Invoking Eternity:

Religion and Temporality in the National Socialist Narrative

By Madeline Levy

Advisors: Professor Kevin J. Madigan, Professor Dan McKanan, and Natalie Malter

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'Who controls the past,' ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future:
who controls the present controls the past.'[1]
- George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

As history would show, the National Socialist narrative was disturbingly effective.

Resting on the two central ideological pillars of Aryan supremacy and antisemitism, it framed

Germany's history in teleological terms, often grounded in religious rhetoric. Despite the

utilization of religious themes and language, there remains much debate over the contested and

complicated Nazi relationship to religion. Similarly complex is the Nazi approach to

temporality.[2] As scholar of fascism Roger Griffin has pointed out, the fascist regimes of the

interwar period present various temporal paradoxes and tensions: being at once past- *and* future-

oriented—relying on an Aryan past while planning a thousand-year Reich—and conceiving of

the nation as an entity within *and* above time.[3] This paper seeks to shine a light on the Nazi

approach to both religion and temporality as they intersect in the Nazi narrative. As a vehicle

into these complex fields of discussion, I will examine one kernel of traditionally religious

temporal imagination that found a place in the Nazi narrative: eternity. Suspending judgement on

the sincerity or pragmatism of its usage, I suggest that understanding the work that the concept of

"eternal" did to root and propel Nazi ideology will offer a nuanced view of the Nazi approach to

both time and religion as well as the stakes of such language.

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[1] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Centennial ed. (New York: Plume, 2003), 35–36.
[2] I take temporality to encapsulate both "a feeling for the motion of time" and what Charles Maier calls "'chronopolitics,'" or "the study of how 'certain views toward time and toward the nature of change' become implicated in processes of decision making." Christopher Clark, *Time and Power: Visions of History in German Politics, from the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (S.l.: Princeton University Press, 2021), 6, 14.
[3] Roger Griffin, "Fixing Solutions: Fascist Temporalities as Remedies for Liquid Modernity," *Journal of Modern European History / Zeitschrift Für Moderne Europäische Geschichte / Revue d'histoire Européenne Contemporaine* 13, no. 1 (2015): 5–23.

In what follows, I begin by giving a brief picture of the complexity of the question of religion in the Third Reich. Then, I offer philosopher Charles Taylor's concept of social imaginary as it intersects with Victor Klemperer's conclusions on the rhetoric of the Third Reich. These frameworks undergird this study as ways to approach the complex terrain that is human thought and action in the Nazi period with a focus on the importance of language. It also acknowledges that where there are tensions there are seldom simple, definitive answers. Next, I turn to scholarly analyses of German temporality leading up to and following World War I, drawing on Griffin, Taylor, and historians Reinhart Koselleck and Christopher Clark. After a brief discussion of rebirth as a key Nazi expression of temporality, I then move to examining it in conjunction with eternality in the propaganda documentary *Triumph of the Will* [*Triumph des Willens*], using the work of historian of religion Mircea Eliade on ritual and sacred time as well as Taylor on gathered time and kairotic knots. I supplement this understanding of eternality with a similar analysis of the film *The Eternal Jew* [*Der ewige Jude*], which serves to highlight the stark tonal range of Nazi propaganda between the positive and the negative: the elevation of the Aryan and the dehumanization of the Jew. Ultimately, I suggest that there are two versions of eternity being offered in these pieces of Nazi propaganda. One version is beyond time in the form of appeals to transcendent Aryan and Jewish essences—the constructive and destructive foundational pillars of Nazi ideology, respectively—and the other version is within time appearing in references to the Third Reich *qua* modern state-entity as the immanent manifestation of the Aryan essence. I claim that, in weaving together these differing yet intersecting eternities into their narrative, Nazi leadership tied a modern state-building project with a vision of an immanent utopian future to seemingly primordial categories of identity framed in a Christian logic of theophany.

Before continuing, I will provide background and explanation for my use of the two films mentioned above. Directed by Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will* depicts the 1934 Nuremberg National Socialist rally and includes the famous shot of Hitler's plane flying above the clouds, which accentuates the feeling that the enthusiastic crowds are welcoming an *ersatz* divinity. The film conveys a sense of unity and cohesion that maps easily onto a totalitarian approach to governance embodied in the cry "One people, one Führer, one Reich, one Germany."[4] Moreover, the documentary presents the 1934 Nuremberg rally and the Nazi Party as imbued with a religious tenor, as Hitler names the rally "a great spiritual meeting"[5] and claims that the Party "will be like a religious order."[6] From the time of its creation, there has been much debate surrounding each of *Triumph of the Will's* labels. To what extent or in what combinations is it propaganda, documentary, and/or art? The classification of *The Eternal Jew* is more clear-cut: propaganda advertised as a documentary. Produced in 1940 and directed by President of the Reich Film Chamber Fritz Hippler, the intertitle at the beginning lays out the premise of the film. As Hippler himself put it: "This film shows actual shots of the Polish ghettos. It shows us the Jews as they really look before concealing themselves behind the mask of civilized Europeans."[7] The film proceeds to run through countless antisemitic and anti-Jewish stereotypes from laziness to usury to a supposed global cabal. Throughout, Jews are portrayed as dirty and, moreover, as a plague. The narrator explains that in 1914 Germans did not take Jews seriously, but that, "This time we recognize that there's a plague here: a plague that threatens the health of the Aryan

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[4] Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will (Triumph Des Willen)*, 33:08, accessed December 1, 2019, http://archive.org/details/TriumphOfTheWilltriumphDesWillen. All timestamps are approximate but should be sufficient to guide the reader to the appropriate moment.
[5] Riefenstahl, 1:34:10.
[6] Riefenstahl, 1:38:07.
[7] Fritz Hippler, *The Eternal Jew (Der Ewige Jude) 1940*, 1940, 0:45-1:07, http://archive.org/details/TheEternalJewDerEwigeJude1940.

peoples."[8] In a particularly infamous scene, Jews are visually equated with plague-ridden rats, as the camera shows a close-up of a hoard, pressed against each other or infiltrating food stuffs. Although the narrator anchors the footage very specifically in Poland, the claims made about the Jewish people are extrapolated to the entire so-called Jewish race.[9]

Both films have been regarded as quintessential pieces of Nazi propaganda, in part due to their documentary form, which exemplified the Nazi philosophy as articulated by Reich Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels: "'Good propaganda does not need to lie [...] It is only a matter of presenting the truth to people in a way that they will be able to understand.'"[10] Interestingly, however, neither piece had enduring viewership in the Third Reich. While *Triumph of the Will* had immediate success, its high box office numbers did not continue, and there is no evidence that it made a lasting impression on the German population. *The Eternal Jew*, on the other hand, did not attract the average German, and many walked out of the theatre, in part due

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[8] Hippler, 2:20-2:38.

[9] In fact, an aspect of Hippler's propagandistic goal, as is evident above, was to erase any distinction between German or "European" Jews and *Ostjuden* or Eastern Jews by showing the so-called brutality of the latter and the so-called disguised nature of the former, who were supposedly just like their Eastern counterparts in being "uncivilized" and unlike "true" Germans or Europeans.

In discussing the specificity of the footage, it is also worth mentioning that its candidness is called into question. While some of the shots are very clearly staged—for instance, scenes showing the supposed covert disguising that is accomplished when Eastern European Jews remove their facial hair and dress in Western European clothes— Emmanuel Ringelbaum, an eyewitness to a later film shot in Warsaw in 1942, notes that Nazi filmmakers deliberately staged many scenes: "'A restaurant owner was forced to lay his tables to suggest to the audience an abundance of delicacies and champagne; then Jews were indiscriminately rounded up on the street and filmed eating and drinking. Grocery shop windows were filled with rare delicacies before being filmed; a boy was made to steal a loaf of bread and run off with it to his friends, who were supposed to be hiding him and his loot.'" Although not in reference to *The Eternal Jew*, this should raise suspicion, if not already raised, over Nazi so-called documentary practices. Similar recollections are provided in Wladyslaw Szpilman's memoir *The Pianist*. Baruch Gitlis, *"Redemption" of Ahasuerus: The "Eternal Jew" in Nazi Film* (New York: Holmfirth books, 1991), 137. Władysław Szpilman, *The Pianist: The Extraordinary True Story of One Man's Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945*, 1st edition (Picador, 2000), 81.

[10] Randall L. Bytwerk, *Bending Spines: The Propagandas of Nazi Germany and the German Democratic Republic*, Rhetoric and Public Affairs Series (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 44, http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebookbatch.PMUSE_batch:muse9780870138997. Citing Joseph Goebbels at the 1934 Nuremberg Rally.

Lest this be misunderstood, I want to clarify that Goebbels was less than pleased with Riefenstahl's piece, as he regarded her work to be too close to art and *Triumph of the Will* specifically to be too militaristic.

to lengthy and graphic sequences showing the *kosher* slaughter of cows as a marker of Jewish cruelty. It was not wholly unsuccessful, but neither was it received with overwhelming general enthusiasm. While addressing public reception is a project for the future, for the purposes of this paper, I approach both films as aspects of a social imaginary and as evidence of the narrative the leadership hoped to convey. Importantly, both pieces present narratives that were central to Nazi ideology: the pride and reclaimed honor of the German *Volk* (*Triumph of the Will*) and the evil and subhuman nature of the Jew (*The Eternal Jew*). In large part, this is why I find it productive to analyze both in tandem, as they represent key aspects of Nazi narrative from the two poles: "constructive" and "destructive." In their references to eternality, both offer a vision of history on a similarly grand scale.

