the state and the spiritual health of the people. For a civilization to thrive, the state must protect its culture from ethnic outsiders and political subversives. The views expressed in *Mein Kampf* were not unique for their time. Hitler's views of the degeneration of culture, civilization, and even the racial component of art were talking points of other German thinkers. However, unlike the others, Hitler put this cultural theory into practice.

Nazi repression of "degenerate art"

Between 1923 and 1933, *Mein Kampf* sold 287,000 copies in Germany.[46] In this same time, Hitler went from a prisoner to Chancellor. After the seizure of power, the Nazi government initiated a process of *Gleichschaltung,* or "coordination," in which they attempted to exert control over German institutions.[47] Culture was no different, with the Nazis addressing art almost immediately. Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January. In February, the Nazis forced prominent members of the Prussian Academy of the Arts to resign. Within the next few months, they closed the Bauhaus school of modern architecture, stripped artists such as George Grosz of citizenship, and established the *Reichskulturkammer* (Reich Chambers of Culture). Hitler passed the "Law for the Restoration of the Civil Service," which allowed the government to dismiss Jews and "politically unreliable" people from civil service, including administrators of art academies.[48] On May 10th, 1933, students of universities across Germany burned supposedly un-

[46] Fischer, *Nazi Germany,* 164.
[47] Fischer, *Nazi Germany,* 278.
[48] Bahr, "Nazi Cultural Politics," 11.

German books. The fact that the Nazis attempted to shape the art world immediately, before even entirely securing political power, demonstrates the importance of art to the regime.

After these spontaneous actions and demonstrations, cultural policy became more official and institutionalized. According to historian Alan Steinweis, cultural coordination was similar to the coordination of other fields. It entailed Nazi coercion, conservative collaboration, liberal surrender, and artists attempting to cooperate with the regime to gain concessions.[49] Similarly to other aspects of the Nazi administration, cultural policy was controlled by multiple Nazi leaders, each competing for power and influence, in a structure that some historians refer to as a "polycracy." Alfred Rosenberg's *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* (Militant League for German Culture) or KfdK was a prominent player in the Nazi Party during the Weimar period but faded in influence due to Hitler's distrust of Rosenberg and as cultural control shifted away from the party and towards the state. However, it remained a dissident voice in artistic culture. In addition, Robert Ley's *Deutsche Arbeitsfront* (German Labor Front) and Bernhard Rust's *Reichsministerium für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung* (Reich Ministry of Science, Education, and Culture) claimed control over art. However, Hitler repeatedly sided with Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, giving his *Reichskulturkammer* (RKK) extensive control over cultural policy.[50]

Although Goebbels came out on top of cultural policy, he was far from dominant. These and other rivals consistently threatened his position. Goebbels himself was fairly moderate in his views on art, being fond of some modern art and initially hoping to foster creativity through guided freedom. However, pressure from Hitler and competition from other Nazi elites led to an

[49] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics*, 35.
[50] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics*, 32-44.

increasingly radicalized cultural policy, as various leaders attempted to outflank Goebbels in confiscation of art and repression of "degenerate art."[51] While these institutional factors did push some decisions and shape some of the diversity in Nazi art, it is important to note that Hitler ultimately determined cultural policy, being personally invested in art and culture. Goebbels only came out on top in culture because he was willing to follow Hitler's ideology above his own preferences, which Rosenberg was unwilling to do. Hitler allowed these rivalries to maintain his absolute power as "arbiter of all disputes."[52] For example, when Goebbels became too powerful and tolerant of liberal modernism, Hitler began empowering the more radical Rosenberg, forcing Goebbels to compromise.[53] In this way, Hitler shaped cultural policy to his ideological preferences.

Under Hitler's direction, Goebbels suppressed any attempts from museums to display "degenerate art" and even restricted printing reproductions of it.[54] In addition to limiting the display of art, the Third Reich also restricted its creation. The RKK was further broken into branches to control membership in each artistic medium. For an individual to practice the visual arts professionally, for example, they had to be vetted and approved by the Visual Arts Chamber.[55] This tied the artist to the regime, making them economically dependent on governmental approval. By 1937 the Visual Arts Chamber had 35,060 members.[56] Members

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[51] Petropoulos, *Art as Politics*, 8-9. Petropoulos makes a compelling case that this competition for status compelled to much of the confiscation and theft of art for private Nazi collections, especially during the war. However, it affected policy to a far lesser degree.
[52] Petropoulos, *Art as Politics*, 35.
[53] Petropoulos, *Art as Politics*, 35-50.
[54] Henry Grosshans, *Hitler and the Artists* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983), 75.
[55] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany*, 186.
[56] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics*, 4. The extensive administration and bureaucratic organization around culture demonstrated that Nazi Germany did not just consider art a propagandistic talking point, but they perceived it as a crucial part of their reign

received financial benefits and had a near monopoly on participation in competitions and exhibitions. Therefore, artists were economically dependent on obtaining and maintaining government approval, which could be rejected for failing to meet stylistic criteria.[57]

In addition to economic control, there was also censorship, although it was far less totalitarian than often thought. In 1936, the government banned all unofficial art criticism, only allowing factual reporting with prior authorization in an attempt to silence "Jewish input" and remaining allies of modern art.[58] Additionally, Hitler disdained criticism, seeing it as useless and unimportant.[59] Regarding censoring artists, multiple institutions controlled censorship and sent mixed signals regarding what was deemed acceptable.[60] Nazi policy was dictated by the rule of men over the rule of law. Therefore, censorship was based on the arbitrary whim of a bureaucrat or a "micro-managing Hitler."[61] Overall, the government allowed limited freedom for artists, who mostly chose to cooperate, although there was still direct control and fearful self-censorship, which drastically increased during the war.[62] Many historians point to 1937 as the turning point when the state no longer tolerated stylistic heterodoxy. However, even after this, artists had significant stylistic discretion within the RKK guidelines. In many cases, artists could determine both their own art and, in some cases, shape policy.[63] The significant stylistic and creative diversity in art during the Nazi period attests to this.[64]

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[57] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics*, 86-87.
[58] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany,* 188.
[59] Grosshans, *Hitler and the Artists*, 77.
[60] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics*, 132-34.
[61] Kater, *Culture in Nazi Germany,* 27.
[62] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics*, 132-146.
[63] Clinefelter, *Artists for the Reich,* 3.
[64] Jonathan Huener and Francis R. Nicosia, *The Arts in Nazi Germany: Continuity, Conformity, Change.* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 3-4.

On the other hand, artists outside of the RKK had far less leeway, which excluded many groups as undesirable. It banned people who were associated with leftist politics during the Weimar Republic as well as those whose art was considered culturally “Bolshevist,” even if they were politically neutral. The removal of Jews was a top priority. Goebbels successfully eliminated most Jews from employment in the visual arts sphere in 1933.[65] However, Economics Minister Hjalmar Schacht initially forced Goebbels to make exceptions for 156 prominent Jewish art dealers, art publishers, and antique dealers for fear that their exclusion would cause too much damage to the economy.[66] Goebbels regarded this as a "cancer on our policy" and was able to remove all Jews from the Visual Arts Chamber.[67]

It is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of such an ambitious policy as controlling cultural output. Certainly, artists found ways around it. Käthe Kollwitz only displayed works in isolated showings. Max Beckmann continued working on his *Departure* triptych by hiding it in his attic (Figure 1). From 1938 to 1945, Emil Nolde made over thirteen-hundred paintings on scraps of rice paper with watercolors because he feared the scent of oil paint would give away that he was still artistically active.[68] While some passively resisted Nazi policy, the majority either fled or cooperated. The fact that they had to resist in secret demonstrates the success of Nazi policy in removing most "degenerate art" from public life.