A Surplus of Views: Religion and the Leadership of the Third Reich

There has been much debate over how to label the religious expression of the National Socialist regime: pagan, Christian, or secular (*qua* political religion). This question is challenging to answer with confidence because of the fragmented, often contradictory response from within the Party's upper echelon.[11] Notably, Heinrich Himmler, Reich Leader SS [*Reichsführer SS*] and eventually also Reich Commissar for the Strengthening of German Ethnic Stock [*Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstum*], had a deep interest in the potential paganism in Germany's cultural past. Founded in 1935 by incitement from Himmler, the *S.S. Ahnenerbe* [Ancestral Inheritance] quickly became a large academic research institution, comprising "scholars in the humanities (prehistory, archaeology, linguistics, ethnography and

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[11] Central to this discussion is the question of who represents the ultimate view of "the National Socialists." Does Hitler's worldview define the Party, as he was the supreme authority? Is it better measured by majority of Party members? The most vocal? The ones in charge of media? This debate is ongoing and, clearly, is not unique to the study of National Socialism.

symbology), natural science and medicine, all directed toward the vindication of the Aryan racial worldview of Nazi and SS ideology."[12] Within this broad mandate, myriad research was produced, all devoted to establishing the Aryan race as connected to the historical past of both Nordic peoples and the Indo-Aryan linguistic group. However, despite Himmler's high status and visibility, "Hitler mocked Himmler in his circle of confidants: 'What nonsense! Here we have at last reached an age that has left all mysticism behind, and now he wants to start that all over again.'"[13] From this it appears that Hitler did not approve of a "reclaimed" Nazi paganism, although he did not censure or halt the research being done at the S.*S. Ahnenerbe* nor did he coerce or even encourage Himmler to alter his personal beliefs. Even in judging the "paganness" of Himmler, there is confusion, as Himmler, though he declared himself committed to a resurgence of paganism, "consistently maintained that even *within* the SS, Christian viewpoints, while not endorsed by the organization, were nonetheless to be respected."[14]

Meanwhile, in Eisenach, the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life [*Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben*] was established in 1939 by theologian Walter Grundmann. This organization, in both tension and tandem with Himmler's *Ahnenerbe*, was dedicated to proving that Jesus had not been Jewish and to removing anything deemed "Semitic" from the Christian liturgy, doctrine, and Bible. Founded at the Wartburg Castle, the Institute's mission was envisioned as a second Reformation for "Protestants had to overcome Judaism just as Luther had to overcome Catholicism."[15] Luther stood as a hero of German pride and nationalism, who

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[12] Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity* (New York: University Press, 2002), 123, http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebookbatch.PMUSE_batch:muse9780814733264.
[13] Richard Steigmann-Gall, "Rethinking Nazism and Religion: How Anti-Christian Were the 'Pagans'?," *Central European History* 36, no. 1 (2003): 82, https://doi.org/10.1163/156916103770892177.
[14] Steigmann-Gall, 99.
[15] Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 2.

fought to be free of the yoke of foreign Rome and Catholicism's "Jewish" influence. In the path

of the legendary Reformer, Grundmann argued that, "[the] Bible would have to be purified […]

restored to its pristine condition, to proclaim the truth about Jesus."[16] Thus, the missions of the

Ahnenerbe and the Institute appear at odds, straining in opposite directions, one toward a kind of

paganism from the Nordic tradition and the other to Christianity devoid of "Jewish" taint.[17] It can

be argued that both were "working towards the Führer,"[18] but it must also be acknowledged that

"Hitler had a well-known contempt for any attempt to turn his political movement into a

religious revival, regardless of the religion."[19]

Indeed, it is this disavowal of traditional religion from Hitler that encourages some to

advocate for the third approach mentioned in the introduction: political religion. Although the

terminology of political religion has existed since the early twentieth century, I focus on the

work of Emilio Gentile and the resurgence of the conversation in the early twenty-first century.

A political religion is formed through the sacralization of politics. Gentile explains that such a

process occurs when:

> A political movement confers a sacred status on an earthly entity … and renders it
> an absolute principle of collective existence, considers it the main source of
> values for individual and mass behavior, and exalts it as the supreme ethical
> precept of public life.[20]

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[16] Heschel, 2.

[17] Although interestingly, it has been suggested that, as conversion in Iceland became common, the people contemporary to the Nordic epic sagas remained unperturbed about the mixing of Christianity with their myths. Moreover, this may be an anachronistic understanding of a Christianity divorced from 'superstition,' when, in fact, even in times of emphasis on doctrinal purity in the Confessionalization period, magic was alive and well for many Protestants. I am by no means well versed in this area, but it seems nevertheless necessary to make mention of this as a potential false dichotomy.
See Rosalie Wax and Murray Wax, "The Vikings and the Rise of Capitalism," *American Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 1 (July 1, 1955): 6–7, https://doi.org/10.1086/221656. See also Alexandra Walsham, "The Reformation and 'The Disenchantment of the World' Reassessed," *The Historical Journal* 51, no. 2 (2008): 497–528.

[18] Ian Kershaw, "'Working Towards the Führer.' Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship," *Contemporary European History* 2, no. 2 (1993): 117.

[19] Steigmann-Gall, "Rethinking Nazism and Religion," 81.

[20] Emilio Gentile, "The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism," in *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives*, ed. Constantin Iordachi, Rewriting Histories (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010), 260.

As such, the designated object of attention attains not only a sacred place in society but also a place of dominance with regard to the derivation of values, ethics, and meaning. By definition, political religion is deeply connected to totalitarianism. Gentile writes that, "a *political religion* is intolerant, invasive, and fundamentalist, and it wishes to permeate every aspect of an individual's life and of society's collective life."[21] As such, the hold on power, rhetoric, and ideology is totalizing, making the political religion a mandated belief and practice. Finally, Gentile explains that political religion takes the form of "*a system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols,*"[22] which bear a distinct mimetic and syncretic[23] relation to traditional religion.[24]

Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century* [*Mythus des Zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*] is just one example of what theorists of political religion point to as evidence. Rosenberg "had pretensions to becoming the movement's great intellectual and official ideologue"[25] and produced his *Myth of the Twentieth Century* in 1930 in that vein. In this dense work, which weaves together Nordic mythological characters like Wotan/Odin with Jesus Christ, Rosenberg argued for a reclaiming of Christianity from the Jews *qua* Romans, advocating that "[instead] of the conventional image of Jesus as the sufferer, an old-new (*alt-neues*) picture had to emerge: Jesus the *hero*."[26] Emphasizing the racialized *Volk* as the idealized subject, Rosenberg wrote:

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[21] Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: University Press, 2006), xv.

[22] Gentile, xiv.

[23] Gentile, 141.

[24] The relationship between political religion and Carl Schmitt's "political theology" calls for deeper examination than can be accomplished in this paper, and, as such, this note serves only to acknowledge the initial resemblances and to flag the question for further study. While the two frameworks appear to share certain similarities—at least on the surface—, Thierry Gontier, for one, makes the case that, based on Eric Voegelin's theoretical formulation of political religion, the two differ at their cores: in their approaches to the character of the sacred and to the human relationship with the transcendent.

Thierry Gontier, "From 'Political Theology' to 'Political Religion': Eric Voegelin and Carl Schmitt," *The Review of Politics* 75, no. 1 (ed 2013): 25–43, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670512001064.

[25] Steigmann-Gall, "Rethinking Nazism and Religion," 85.

[26] Steigmann-Gall, 88.

> Today a new faith is awakening–the *Mythos* of the blood; the belief that to defend the blood is also to defend the divine nature of man in general. It is a belief, effulgent with the brightest knowledge, that Nordic blood represents that *Mysterium* which has overcome and replaced the older sacraments.[27]

Sentiments like these which sacralize the *Volk* in place of traditional religion are what lead some scholars to name Rosenberg's approach to Nazism as political religion. Often regarded today as unreadable in its meandering polemical, conspiratorial excurses, *Myth of the Twentieth Century* nevertheless had an immense impact at the time.[28] In 1937, Rosenberg added an authorial note to commemorate the printing of half a million copies.[29] That said, Rosenberg is careful in his introduction to distance his work from official party doctrine, writing: "These are personal avowals throughout, not points in the program of the political movement to which I belong."[30] It is hard to evaluate the accuracy of this statement, however, given the ubiquity of the book in the Third Reich and, in part, because Rosenberg operates in contradictory sentiments, explicitly opposing the claim that he was attempting to found a new religion while also making statements like the one above on a new faith. Almost as much as the content of *Myth*, the very interpretive issues surrounding it make it an interesting case study in discussing the label of political religion.

Although I ultimately do not advocate adhering any single religious categorization to the National Socialist regime, I find the label of political religion compelling in some ways. Part of what I have found helpful in the terminology is the fact that political religion employs a number of definitions across the theoretical spectrum to think about the definition of religion. Relying in

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[27] Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century: An Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of Our Age*, 1st English ed. (Torrance, Calif.: Noontide Press, 1982), 62.

[28] It is worth noting that it continues to have a disturbing impact on extremist movements today, as a simple internet search will show.

[29] Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, lxi.

In his memoir *Europa, Europa,* Solomon Perel recounts that upon arrival at the Hitler Youth school in Brunswick, he was given *Mein Kampf* and Rosenberg's book, whose author Perel remembers as "the chief ideologue of the Nazi party." Solomon Perel, *Europa, Europa*, trans. Margot Bettauer Dembo, 1st edition (New York; Chichester: Wiley, 1999), 92.

[30] Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, 1.

part on Gustav Le Bon, a scholar of crowd psychology, Gentile claims that "[religion] originates

in the most peremptory of human instincts, namely 'the need to submit oneself to a divine,

political, or social faith, whatever the circumstances.'"[31] Because of this inherent drive to find

the transcendent, Gentile explains, "[religion] thus produces a formidable power to generate

enthusiasm and action and to channel individual and collective energies toward a single purpose,

the triumph of their beliefs."[32] I posit that these elements of power and enthusiasm play a large

role in the desire to understand National Socialism in relation to political religion, associating

religion with a functional connotation.

The functionalist school of definitions is quite strongly present in the discussion of

political religion. Drawing on Émile Durkheim's definition of religion, Gentile considers that

"Religion is the condition in which the individual […] transcends himself or herself through deep

involvement in the collectivity to which he or she belongs as a result of shared beliefs."[33] In this

view, religion is defined by its function of bringing people together in community in such a way

that the whole is greater than the self. This immediately calls to mind the National Socialist value

of "The Common Interest over Individual Interest,"[34] which is reiterated in other formations

throughout Nazi propaganda including the extreme shows of unity in the militarized formations

in *Triumph of the Will*[35] and the cry of "One people, one Führer, one Reich, one Germany."[36]

Although functionalism plays a large role in the definition of political religion,

phenomenology and Rudolph Otto make frequent appearances as well. Gentile refers to Otto's

notion of the numinous with regard to the horrors of World War I. He claims that the experience

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[31] Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 6.
[32] Gentile, 6.
[33] Gentile, 8.
[34] Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman, eds., *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, Weimar and Now 47 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 14.
[35] Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will (Triumph Des Willen)*, 3:16-3:50, 1:14:26-1:29:58.
[36] Riefenstahl, 33:08.

of confronting the massive loss of human life produced a response in line with the *mysterium tremendum* of a numinous experience.[37] In this vein, Gentile cites Mircea Eliade's notion of the "metamorphosis of the sacred,"[38] explaining: "In the age of secularization […] the sacred has demonstrated a fierce tenacity with the persistence, and often the strengthening, of traditional religious beliefs, as well as with the growth in newer sects, movements and religious cults."[39] While the human impulse towards the sacred remained, Gentile claims it was redirected for some to political religion.[40]

Therefore, by emphasizing the ways in which National Socialist ideology and practice dovetailed with theories of traditional religion, the hermeneutic of political religion highlights how the Nazi *Weltanschauung* could have fulfilled both an intrinsically human yearning for the transcendent and a functional, societal purpose. This is what I find compelling about applying the concept of political religion to National Socialism: its power to compel action and to create unified meaning.

What I find less convincing about the heuristic is what I ultimately take issue with in any attempt to label the religious expression of the Nazi regime as a totality: the contradictions. As Bernard Mees notes, "the National Socialists only ever attempted the feat of setting out their party's program once, in the 25 articles of the Party produced by Hitler and Gottfried Feder in

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[37] Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 15.
[38] Gentile, "The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism," 269.
[39] Gentile, 269.
[40] While for some secularization can leave a void, I push back on the notion that political religion is primarily or only a substitute for a lost creed, especially in light of the many German Protestants and Catholics who simultaneously held their traditional religion and their National Socialist ideology. Doris Bergen and Richard Steigmann-Gall too point to the complication of the simultaneous subscription to political and traditional religion. The question of overlapping political and traditional religious systems certainly complicates the theory of totalitarian religion. Richard Steigmann-Gall, "Nazism and the Revival of Political Religion Theory," in *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives*, ed. Constantin Iordachi, Rewriting Histories (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010), 303.