These policies reflected Hitler's cultural ideology. From the twenty-five points and *Mein Kampf*, he clearly viewed it as the state's responsibility to protect the people from "spiritual

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[65] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics*, 120-126. Many banned Jewish artists emigrated, but others formed the *Jüdischer Kulturbund* (Jewish Culture League), which provided employment and support under government supervision. The government tolerated the *Kulturbund* as a source of information until the final ghettoization of the German Jews in 1941.
[66] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics*, 107-112.
[67] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics*, 112-13.
[68] Grosshans, *Hitler and the Artists*, 80-82.

madness."[69] In a speech outlining the goals of the new government on March 23rd, 1933, Hitler proclaimed, "Simultaneously with this political purification of our public life, the Government of the Reich will undertake a thorough moral purging of the body corporate of the nation. . . It is the task of art to be the expression of this determining spirit of the age.[70] By expelling non-Germans and leftists from positions in artistic exhibitions and banning them from participating in the RKK, the Nazis successfully purged the art world from what they considered subversive elements. Through actions and rhetoric like this, Hitler wanted to portray the Nazi movement as "the authority which rescued the German people from collapse," as he mentions in a later speech.[71] He wanted legitimacy for the Nazis as the protectors of German culture against subversive elements. The Degenerate Art Exhibition was one of the most explicit ways they attempted to differentiate themselves from Weimar Culture.

In the same speech, Hitler also proclaimed: "But these modern works we would also preserve as documents into which the people had fallen. The Exhibition of the 'Art of Decline' is intended as a useful lesson."[72] While the *Kamfbund für deutsche Kultur* (Militant League for German Culture) had been setting up small-scale *Schandausstellungen* (Exhibitions of Shame) denouncing Weimar art since at least 1933, this principal exhibition opened in Munich in 1937 on the same day as the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen* (Great German Art Exhibition), an intentional choice to juxtapose the two. Despite Hitler claiming its purpose as educational, the

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[69] Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 258-59.
[70] Adolf Hitler, "Defining the aims an tasks of the new Government on March 23, 1933," in *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler,* 568.
[71] Adolf Hitler, "Speech at the *Kulturtagung* of the 1937 *Nuremberg Parteitag,*" in *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler,* 593.
[72] Adolf Hitler, "Speech at the opening of the House of German Art on July 18, 1937," in *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler,* 588.

museum was a polemical effort to demonize the art of the Weimar Republic.[73] The gallery guide to the exhibition outlines the intentions: "*It* [the exhibition] *means* to expose the common roots of *political* anarchy and *cultural* anarchy and to unmask degenerate art as *art-Bolshevism* in every sense of the term."[74] In this sense, it tried to tie "degenerate art" to leftist politics and the chaos of the Weimar Republic.

However, unlike books or speeches, the exhibition aimed to make the public create this association instinctually. The gallery was designed to heighten the public's discomfort and disgust. The space was crowded, and works were displayed haphazardly and chaotically, with bold graffiti coloring the walls.[75] The exhibition targeted art critics and dealers as much as the artists themselves.[76] The Nazis understood that most of the public knew little to nothing about modern art and its meaning.[77] Therefore they included many quotations from reviews paired with the artworks intending to show the absurdity of those who defended these works as elitist and nonsensical. While there were comparatively few artworks by Jewish artists, many quotations were from Jewish art critics intending to show how the Jews influenced German culture for the worse.[78] It is challenging to gauge how the public received the Degenerate Art Exhibition. However, it was very well attended, with over two million visitors. For many, this would have been their first exposure to modern art.[79] This exhibition helped the campaign to eliminate

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[73] Bannon, *Degenerate Art,* 19.
[74] "Facsimile of the 'Entartete Kunst' Exhibition Brochure," trans. David Britt, in *Degenerate Art,* 360.
[75] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany,* 190-91.
[76] Neil Levi, "'Judge for Yourselves!'The 'Degenerate Art' Exhibition as Political Spectacle," *October* 85 (1998): 48.
[77] Mary-Margaret Goggin, "'Decent' vs. 'Degenerate' Art: The National Socialist Case," *Art Journal* 50, no. 4 (1991): 85.
[78] Levi, "'Judge for Yourselves,'" 48.
[79] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany,* 190.

”degenerate art” from public life by turning the public against it.[80] It additionally allowed the Nazis to position themselves as the protectors of German culture by removing supposed alien elements in art, in the same way they claimed to be the regenerators of a new German civilization free from the corruption of “subversive” influences.

What is true German art?

“A Revolution sweeps over the face of the State, and yet at the same time concerns itself with sowing the first seeds of a new higher culture. And it does this indeed in no merely negative sense.”[81] There was a general agreement among far-right conservatives in the Weimar period that the modern styles of Expressionism, Dada, and New Objectivity were detrimental to German civilization. The Nazis were successful in informing culture in this “negative” sense, but they also attempted to promote artistic creation. By adopting “neocoporatist notions of professionalism,” the RKK restructured the cultural sphere to provide economic support and incentives for artists.[82] They sponsored exhibitions and other opportunities for artists to display and sell art. The government also commissioned many artists, from architects designing grand public buildings to painters and craftsmen decorating government buildings. The Visual Arts Chamber also provided funds and stipends to help artists who were struggling. While there were still many flaws in the system, these policies, when combined with general economic recovery, were able to significantly improve economic conditions for many artists when compared to the liberal approach of the Weimar Republic.[83] These benefits of Nazi patronage pushed many to

[80] Barron, *Degenerate Art,* 22. Some people may have attended the Degenerate Art Exhibition out of genuine appreciation for the art and artists on display. However, interest in scandal and moral outrage are also powerful motivators. It is difficult to determine how people received the exhibition, but it likely had the desired effect on many visitors.
[81] Hitler, ”Address on Art and Politics,” 569.
[82] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics,* 74.
[83] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics,* 73-79.

compliance. Some did resist, but for many, economic and professional advancement trumped moral and ideological convictions.[84] In *The Faustian Bargain,* historian Jonathan Petropoulos argues that the Nazis succeeded in influencing culture because they had help from many in the art world. He found that museum curators, art dealers, art critics, art historians, and artists were all willing to collaborate with the Nazi regime.[85] This collaboration also shaped artistic styles and subject matters. Perhaps the most prominent example is Arno Brecker. During the Weimar Era, Brecker worked closely with many modernists at Düsseldorf Academy. While having some sympathies to the classical style, much of his early work, such as 1925's *Aurora*, shared inspiration from Expressionists (Figure 2). Later, the Nazis even confiscated some of his early sculptures as part of the purges of "degenerate art."[86] However, after the Nazi rise to power, he became one of the most prominent artists for the Reich. Although he was mostly apolitical, Hitler appealed to his artistic idealism and professional ambition, contributing to his adoption of a more idealized Hellenic style to conform to Nazi aesthetics, as evident in 1939's *The Torch Bearer* (Figure 3).[87] While Brecker is far from representative of all German artists, he represents how Nazi incentives influenced artistic styles and subject matter.

In many cases, artists cooperated with the regime in ways that influenced their art. However, the Nazi style the government was trying to promulgate was not always clear. This is partially due to stylistic disagreements within the Third Reich, best exemplified by Goebbels' and Rosenberg's differing aesthetic visions, both of which Hitler eventually rejected. Historians

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[84] Huener and Nicosia, *The Arts in Nazi Germany,* 5.
[85] Jonathan Petropoulos, *The Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.
[86] Petropoulos, *The Faustian Bargain*, 220.
[87] Petropoulos, *The Faustian Bargain*, 222-26.

have long viewed Nazi art as entirely reactionary, looking backward to an idealized past.[88] It is true that there were many inside and outside the Nazi party who wanted to turn back the clock on culture. These groups and individuals did impact Nazi art but did so despite the wishes of the Third Reich. For example, the German Art Society, a group of *völkisch* artists, opposed Weimar art for the same reasons as other cultural pessimists. Vehemently opposed to modern society, they attempted to recreate the traditional style of nineteenth-century salon paintings while infusing it with biological racial meaning.[89] Despite many Nazi leaders seeing them as regressive, the German Art Society continued to produce and exhibit art throughout the Third Reich, leading to artworks of an uncomplicated idealized racial past in a traditional style, such as Hans Schrödter's *Forest Workers (Waldarbeiter)* (Figure 4).[90]

There were also strong *völkisch* advocates within the Nazi Movement, most notably Alfred Rosenberg, who did not tolerate modern art forms, even if the artists themselves supported the Nazi movement as they did not possess the "intuitive quality" of the ideal of beauty.[91] In 1928 he founded the KfdK to further include artists in the National Socialist movement and to agitate on cultural issues. By 1932, it had 2,100 members. Strongly reactionary, the KfdK embraced a strong racial theory of art rejecting modernization, capitalism, and liberalism.[92] In his book *The Myth of the Twentieth Century,* Rosenberg claims the requirements for the revival of German art are "The Nordic racial ideal of beauty; the inner dynamic of European art, hence *content* as a problem of form, and; the recognition of an

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[88] Betts, "New Fascination with Fascism," 541-53.
[89] Clinefelter, *Artists for the Reich,* 1-2.
[90] Clinefelter, *Artists for the Reich,* 82-87.
[91] Alfred Rosenberg, "Revolution in the Visual Arts?," in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, ed. Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 488.
[92] Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, & Economics,* 23-27.

aesthetic will."[93] This manifested with the KfdK's romanticization of pre-industrial German life, especially the Middle Ages, as a more idealized and racially pure society.[94]

The work of the members of these and other groups contributed to the *völkisch* and traditional art that many associate with Nazi Germany. However, Hitler repeatedly denounced the approach of looking to a mythical German past. When Himmler and others searched for artifacts to prove the aesthetic heights of the Teutonic Age, Hitler complained:

> It isn't enough that the Romans were erecting great buildings when our forefathers were still living in mud huts; now Himmler is starting to dig up these villages of mud huts and enthusing over every potsherd and stone ax he finds. All we prove by that is that we were throwing stone hatchets and crouching around open fires when Greece and Rome had already reached the highest degree of culture.[95]

He had little regard for old German art, describing the work of Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald as "ugly."[96] By contrast, Rosenberg said that Grünewald's *Isenheim Altar* (Figure 5.), "in upward soaring power, is unequaled in world history."[97] These aesthetic disagreements, and Rosenberg's unwillingness to compromise ideologically, contributed to his waning influence in the cultural sphere after 1935.[98] Hitler did not want Germany to retreat backward in culture but move forward. However, this did not entail a wholehearted commitment to modern art.

In contrast to Rosenberg's vision of the Nazi revival of old German art, others, most notably Goebbels, wanted to utilize Expressionism. In addition to genuinely admiring it, Goebbels saw Expressionism as an authentically German style that could express German views

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[93] Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century: An Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of Our Age*, trans. Vivian Bird (Torrance, CA: Noontide Press, 1982), 196.
[94] Petropoulos, *Art as Politics*, 28-32.
[95] Adolf Hitler as quoted in Grosshans, *Hitler and the Artists*, 84.
[96] Grosshans, *Hitler and the Artists*, 84.
[97] Rosenberg, *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, 253.
[98] Petropoulos, *Art as Politics*, 37-50.

on land and nature and reject the dehumanizing industry of the constructivist and abstract art styles.[99] Additionally, Goebbels felt that the Reich must be modern in some aspects of technology and culture to resonate with modern people.[100] Specifically, Goebbels and others admired the works of German expressionists such as Ernst Barlach and Emil Nolde. However, by the opening of the Degenerate Art Exhibition in 1937, Hitler had definitively ruled against them, forcing Goebbel and the RKK to be less tolerant of Expressionism.

Many of Barlach's works reflected his struggle to understand the tragic realities of the First World War. Many on the right criticized his unheroic depictions of the war and German soldiers. The *Magdeburg Memorial* (Figure 6.) was an object of particular ire because of the figures' inhuman proportions and characteristics that some claimed were more Slavic than German, leading to the memorial's removal and Barlach's censure.[101] While Barlach was mostly apolitical, Emil Nolde was enthusiastic about Hitler's rise to power, even joining the NSDAP. Despite being politically aligned with Nazi beliefs, his art was still considered stylistically "Bolshevist." Hitler despised it for "the violent distortions and colors in his work."[102] In 1937, the authorities seized his works, displaying some in the Degenerate Art Exhibition. In 1941 the RKK forbade him from painting.[103] Many historians point to the examples of Barlach and Nolde to demonstrate the Nazi intolerance of modernism. However, the criticisms of these artists were not primarily that they were modern *per se*. Rather, they attacked Barlach and Nolde for their unflattering depictions of the human form. Additionally, Hitler continually empowered Goebbels

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[99] Brandon Taylor, "Post-Modernism in the Third Reich," in *The Nazification of Art: Art, Design, Music, Architecture, and Film in the Third Reich*, ed. Brandon Taylor and Wilfried van der Will (Winchester, UK: Winchester Press, 1990).
[100] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany,* 187.
[101] Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism,* 174-184.
[102] Adolf Hitler as quoted in Kater, *Culture in Nazi Germany,* 35.
[103] Kater, *Culture in Nazi Germany*, 34-36.

in cultural policy while reducing Rosenberg, suggesting some sympathy with Goebbels' approach, even as he reigned him in.[104]

Ultimately, however, Hitler rejected both Rosenberg's and Goebbels' approaches, considering them cultural regression; historicism attempted to recreate the past, and Expressionism attempted to capture aspects of primitive emotions. Speaking on modern art, he argued, "it is not the function of art to retreat backward from the stage of development which a people has already reached: its sole function must be to symbolize that development."[105] Additionally, under Hitler's understanding of art, it would not make sense to look forwards or backward for inspiration because he rejected the premise of stylistic development in art. He argued that because of Jewish influence in the media, "Art was said to be 'an international experience,' and thus all comprehension of its intimate association with a people was stifled: it was said there was no such thing as the art of a people or, better, of a race: there was only said to the art of a certain period."[106] Later in the same speech, he rejects this typology:

> For this 'modern art' National Socialism desires to substitute a "German" art and an eternal art. . . there can be therefore no standard of yesterday and to-day, of modern or un-modern: there can be only the standard of 'valueless' or 'valuable,' of 'eternal' or 'transitory.' And therefore in speaking of German art I shall see the standard for that art in the German people, in its character and life, in its feeling, its emotions and its development.[107]

Therefore, in this speech, Hitler rejects both Goebbels and Rosenberg by choosing not to look at "yesterday" and "to-day." Instead, he believed that art was either reflective of its people or not. So, what did Hitler envision in "German art" and "eternal art"?

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[104] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany,* 187.
[105] Hitler, "Speech at the opening of the House of German Art," 590.
[106] Hitler, "Speech at the opening of the House of German Art," 585.
[107] Hitler, "Speech at the opening of the House of German Art," 586-87.