1920"[41] which were not uniformly followed after the rise to power. There may not be an answer to the question of which religion National Socialism followed or if it was attempting to create its own, because, in fact, "a balanced ideological system did not exist."[42] Indeed, Nicholas O'Shaughnessy suggests, "the Nazis were never ideological in the sense that Marxism or Communism was ideological […] *Mein Kampf* was not a text in the normal sense of the term but a stream of consciousness: a collation of feelings and impulses."[43] While we can debate the sincerity of the comment, Rosenberg wrote in his notes on the Third Edition (October 1931) of *Myth of the Twentieth Century*: "The National Socialist movement is not concerned with exerting religious dogmatism."[44] This lack of ideological and practical agreement, evidenced above in the discord between the missions of the *S.S. Ahnenerbe* and the Institute in Eisenach, makes it, I argue, impossible to clearly delineate the religiosity of the Nazi Party. However, while the flourishing of contrary viewpoints on religion may seem anathema to the totalitarian Third Reich, it is clear, I claim, that the varying usages of religion served one unified goal: the creation and propagation of a narrative of nationalist identity and supremacy that lent meaning to the lives of many Germans in crisis. And because it is inadvisable to label the regime's religious expression, I turn to the heuristic of social imaginaries as a way to acknowledge the confluence and coexistence of these various religious influences.

The Framework of the Social Imaginary and the Element of Language

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[41] Bernard Mees, *Science of the Swastika* (Central European University Press, 2008), 14, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7829/j.ctt1cgf8xw.

[42] Hermann Bausinger, "Nazi Folk Ideology and Folk Research," in *The Nazification of an Academic Discipline: Folklore in the Third Reich*, ed. James Dow and Hannjost Lixfeld (Indiana University Press, 1994), 13.

[43] Nicholas J. O'Shaughnessy, *Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 17.

[44] Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, liv.

Speaking in terms of a social imaginary opens up possibilities to acknowledge the complex milieu of religious material that coalesced with cultural and historical aspects to feed the jumbled stream of Nazi ideology.[45] In *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Charles Taylor explains that, "The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society."[46] Taylor makes it clear that, in contrast to theory, which is often the property of elites, social imaginaries are not made up of abstract concepts that require intentional concretization. Rather, social imaginaries by their nature take an active role in producing and upholding social norms and activities. Moreover, they make sense of them, offering a framework for understanding society as a whole. The terminology of imaginary specifically invokes, for Taylor, "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends."[47] This emphasis on symbols, narratives, and myths will become particularly salient in the following discussion on religion in *Triumph of the Will* and *The Eternal Jew*. It is also important to note that Taylor is gesturing to regular people—though one can debate the extent to which this is achieved in his approach. In studying propaganda and National Socialist ideology, the question of the connection between the ideologues and the larger citizenry is sometimes skirted. Imaginaries allow us to name the underlying influences that shape both parties as members of the same society. Related to the philosophical concept of backgrounds, Taylor explains that social imaginaries include:

> Our grasp on the wider predicament: how we continuously stand or have stood in relation to others and to power. This, in turn, opens out wider perspectives on

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[45] Like the philosophical notion of backgrounds, or, perhaps, Jürgen Habermas' "lifeworld," I find the terminology of social imaginaries to be useful, in part, because of its intention to encapsulate such a broad framework of meanings. That said, this very capaciousness can destabilize the term, and it is this tension that I hope to take up in the future.

[46] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 2.

[47] Taylor, 23.

> where we stand in space and time: our relation to other nations and peoples […]
> and also where we stand in our history, in the narrative of our becoming.[48]

This element of a social imaginary is very important for its application to 1920's and 1930's Germany. As I have alluded to and will expand upon further, the post-World War I period in Germany was a moment of existential crisis, a moment where the meaning of history was shifting and unstable. To use Taylor's phrasing, the past narrative of Germany's becoming was being questioned, and, using cultural, religious, and philosophical elements from the background of that disrupted social imaginary, the Nazi Party shifted it to offer a new narrative of becoming. Therefore, Taylor's notion of the social imaginary—as a framework inherently linked to making sense of and understanding one's position in history and in international politics—relates directly to the issue at hand.

Finally, there is something deliciously investigative about the heuristic of social imaginaries. Taylor writes that a new social imaginary "begins to define the contours of [the participants'] world and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention."[49] Examining an historical—or present—social imaginary then becomes an act of unearthing what is hidden, of pushing the concealed into the open where it can be inquisitively and critically analyzed. This aspect of exposure is the goal, not just with regard to scholarly purposes but also with an eye to learning from history.

In fact, Taylor's terminology of social imaginary addresses an often-debated issue within the discourse of Nazi use of religion: sincerity as opposed to pragmatism. Because Hitler was "famously opportunistic,"[50] there is cause to question just how genuinely we should take these instances of religiosity—as paganism, Christianity, or secular religion—within Nazi rhetoric. In

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[48] Taylor, 27.
[49] Taylor, 29.
[50] Mees, *Science of the Swastika*, 14.

Mein Kampf, Hitler claims that, "*To the political leader, the religious beliefs and institutions of his people must be sacrosanct.*"[51] He also states, however, that, "for me and all true National Socialists there is but one doctrine: people and Fatherland."[52] Amidst this disjointed treatment of religion, Hitler discusses the role of the program-maker in contrast to the politician, which further complicates the question of sincerity and pragmatism by affirming both. Hitler writes that:

> The program-maker of a movement must determine its goal; the politician must attempt to reach it. Accordingly the thinking of the one is determined by eternal truth, the action of the other by the practical reality of the moment.[53]

Thus, this issue of sincerity with respect to religion in the Nazi party is a stumbling block for any move to label the regime. Yet, in his social imaginaries, Taylor focuses more on the outcome rather than on the intention of nationalist rhetoric. He suggests that "much of what we call nationalism is based on the idea that there is some basis for the unit chosen other than historical contingency or political choice,"[54] citing "a common language, common culture, common religion, or history of common action."[55] He writes:

> The point has been tirelessly made that much of this common past is frequently pure invention. This is true, but it has certainly often been a politically effective invention, which has been interiorized and become part of the social imaginary of the people concerned.[56]

Taylor acknowledges that even if or when the narrative of the common past is fabricated, it nevertheless has the ability to transform into a perceived truth that embeds itself in the social imaginary, subsequently shaping societal life. Indeed, on the topic of the use of religion in the

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[51] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Stackpole Sons, 1939), 120. Italics in the original.
[52] Hitler, 211.
[53] Hitler, 208.
[54] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 177.
[55] Taylor, 177.
[56] Taylor, 177.

Third Reich, Victor Klemperer, a contemporary and prominent linguist, writes: "Experience has shown that the most powerful and lasting suggestion is brought into play by those conmen who have already conned themselves."[57] It is possible to produce propaganda intentionally and pragmatically and simultaneously to believe in the sincerity of one's message. While ultimately, it may be impossible to measure fully the sincerity of Nazi beliefs—given both the heterogeneity of individual members and the limitations of the historical archive—nonetheless, Taylor's heuristic allows us to appreciate the ways in which the propagandistic rhetoric simultaneously shaped and was shaped by the cultural and societal milieu. It also allows us to bring in the question of secularity and modernity without dismissing religion as anathema to either, as we will see in the sections that follow.

Before moving on, I want to recognize the importance of language for a social imaginary, using Klemperer's understanding of the LTI [*Lingua Tertii Imperii* or Language of the Third Reich]. As a philologist, Klemperer maintained that:

> Whatever it is that people are determined to hide, be it only from others, or from themselves, even things they carry around unconsciously – language reveals all. … what a man says may be a pack of lies – but his true self is laid bare for all to see in the style of his utterances.[58]

Regardless of whether the content of a statement is calculated or not, factual or not, word-choice, Klemperer believed, opened a window to understanding the person or the society at its core. In this way, studying someone's language is akin to studying someone's social imaginary in that it acts as the framing and grounding of all interaction. For Klemperer, however, language is not only a way to understand what is already extant within the subject, but it is something that changes the subject. He explained that "language does not simply write and think for me, it also

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[57] Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI, Lingua Tertii Imperii : A Philologist's Notebook* (London ; New Brunswick, N.J.: Athlone Press, 2000), 111–12.
[58] Klemperer, 11.

increasingly dictates my feelings and governs my entire spiritual being the more unquestionably and unconsciously I abandon myself to it."[59] This is the constitutive element of social imaginary described above—the notion that one's social imaginary shapes how we see the world, even unconsciously. This insidious element is what Klemperer called "the most powerful Hitlerian propaganda tool,"[60] for, "Nazism," he wrote, "permeated the flesh and blood of the people through single words, idioms and sentence structures."[61] Thus, language ought to be understood as a key part of the construction and propagation of the Nazi social imaginary.

While the Nazi Party certainly utilized the antisemitic vocabulary that was already circulating in prior social imaginaries, they also corrupted words that were not previously understood as eugenicist, morphing their reception yet playing on their past meanings—for instance, a simple word like "pieces" [*Stücke*] which became a degrading, dehumanizing way to refer to dead bodies in the concentration camp crematoria. A similar polluting process took place, Klemperer and I suggest, with language that traditionally had been used in religious contexts—for instance, "prophet," "holy," and, as we will delve into later, "eternity." These words carried with them power, often imbued with notions of ultimate meaning or sacrality, and the Nazis harnessed these connotations and reoriented the words for a new nefarious purpose. As Klemperer vividly says, the Party "[steeped] words and groups of words and sentence structures with its poison."[62] In the next section, I will examine how a crisis of historical meaning provoked in part by World War I created and evidenced a social imaginary ripe for poisonous appropriation of religious rhetoric.

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[59] Klemperer, 15.
[60] Klemperer, 15.
[61] Klemperer, 15.
[62] Klemperer, 16.

A Crisis of Historical Meaning: Approaches to "Modern" Temporality

Although Hitler's rise to power has in the past been portrayed as primarily a result of virulent, popular antisemitism, the great degree to which circumstance magnified the appeal of Nazi ideology is becoming more frequently recognized. While fighting World War I inspired a heightened feeling of national unity, losing the war and the subsequent, perceived victimization by the Treaty of Versailles also contributed to this sense of national identity in need of defense. Perhaps more damaging than financial reparations,[63] the loss of land and the admission of total guilt for the war dictated by the Treaty of Versailles was a large blow to German national identity. Moreover, the stock market crash between 1928 and 1932 certainly affected Germany, resulting in political conflicts between the rising right *qua* the Nazis, the Communist left, and the moderate-to-conservative Weimar government. Given current events, some attention is being paid as well to how the 1918 Influenza pandemic contributed to Nazi popularity at the voting booths—in terms of death toll and the following economic strife. It was a perfect and terrible storm of physical, emotional, and spiritual turmoil, producing—or perhaps highlighting—a crisis of meaning.