Classicism and modernism in Nazi architecture

Eternal German art reflects the "true character of our people."[108] According to Hitler, it reflects the essential characteristics of the German people rather than expressing a specific style or trend. Since the German people do not change in character, neither would true German art. This vision of "eternal art" is best understood through Hitler's architectural vision. Throughout the Third Reich, Hitler was extensively involved in architectural plans, envisioning a transformation of German cities through monumental public buildings, almost to the point of obsession. According to Albert Speer, one of Hitler's architects, he worked directly with the architects treating their ideas with respect but placed himself as the ultimate arbiter of plans.[109] These plans for Berlin (Figure 7.) and Linz (Figure 8.) reflect Hitler's ambition to transform Germany through art. According to Speer, "his sense of political mission and his passion for architecture were always inseparable."[110] Speaking of building plans, Hitler said: "And since we believe in the eternity of this Reich. . . these works of ours shall also be eternal, that is to say that not only in the greatness of their conception but in the clarity of plan, in the harmony of their relations they shall satisfy the requirements of eternity."[111] They designed them with a thousand-year Reich in mind. Knowing this vision for eternity, Speer pitched his design for the Zeppelin Field with "A Theory of Ruin Value," by which these constructions would remain impressive and inspiring, even in a state of decay.[112]

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[108] Hitler, "Speech at the opening of the House of German Art," 588.
[109] Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich,* trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 94-95.
[110] Speer, *Inside the Third Reich,* 95.
[111] Hitler, "Speech at the *Kulturtagung,"* 593.
[112] Speer, *Inside the Third Reich,* 66.

They envisioned these architectural plans as an eternal inspiration of true Germanic art. Therefore, their style is informative of Hitler's artistic vision. Hitler's architectural plans and completed Nazi projects, such as Paul Troost's House of German Art (Figure 9.) and Speer's Zeppelin Field (Figure 10.), were all emblematic of a relatively unadorned neoclassical style. In his vision for eternal German art, Hitler was inspired by Greek art. In his memoir *Hitler and I,* Otto Strasser, a member of the NSDAP who fled after the Röhm Purge, claimed that Hitler once said, "The old art, the new art simply don't exist. There is only one kind of art, and that is the Greco-Nordic. . . Anything worthy of the name of art can only be Greco-Nordic."[113] While this quote is unverifiable, Hitler undoubtedly had a strong affinity for classical art and architecture.[114] It might seem contradictory for Hitler to look to Greek art to inspire racially German art, but there are some sensible explanations. Speer argues that Hitler believed the theory that the Dorian ethnic group of ancient Greece was Germanic in origin.[115] Despite this, Hitler did not necessarily want to revive classical architecture. Instead, it was a useful basis by which to express Nazi ideology.

[113] Otto Strasser, *Hitler and I,* trans. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1940), 103.
[114] Grosshans, *Hitler and the Artists,* 82-87.
[115] Speer, *Inside the Third Reich,* 115.

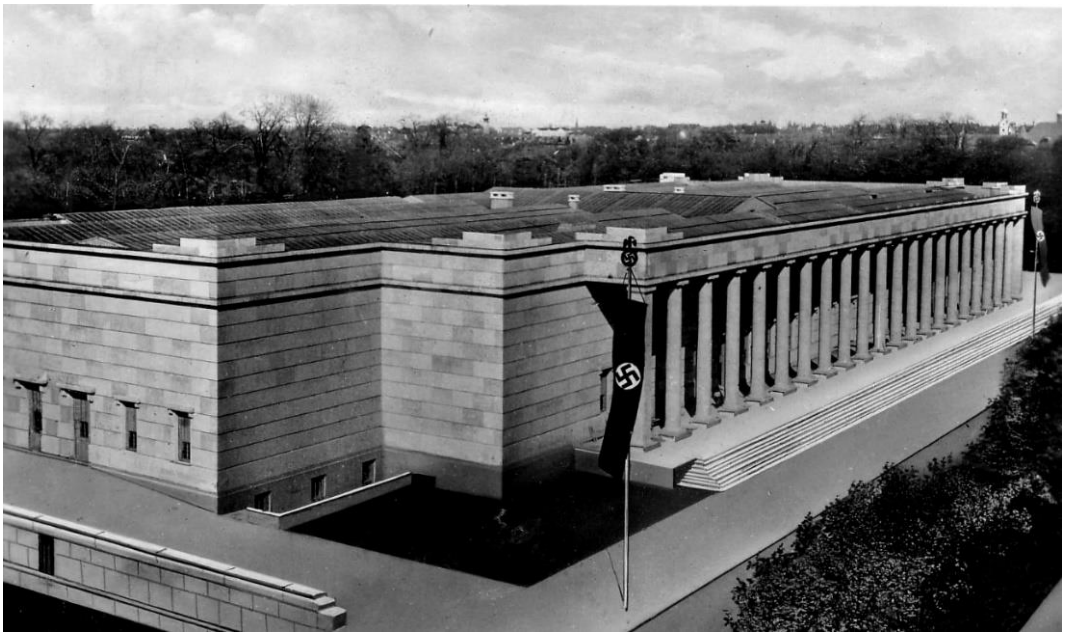

Figure 9. Paul Troost, House of German Art, 1937, https://prabook.com/web/paul_ludwig.troost/1345368.

Since Hitler understood art as civilization, it made sense to emulate the Hellenic style, as classical antiquity is often perceived as the height of civilization. Hitler was reportedly impressed by how "Mussolini could point to the buildings of the Roman Empire as symbolizing the heroic spirit of Rome. Thus, he could fire his nation with the idea of a modern empire."[116] The classical style was, therefore, a way to transmit notions of national spirit, even in the modern era. The misuse of the classical style was also helpful for transmitting ideas of empire. For example, the plans for Berlin were better suited for military parades than for solving traffic problems.[117] The buildings themselves were authoritarian and militaristic in their construction. Historian Brandon Taylor argues that "the very forms and angles of National Socialist architecture were imbued with the values of the harsh, the aggressive and the coercive."[118] This was especially poignant

[116] Speer, *Inside the Third Reich,* 66.
[117] Whyte, "National Socialism and Modernism," 263.
[118] Taylor, " Post-Modernism in the Third Reich," 136.

given the Nazi association between the artist and the warrior.[119] Additionally, Hitler saw classical art as the product of a more racially pure era, without Jewish corruption. Therefore, Greek art could serve as the model for a racial ideal.[120]

In addition to undeniable neoclassical elements, Nazi architecture also betrays modernist tendencies, with continuity in many stylistic elements from the Weimar period.[121] Many Nazi designs shared the Bauhaus affinity for simple shapes and lack of decoration. Although these buildings contain many neoclassical elements, the austerity and functionalism of the facades are a continuation of many Weimar constructions.[122] In some cases, there was also continuity in personnel. As previously mentioned, Breker started his career as an Expressionist. Additionally, Ernst Neufert and Herbert Rimpl were both associates of Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus. Neufert helped create standards and norms for Nazi construction. Rimpl designed the Heinkel aircraft factory (Figure 11), in which Rimpl's modernist heritage is plainly visible.[123] Furthermore, Taylor argues there was continuity in the understanding of the social meaning for art with "a concern for the future, a reaching, for the sublime, mass popularity, the rule of instinct, and so forth."[124] The Nazis inherited the idea of fostering a utopian civilization through art from the Weimar Era and expressed these ambitions in similar ways.