In his book *Time and Power,* Christopher Clark, having traced notions of historicity from the Great Elector Friedrich Wilhelm up through Otto von Bismarck, paints a picture of the destabilization felt by German intellectuals at the end of World War I. He explains that, "Many writers and cultural figures saw in the events of 1918-1919 something like a break in the fabric of historical experience."[64] In order to comprehend the weight of this crisis, it is necessary to

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[63] Though often the reparations laid out in the Treaty of Versailles are seen as the catalyst for the future economic hardships and subsequent response, Weimar Germany was actually fairly well off due to a boom in industrialization, until the stock market crash.
[64] Clark, *Time and Power*, 166.

grasp "what 'history' had come to mean to the intellectuals of the Wilhelmine Empire."[65] Indeed, Clark explains that, "It had acquired metaphysical authority as the field in which supposedly transcendent 'ideas' (like that of 'the state') interacted dynamically with the forces unleashed by a flawed humanity."[66] In other words, a sense of history as a progressive through-line had provided meaning and forward motion for the Empire. Along this flowing river of history, as Bismarck liked to call it, the defeat in World War I and the subsequent Treaty of Versailles felt like a rupture, a sudden inconsistency in the forward march of German progress.

If history were to continue to be conceived of as linear, it would logically have to be accepted that Germany's position in 1919 was teleologically as it ought to be. For those who would create and subscribe to the Nazi party, this was untenable. Clark posits that,

> If history had to some extent absorbed that elementary stabilising and orienting function we ascribe to religion, then it followed that the crisis in traditional historical thinking must present itself as 'a problem for life and culture of the greatest and most difficult kind'.[67]

While I challenge the implicit assumption of the general whole-sale disenchantment or secularization of Germany, it is worth considering the extent to which an understanding of history imbued with meaning for a German identity had taken on a grounding function. In fact, this crisis of historical consciousness complicates any inclination to iron out the complexity of the relationship between time and religion or the secular. The vision of history presented above suggests a metaphysical framework in which immanent history itself was considered to be sacred. Interestingly, just as Clark points the reader towards history's endowment with sacrality, he simultaneously cites Mircea Eliade to call the pre-war time "profane." Clark claims that, "There are circumstances […] in which humans may 'revolt against the nightmare of history'

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[65] Clark, 168.
[66] Clark, 168.
[67] Clark, 169. Citing Wolfgang Hardtwig.

and seek refuge 'outside the boundaries of profane time'."[68] This references Eliade's notion that historical Hebrews utilized their religious stories to understand their immanent lives. Eliade explains: "to endure their military defeats and political humiliations, the Hebrews interpreted contemporary events by means of the very ancient cosmogonico-heroic myth."[69] In the context of his theory of eternal return, Eliade suggests that, in framing current events in terms of mythical meaning, the Hebrews entered into mythical, cyclical, sacred time and left linear, profane time. As will be discussed later, this may not be a perfect analogue to the Nazi approach to time, but it is resonant in terms of a meaning-seeking reaction to crisis. Thus, the end of World War I could be construed as a moment of crisis in which history, in the context of German identity, pivoted either from possessing a religious meaning to carrying a sense of nihilism or as a situation necessitating a shift *to* a transcendent way of conceiving of time—or perhaps both.

Charles Taylor's philosophy of the immanent frame provides another way of formulating these complex issues of religion, time, and modernity.[70] In *A Secular Age*, Taylor grapples with what he calls, "secularity 3 (the change in the conditions of belief),"[71] which makes it "not only easy, but even inescapable"[72] for many to not believe in God. Out of this enormous work, I would like to emphasize Taylor's contribution of the spun immanent frame. For Taylor, the immanent frame is the broad situation common to modern Western societies.[73] He describes it as follows:

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[68] Clark, 170.

[69] Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History*, [Rev.], Bollingen Series 46 (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), 38.

[70] Taylor's framing of modernity against the Middle Ages falls prey to a narrative of periodization much like Reinhart Koselleck's, as we will see shortly. The critique that Kathleen Davis levels against Koselleck applies as well to Taylor. See footnote 76.

[71] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 423.

[72] Taylor, 25.

[73] Taylor's focus exclusively on the "West" has been flagged by a number of scholars. Dipesh Chakrabarty notes the lack of indigenous peoples, while Paul Mendes-Flohr and Peter Gordon comment on the absence of Jewish voices.

> Modern science, along with the many other facets described—the buffered identity, with its disciplines, modern individualism, with its reliance on instrumental reason and action in secular time—make up the immanent frame. This can be lived in many ways. Some are open to transcendence, and some move to closure.[74]

What is particularly interesting in this statement is the last two sentences. Although the immanent frame acts as an underlying condition that facilitates unbelief, Taylor is compelled to show that it does not necessitate unbelief, for belief certainly still exists. To answer this problem, Taylor proposes the language of an immanent frame that is "spun" either to openness or closure to transcendence. Therefore, someone with a closed immanent frame will see only the immanent, and someone operating with an open immanent frame will live in the immanent but still have access to and be informed by the transcendent. As we will examine later, the terminology of an open immanent frame helps shine a light on the Nazi approach to religion, as it describes a relationship with the transcendent occurring within the immanent—a kind of blending of the two realms and times.[75]

This question of temporality and modern crisis also preoccupied Reinhart Koselleck, who theorized that Europe underwent a "saddle period" [*Sattelzeit*] between 1750 and 1850 in which the understanding of time shifted to accommodate a view of increasing human agency with

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Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Modern and the Secular in the West: An Outsider's View," ed. Charles Taylor, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 2 (2009): 393–403. William Schweiker et al., "Grappling with Charles Taylor's A Secular Age," *The Journal of Religion* 90, no. 3 (July 1, 2010): 367–400, https://doi.org/10.1086/651709. Peter E. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor's 'A Secular Age,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 4 (2008): 664.

[74] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 566.

[75] Even as the notion of an open immanent frame carries utility for thinking about the Nazi narrative, it is important to note Peter Gordon's insight into a potential paradox inherent to Taylor's argument. Gordon asks: "if to be modern is to live within an immanent frame then how would a transcendent God show up at all?" He sees Taylor's answer of the spun immanent frame to undercut the supposition of the importance of background. If the background we share, our social imaginary, truly "means a transformation in the sorts of entities that can show up" then "such a transformation should also change *us*. And, indeed, Taylor thinks it *has* changed us in profound (and sometimes unfortunate) ways." In spite of this shift, however, there remains the option and desire for the transcendent. Gordon successfully hits on Taylor's assumption that background, while important for conceiving of unbelief, is trumped by belief, betraying a quiet favor for the latter.
Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God," 669, 669–70.

respect to the making of history. He saw medieval time as inherently static in contrast to modern time which held the possibility of change.[76] "Koselleck has all along been narrating a double break," Kathleen Davis explains:

> a historical break with a religious mode of ruling the state, and a qualitative break within the conceptualization of temporality itself. In his account, the elimination of religion and religious expectations yields not only politics, but meaningful historical time, and at the critical juncture they fuse.[77]

Although Koselleck focuses more on modernity and time than "secularization," per se, his arguments are deeply intertwined with European debates over the significances of living a secular or religious life in a secular or religious society. Particularly relevant for this discussion of fascism, Koselleck saw this shift in perspective in the temporalization of utopias, pointing to the French Revolution and, more broadly, to communist and nationalist movements. As Roger Griffin explains, these newly envisioned utopias

> ceased to be located in a metaphysical dimension or in the «nowhere» of wishful thinking, but were now projected into the future as earthly projects to be pursued

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[76] Kathleen Davis critiques Koselleck for the way in which he homogenizes temporality in the Middle Ages and suggests that meaningful time was inaccessible because bound to divine forces. By flattening human experience before approximately 1500 to static temporality, Koselleck reinscribes Orientalist patterns and, Davis notes, the periodization that can often accompany theories of modernity. Davis pushes against this on the basis of two main observations: "'the Middle Ages' is not a temporal or geographical unity," and there are examples of less than static thought on the very topic of temporality before modernity. Regarding the former, Davis calls attention to the role that colonization played in the formation of the concept of the Middle Ages using, in part, the words "feudal" and "secular" and linking both to debates over sovereignty as Western Europe occupied "new" territories and societies. She argues that, to this day, the adjectives "medieval," "barbaric," or "uncivilized" act as justifications to intervene in situations that where intervention may or may not be ethical. Beyond the construction of "Middle Ages" as a tool for colonialism, Davis uses The Venerable Bede to question Koselleck's—and others'—insistence on the across-the-board static nature of "medieval" time. In the eight-century B.C.E., Bede "elaborated what we could call a secular theology of time, whereby the necessary, ongoing calculation of time becomes a regulating practice, a way of living that in turn generates the history of the world." One manner in which this is evident is his groundbreaking use of *anno domini* which connects Jesus Christ's incarnation with immanent time, much as Eliade theorized centuries later. Deeply concerned with measuring time, Bede did maintain that end of time was—and should be—incalculable, which does contrast to Koselleck's notion of temporalized utopia. Certainly, there have been shifts in social imaginaries of temporality since 700 or 1500, but Davis cautions against assuming a clean delineation between "medieval" and "modern."
Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 16, 104, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/14053.
[77] Davis, 95.

and realised not just within historical time, but by taking charge of and directing the evolution of history itself.[78]

This certainly accords with Nazi attempts to form the future of Germany and Europe, for instance regarding the use of eugenics, which quite literally seeks to control evolution. Moreover, the notion of a temporalized utopia will become especially salient for the later analysis of eternity. Griffin understands this shift in temporality to be a central aspect of fascism, writing, "The premise of all fascist movements and regimes is that history can be made."[79] This tenet is on full display in the Nazi attempt to distance the new regime from the Weimar era through the language of rupture and rebirth, to which I turn shortly, as a transition into discussing eternality. Indeed, temporality was a considerable concern in the German social imaginary. Whether understood as profane or sacred, linear or cyclical, homogenous or multi-dimensional, continuous or interrupted, it is clear that the categorization of time was a central issue with respect to understanding the meaning of one's life in the cosmos and specifically in the German polis. With that, I turn next to the question of the Nazi approach to time evident in *Triumph of the Will,* beginning chronologically with the intended rupture from and rebirth out of the Weimar era.

Rupture with Weimar and Rebirth of the *Volk*

In conceiving of National Socialist temporality, particularly in light of Griffin's emphasis on the import of history-making in fascist movements, I look first to their inception as a party of revolution which sought a break in time from the immediate past of the Weimar era. Taylor comments that, "the idea of revolution can easily turn into a powerful myth, that of a past nodal

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[78] Griffin, "Fixing Solutions," 10.
[79] Griffin, 15.

point whose infinite possibilities have been frustrated, betrayed, by treachery or pusillanimity."[80] This aligns with the Nazi Party program's insistence that Germany's loss of World War I could be attributed to being stabbed in the back by Jews and politicians and that the democracy of the subsequent Weimar Republic was built by these so-called enemies. This necessitated a struggle [*Kampf*] to restore Germany to its destiny. In service of this, the past of the Weimar Republic would be ossified and excised. In his analysis of National Socialist museums and exhibitions, Clark describes, for instance, the layout of the Halle Museum, whose first floor detailed the Weimar Republic in which the Nazi Party was born. This section was modelled after traditional museums with glass displays that intentionally evoked static, taxidermized objects. Upstairs was a hall of memory, designed to be simple, quiet, and solemn, which commemorated those who died for the cause. Of the museum, *Gauleiter* Rudolf Jordan commented that, on one hand, "there was the 'timeless struggle' (*der zeitlose Kampf*) of the National Socialist movement; on the other, the 'parliaments, with all the blabbering of day-to-day politics'."[81] In this shaping of memory, Clark claims, we see the National Socialist project of remodeling time. Speaking of the Weimar government, Hitler said, "'We National Socialists have the right to refuse that we be integrated into that line.'"[82] Clark explains, "Restructuring the relationship between the present and the past in this way allowed the vanquished 'system' of the recent past to be evacuated from the present."[83]

The project of rupture with the recent past saturates *Triumph of the Will*. Riefenstahl positions the entire piece in relationship to these events, such that the opening intertitle presents the text, "20 years after the outbreak of the World War; 16 years after the start of the German

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[80] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 176.
[81] Clark, *Time and Power*, 182.
[82] Clark, 178.
[83] Clark, 178.

suffering; 19 months after the start of German rebirth."[84] Not only is the moment of the 1934 Nuremberg rally framed in the context of World War I, German suffering is not said to have begun until the end of the war, the Treaty of Versailles, and the beginning of the Weimar Republic, certainly an indication of the extreme contempt held toward this government. The Party Congress itself begins by commemorating both the late President Paul von Hindenburg, who is framed as "the first soldier of the Great War," and "our fallen comrades."[85] One of the most poignant moments of distress over the recent past comes in the roll call of workers. When ceremonially asked to state where they are from, the last worker to speak says mournfully, "Saarland,"[86] ending with a sad lilt as he names one of the territories separated–in what some called a transgression of sovereignty–from German control by the Treaty of Versailles. The impact of World War I and the Treaty of Versailles, whose imposition the Nazis blamed on the founders of the Weimar democracy, pervades *Triumph of the Will*, particularly as it connects to the subsequent envisioned rebirth of the nation.

Following the proposed rupture from the Weimar era, National Socialist propaganda presented the revolution as a moment of rebirth, a conception of time deeply linked to religious notions of resurrection. Articulating what he calls the palingenetic myth, Griffin places great weight on the framework of national rebirth. As a part of the "New consensus" of fascist studies seeking to examine instances of fascism as political ideologies in their own right, Griffin suggests that the palingenetic myth occupies an important role and frames it in terms of "destruction and (attempted) creation"[87] and death and rebirth. There are three particularly

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[84] Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will (Triumph Des Willen)*, 0:57-1:50.
[85] Riefenstahl, 22:55-23:08.
[86] Riefenstahl, 33:00.
[87] Roger Griffin, "Cloister or Cluster? The Implications of Emilio Gentile's Ecumenical Theory of Political Religion for the Study of Extremism," in *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives*, ed. Constantin Iordachi, Rewriting Histories (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010), 292.

notable references to rebirth in *Triumph of the Will,* although I will discuss the third in the

following section of this paper. The first, mentioned above, occurs in the opening sequence, in

which the 1934 Nuremberg rally is placed in relation to "the start of German rebirth."[88] The

second takes place later, when the names of the World War I battlefields are called as flags are

slowly lowered to the ground. With a resounding crash, a voice proclaims, "Comrades who died

on the battlefield…" followed by the masses chanting, "You are not dead. You are alive. You are

Germany!"[89] This not only serves to reinforce a sense of martyrdom and remembrance but

suggests an explicit–if figurative–resurrection through the rebirth of the German nation, more

specifically, the *Volk*.

Central to Nazi use of "rebirth" and "eternal," *Volk* quite broadly means people, and in

terms of the National Socialist use it came to have significant racial connotations. In general,

scholars are somewhat squeamish about offering a clear definition, in part, as ethnologist

Hermann Bausinger explains, because "[the] objectification *Volk* is not a given which is there for

the researcher, like so many other research objects. It represents more of an abstraction, drawn

from the social structure, and one must always suspect ideology."[90] As an implicitly boundary-

making concept, it is deeply linked to nationalism, although it was not always invoked with

genocidal intentions.[91] A prolific voice in philosophy and literary criticism writing around the

turn of the nineteenth-century, Johann Gottfried von Herder was "the first influential figure to

speak of an essential Germanness that he wished to see cultivated rather than suppressed."[92] In

doing so, "Herder spoke of a national spirit or soul of the *Volk*, a spirit of Germanness that united

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[88] Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will (Triumph Des Willen)*, 0:57-1:50.
[89] Riefenstahl, 35:15-36:00.
[90] Bausinger, "Nazi Folk Ideology and Folk Research," 11.
[91] This latter fact is not meant to excuse its inherent ties to racial ideology and its eventual contributions to eugenics.
[92] Mees, *Science of the Swastika*, 16.

the German-speaking peoples of Central Europe."[93] In pushing away from the French ideal of

Enlightenment, Herder emphasized the common people as carriers of a distinguished ancient

lineage. Rather than give in to the burgeoning universalist sentiments on the continent, he

"theorized that the *Volk* (by which he primarily meant the peasant folk) represented higher

individuals who had kept alive the creative spark of their heritage."[94] In conceiving of this spirit

of *Volk*, Herder placed primary importance on common language, claiming that, "'a nation …

has nothing more valuable than the language of its fathers.'"[95] This understanding of language as

"a peculiar 'national genius' of a folk-community" became, as Roland Scheel writes, "a

necessary precondition for appropriating Norse material as a pure mirror of the Germans' 'own'

national characteristics."[96]

Based then on the foundation of the concept of *Volk,* as presented by Herder, part of the

German social imaginary was an understanding of an essential—eternal, perhaps—Germanness

that lived continuously in a people, expressed through common language and folk poetry. By

making a claim to this continuity, the very foundation of National Socialist ideology—*Volk*[97]—

was rooted in a bid for a certain understanding of time, or, as Clark writes, "A temporality

centred [sic.] on the *Volk*—not as a population, but as a transhistorical racial essence"[98] which

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[93] Mees, 16.

It ought to be noted that for Herder the German *Volk* was only one of many valid, unique national essences. He was influential for other non-German nationalist projects as he advocated not for German supremacy but for the importance of upholding the integrity of each one's own national *Volk* identity—nonetheless, a potentially problematic view.

[94] James R. Dow, "There Is No Grand Theory in Germany, and for Good Reason," *Journal of Folklore Research* 45, no. 1 (2008): 56.

[95] William A. Wilson, "Herder, Folklore and Romantic Nationalism," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 6, no. 4 (1973): 827, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1973.00819.x.

[96] Roland Scheel, "German Perspectives," in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, De Gruyter Reference (Berlin ; Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 914.

[97] This is certainly not to ignore the centrality of antisemitism to Nazi ideology. In fact, antisemitism was directly linked to the purity of the *Volk*.

[98] Clark, *Time and Power*, 199.

facilitated "a flight into deep continuity with a remote past and a remote future."[99] This element of continuity with a so-called essential truth about the German people ties directly into the multi-layered use of "eternal" in *Triumph of the Will*.

Conceptions of the Eternal: Within or Beyond Historical Time?

Examining the Nazi use of the descriptor eternal—and its relatives "eternity" and "the eternal" —illuminates a great deal about their approach to time, history, and religion, for, as I will discuss, the concept can speak either to an embedding in or a transcendence of historical time. In this section, I first present Klemperer's analysis of the term for the LTI, followed by an appraisal of its use in *Triumph of the Will*. In order to account for the tension between a concept of the eternal which is timeless and one which is historical, I next introduce Mircea Eliade's thinking on eternal return as a cyclical feature of "archaic" religion in comparison to his understanding of linear sacred time in a religion centered around theophany. Ultimately, I find that the latter notion of sacred history resonates more closely than the former with the Nazi use of the word eternal on display in *Triumph of the Will*, which, it should be noted, is not how Eliade himself uses the term eternal. Augmenting Eliade with Charles Taylor's discussion of secular and higher time, I draw in Taylor's terminology of gathered time and kairotic knots and warps as ways of further naming immanent moments with transcendent meaning.

Klemperer notes the centrality of the concept of the eternal [*ewig*] for the Third Reich, explaining that, "It is one of those words in the LTI dictionary whose specifically Nazi aspect derives purely from excessive use."[100] This is illustrated by the following rather striking story:

> In examinations for apprentices there is a common but pernicious trick-question.
> It reads: 'What comes after the Third Reich?' If the candidate is gullible or falls

[99] Clark, 208.
[100] Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, 110.

into the trap he will answer 'the Fourth', at which point he will be failed
mercilessly as an inadequate disciple of the Party (even if he has an excellent
knowledge of his subject). The correct answer should read: 'Nothing comes after
it, the Third Reich is the eternal German Reich.'[101]

This anecdote indicates both the core ideological concept of the Third Reich as eternal and, true

to totalitarianism, the degree to which it had been integrated into all aspects of life and presented

as common knowledge. Though the term eternal was by no means a new word, through the LTI,

it shifted to have a new meaning with reference to the state and the Party in the social imaginary.

Comparing "eternal" to other adjectives frequently used in Nazi rhetoric, Klemperer writes that:

It is possible to see *ewig* as the final rung in a long ladder of National Socialist
numerical superlatives, but with this final rung heaven is reached. Eternal is an
attribute reserved exclusively for the divine; by calling something eternal I elevate
it to the sphere of the religious.[102]

By emphasizing the religious core of the word eternal, Klemperer references the way in which

the Third Reich was presented and—disastrously—accepted as a sacred entity itself. Attributing

eternality to the regime, especially in the frame of a ladder to heaven, suggests that it embodies

the soteriological *telos* of the German *Volk*. Ultimately, Klemperer argues that, "at its height the

LTI was a language of faith because its objective was fanaticism."[103] While it may be tempting

to react to this statement by launching into a critique of equating National Socialism with faith, I

posit that there is more to learn from taking a philologist like Klemperer at his word. Klemperer

does not say National Socialism is religion; he says faith and the LTI share linguistic qualities.

Throughout his book, he shows that this is true in the realm of word usage, as in the discussion

of eternity here, and with this statement quoted above he shines a light on the affective power of

both faith and the National Socialist rhetoric. Klemperer articulates something important about

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[101] Klemperer, 110.
[102] Klemperer, 110.
[103] Klemperer, 109.

the appearance of religious words in National Socialism: the former's ability to code something as sacred and therefore worthy of affective devotion, even outside the scope of religion in any formal, traditional sense.