It is not surprising that there is some stylistic continuity between the Nazis and the period before them. Neither, as some historians suggest, is it necessarily contradictory. When discussing

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[119] Taylor, " Post-Modernism in the Third Reich," 136. See Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, 275-76, for his thoughts on the importance of World War I for reawakening the artistic spirit.
[120] Grosshans, *Hitler and the Artists*, 86-87.
[121] Lane, *Architecture and Politics*, 8-10.
[122] Whyte, "National Socialism and Modernism," 263.
[123] Whyte, "National Socialism and Modernism," 262-63.
[124] Taylor, "Post-Modernism in the Third Reich," 129.

cultural development in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler makes a metaphor: "Thus the meaning and purpose of revolutions is not to tear down the whole building, but to remove what is bad or unsuitable and to continue building on the sound spot that has been laid bare."[125] Hitler was not uncompromisingly anti-modern. In many ways, he depended on modernity and its industry for promised economic regeneration and military recovery.[126] Instead, through the process of coordination, the Nazis were able to remove many elements of the modern art world they saw as corruptive and un-German. This left the appropriate elements of modernism, to which they could apply a Nazi veneer.

Painting and the Nazi ideal

The classical and modernist elements present in Nazi architecture demonstrate two important points. First, the Nazi government wanted to foster art that would resonate for generations. Second, rather than the Nazis creating a distinct style, they appropriated existing styles for their own purposes, even if that involved including aspects of modernism. There is significant evidence that this applies to painting as well. Using previously understudied artworks, historian Gregory Maertz found many examples of German paintings with modernist elements, even for artists with official Nazi patronage.[127] An example is Carl Busch, whose paintings contained distinctive elements of post-impressionism and surrealism (Figures 12 and 13), yet he

[125] Hitler, *Mein Kampf,* 261.
[126] Taylor, "Post-Modernism in the Third Reich," 136.
[127] Maertz, *Nostalgia for the Future,* 14-33. For a long time, historians have been limited in the Nazi artworks they have been able to examine, due to the informal taboo against museums displaying Nazi Art Therefore, most historians primarily focused on the NS-Reichbsesitz, a collection of 775 works that Hitler purchased at the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen* (Great German Art Exhibitions) between 1937 and 1944. However, Maertz was able to examine the German War Art Collection. American soldiers under Captain Gordon Gilkey collected these 9,176 German artworks from 1946 to 1947, trying to confiscate all German artworks to control the Nazi legacy. This collection has been mostly unstudied up to this point.

was still a member of the Wehrmacht's *Staffel der Bildenden Künstler* (Squadron of Visual Artists) and participated in all but two Great German Art Exhibitions.

Figure 13. Carl Busch, *Kartoffelernte (Potato Harvest)*. 1934/5., 1943, Painting, German War Art Collection, in Gregory Maertz, *Nostalgia for the Future: Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts of Nazi Germany* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2019).

Just like the case of Nazi architecture, these paintings looked to the future. According to Maertz:

> 'Progress,' in National Socialist terms, was to be achieved by a nostalgic return to an imaginary pre-modern state of Nordic racial perfection. But this condition could only be recovered by bringing about the biological purification of the German Volk in a utopian future. The regeneration and rebirth of Nordic humanity—the ultimate goal of the National Socialist rebellion against the legacy of 1789–was to be prefigured in the visual arts of the Third Reich. The nostalgic "futurism" of National Socialism was intended to be a wholly indigenous modernist style rooted in German artistic tradition which eschewed the liberal, decadent, foreign-influenced cultural legacy of the Weimar Republic.[128]

Through official patronage and incentives for working with the government, a great deal of art reflected Nazi values. Therefore, Nazi art had recurring themes based on an ideological vision

[128] Maertz, *Nostalgia for the Future,* 56-57.

with a greater consistency than in style. Even pastoral scenes, typical of the *völkisch* approach, sometimes contained modernist elements, such as the flat perspective and anatomy in Werner Paul Schmidt's *Erntezeit (Harvest Time)* (Figure 14). Despite the differences in style, nearly all peasant and pastoral scenes exhibit the idyllic nature of a racially pure German *Volk*.[129] Another common theme of Nazi art, especially after 1939, was depicting war and fearless soldiers, displaying heroism and masculinity while serving as wartime propaganda. As the war started to turn against the Nazis, art became a way to reassure people of both the situation on the front and the heroic nature of the cause.[130] Emil Scheibe's *Hitler at the Front* (Figure 15) depicts bright-eyed German soldiers gathering around Hitler's calm paternal figure, looking to him for wisdom and leadership in the war.

Even before the war, masculine heroism was a prominent theme, as one of the primary expressions of this eugenic vision through art was the cult of the body. In a speech at the House of German Art opening, Hitler proclaimed, "The new age of to-day is at work on a new human type. Men and women are to be more healthy, stronger: there is a new feeling of life, a new joy in life. Never was humanity in its external appearance and in its frame of mind nearer to the ancient world than it is to-day."[131] This cult of the body again relates to Hitler's passion for Greek art, which shares the artistic representation of the human ideal. Heroic and idealized nudes were a prevailing theme in much Nazi art, like in Greek art. However, the Nazis did so with a eugenic racial interpretation. Hitler said, "as we look upon the final result of this process [our

[129] Maertz, *Nostalgia for the Future,* 59-60.
[130] Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992), 159-163.
[131] Hitler, "Speech at the opening of the House of German Art," 290.

own cultural development] we cannot but wish for an art which may correspond to the increasing homogeneity of our racial composition."[132]

Figure 16. Albert Janesch, *Water Sports,* 1936, Painting, In Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992), 64.

The interest in fitness and athletics emerged in the Weimar Era, but the Nazis coopted it as a part of their aesthetics (Figure 16).[133] Depictions of women emphasize the racial ideal as well. While they are heroically athletic in some instances, they are more often depicted as passive as a reaction against the "new woman" of the Weimar Era.[134] They reinforced norms for female behavior through art depicting them as mothers, often in rural scenes to contrast with the liberated sexuality of the Weimar period. For example, in *Mutter in Ährenfeld,* artist Karl Mader highlights the fertility of a German nursing mother by surrounding her with a field of wheat. (Figure 17). The female nude was another popular subject, with paintings sometimes straying

[132] Hitler, "Speech at the opening of the House of German Art," 587.
[133] Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich,* 38.
[134] West, *The Visual Arts in Germany,* 200.

towards the borderline pornographic, perhaps reflecting the regime's preference for procreation among valuable partners than adherence to Christian sexual morality.[135] Across all subject matters, the works almost unanimously display the ideal of Nordic beauty.[136] The Jew, a staple figure of Nazi propaganda in posters and films, is absent from Nazi painting and sculpture, supporting the claim that the visual arts were a way to envision a future racial utopia. These themes of *Volk*, youth, strength, the body, and Aryan superiority were products of Nazi ideology but also ways in which they attempted to lay the groundwork for the coming thousand-year Reich by envisioning what that future might look like.

Conclusion

Examples from Nazi architecture and painting demonstrate that some elements of modern art prevailed throughout the Third Reich. Understanding the ideological motivations behind Nazi cultural policy is beneficial to the ongoing historiographical debate surrounding modernism in Nazi art. They did not remove, or attempt to remove, modern art entirely from German culture, as some historians have claimed. Neither was this continuation of modern art a contradiction because the National Socialist ideology was not innately anti-modern. As historian Phillip Morgan argued: "They wanted to inject some 'soul' or 'spiritual' meaning into modern existence, impart some cohering collective experience, which did not signify an actual return to a pre-modern communitarian idyll. What they offered was an alternative 'modernity,' not an

[135] Barbara McCloskey, "Marking Time: Women and Nazi Propaganda Art during World War II," *Contemporaneity* 2 (2012): 4-7.
[136] The contrast between the "Nordic beauty" on display in the House of German Art was very likely intentionally contrasted with the "ugliness" of Weimar art and the people it correlated to, as highlighted in the nearby Degenerate Art Exhibition.

alternative to 'modernity.'"[137] They did not try to turn back the clock on human development but rather lay the groundwork for future development based on Nazi values.