Building from this foundation of the LTI use of the word eternal, I move to examining how this is made manifest in *Triumph of the Will*. Indeed, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* presents an eternal German *Volk*–an entity continuous with the past, which, after the perceived aberration of the Weimar era, has been reborn through the Nazi Party, and will continue into the eternal future. Hitler's final speech in *Triumph of the Will* leaves the viewer with a strong message of the eternal future he envisions and expects for the German *Volk*. Amid wild gesticulations, Hitler proclaims, "It is our wish and will that this state and this Reich should remain in existence in the coming millennia. We can be happy in the knowledge that this future will belong to us totally."[104] Attributing this continuity to the youth who will carry on the work, he goes on to exhort that, "Only when we in the Party, using all our strength, have achieved the highest National Socialist ideals, only then will the Party be an eternal and indestructible pillar of the German people and the Reich."[105] In these statements, Hitler refers to an unending future of the ilk described in Klemperer's anecdote about the Fourth Reich question and Koselleck's temporalized utopia. The film and rally both end with a declaration of the eternal character of the National Socialist Party. In the final moments of Hitler's speech, he exclaims that even as the rally comes to an end, he sees future enthusiasm for "[people] will be gripped, cheered, and inspired anew. Because the idea and the movement are the expression of our people and a symbol of the eternal."[106] In an important and perhaps contradictory nuance, here, eternal is not

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[104] Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will (Triumph Des Willen)*, 1:39:30-1:39:44.
[105] Riefenstahl, 1:40:26-1:40:49.
[106] Riefenstahl, 1:41:50-1:42:06.

only suggesting a paradoxically infinite temporal quantity; it does seem to refer to a sacred

category or entity, akin to Klemperer's comment that the eternal gestures to the divine.

From even these few instances, there does appear to be a tension inherent in the fact that

eternal can refer to a measure of constancy *in* time or to something *beyond* time. Does an eternal

entity exist within history or separate from it? In order to pinpoint which version of eternality

was articulated by the Nazi movement, I suggest we think with Mircea Eliade, a scholar with his

own upsetting affinity for nationalism and fascism. Eliade has a contested legacy, for, although

he did write against racism and totalitarianism, he also supported the interwar Romanian fascist

group the Legion of the Archangel Michael.[107] I do not seek to present Eliade's scholarship as

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[107] Up until 1934/35 there is record of Eliade's opposition to antisemitism and German and Italian fascism. Among these writings is his article "Racism and the Cinema," which rejected the veneration of the white race, and an article against conflating nationalism and antisemitism, as well as a few other instances of written pushback against specific antisemitic people. Under a pseudonym, Eliade wrote "Against Left and Right" which condemned extremism on both sides. In 1935, Eliade maintained that intellectuals should not become enmeshed in politics. It can come as a surprise then that later in 1935 he wrote complementarily of Corneliu Codreanu, the founder of the Legion, and that by 1937 Eliade was convinced that the movement was a needed spiritual revolution. Raul Carstocea examines this transition and points to both the unfavorable interwar economic situation and Eliade's own scholarly work. Carstocea explains that, "[Eliade's] statements in favour of the Legion […] point towards the «escape from history» that remained one of the most important themes in Eliade's writings, understood both in a particular (i.e. specific to Romania) and a universal dimension." Moreover, Carstocea calls attention to the importance of the Legion's religious tenor for Eliade who wrote that, as opposed to communism, fascism, or "Hitlerism," "«the Legionary Movement was born under the sign of the Archangel Michael and will triumph through God's grace. That is why, while all other contemporary revolutions are *political* – the legionary revolution is *spiritual and Christian.*»" The Legion did draw significantly on Orthodox Christianity, particularly employing the language of resurrection of a new man. After the war, Eliade never issued a statement rejecting or affirming his support of the Legion. In 1949 he published *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, and in 1959 *The Sacred and the Profane*. Much debate remains over his relationship to antisemitism, for there certainly are written and reported remarks that look like antisemitism—tying Jews to disease, for instance. While the authenticity of some has been called into question, others are undeniably his words, but Bryan Rennie, arguing against the charge of antisemitism, suggests that "equating all ethnicities and ideologies that threaten national security cannot be accurately identified as antisemitism. There is no indication that Eliade regarded Jews as any more inclined to be 'national traitors' than others." That said, the Legion itself was not so careful to distinguish between nationalism and antisemitism, explicitly naming the Jews as one of their major enemies. Scholars note that, while the Legion shares many resonances with the other European fascist movements in the interwar period, it is unique to its context, and it is both the overlaps and the tensions that make Eliade's relationship to it particularly interesting for this paper.
Raul Carstocea, "Breaking the Teeth of Time: Mythical Time and the «Terror of History» in the Rhetoric of the Legionary Movement in Interwar Romania," *Journal of Modern European History / Zeitschrift Für Moderne Europäische Geschichte / Revue d'histoire Européenne Contemporaine* 13, no. 1 (2015): 90, 91.
Philip Ó Ceallaigh and Bryan Rennie, "Mircea Eliade and Antisemitism: An Exchange," Los Angeles Review of Books, accessed December 9, 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/mircea-eliade-and-antisemitism-an-exchange/.

unproblematic, neither in terms of its intersection with his biography nor with regard to his methods and biases. Rather, in acknowledging his positionality, I suggest that, as a thinker contemporary to the Third Reich, his theory of time and the sacred is particularly interesting to put into conversation with National Socialism. Eliade, I posit, can shed some light on how eternity interacts with time as manifested in history. As such, I offer his discussion of how different types of religion approach time, particularly how the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ's incarnation differs from what he presents as the myth of the eternal return of "archaic" religions.[108]

In both *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* and *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade concerns himself with distinguishing between the "religious man" and the "nonreligious man" by examining their relationships with time. On the whole, Eliade divides these into archaic and modern sensibilities respectively.[109] The archaic, religious man, he writes, "lives in two kinds of time, of which the more important, sacred time, appears under the paradoxical aspect of a circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present that is periodically reintegrated by means of rites."[110] This illustrates that, for Eliade, the crux of archaic sacred time is that it is not linearly progressing, rather it is repeatable. Through cyclical events, festivals, and rituals, Eliade sees archaic, religious man as returning to a mythic

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[108] Moving forward, I will refrain from flagging "archaic" with quotation marks with the reader's understanding that I take issue with this categorization of non-monotheist religions as "archaic." In a similar vein, this footnote serves to call attention to Eliade's gendered use of "religious man" as a universal for the word human. Though I proceed to use his terminology, I mark here my disagreement with his usages.

[109] Eliade does claim that even "the modern man who feels and claims that he is nonreligious still retains a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals," and, in fact, that the "profane man cannot help preserving some vestiges of the behavior of religious man." He goes on to present a somewhat contradictory vision of whether or not nationalism would fit into this category of "camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals." Regardless, I do not wish to argue that Eliade would call National Socialists "religious men." I only want to suggest that his conception of sacred time and eternity do share interesting resonances with what can be witnessed in Nazi rhetoric, ritual, and ideology.
Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 204–5, 204.

[110] Eliade, 70.

time, most often a moment of cosmic creation. "Through the repetition of certain paradigmatic gestures," Eliade explains "there is an implicit abolition of profane time, of duration, of 'history'; and he who reproduces the exemplary gesture thus finds himself transported into the mythical epoch in which its revelation took place."[111] In this way, a ritual or a symbolic object can remove the archaic, religious man from the line of profane time and bring him back to an original sacred time. Returning to his conception of the religious man contra the nonreligious man, Eliade argues that, "the former refuses to live solely in what, in modern terms, is called the historical present; he attempts to regain a sacred time that, from one point of view, can be homologized to eternity."[112] Eliade sees the archaic, religious man taking flight from time, divorcing from the historical profane moment, and, in this way, attaining eternity.

Eliade sees this archaic, religious notion of eternity *qua* eternal return which lies beyond historical time contrasting with the "Judaeo-Christian"[113] understanding of sacred time which intersects with history and follows a more linear path.[114] Eliade explains that, in Christianity, "Since God was *incarnated*, that is, since he took on *a historically conditioned human existence*, history acquires the possibility of being sanctified."[115] Rather than the sacred being something that exists separate from the immanent world, the divine enters into historical, profane time, allowing the latter to take on sacred meaning. "When a Christian of our day participates in liturgical time," Eliade explains, there is a marked difference from the way in which ritual and festivals are experienced in "archaic" time, for "[the Christian] recovers the *illud tempus* [that

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[111] Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 35.
[112] Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 70.
[113] Eliade, 112. I suggest that Eliade uses the language of Judaeo-Christian, because it emphasizes what he sees as the division between archaic religion and non-archaic religion *qua* Judaism and Christianity. It also connotes his understanding that Judaism and Christianity stand in relation to each other with respect to temporality.
[114] Although Eliade makes the point that Judaism first made this intervention, his discussion of Christianity is more apropos for the purposes of this paper and, indeed, he argues that Christianity pushed this further than Judaism.
[115] Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 111.

time] in which Christ lived, suffered, and rose again–but it is no longer a mythical time, it is the time when Pontius Pilate governed Judaea."[116] Thus, history can become imbued with teleological and, importantly, soteriological importance. Eliade argues that, in the "Judaeo-Christian" understanding, "God's interventions in history […] have a transhistorical purpose—the *salvation* of man."[117] Although Christianity involves cyclical notions of ritual and liturgy, the Christian theological imagination, Eliade suggests, is oriented to a linear time into which God intervened in the form of Jesus Christ, converting historical time into a kind of sacred time.

I suggest that this framework clarifies the Nazi use of the term eternal in *Triumph of the Will*. While in Eliade's distinction between archaic, mythic time and Christian, historical time neither is more or less sacred, in the former, the sacred exists outside the bounds of profane time and in the latter, it co-exists with and reconstitutes formerly profane time. Therefore, an archaic understanding of an eternal entity would envision it as apart from the historical world, whereas, for Eliade, a Christian understanding of an eternal entity would, on the basis of the Incarnation, see it within historical time. I posit that the latter maps more accurately onto the terminology of eternal found in *Triumph of the Will,* particularly that which references an everlasting future for the Third Reich. In this sense, the Nazis do not use the word eternal in the same way as Eliade when he describes archaic eternal return. Nevertheless, Eliade's use of the term eternal serves to open a discussion into the configuration of sacred time which, in turn, leads to his understanding of the divine entering into historic time. It is this concept of sacred time that is reflected in the Nazi narrative in *Triumph of the Will*, and therefore, when the term eternal is used, it refers not to Eliade's eternal return but to the location of the *Volk qua* the Party in sacred time within history.

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[116] Eliade, 111.
[117] Eliade, 112.

Indeed, Hitler's statements presented above clearly articulate a vision of a temporal—if debatably unending—future, recalling Koselleck's notion of a temporalized utopia.

Taylor's theory of time can help here to augment the understanding of eternity manifested in time and to tie it to revolution. Like Eliade, Taylor distinguishes between higher times and secular time—for Eliade, sacred and profane. Although Taylor notes that some people of faith do not live entirely in secular time, he argues that it is the predominant experience of time for the modern West. Secular time, for Taylor, is chronologically linear: "One thing happens after another, and when something is past, it's past."[118] It is also invariable. For those living in secular time, Taylor explains, "Time has become a precious resource, not to be 'wasted'. [...] We have constructed an environment in which we live a uniform, univocal secular time, which we try to measure and control in order to get things done."[119] In contrast to this, Taylor uses the terminology of "higher times," which, he writes, "gather and re-order secular time. They introduce 'warps' and seeming inconsistencies in profane time-ordering."[120] Shifting to his discussion of higher times, Taylor turns first to Platonic eternity, noting that eternity is "[the] most obvious term to introduce here […] because it is the philosophically and theologically consecrated term for higher time."[121] Because Platonic eternity centers on the notion of ideal forms which exist outside of time and the world, accessing eternity in this view involves always a transcendence of this world and of time. Taylor, like Eliade, points to the shift that occurs with Christianity[122] wherein the eternal manifests in time. After mentioning the Incarnation and the Crucifixion, Taylor emphasizes Saint Augustine's work in which "eternity is

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[118] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 55.
[119] Taylor, 59.
[120] Taylor, 55.
[121] Taylor, 54.
[122] Taylor specifically attributes this to Christianity and not to a "Judaeo-Christian" lineage.

reconceived as gathered time."[123] In gathered time, God is seen to hold all times together in

God's hand, such that the eternal occurs as a simultaneity that allows the past to be fully in the

present moment, for instance, in the liturgical cycle. To these notions of eternity, Taylor adds

Eliade's notion of archaic eternal return to the moment of creation. Finally, Taylor also utilizes

the language of "kairotic knots." He relates these to carnival wherein they act as "moments

whose nature and placing calls for reversal, followed by others demanding rededication, and

others still which approach Parousia: Shrove Tuesday, Lent, Easter."[124] He also acknowledges

that, "Revolutions themselves are understood by their heirs and supporters as such kairotic

moments. And nationalist historiography is full of such moments."[125] In this statement, Taylor

suggests that the quality revolutionary, nationalist, and religious time share is gathered moments

which relate the past, present, and future to each other in a simultaneity that imbues the moment

in question with a sense of heightened meaning.[126] It is this notion that I find particularly

resonant for the Nazi approach to time, as I will shortly discuss regarding the Blood Banner. If

Eliade forms the theoretical base for understanding the eternal manifested and playing out in

time, Taylor adds further nuance to discussing the particular moments as gathered kairotic knots

or warps that connote re-ordered meaning.

In the context of the Nazi narrative of history, the Munich Putsch, or Beer Hall Putsch,

stands as one reference—firmly anchored in historical time—for future moments of higher,

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[123] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 56.
[124] Taylor, 54.
[125] Taylor, 54.
[126] That said, Taylor believes that nationalist transcendence is not truly transcendence. As Peter Gordon notes, "Taylor is being quite candid when he describes any recourse [to secular transcendence] as a 'substitute.' His conclusion seems to be that such a recourse can never be entirely successful since the sought-after transcendence is not actually God." This is one instance of many in which Taylor's personal stake in traditional belief comes to the surface. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God," 664.

gathered time. This becomes evident in the treatment of the Blood Banner consecration that took

place each year at the Nuremberg rally. Klemperer describes this Nazi ritual as follows:

> The first victims of the Party, the sixteen who died in front of the Feldherrnhalle,
> are treated like Christian martyrs in the rituals and language accorded them. The
> flag which was born at the head of their demonstration is called the *Blutfahne*
> {Blood Banner}, and new SA and SS standards are consecrated by touching it.[127]

Riefenstahl's depiction of this ceremony shows a line of uniformed men holding the yet-to-be-

consecrated standards which prominently display a swastika and the phrase "Germany, awake"

[*Deutschland erwache*]. It is worth pausing at this phrase for a moment, as it is intensely tied to

the intended caesura, the notion of rebirth and resurrection, and the historical moment of the

Nazi movement's struggle. The phrase comes from a poem by Dietrich Eckart written for the

Nazi Party between 1919 and 1923 which became for a time its Storm Song or Assault Song

[*Sturmlied*]. "*Deutschland erwache*" is the final line of each verse, which begins "Storm! Storm!

Storm! Storm! Storm! Storm! Ring the bells from tower to tower!"[128] In the second verse, it is

proclaimed, "The air shall clang and cannonade; Rushing forth in the thunder of vengeance!"

gesturing to the damage done by the Treaty of Versailles and the Weimar Republic. The next

lines explicitly evoke resurrection, reading, "Ring the dead out of their grave! Germany, awake!

Awake!" Knowing this background to the phrase that appears on the standards being consecrated

at the Nuremberg rally adds even more meaning to the ritual as one inherently tied up with the

narration of time. Indeed, as Hitler proceeds down the line, touching the Blood Banner to the

new standards and shaking the men's hands, a cannon continually fires–cannonading as the

second verse proclaims. Although initially the camera shots focus primarily on the human action,

throughout the ceremony, Riefenstahl directs our visual attention more and more to the cannon,

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[127] Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, 109.
[128] Eccu, *Sturm! Sturm! Sturm!*, accessed November 1, 2020,
http://archive.org/details/SturmSturmSturmDeutschlandErwacheENG.

ultimately alternating between a consecration and a cannon shot, tying together the ritual with the sound which is meant to awaken Germany to vengeance. The solemn ritual ends as the camera switches to fade out on three massive swastika banners and a Nazi eagle in the foreground.[129]

While this Blood Banner ritual stands as clear evidence of Nazi allusion to martyrdom and sacrality through the concept of consecration, it also parallels Eliade's notion of Christian liturgy which returns with its ceremonies not to a mythic time of origin but to the historical moment of Jesus Christ's incarnation during the rule of Pontius Pilate. In Taylor's terminology, it represents a gathered warp in the line of time, a return to a higher time which infuses meaning into the present moment. The Blood Banner consecration is not a ritual in the archaic sense, nor does it allude to the eternal as that which lies beyond time; rather, it evokes the revolutionary martyrdom of the Beer Hall Putsch through the banner itself and, through the phrase "*Deutschland erwache*," the Blood Banner consecration draws the contemporary National Socialists back to that early moment of the Party and of their perceived struggle. In this, the ritual provokes a sense of sacred time *in history*.

Thus, *Triumph of the Will* presents a teleological vision of the Third Reich—embedded in linear, historical time with reference to higher time. The attainment of the National Socialist Party to the level of governance is a victory, an arrival at an end goal which signifies the salvation of the Aryan, German *Volk*. In conversation with Eliade and Taylor, it is clear that the notions of rebirth and ritual in *Triumph of the Will* create a sense of sacred, gathered time that is rooted in historical time. Given the status that the rebirth of the *Volk* after the rupture with the Weimar Republic has in the Nazi narrative, utilizing Eliade's notion of Jesus Christ's incarnation

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[129] Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will (Triumph Des Willen)*, 1:10:42-1:12:07.

as interruption sheds light on the degree to which this is presented as a moment of sacrality in historical time, or, using Taylor's terminology, a kairotic knot. Further, the word eternal is often attached to an everlasting future within historical time, and even when the term seems to refer to an entity outside of time—as evident in Hitler's statement that, "Because the idea and the movement are the expression of our people and a symbol of the eternal"[130]—thinking with Eliade and Taylor, it becomes clear that the eternal as divine or sacred can become part of historical time, imbuing the latter with sacrality. Of course, the Nazi ideology of Aryan, *völkische* supremacy articulated here in terms of historical sacrality had its counterpart in antisemitism, which also relied upon language of eternity, as I will examine next in *The Eternal Jew*.

The Eternal Jew: Further Explorations into "Eternal" in Nazi Narrative

Discussing Nazi propaganda films and the language of eternal inevitably calls to mind *Der ewige Jude* [The Eternal–or Wandering–Jew]. Beyond being noteworthy as a significant piece of antisemitic propaganda, the film's title is especially of interest for this paper. *The Eternal Jew* refers to the story of the Wandering or Eternal Jew—a story with a long and varied history, parts of which I will discuss here. Perhaps loosely derived from *John* 18:10 and 18:20-22 in which an officer of the High Priest Caiaphas—perhaps Malchus—strikes Jesus, the narrative has had two significant, distinct pivot points. The first of these was its appearance in the thirteenth century book *Flores historiorum* authored by the monk Roger of Wendover in St. Albans. It recounts that Cartaphilus, Pontius Pilate's doorkeeper, hitting Jesus as the latter left for Golgotha, said "'Go, Jesus, why do you tarry?' – whereupon Jesus said to him: 'I will go, but

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[130] Riefenstahl, 1:41:50-1:42:06.

you shall wait until I will come again.'"[131] With this pronouncement, Cartaphilus was punished

with immortality until the Second Coming. Notably, Cartaphilus is not Jewish nor is he

condemned to wander. The similarities to the eventual story of the Wandering Jew are the

narrative element of a confrontation with Jesus on the way to his crucifixion, a parallel

proclamation from Jesus, and the notion of immortality until the Second Coming.

 The story begins to look more like its twentieth century version in a pamphlet or

chapbook circulated in 1602 in the German language called Short Description and Narration of a

Jew with the Name Ahasuerus [*Kurtze Beschreibung und Erzehlung von einem Juden mit Namen*

Ahasuerus]. The unknown author, denoted only by a pseudonym, tells that Paul von Eitzen, a

student of Martin Luther's, met Ahasuerus, a wandering Jew who claimed the following story as

his own: "On his way to Golgotha Jesus had leaned against his house, but he had driven him

away, whereupon Jesus said to him: 'I will stay and rest, but you shall go.'"[132] From then on,

Ahasuerus had been wandering the earth. R. Edelmann, in his essay on the history of this story,

writes that,

> whereas Cartaphilus is doomed to longevity only ('*I am going,* but *you shall wait*
> till I will come'), and having been baptized lives a tranquil and peaceful life in
> one place […] the Jew is punished with eternal *wandering* ('*I will stay* and rest,
> but *you shall go*').[133]

Thus, the narrative shifts to be a story about Jews specifically and to include, in addition to

immortality, the element of wandering.[134] Edelmann also notes the immense importance of the

fact that, for the Jew, there is no way out: "Although, as is presumed, he repents, there is no

[131] R. Edelmann, "Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew: Origin and Background," in *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend*, ed. Galit Hasan-Rokem and Alan Dundes (Indiana University Press, 1986), 5, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106005609612.
[132] Edelmann, 7.
[133] Edelmann, 7.
[134] Interestingly, Edelmann wonders if the syllabic similarity between "Cartaphilus" and "Ahasuerus" led von Eiten to choose this name out of the Book of Esther to represent the antagonist of his version.

question of baptism in connection with him. He *has* to remain a Jew under the doom, eternally."[135] Finally, Edelmann points the reader to the fact that this 1602 pamphlet and its version of the story is the one that first takes on "the character of a popular legend circulating among the illiterate common people."[136] With this 1602 version, either "Eternal" or "Wandering" becomes appropriate as the descriptor in the title of this myth. The direct translation of the German *der ewige Jude* is "the Eternal Jew," which, as Hyam Maccoby points out is "more faithful to the earliest version of the story than [the English] 'Wandering Jew' or the French '*le juif errant*.'"[137]

Although the characteristic of wandering becomes central to the story, eternality *qua* immortality remains crucial, particularly to the way in which it was appropriated into Nazi ideology. Adolf Leschnitzer calls attention to a telling reference to the Eternal Jew in Gottfried Keller's 1861 novella The Banner of the Upright Seven [*Das Fähnlein der Sieben Aufrechten*]. In a casual conversation, Keller depicts a character saying,

> 'Or do you wish one day to drag on an existence like that of the Eternal Jew who cannot die […]? No! A people that knows that one day it will no longer exist, makes all the more vital use of its days, lives all the longer and leaves behind it a glorious heritage'[138]