The Nazi approach to art follows this idea. Through Hitler's writings, he demonstrated ideological continuity with the cultural pessimists of the time, who associated the quality of art with the strength of civilization. These thinkers rejected modern art as part of a perceived civilizational decline. Hitler offered a vision for the regeneration of German civilization, which involved improving art. This involved the removal of art and artists that Hitler, drawing on contemporary philosophical thought, considered corruptive to German civilization. The continuation of modernism in Nazi art demonstrates that the removal and shaming of "degenerate art" and the persecution of its creators and supporters were not necessarily based on the art's association with modernity. Instead, the Nazi campaign against "degenerate art" was more of a campaign against the perceived cultural influence of Jews, political opponents, and others seen as proponing art contrary to the Nazi ideal.

Additionally, the Nazis promoted art they saw as advancing their civilization. While some wanted to return art to a pre-modern style and others wanted to coopt aspects of "degenerate art" forms, Hitler wanted to create an alternative modernity, not turn back the clock. Therefore, the artistic style was less important than the piece's ideological message. Unfortunately, as Maertz discusses, the great majority of Nazi art is unavailable for both public view and often for historical study, leading many towards an unrepresentative perception of painting in Nazi Germany.[138] Understanding Hitler's intention for Nazi art to serve as the cultural foundation for a new great civilization means that it often reflects the values Hitler

[137] Philip Morgan, *Fascism in Europe, 1919-1945* (London, UK: Routledge, 2003), 192.
[138] Maertz, *Nostalgia for the Future,* 14-33.

intended for that civilization. Further investigation of understudied Nazi art could reveal more about both Nazi ideology and the way they envisioned the idealized German future.

Appendix

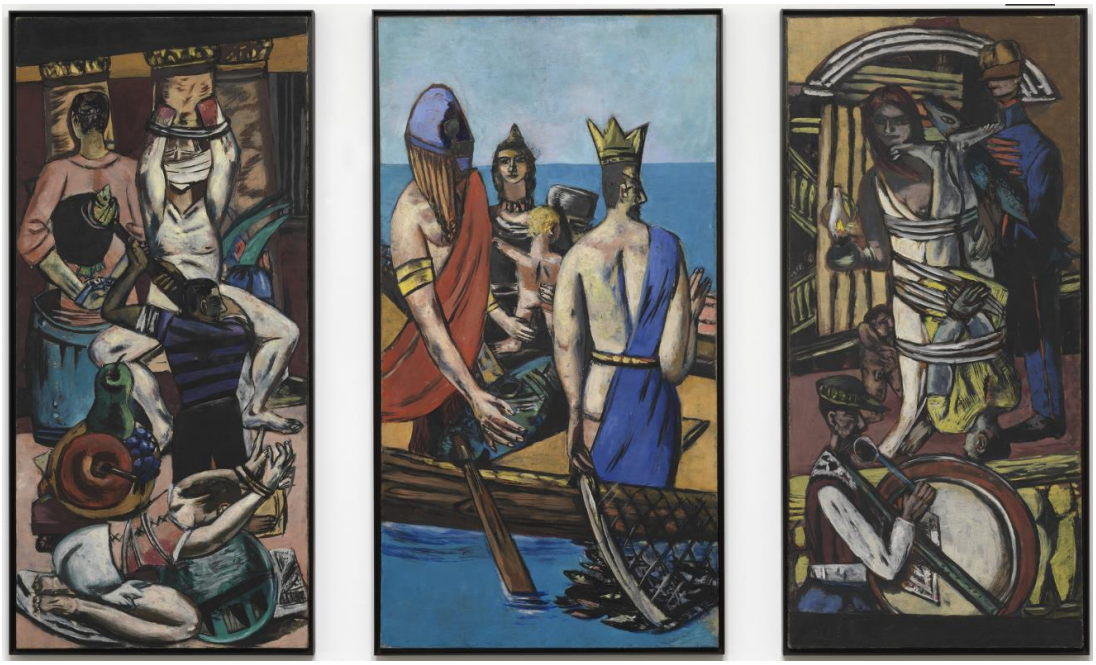

Figure 1. Beckmann, Max. *Departure*. 1932-1935. Painting. Museum of Modern Art. https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78367.

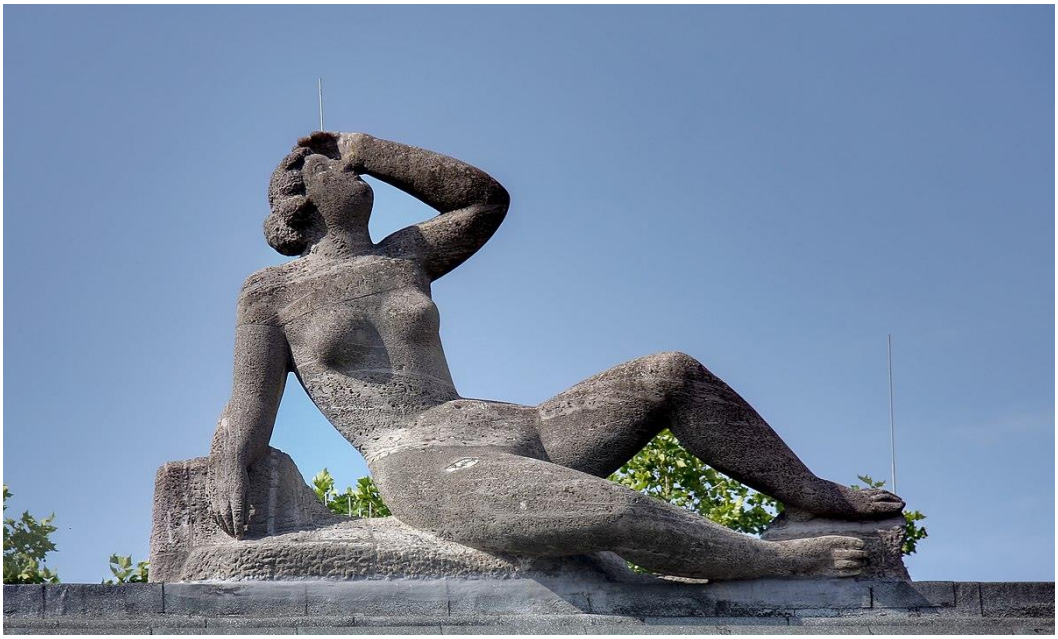

Figure 2. Breker, Arno. *Aurora.* 1925. Sculpture. Museum Kunstpalast. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Museum_Kunstpalast_-_Aurora_-_Arno_Breker_%288086-88%29.jpg.

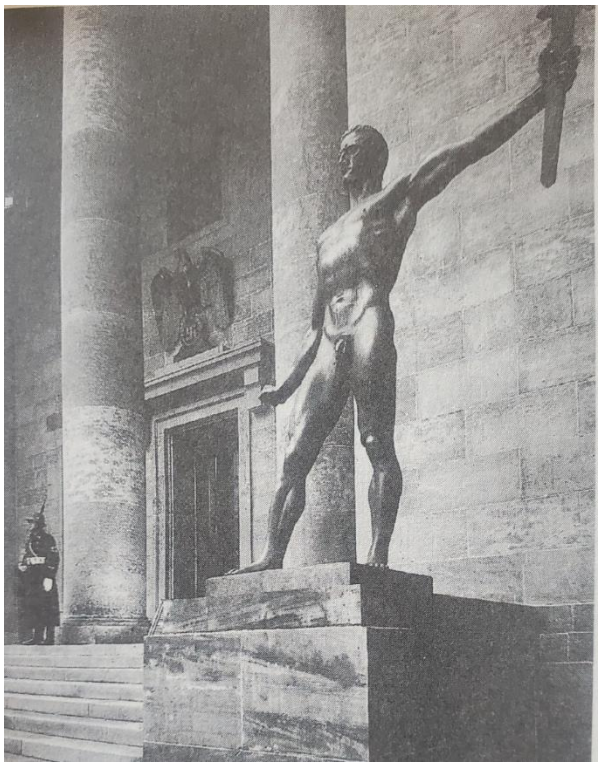

Figure 3. Brecker, Arno. *The Torch Bearer* at the entrance of the New Reich Chancellery in Berlin. 1939. Sculpture. In Jonathan Petropoulos. *The Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Figure 4. Schrödter, Hans. *Forest Workers (Waldarbeiter).* 1936. Painting. In Joan L. Clinefelter. *Artists for the Reich: Culture and Race from Weimar to Nazi Germany*. Oxford: Berg, 2005.

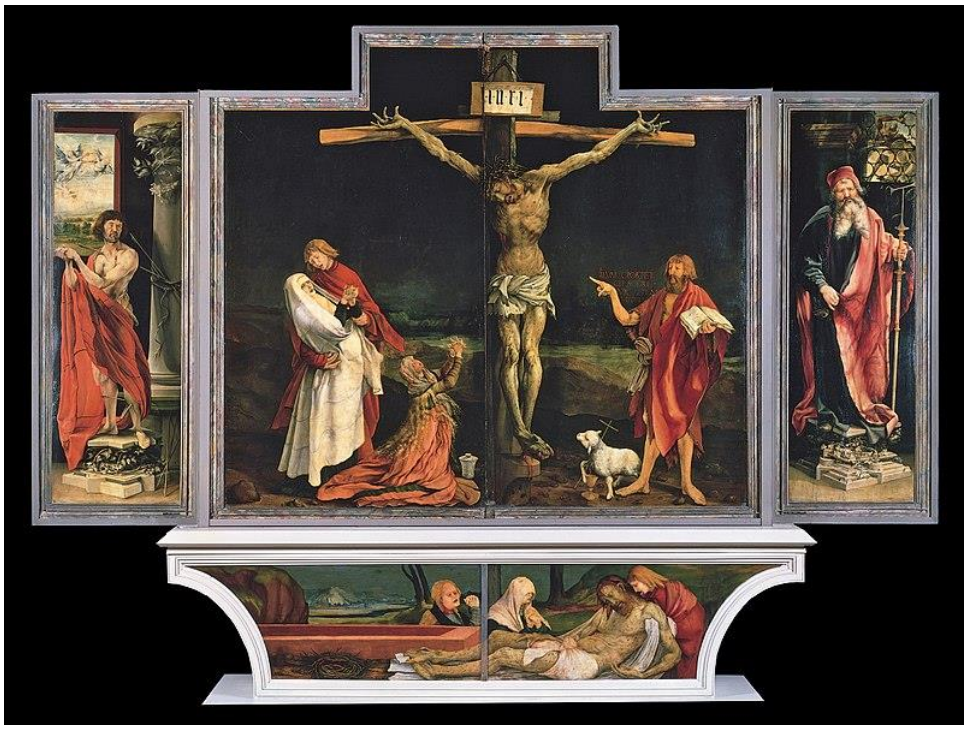

Figure 5. Grünewald, Matthais. *Isenheim Altar.* 1512-1516. Painting. Unterlinden Museum, Colmar. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grunewald_Isenheim1.jpg.

Figure 6. Barlach, Ernst. *Magdeburg Memorial.* 1929. Sculpture. Cathedral of Magdeburg. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Barlach_Magdeburger_Ehrenmal.jpg.

Figure 7. General Building Inspector of the Reich Capital. Model of the North-South Axis of Berlin, looking north towards the Great Hall, final version. 1942. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germania_%28city%29.

Figure 8. Model of the *Führermuseum* from the planned "European Culture Complex" in Linz, Austria, c. 1933. https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/story-hitlers-art-museum/.

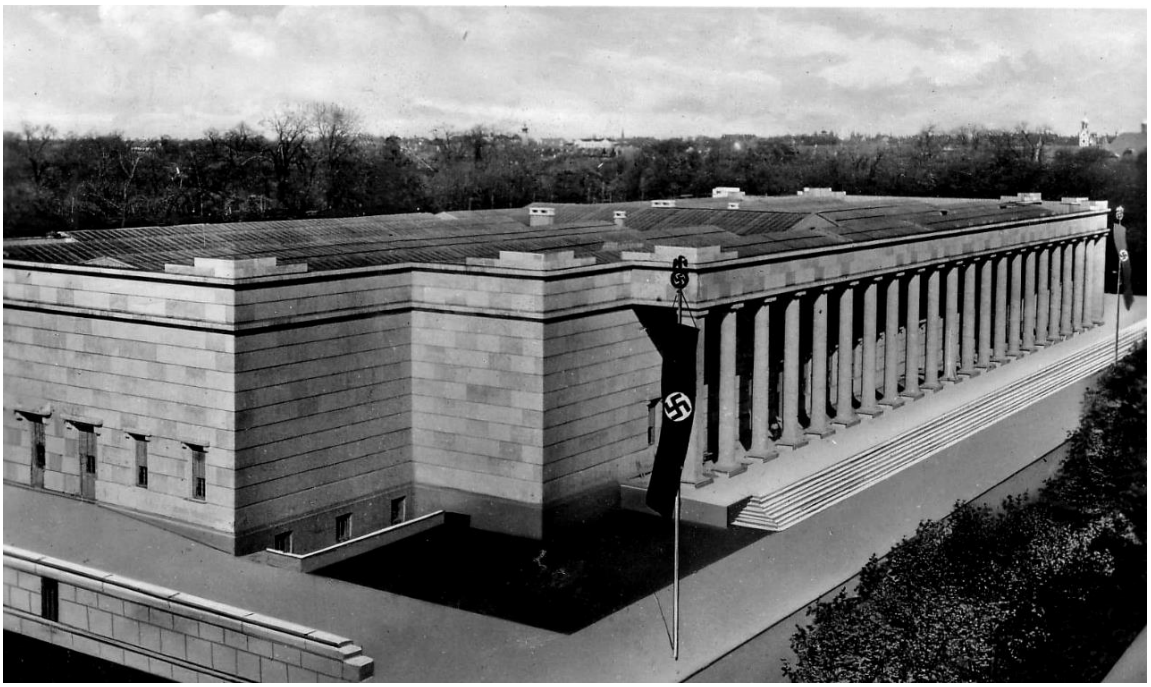

Figure 9. Troost, Paul. House of German Art. 1937. https://prabook.com/web/paul_ludwig.troost/1345368.

Figure 10. Speer, Albert. Zeppelin Field. 1937. https://museums.nuernberg.de/documentation-center/the-site/the-nazi-party-rally-grounds/information-system-rally-grounds/point-07.

Figure 11. Rimpl, Herbert. Heinkel Aircraft Factory, Oraneinburg. 1935-1937. https://i.pinimg.com/originals/2a/27/a0/2a27a0bff4cb1d383617094cf0be4ee7.jpg.

Figure 12. Busch, Carl. *Spähtrupp I (mit Tod)* [Reconnaissance Patrol I (with Death)]. 1943. Painting. German War Art Collection. In Gregory Maertz. *Nostalgia for the Future: Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts of Nazi Germany*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2019.