Leschnitzer points to this as evidence of a changing attitude toward the Eternal Jew, a figure who appears to have become an established element of the social imaginary even as the specific details and implications of the myth shift. He writes, "Keller's words conjure up a mythical image of compulsive force, the weird figure of the Eternal Wanderer who cannot die, forever

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[135] Edelmann, "The Wandering Jew," 7.
[136] Edelmann, 8.
[137] Hyam Maccoby, "The Wandering Jew as Sacred Executioner," in *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend*, ed. Galit Hasan-Rokem and Alan Dundes (Indiana University Press, 1986), 237, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106005609612.
[138] Adolf F. Leschnitzer, "The Wandering Jew: The Alienation of the Jewish Image in Christian Consciousness," in *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend* (Indiana University Press, 1986), 228, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106005609612.

dragging on an existence without aim or purpose."[139] This notion of Jewish life as having no

purpose differs substantially from the more traditional Christian approach to this story. Both

Leschnitzer and Maccoby explain that the version of the story that holds closer to a vision of

Christian eschatology maintains that the Wandering Jew is an important witness to Christ's life

and death. The Wandering Jew, from this perspective, serves as confirmation of Christian truth,

and, moreover, the continual promise that the prophesied Jewish conversion at the Second

Coming will occur.[140] In this sense, then, the Wandering Jew, as a representative for all Jews,

affirms the essential role of Jews in Christian soteriology. The reference from Keller's novella

shows, however, that there is a shift with respect to the purpose of Jewish life–a shift that deems

it unnecessary. Leschnitzer attributes this to growing secularization in Germany which retains

the story but eschews the Christian eschatological meaning of Jewish existence.[141] Maccoby

notes that the version that gives the Jews a role to play in the Second Coming contains "the

positive hope of reconciliation," whereas, in the later versions of the story which remove this

purpose, "the sufferings of the Wandering Jew are seen merely as just punishment for his

depravity"[142] without hope for redemption. Maccoby suggests that the Nazi version, which

continues in this vein, takes on "something of a twist, since in this development the wanderings

of the Wandering Jew became part of his nature rather than his punishment."[143] In this way, the

Nazis further racialized what was already an essentializing story. Moreover, Maccoby claims that

in the Nazi telling,

> the prolonged life of the Wandering Jew was also given a hostile connotation: it
> meant that the Jew was an eternal plague. In German the immortality of the Jew

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[139] Leschnitzer, 229.
[140] Maccoby, "The Wandering Jew," 251.
[141] Leschnitzer, "The Wandering Jew: The Alienation of the Jewish Image in Christian Consciousness," 233.
[142] Maccoby, "The Wandering Jew," 252.
[143] Maccoby, 252.

was stressed, rather than his wandering, in the appellation '*der ewige Jude*'; but the question that it posed was, 'Will this nuisance never have an end?'[144]

This observation quite directly ties back into the film *The Eternal Jew*, for it is clear that the title evokes what the Nazis see as the eternal nature of the plague that is the Jewish people. By using this phrase as their title, writer Eberhard Taubert and director Fritz Hippler play on this connotation, combining the Nazi racial antisemitism with a long history of Christian anti-Judaism.

Within the film itself, they also emphasize the eternality of the so-called negative racial characteristics of Jews. In a lengthy discussion of art, Hippler states that, "The concept of beauty of Nordic man is incomprehensible to the Jew by nature and will always remain so."[145] This is certainly not the only comment of this kind in the film. The aspect of eternal wandering is also important for Hippler in *The Eternal Jew*, as he works to emphasize that Jews are non-native invaders in German land. Amid its thematically scattered scenes, a reoccurring topic is Jewish migration. Hippler narrates that, "Their homelessness though is a matter of choice, and in keeping with their entire history, 4,000 years ago their Hebrew ancestors were already wandering."[146] Various sequences of maps showing supposed Jewish expansion depict Europe and eventually the globe as being covered and filled with Jews. Hippler cautions the audience that, "Wherever the body of a nation shows a wound, they anchor themselves and feed on the decaying organism […] and therefore endeavor to deepen and prolong all conditions of sickness."[147] Tying in eternality to this pest-like wandering, Hippler explains that "The Jews have been this way throughout their entire history. Their faces bear the age-old features of the

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[144] Maccoby, 253.
[145] Hippler, *The Eternal Jew (Der Ewige Jude) 1940*, 36:46-36:54.
[146] Hippler, 13:40-13:57. Clearly, Hippler departs here from the myth of the Eternal Jew and the moment of confrontation with Jesus Christ, aligning himself more closely with essentializing racism.
[147] Hippler, 12:05-12:22.

perpetual sponger, the Eternal Jew, who in the course of time and world-wide wanderings is always the same."[148]

Similar to its usage in *Triumph of the Will*, the concept of eternality in *The Eternal Jew* functions in a dual manner: to suggest something everlasting—though not perhaps truly everlasting—and to allude to a racialized essence existing in and throughout history. The equation of eternality to immortality is clear from the discussion above, with respect to both the life of the Wandering Jew and the unending so-called plague. In multiple versions of the story, however, there is tension in the fact that it is implied that this historical eternality need not be truly eternal. In the version pertaining to Christian eschatology, the Eternal Jew will be the Eternal Jew no longer at the Second Coming of Christ. In the Nazi version, there is an implied end in eugenics and what history came to know as the Final Solution. It is significant too that the film *The Eternal Jew* culminates with Hitler's infamous proclamation at the Reichstag on January 30, 1939: "Should the international Jewish financiers inside and outside Europe succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the victory of Jewry but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."[149] Much scholarly debate surrounds whether to read this as a clear threat of impending genocide or as a reference to a vague, abstract Nazi ideal. Regardless, it is clear that the eternal "Jewish plague" is not envisioned as truly everlasting. In a way, this corresponds to the complex connotations of eternal in *Triumph of the Will* in that it alludes to a perennial nature that nonetheless exists in time.[150]

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[148] Hippler, 12:25-12:39.

[149] Hippler, 1:03:18-13:35.

[150] Despite the descriptors of eternal, everlasting, and unending that the National Socialist party applied to the Third Reich, James E. Young brings up the fascinating and complex issue of what he calls the "particular [Nazi] aesthetic of 'anticipated retrospection.'" In line with the Nazi appreciation for Roman civilization *qua* extant ruins, Nazi architect Albert Speer's work and theory of "ruin-value" is one example of this preoccupation that Young mentions. Although certainly not uniform across the party—Young explains that some Nazis felt this outlook lay in the realm of blasphemy—the existence of this "anticipated retrospection" mirrors the somewhat paradoxical notion of the potential finitude of the eternal Jewish essence on offer in *The Eternal Jew* and Nazi ideology more broadly.

It is this element of perennialism that I suggest allows for further insight into the work that the word eternal does for the Nazi narrative of history. It hits on the essentialized notion of racial characteristics: Jews are always, "eternally" corrupting and plague-like, while German Aryans are always, "eternally" pure and heroic. Each people can be no other way; as long as they exist, they are always as they are. The degree to which statements like these correspond to a racialized ideology will come as no surprise to someone familiar with the Nazi movement, as briefly discussed above regarding the notion of *Volk*. What is particularly worth noting is the way in which attributing eternality to (a) characteristic(s) of a people turns them into a player on a larger stage of time. Suddenly, it is not the Jews of 1940 against the Germans of 1940, but the Jews as a whole against the Germans as a whole. The struggle of 1940 is the struggle that has occurred throughout history—in this way it is eternal as in unchanging. Nevertheless, it is an eternal battle with a paradoxical end brought about by the Nazi Party's ultimate battle with the Jews, evident in their hubristic labeling of the Final Solution, heralding a Nazi utopia that occurs in time. This tension rests together in the Nazi narrative as they weave together so-called eternal, unchanging, racialized essences with historically situated events, creating a narrative both firmly rooted in historical time and saturated with heightened meaning.

Conclusion

Near the end of *The Eternal Jew,* Hippler's voice proclaims that, "The eternal law of nature, keeping one's race pure is the legacy which the National Socialist movement leaves to the German nation forever. In this spirit, the unified German people march on into the future."[151]

James E. Young, "Nazi Aesthetics in Historical Context," in *After Representation?: The Holocaust, Literature, and Culture*, ed. R. Clifton Spargo and Robert Ehrenreich (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 95–96, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/6022.
[151] Hippler, *The Eternal Jew (Der Ewige Jude) 1940*, 1:04:33-1:04:54.

Here, eugenicist logic is given eternal status as a law of nature, and Germany's unified purity is given an unending future. Ultimately, I conclude that while the invocation of eternality that transcends time rooted the Nazi ideology in supposedly unimpeachable racialized truths, the simultaneous and seemingly paradoxical employment of eternality within time put the onus on the people to act in order to bring about the Nazi utopian vision. Therefore, despite the tension in definitional logic, the language of "eternal" did significant work for the Nazi narrative even as it described two somewhat contrasting understandings of human's relationship to history in terms of time. Citing Joachim Fest, Griffin notes the paradox inherent in the fact that, "the Nazis «longing to return to a primordial state of culture» constantly intersected with «a future-directed» ambition."[152] Through analysis of *Triumph of the Will* and *The Eternal Jew*, I suggest this relationship, which encapsulates the tension and intersection between the transcendent and immanent elements of eternity, comes starkly to light. Moreover, when the word "eternal" acts as a signifier of eternal truths and of the manifestation these truths—*qua* the *Volk*—in historical time, the usage follows a Christian—or "Judaeo-Christian"—model of sacred time, per Eliade, and of Augustinian eternity, per Taylor. When the term refers rather to an immanent utopia, it diverges from this Christian framework—wherein utopia is not realizable within the immanent frame—exemplifying what Reinhart Koselleck called "temporalized utopia," a feature of secular modernity, as he saw it. This invocation of eternity is particularly reliant on the moments of gathered time that endow the present with meaning from the past in order to build the future. In drawing from the social imaginary Christian notions of theophany as well as secular notions of the primacy of the immanent realm, eternality does the work of rooting the Nazi narrative in its supposedly transcendent eugenicist ideals and simultaneously propelling human action to realize

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[152] Griffin, "Fixing Solutions," 16.

these ideals in the immanent frame, resulting in a narrative of an *ersatz* sacrality playing out in historical time. This proved to be a dangerous combination.

Examining the word "eternal" in *Triumph of the Will* and *The Eternal Jew* showcases the stakes of temporality in the Nazi narrative, the degree to which such temporality is interrelated with religion, and the complexity of the social imaginary with respect to religion. In approaching these large topics at the minute level of a single word, we are able to ask specifically what work is being done with this concept and what meanings it brings to the table. I posit that the co-existing notions of eternality as call to immanent utopia and as invocation of transcendent, essentialized racial "truth," underline the inaccuracy and inefficacy of attempting to categorize the regime's ideology and practice as wholly religious or secular. By focusing not on categorizing National Socialism but rather on the significances and subsequent connotations of ideological rhetoric as it appears in grand narrative, I suggest we are able to delve deeper into the tensions presented by the Third Reich—those tensions that haunt us and compel us to continue asking: "How did this happen?"

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