Figure 13. Busch, Carl. *Kartoffelernte (Potato Harvest)*. 1934/5. Painting. German War Art Collection. In Gregory Maertz. *Nostalgia for the Future: Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts of Nazi Germany*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2019.

Figure 14. Schmidt, Paul Werner. *Erntezeit (Harvest Time).* 1936. Painting. In Gregory Maertz. *Nostalgia for the Future: Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts of Nazi Germany*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2019.

Figure 15. Scheibe, Emil. *Hitler at the Front.* 1942-43. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9114649/The-Army-collection-Nazi-art-locked-away-Fort-Belvoir-1945.html.

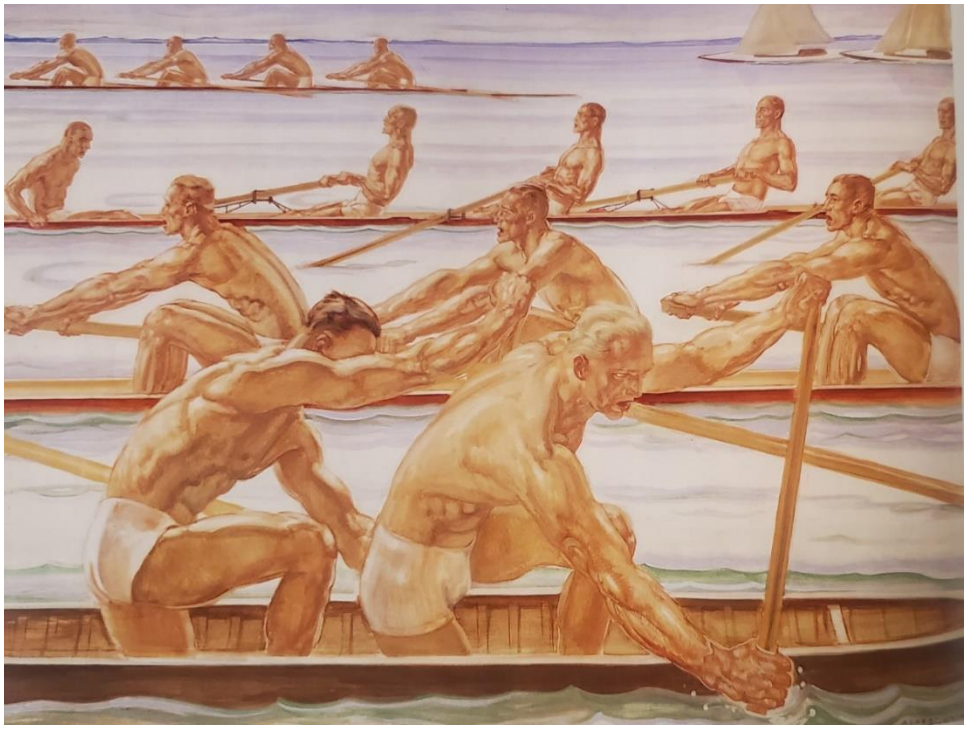

Figure 16. Janesch, Albert. *Water Sports.* 1936. Painting. In Peter Adam. *Art of the Third Reich*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992.

Figure 17. Mader, Karl. *Mutter in Ährenfeld (Mother in a Ripe Field of Wheat).* 1941. In Gregory Maertz. *Nostalgia for the Future: Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts of Nazi Germany*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2019.

Glossary

Barlach, Ernst (1870-1938). Famous German expressionist sculptor. While some on the right tried to advocate for his work as authentically German, he was ultimately condemned as a "degenerate" artist, and the Nazis confiscated many of his works.

Bauhaus. A German art school and movement. Founded in 1919, it pioneered modernist architecture during the Weimar Republic. The Nazis shut it down in 1933.

Beckmann, Max (1884-1950). A German painter associated with both Expressionism and New Objectivity who was highly regarded in the Weimar Era. The Nazis seized much of his art. Banned from working, he painted *Departure* and *The Organ Grinder* in secret before fleeing to the Netherlands in 1937.

Brecker, Arno (1900-1991). Architect and sculptor. He studied at Düsseldorf Academy, employing expressionist and classical styles in his works, some of which were confiscated as "degenerate art." However, he is most well-known for his heroic public sculptures for the Third Reich.

Dada. An eclectic and irrational early twentieth-century avant-guard art movement. It was often associated with left-wing politics.

Expressionism. A modern art movement that intends to invoke emotion and ideas through abstraction. It emerged primarily in Germany in the late nineteenth century but reached its height of popularity in the early Weimar Era.

German Art Society. An independent group of *völkisch* artists formed in 1920. Its members opposed modern art and created art with traditional style and themes.

Goebbels, Joseph (1897-1945). As Hitler's minister of propaganda and head of the RKK, Goebbels was a significant player in cultural policy. He admired some modern art and initially hoped to coopt Expressionism as an authentic German art style, but he turned against it due to competition from his rivals and to win approval from Hitler.

Große Deutsche Kunstausstellungen **(Great German Art Exhibition)**. An annual art exhibition held in the House of German Art. Started in 1937, the Nazis used it to attempt to display the merits of "true" German art patronized by the Third Reich.

Hitler, Adolf (1889-1945). The leader of the NDSAP and Nazi Germany. Before going into politics, he dreamed of being an artist or an architect. This passion continued into his reign as Führer was heavily invested in architectural plans and shaping cultural policy through his deputies.

Impressionism. An artistic movement that emerged in the nineteenth century, originally in France. It was characterized by quick loose brush strokes to capture a fleeting moment. It is often considered a predecessor to modern art, although Nazis rarely lumped it in with the "degenerate" styles.

Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur **(Militant League for German Culture)**. Founded by Alfred Rosenberg in 1928, the KdfK was originally the cultural arm of the NSDAP, being fiercely critical of modernism and perceived Jewish influences. However, it waned in influence after the Nazi rise to power.

Kollwitz, Käthe (1867-1945). A highly prominent Expressionist and realist artist. The Nazis removed most of her art from display and threatened her, although she continued to work and display art in insolated showings until her death.

***Neue Sachlichkeit* (New-Objectivity)**. An artistic style that emerged in the 1920s. As a counter to Expressionism, it often depicted the world in a critical and cynical way.

Nolde, Emil (1867-1956). A German-Danish Expressionist painter known for vibrant colors. Nolde was initially a supporter of Hitler, joining the NSDAP. However, the Nazis eventually condemned him as a "degenerate" artist, confiscating his art and banning him from painting.

***Reichskulturkammer* (Reich Chambers of Culture)**. The Nazi agency primarily responsible for cultural policy. Headed by Goebbels, it regulated artistic display and production.

Rosenberg, Alfred (1891-1946). Principle ideologue for the NSDAP, writing *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, among other works. He advocated for a *völkisch* approach to German art as the head of the KfdK. While prominent during the Weimar period, Hitler reduced his role during the Third Reich.

Speer, Albert (1905-81). Minister of armaments and Hitler's favorite architect. He helped design some of the most iconic buildings and plans for the Third Reich, such as Zeppelin Field and much of the plans for Berlin. While serving twenty years in prison, he wrote *Spandau Diaries* and his memoirs *Inside the Third Reich*

***Staffel der Bildenden Künstler* (Squadron of Visual Artists)**. The Wehrmacht's combat art program. Much of its art is in a variety of styles, including modernism.

Visual Arts Chamber. The subdivision of the RKK that specifically delt with architects, painters, sculptors, designers, and other creators and dealers of visual art.

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